

GEORGI GODHUNT

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Prologue

Believe it or not, a lot of attempts for restoration were made. Some of them - well-known. Others - hidden from the eyes of many.

Since old days people on these magical lands knew what should guide them. Their legacy survived even in hardest times. Even when all the evil forces of natural and supernatural, of visible and invisible, were against them - the spirits of those who were born to win never allowed anyone to completely shatter their purpose.

Yet, as the time passed, changes become harsher and more brutal. The lack of faith destroyed the potential in many souls; what some creatures did to the balance of these once glorious lands caused a lasting turmoil for many who were too weak - and for many who were strong but still threatened by the powerful force of evil.

This is when a man and a woman fell in love - and their bond was strong enough to lead people in the right direction. To lead at least those people who at that point were not too possessed by the misleading power the evil offered to everybody.

The potential seemed promising again - for everyone who could open their eyes and actually allow themselves to see it. Yet, a lot had to be made for the monarchy to go back to its strong - and this time fair and useful for the worthy ones - foundations. More and more people believed that these two leaders, these two people in love, would forever be able to connect their bright rays in the endless guiding light of justice.

Until they weren't able to do it anymore.

I

Male Hypnotized

Tired eyes closed. Exhausted body lying on the shore. Fingers of hands, naked heels of legs touching the colourful pebbles. Nose – and mouth – breathing hard. Ears, full of water, listening...

Nathaniel was listening. To the muffled sounds of the water in his ears. To the other water - of the sea. To the sounds of breeze touching everything around, including him. He could hear even the game a crab was playing while pinching a seashell not far away from here.

And then there was *her voice*. The magnetic song of a female whose language was different, not human. And somehow Nathaniel was sure that she was a mermaid. And that she was singing to him.

It was when the crab came too close to Nathaniel's body when the man got out of the trance and opened his blue eyes abruptly. A lock of his blonde hair made him start blinking - until seconds later his hand removed it from the eyes.

The sky was blue - not a single cloud. Then the sea was blue as well - as Nathaniel found out when his body moved and slowly got up.

'Where are you?' His lips suddenly whispered.

Yes, he just stared at the water and asked this question - without even knowing who he was talking to. He couldn't hear her majestic voice anymore. The song he fell in love with while being in his strange sleeping condition was not touching his senses anymore.

She was nowhere to be found. And Nathaniel wasn't even sure *who* she was.

'What the...!' the man suddenly shouted.

The crab had finally reached his body and now not only the sound of its movements made some discomfort for Nathaniel - but also the claws of the animal. They had just pinched his pinky toe, urging him to make a quick movement while almost saying a swear word.

He did no harm to the crab - yet the crab got scared and quickly went back into the water. Meanwhile Nathaniel looked around and tried to find out where he was - and to remember what brought him here. There were some rocks, as well as some fresh vegetation. On the upper level the rocks were gradually building up a hill. And next to it - another hill. And down the shore - one more, third one. This is where some wooden remainings were clearly visible even from distance.

'Oh, crap... The shipwreck!' Nathaniel finally remembered.

He remembered trying to control these wooden remainings before they become remainings - but sadly, he had failed his mission.

Or did he?

Suddenly Nathaniel started blinking again - this time without a lock of hair coming into his eyes. The young man once again turned his well-build body in direction of the tree hills. Just to realise that they were ordered in a quite specific - and very strict - way next to one another.

'No way...' Nathaniel whispered while his bare feet slowly started going forward. 'Is this... Architraves Island!?'

No answer.

'Is this Architraves Island!?', he repeated even more louder than the first time, seemingly expecting to be heard by someone.

And somebody *did* answer.

‘Yes, it is.’

Nathaniel felt such a joy in his heart and soul. Then he felt anxious.

‘Please... please, Erastos, let me explore it!’

‘No, master, no chance.’

‘But I... I need to! This island has been considered lost for centuries! I must find more about it! And meanwhile I can also find... her... Find that... that special girl... the mermaid...’

There was very tender trembling in his voice. Yet, the mind of the so called ‘Erastos’ couldn’t be changed.

‘Sorry, master. I must bring you back.’

‘No!!!’

Probably Nathaniel’s scream was heard in the same velocity both on the island and in the empty metal room where he physically transferred a few moments later, after a shining light took over his body.

Erastos - a young man, maybe only four or five years older than Nathaniel, but already with some grey hair - saw the angry look on the face of the other one. An angry look accompanied by some angry words:

‘I just asked for a few minutes... or hours!’

‘Or weeks, like the previous time when you used the Room of Fair Magic without permission?’, Erastos’ sarcasm hit the other man without hesitation. ‘You should be grateful to your mother that she even allowed you to visit it once a month.’

‘Visit it for what? To suddenly find the long-lost island of Architraves and just when my journey finally started getting fruitful to be immediately brought back to the Room?’

‘Well, before those ‘fruitful’ events you also got your ship wrecked and almost died...’ Somehow the sarcasm of Erastos kept being more successful. ‘You should be ashamed that back in those moments you once again used one of your forbidden tricks and stopped me from bringing you back earlier. Others would be punished for such a disobedience - if they had someone like me to bring them back here in one piece, of course.’

‘Oh, come on, man, you know that the possibility of really dying while being in the Room of Fair Magic is not too high,’ Nathaniel reminded him while making a bored gesture with his right hand. ‘Especially for the son of two of the leaders of modern Atlantis. The two leaders who originally *created* that Room with the help of powers of nature.’

‘I know your parents made sure that you cannot be hurt easily during your travels. Yet, the possibility of harm is still real, my dear prince.’

The younger man laughed sarcastically, then went to one of the metal walls of the room. He put both of his hands on it and then it completely changed, turning into a glass. Nathaniel looked at the enormous futuristic - yet somehow traditional - night city on the other side. It must’ve been raining in the last several hours because everything seemed wet and almost nobody was wandering on the streets.

Among the most magnificent things in sight was the shining double rainbow in the distance. It seemed so unrealistic while piercing the darkness of the area that anyone unfamiliar with its nature might think it was of an extra-terrestrial origin. And this thought would be close to the truth, actually.

The prince sighed.

‘Our power is given to us in order to take risks. To explore our world and make it better. Even when this means wrecking ships while looking for other inhabitable lands in our wretched world. Even when, all of a sudden, finding something we usually could only dream of. Like the island which mysteriously disappeared of our sight centuries ago.’ He looked at the other man with a face full of deeper feelings. ‘It may sound like something trivial, Erastos, but I want to be one of the people who make this kind of difference. Not only in Atlantis but also in some of the other possible worlds out there. Our civilization didn’t survive more than any other on this planet without a reason. Without risks. Without ships wrecked in the right place and right time.’

‘Your words seem very wise - and of a man who your parents would definitely be proud of - yet, master, you are too important for this same civilization you’re talking about. This is why we need to protect you.’

‘What do you need to protect me from? I survived the shipwreck. And I was on a peaceful island. The only harm I got was when a crab pinched my toe.’

‘Not seeing the potential harm in your first minutes there doesn’t mean it didn’t exist.’

‘It doesn’t mean it existed either,’ Nathaniel once again sighed, then looked back at the night city. ‘I am so tired, Erastos. So tired of always arguing with somebody. Wish I could just follow my own orders. Not anybody else’s. And, who knows, this could lead me to much better places than expected... To music much more harmonic than the one we listen to everyday in what has remained of this world.’

With a special spark in his eyes, the younger man took a deep breath. A slight smile appeared on his face. Erastos knew what made him feel this way.

‘I suppose you are talking about *her*? The girl whose voice you heard - and who you think is a mermaid.’

‘Didn’t you hear her? It was an angelic voice. A melody of pure Heaven...’ Nathaniel looked at the other man as his face became even more romantic.

‘Actually, no, master, I didn’t hear anything. It might’ve been just a glimpse of your wild imagination.’

‘Imagination?’ Nathaniel laughed. ‘You must be kidding. Her voice was so real... so touching... so unimaginably wonderful...’

The look on Erastos’ face didn’t change - which shocked the younger man.

‘Wow... You really didn’t hear her. But how is this possible? I never turned off this function of the connection between me and this room when I was using the Fair Magic. Maybe something with the Magic itself is wrong?’

‘No, it isn’t,’ Erastos shook his head. ‘I checked it more than once, especially when I thought that you are going to drown. Look, master. I am not telling you are crazy for imagining things. I just think that you and your mother both bring your... let’s call it ‘fairytale nature’ everywhere with you. So... it is normal for you to wish you’d one day become part of your own version of “The Little Mermaid” ...’

‘Can you blame me?’ Nathaniel laughed once again. ‘They once told me that my grandparents were literally friends with *the real* Little Mermaid - back there, where our family comes from. My great grandparents were part of the fairytale world as well - if not among the most glorious of the characters who ever lived there. Oh, and let’s not forget that my father’s second cousin, Noah, is the one and only *Prince of Cinderella* - not to mention that he also turned out to be a merman, by the way. Our dynasty expands in many places and cultures, has many extraordinary powers and has fought unbelievable enemies. And even though here, in this parallel world where the family of my father and my mother was once forced to live, my mother and I are probably the only remaining members of this big dynasty... some things never change.’

So yes, it is quite normal for me to not imagine fairytale scenes for myself and my personal life. But to really experience them, without any doubt.'

He once again took a deep breath. Erastos remained silent, as he was during the short - but powerful - monologue of his master. Then Nathaniel shook his head and said:

'I am sorry. Maybe I demand too much of you. But you are not *that* qualified to understand such things. Because you, like many things of my life nowadays - and I don't mean the captivating voice of that girl - are just not real,' He stared at Erastos and even gave him a slight look of warmth. 'You are done here now - the approved process of Fair Magic is off for this month. You may leave.'

The older man just nodded. Then he disappeared as his holographic self immediately turned off - until further notice.

Nathaniel stood there, by the glass wall, for some more minutes. He stared somewhere out there while his mind was still fully possessed by the idea *of her*.

And the idea of finding her someday.

II

Symbiosis. Him at Home.

Once Nathaniel left the Room of Fair Magic, he felt fire in his blood. The pressure in his body and soul had to be released somewhere and somehow. And oh yeah - it was a lot of pressure.

This is why the speed of his flying hyper car was big, too - yet he somehow managed to not break any rule. Nathaniel was fair to everyone not only because he was the successor of the great King and Queen of this region of Atlantis - but because dignity ran into his blood from day one.

Well, the flying cars at that time of the current 16th century usually could give some very promising opportunities to a person even without making him push the limits. Like going forward with the speed of like 300 km per hour while having the chance to see most parts of Kale, one of the magnificent big cities of Atlantis, from a very good point. And also having the chance to make contact with other people on the highway even without leaving the vehicle - like Nathaniel did once another similar car approached his and a then very familiar laugh was heard:

‘Wow, this is a pretty unusual speed for my fella!’

The face of another young twenty-something years old brown-haired black man appeared on the wide screen next to the steering wheel of Nathaniel’s car. His smile was quite big.

‘I am not in the mood, Kibwe,’ The prince gave a quick ‘real’ look at him in the other vehicle. ‘And no - it is not one of those moments in which I probably act like a spoiled royal kid without realising it. This time it is *serious*.’

‘Hm... Maybe we should stop somewhere and speak, then.’

Kibwe also took a look at the other man for real, not on the screen. Nathaniel really didn’t seem very happy. But even without being in the mood for jokes and funny talks, he made an exception for his best friend.

‘Let’s go to the Amphitheatre. Think I need to feel like the important person for at least five minutes.’

Nathaniel’s car went straight forward to the centre of the city - and Kibwe followed it. Luckily for them, at that late time there were no too big and too annoying traffic jams - so they approached the aforementioned place very soon.

The Amphitheatre didn’t have its own parking space - so the two men had to leave their vehicles not too far away from it and walk for a few minutes.

‘You can start talking now,’ Kibwe said with a slight smile, while putting a hand on his friend’s arm.

Nathaniel looked at him, then sighed.

‘Would it be enough just to say the name Kassandra Terek?’

‘Oh... I got it,’ Kibwe started biting his lips without removing the smile. ‘The bossy mom Kassie. The mighty Queen of this region who always feels the need to take care of *everything* after the disappearance of the King.’

‘*Everything* is such a weak word for what my mother feels the need to do on a daily basis. Especially in the life of her twenty-four years old son.’

‘Well, I am sure Kassandra has her reasons... ‘

‘I got the reason for her to keep her only child safe. Yet, what she did today - or what Erastos did as her faithful puppy was not OK.’

‘You know Erastos doesn’t have a chance, right? He is not *one of those* AI people.’

‘Yes, I know his model is not among ‘the most conscious’ ones. This is why am not putting the blame on him but on her. However, let’s just go in the theatre and try to forget it for at least some minutes.’

He said this just as they arrived on the main square in front of the amphitheatre. There were not many people here this night - because of the evening rain and maybe because it was Tuesday. Only two girls sitting on the modern stairs and a lovely young couple taking some selfies in front of the colossal monument of Plato, the ancient philosopher and first advisor of several great rulers of Atlantis.

Nathaniel looked at these cute lovebirds and this sight made him take another sigh.

‘I was so close to her... yet so far...’ He whispered.

‘Sorry, what did you say?’, Kibwe asked.

‘Never mind,’ Nathaniel shook his head. Then he looked at the entrance in front of them. ‘Seems like there is nobody.’

‘Well, the prices are pretty high for most of the people...’

‘Another thing my mother should worry about more than messing into my life.’

The new potion of inevitable sarcasm was so hard that Kibwe almost asked him for details. Yet the friend of the prince once again decided to be more delicate.

‘Whenever you are ready you will share to me what she did this time, won’t you?’

Another sigh on Nathaniel’s side, another look at the other boy - but this time with a slight nod.

‘Maybe after the concert. Let’s get in.’

He stared at the special sensor next to the entrance. The robot scanned his eyes and then greeted him:

‘Welcome, Mr. Terek. Do you confirm paying 3 talents for the “Ultra Amphitheatre Experience”?’

‘Yes.’

‘Thank you. Let me inform you that 1/10 of this amount will be given for the Charity organisation of your mother, Cassandra Terek.’

‘Thanks for reminding me of her and how great she is,’ Nathaniel’s sarcasm once again seemed on point - even the invisible AI robot got it.’

‘I am sorry if I touched a delicate place.’

‘No worries. Just let me in.’

‘OK, Mr. Terek. Before that I should ask you - is your settings of the performance the same as those of your previous visit?’

‘Yes,’ Nathaniel answered but then quickly corrected himself: ‘Actually... for the opening song of the playlist you can put “Rage on the Summit” by Galaris Calmstorm.’

‘OK, Mr. Terek. Then we’re ready. You and your companion are welcome to enter the stage. Will he be part of your show?’

‘No. thanks,’ the other man answered. ‘This is his moment of fame!’

The doors in front of Nathaniel and Kibwe opened. Loud electronic music with rock elements started playing on the other side, as an expressive manly voice presented the upcoming:

‘Are you ready? Are you ready for the peak of the night - of should I say *‘the summit’*?’

Massive shout as of a large crowd shook everything around. Nathaniel looked at Kibwe and, finally, a slight smile appeared on his face too.

Meanwhile, the presenter's loud voice said:

'Then let's all of us invite on the stage... the unmatched... the one and only... prince Nathaniel Terek!!!'

With even stronger shouts of the exalted crowd Nathaniel took the last few steps to the stage. His smile remained the same - slight but real. His blue eyes started sparkling as the untamed blonde hair around them changed - and turned into a quite futuristic haircut of a fabulous rock star. The same happened with his body, too - the usual clothes on him changed with a quite modern dark costume, tightly covering everything down the neck.

Nathaniel walked to the centre of the stage and it was then when he finally looked at what was in front of the stage itself - the wide area full of the real ruins of that once remarkable amphitheatre of Ancient Kale, now decorated with so many modern holographic components, giving it the look of a contemporary - yet traditional in many ways - concert hall. The wild crowd was also consisted only of holograms - some of them so crazy realistic in their lunacy!

'Nate! NATE!!!', a young teenage girl with freckles, who was standing front and centre in the crowd, looked at the performer like she was looking at one of the gods. She was a new addition to the algorithm which was forming the concert based on the singer's settings. 'I love you, Nate! I LOVE YOU!!!'

Even if knowing she wasn't real, Nathaniel looked at her and gave her a wider smile. He didn't realise how suddenly his soul connected this image of her to the idea of the girl with the beautiful voice he had heard on the Architraves Island. Jumping not only into this non-existent music fame but into the dream of the mermaid he believed was completely real, he got closer to his wild female fan. Just on time for the intro of electronic rock music to lead him into the song he sang with the deep feelings of his heart:

Well acquainted we were, right?

To the fact that we agreed to be

To be in these different lights

Oh, we should've been prepared to see

To see the fallout

To scream loud

'Cause of pain inflicted by our dream

To manifest proud

To just get out

This so wild destruction in our team

In our breaths the ice will always feel on our lips

And we will never build (again) this house of sticks

Oh house of sticks

House of sticks

Clouds preparing for their fight

*Up there on the peak of you and me
Rain betraying that bright sight
Yet, this rain is just a little fee
To see the fallout
To scream loud
'Cause of pain inflicted by our dream
To manifest proud
To just get out
This so wild destruction in our team*

*In our breaths the ice will always feel on our lips
And we will never build (again) this house of sticks
Oh house of sticks
House of sticks*

*Remember me...
Just sing to me and we will resist
No matter how we clear the mist
We'll have our sticks
We'll build our sticks
Our house of sticks
(Just) sing to me...*

Nathaniel was a good singer - actually, he was a *great* singer. His musical presence was far from the frightening non-existence of almost everything so realistic around him and the amphitheatre. It was not only his voice, not only his handsome and sensuous body - but his soul. His bare soul was singing, like usually happens with people who possess the power to naturally shine in the perfect symbiosis of talent and deep internal feelings during their performances.

Symbiosis, by the way, was clearly present not only in Nathaniel's minutes on that once majestic, now illusive amphitheatre stage, but also in his touching fusion with this place and the visions in it. The holograms, many of which were powered with some complicated type of artificial intelligence, reacted the way they were programmed to - including that, undoubtedly, most devoted one of them, the young girl with freckles. Everybody sang with him, everybody screamed, everybody reacted with such tender to all his movements and to the sole way he combined the gestures of his body with the deep lyrics of the song.

But they were not real. Neither was his fusion with *them*. Because in all these precious moments Nathaniel was thinking only about *her*.

Kibwe, the only completely human spectator of the young prince's breathtaking performance, felt really shocked. He stared at him with wide open eyes and mouth - never had he seen his friend acting in this way on this stage... or on any other. Something was quite different. Something was furiously emerging...

Well, at the end of his performance Nathaniel seemed *literally* furious. The emotional expression on his face easily became angry. His left hand's fist clenched as he, previously standing on one knee before the girl, abruptly stood up, dropped the microphone on the floor and said:

'This was such a stupid idea.'

Then he just went straight forward the exit.

'Nate!' Kibwe shouted his name and went after him.

'Mr. Terek, you have 12 more songs in the setlist of your concert', the familiar voice of the artificial intelligence reminded to him,

'Screw it! Screw them all!', Nathaniel just shouted as he left the building.

'Nate!', Kibwe kept following him. 'Nate, please stop! You can talk to me!'

'Not today, please...' For a moment the emotional expression on Nathaniel's face returned, as he looked at his friend. 'Please, Kibwe, I need to be alone...'

The other man stopped walking. It was him who took a deep sigh this time, as he watched the prince slowly disappearing in the distance of the dark night...

Why was Nathaniel feeling this way only because of a girl he never actually saw? Did she put a spell on him with the magic of a mermaid's voice? Or was he going nuts?

So many questions possessed the young man's mind as he arrived home minutes before midnight - yet none of them possessed him as powerful as... her. Again - her.

Nathaniel's family home, currently consisting of only him and his mother, was a big mansion constructed by one of the greatest and most popular architects of this city - Georgianno di Giacomo. It had a long alley of different types of well-maintained trees, leading to a big building in minimalist style, made by stone and steel. The porter was a well-trained humanoid robot with elegant appearance of an old man who had the abilities not only to greet the people at the entrance of the house but also to fight the unwanted invaders effectively.

He also had the ability to be a good messenger.

'Master Nathaniel! Welcome home! Your mother wants to speak with you.'

'Oh, really? What a shock!' answered the young man with his growing sarcasm which got better and better in the last hours - and probably even Erastos would admit it. 'Tell her I am busy!'

Without even waiting for the robot to say something else, Nathaniel went into the house and soon into his room. He gave a quick order to the magnetic curtains to cover the glass wall, then he put the newest LP vinyl of the electronic chanson duo Abigiele Mitras and Arnaud de Bocher on the record player.

As the mesmeric power of the music started floating in the air of the big room, Nathaniel, completely alone in the dark, lay down on his comfortable bed and started moving in different directions, in a desperate attempt to finally fall asleep after the long day. Quite expected, he couldn't. Because he thought about her almost the whole night.

And *her* was not his mother but someone he didn't even knew that well.

‘Good morning, Mr. Terek. Let me remind you that your mother still wants to talk with you.’

The first words Nathaniel heard on the next morning were not what he expected them to be. Alongside the peaceful sound of the alarm, the voice of the porter was a surprise - especially when the robot himself was not here, yet his mind had connected with the net of the young man’s room.

‘Oh... are you serious? I just fell asleep two hours ago!’ Nathaniel said with a sour expression on his face.

This was true - around 6 o’clock, just around sunrise, the young man was finally able to close his eyes for more than five minutes - and his tired body could finally take an effective rest.

But apparently miss Cassandra Terek didn’t want to wait anymore - especially after her son didn’t answer to her first request for a meeting.

‘Ok, Ok...,’ Nathaniel made a quick gesture with his hand. “Tell her I’m coming in ten minutes.”

He got up from his bed, then yawned and went to brush his teeth in his personal bathroom. After considering taking a shower too the man decided that it would be good to go to his mother first - as she seemed impatient. Not that his desire to meet her was as big as hers.

Queen Cassandra’s chambers were on the upper floor of the building - so she could also have a good view at the surroundings that were partially her possessions. During all the years at this big mansion, she made sure that this part of the house would be among the most clean, tidy, and elegant - like her own casual style was. As one of the main graceful rulers of Atlantis this tiny middle-aged woman kept her look in more than just a normal modern-fashioned style. Somehow, she always coped to combine the newest tendencies with some of the most wonderful elements of the vintage style of the centuries before.

This morning, she was wearing a gallant dark blue dress with glass slippers - yes, real glass slippers, like the famous ones of the not so unfamiliar to her family fairytale character Cinderella. The hair of miss Cassandra was long and blond - the same colour nuance of her son’s. But her eyes were not blue like his - they were green. Captivatingly green - and anyone who stared at them would feel both admiration and respect.

Well, it seemed that this morning Nathaniel was not among those people. When he entered her cabinet, he looked at her as she was standing next to the window, drinking her morning tea and greeted her with a quiet voice and frowning face:

‘Good morning, mother. I thought that you had to work this morning.’

‘Well, my son didn’t honour me with his attention in the night, so I had to call the others and tell them I’ll be late.’

‘Weren’t you going to the border of the city with the Wildest Side? I heard there were some protests there.’

‘Yes, there are. But things are quite peaceful now. The people at the border once again complain about the salaries - which have always been understandable, considering how hard and responsible is their work to keep the city safe. But you don’t have to worry - one of my closest advisors, Nastimir, is there and is currently talking with them.’

‘Nastimir? I haven’t heard of him.’

‘Well. You and I are not very close these days,’ Cassandra emphasized. ‘That’s why you don’t know the new group of three human advisors and two AI. However, this leads us back to the reason I called you here... twice. Erastos told me about what happened yesterday in the Room of Fair Magic.’

‘Oh, really?’ The fake smile on Nathaniel’s face brought his recent sarcastic behaviour to a next level. ‘So, he told you that I randomly found the one and only island of Architraves but had to leave it because of your orders?’

‘Yes, he shared that information with me - and I am impressed. Also, he told me that you... kind of met a girl you believe is a mermaid.’

Her eyes partially closed during these words and her look concentrated on his face - like she wanted to read his son’s mind in his reaction to her words. And she *did* succeed to read it - he got excited even though he pretended to keep his cold behaviour towards her.

‘Yes. I met that extraordinary girl but didn’t have the chance to learn more about her.’

‘But you would like to, wouldn’t you?’

Nathaniel blinked.

‘What a question? Of course I would. I think it is obvious.’

Kassandra nodded. That very specific look on her face was kind of mysterious. As was the connection of the current topic with her next question:

‘Nate, my dear... did your father ever told you in detail the story of how he arrived on these lands when he was a child? How the two of us met?’

Nathaniel blinked once again. He also shook his head.

‘Not with much detail. I was too small when he disappeared. But what this has to do with the island and the girl?’

‘Follow me, son, and you’ll get your answer.’

Kassandra took some steps in direction of the cabinet door and then went out. Nathaniel was not sure what to think but he followed her after all.

‘Let me guess - this is some kind of ‘intervention’,’ He laughed as they were walking down the corridor. ‘You will tell me some touching story and I will have to be ashamed of the way I am acting - even though *I am right*.’

‘No, it is not an intervention. Believe me, son, I am sure that what I will show you will catch your attention.’

She opened a special door with a key, then she went down the stairs on the other side. Meanwhile Nathaniel’s attention already was caught.

‘We are going... in my father’s quarters?’, asked he while following his mother. ‘But I thought you allow me to go there just in special cases.’

‘This case is special. I believe it is time for you to know some important things about your father and me. Things I kept in secret from you for too long time, I am afraid.’

At the bottom of the stairs there was another corridor with several doors. Somehow everything here, in this basement, looked like a kind of an underground laboratory.

Very similar laboratory vibe could also be found on the other side of some of the doors - like the one Kassandra unlocked and entered alongside her son. Surprising or not, in the room there were some desks and many shelves with different kinds of colourful chemicals in vials, as well as an open central space with a drawing of a full circle in the exact middle.

‘I never knew my father had such things in his quarters,’ Nathaniel looked at everything with quite a surprise. ‘I mean... how could he feel place like this as... home? It is like we are standing in one of the many soulless laboratory buildings from those old sci-fi movies of 15th century...’

‘This place is just one part of his quarters - there is also another part which is not underground and is a very warm and shining place - it is also connected with my chambers. However, your father always needed a place like this for his... research goals... and experiments...’

‘Research goals? Experiments? Are we talking about the same man I remember? Something makes me feel you are not talking about his political responsibilities?’

‘Well, some things are connected. Some are not,’ said Cassandra, then she went closer to the centre. ‘Would you please come here, next to me?’

She entered the circle and made a welcoming gesture with her hand in order to give her son an obvious sign to do the same. Nathaniel, who was still not quite sure about all of this, decided to have some faith in his mother - so he went there. Then she put her hands on his shoulders and, after giving him a warm look of a really caring parent, whispered:

‘Oh, my dear... I don’t know where to start from... so let me just show you. Well, before that let me first introduce you to this circle of... a Very Special Fair Magic...’

‘Very Special,’ Nathaniel blinked. ‘You mean... it is different than the magic we use in the other room?’

‘Yes, indeed. I mean, the usual Fair Magic is quite astonishing on its own... but the adventures of me and your father through our early years brought in our lives much more than that. The Fair Magic has always been a magnificent way for people like us to do some unordinary things - like visiting multiple places without the need of a traditional definitive teleportation. But... what would you say if I told you that this Magic can also give us the ability to visit some other much more complicated things like... somebody’s memories?’

Nathaniel opened his eyes and mouth in a complete shock.

‘You... you are telling me that this room has this spectacular ability!?’

‘No, not the whole room,’ Cassandra shook her head then looked down. ‘But *this place in particular*. You know, my dear, that your father and I didn’t choose our family house to be built on this land only because of a political strategy or because we liked how beautiful this region of Kale is. We choose it also because your father found... this special spot. Of course, he didn’t share this valuable information with anyone but me - and with another person you don’t know. Even the Council of the Rulers does not know about it.’

‘Isn’t it like... hm... illegal then?’ Nathaniel scratched his neck.

Kassandra sighed. She made a slow movement with her head before making it nod.

‘It is a secret we had to keep for many years. But now... now it is your time to know about it, my sweetheart. I led you here not only to tell you the truth... not only to share the story of your father with you... but to *show* you that story. The way *I remember it* from the day your father showed it to me here, on this same place.’

‘So... so when I make contact with this Special magic, I will feel like I am there... with him?’ Nathaniel couldn’t believe how excited he really was after hours of being mad at his mother.

‘Yes. But you won’t be able to do anything. He won’t see you. I won’t see you - neither my current self nor the version of me from those memories. Even you won’t be able to feel your own presence - it will be like you are just part of another life... of another movie presented to you in a spectacular third-person way... of another book, consisting of some details that even the characters of which are not aware of... Its magnificence is hard to be explained. At first it will probably feel strange but... you will quickly adjust yourself to it. And after that, when you get back here... you will know everything...’ Cassandra took a deep breath, then asked: ‘Are you ready?’

Nathaniel took a deep breath too, as his body was already shaking with excitement.

‘Yes, I am.’

Kassandra nodded, then she closed her eyes, and his son closed his.

Their minds took a headstrong leap into somewhere else - without actually existing there in their current form...

Another book.

III

Book of Reed: Arrival

The boat drifted along the Clint River smoothly, without big waves. The water seemed quite calm, despite all the disturbing theories of those poor villagers of the area, who during last night's devastating storm had already begun to imagine the worst i.e. the new end of the world. And they had not just imagined it but had started to spread their anxiety to other people, while at that very same time the unstable windows of their little wooden houses had rattled as never before; and the windows of their humble homes had cracked and even got broken under the influence of the monstrous rain and winds.

These villagers would by no means be misunderstood in their concerns. Dating back to their earliest childhood times, all the inhabitants of this area of Atlantis and to others beyond it had heard the myths of the Ancient Storms - four legendary supernatural phenomena, all of which went down in the history of the last three millennia as much more terrible and destructive than the most recent one from last night. Few had survived the devastations brought by those unprecedented storms, and few were the ones whose accounts, passed down through the generations, preserved the memory of those scary times through the centuries; the memory of how the destructive power of nature (or of the gods) completely altered the earth's surface, ending almost everything that existed before and pushing humanity to the need to develop its civilizations anew - with the lands of Atlantis being the most preserved central point of all of that.

But humanity, which during its existence had always been forced to learn how to survive harrowing events, once again had coped to do it - even though those four connected to each other events turned out to be some of the most devastating possible. And the scars left after them were with long-lasting effect - the last storm was centuries back in the past but the legend of it and its predecessors startled a lot of people to this day. Mostly people who felt unprotected in their poor villages and tiny hovels, like those along this particular region around river Clint. The same ones about whom we have already said how much the recent storm had frightened them.

Although he had come from quite a distant place - as far as the harbour in the Villain area of northern Atlantis, from where he had caught the forementioned boat - the small passenger had already heard of that almost disastrous new storm that had raged in this another region the night before. And, despite the alarming thought that such a storm might possibly repeat itself the next night - and the next - the traveller was persistent about the goal he had.

He was a little boy, no more than eight or nine years old, with short, dark hair and blue eyes. Dressed in decent clothes typical for the middle class in the Italian Renaissance of 8th century (a culture that almost vanished after the last storm in 9th but was still relevant in some northern regions of Atlantis) At first glance, he gave the impression of not being someone rich, but someone who during the last couple of years had been fortunate enough to acquire some more expensive items, such as his current clothes.

The boatman— a thin and tall, white-haired man with green eyes and a sunken face—often took a glance at him and his clothes with a specific look. It seemed as the man was trying to judge where was this child coming from—whether from one of the several large cities or from one of the other country villages across the river delta where they'd met earlier. They had been drifting together in the calm waters of Clint for about two hours now, and although their common river voyage had almost come to an end, the boatman could not help but ask who he was transporting.

Actually, he did not bring himself to ask this question during the traveling itself, but nevertheless, when the vessel finally drew up to the wharf of one of the many fishing villages around, without taking his eyes off the child he said:

“We're here, boy,” he was silent for a few moments, then added: “Are you sure you want me to stay so I can take you back later? You don't seem very rich to me. It even seemed like you gave me the last money from your little pouch when you wanted me to bring you here, so you probably do not have anything to pay me for the return. You should know that I don't work for free, even with children.

“I understand your concerns, sir,” answered the boy, putting his left hand in one of the pockets of his pants. “But I can assure you that I have another pouch of money. These coins I saved last year and the other ones - the year before.

“Hmm,” the boatman murmured as he partially closed his eyes more, staring closely at the passenger before finally deciding to say: “If you needed a whole year to save so much money, then I am right - you are not very rich.”

“A person's wealth is not always expressed by money”, the boy gave this reply with a slight smile.

“And yet... you are not very rich”, the man emphasized in a clearer tone. “What makes you believe that it is reasonable to throw away your last saved coins to get this far, only to come back an hour or two later?”

“There is certainly a solid reason for my belief”, said the child with positivity in his expression, then stood up and put the hat that he had been holding on his lap until now. “I won't be late, I promise. But so that you don't think I'm misleading you - wait for me for only an hour, and if I don't come back, leave me behind and transport someone else.

The boatman did not answer with words - after staring at the kid with his look of hesitation for a few seconds, he just nodded. The boy didn't say anything more either - he just got off the boat.

As soon as his feet stepped on the wharf, the child first looked up at the cloudy skies, which made the surroundings quite gloomy. He assumed that it might rain soon. While hoping the rain won't be disastrous like the yesterday's one, he took a deep breath as he looked ahead at the not very large, wooden staircase, with several steps to the right (three of which had been torn away by the storm), and then a few more to the left. It led to the main cobblestone street of the small fishing village - the one which the little boy had been longing to visit for some time with a very specific purpose.

There weren't many people around, and the few that could be seen on the two sides of this same street were mostly in the yards of their houses or workshops, trying to bring some sort of order to the aftermath of the storm. Perhaps it was because of their personal worries that almost none of them paid any attention to the stranger boy when, seconds later, he climbed the stairs and found himself on the still wet cobblestones.

However, the child did not start walking on either side of the street - he only looked cautiously at the people around. It was as if he was trying to make sure that no one would see what he was about to take out of the pocket of his coat. It was a small, old parchment with some sort of large-scale map on one side of it. A rather long, mostly river road was depicted - and it ended right here, at this village by the river, or more precisely - to a larger and much richer-looking house.

With sparks of excitement in the eyes, the boy soon looked there, into the distance, where he quickly found this same building, somewhere behind the roofs of the poor ones in front of him. Then he quickly put the map back into his pocket and walked down the perpendicular street to the main one. After going in that same direction for a few minutes, he came to another staircase, this time stone, leading out of the village. As he was going down on it, the view at the big house became better - it was about a hundred meters from here, down the slope, just at the beginning of a vast, dense forest of mixed vegetation.

It was not only large but a majestic building, almost resembling a palace. It was quite clear that this was the home of someone high up in the hierarchy of this wide region of Atlantis. Which fact was inevitably emphasized in the dazzling contrast between this place and the poverty around it.

But even if built and maintained in this quite impressive luxury style, somehow this rich house did not give the vibe of something shining, but for something dismal - and the reason for that was not only the bad weather.

Speaking of weather, the house didn't even seem that affected by the storm. Only two of the partially unhinged windows and the broken glass on another one gave the slight hint that this house had indeed been here during the destructive event that had ravaged the area the night before.

As soon as he reached the last step of the stairs, the young man could already see the house in full, which increased his desire to get closer to it a moment sooner - but also increased the chance for others around to see him as well. So, he continued straight ahead, but not on the small, winding path that led there, but straight across the meadow of uncut withered grass, for a more direct - and yet not so visible - route. Of course, this action got his shoes dirty with mud, but the boy was obviously eager to carry out his plan.

As soon as he reached the house, he tried to hide unnoticed under the ledge of one of the unhinged windows on the ground floor. He listened for any possible sound on the other side and when he didn't hear even the noise of a stray cockroach, he prepared to enter the building quietly. Of course, before this stealthy intrusion, he took off his shoes - he didn't want to leave any traces that might point anyone's attention to him. It was just then when he climbed onto the ledge and jumped over it, ending up on the ground floor of the rich house.

He found himself in the atmosphere of a typical living room of wealthy people in this area of Atlantis. The 4th century Baroque style was clearly emphasized both in the furniture and in other details of the room's design. But although the boy had seen such grace around him seldom in his life, he was not now drawn away by the wonder of what surrounded him in this foreign home, for his attention was still focused on his main goal.

Moreover, out of a sudden, he heard a loud woman's voice somewhere nearby:

"Ivan! Ivan!"

She was not screaming at him, yet the boy felt the increased apprehension of the possibility that his intrusion here might be discovered very soon, so his instinct made him instantly jump behind an armchair to the side. In order to be aware of the situation, he immediately took a peek behind it, just in time to notice a delicate, yet somehow mad-looking middle-aged woman with high blonde hair and a gorgeous dark blue baroque style dress. She was coming from the next room - and she was constantly repeating:

"Ivan? Ivan, where are you, damn it!"

It wasn't long before she got an answer - it came from downward the staircase at the other end of the room:

"I'm here, I'm here, Madeleine! Whoa, whoa, whoa! How many times do I have to tell you that in my area you say 'Ivane' when you want to call a person named 'Ivan'?"

The voice was of a large man in his sixties with white hair. He was dressed in a nice, dark suit and wore a bowler hat on his head. Something about his appearance, as well as the woman's, felt sinister.

"Only 'Ivan' sounds more decent", replied the lady in a peculiar, somewhat haughty tone. "You don't want others to hear us speak in the strange way from your area and think that we come from some rotted village, bringing with us the typical dialects of that village? It's enough

for me that we live so close to those wretched slum huts that I'm ashamed of every time I am forced to drive past them with my expensive car! What a rat hole!"

"Okay, okay, enough complaining, woman! Why did you call me? I had just started tasting the wine in the cellar, to see if at least this year it came out good."

"I guess your daughter is a little bit more important than the wine!", replied Madeleine in an outraged tone. "She needs you in her room upstairs. One wing of her wardrobe next to the broken window has come off its hinges. And can you imagine - without asking us, she called some ragged young man from the village to fix it for her! I was disgusted to find out that such a dirty individual had set foot in our home, and I'm worried that our daughter might even have a crush on him! Just seeing the sparks in their eyes..."

"Hmm... it doesn't sound good, indeed...", answered Ivan, squinting one of his eyebrows and walking towards the door from where the woman had come two minutes ago.

As soon as they both left the living room, the still well-hidden boy took a breath and stood up. He didn't waste any time thinking about the snobbish conversation of the couple - he just looked with an excitement towards the direction the older man had just came from. The stairs leading somewhere down.

Without delaying his action even for a second, he walked over there. The staircase was quite wide and was not separated from the living room by any door. There were about fifteen steps, but the nimble boy went down them for seconds. And while he was going down, he looked at the not very large intermediate room, located below - there was a long cabinet with candlesticks on it, as well as some expensive items and paintings attached to the walls. To the left, on the corner, there was a large Christmas tree, decorated mostly with big gold and silver balls. And to the right, right next to the opposite wall, there was an open wooden door - obviously leading to the cellar.

It was this door that the boy looked at, with his gaze filled with specific flashes of excitement. He was about to head towards it, but suddenly he saw a shadow looming on the other side of it - apparently someone else was also leaving the basement. Once again, the young man got afraid that he might be caught, so he quickly found a new hiding place - behind the Christmas tree.

Then the door opened and a tall thin woman with grey hair, dressed as a medieval maid, stepped out of it.

"Mr. Connolly, where did you disappear?", she called the master out, but received no response, prompting her to add to herself: "This man has completely lost his mind over that capricious woman and their spoiled daughter! While he deals with her nonsense, the wine will go stale!"

She said this in an angry tone as she was already climbing up the stairs, determined to find her master. The boy, hidden behind the tree, only waited for her to get far enough to step quietly forward and slip behind the still opened door to the cellar.

As soon as he got in there, the child saw that there was an old lighted lantern by his side - so he took it. Then he once again put hand into the pocket of his top and took out the same map, but this time he turned it to the other side, where a different outline was drawn. It represented something like a drawing of a building, or more precisely, of a specific floor of a building - the basement.

Taking another deep breath, the excited boy looked down at the dark staircase he was about to descend. He didn't give it much thought as he knew there was no time to waste - so he hurried down, holding the map in one hand and the lantern illuminating his path in the other. And when he reached the end of this much smaller staircase, he found himself in front of two corridors. He only needed one more look at the map to know he needed to go left - as he did.

During the next few minutes, the young man tried not to pay attention to either the intrusive smell of mould or the cobwebs that were in all corners of the corridor. At one time, a large rat also passed close to the boy - who was not even startled as he just said sarcastically:

“Hm.. yes, yes... The village is a rotted hole, and your home is the king's palace itself...”

Soon he reached the end of the corridor where two doors were visible - one on the left and the other on the right. The boy looked at his card one last time, then he chose the right one. He put the parchment back in his pocket and walked towards it with frantic excitement, then pressed the handle and pushed it in.

The young man found himself in an otherwise completely dark room, which he immediately illuminated with his lantern. There was a lot of old, dusty furniture, and a bunch of junk in boxes and wooden chests. One of the chests caught the boy's attention - so he reached it and, after putting the lantern aside, he crouched down. The kid managed to move it a little bit, even though it was quite heavy for a little person. After that he began to cautiously touch the bricks behind it.

A trembling wave of joy made the child's heart to beat faster as he found what he was looking for - a particular brick that could be removed. As soon as he did remove it, several bugs came out from the other side - yet the impatience immediately overcame his concern if there weren't some more in the secret hideout – and he quickly stuck his hand into the hole. Even the fact that two spiders *did* crawl on his fingers did not startle him - as soon as his hand touched what he needed and then immediately got out of there, the young man blew them away. Then he stared at the object in his hands for a moment.

It was a small, light blue blanket that had been partially damaged by the moisture and by some of the inhabitants of this basement but was probably still usable. At the very least, it still had its original gold-threaded inscription. Reed Terek.

The boy touched this inscription with such a deep feeling - and with that same feeling he soon unfolded it, just to feel an even stronger wave of emotions caused by the other thing that was hidden inside. A round, golden pendant necklace, on which smooth surface, in addition to the beautiful ornaments on the rounded part, was also painted one of the two words from the blanket's inscription - Terek.

The boy shed a tear. With a storm of various deep emotions, he hugged both the pendant and the blanket. But just as he felt the need to pour out these feelings in even more tears and sobs, the young uninvited visitor to this house was suddenly startled, for he heard a rough, masculine voice behind him:

‘Who are you and what are you doing in my house!?’

The child instantly recognized the voice of the master of this place, Ivan, whose angry eyes he soon met. He just stared at the older man with a pale face, without telling anything, which made the scowling man to step heavily towards him and say:

‘I asked who you are and what are you doing in my property, you little tramp!?’ While shouting these words Ivan finally paid some attention on the blanket and the pendant in the child's hands, then at the displaced chest and the removed brick. “Well, well... Looks like this place hides more treasures than expected! Give me these things!”

‘No! They are mine!’

‘Give them to me immediately, you dirty rat!’, the master ominously took some steps closer the child, ready to grab him with his rough hands.

The boy was very scared. He screamed loud, then he...

IV

The Microtyphons and their Typhon

‘Run!’, Nathaniel’s scream, though of a grown man, was also very loud.

Then he realised he and his mother were not in the old basement anymore - actually, they were in another old basement.

‘Why did we get back here!?’ Nathaniel asked Cassandra, looking at her quite thrilled face. ‘I thought that you wanted to show me *the whole story!*?’

‘Nate, dear... Something happened...’, the woman said with a serious face.

‘Yes, I know something happened - obviously my father, Reed, got himself in a very extreme situation back then!’

‘No, I was not talking about these moments of his life that I just shared with you,’ Cassandra shook her head. ‘Some of my people just sent me a message while you were still following the story. *A message in the present.*’

‘So... you can get out of these... memories... without making the other person with you leave them too?’

‘Yes, indeed. During them I had more sensibility about the real present world than you. This is how I just got... the disturbing message...’ She took a sigh, trying to remain calm. ‘They attacked us. They attacked the fort.’

‘What!? Who!?’

‘The people... the creatures from the Wildest Side.’

‘The Wildest Side...’, Nathaniel started trembling. ‘But the things were supposed to be peaceful there... You told me there was no danger...’

Kassandra took a deep breath. The wrinkles on her forehead got more visible, showing her anxiety.

‘I got wrong. But I will make sure they will be pushed back!’

Not everyday people could see Cassandra Terek admit her guilt - mostly because she hardly made any mistakes in her life. This is why the situation seemed very serious - and why, as soon as she gave this quick explanation to her son, the woman hugged him and left the place.

Nathaniel, of course, followed her. Not only because he felt that he also had the responsibility to protect this city. But also because his own guilt at that same time was burning his soul.

The guilt of the thought that if it wasn’t for him and his neglecting behaviour towards her during the night, right now she would’ve been there already, and the situation would probably be more peaceful.

The story of the famous wall border between the metropolitan city of Kale and the Wildest Side was almost of a mythological nature. Some claimed that it was there long before the foundation of the city itself - back to the times when this area of Atlantis was not inhabitable,

yet it was too close to the pretty much inhabitable forest on the other side where the scary creatures came from. So, somebody built the wall to protect the people - and while some of the modern citizens still believed it was a creation of Hephaestus, the god of crafts himself, others preferred to stick to, let's call it 'the scientifically proven' theory about Lysander, the great architect of Atlantis. Of course, many people claimed that Lysander was Hephaestus in disguise - so that both the stories would be true.

But one thing about this wall seemed like a fact nobody would argue about - it was built in the centuries between the First and the Second Storms - this is when the creatures in the forest started to appear, so this region was called 'the Wildest Side'. Many people believed that the First Storm itself brought these scary beings on Earth... and yet again, the others blamed the gods for this very disturbing cruelty.

As for the wall itself, some archaeological evidence seemed to prove that at first it was built by stone, after that it was completely replaced by the current one of steel. Of course, people of the current 16th century couldn't go without adding some pretty advanced technological improvements to it, the strongest of which was the powerful electric system attached to it. The revolutionary correlation between electricity and a magnetic field of a very specific type, which cohabited in this particular system, made the defence mechanism of the wall so mighty that even the people who were hired to additionally protect the border were scared of the idea of getting too close to it - hardly would anyone survive the contact with this powerful barrier.

This is why everyone here and around Atlantis were in for a big shock of the news that the creatures on the other side had not only got close to the defence wall. They had drilled a big hole in it.

Two of these people were the ruler Cassandra and her young son Nathaniel. Soon after leaving the quarters of Reed Terek, they got on their hyper cars and flew to the dangerous point of Kale in less than thirty minutes through the special underground tunnels built for extreme situations. Currently this was the preferable option for quick movement from one point to another, as the teleportation rooms of their mansion have been broken for the last two days - and it was now that the mother and the son realised that this might have been a part of someone's much larger plan.

Soon after the fast vehicles of them and of some of their best trained fighters got out of the tunnels, the shocking view at the destroyed part of the defence wall hit them immediately, as it could be seen even from distance. But even more shocking was the realisation that followed - that they all wouldn't be able to get too close to that war zone themselves...

Just as the cars got out of the tunnels and Cassandra, the military leader of them all, took the course straight to the place of chaos, some strange magnetic field - not as strong and murderous as the one of the walls but still quite powerful - made the vehicles to lose balance. One by one, they started reeling in the air, after that they all fell. Only those with the quickest reactions survived - after succeeding to launch the option of their parachutes on time. Luckily for the Terek family, Cassandra and Nathaniel were among them - yet they both reached the ground on two quite distant places.

The queen landed down there, at the old stadium while her son found himself up there, on the hill, at the site of the ancient Acropolis, pretty much near the ruins of the old temple of Apollo. His position was a little bit closer to the broken wall - and because it was on a higher ground, both the battle with the creatures near the wall and the location of Nathaniel's mother were visible to him.

Both of which made him shiver in the next minutes. There was no surprise that the situation near the wall would be bloody but what happened to Cassandra after she stepped on her feet down there, on the stadium... well, even without that much blood it was disturbing too. Because the woman fell exactly where she was expected to - or at least expected by those who had made this trap especially for her.

In the first moments after landing Cassandra was surrounded by an army of... creatures.

“Microtyphons... They went that far!?” Nathaniel whispered up there, on the hill, with his eyeballs wide opened.

And maybe this is the most suitable time to finally explain what these creatures, microtyphons, were.

Since ancient times typhons¹ were among the scariest monsters because of their frightening look. Well, let’s imagine that through the years (and millennia) some components in their appearance evolved or, like it is probably most appropriate to say - shrunk. Those once giant creatures became smaller and smaller; their hands, once consisting of many snake heads now had only once on each hand; also, it seemed like with time they had lost their wings.

Yet, they were still very dangerous - especially if they were more than one, like was the case of those who were surrounding Cassandra Terek at the stadium. Before she could realise what was happening, at least ten microtyphons came from different sides - and she was there, alone in the middle, with only one parachute next to her.

But sometimes even a parachute could be enough for a good battle.

“Get lost, you, monsters!”, she shouted with anger, as her hands caught and squeezed hard the ropes her body was still attached to.

She got the parachute in the air and made one aggressive spin with her body, thereby hitting the closest microtyphons. Some of them fell on the ground, yet others bit the cloth part of the long device with their snake hands and pulled the woman in their direction. Cassandra managed to keep balance - but at the same time another army of more than twenty similar creatures surrounded her.

Nathaniel, who still looked at his mother from above, started running in that direction with the fierce intent to help her - but soon he met a very difficult obstacle himself when five microtyphons came in his direction.

‘Don’t you dare to come close to me!!! Nor near my mother!’, the prince screamed to them, but it didn’t seem like these words touched the monsters.

Nathaniel was forced to take some steps back up the hill. And just when his mind started going through all the options for survival, while his main goal was still to help Cassandra, something even more unexpected happened. Some of the other men who survived the clash of the flying cars with the strange new magnetic field also ran towards their queen - but seconds before approaching the stadium they were... smashed. By two giant snake tails.

‘Mom! Look out!’, Nathaniel, who still had better viewing at the surroundings, stared at this newcomer on the battlefield... and even though its existence made him speechless he succeeded to at least scream loud enough.

Down there, at the stadium, Cassandra heard him, even though she couldn’t distinguish his words. But she had already felt the presences of this demonic creature anyway, as its shadow loomed behind her.

Then she turned in this direction and... saw it. A mythological *typhon* in full size and strength - a version of the much smaller monsters which was considered extinct. But here it was - right in front of her, so respectful and terrifying.

Kassandra wouldn’t stand a chance against something that enormous - and its army of more and more microtyphons surrounding her. Not while her weapon was only... a parachute.

¹ Typhons - giant creatures from Ancient Greek mythology with partially human look but also with wings, many snake heads instead of fingers and two snake tails instead of legs.

Of course, she tried to fight, she tried to resist - but with no effect. Soon the gigantic typhon caught her with one of his tails.

‘No! Leave her alone!!!’, Nathaniel shouted, while at the same time he had to run away from one microtyphon which had approached him at his location.

Of course, the larger creature didn’t pay any attention to him - it just flew up in the sky while one of his giant tails was still holding Cassandra.

‘NO!’, the man screamed once again, then he started running as fast as possible up the hill, in the direction the monster went with his mother.

The ruins of Apollo’s temple didn’t help his way - but Nathaniel jumped on and between them with the speed of a lightning. This is how at one moment he was close enough to climb one of the columns and, after jumping high enough, to grab the other tail of the flying monster.

Sadly, the typhon was too much bigger and stronger - so this attack didn’t bother it at all. Just one quick movement with that same tail was enough to push back the human and to make Nathaniel fall in direction of the ground.

‘NATE!!! NO!!!’ This time Cassandra was the one who shouted, as meanwhile, her son’s reaction to the deadly event made him naturally scream too:

“AAAGH!!! HELP!!!”

As everything around the young Nathaniel turned into shining light, his soul felt shaken by the heartbreaking thought that this was the end. He was now dead. And he died so young... so full of strength... Before even having the chance to save his mother. To go back to Architraves. To meet the mysterious woman with the wonderful voice...

No one could help him anymore...

Then, after opening his eyes, he found out that somebody had probably helped him during his fall - and brought him to a magnificent, breathtaking place.

Nathaniel was now lying on a... cloud. And the cloud was surrounded by colourful trees and bushes with beautiful shining blooms. The wonderful scent around came not only from them but also from the waters of the small lake nearby - waters so unimaginably blue that everyone could think they were not real.

There was a large branch of one of the apple trees that was hanging over the lake - and on the branch a handsome man was sitting. After somehow sensing that Nathaniel’s curious eyes were now opened and were examining the place, he came down from the tree, stepping into the water with his bare feet and in his full height - a little bit bigger than of an ordinary human. As he turned around and started walking, each tiny detail in his exceptional appearance, in his calm and confident movements seemed so supernaturally exquisite, yet so full of the energy of a real dark-haired, blue-eyed athletic man.

Even though the completely fit body of this unusual person had some kind of a long piece of white cloth on it, he seemed almost naked - as this simple version of an ancient tunic didn’t cover much. That specific detail became even more sensible when he got closer to the human man.

But at that moment Nathaniel couldn’t think about such things as someone else’s nudity.

‘Who are you? And where am I?’, were the obvious first questions of the blond man, followed by another completely expected one: ‘My mother... what happened to her!?’

The other guy stared at him with eyes half closed. Then he answered with such an unexpected - even though completely consistent with his look and movement - calm voice:

‘Obviously, your mother was kidnapped by that typhon.’

Nathaniel shivered.

‘So... so that monster *did* succeed. It abducted her. And I couldn’t help her..., a deep sense of guilt possessed his heart. Tears appeared in his blue eyes. ‘But... but I tried...’

‘You acted like a fool. Of course, the creature wouldn’t let you stay clinging on its tail. Out of the two of you *it was the dominant one.*’

The other man frowned.

‘Once again... who are you? And where are we? Did *you* bring me here and *why?*’

The taller one laughed.

‘So many questions you can answer yourself, human. You are the one who summoned me, after all. Who asked me *for help*, even without realising it.’

‘What!? No, I didn’t...’ Nathaniel’s reaction was quick, as were his next words of a completely confused person: “I mean, I cried for help while I was falling straight to the stone ruins of the temple but...”

Then suddenly he wasn’t that confused anymore. Not after he remembered whose ancient temple was the aforementioned one - and how close the supernatural man who was now standing right in front of him looked like to the idea of that particular ancient god.

Not just close. Because he *was* that god.

‘Apollo!?’

V

The Unusual Man and the Mysterious Woman

‘Apollo, indeed. Why are you so shocked, my human friend? As I said, you were at *my* temple when you cried for help, remember?’

The ancient god seemed like he had a sense of a delicate humour, even when at the same time he slightly criticized the man in front of him. Nathaniel caught the delicate nuances of both, yet his mind was still fully blown away by... the facts.

‘I... I... Yes, I was at your temple... or at least where those pitiful remains of your temple stay...’

‘Ouch. That hurts.’

‘Oh, I am sorry, didn’t mean to tell it in a such disrespectful way...’, Nathaniel replied with a serious, embarrassed face to Apollo’s not so serious words. “I mean... we, the people of 16th century are not so passionate of those ancient beliefs anymore... so you and the other gods of Olympus are... well, you know, something we usually don’t consider real.’

‘That hurts even more,’ the other man kept his tone.

‘I am sorry... again,’ Nathaniel made a quick gesture with both his hands, then he sighed and added: ‘Guess I don’t know how to talk to an, obviously, pretty real ancient god.’

‘It takes time... sometimes. Yet, you, Nathaniel Terek, are usually a man with big knowledge and good manners - so I will excuse you that right now you don’t act like yourself.’

‘You know who I am? Wow, your divine research in that one second while I was falling must’ve been among the quickest in history.’

‘Oh... no, no, my dear human,’ Apollo laughed. ‘I knew who you are since before you were born.’

‘What? How?’ Nathaniel didn’t expect Apollo to make him even more surprised and confused.

‘Well, you’ve heard of prophecies, I suppose... It is like in all those books and movies...’

‘Wait... there is a prophecy... about me?’

And this is how the human man, as he pronounced these, well, let’s call them ‘quite trivial and overused’ words in pop culture, got even more surprised and confused about the possibility of them reflecting something completely possible.

As possible as the idea of a real god from ancient myths standing in front of him in flesh and blood, and confirming:

‘Yes, there is. Actually, you are just a part of that prophecy. I won’t get to details about it because I don’t think that your human brain is fully capable of understanding some things. Not yet. Other things, though, you are meant to understand during your upcoming journey. But I will tell you, human, that I didn’t just hear you ask for help there, on the hill, where my once magnificent temple still stands. I was watching you. Waiting for us to finally meet.’

Nathaniel blinked with his eyes, then his eyebrows furrowed.

‘So... so you knew in advance what was going to happen? You watched while those relentless creatures caught us in a trap! While that monster took my mother! You watched everything and did nothing!’

‘Except for saving your life?’

While the feeling of irony by Apollo's words made Nathaniel a little bit embarrassed, he decided to risk looking ungrateful when he replied:

'Yes, you saved me. I am thankful. But you didn't help my mother, even though you probably were able to! Why? Why didn't you? Was that stupid prophecy so explicit that only I should've been saved but not her?'

'Well, it said nothing of a great importance about her role in all of that, to be fair. I couldn't mess with anything else down there, on Earth. I had to do only what was destined for me to do – because my role of saving you and pushing you in one concrete direction is also part of the prophecy. Nothing else.'

'As if you, gods, didn't mess with our lives a lot in the past,' This time Nathaniel allowed himself to go back to his sarcasm.

'What do you know about us, young man?', asked Apollo as he took some more steps forward the human. 'Because, believe me, your old myths are just a part of the much bigger story.'

Touche. Nathaniel, even if well-educated and full of passion for exploring the world and the mystical components surrounding it, wouldn't possibly know *everything*. Nobody could - even the gods themselves. Well, at least they knew *more than him*.

This is why arguing with Apollo wouldn't be helpful for the young prince - especially when Apollo obviously wanted to help. Which, of course, made Nathaniel curious enough to ask some other questions:

'Ok. You are more informed than me about what is destined to be. So, would you please tell me what exactly is my destiny? How can I fulfil it? And would this help me save my mother after all?'

Apollo brought a little smirk on his face. One of his eyebrows went up.

'Well, that depends on your decisions.'

'My decisions? But I thought everything is already written somewhere out there and I should... follow the path.'

'Do you know, human, how many paths of possibilities are available out there? You obviously don't, so let me enlighten you. Even if we, gods, can witness the future of most of you - with the help, of course, of the Fates - we are also not able to know for sure what is ahead of you - or ahead of ourselves, too. We just know that when something of a great importance is needed to happen - like what is expected to be the outcome of what we are doing right now - it happens... most of the times. So, we all read the pages of that book of the future life like it is one of those game books, or interactive movies, where several possible endings are included. Well, minutes ago I prevented one of the endings in your case - you fading away into oblivion down there, in the lands of my dear uncle, Hades. But that would've been the worst possible ending out of the approved once by the Destiny itself - not because a random human being would die, like hundreds of people die every day among the remains of your once bigger world; but because that human being would be *you*. Nathaniel Terek, only son of Reed and Kassandra Terek and one of their two children involved in all this unimaginably complicated story.'

'Wait, wait... *two* children!?' Nathaniel allowed himself to interrupt the god. The young man couldn't imagine being more shocked, after the string of all these events and revelations. 'No, you are mistaken. I am not just their only *son*. I am their only *child*.'

Once again Apollo laughed - and, by the way, the bigger his smile was, the more contoured and attractive his dimples were.

'I told you that you know nothing on many topics, my human friend. But I couldn't blame you. You weren't even born when your sister was kidnapped.'

‘Sister? Kidnapped?’, Nathaniel shouted. ‘No, this is not possible. My parents would’ve told me something like this...’

‘And put such a burden on you? Would they?’, Apollo’s questions were as valuable as answer to the human man who knew well his parents, even his father who had disappeared from his life a long time ago. Another topic which the ancient god decided to talk about just a few seconds later: ‘Reed and Cassandra have always been great parents - even too great at times. So caring that they couldn’t forget their first-born daughter even when there were no trace leading to her whereabouts. But meanwhile, they were also humans – even if among the immortal ones, in terms of never dying because of age, like is the whole dynasty of yours – to which fact you are familiar, as far as I know. However, we both know that humans can develop deep feelings to each other – especially in times of sadness and confusion. This is how *you* were created among the waves of the sea of that eternal dismay of your parents. But Reed and Cassandra being your parents made the situation harder - because after giving life to you, they had to care about you, too. This is why they made the impossible to be there for both of you - their two children. While keeping the secret of your big sister’s disappearance even from the closest people who were surrounding them...’

‘So... this is why both of them always travelled somewhere’, it was just now, after the revelations of the ancient god, that many pieces of the puzzle inside Nathaniel’s head got on their places. ‘Sometimes together but most of the time separated. The journeys in those first years of my life made them worthy enough to be crowned as the King and the Queen of the Kale region... but this was also the period when my father disappeared... and never got back...’

With deep sadness but still with a glimpse of hope in his eyes, Nathaniel took a sigh. Apollo’s next words took his excitement to another level:

‘Yes. But did you ever wonder if his disappearance was only something bad?’

‘What do you mean? Of course it is bad,’ the human man made an indignant gesture with one side of his mouth: ‘Ok, maybe I am once again questioning your godly awareness on some topics but... how could a disappearance of a husband and a father from the lives of his wife and kid be considered... good? In which dimension its absence from their lives could be taken as ‘not only bad’?’

‘The dimensions around us, especially in our case, are quite marvellous while they are weird, my dear human,’ Apollo laughed again. ‘But let me go back to your question - how what happened to Reed Terek affected his family in both bad and good ways? Well, you already know the bad side - he wasn’t there for you and your mother. But maybe... he was there for someone else as much as important for him as you two?’

At first Nathaniel had to think, in order to realise what surprising turn of the events was just pointed by the god.

‘My... my sister?’ He was both amazed and excited. ‘So, he found her after all? But then he... disappeared with her? What? Why?’

Apollo took a deep breath.

‘Some answers you would find in the next stages of your own journey. I cannot reveal everything to you - because some revelations are part of your future path, after you leave this place.’

‘So you just poked me and now you will make me go?’ Nathaniel frowned. ‘And, by the way, is this place here Olympus - maybe I will get a complete answer *at least to this...*’

‘Well... it is connected to Olympus but... at the same time it is somewhere else...’

‘Ok, so I will not get the complete answer at least to this,’ Nathaniel replied with both sarcasm and disappointment. ‘You gods like to always be enigmatic.’

‘Well said, young man. Enigmatic. Not only us but everything that is happening in this unique case is connected to an enigma. I know much more than you about what is happening in many different parallel worlds – and if I have to give you a hint about your case, I will say that many things are connected with the consequences of some serious multi-dimensional events that occurred after my bossy grandfather Cronus got enraged and this caused some changes in the balance...’ He saw the surprised look on Nathaniel’s face and decided to add: ‘Yes, as usual, much of what is happening relates to some family drama among us, the gods. But you will find more during your journey...’

‘You keep repeating about this upcoming journey of mine, but you never go into details...’

‘Because details... are part of the journey itself... After I saved you, as I had to do, I will just push your body and your soul in the direction of more mysticism’ Apollo took the last few steps towards Nathaniel before putting hands on his shoulders. “At first you will be confused but with time everything will become clearer. Just allow the powers - of the supernatural and of your own spirit - to guide you through the trials needed...’

‘Wow... so out of a sudden you add this quite alarming word - *trials*... Should I be *too* worried?’

‘Hm... It depends on your own psychic and physics. The upcoming trials are not like the famous labours of my recently estranged brother, Heracles, if this is what you ask. But they could be tough, yes. Especially when you don’t know who to trust on your way. Let me give you at least one clue, Nathaniel, before letting you go. Listen to the call of your heart - even when you meet *her* and she seems like someone unknown...’

‘Her?’

Of course, since yesterday Nathaniel couldn’t think about anyone else when hearing the word ‘her’ while it being emphasised in that specific way. Was Apollo talking about her? Was he giving him another hint - that Nathaniel will have the chance to meet that wonderful girl, after all? To talk to her... to hold her...

The ancient god quickly put a pause on his dreams.

‘Oh, no, not *that* her... but... However, you’ll soon find out... Good luck!’

No more talking from the god’s side. No more explanations. Even when a second later Nathaniel opened his mouth with the need to ask something else, Apollo simply didn’t give him that choice - like he didn’t give him any choice in this situation, actually. He just... pushed the prince. He *literally* pushed him and then Nathaniel fell in the magical softness of the clouds...

A path of destiny should be followed. And this path was sent into an astonishing new direction when Nathaniel’s body and soul were rushed into a very specific state...

Forest. Deep, dark forest.

Well, it was quite dark but at least it was still daytime, so some rays of light made the place that was now surrounding the young prince not *too* dark. Yet, from the second he arrived here, the man felt completely lost.

For now, his only way seemed to be a little slope between some very tall trees - he followed it while trying to be prepared for everything.

‘Oh, yes, this is not like Heracles’ labours, but it is still quite a trial...’ at one point he began talking to himself. Now he could understand what Apollo meant when he said these words

- or at least he thought he understood. ‘Who knows, maybe if a just walk for some hours... AAAAGH!’

Suddenly Nathaniel slipped down the slope and a few seconds later his body fell into a hidden hole between the wild vegetation. He hit one of his hands - but at least he didn’t get too bad injuries.

‘What is expected from me to do!?’ starting to feel anxious, the young prince stood up and looked at the skies, visible between the branches of the trees. ‘At least give me a sign if *this* is the way I am supposed to go?’

Nothing happened. So, Nathaniel just made an angry gesture, then he snorted and quickly got out of the hole. He kept going on his way (or at least on what he hoped was his way) while trying to be even more careful.

Then the rock appeared.

A big stone blocking the only pathway. Walking around it would be impossible even for someone who had experience of climbing trees - the vegetation was *too* wild and the possibilities of some not so pleasant animals appearing from the depths of it was quite high.

Nathaniel had *to climb the rock*.

At least he had some experience with this. Years ago, he and his mother used to go climbing the high peaks north of Kale - somehow, she always believed that this was some kind of a special connection to his father’s disappearance, as he was last seen in that same region days before vanishing from the face of Atlantis.

And now, for the first time the prince had that additional clue that maybe the disappearance of the king was connected with the disappearance of his bigger child, Nathaniel’s big sister.

Oh, man, the idea of that girl was still so unbelievable! And the young brother of hers still tried to assimilate it. He had... a sister. Another child of his mother and his father - a kid they never talked about in front of him. A girl who, if she was still alive, would be few years older than him. So amazing...

Exciting things to think about at that time. However, the big rock was still standing on Nathaniel’s way.

It is good that the man also had some muscles - with the help of them and of some old knowledge he got on the top of the stone for a few minutes. But just when he thought that the hardest part was behind him, the prince heard a hissing sound. Then he saw the one who made it - a big snake, maybe three meters long, Doing some chaotic movements down there, on the other side of the rock.

‘Damn, I am so tired of meeting snakes today!’, Nathaniel whispered to himself. ‘Well, at least it is not a typhon... or a hydra...’

While he was pointing some references to the recent disturbing events and, once again, to those not so recent labours of Heracles, the man started looking for some less dangerous way to pass through the snake without having to walk on the same path where it moved in different directions. And he saw some kind of a solution - the branches of the trees. Up there, on the stone, the vegetation was not that dense so with a good enough plan Nathaniel probably would’ve had the chance to remain whole.

Probably.

‘Either you risk it or you stay here and meet a disgraceful death of hunger and thirst,’ he quietly said to himself once again, then he looked at the slope behind him. ‘Or maybe go back and search for another way... Oh, however... This way has obstacles – so probably it is the right way...’

He decided not to think about going back anymore - and maybe this is how he followed the call of his heart in a not so joyful mood, considering the visible – and some hypothetical not so visible on that point - dangers in front of him...

So, he climbed on the branch that was near him. Then on the other. And on the other. And while he was climbing, the snake continued its chaotic circling down there, without paying too much attention to him. At least it didn't pay attention to him before his presence became too obvious.

When the shadow of the human passed over, the reptile looked at him and hissed. Quickly the deadly animal started climbing the same tree Nathaniel was on right now.

"Oh no! Get back!", he shouted but when the snake didn't listen to him, he became faster and faster.

The chase between them up there, between the crowns of the trees was kind of thrilling - and happily, we could say that Nathaniel won at the end of it. Having been able to trick the animal to go in the wrong direction he succeeded to finally step on the ground again - and to walk (run) down the same familiar slope.

He kept running until he reached... the beach.

An enchanting beach. Quite different than the last one Nathaniel had visited, Architraves, it consisted of small flat pebbles and was surrounded by a fog. Even with a prominent mysterious vibe, that special place also seemed like a quiet and peaceful piece of art - one that came straight from a masterpiece painting. A place for solitude and ultimate nirvana in the world...

But... what was that world anyway?

Nathaniel felt that he was not on Olympus or wherever Apollo had taken him a while ago. This place didn't seem like Atlantis too - or at least the prince had never visited such a wild, yet wonderful place of his enormous home island. A unique place where no trace of a present human civilization was visible.

Here came the next question - was Nathaniel really alone here?

As the young man took his first steps in the direction of the water - a water so clean and blue that it most definitely didn't seem like a part of an island with several metropolitan cities on it – he also felt captivated by how pure and fresh the air was, even in the presence of a fog.

There were some other mysterious and barely visible, but at the same time picturesque lands in the distance. A blurry point to stare at with hours, while sitting with on the beach with dreamy thoughts - yet what suddenly captured Nathaniel's mind the most was... the silhouette that came from that same direction.

A slim gallant woman with very unordinary presence. She almost seemed like a ghost - but she wasn't. She also looked like a human - but something in her wasn't typical for a human. Nathaniel could feel these facts without even seeing her face - or any other component of her fascinating appearance. Because the lady stayed there, in the fog, drifting slowly over the water, as the light breeze was slightly blowing her gorgeous long hair and beautiful dress. The only connection the young prince could have with her at that moment, apart from seeing her mysterious silhouette, was her deep, expressive voice:

'Hello, young prince Nathaniel, of the Terek dynasty...'

The man blinked with an excitement. Her voice sounded so warm and caring, almost like of a mother. But Nathaniel couldn't remember meeting her before.

'You... you also know who I am? Even in my... current look?'

It was just now that Nathaniel took a quick glimpse at his own body and clothes. After the crazy events around Apollo's temple and after the not too long but rough enough experience in the forest his appearance wasn't the best.

‘Yes, my dear’, the mysterious woman still sounded so calm and gracious. ‘You are Nathaniel Terek, son of Reed and Cassandra Terek, grandson of Derek and Taylor Terek, after whom that branch of your old family is named...’

‘You are familiar with my grandparents too? I mean, *those* grandparents who I never met because they and many more of my relatives from my father’s side, live in another realm?’

‘Yes. I know more about them, as I know more about some other relatives of yours’, Nathaniel still couldn’t see her, but he was sure that she had a kind smile on her face.

‘But even my mother and I don’t know too much about all those members of my father’s family. Only my dad himself had met some of them several times in his younger years’, he furrowed an eyebrow. That strange lady seemed so nice, but he knew that sometimes hospitality could be fake and dangerous. ‘And... if you are so close to them... why wouldn’t you show your face to me?’

‘I will, I promise. But first you need to experience... other memories of me. Ones that are not yours.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Well, it is not hard to explain. It was just several hours ago from your perspective, when you and your mother were standing there, in that basement... in that circle of Very Special Fair Magic...’

Once again for that day, Nathaniel was completely stunned.

‘You... you know about this? But... but it was s secret... and only my mother and my father knew about it...’

‘Yes, but for someone like me these places of Very Special Fair Magic are completely visible even without the need to research them. This is why I now know that we are currently staying on one of them. And this is why I waited for you to come here after Apollo sent you.’

‘So you and him are accomplices? Hm...’ Nathaniel was still not quite sure if he should trust that woman. Yet something in her was still so trustworthy...

But was *she* the one Apollo talked about?

‘We could say that we are accomplices, yes’, the woman replied with a slight laugh, then added: ‘However, let me show you what I mean. Believe me, young Nathaniel, when I say that you need to witness the story I will share with you - part of which was previously shared with me, too. It would be longer than the unfinished story of your father that Cassandra didn’t have the time to project into your mind - because here, on this place, we have a lot of time.’

‘Will you tell me what this place is, before ‘projecting’ anything into my mind?’, asked Nathaniel. ‘Or you, just like Apollo, prefer being secretive while talking some not very clear things?’

‘You will get an answer to this question, I promise. To this question and to some others - but many new questions will arise, I am afraid. I don’t know all the answers myself - and this is where you come, in order to fill some blank spaces even in my own fateful journey. And to continue straight forward on the path of fulfilling your destiny - while helping others fulfil theirs too. Are you ready, my brave Nathaniel?’

The man took a deep sigh. He still had his hesitations. But while it seemed like he had a choice in this whole scenario, something deep into his soul made him feel like he didn’t. He *had* to follow the mysterious lady into that another story. Not for a first time in the past few hours, he had to follow what his instincts - not his mind - called him to. Ironically, considering that those same instincts almost got him killed near the temple of Apollo – what at the same time brought him right in front of Apollo himself, of course.

So, Nathaniel humbly nodded with head, thus giving green light to the strange lady to spread her hands on both sides. And, without even moving closer to the young man... to show to him...

VI

Book of The #Hinn: Piano Ballad

*Oh, you dear journey of mine,
Would you please step out in the light?
This is how we'll know we're fine
In the fire of our path and our fight*

Tenderly and lovely, the wild madness in the introduction of that famous “Often Fire” song somehow perfectly arranged all the four necessary, desirable words of a legendary fairytale beginning - “Once upon a time” - in the world of harmony.

Or at least in the colourful world of Harmony Hamilton and her constant daydreaming these days.

The woman who was sitting next to her in the dark secret room between the balconies of the old theatre hall - a gorgeous diva with youthful look, considered by many as one of the most popular pop stars and music producers in the last decades - couldn't help but see the magical glimpse in these two magnetic blue eyes of the girl. This same older lady, who Harmony knew just as ‘My dear aunt Samantha’, graced the moment with a mild smile of warm feelings on her face - but it was not before the ending of the song when she finally decided to ask her niece:

‘So... would you tell me more about these undoubtedly profound thoughts in your pretty head, my darling?’

Harmony looked at her with a positive vibe.

‘I love it. The song. The setting. But most of all – the singer. She is a diamond, Sam. I think that you should hire her.’

‘Thank you for that precious, helpful opinion about the casting call, my sweet girl,’ Samantha’s smile got bigger. - ‘But I was not talking about it.’

‘You weren’t?’

‘No. I wanted to know more about *your* thoughts. These romantic nuances of a dreamer which have taken over your head and the beautiful soul in it. Harmony, my dear... are you in love?’

The girl blinked, as her soft, white cheeks turned red.

‘Oh... in love? Oh, auntie... I... I am too young to fall in love.’

‘Actually, you are just in the age when many of those fairytale princesses fall in love’, said Samantha, almost laughing.

‘Yet, as far as I know, I *am not* a fairytale princess but an American high school student in London. A teenager with *too big* dreams, perhaps,” Harmony sighed as she looked at the piano on the stage. ‘And life is not always a song we could sing with our hopes that it will lead us to our Happy Ending. Sometimes it doesn’t even lead us to our Happy Beginning.’

‘Nothing is guaranteed but, as we know pretty well, life still arranges the best Happy Beginnings and Happy Endings for some people,’ Her aunt stated as she gently touched the nice long, blond hair of her niece. ‘Having your own fairytale is not impossible these days, my sweet child.’

‘Ok... I have to admit you are right about this,’ Harmony said, then she looked at the elegant female singer who was still standing on the stage and listening to what the other members of the

jury in this musical contest, the visible ones, had to say. ‘But let’s talk about that topic later. Now it is time for *this* wonderful power vocalist to shine and have *her* Happy Beginning and, hopefully, her Happy Ending. You *will* give her a chance to be the new groundbreaking star of your music company, won’t you?’

‘Of course, I will.’

Samantha didn’t seem to have even a tiny doubt about that answer in her heart. And Harmony was happy about it – yet she still couldn’t stop thinking about... *him*.

And he couldn’t stop thinking about her either.

As the young Finn Trent was staring at the front façade of the glorious Notre-Dame de Paris cathedral, he was trying to convince himself to finally call Harmony.

‘Nothing scary, Finn, nothing scary....’ He said loudly, yet only in his thoughts. ‘She is just an old friend of yours who happens to be in London while you are in Paris. You two could just hang out for some drinks and... talk. Nothing scary, Finn, nothing scary.’

So, after taking several pictures of the great old building with his hyper phone, the young man also took a deep breath and quickly found Harmony Hamilton’s profile in the mobile version of the modern social media platform “Presence”. It was then when he finally did it – he got brave enough to press the dial button and call the girl for a video chat.

At that time Harmony was just going out of the theatre and heading to the street leading to Piccadilly Circus. Just when she was reading an interesting article about some interesting old stone artifacts that have recently been found in Copenhagen, Denmark, the picture of her old friend Finn Trent appeared on the screen and made the girl tremble with excitement. She quickly brushed her long hair with her delicate fingers, then she answered the phone – and the first sight of Finn she saw was him brushing his own dark-brown hairs with his own fingers.

The two young people smiled at each other.

‘Hello!’ They said at the same time.

And then their smiles got even bigger.

‘Sorry, I don’t mean to take much of your time... but I saw your recent posts,’ Finn started explaining with a flicker in his hazel eyes. ‘You’ve been in London for the past several days, right?’

‘Yes.’

‘Great! Because I am in Paris right now and... you know, these two great old cities are very close to each other, and you don’t even need to wait on those endless lines in the stations for modern teleportation... so I wondered if we two could...’

‘Yes, we can,’ Harmony didn’t even need to hear the whole invitation of him to know that she already agreed with it. ‘I’ll be glad to see my old childhood friend in person and walk the wonderful streets of the Old World with him! Yet today I have plans to visit a place which is not in London, nor in Paris. So... could we possibly both travel to that not-so-distant another city in Western Europe?’

‘It is not a problem for me, as I am completely free today. Which city are you talking about?’ asked Finn.

‘Antwerp, Belgium.’

So, they both travelled to Antwerp, Belgium.

And when their overjoyed eyes gazed at each other in the late afternoon of that same warm day of late summer, Harmony and Finn both knew *that* was the place they should be right now. They quickly got closer to each other, then they hugged right in front of The Brabo Fountain and all the historic buildings surrounding it.

‘Wow... you got even prettier than the last time I saw you,’ Finn said then with his usual behaviour of a gentleman - that noble kind of man rarely seen in the second half of the 21st century.

‘It was just a couple of weeks ago,’ Harmony stated with a big smile.

‘Well, I guess Europe helps beautiful people to get even more beautiful!’

‘It does, indeed – just look at you!’ The girl decided to give him some compliments in return, as she looked at his handsome body. “You do workout even on your trips, I guess?”

‘Not exactly. But in the last three days I’ve been giving some help to my cousin Luke in his vineyard near Paris.’

‘Vineyard near Paris... What a lovely thing!’

‘It’s even more lovely when you see it in front of you... and remains lovely even when you get tired of working hard in it. But most lovely it is at sunset, after a hard-working day, when you just sit on the bench and stare at the scenic view with a fresh apple in your hand... and your mouth’, said Finn, laughing, then he asked: ‘However... Where are we going now? Is it a place as cozy as an old vineyard in a French province?’

‘In some ways it is,’ Harmony answered with a kind of a mysterious look on her face. ‘To be fair, it is not situated here, in the centre of the big city, but in its outskirts.

‘Guess it is not a vineyard?’

‘No, it is much bigger. A castle.’

Finn was pleasantly surprised.

‘This sounds promising.’

‘Yes... it is!’ Harmony’s voice got even more excited, as was the look on her face. ‘Can you imagine? Another old castle discovered in a country of castles – isn’t it thrilling? And we are some of the first people who have the chance to see it in this early stage, as it is still not open for visitors.’

‘Let me guess... This awesome privilege of ours is a fact because of that famous uncle of yours, Troy, and his wife, Celeste? Two of the greatest young archaeologists of our time.’

“That’s right,” Harmony nodded her head. ‘They just gave me a special pass for the ruins of that same castle that their close friends and colleagues found in a wild forest earlier this year. However, we won’t meet Troy and Celeste because they have to take care of some other professional responsibilities in the wide world, yet two of the people I just mentioned will be waiting for us at the site. So, handsome adventurer... are you ready to go back in history?’

‘Oh, yeah, you sweet girl of beauty... I am!’

This is what Harmony and Finn were forced to realise when they later went deep into the forest north of Antwerp. Usually, this place was known to be surrounded by some of the small buildings of the city's outskirts but for the two young teenagers walking through the barely visible paths felt like a never-ending journey through the wild.

At the end of the first hour Harmony stopped at one place, focusing her attention on the screen of her hyper phone (the battery of which was almost drained already). The online map still showed their location with details – yet it felt like the boy and the girl were wandering in the exact same part of the forest they were thirty minutes ago.

'Let's hope it's not broken,' the girl said about her mobile device.

'Don't worry, mine is also an option,' Finn quickly got his own phone out. 'Just send me the location of the castle.'

Harmony nodded and fulfilled his wish. But when the young man's device tried to get to their own location first, the result left both teenagers speechless.

'No... that can't be real...' Finn started, shaking his head.

'What?'

'My map shows me that right now we are *not anywhere near Belgium!*'

'How is this possible? We were in Antwerp just an hour or two ago! Where are we then?' Harmony answered her own last question by just looking at her friend's phone. 'Austria!? What!? How!?'

She quickly changed the scale of her own digital map and then the new shock came – instead of looking at the map of the Belgian forest now she was looking at a map of an Austrian forest near the town of Murau.

'Totally confusing!' Harmony exclaimed then. 'Our devices want to tell us that we didn't just completely change our direction but also went across the whole of Germany and climbed the Alps without even realizing it?'

'Don't worry, pretty girl. There's got to be an explanation for this. Maybe if we continue walking straight to the point on which the old castle is supposed to be... Look, the map still shows it somewhere near us... even though it somehow changed its location from Belgium to Austria.'

Harmony was not very pleased about the idea of them potentially getting deeper into the woods of confusion, but she had to admit that this was their only chance of getting *somewhere else*.

So, she and Finn continued walking in the same direction they'd been going for more than an hour now – the newly discovered old castle. A few minutes later they got some kind of positive rush when one of its highest towers suddenly appeared between the crowns of the trees – this gave both teenagers some orientation about where they had to go. At one point they even stopped using the presumably-bugged maps of their phones – just to find out another shocking fact when they decided to check them again while finally getting close to the big palace.

'No way!' Harmony was the one who first discovered it. 'We're not in Austria anymore!'

'You are kidding, right? We moved to another country *again*?'

'Apparently, yes. According to my map right now we are in the wild forests of the Balkan Mountains in... Bulgaria.'

She said the name of the country not very loud – because her words were suddenly interrupted when the phone's battery died, and the device turned off.

'Let me see if it is the same with my... map...' Finn looked at his own hyper phone – just to find out that it was also not working. 'How is this possible? My battery was half full!'

‘It looks like we got into a forest of impossible things,’ said Harmony, feeling some cold shivers, then she looked at the castle nearby. ‘Maybe we can find some answers when we finally get to our destination?’

Finn wanted to look optimistic but, just like her, he felt like this was their only option. So, they just followed the path of it again - although ‘path’ did not seem like the right word anymore. The trees and the bushes were so close to each other in this part of the forest that even the big palace couldn’t be seen clearly. Paving their way through that dense nature gave the boy and the girl some not so serious stitches.

Everything changed when they finally reached the castle. Even though the teenagers were still totally confused about what was happening, they both smiled with a kind of relief, as their curious eyes met the front façade of the marvellous building in its full. A centuries-old castle with a lot of history – that was for sure. With the height of a modern skyscraper and the look of an architecture masterpiece of a Renaissance genius, the palace was also, expectedly, all covered with the signs of an abandoned building - but not the overgrown flora, nor the shadows of the wild fauna, not even the mud surrounding the place could make that piece of art look less magnificent. Actually, these components made it look even more respectful.

And in its core this sense of respectfulness towards the castle was something hypnotizing for people with romantic souls like Finn and Harmony. It was like a calling everybody needs to hear, a melody destined to be followed...

With their hearts full of excitement and their eyes full of eagerness, the two young people quickly got closer to the grand gate of the old building. There was no fort wall, neither there were locks – the big wooden door was just there, waiting to be opened. Yet, the girl and the boy clearly weren’t prepared for what was awaiting them on the other side of it – but they still went there.

VII

Book of The #Hinn: The Bard in the Woods

The first thing they saw was *the bard*.

Young, handsome dark-haired man with quite different clothes and a lute. Sitting on a rock in a forest and singing with the vibe of a carefree bird:

*Then the old wooden chest opened,
Oh, then the old wooden chest opened!
So prince Kyle and princess Fea got curious,
But their bold curiosity got somebody else furious!
It was the...*

He suddenly stopped, as his bright blue eyes saw the two teenagers who had just appeared on the pathway between the branches of the bushy trees nearby.

Yes, let's repeat this unexpected fact - the bard was not sitting in a castle hall but on a big rock in a wild forest. Unexpected and astonishing fact which quickly made Harmony and Finn even more confused. During the bard's song they'd already started looking in different directions, searching for the castle's doors – but they'd found nothing. Then they looked at him, as surprised as he stared at them.

'Oh, dear... my cozy hideout was finally found, I guess!' The man with the lute got up on his feet, greeting them with a kind smile and a sense of humour. 'I suppose that now my songs and I are forced to go back home and make my dear neighbour Mrs. Haffley angry again!'

'Who are you?' asked Harmony. 'And what is this place? Where is the castle?'

The bard made a strange gesture with his eyebrows.

'The castle? Hm... are you lost?' he asked as he looked closely at them.

From the very beginning their clothes seemed quite unordinary to him, as his clothes seemed unordinary to them, like was previously said.

'Kind of,' was Finn's answer. 'We were just going into an old castle's entrance when we suddenly got here. And we cannot explain how or why!'

'Oh!' the bard got excited. He remained silent for some seconds, then whispered: 'The Strangers from the Old Castle's Gates... That's you two! I just cannot believe my luck!'

Finn and Harmony's confusion got even wilder. Fortunately (or maybe not), the bard's explanation came immediately afterwards:

'But if you are really *them*, of course, you wouldn't know it. The Strangers from the Old Castle's Gates never know who they are because usually they are chosen to participate in this magnificent Upcoming of our kingdom without being told in advance. And the one who meets them first, their Fellow Pal – in that case of ours it happens to be me (oh, lucky me!) - must explain everything to them and lead them in the world of Arbortrium!'

'Arbortrium? This is how the place we are standing right now is called?' Harmony asked.

'Yes. It is one of the biggest and greatest kingdoms possible. And each year it becomes even greater when The Strangers arrive and the Upcoming starts. But let me explain all of this to you in detail. The story started when three centuries ago the Three Dryad Sisters built the

Palace on the Tree with Three Branches. I've never seen it in person, but I've heard such wonderful stories of its magnificence. It is the place where one of them – the strongest one, Alilla – still lives today as a ruler of our lands. She is also the one who created the idea of the games with The Strangers, the so called Upcomings.

'You, my friend, keep repeating about these Upcomings,' said Finn. 'Could you please be more specific about these... games... because, as you probably don't know (like we two do not know anything about your world) - in the long history and in the colourful pop culture of our world sometimes the term 'games' could relate to many things, some of which too scary and even sadistic, created by the mad mind of a tyrant...'

'Oh... no, no, no... our Upcomings are nothing like that!' the bard laughed. 'As for explaining the nature of them – I was just heading in that direction. So let me first start with your role in them, beautiful lady...' He stared at Harmony once again. 'As a female, the main reason *you* are involved in the Upcomings is to find out - and actually, we all need to find out - what you are...'

'To find out *what* I am?' Harmony did not know if she had to be confused or offended.

'Yes - if you are a Hero, a Coward or a Martyr.'

'Wow! The second one was rude, man,' Finn exclaimed. 'And what about me, the other Stranger? Why won't you and your people try to find out if I am... one of these things too?'

The bard laughed again, then took some steps around Finn and looked closely at his whole body – both front and back. After that the young musician stated:

'No need to worry about you. There is no doubt that you are a Prince Charming.'

'Really?' asked Finn as his eyes started winking. 'You got the answer that easy, just by staring at my looks?'

'Well, even without looking that close anybody would know for sure that you are handsome enough to be a Prince Charming.'

'Hm... so, if the handsome male Strangers have to be immediately considered as Princes Charming, then why the female ones can't be... Princesses... or maybe Magical Fairies?'

Finn took a look at Harmony as his deep feelings towards her personality and towards her, undoubtedly, fairytale beauty, possessed him again. That girl was so gorgeous, and she most definitely deserved to be compared to those princesses of legendary beauty or fairies of wonderful magic. And her eyes clearly said to him how possessed by him she was too.

Meanwhile the bard answered the question:

'Things are more complicated with girls than they are with boys. This is because the rulers of our kingdom, the Three Dryad Sisters, are all girls – well, they are actually grown women. That's why they have always wanted to be sure that the female participants in the Upcomings would know their place more than any other – and be proud of it.'

'Proud of being a... Coward?' Harmony couldn't help but be sarcastic. 'Can't wait to find out the feeling of it!'

'You definitely won't be a Coward, pretty girl' Finn assured her with a wide smile. 'I know for sure that Hero suits you more. And let's hope you won't be a Martyr.'

'Actually, Martyr is considered the greatest one of the categories – the one most of the girls usually dream of at the end of the Upcoming,' said the bard.

'They dream of being... dead?' Harmony wanted these words to sound different, but they just couldn't.

‘Not exactly,’ the bard shook his head. Then he took a few steps away from the teenagers and closer to the wild vegetation nearby. ‘But let’s leave all other explanations for later. Now we must go to the village, in order to start the earliest preparations for this year’s Upcoming.’

‘Wait a minute,’ said Harmony. ‘You just expect us to come with you, the complete stranger, through the wild forest, and participate in some so-called Upcomings for which we were just somehow abducted by your world?’

‘Oh, no, my dear,’ the bard shook his head again. ‘By coming with me you two will just follow the lead to *your own destiny* – because, believe me, you would eventually reach it one way or another. As for the other details... maybe it is time for me to not be a stranger to you. Let me finally introduce myself – my name is Bromley Wenlic... the glorious bard Bromley Wenlic (well, at least glorious in my home village, Blazewood)! And don’t worry - I will not just lead you through a dangerous dark forest into an unknown world. Because here, in Arbortrium... some things could be easier.’

He left Harmony and Finn totally amazed when his hand reached the tree leaves nearby but instead of just touching them his fingers suddenly opened an invisible portal between them... in the air.

‘Let me present to you the Blazewood village!’ Bromley Wenlic said with a positive tone as his right hand pointed to the small wooden buildings on the other side of that same portal.

‘You are... a magician too?’ asked Harmony.

‘No, no, my dear – I could wish,’ the man with the lute laughed once again. ‘Cutting a short way between our homes and the nearby nature is something everybody who has lived in Arbortrium for a long time could do. It’s our connection with that same nature, you know? The nature our Dryad Queens come from.’

Harmony and Finn looked at each other. They were still unsure if listening and following the steps of this quite an interesting man would be the best for them – yet just staying here in the woods didn’t seem like a promising idea either.

So, they decided to give Bromley Wenlic a chance.

But just when the boy and the girl were making their first steps towards him and the portal, the bard suddenly slapped his own forehead and exclaimed:

‘Oh! I almost forgot! *The Animal Sidekick!*’

He started looking in different directions. At first, he was silent but when he finally found what he was looking for – and it happened to be in a small river passing nearby, he shouted with a tone of joy:

‘Here you are, tiny buddy! Are you ready for an adventure?’

Soon he took the little animal in his left hand and quickly gave it to Harmony.

‘A turtle?’ she asked.

‘Not just a turtle, my dear – but THE turtle of that journey of yours. Each time the Strangers from the Old Castle’s Gates arrive in Arbortrium they receive a sidekick given to them by their Fellow Pal (And that’s me!), the feeling of whom decides which kind of animal is the one selected specifically for them! Well, let’s hope that my feelings did not lie to me, and that I didn’t just take an innocent little soul from its family.’

He looked at the river once again and Harmony and Finn did the same. Then the young girl gave the little turtle a smile and said to it:

‘I promise that, if it turns out that we have taken you by mistake, I will bring you back here myself.’

The little animal didn't answer even with a movement of its body – right now it was hiding in its shell. Nobody could say for sure if it was scared because of the situation or if it was just sleeping and preparing for the great mission of its life. But one thing was for sure – neither Harmony nor Finn felt fully comfortable taking it with themselves on the other side of the portal.

But they had to do it. Seconds later, the bard, the boy, and the girl with the little turtle finally stepped into the portal, and it immediately closed by itself behind them.

Chapter VIII

Book of The #Hinn: Lady Graciella's Home

The Blazewood village immediately inspired Finn and Harmony with its traditional look. In their world all the small square houses with tiled roofs and nice green yards would have been considered a timeless classic of past eras – but in Arbortrium these buildings and their perfect symmetrical arrangement were just a part of today's reality.

Many of the residents here were curious about the newcomers when the well-known bard led them and the little turtle to the centre of the village. Some of these people, all of which wore the same type of old-fashioned clothes as him (or at least they would be considered old-fashioned in the teenagers' world), quickly guessed that the two strangers were *The Strangers* - which, of course, made them excited and even a little bit jealous of the person who had found them first – Bromley Wenlic, the bard. Or as we'll call him from now on – just Bromley.

One of the few people whose hearts naturally didn't know what jealousy meant was just sitting there at the fountain on the main square. She was a thin middle-aged woman with short height and grey hair – and some people found a striking resemblance in her look with one of the four stone dames on the statue of that same fountain. The statues, alongside their marvellous beauty and their confident poses of powerful femininity, had been the most shining part of Blazewood's centre for decades.

Lanna, the aforementioned middle-aged lady, had also been a core part of the village for a very long time. Her wide spectrum of knowledge was the reason for many people from the whole kingdom of Arbortrium to come here every day, with the hope she would be able to answer their questions and solve their problems. So, it was nothing new nor unexpected for her that someone would come here leading this year's Strangers from the Old Castle's Gates with him/her – yet it was the first time this someone would be a young man who Lanna helped raising.

'Oh dear! Good gracious!' Her scream of excitement attracted even those who didn't see the newcomers in the first place. 'Is this what it seems to be, Bromley?'

'Yes, it is. Lanna,' the bard answered with his well-known positive smile. 'The Strangers! I was the one who was meant to find them this year!'

'I recognised them immediately! My radar is never mistaken! Wonderful! So wonderful!' The grey-haired lady exclaimed, as she made a full circle around Finn and Harmony, examining them. 'And they are both so pretty – actually, some of the prettiest in recent years!'

'Thank you,' Harmony decided to be polite with that sympathetic woman. 'So, you are the other one who will prepare us for the... Upcoming?'

'No, darling, but I will help with whatever I can, of course. Lady Graciella is the one who will prepare you. Seems like her involvement is of a great importance this time.'

'Lady Graciella? Who is she?', asked Finn.

'Hm... I'll let her introduce herself when we go to her home.'

'So, the two of them meeting her is *that* needed after all? They are... two of *those Strangers*?' The bard got even more excited.

'Yes, Bromley, I think so. Your radar seems strong, too.'

'One of who...?' Harmony asked.

'She'll explain it better, my dear, she'll explain it better,' said Lanna as her left hand grabbed the right one of the girl. 'Come with me. You all come!'

Harmony, Finn and Bromley didn't resist – they followed her on a tiny path leading to the other side of the village. When the four of them (actually, *the five* of them, considering the importance of the little sidekick turtle) got there, they saw... nothing but a wide meadow.

'Are we going to ride horses now?' asked Harmony and while her flickering eyes were looking for that particular kind of animal, many nice memories came into her mind - memories of her parents teaching the five-year-old version of her how to ride a horse on a peaceful meadow like this.

'No,' Lanna nodded her head. 'No need for that because Lady Graciella's mansion is right here.'

'Is it?'

It didn't seem so. At least in the first moments – but when Lanna led Harmony, Finn, Bromley and the turtle through the meadow *many things changed*.

Oh, how they changed!

First came the water from the sky – but it was not rainwater at all. A sudden splash of an amazing waterfall got both Strangers and their companions completely wet – but just for a second, because in the next one a scary darkness embraced their whole bodies and somehow made them dry again.

'What's happening?' Harmony got upset and, of course, the first thing she searched for in the darkness was the hand of the only one she fully trusted.

Finn searched for her hand too. And as their shivering fingers touched, a dreamy magic filled their bodies with joy and gave them bright faith – as well as some other unforgettable feelings...

Then the darkness turned into a dense grey fog, and later the dense grey fog turned into a light mist.

This state – the mist – was the one which was meant to stay for longer. As was meant to stay the huge old 17th century Baroque-style palace in the wide front yard of which all of them were currently standing.

Lanna, who had just witnessed how stressfully worried and numb Harmony and Finn were during the whole process, quickly gave Bromley a judgmental look.

'You didn't tell them about the Transitions through the Stages of Senses!?'

'Well, I showed them how we, the local people, could make an Ordinary Transition,' The bard started, biting his lips with a slight smile. 'But, as I've never been able to become part of a transition between Stages before, I didn't actually know *what* to tell them.'

'So, could anyone finally *tell us* something?' Finn then asked with a raised sarcastic tone.

'As soon as possible – or at least before we start thinking that we've been kidnapped *again!*' Harmony added.

'Ok, I'll explain,' said Lanna. 'As you already know, our world is quite different from yours. And the kingdom of Arbortrium is, undoubtedly, one of the most interesting ones around. Some of us are able not only to open portals from one place to another just with the help of our hands, but we could also visit some places which are usually not visible to everyone. Like Lady Graciella's house here.' She looked at the impressive building in front of them, then she continued: 'This mansion has always been hidden in the Second Stage of Senses – which is not reachable for an ordinary person from the First Stage, but after a special transition, like the one from a minute ago, it becomes fully visible for people with special abilities like me. And, as you probably already realise – for the Strangers from the Old Castle's Gates and their Fellow Pal.'

'Yes - *now* we understand,' said Finn, again with his sarcastic tone.

‘Are the Stages of Senses only two?’ asked Harmony who certainly was not expecting the answer she would get:

‘Oh, no,’ Lanna laughed. ‘There are one hundred and eighty-six Stages.’

‘One hundred and eighty-six!?’ Harmony and Finn exclaimed at once.

‘To be fair – one hundred and ninety-two if we count the six Most Mythical Ones, four of which have been something too rare-to-be-seen even for me.’

‘Our world is quite different, as our dear gentle Lanna already told you,’ Bromley said, then hugged the grey-haired lady with the friendly tenderness of his left hand. ‘And the kingdom of Arbortrium in particular. There are so many things to be seen by some people and so many to not-be-seen by them.’

‘Is this fair for everybody?’ Harmony took a sigh. ‘I mean... doesn’t anybody deserve to be... fully free to explore the world they are born in?’

‘Well, my dear, that theme is also something quite different and even more complicated than in your world,’ said Lanna, as she warmly put her hand on the girl’s shoulder. ‘But don’t worry, as Strangers from the Old Castle’s Gates, you and your young Prince Charming will be able to unlock many of the Stages much faster than most people of Arbortrium – as you proceed in the Upcoming, of course.’

‘Oh... we two are not...’ Harmony and Finn’s simultaneous reaction to some of her words was immediate.

‘I mean... he is not my...’ said the girl, as she looked at her old friend with shy eyes and rosy cheeks. ‘We are not together!’

‘Like *together* together!’ Finn added, looking at her in the same way.

The ironic thing was that they both knew what they *actually* wanted. And they both knew what the other one *actually* wanted. And Bromley and Lanna knew *all of this* as well. But for now, the statement of the teenagers was not a lie - Harmony and Finn really had to be considered not *together* together.

‘Hm... We’ll see, we’ll see...’ the older lady made a mysterious – yet not that unclear - movement with her half-closed eyes as her smile got bigger. ‘But now it’s time to go.’

She took some steps to the grand staircase leading to the big wooden front doors of Lady Graciella’s house – and the others followed her again.

Surprisingly, this enormous mansion didn’t seem to have any doorkeepers, wardens, janitors or all kinds of other servants – at least not near the main entrance; and at least not the types of servants Harmony and Finn would expect to meet here. But as they and their companions started walking through the vast luxurious corridors and the magnificent interior of the old Baroque-style building, Lanna gave some hints to the girl and the boy, as well to the curious Bromley, telling them that the mansion’s personnel were actually present – but not in an ordinary way. As Lady Graciella was usually a person of solitude, her servants were a special type considered a part of Stage of Senses No. 6 – individuals, not necessarily humans, who live in specific areas of the kingdom and are born to serve others. When hired, they become possessions of their master and live in a small house in the backyard of his or her home – and he or she is the one who could ask them to teleport nearby in case of need. Also, the owner of that pretty special personnel could decide how visible they are allowed to be – which means that even people who have the ability to see in the Sixth Stage could not be able to actually see these bizarre servants if the same are not allowed to show themselves.

‘There is something sad in this type of life,’ Harmony couldn’t help but feel bad when Lanna explained this type of hierarchy structure to her and the others.

‘Well, we could be sad for them if they were able to feel sadness themselves,’ said the older woman. ‘But, as I explained, they are born to live like that – which is not connected to any personal feelings for them. However, we are finally here. Lady Graciella’s Great Library – the place she usually likes to spend her afternoons!’

Lanna said this as she stopped in front of two big wooden doors decorated with some noteworthy carved ornaments – of birds and tree branches, with an accent on the many opened books in between them. They were closed but the grey-haired lady quickly opened them without even knocking – as if Lady Graciella was already expecting all of her guests.

And when Harmony and Finn took their first steps in the big library, they finally saw the owner of the mansion – she was sitting in an armchair near a fireplace. Then the unexpected realization came.

Lady Graciella was not exactly a human.

Her slim body had an impressive height of almost 2 meters (if we need to be accurate – 1.98m). The fine hands and the fine legs of this unordinary woman were in perfect sync with her elegant figure – as were the thin neck and the very interesting almost spherical head of hers.

As were her four transparent wings. And the flexible long abdomen which she usually used as a third leg. And her two enormously big eyes with a nearly human vibe, reigning there, at the top of this still non-human body.

Many of you might have already guessed but let’s say it straight – Lady Graciella was a large dragonfly. Not the type we could usually see in nature, nor exactly the type of that once popular piece of art jewel called ‘the dragonfly woman’², she seemed like her own unique kind of an insect with some sensible similarities to a human.

But her intelligence was way above normal for a dragonfly and an average human.

‘The Strangers from the Old Castle’s Gates!’ As this specific Lady Graciella’s exclamation proved to Finn and Harmony that she could also talk, the giant dragonfly got up off the cozy armchair and stepped closer to them. ‘I knew it. I felt it. My senses never disappoint me – today is the day they were destined to come to me!’

As her delicate blue body moved in a classy manner, the two human teenagers found out that she also had some black hair – pulled back behind that peculiar round head with the previously mentioned big eyes, a small mouth and two tiny, almost invisible antennae on it. Even without human ears she was also somehow able to hear and understand what others say to her – that’s why Lanna’s next words made her even more excited:

‘And they are quite special, my dear, don’t you think so?’

‘Oh, yes, they are! Of course, of course... Even more special than most of the special ones, I see...’

Yes, she could totally see it – and the others around her could see how the black irises of her interesting near-human eyes got bigger as she stared at this year’s Strangers from the Old Castle’s Gates.

‘So extraordinary... So amazingly enigmatic...’ Her excitement got bigger and bigger. ‘I feel that this year’s Upcoming will be remembered for a very, very long time!’

Finn and Harmony looked at each other, then looked at Lady Graciella again before the girl asked her:

‘Could you please explain to us what do you mean by that? Lanna and Bromley also said we are... *different* Strangers.’

² A famous corsage ornament created by the French jeweller René Lalique at the end of XIX century

‘Not only you are different, but you might turn out to be one of a kind... well, actually two of a kind.’ the human-like dragonfly smiled. ‘You see, I could usually feel some of the most delicate components connected with the individuals around me. That’s how I know that your names are Harmony Hamilton and Finn Trent, and you come from the planet Earth in a parallel dimension of ours. You might think I am some kind of a medium, right? But no, I am not. This is just a part of the nature of my type of clever - and, sadly, almost extinct - dragonfly species. This is why The Three Dryad Sisters once gave me the chance to be one of the few Trainers of The Strangers in the kingdom. We are the ones who could, more than anyone else, feel what is needed for leading characters like you to become the Perfect participants in the Upcoming. Yet, in very rare cases newcomers like you are *even more special* than the others. For now, it is hard for me to explain what that means but let’s say that decades ago one of the three other known Special couples of Strangers even succeeded to break the boundaries and become something different from what the Upcoming usually makes The Strangers.’

‘A Hero, a Coward, a Martyr’, Harmony proved to already be well-informed of the three roles she was expected to explore.

‘Or Prince Charming.’

Not having too much choice, Finn made a funny gesture with his eyebrows and part of his mouth.

‘Yes, indeed,’ Lady Graciella nodded with an even wider smile on her head.

‘So, which are the Special options for us?’ asked Harmony. ‘Or at least what was the one reached by the people you just mentioned?’

‘Oh, my dear, I could not share that information with you. That could interfere with the choices you will make in the Upcoming. But at least now I could help you find the right place for you in the kingdom of Arbortrium – by training you. Come on, let’s first introduce you to the place you will live during that period.’

She went to the doors of the library and then led Finn, Harmony and the others to the East wing of the palace. They all went on the second floor where Lady Graciella explained:

‘So, from now on, until the end of the Upcoming, this floor will be property of you and only of you. Of course, I remain the master of the mansion,’ the dragonfly woman laughed gently, then continued: ‘You, Harmony, will use the rooms on the left side, and you, Finn, will use the rooms on the right side. Young bard Bromley, you could live in the room in between them at the bottom of the corridor – only if you don’t want to travel from your own home in Blazewood every day, of course. You three won’t need servants here because I’ll make sure that in your free time, you’ll have anything you need – but you should be aware that the free time won’t be too much. We must prepare you, Harmony Hamilton and Finn Trent, for the important mission, which means we four should train as hard as we can. The first training starts tomorrow at 08:00 AM in the old wooden arbour in the backyard. Be there on time. I will wait for you.’

As she said all of this, she gave the two Strangers and their Fellow Pal one last positive look – as did Lanna before both of them went back in the direction to the library.

And while the woman with the grey hair and her old friend, the dragonfly lady, were having their tea hour between all of those shelves with books, Harmony, Finn and Bromley had the pleasure to explore the wide range of possibilities that their floor of the East wing could offer. That included not only large bedrooms with comfortable beds in the same magnetic Baroque atmosphere of the place but also some quite unexpected rooms like a quite futuristic bathrooms with all amenities possible, their own two smaller libraries and, what would probably be the most pleasant place for young people of their age – an Entertainment room consisting of variety of many intriguing video games and other similar features from different epochs.

So, for the rest of the evening the newest two Strangers from the Old Castle's Gates and their Fellow Pal had the opportunity to relax. They all knew any rest could be vital for them, considering the importance of the mission they had to fulfil.

Chapter IX

Book of The #Hinn: Lion's Bridge

*Far away, in lands ancient of wine and goods,
once lived Bartholomeus, the merry minotaur of the woods!
Every morning, he greeted all the people with a happy roar,
he woke them and their slothful livestock to the core!*

Harmony and Finn opened the doors of their opposite rooms in the East wing of Lady Graciella's mansion and each one of them gave a sleepy look to the cheerful bard who had just woken them with a song. Bromley, on the other hand, artistically played with the strings of his lute for one last time before honouring the teenagers with his wide friendly smile and with the greeting words:

'Good morning, my fellow Strangers from the Old Castle's Gates! Are you ready for your first training day? We have only fifteen minutes left to prepare and to go to the backyard!'

'Fifteen minutes!' the boy and the girl exclaimed at one and the same time.

They stared at each other for a moment, then quickly went back to their rooms, closing the doors behind.

Another six minutes later Finn went out of his cozy bedroom again, and Harmony did the same in the minute after. They both had more clothes on them now and their hairs were tidier... or sort of.

Bromley was waiting for them on a couch in the lobby on the same floor. When all three of them were ready to go, they headed to the backyard. Meanwhile the bard gave a positive look to the small turtle who Harmony was holding in her left hand..

'Did you give her a name?' He asked.

'Oh, it is female?' Harmony's face shined as she tenderly touched the animal's head. 'No, she doesn't have a name yet. At least not a name *any of us* gave her, but who knows how her parents named her...'

The girl sighed. She still felt uncomfortable that the so-called Animal Sidekick of her and Finn was a creature they took from its home in the wild. Bromley was quick to try relieving the guilt in the hearts of her and the other boy:

'You two shouldn't worry. Usually, the Sidekicks of The Strangers from the Old Castle's Gates are meant to get better lives when they become Sidekicks. Which means that the previous life of this little buddy was not as promising as its current one.'

'Yet, her parents could be somewhere there, looking for her.'

'If this is true - soon they will find out that their daughter has become the main Sidekick of this year's Strangers, which will make them proud enough to understand the situation and to wait for her to return in their lives someday. But if you need to say 'Sorry' to your little turtle - you could do it right now. Turtles of Arbortrium understand much more things than you probably think - and yours is fully able to get what you want to say to it. Soon it will be able to talk to you, too.'

'How wonderful!' exclaimed Harmony and once again touched the small animal's head with tenderness, as she said to it: 'You should know, little friend of mine, that I am truly sorry for the situation. Finn is, for sure, sorry too. But we are also thankful that you could share the

upcoming adventure with us - and we promise that once our mission is accomplished you will be able to go back to your original home in the river!’

‘As for your name,’ said Finn. ‘You seem so tiny and fragile, yet so fresh and cool - and we would definitely treat you as our precious tiny and fragile, yet fresh and cool Animal Sidekick - so probably we should name you... hm... Fraggy?’

‘I like it!’ Harmony accepted the suggestion.

‘Nice name, indeed,’ said Bromley.

At that time the three of them had already reached the gate to the backyard - and after opening it their thoughts immediately went into another direction. The training.

While walking on the main path and searching for the old wooden arbour, Harmony, Finn, Bromley (and probably Fraggy, too) felt quite captivated by the fresh and well-maintained back garden of Lady Graciella’s home. The amount of lush vegetation here was impressive - you could easily feel like you were in a pretty big botanical garden. The variety of plants was uncountable - as were their colours.

There was also a small lake with a fountain and many water lilies in it, on the other side of which there was a two-floors house, almost hidden between the leaves of three giant oaks and a willow. It seemed empty, even abandoned, but the teenagers and the young bard knew that it was the place where the unusual servants of the mansion lived.

At 07:59 AM the three humans and the turtle finally reached the wooden arbour where the fine dragonfly lady was already waiting for them.

‘Good morning, sweet children!’ Lady Graciella greeted them with a smile. ‘Come, come here. Let’s start this amazing journey as soon as possible!’

She invited them to sit on two of the benches. She herself was already sitting on another short bench surrounded by the flowers of two luxuriant hydrangea bushes - light blue and dark purple.

‘I see that our little Sidekick is here as well,’ said the insect lady, giving an even bigger smile to the calm turtle. ‘Good, good. She better be prepared for the game, too.’

‘We just named her Fraggy,’ said Harmony.

‘Nice name,’ Lady Graciella approved, then she took a deep breath with her mouth and got back into the main direction of their talk: ‘So, my darlings, let me explain what we will do today. To be fair - this is closely connected to what the real Upcoming will consist of. Harmony, Finn, what you two are meant to bring to the world of Arbortrium is... not like anything the other Strangers before you brought. Completely unique. Because *your own senses* will create it. We are talking about some possible *brand new Stages of Senses*.

‘We can somehow create Stages by ourselves?’ Harmony felt astonished.

‘In a way - yes. During the official Upcoming - and during our practice before that - you will first create *your own dimension* - a one which would be completely new for Arbortrium. Of course, this dimension won’t be independent of our kingdom - because it is Arbortrium’s mighty magic that makes this ability possible in the first place. The magic The Three Dryad Sisters once gave these lands.’

‘About these sisters...’ Finn decided to gently interrupt her. ‘I think that it is time for us to know more about them.’

‘You will know everything you need once you complete the Upcoming,’ said Lady Graciella. ‘Because this is when you will be finally able to see their unmatched Castle on the Tree with Three Branches - their kind of palace. It becomes visible in this greatest non-mythical Stage of them all - the last one, 186th. Only The Strangers from the Old Castle’s Gates and few other persons like me are given the chance to have that precious gift.’

‘You seem like a quite special citizen of this world,’ stated Harmony. ‘It is surprising that the ability to see you becomes active only in Stage 2.’

‘Thank you, sweetheart,’ said Lady Graciella with a gracious smile. ‘Well, the main reason people like you and your Fellow Pal could see me in an early Stage like the second one is, as you could probably guess, because I am one of the selected helpers of the Strangers. I got that position years ago, as I am one of the few trusted persons of The Three Dryad Sisters, like I already told you yesterday. Currently, of the last remaining one on the throne - Alilla.’

‘What happened to the other two?’ asked Finn.

‘This is a story I am not allowed to share with you - not yet. But I promise you that you will find out the answers of this and many others of your questions during the process of training or at the end, when this year’s Upcoming game is completed. As for today’s training - do you have any other questions or should we start?’

Finn and Harmony looked at each other, then they looked at Bromley who also didn’t look fully familiar with that matter.

‘Well,’ said the girl. ‘Probably you should first tell us more about that whole *dimension* we are expected to create.’

‘It doesn’t need to be a dimension like, let’s say, a whole universe, whole galaxy or even a whole planet. It just needs to be *a place*. Somewhere only your minds, along with your bodies, will be able to go - and I am talking about you two, Strangers, your Fellow Pal and your Animal Sidekick. Nobody else - not even The Three Dryad Sisters - will be able to visit it - not until you develop it into something good enough to be connected with the unique mind of the Stadium of the Upcoming. Just then, in front of everybody, you will present your great creation and all the secrets and novelties your minds had previously created by going deep into your own souls. This is when you will have to pass through an epic and risky adventure in which you, Harmony, will show yourself as a Hero, a Coward or a Martyr, and you, Finn, will be a Prince Charming - if, of course, your special case don’t lead you into a whole new different and rare direction. Once you finish your journey in front of the hundred thousand eyes of all those species of Arbortrium present, your dimension will change its form - by examining this new final creation of your connected minds, the Stadium will integrate all of the useful parts of it into our kingdom.’

‘So... our dimension will somehow *merge* with Arbortrium?’ asked Harmony.

‘That’s right! And that unique creation of yours will enrich our magical kingdom with its own knowledge, its own wisdom, its own one-of-a-kind elements - some of which could possibly create some brand new Stages of Senses, as I previously said. Or add something to some previously existing ones.’

‘Sounds... very exciting,’ said Harmony, looking at her old friend again. ‘For us to be able to create something special which would help one whole kingdom.’

‘How could we imagine what kind of mission was expecting us while looking for that old castle in Belgium?’ Finn smiled.

‘Belgium?’ asked Lady Graciella. ‘Is this the place where you walked through the Old Castle’s Gates?’

‘Well... not exactly,’ said Finn.

‘We started our journey of searching for the Castle in Belgium but as we were walking through that forest, we suddenly realised that we somehow got to Austria... and not that much later we found out that we even reached Bulgaria. Then our phones turned off.’

‘Austria... Bulgaria... Hm... interesting...’ Lady Graciella gently touched her chin, then her big eyes got half closed as she stared at the two teenagers. ‘I’ve heard of these countries before - but we’ve never had Strangers who arrived from there. Let’s see what an interesting

dimension your minds will create while you are connected to the last place in your parallel universe you've been before entering The Old Castle's Gates.'

'Does it matter?' asked Harmony.

'Oh, yes, it definitely matters. You see, my children, your whole personalities were created during your early years and the planet or planets you were living on. Your connection with your original world will always be part of you - and that is the main reason people like you are needed in our kingdom in order to enrich it with the uniqueness of their home universe. That said, your souls somehow remember *the sense* of last being in that universe - and of that specific place on which you took your last 'home breath'. So... Bulgaria. That is what will definitely be an important part of your new dimension's basis.'

'A country we barely know?'

'Oh... you already know more than you think - just being there and feeling the country's presence around you already gave you enough - and Arbortrium's magic will help this potential in some astonishing ways. But I'll let you see it and feel it by yourself when you start building your dimension. Are you ready?'

The boy and the girl were pretty excited - and they showed it to one another when they looked at each other again. Then they gave one more look to the also very thrilled to be part of this bard - and just when they saw the approval in his curious eyes, they could finally answer Lady Graciella's question:

'Yes, we are.'

'Wonderful!' exclaimed the older woman, then her mouth took a deep breath again. 'So, you could just close your eyes and let the power of this very special arbour - and the powers of the magical thoughts I'll send towards you - possess you. Of course, you don't need to create and transfer yourself into your dimension while we are all completely quiet. Bromley could sing one of his songs while you took yourselves, himself and the turtle... to your new temporary reality.'

'So they will be with us *everywhere* in that dimension?' asked Harmony.

'Indeed. But they won't be able to create anything your own minds wouldn't want to. Yet, they will help you when it is needed. Actually, the potential song of the bard could be some kind of help, too. By singing it Bromley would... let's say *set the initial tone* of some components of your new dimension - and at least at first it won't be necessary for you to worry about potential danger. Because the tender energy of the music will drive them away in advance.'

'Wow... and some say that music doesn't heal,' said Bromley whose spirit was highly elated after these words. 'So, my dear Strangers from the Old Castle's Gates... what kind of song do you wish your favourite faithful bard to sing for you so he can help this thrilling cause of yours?'

'Hm... you know, the one you woke us up with sounded kind of promising,' said Harmony.

'It was something about a... happy minotaur?'

'Ballad of Bartholomeus, the *Merry* Minotaur,' Bromley clarified the name, making an accent on the word 'merry'. 'It is an old children's song for 'Good morning'

'What a positive way for a child to start a day - by listening to a song about an infamous bloody monster of Ancient times,' Finn said sarcastically.

'Oh, no, Bartholomeus was anything but bloody! But you'll get what I want to say when you listen to the whole song,' said Bromley, then took a deep breath, closed his eyes and touched the strings of his lute with fingers, creating a pleasant introductory sound.

Harmony and Finn closed their eyes too. And as the bard started his song, Lady Graciella started sending her special magical thoughts to the three of them and the little turtle.

The two teenagers' minds slowly drifted off while listening to the children's song:

*Far away, in lands ancient of wine and goods,
once lived Bartholomeus, the merry minotaur of the woods!
Every morning, he greeted all the people with a happy roar,
He woke them and their slothful livestock to the core!*

*No, Bartholomeus didn't mean to be scary,
As this ballad tells you - he was merry.
A friendly smile, a soul so soft, a heart of gold -
Sadly, people's views of minotaurs were quite old:*

*'We should kill that monster at any cost
Before it becomes the reason for many lives lost!'
It is what that old crone, Miss Holsworth said,
Convincing everyone Bartholomeus was a threat.*

*But he wasn't - and he wanted to prove them wrong.
That is why he decided to go on a journey so long -
To save the miller's youngest daughter, Mirrabel,
Who in a bad, trustless marriage had once fell!*

*She was a rare beauty of an indisputable kind,
Thus evoked some sin longings into her husband's mind.
He was jealous of everyone who could see her face,
So one day he just kidnapped her without a trace!*

*So, Bartholomeus asked the town's witch for a spell -
She, just like him, was of a nature kind and well.
Ability to fly she gave our minotaur so merry,
And outstanding strength - both for him to carry.*

*The mythical hero of the woods fled away south.
So many people he horrified with his beastly mouth,
With his horns, his bull hoofs, his long tail,
His steps heavy that easily left a solid trail!*

*Yet, a creature like him had a useful side -
He was not afraid of darkness, of places with no light.
Feature so useful to his otherwise scary nature
That led him straight deeper into this adventure.*

*When his path of searching led him to a cave,
He had a lot of courage, a strength of someone brave.
For the sake of the girl in the cave he quickly went -
But soon a sudden...*

Light, warm wind is what suddenly interrupted the bard's song.

Yes, it *was warm* in the backyard of Lady Graciella's home, but not *that warm*. Something had definitely changed and that's why Harmony, Finn and Bromley put all their current dreamy senses on hold and opened their eyes at once.

They were *there*. At the basic beginning of the special dimension created by The Strangers from the Old Castle's Gates. And it was not basic at all, even though at first it seemed like a... desert.

'I can't believe my eyes!' exclaimed Harmony with a lot of excitement. 'It is true! We are not in the arbour of Lady Graciella's backyard anymore. We are in *our own* reality.'

Her last words were meant for Finn, who seemed as amazed as she was.

'And our own reality begins with a... desert?'

'I guess, my dear Strangers, that the first creation of these shared senses of yours is not exactly a desert,' Bromley said. 'Look at this particular kind of trees in the distance. The place we're currently in is more like a *savanna*.'

And really – the mass flora of this dry place had too many specific characteristics of a savanna than of another well-known type of almost-a-desert. The tall vegetation the bard just mentioned (to which vegetation the three people and the turtle got even closer in the following minutes) had the appearance of typical acacia trees. The presence of a large baobab not too far away between them was yet another proof of the kind of ecosystem The Strangers' minds had created.

The lion who was sitting on an empty field next to the trees was another proof.

'Lion!' Harmony almost screamed, yet her senses of self-preservation stopped her in time. 'Could it be dangerous? I mean, it is the world *of our minds*, and we wouldn't want anybody here to get hurt, right? Well, actually, Lady Graciella hinted at us that dangers are somehow possible here so...'

Her question was addressed to the bard who still seemed more familiar with all these kinds of stuff than Finn and her.

'Nobody could tell for sure,' answered Bromley. 'Dangers are possible even in the dimension of your senses, yes. They are usually provoked by the magic of Arbortrium and when occurring they are meant to be part of the preparation for the ones in the Upcoming. But this lion doesn't seem to be fierce. Actually, I think that we could approach him and talk to him.'

'To... talk... with a wild lion?'

'Yes. But you two are the ones who decide what we should or should not do in this dimension. I only listen, give opinions and advice.'

‘Well...’ said Finn, staring at Harmony as she stared at him. ‘When will we have the chance to *talk to a lion* again?’

‘At least several hundred times if you explore that world of yours through the years,’ Bromley decided to give both of them a quick answer.

Harmony and Finn looked at him with their eyes full of amusement, then looked at each other again. But there was no need for them to think anymore – they had taken a decision even before the bard’s answer.

The Strangers, their Fellow Pal and their Animal Sidekick got closer to the lion. That’s when they found out that he was not alone at all here – not too far away from the impressive animal, just behind a tall bush of dry vegetation, there were also a lioness and three young lion cubs. The little ones were playing with their momma in an adorable way – and they continued their funny game even when the humans and the turtle in girl’s hand approached them.

The lioness took a look at the newcomers in a quiet, calm manner. She said nothing to them – but the lion did. And he totally surprised them with what he had to say.

‘You want to learn more about History?’ asked the lion, staring at The Strangers from the Old Castle’s Gates with a deep, perceptive look in his eyes.

‘About... History?’ Harmony was not sure what his suggestion was about. ‘History... of *what?*’

‘Of *here*. And not only.’

‘*Here* has a history?’ Finn was pretty confused as well. ‘I thought that we two just created it?’

Lion brought a specific, unusual smile on his animal face.

‘Everything has a History. Even before that, as you call it in your lands, Big Bang and the many variations of it in different cultures. But I am not the one you should speak to about *this History here*. You better go and talk to your great-grandfather, young girl.’

His head slowly moved to his right. But while the humans in front of the lion were reacting by looking in the same direction, Harmony couldn’t help but ask:

‘My... my great-grandfather? What does he have to do with... all of this?’

That’s when she saw what the others could also see. Right there, not far away from here, there was a building. A wooden house with two floors and a small label with a handwritten text over the front door.

‘What is...’ Harmony decided to ask the lion but just when her look tried to go back on him... he was not there. He was gone, and the lioness and the little cubs were gone as well. ‘Hey, where are they!?’

‘I suppose they were meant to be some kind of a sign your shared subconscious wants to give you,’ said Bromley, looking at the wooden building. ‘And this is probably the next sign.’

‘So, you think that we should go in there too if we want to continue our journey and get some answers?’ asked Finn.

‘Indeed,’ said the bard as his head nodded. ‘But let me remind you again - *you two* are the ones who decide what we all do here, in this dimension.’

The boy and the girl stared hesitantly at each other – apparently, they were meant to do it often in the strange situation they were brought in without their full will. A situation with so many sub-situations in which the teenagers had to take decisions.

‘Ok. Let’s go,’ said Harmony. ‘And let’s hope that we will find someone inside who would be able to tell us how my great-grandfather is involved in all of this.’

So, they all approached the wooden building. And as they were getting closer to it, the clearer the text of the label over the front door got - '*Inn of History*'.

Finn knocked on the door, but nobody answered – so he decided to open it and go inside first. Harmony, the turtle in her hand and the bard followed him.

The setting there was quiet and dark – yet not too dark. Only a few small windows on the ground floor were serving some kind of weak illumination to that old, dusty place. The only bigger room here seemed like an abandoned inn – as the label over the main entrance almost said. It had all the signs of those well-known inns of old times, but it missed the most important thing – the light of the living.

After exploring the ground floor for some minutes, Harmony, Finn and Bromley decided to go upstairs. They tried to be as careful as possible while stepping on the wooden stairs of an uncertain condition at the bottom of the hall. When they got there, they were surprised again - because they found out that the inn was not quite abandoned after all.

The second floor was a little bit brighter – yet with some dark shadows covering the place. In front of the main window there was a table – and at the table a woman was sitting. Tall, slim, with brown shoulder-length hair, she was dressed in blue jeans and a green sweater. Her face was oblong and dry – as the newcomers could see when she stood up and turned to them, looking at them in a quite uninterested way with her amber eyes.

‘What would you like to order?’ she asked them with a bored voice.

‘We... we would...’ Harmony stammered. She and her companions looked at each other again. ‘Actually, we don’t plan to order anything.’

‘Hm... really? So why are you here? Nobody visits “Inn of History” nowadays.’

‘We’d like to talk to you about... what The Lion said to us,’ answered Finn, aware that the woman might not know who that lion was.

But she knew. And her eyes got bigger when she heard his words.

‘So... you *are* here about History after all.’

‘Well... we suppose so...’ said Harmony, looking at Finn and Bromley again. ‘The lion mentioned something about... my great-grandfather. And, considering how History is involved in all of this, I think he meant that famous grandfather of mine who is *a very famous historical figure* - Georgi Go...’

‘That explains everything,’ The woman interrupted the girl before Harmony could finish. At the same time the same strange lady started nodding her head. ‘But I am afraid that I won’t be able to tell you much. You should first travel to The Bridge by the roller coaster. Just after you pass on the other side of that river structure, you’ll find more about your great-grandfather’s adventure with Jay Trent.’

‘Trent?’ asked Finn. ‘As *my family name* Trent?’

The woman didn’t answer – actually, she was already going in a specific direction at the other end of the floor.

‘Hey! Where are you going?’ Harmony tried to go after her but just when the strange woman opened the only door at the opposite wall, the unknown lady suddenly disappeared in bright light.

By risking to follow her on an uncertain path, the two teenagers, the bard and the still-passive turtle followed her on the other side.

That’s when their bodies were suddenly caught up in the grip of something unexpected - but not *that* unexpected. A roller coaster with comfortable open seats, similar to those of a

chairlift. Before anybody could react, it started moving at a high speed – in a circle amidst the shining green nature at the back of the Inn of History.

No, they were not in a savanna anymore. Now they were in the middle of a nice fresh valley in the pine woods – but not for too long...

Spinning around and going deeper into the valley, shouting with no clear direction, our companions soon got so dizzy that it took them some seconds to get back in good shape when the roller coaster finally released them, and they were able to step on their feet again.

And then they saw it right in front of their eyes. The Bridge.

A stable stone structure over a river. Not too monumental in size but possessing quite an impressive look if compared with the low tiled houses surrounding it (mainly on the other side of it where a big old town was situated). There were several places in the distance where some distinctive towers and domes of different temples could be seen in the heights.

But what the newcomers of this special place found even more intriguing was the multi-coloured linen flag hanging on the nearest side of the bridge. It seemed torn and dirty, probably because of the weather conditions, but the beautifully embroidered words in the middle of it were still visible. They were written in the Cyrillic alphabet – a type of script Harmony and Finn usually found unfamiliar but now they were able to read it... somehow. As was their human companion, the bard.

‘Our Liberty is Here...’ It was the girl who first read the words carefully - but in her own native language, English. ‘Wait a moment... how did I automatically translate a language I never knew!?’

‘You are not the only one,’ said Finn.

‘I could read the text as well. And I think I know the reason,’ stated Bromley who was also quite excited in his own way. ‘We are in *your world*, after all. Even the unfamiliar things could become familiar to you – and to your Fellow Pal, of course – here.’

‘Incredible!’ exclaimed Harmony. ‘I wonder if we will be able to keep the ability to understand this language when we get back to Arbortrium or to our home world? I guess it might be Bulgarian, right? Lady Graciella said that somehow the base of our dimension could have some common roots with this country.’

‘Well, we could try to go on the other side of the bridge and ask somebody if your hypothesis is right,’ suggested Finn. ‘That strange woman in the inn hinted to us that we could not be able to pass, though...’

‘We could at least try,’ said Harmony but just when she and the two men made their first steps on the bridge... the complications came.

All of a sudden, the weather changed. Dark clouds covered the skies, and it was seconds later when wild rain started pouring over the heads of the travellers. They couldn’t even reach the middle of the river structure when scary merciless lightning blocked their way by hitting the bridge and creating an enormously majestic wall of electricity.

The Strangers, their Fellow Pal and their Animal Sidekick didn’t even have the chance to try passing through the killing barrier between this side and the other. When the lightning hit the bridge and the ground under their feet shook, the two creators of this dimension had their minds totally shaken too – so the symbiosis between them got weaker.

The next thing they remember was the stunned look on Lady Graciella’s face – still sitting there, on the small bench between the flower grasses of her mansion’s backyard. But now her eyes were wide open – as were the eyes of the people who had just returned here.

‘Oh, dear! Are you fine? You are trembling!’

She said the visible fact – the three young people’s vibe was of some quite disturbed humans. Fraggy the turtle was hiding in its shell.

‘We... we...’ Finn stammered, then he and Harmony started explaining everything in a quite distraught way: ‘We almost got hit by a lightning!’

‘We were just trying to get on the other side of the bridge!’

‘The strange lady from the inn told us to try going there in order to find the answers we need!’

‘Answers about what she and the lion mentioned about my great-grandfather Georgi and someone with Finn’s family name, Trent!’

‘But we got no answers at all!’

‘Calm down, my dears...’ Lady Graciella went closer to them, in order to touch their hands and give compassion to them and to the bard. ‘Maybe you should go to your rooms and rest. Let’s see each other tomorrow at the same time - here, at the same place. When you are calm you can explain everything in detail to me and we will discuss our next steps. But you should relax before that.’

The younger ones agreed with the dragonfly lady. They stood up and went straight into the house, still full of the dizziness of their wild experience in the other dimension.

Lady Graciella couldn’t stop looking at them until they were not in the backyard anymore. But now her look was not just stunned. The dragonfly lady was worried – by something she had tried to hide from the humans, but she couldn’t hide it from herself.

Something bothered Lady Graciella’s soul, and she had to act as soon as possible – that’s why once she was alone in the backyard, she quickly stood up and disappeared in magical light.

X

Book of The #Hinn: The Council. The Pieces of a Shattered Star.

A luxurious chariot of a light blue colour, decorated with artistic silver images of nature, stopped at the front gates of a mysterious mountain palace. Seconds later, a fine dragonfly woman stepped out of the traditional – yet very modern in its mechanical core – vehicle and took a few steps to the entrance in the tall, metal fence. It opened in front of her, and the peculiar lady went inside.

The palace behind the fence was of a very strange, unordinary nature. It was carved into the high mountain peak of mountain Venesko, north of the Blazewood village. Not too many residents of Arbortrium were able to reach this place even with hard climbing skills – because it was hidden in Stage of Senses No. 182.

But Lady Graciella was never worried that this magnificent place could not be reachable by her – not only because she was one of the few living creatures who were able to visit Stage 182, but because she was also one of the most important representatives of the unique council that this unordinary house was a residence for. A council selected, of course, by the Great rulers of these lands – The Three Dryad Sisters.

Once the dragonfly lady stepped into the wide lounge of the big house, she was greeted by an interesting man whose head was of a badger, but his body had a much larger structure, like of a grizzly bear. But his manner had nothing to do with that of any of these types of wild animals...

‘Good evening, dear Lady Graciella,’ he said gently, with a friendly face. He even bowed his head. ‘The Council is waiting for you in the main hall.’

‘Thank you, Gerardo,’ said the dragonfly lady, nodding her head, with a smile. ‘I am glad everybody is here on time.’

She took another few steps straight to the big doors at the other end of the lounge. She opened them with both of her hands and then gracefully entered the main hall.

‘Good evening! Thank you all for coming!’

‘We were intrigued by what you said,’ The first person who talked to her was an old human lady with white hair. She seemed quite normal but many people in Arbortrium knew that she was Petrona, one of the most powerful witches in these lands. ‘Something about *how different* this year’s Strangers from the Old Castle’s Gates are?’

Lady Graciella sighed. She went to the only free chair and sat on it.

‘Quite different, indeed. To be fair – scarily different.’

‘Tell us more about them,’ said a big blue fox who had enchanting light green eyes.

‘Their names are Harmony Hamilton and Finn Trent, and their Fellow Pal is Bromley Wenlic, the bard of Blazewood. Their Animal Sidekick is a young turtle they called Fraggy.’

‘Nothing surprising in all of this,’ stated another peculiar member of The Council – a man with a reptile body and a human head with four eyes.

‘The surprise came earlier today, during my first training with them,’ explained Lady Graciella. ‘Like always, we were in the arbour of my backyard. Everything seemed normal as always – I told them all the details they needed so they could start building their dimension, then they closed their eyes and, with the great power of our wonderful kingdom and with my magical thoughts sent straight to them... they disappeared. For several hours I waited patiently for their return – and for the whole time I could feel that they were in the dimension that Harmony and Finn created, and in that dimension, time passed in a different way – as usual.’

‘You still don’t tell us something new, my dear,’ the blue fox interrupted her.

‘Yes... because everything seemed absolutely normal... until the last minutes before their arrival back to me,’ Lady Graciella sighed again. ‘Usually I could feel it – and embrace it. But now, when I felt that they were coming back from the world that they created... a completely new anxious feeling obsessed my soul... I knew something was missing. *Someone* was missing.’

‘Oh no... One of the strangers or her companions couldn’t leave the new dimension and come back to you?’ asked another member of the council - a lady with a body of some kind of an animal and three round heads with a horn on each.

‘No, no, they all were back a few moments later... But someone *was* missing. I don’t know how to explain it because, as you know, usually the individuals in our Games are meant to be four each year – two Strangers, one Fellow Pal and one animal Sidekick. But as they returned to me... I felt that they should’ve been *five*.’

‘That’s impossible,’ said the man with the reptile body. ‘The number of companions has always been *four*. Everything different than that should be considered anomaly.’

‘Maybe *it is* some kind of anomaly,’ stated the blue fox woman, then asked Lady Graciella: ‘Did you share your concern with them?’

‘No,’ she answered. ‘They were quite stressed themselves when they appeared in front of me. And the reason was somehow connected with The Strangers themselves – with Harmony’s great-grandfather, Georgi, and with somebody who has Finn’s family name, Trent.’

‘Hm... Georgi... The Trent family...’ said an old human man, who was silently sitting next to the blue fox – until now. ‘I don’t know why, but this combination of names sounds familiar to me.’

‘Then you should do some research,’ stated Petrona, the witch lady, after carefully listening to all things the dragonfly woman had to say. ‘And you, Graciella, should be very cautious during the next training with the four of them. It is important for you to find out if the case of these Strangers is too risky for the balance of Arbortrium.’

‘Straight from the beginning they felt quite different to me... but I couldn’t imagine they could be *this* different,’ said Lady Graciella, then nodded her head. ‘Ok, I will try to find as much as possible during our next session. But what if I find nothing?’

Silence. A deep, awkward silence took over the place – but this silence was an answer to the dragonfly woman’s question. As was the harsh look Petrona brought to her face.

Lady Graciella was shocked by the suggestion the witch gave her without even talking.

‘No... you can’t be serious,’ she said as she stood up abruptly from her seat. ‘You don’t really suggest that I...’

‘We cannot allow things to get out of control, Graciella,’ the witch stated, frighteningly calm. ‘You remember what happened in one of the previous three different cases, don’t you?’

Lady Graciella took a deep breath.

‘It will be different now,’ she said quietly. ‘Like we made sure it would be in two of those cases.’

‘How could we know this for a fact?’ asked the man with the reptile body. ‘Petrona is right – if in the next training session The Strangers show to you that their case is *too different* than allowed... then you should...’

‘Don’t even say it!’ Lady Graciella shouted, then she turned around and went to the doors of the hall, but she didn’t get out before hearing the last words of Petrona which were addressed to her:

‘Remember what principles you are meant to follow, Graciella. Don’t do something you will regret. Just do your job.’

The dragonfly lady stopped walking for a moment, yet she didn’t say anything to the witch or to any other member of The Council. She took a deep breath again and then left the room – trembling and deeply torn apart in her soul.

In different cultures of the home Earth of Harmony Hamilton and Finn Trent, seeing a falling star could mean many things. But in Arbortrium the disappearance of a star from the night sky was a different kind of event.

The two Strangers from the Old Castle’s Gates had an interesting, shared moment connected with this phenomenon, as many residents of this kingdom would call it. It happened later the same evening when the young girl was staring at the stars while staying on the balcony of her room in Lady Graciella’s house. In her hands she was holding a book with some intriguing images in it. She was so focused on examining both the night sky and some of the pages of that same book that she didn’t even look at the door of her room when somebody suddenly knocked on it.

‘You may come. It’s open,’ she said.

Somehow Harmony knew the one who was entering the room was Finn. When he saw her on the balcony, he reached her with slow steps – but before he could say something... the event happened.

‘Look!’ the girl exclaimed with excitement as meanwhile her hand pointed at the one and only... *red* star in the sky.

The star was shining more brightly than all the others – and its different colour made it even more visible and outstanding. But probably the most breathtaking thing about it came seconds later, when the red shining object got scattered in thousands of pieces which went in different directions, creating the impression of a firework-like sight.

After any of the small pieces were no longer visible, stunned Finn finally allowed himself to say:

‘Wow... It was... amazing! Was it really a star?’

‘Yes, it was,’ answered Harmony and then she finally gave the young man a shining look with a smile. ‘I was waiting for it. Did you know that in this world falling stars don’t really *fall* or move in a direction, but they get bigger, then change their colour and at the end they scatter into many pieces? We just witnessed that process with one of the rarest types of ‘falling’ stars – the red ones. They appear once or twice in this kingdom’s year cycle – and the small pieces of them don’t just disappear in the air but each of them finds its way to the night bed of... those lovers who are meant to be together.’

She said her last words quietly as her glimmering eyes met his eyes. For a moment they felt bewitched by this special inmost moment not only between their physical bodies but between their sparkling souls too.

Then Finn smiled and stated:

‘You seem very acquainted with this world’s nature phenomena.’

‘Not exactly,’ said Harmony. ‘But earlier today I decided to try reading something from my private library – and I found this book of legends about the stars in Arbortrium. Imagine how

surprised I was when I got deeper into the calendar of these unordinary events and calculated that it is very possible that the scattering of the red star could be seen *this evening*.'

'And apparently I had the best luck to come to your room at that same moment,' noted Finn, still giving her that charming smile on his face.

'Yes...' Harmony whispered with the gentle tone of her sweet voice. 'By the way, why did you come here?'

'I just wanted to be sure that you feel better now. It's been a few hours after the... session in the garden... but we never talked about it after Lady Graciella sent us to our rooms.'

'I am good now, thank you, And I am glad to see that you are good as well. But I don't think talking would help us much. I feel we need to go *back there* if we want to know what to do from now on. That bridge and the electrical wall in the middle of it... We *must* find another way to pass them.'

'The river didn't seem that deep and wild,' said Finn. 'We could probably try reaching the other side by just... getting through the waters?'

'We could,' agreed Harmony. 'But we cannot be sure that another terrifying lightning won't cross our way again. Also, I think that we should talk to Bromley and hear his opinion first.'

'That's right, we should. His role in all of this might be more important than he thinks himself,' agreed the young man, then he took a deep breath. 'So... I suppose that we should just go to sleep and wait for... tomorrow?'

Harmony nodded. At the whole time of their short talk the glimmering eyes of both of them couldn't stop staring at each other. The boy and the girl felt so attached to one another that neither of them wanted to go away – yet they knew that their bodies and minds had to be in full shape for tomorrow's second session.

'Good night,' said Finn.

'Good night,' Harmony answered.

Then the young man walked out of the room – with steps as slow as those not long ago.

Harmony sighed. She gave one last positive look to the night skies, then she went inside.

The girl left the book on the table nearby, then she prepared herself for a healthy sleep by putting a nightdress on. But just when Harmony sat down on the sheets, something quite exciting captured her attention. It was lying there, under the pillow – and it was shining with a soft red light. The young beauty quickly removed the pillow and then both her body and soul started trembling with a tender feeling of joy as her hands took it cautiously.

It was a small part of the red falling star. One of the many that were meant to find their way to the night beds of the people who were meant to be in love...

Harmony didn't know but at that same time, in his own room Finn was also staring at another part of the star. A one he had just found under his pillow too.

That clearly meant that great love was waiting for them somewhere here, in the majestic world of Arbortrium.

Chapter XI

Book of The #Hinn: Betrothed

The next morning Finn, Harmony and Bromley shared with Lady Graciella more details about their unusual experience in the parallel dimension - not that she hadn't already felt it by herself in a way. They were all sitting on the same benches in the backyard's arbour.

During their narration the dragonfly woman was quiet. She listened with increased attention, as if trying to assimilate each word was of a great importance. Nobody else but her knew that it really *was* of a great importance...

'And then we suddenly teleported here...' Harmony said at the end of the story. 'Back to you, in this garden, in this same arbour.'

'And if we have to be fair - no matter how traumatised we were back then, now we can't wait to go back to our new dimension again!' exclaimed Finn staring at the girl with flickers in his eyes – still with the same passion as hers.

'Back to where the wild lions are,' she said.

'Back to the inn. And to the bridge,' Finn added. 'Maybe the answers about Harmony's great-grandfather and my original family name are really hidden somewhere there.'

'Your original family name?' Bromley was surprised. 'Do you have *another* one but Trent?'

'Well... kind of,' said the other man as he looked at Harmony. 'The Trent family were my biological relatives who raised me for the first years of my life. Sadly, almost all of them died and I was adopted by a good couple in another family. This is how I first met Harmony, actually.'

'My parents and I lived in a farm not far away from the mansion in which he was raised,' added the girl. 'We had some unforgettable moments on those lands...'

'And, as you can see, we still create some unforgettable moments together,' said Finn, also smiling. 'However, during the recent years my adoptive parents allowed me to keep my original family name - they knew how deeply attached I was to the memories of my biological relatives. Actually, they even helped me to find the last remaining member of the old Trent dynasty - that kind uncle of mine in France.'

'Do you think that he could know something more about what that strange woman in the inn said?' asked Bromley.

'Who knows,' answered Finn, then he took a breath. 'But let's first see what we could find out in the dimension Harmony and I create by ourselves. Can we go there already?'

Ho looked at Lady Graciella impatiently. She also took a breath, then nodded and answered:

'Yes.'

But just when The Strangers, the Fellow Pal and, supposedly, the turtle Sidekick were getting ready to teleport again, the dragonfly woman said to them with a different, kind of tremulous tone:

'But... dear children... Try to be as careful and responsible as possible. Everything you do in that other dimension should be in line with the destiny Arbortrium's power gives you. I believe that deep inside your souls you could feel which is the right direction for your journey. You may try going in many different directions but never turn aside and do something which

could lead to the harming of any of you. Remember that your lives and well-being are something important to all of us...'

This short but very meaningful speech of the insect woman quite touched the three young humans - and they didn't even know the hidden meaning in it...

After Harmony, Finn and Bromley nodded with their heads, Lady Graciella took a deep breath again, then said:

'You may close your eyes. Now the transition will be faster because the realm is already created.'

They did what she asked for - this time without a song. They were so focused on just going there as soon as possible and trying to pass through the bridge...

Lady Graciella helped them to disappear again - with her special thoughts. But nobody knew that this time her thoughts were different - and no one of the young companion heard the words she said once the process was done, and she was now alone in the garden's arbour:

'And forgive me, my sweet darlings... Forgive me for what I just had to do in order to protect you from that even more horrendous thing they ask me to cause to you if it turns out your connection to the other dimension gives you *too much* power...'

Not aware of the potential danger, Harmony, Finn, Bromley and Fraggy opened their eyes after the now-familiar transition from one dimension to the completely new one created by The Strangers.

Then the first surprise came.

'The bridge... We are not near it?'

Finn started looking confused in all directions, as did the others.

'No, it's not anywhere to be seen... nor are the savannah and the Inn,' Harmony stated. 'I thought that each time we go back here we'll continue at the same place where we have left this dimension the previous time?'

Her last question was directed to the bard. He answered:

'Well, you are new to this 'creating' of that world here. I suppose that's why even you still don't know how to control some things.'

'So each time we teleport back here we will probably be at an unknown place? It is madness! How could we have some progress in this new realm of ours if we don't even build it in a progressive order of logical connections?'

'Who knows, maybe it is part of your training to find a way to connect the pieces of a scattered dimension. Yes, I know that the word *scattered* is probably not quite appropriate for a place you create *at the moment* and which has never been *one whole*... but I think you got what I meant to say.'

'So... what should we do now?' This time Harmony sent the question to Finn's attention.

'No idea. Maybe we just... go in a random direction? By the way, what exactly is this place?'

He and his companions couldn't stop looking around. That new part of Finn and Harmony's world didn't seem like anything any of them had seen before. If we describe it as a typical 'forest' we would probably lie - because it definitely didn't have normal types of trees,

bushes and grass - but if we tell it wasn't a forest we won't tell the truth either. Because what currently surrounded the four confused adventurers still seemed like some kind of a forest vegetation - but it wasn't that densely and the strange flora consisted of many yellow plants, tall two or three metres, with a kind of strange round blue fruits on the top - five on each 'tree'.

There was nothing else around. And by 'nothing' I mean that even the ground was not of a familiar type but it was just a flat surface in light green colour. Only the skies had the look that all of the companions would consider 'normal'.

After Finn's suggestion that they should just go in a random direction met the approval of the others, him, Harmony, Bromley and the turtle in the girl's hands went through a region in which the peculiar type of trees were lower. That is when the young lady asked the bard:

'So, while we move forward into the unknown you could probably... continue the song until we get somewhere? I am very curious about what happened to Bartholomeus after he entered the cave. And you sing it very well.'

'That's right,' agreed Finn.

'Thank you,' said Bromley. 'I am glad that this year's Strangers are that invested into the songs I like to sing. Let's dive into Bartholomeus' story again then!'

He played the introductory chords with his lute and started singing:

*Far away, in lands ancient of wine and goods,
once lived Bartholomeus, the merry minotaur of the woods!
Every morning, he greeted all...*

'Wait, wait...' Harmony interrupted the song. 'Is it necessary to start from the beginning? I mean, we already know what happened until he went into the cave...'

'Could you continue from that point?'

Bromley made a face gesture of full shock. He seemed kind of offended, too.

'What bard would I be if I start singing my songs from the middle? Songs are pieces of art which should be experienced in its whole shining grace.'

Harmony and Finn looked at each other with some guilt in their eyes.

'We're sorry we misjudged your dedication to your art. Ok, sing it from the beginning then,' said the girl.

Bromley nodded. He took a breath, then his tender fingers played these first chords with his lute again as his mouth sang:

*Far away, in lands ancient of wine and goods,
once lived Bartholomeus, the merry minotaur of the woods!
Every morning, he greeted all the people with a happy roar,
He woke them and their slothful livestock to the core!*

*No, Bartholomeus didn't mean to be scary,
As this ballad tells you - he was merry.
A friendly smile, a soul so soft, a heart of gold -*

Sadly, people's views of minotaurs were quite old:

*'We should kill that monster at any cost
Before it becomes the reason for many lives lost!'
It is what that old crone, Miss Holsworth said,
Convincing everyone Bartholomeus was a threat.*

*But he wasn't - and he wanted to prove them wrong.
That is why he decided to go on a journey so long -
To save the miller's youngest daughter, Mirrabel,
Who in a bad, trustless marriage had once fell!*

*She was a rare beauty of an indisputable kind,
Thus evoked some sin longings into her husband's mind.
He was jealous of everyone who could see her face,
So one day he just kidnapped her without a trace!*

*So, Bartholomeus asked the town's witch for a spell -
She, just like him, was of a nature kind and well.
Ability to fly she gave our minotaur so merry,
And outstanding strength - both for him to carry.*

*The mythical hero of the woods fled away south.
So many people he horrified with his beastly mouth,
With his horns, his bull hoofs, his long tail,
His steps heavy that easily left a solid trail!*

*Yet, a creature like him had a useful side -
He was not afraid of darkness, of places with no light.
Feature so useful to his otherwise scary nature
That led him straight deeper into this adventure.*

*When his path of searching led him to a cave,
He had a lot of courage, a strength of someone brave.
For the sake of the girl in the cave he quickly went -
But soon a sudden pain shattered all his strength!*

*'Ouch!', Bartholomeus screamed so loud, so sad,
As his left huff got hurt so deep, so bad,
By a big pin - made of metal, sharp and thin,
Put here to prevent intruders to walk in.*

*'Who is there!?', then a sudden shout was heard -
A shout in the dark, from a place of mud and dirt;
A shout of a man - young and brave, with a lantern in hand -
And a face of hesitation when he saw our horned friend.*

*'I am not a threat, milord - please don't scream, don't pass out,'
The merry minitour was quick to explain clear and loud.
'Bartholomeus my name is, and I am a creature most mild,
Not like some of my ancestors who were quite wild.*

*For a young girl I am looking - the daughter of the miller,
Her evil husband took her - let's hope he is not a killer!
My search to this cave of darkness led me a minute ago,
Then that sharp pin my foot hurt like an arrow of a bow!'*

*'Hm,' the other man murmured - still hesitant but brighter,
'You seem like a minotaur who is dignified, who is a fighter.
I will give you a chance, my friend, a chance to prove yourself,
As we are both going on the same thin shelf.*

*The miller's daughter, Mirrabel, is what we both are looking for,
As she my true love is - from a long, long time before -
And me and my modest self are also a true love to her, I believe,
Yet, they once made her merry that cruel thief.*

*Not only her precious heart he once stole from me - that villain!
Not only my big fortune - that was left to me by my father Dillon -
But he...*

'Oh, that's a funny coincidence! My father's name is also Dillon!', Harmony decided to point out that fact - but then she quickly realised what she had just done to the narration. 'Oh, no... Bromley, I am so sorry! I interrupted your moment of art! Please, continue!'

'Continue?', the bard looked at her with a furrowed brow.

'I mean... Oh no, I ruined everything, didn't I?' She also stared at Finn with a feeling of guilt and yes - the funny expression on his face confirmed it. 'Ok, maybe we could listen to the song... from the beginning?'

'We most definitely would,' said Bromley, then started the familiar verses of poetry again:

*Far away, in lands ancient of wine and goods,
once lived Bartholomeus, the merry minotaur of the woods!
Every morning, he greeted all the people with a happy roar,
He woke them and their slothful livestock to the core!*

*No, Bartholomeus didn't mean to be scary,
As this ballad tells you - he was merry.
A friendly smile, a soul so soft, a heart of gold -
Sadly, people's views of minotaurs were quite old:*

*'We should kill that monster at any cost
Before it becomes the reason for many lives lost!'
It is what that old crone, Miss Holsworth said,
Convincing everyone Bartholomeus was a threat.*

*But he wasn't - and he wanted to prove them wrong.
That is why he decided to go on a journey so long -
To save the miller's youngest daughter, Mirrabel,
Who in a bad, trustless marriage had once fell!*

*She was a rare beauty of an indisputable kind,
Thus evoked some sin longings into her husband's mind.
He was jealous of everyone who could see her face,
So one day he just kidnapped her without a trace!*

*So, Bartholomeus asked the town's witch for a spell -
She, just like him, was of a nature kind and well.
Ability to fly she gave our minotaur so merry,
And outstanding strength - both for him to carry.*

*The mythical hero of the woods fled away south.
So many people he horrified with his beastly mouth,
With his horns, his bull hoofs, his long tail,*

His steps heavy that easily left a solid trail!

*Yet, a creature like him had a useful side -
He was not afraid of darkness, of places with no light.
Feature so useful to his otherwise scary nature
That led him straight deeper into this adventure.*

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He had a lot of courage, a strength of someone brave.
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But soon a sudden pain shattered all his strength!*

*'Ouch!', Bartholomeus screamed so loud, so sad,
As his left huff got hurt so deep, so bad,
By a big pin - made of metal, sharp and thin,
Put here to prevent intruders to walk in.*

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Then that sharp pin my foot hurt like an arrow of a bow!'*

*'Hm,' the other man murmured - still hesitant but brighter,
'You seem like a minotaur who is dignified, who is a fighter.
I will give you a chance, my friend, a chance to prove yourself,
As we are both going on the same thin shelf.*

*The miller's daughter, Mirrabel, is what we both are looking for,
As she my true love is - from a long, long time before -
And me and my modest self are also a true love to her, I believe,
Yet, they once made her merry that cruel thief.*

*Not only her precious heart he once stole from me - that villain!
Not only my big fortune - that was left to me by my father Dillon -
But he, her husband evil, also took her, while she was screaming.
I know because I saw them – while I was at home, scheming.*

*Scheming how to break her free from him, once and for all,
Then I saw her – so tiny, so thin, abducted by her man so tall.
In that direction I ran with the speed of light,
But sadly, soon they disappeared from my sight.*

*Yet, I never gave up, my friend – their tracks I followed,
My neighbour's old horse I quickly borrowed,
To this cave my searching finally led me today -
To this cave and to you, with whom I'd like to stay!*

*To stay and to fight the evil, my friend dearest,
I have faith in you - minotaur scary, but with soul purest!
And to prove it I will give you this – a special chain –
Once around your foot we put it, it will heal the pain!'*

*Then he, the real love of Mirrabel, a man whose name was Bryton,
A metal chain brought out – and wrapped it as a python
Around Bartholomeus' injured leg – and, wow, what a wonder!
That hairy hoof quickly healed, without a banter!*

*Bryton was really a human of decency, of a noble kind.
The creepy, but merry minotaur he helped, in their way to find,
To find the miller's daughter – in which direction then they went,
Feeling like two faithful buddies, like a friend and his friend.*

*Then they found her - a marvellous beauty, even in a shell.
Mirrabel was there, in the inner part of the cave - scared but well.*

Chained in different kind of chains – not the healing ones.

Her abuser to escape she finally had a chance!

“Oh, Bryton, my dearest love!” She shouted then

And her look shined with happiness – until she saw they were two men.

The human one – the king of her heart, so handsome, so bright -

And the minotaur – hairy, with horns and hoofs, a creature to fight.

So she screamed louder, and louder – as never before.

This is how her cruel husband found out that they were now four

And he appeared – so harsh, so ready for blood -

His presence almost felt like a deadly flood.

But Bryton and Bartholomeus were still at their bravest –

They freed Mirrabel of her fear and her chains – in a way safest.

Bryton with a kiss and with words of confidence and faith,

Bartholomeus with a minotaur’s strength – and with hairy fingers eight.

From the evil husband they all started running, without hesitating,

As he chased them – with a fierce face and with a body madly shaking.

Shortly after, a different exit of the cave they both reached

And a bright place they found – but with path so breached...

‘Miss Harmony! Finally! I found you!’

A sudden shout of a man’s voice got the song interrupted... once again. This is when the four companions saw that a tall old human man in fancy old-style clothes was approaching them on their right. When he got close enough, he caught the girl’s hand without asking and pulled her in the direction he had just came from.

‘We’ve got to hurry! The Strong Charmer is waiting for us!’

‘Wait!’ exclaimed Harmony and pulled away from him. ‘Who are you? What do you want from me? What *Strong Charmer*?’

The old man seemed surprised by her reaction.

‘It is not funny, Miss Harmony,’ said he. ‘The Strong Charmer already thinks that you are not serious enough about your engagement!’

‘Our... engagement!?’ Harmony didn’t expect that she could be even more shocked - and in the eyes of Finn and Bromley she saw that they felt the same way. ‘What do you mean? I am not engaged *to anyone*!’

The strange man blinked.

‘Miss Harmony... are you Okay? Did you hit your head? You are acting very irrational. You even pretend that you don’t know the man you’ve been betrothed to for your whole life!’

‘I am not *betrothed*! I don’t even know what you are talking about! I am not even from this dimension! Well... to be fair... I *create* this dimension right now...

She gave Finn a quiet look.

‘That’s right, indeed,’ agreed the insistent man and then gave a glance to the same teenage boy. ‘You two are the creators of this special world of ours. However, it is a world with rules. And by moving forward in building it you two get closer to some goals that you are destined to reach in your lives from the days of your births - like getting engaged to The Strong Charmer is what you are meant to be, Harmony. But I don’t get why you are not automatically aware of it?’

Not just him but nobody else knew the answer of that. Still in a full shock, Harmony stared at Finn, then at Bromley - and neither three of them was sure if it was more shocking that Harmony was supposedly betrothed to an unknown person or that the strange old man just made it sound logical.

One special look between the two teenagers seemed different and quite sad. Even without saying words it was obvious that till that point they both secretly expected something else to be the girl’s destiny. *Somebody* else.

However, they were still not sure if any of this should be considered serious enough to get them worried - and for now it felt better for them to just think of this man’s appearance as a sign of where their path should go. Lady Graciella warned them that it is of vital importance that they do not deviate from the destiny Arbortrium wanted to establish for them - and somehow, they felt that for now the right way was the one led by this unknown stranger. So, the boy and the girl decided to follow him for the sake of the training and, hopefully, for the aim of finding their way back to the bridge. They did it, as did the bard.

While walking with the old man in that new direction through the strange colourful woods, some other questions arose to his attention.

‘What is your name?’ asked Harmony.

‘As strange as it is for me to answer a question you are meant to already know, my dear Miss.... My name is Percival. I am the first Councillor of The Strong Charmer.’

‘Is he a king?’ Harmony felt strange that she knew nothing about the men she was said to be betrothed to.

‘He is royalty, for sure. And he has a deep influence in the lands he resides. Yet, he cannot be a ruler - because you and your friend are the rulers of this kingdom.’

‘I am a ruler who cannot decide by herself who she wants to be married to? And is obliged to listen to somebody who tells her that she is already promised to someone?’ The girl couldn’t help but be ironic. Especially when she knew that in some other historical times rulers in her world were actually forced to be part of such a system from the day of their births.

‘Things are complicated in the lands of your power, my dear,’ said Percival. ‘But be sure that soon everything will get clear to you. *To all of you.*’

‘Could you please make one other thing clear for us in advance?’ asked Finn. ‘I was said to be Prince Charming in this crazy journey. Without me having another option - if it doesn’t turn out that Harmony and I are one *too special* case, of course. So what is that other man who claims to be Charming - not that I claim it for myself...’

‘He is a *Strong Charmer* - there is a big difference. You’ll get it when we get to him. Well. Actually, we are very close. Here is his home.’

He stopped walking for a moment and he pointed his finger to the tall mountain who, out of a sudden, appeared in the distance. A mountain which was not an ordinary mountain at all - because at its peak it had a crater and boiling lava.

‘The Strong Charmer lives... in a volcano?’ exclaimed Harmony.

‘He must be *really strong* to survive those conditions,’ said Bromley with the proud face of a man who just told a good joke.

‘Don’t worry. The volcano is not active,’ said Percival.

‘Man... we can *literally* see its boiling lava at the top of it!’ noted Finn.

‘You should learn more for the world you create. This is the inactive state of the volcanoes in this dimension. It is when they seem calm when they are most dangerous.’

‘Wow!’ Harmony was quite surprised. ‘You seem to know much more about our minds’ creations than us!’ This is when her eyes started blinking with a sudden excitement because of an idea she just had. ‘Wait... does that mean that you could also know something more about what my great-grandfather has to do with all of this? And how is Finn’s family name, Trent, included in the narrative of this journey?’

Percival looked at them for a moment with a hesitation. He shook his head.

‘No. I know nothing.’

The Strangers and their Fellow Pal were confused.

‘Really?’ asked Harmony. ‘Because everyone else we talked to in our previous visit in this world knew something.’

‘My mission here is different. I am the one who makes sure the part of the story including The Strong Charmer is complete. So, let’s go to finally see *him*.’

He continued walking in the direction of the presumably inactive volcano. The three younger people, still full of confusion, decided to follow him again, no matter how dangerous it seemed at first thought.

In the next few minutes the setting around them became much more cosy. That intrusive, almost soulless vibe of the previous forest slowly turned into the familiar feeling of a normal pine forest.

‘Pine forest!’ Harmony suddenly exclaimed as some dizzy images of the past touched her mind. ‘Like the one surrounding that strange valley with the roller coaster which brought us to the bridge!’

‘Do you think we are walking through the same pine woods?’ asked Finn while his curious eyes looked around, exploring their new surroundings.

The girl couldn’t tell for sure. She opened her mouth to say something but then the sudden exclamation of Percival interrupted her:

‘Finally! We are here!’

Here turned out to be a very unexpected place. At first the old man’s companions couldn’t understand what he was talking about but just a few seconds later... they saw *the entrance*.

One of the tallest pine trees in front of them had an unusually large trunk - even for a plant that big. The thin cut on its dry bark was barely visible - but the important fact is that it *was* visible and it became even more distinguishable when Percival put his left hand on it and then the portal unfolded in its full shining grace.

‘Well... this is not an entrance in the air, but its effect is quite similar!’ stated Finn with a little bit of laugh, looking at Bromley. ‘That Strong Charmer has an interesting taste for his home!’

‘It is us who in some ways dictate his taste, I suppose,’ said Harmony, also with a smile.

‘Oh... no, no!’ exclaimed Percival. ‘This is not the entrance for The Strong Charmer’s palace.’

‘It isn’t?’

‘No, it is only the entrance for the guests of the lobby. As you will see in just a few seconds that going on the other side of this gate will bring you into a currently invisible parallel part of the volcano’s foothills. This is where the Charmer will be waiting for us - but you won’t be able to step into his main estate. Until you become his wife, Miss Harmony. Just follow me now.’

He slowly went into the shining entrance, then The Strangers, the Fellow Pal and the Animal Sidekick followed him. This is when the gate closed behind them and the cuts in the pine tree’s bark recovered to their previous state, but now with some fresh golden amber sealing them.

When everybody got to the other side, they made some steps into a dark tunnel with a flash of another shining light at the end of it nearby.

‘This Charmer has a very grim transition to his main home,’ said Finn then.

‘As I already told you - this place is not connected to his estate in any way,’ Percival stated again.

‘Then how does he enter his estate?’ asked Harmony.

‘Oh girl, you really know nothing about your future husband,’ the old man noted with a quite indignant gesture on his face. ‘He enters his palace by the crater, of course.’

‘He... jumps into the boiling lava?’ the girl was shocked once again.

‘Not exactly. He doesn’t need to jump because he can just step inside of the wide space under the lava. The *harmless* lava, if I need to specify again that *this* state of the volcano is the peaceful one.’

Finn and the other two younger people’s questions weren’t quite answered by these words of Percival but what they saw once he led them into the bright hall at the end of the tunnel was an enough answer by itself. By *himself*.

The Strong Charmer was even stronger than expected. While his appearance was of a human, his impressive height made him look more like a giant.

The other impressive thing about him was that he looked remarkably handsome. His body, covered with a white shirt and grey tight pants, seemed athletic as a statue of old times (in order to be fully comprehensive, we could also say that his current pose strongly resembled the one of Michelangelo’s *David* but with a lowered left hand). The hair on the man’s head was black and curly, and his eyes - blue and enchanting like the depths of an ocean.

Yes, he was definitely a tremendous Charmer - and one of the most charming things about him was his attractive smile and his masculine voice with a kind of an English accent. Both of which he gladly presented to them once he saw them coming in the hall and said to Harmony:

‘Oh, you, lovely future spouse of mine! I am glad to finally be able to see your face of a captivating beauty!’

XII

Book of The #Hinn: The Way They Are Meant to Conquer

Usually, Harmony Hamilton was not the kind of girl who would fall for someone just because of his irresistible look. Some people might think it is hard for a young woman like her to resist this kind of temptation, considering that she had lived her whole life in a farm, surrounded by many handsome farm boys working at her home estate and at all the neighbourhood houses in the same district. And actually, once she became the beautiful lady we know today, she'd had more than one opportunity for a passionate countryside story in a full chick lit style – but she never felt attracted to idea of this.

She kept her moral views even when her eyes were looking at that insanely handsome giant fiancée of hers, The Strong Charmer. While impressed by his truly charming presence, she couldn't feel any romantic or passionate feelings for him – because her heart was already possessed by someone else in this same hall...

But The Charmer still didn't know it.

'Oh... you are such a precious symbol of eternal grace, my dear lady!', he said, taking two steps closer to everybody. 'I can't wait till we're married and our vows give you the magical power to become as tall as me! Every man would be lucky to have the opportunity to touch that gentle, soft face with his tender fingers...'

His hand almost touched her head, but he stopped on time – apparently, he didn't want the girl to feel pressured by him - literally and figuratively. But he also couldn't expect how surprising her next words would be:

'Thank you for the kind words, Mr... Charmer. Yet, I hope you don't feel offended when I tell you that... I won't get married to you.'

Nobody knew if the giant men felt offended in that first moment when he heard this, but it was for sure that he felt a shock.

'You... won't marry me?' He blinked multiple times. 'Well, that was an unexpected beginning of our conversation.'

'Don't get me wrong... You are a... gorgeous man...' Oh yeah, he was totally gorgeous, and she didn't have a problem admitting that. 'And I know you think that you and I have always been destined to be betrothed to one another. But... the thing is... *I just found out about it* when Mr. Percival shared that information with me and my friends.'

'Somehow she didn't get *the knowledge* and *the feelings* she was supposed to, Sir,' explained the older man. 'It is quite strange, quite strange. She didn't even know who you are – or at least she claims that.'

'It is the truth!' exclaimed Harmony.

'We both could confirm it,' said Finn, giving a quick look at Bromley. 'We were searching for that strange bridge when Mr. Percival suddenly appeared and insisted that we should follow him to you.'

'The bridge?' The Charmer got even more intrigued. 'The one with the answers about that great-grandfather of yours, precious lady, and his old friend, the ancestor of you, Mr. Trent?'

He said it like he was talking about a fact well-known by everybody on these lands, not expecting how excited his words could make the younger humans in front of him (with whose names and family he was apparently well-acquainted). But he saw the face gestures of total surprise of Harmony, Finn and Bromley – as he heard the girl's next question:

‘Oh, so you know more about them! Could you please explain to us what my grandfather and the other man with Finn’s family name have to do about this dimension?’

‘I would tell you my dear, of course.’ said The Charmer, then sighed. ‘But I am allowed to share that information only with the lady of my heart... after we exchange our wedding vows.’

‘So... I *must* marry you, in order for our journey in this realm to have a continuation?’ Harmony felt cold thrills shaking her entire body. She looked at Finn with a sad face. ‘And we don’t have... another option?’

‘No. This is the only way,’ answered The Charmer. ‘Sorry but even if I agree to the quite unexpected fact that you, beautiful girl, don’t want to marry me... I *physically* can’t tell you more about those two adventurers before we become a husband and wife.’

‘Lady Graciella didn’t mention to us that the obstacles on our way in that parallel world will be *that* inevitable!’ shouted Finn who was visibly annoyed by these new circumstances. ‘And that they will consist of such things as... an arranged marriage to somebody we don’t even know! No offense, brother Charmer!’

‘How am I expected to prove myself as some kind of hero, coward or a martyr if I do not even fight *real* dangers?’

Harmony didn’t mean that she *wanted* to fight real dangers. But, as this realm of her and Finn’s souls would teach her multiple times in the future, she had to be careful with even the tiniest sparkling ideas in her mind. Because sometimes they could become true, especially if The Strangers from the Old Castle’s Gates were still in their unstable, training period.

As the echo of the girl’s words reverberated in the wide hall, everything else surrounding her and her companions became absolutely quiet. Not even the sound of the boiling lava of the volcano was to be heard – which caused Percival and The Strong Charmer’s faces to turn pale.

‘Oh no... the horrible silence!’ the old man screamed. ‘Dangers are coming! Devastating disasters!’

Not long after his shout of a terrified man, everything around changed. The hall’s walls got darker; the lights faded to a creepy level. Then the startling screams of men and women wrapped both the bodies and the souls of everyone in a horrific way.

They could hear it. They could feel it. They could swim in the fiery sea of its evil magnificence...

The powers of Arbortrium sent Harmony and Finn into the first dangerous trial of their dimension (if we don’t count the lightning on the bridge that we still don’t know much about). And only the two of them could fight what was coming – none of the others could even see what they saw in the next few minutes... Bromley, the turtle who suddenly appeared in his hands, the old chancellor Percival, The Strong Charmer... at this time they could see only darkness. The Strangers from the Old Castle’s Gates were the ones who could see *the monsters*.

It began with a fierce, merciless roar in the dark. Then came the light of the fire; it was surrounding Harmony and Finn in a full circle – to a point of no escape. That same burning light showed the slaughterous creatures in their whole crooked appearance, touched in an additionally horrific way by the shadows of the darkness around.

The boy and the girl got goosebumps. The blood in their bodies froze as the three monsters stared at them; the one on the left looking like a boar but with malformed head and teeth much bigger and sharper; the other on the right being some kind of a giant black bird with long mechanical beak and eyes full of madness; and the one in the centre, the most ‘normal’ of them all, because of its familiar mythological nature, was a dark Cerberus with three heads.

As they were approaching the two teenagers slowly, like a predator reaching its prey, Harmony and Finn gazed at each other.

'Who would know that our shared minds could create something... *that* murderous,' the young man decided to try being facetious, in case these were the last moments of their lives.

'Not our minds are creating and controlling this but the magic of Arbortrium – and I suppose it is the same with my unwanted engagement,' said Harmony, then added with similar sarcastic tone: 'Is it crazy that I *still* don't prefer the second one?'

'Being able to follow your own choices is most important sometimes... even when the alternative of it is being eaten by bloodthirsty monsters,' said Finn as he and the girl looked at the three creatures again – just in time to see the central one, the Cerberus, jumping towards the two humans, full of its relentless hunger. Luckily, both Strangers coped to avoid the deadly attack. 'How are we supposed to fight them without any weapons or special powers!?''

'Well, *our minds* are our powers,' said Harmony, then she and Finn had to run again for their lives as the other two scary animals, the boar and the bird, tried to attack them as well. 'This world is *ours*. There must be some way to defeat these creatures – or at least teleport ourselves somewhere safer!'

The Cerberus struck again – and this time Harmony had the bad luck to be closer to it. Finn, who saw the potential danger, reacted immediately and did something quite risky – he quickly jumped on one of the heads of the monster, hitting one of its mad eyes with a fist. The monster roared ominously – the boy's audacity made it even more enraged. One of its other two heads tried to reach him and eat him at once but Finn's reaction was fast once again, and he jumped in a different direction.

Well, his reaction was fast but not perfectly calculated. As his feet stepped on the floor again his body couldn't get immediately stable, so the elbow of his left hand got slightly burned by the fire ring surrounding them. The male Stranger cried with a loud voice and for a moment his body bent down in a painful spasm.

'Finn!' Harmony's scream echoed everywhere as she ran to him and embraced him with one hand.

'I am Okay, don't... worry,' Finn said but with a strange tone in his voice for the last word. His eyes stared at the monsters with a different kind of excitement. 'Harmony... look! They... they seemed scared of us!'

The girl wouldn't believe it if she didn't see it with her own eyes. Yes, the three bloody monsters were acting differently now. They still looked at the strangers with rage, but at the same time they were keeping an unusual distance to them – like they didn't dare to get closer.

'What happened?' asked the young woman.

Finn already had an idea. He gave Harmony one of those looks of sensual tenderness, then he touched her beautiful face with his right hand.

The monsters took another step backward.

'Our closeness...' Finn whispered and then Harmony finally got it:

'The way you care enough for me to jump on a beast's head...'

'Or the way how you forget about everything else and run to me to support me...'

'The way we stand by one another. It pushes them away.'

While saying her last words, the girl hugged her old friend even closer – which made the beasts take another step backwards, making them dangerously close to the wall of fire...

That's when Finn gazed deeply into Harmony's eyes – and Harmony gazed deeply into Finn's eyes. Their faces got closer as the man whispered:

'I need to tell you something...'

‘I have something to tell you, too... I... I...’

Eyes half closed in a magical rapture of two souls touching each other in a world created by their special connection... Breaths of Water and Fire, of Earth and Air - all in one... Lips closer than ever...

And a power that strong that it pushed three enraged monsters to step into flames by their own will.

But Finn and Harmony didn’t have their first kiss – not here, not now. The idea of *almost* getting to it was enough for the evil in this first extreme battle in their new dimension to be defeated once and forever – and while the boar, the bird and the Cerberus burned into the flames, everything around changed and got brighter and brighter. Interrupted by this radiance surrounding them, they opened their eyes widely – and then they could feel the presence of Bromley the Bard and Fraggy the Sidekick turtle behind them. As they could clearly see The Strong Charmer’s confused, yet happy face in the white distance, telling them with a voice of echoes and a captivating melody:

‘You two... You should come back to me and ask me again that question of yours... I can now tell you... I can tell you what I know about your ancestors even without being married to someone!’

Then he disappeared – as disappeared the light setting, changed by the well-known Lady Graciella’s back garden.

And the face of a full shock she herself had on her face – and this time she couldn’t keep it hidden.

‘How... how did you do it!?’ She screamed, making the companions surprised by her unusual behaviour.

‘Did you... did you see it? Our battle with the monsters?’ asked Harmony with excitement.

‘At first - no,’ replied Lady Graciella, shaking her head anxiously. ‘But I will be fair with you - since the first moment of this second training of ours I used another parallel power of mine to read some of your memories and learn more about your story before that moment. About your connection to one another. This is how I also saw what happened with the three monsters - in the seconds before I ended our session. You... you defeated what I made sure *was meant* to be your destiny - at least your *temporary* destiny in this second training visit of your dimension!’

The three young people looked at each other. Even more shocked.

‘You... you wanted those monsters to kill us!?’ exclaimed Harmony.

‘Monsters? No! I was talking about your inevitable engagement to The Strong Charmer!’

‘You arranged my engagement with The Strong Charmer!?’ This time the girl’s exclamation almost sounded like a loud shout. ‘But... why!? Why would you interfere into our world in a such... inappropriate way!?’

She still couldn’t forget the feeling of unpleasant shock of the idea that she was betrothed to someone she didn’t even know. Shock caused by none other than Lady Graciella, apparently.

The dragonfly woman herself was still in her own kind of a current shock. She even stood up from her bench and made some anxious steps in the arbour. She was quiet for a while, then she stopped at one place and gave the two strangers a very serious look.

‘You two should run. Now. As far as you can!’

‘What!? Why!?’ Harmony got even more confused, as were the other two men, especially Finn.

‘And why don’t you explain to us what is happening? Why are you acting that strange? And why would you want to mess with our path in the realm the two of us create?’

‘It was... it was just a test. And you two passed it. Which is what I had hoped you wouldn’t be able to do - so I wouldn’t be forced to... to...’ With her pale face, she stared at the young Strangers while her mind still didn’t even want to allow such a thought to pass through her mind. And it didn’t. ‘You simply don’t understand, my darlings! But I don’t have time to explain! You should just know that you two, Harmony Hamilton and Finn Trent, are *too powerful*. Too scarily powerful to be allowed to participate in the official Upcoming!’

‘You mean... powerful like those few different cases in the past?’ asked Bromley.

‘Even more powerful than most of them... except one.’ said Lady Graciella with a trembling voice and disturbing memories flying back into her mind. ‘The one with two people who almost destroyed The Palace on The Tree with Three Branches!’

‘I’ve never heard about it...’

‘That’s because it was made sure that the memories of it would be locked into... Sense 179...’

‘One of the last ones?’ Finn asked.

‘Indeed,’ Lady Graciella nodded. ‘It was important only the most trusted residents of Arbortrium to remember it - the ones who should make sure this never happens again... at any price. Including eliminating all potentially too powerful Strangers and everything connected to them.’

Some realizations are too painful – and the realization Harmony, Finn and Bromley had after these words of the dragonfly lady was one of them.

‘You... you really wanted to kill us!?’ This time Harmony’s exclamation was a scream of a pure kind. She even stood up from her place as Finn and Bromley did the same. ‘Someone sent you to... eliminate the threat!?’

‘No, no!’ Lady Graciella exclaimed. ‘Believe in me, my sweethearts... I would never hurt you! But I knew that even if I didn’t do it, as was ordered to me... somebody else much more soulless would do the job. This is why I had to interfere with your training, I had to make sure your power stays within the limits. And by pushing one of you in a marriage with somebody else, I expected to drive the necessary partial wall between the two of you - at least for this second session,’ She looked at The Strangers. ‘But you succeeded in surprising me once again. You... you fought it! And you won! Your powers, my darlings... they are something groundbreaking! And, even by risking my own good, I must make sure they will be saved long enough to... to...’

She stopped talking for several seconds.

‘To what?’ Finn asked. ‘Is there something else you are not telling us?’

Lady Graciella seemed torn apart. She remained silent for a few more seconds, then took a deep breath and answered:

‘There are some things neither of you know or could expect. Arbortrium... as wonderful place as it is, keeps dark secrets. But you, extraordinary Strangers... you are the hope we all need!’ The older woman took the shivering hands of Harmony and Finn and told them with a shining emotion: ‘That’s why you should go now! You should run... and run... and run... as far as you could! And be sure that, when the day comes, you will come back to defeat the greatest evil!’

Somehow the boy and the girl felt that they could still trust her – even after everything she just shared with them. Even after she confessed that they sent her to kill them. That she messed with their dimension in order to test the power that their connected souls were meant to conceive, to bring to this startling world and to all the other words and to strengthen it...

But now Lady Graciella was as truthful as she could be. And it was enough for Finn, Harmony and Bromley to look at each other and take the important decision to follow her advice... and run.

The garden never looked this beautiful as in those precious moments in which the three running young people were leaving it, without knowing if they would ever come back here again. If they will be able to remain alive for long enough to have the opportunity to look at all those components of the lovely nature which made it *perfect*...

The Strangers from The Old Castle's Gates soon disappeared between the fresh vegetation in the distance in this very special backyard whose owner's caring eyes stared at them until the end.

Then Lady Graciella took another deep breath in this newly created situation of life and death. In which she risked everything for the common good.

But even if endangered, the dragonfly lady still didn't plan to stay like a passive, scared child in her home, waiting for her court sentence if the escape of The Strangers failed. She knew that she could do something in order to help them even in a distance, to bring to them someone who could turn out to be the missing piece of the puzzle. The unexpected one whose presence somewhere out there she could feel twice – at the end of each training session with the young boy and girl.

Lady Graciella went in a specific direction, determined to find at least a simple clue about the last person who was destined to become part of the journey of these very special Strangers from the Old Castle's Gates and their companions.

Chapter XIII

Book of The #Hinn: The Valley of Red and Purple Cinnamon

Running for your life is, no doubt, one of the most crucial things, even when you are not sure if your powerful enemy is already chasing you or if the persecution is impendent. All thoughts are possible in moments like these – including the stressful picture of your potential upcoming defeat.

Such a nightmare.

And what if all of this happens in those minutes of the clock in which nightmares usually occur – during the night hours – as was the case for Harmony, Finn and Bromley? It was just after leaving Lady Graciella's mansion when the three companions, running in the direction of the woods, got to the realization that during their recent stay at the parallel dimension, the bright part of Arbortrium's new day was displaced by the dark one.

They realised this and something even more disturbing.

'It is... night already?' Harmony, while feeling distressed by all that had happened, took a look at the bard.' But I thought that the time in the other realm doesn't pass faster than the time in Arbortrium?'

'That's right. They pass in one and the same way. Yet I might've forgotten to mention to you that Arbortrium's days and nights are often quite different in each cycle – that's why today the night is twice longer than yesterday.'

'We have such a luck then!' exclaimed Finn with his already familiar tone of sarcasm. 'Not only we should escape potential death, but we have to do it during the nighttime.' He then touched a place on his hand that he had just bandaged with a part of his cloth and sighed. 'Well, at least I didn't get burnt too bad by the flame – it doesn't hurt anymore.'

'And at least we are *together*, as trivial as it sounds. Three humans and a little, silent...' said Bromley with a sigh while putting his hand in the big pocket of his top wear. He suddenly opened his eyes wide. 'The turtle! Where is it!? I put it here just before we teleported back into Lady Graciella's Garden – so it could be in a safer place!'

They all stopped running. This is when Harmony and Finn remembered that their companions were originally two, even though the forementioned one of them was so passive that it was easy for people to not notice its presence... or its absence.

'Oh no! Poor Fraggy!' Harmony screamed. 'Maybe it somehow got out of your pocket while we were still in the garden? Or while we were running?'

'No, I held my hand here, on the pocket, the whole time, making sure I feel its presence. And... to be fair... I *still feel it* while touching the pocket from outside!'

His tender fingers touched the soft cloth from the outer side and there it is – the sense that Fraggy the turtle was still inside felt *perceptible*. But when he put his hand in that same pocket again... the animal Sidekick *was not* there.

'How is it possible!?!'

'We are talking about a case of something supernatural, obviously,' stated Finn, then Harmony added with her worried, trembling voice:

'Oh... no... Do you think that somehow Fraggy got *stuck* between the worlds?' She is *half here* but at the same time... she is *half there*.'

'This is the only explanation,' the bard agreed. 'Not very logical but still... explanation.'

‘That means that we just got another reason to go back in our dimension,’ said Finn, looking at Harmony. ‘Now we not only should talk to The Strong Charmer in order to get some answers... but we must find our newbie friend!’

There was no second opinion here – not that Harmony and Bromley would argue. All three of them knew the importance of their mission, even if it had completely changed in the last few hours.

They started running again. But while the direction remained quite uncertain, their souls got more and more impetuous.

Of course, they had to resist some temptations on their way. Like the sweet and alluring thought of transportation with the help of Bromley’s powers as a resident of Arbortrium. Even if these kinds of transfers did not give a normal bard like him the power to bring himself and his new friends too far away, a jump like this could be helpful in this sudden getaway. But they couldn’t risk using an ability which could possibly be tracked by their enemy – especially in these tremulous moments in which they no longer could know for sure what the lands and their mysterious rulers really represented.

Soon The Strangers and the Fellow Pal entered the same forest where the three of them first met two and a half days ago. But they didn’t stop even when the woods gave them the feeling of some kind of shelter, with the thick cover of all those branches hanging over their heads.

But could a shield of trees be protective enough in a kingdom ruled by a *nymph of the trees* - like the last remaining of The Three Dryad Sisters? Nobody knew.

When the light of the next day finally came, the three companions were still running. Well, ‘running’ was not the right word anymore – not in the case of these three insanely exhausted young people after a whole night spent in passing through a dense, inhospitable forest with all of its natural inhospitable conditions. But they were still moving forward pretty fast with their faint feet and tired faces.

To be fair, they met the new day with excitement – because it was then when their eyes suddenly saw that the end of the forest was near them. Ironically, now it was exactly what they needed – to leave these almost endless woods behind and experience something new. So, they did it, partially recharged for another round of running.

What they saw after passing through the last few forest trees was unexpected – the adventurers even stopped at one place and let themselves to study it with their curious eyes for some minutes. Down the slope there was a nice wide valley full of... different kinds of trees. Very small, not taller than a toddler, with two main colours in many different nuances prevailing in this wonderful range of magical shades – red and purple. While not typical in size and colour, these plants had a very specific scent which immediately gave Finn, Harmony and Bromley the hint about what type of vegetation they were looking at.

‘Does this unusual place smell like a... cinnamon?’ asked the girl, stunned by the beautiful scenery and the pleasant aroma of one of her most favourite ingredients for a tea.

‘Yes, it is, I suppose, the famous Valley of Red and Purple Cinnamon,’ replied the bard. ‘I’ve heard stories about it my whole life, but I never went that far from my home to see it.’

‘You never travelled in such territories, distant from Blazewood?’ Finn was surprised. ‘Even with your ability to teleport?’

‘This place is not in the reach of similar abilities. Actually, this area is considered ‘uncertain.’ Some of the few people who reached it usually spread stories about an extraterrestrial presence here. It was never confirmed if it was part of anybody’s imagination or probably a touch with some of the many Stages of Senses.’

‘Quite intriguing,’ said Harmony. ‘And now we are going to become part of it and explore it by ourselves, right!’

‘Do you think it is rational?’ asked Finn. ‘I mean... we are on the run now. Crossing a strange valley which is considered ‘uncertain’ might not be the best decision for our escape.’

‘Hm... I could not argue with that,’ said the girl, then she looked around. ‘But... what other option do we have? This valley seems to be wider than normal. It is *everywhere in front of us*. The only other possibility is... the way back.’

All of them knew that the way back was not really a possibility to be considered. That’s why, after taking some deep breaths, they decided to move forward – through the beautiful, yet mysterious, valley of unusual cinnamon trees. And this time they did it with slower steps because they knew that examining something new like a such slope – even if not very steep - should be done carefully.

The pleasant scent of the scenic place touched the senses of the three young people even deeper when they were walking among the millions of plants spreading it out. So much bliss, so much tenderness did the plants bring to their bodies... For some moments The Strangers and their Fellow Pal almost forgot about the tense situation they were brought in recently.

For some people moments like this could be very... romantic.

‘We never talked about what happened between us in the fire ring...’ Finn, giving Harmony a gaze of gentleness, took a first step in a conversation which was pending for a quite time. ‘Or at least what *almost* happened between us...’

Harmony also looked at him with pure kindness and a glimmer of special feelings.

‘It was not planned but it was not unexpected either, was it?’

‘The same way it was not something any of us would forget... ever... I mean... who would forget almost kissing someone as gorgeous as me?’ Finn laughed, as did Harmony.

His nice smile once again brought to his face the typical appealing vibe of a Prince Charming. And the girl, even without knowing for sure if she herself was a Hero, a Coward, a Martyr or just an ordinary American teenager dreaming of being a Princess, felt crazy about that smile. About that face, these irresistible dimples on it... About his whole look and personality.

And he felt the same way, just by looking at her extraordinary beauty and sensing her exquisite soul...

Harmony’s aunt Samantha was probably right – the fairytale moments were not something unreachable for a romantic girl like her after all. Especially when the young lady had the opportunity to extend this fairytale’s world in more than one dimension – but with this one and only kind and handsome man...

‘Is this said clearly – or is it still hidden there?’

Karen the mermaid was staring at the air,

Talking to the skies, blinking in disguise,

While her body was paying that cruel price...’

Bromley Wenlic's sensual voice, accompanied by his faithful lute, was in tune with Finn and Harmony's feelings – at least until the part about paying the cruel price. Nevertheless, the boy and the girl decided to point their attention to the talented bard who was waking several meters in front of them and was singing another one of his touching songs.

'Is this a song about "The Little Mermaid"?' asked Harmony, making Bromley to stop playing on the lute and turn around to Finn and her, just in time to surprise both of them:

'Oh, no, she was not little at all. She was a two hundred and fifty-seven years old woman.'

'So... she wasn't dreaming of being a human?'

'No... Why would she? Her whole life was underwater – and her children and grandchildren were still there. But she had the bad luck to be thrown on a dry rock by a sea storm. Not being able to go back into the water, she started to look at the bright skies and reminisce about her good times. Happily, they saved her at the end,' Bromley took a breath, then added: 'And... before I knew it, I just told you the whole story by *speaking*, not singing. What a shame for a bard like me!'

'We still have to hear the ending of the story of Bartholomeus,' said Finn. 'You could correct your mistake with the mermaid's tale by *singing* to us what happened to the merry minotaur.'

'You know that I should start this story from the beginning again, right?' Bromley asked with a little bit of a laugh.

Finn and Harmony looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders.

'If your bard's excellence still needs it... let it be this way!' Harmony replied with a smile.

Bromley nodded, then he touched the strings of his lute... and the familiar song started once again:

*Far away, in lands ancient of wine and goods,
once lived Bartholomeus, the merry minotaur of the woods!
Every morning, he greeted all the people with a happy roar,
He woke them and their slothful livestock to the core!*

*No, Bartholomeus didn't mean to be scary,
As this ballad tells you - he was merry.
A friendly smile, a soul so soft, a heart of gold -
Sadly, people's views of minotaurs were quite old:*

*'We should kill that monster at any cost
Before it becomes the reason for many lives lost!'
It is what that old crone, Miss Holsworth said,
Convincing everyone Bartholomeus was a threat.*

*But he wasn't - and he wanted to prove them wrong.
That is why he decided to go on a journey so long -*

*To save the miller's youngest daughter, Mirrabel,
Who in a bad, trustless marriage had once fell!*

*She was a rare beauty of an indisputable kind,
Thus evoked some sin longings into her husband's mind.
He was jealous of everyone who could see her face,
So one day he just kidnapped her without a trace!*

*So, Bartholomeus asked the town's witch for a spell -
She, just like him, was of a nature kind and well.
Ability to fly she gave our minotaur so merry,
And outstanding strength - both for him to carry.*

*The mythical hero of the woods fled away south.
So many...*

‘Wait... do you see that?’

So, the ballad was interrupted for the sixth time – by the singer himself. Bromley concentrated on something in the distance of the current boundless flat area of the valley – and The Strangers did the same.

‘Yes... there is something. Definitely,’ Harmony agreed,

‘Is it moving? I don’t think so,’ Finn asked and answered by himself.

‘I think it is something like a tree. A *bigger* tree, I mean,’ said the girl, looking at all the other short cinnamon trees which were still giving them the delightful sense – and scent – of joy. ‘Should we get closer?’

The men were not sure – as wasn’t she. But in the end their curiosity, blended with the thought that they were going in this direction anyway, prevailed. The three friends went to see the tree more closely.

It was not a cinnamon tree – more like a giant *Crassula ovata*³ With its huge and respectful appearance it easily gave the travellers the impression of a magnificent lone person in a field of eternity. And not only its look had a presence of a person...

‘You can see me?’ a sudden, magical womanly voice echoed around and caused Harmony, Finn and Bromley to stop their steps just before they reached the tree.

They had to see the formation of a near-human body in the bark of the large plant’s stem to realise that *the tree itself* was talking to them.

‘Yes. You can definitely see me,’ stated the strange woman, looking at The Strangers and their Fellow Pal with a hopefulness. ‘Finally! So unusual! So unusual...’

‘We can see you... and you can talk?’ asked Finn, just before Harmony added with a worried look on her face:

³ Also called jade plant

‘Oh... are you... are you a dryad? The only remaining one of the Three Dryad Sisters?’

These words made the strange face on the bark seem quite nervous. Her slim, beautiful figure climbed up the tree and moments later she appeared in an almost human form, sitting on one of the branches - yet she remained connected with it in a magical way.

Magical like her beauty. Oh, how unbelievable that beauty was... Elegant like an aristocratic lady, with long green hair and magnetic blue eyes. To be fair, she would’ve been completely naked if her artistic fusion with the tree hadn’t kept most of her body hidden.

‘Yes, I am a dryad. But don’t make the mistake of thinking that I have something in common with that demon Alilla. My sister.’

‘So... you *are* one of the Three Dryad Sisters after all?’

‘No. I am not one of those three witches who made Arbortrium’s residents subservient of their power. Those three soulless women who cursed even their own little sister...’

A total surprise for Harmony, Finn and Bromley.

‘You are... the *fourth* Dryad Sister?’ the girl exclaimed. ‘We didn’t know there was a fourth one.’

She gave a quick glance at the bard. He said:

‘I didn’t know it either when I told you the story of Arbortrium’s rulers. Not until now.’

‘Ah... Arbortrium’s rulers...’ the woman of the tree seemed irritated. ‘How angry these words make me... They didn’t deserve to win. I could’ve stopped them if they hadn’t stopped me first.’

‘Did they turn you into a... tree?’ Bromley asked, taking some slow steps closer to the dryad as his intrigued eyes were staring at her.

‘Oh... no, no...’ She smiled for the first time, then tenderly touched the branch she was sitting on. ‘This tree is *my dryad tree*. As you may know, we, the most powerful dryads, have the opportunity to get raised alongside a tree which is like our second half. Unlike all the other normal trees with which we could blend, our personal ones could move with us everywhere – and usually they are invisible to almost everyone.’

‘That sounds so cool! To have your own personal flexible tree!’ Bromley seemed elated. ‘But something tells me that the curse you just mentioned binds you with it even more than needed...’

‘Yes, it does,’ the dryad sighed. ‘As much as I love my tree... not being able to move anywhere else with it is ruining my soul. It’s ruining my sanity. *This* is what Alilla and my other two older sisters Umbria and Ester did to me only because I dared to question their plan to invade these lands centuries ago. I’ve been frozen here, in this valley, for so long... and nobody who crossed it was able to see me – until today. The day on which came you, my dear unusual Strangers! And your Fellow Pal, of course.’

The mild look she gave Bromley at the end of her short speech made him smile again, once again feeling so proud of being such an important thing as a Fellow Pal. And not to usual Strangers from the Old Castle’s Gates but to these two *extraordinary* Strangers...

‘We are the first people who are able to see you?’ Harmony was stunned about what the dryad had just told them. She once again shared an excited look with Finn. ‘Lady Graciella was right. Maybe we *are* different.’

‘This is not something you should ever doubt about,’ said the dryad. ‘Yet, let me tell you a story which will probably help you understand more about that astonishing nature of yours. As I heard with my extra sensitive ability to hear in the distance... you like stories. The one about

Bartholomeus has a very impactful ending, by the way. Especially if it is completely sung by someone talented, like it would've been if you hadn't stopped when you saw my tree.'

She stared at the bard once again, He, feeling proud of her kind feelings towards him, brought a smug gesture of his face and said:

'Thank you. I always appreciate a compliment said by a pretty woman,' he took a breath, then he added: 'And, who knows, maybe I will get even more inspired when you share your forementioned story with us.'

'Oh no, it is not my story,' the dryad was quick to specify. 'It is a story of nature with a powerful moral in it... It started with...'

Out of a sudden, a blinding light made everyone close their eyes and... tremble.

XIV

The New Atlantis

In cases like this, not that they happen very often, it could be quite hard for a person to distinguish reality from non-reality - especially when that same non-reality has been a pretty much unforgettable reality for other people.

So, when the connection of Nathaniel (remember him?) with that much longer and astonishing vision was suddenly interrupted, at first, he started breathing fast, with his heart beating madly. The young prince seemed like he had completely lost his ability to speak - until some words came on his mouth after all:

‘And this is... the end of the vision? You cannot show me what happened to them after that evil tree woman abducted them!?’

The mysterious lady in the fog reacted in an unexpected way - she laughed.

‘Oh no... please, don’t think of Evangeline as of someone malicious. She is the last person to be called ‘evil’. I know her very well and I can assure you that she did nothing bad to Harmony, Finn, Bromley and the turtle, wherever the last one was at that moment. Actually, Evangeline was the one who contacted me immediately after they disappeared in front of her eyes. And it was visible how worried she was.’

‘So... you... you were there? In that extraordinary realm of Arbortrium?’

‘Not only I was there... but I played, well, let’s say... a pretty important role in what you just saw.’

Her voice sounded so familiar now - since the vision, that same voice gave Nathaniel a big hint of who she actually was. Yet, he still needed one final push - and it came soon, when the mysterious woman got closer to him while magically removing the mist that had blurred her appearance until now.

Seconds later the prince could finally see that she was nobody else but Lady Graciella herself.

‘You... you are the same in person as in the visions...’ He was astonished - both from this fact and from that undoubtedly magnetic presence that the dragonfly woman possessed.

‘These places of Very Special Fair Magic are wonderful, right?’, she looked around. ‘They can fully transfer you and your mind even in events that are not memories of the one who shares them with you.’

‘But... how is it possible for you to have experienced *all* those visions so you can share them with me? Especially after The Strangers and their Fellow Pal ran out of your property...

You sound like you still haven’t met them again - so you shouldn’t have the same connection with them that you had during the training hours in your backyard... should you?’

‘Yes, but I still had some connection. With nature. With other small - and not so small - witnesses to what they did after they left my house. Connection that helped me experience those memories of The Strangers and their Fellow Pal in the hours that followed - but it was unexpectedly disturbed when they met Evangeline and disappeared.’

‘And you are still completely sure she had nothing to do with this?’

‘Yes, I am. She might be the outcast little sister of the Three Dryad Sisters, but she has a good soul. But you will see it for yourself because very soon you will also meet her - in person, not in a vision. If the plan of me and Evangeline - and of others, of course - goes without problems.’

‘And this plan is...?’

Lady Graciella sighed.

‘Sorry, young prince Nathaniel. This is everything I can tell you for now. I swore to secrecy to someone I deeply respect. He wouldn’t be happy if I reveal everything to you in advance... Your way just has to go the way we hope it will go - without the knowledge of some details that could eventually change your decisions... and change this path of yours, respectively.’

‘Hm... Secrets after secrets... Unknown persons after unknown persons... and I should just... listen to all of them? To all of you? Hm...’ The man furrowed an eyebrow. ‘Do I already know that ‘someone’ you just mentioned? Is it Apollo?’

‘No, but it is someone as much important for this case as him.’

‘Can you at least tell me who were you heading to meet when you urged Finn, Harmony and Bromley to run? Did you find that... missing fifth companion?’

Nathaniel felt ironic about how many times these words, ‘at least’, were mentioned by him or by somebody else in the latest vision. Really, all those cryptic speeches of Lady Graciella and her allies got him more and more frustrated.

‘Well, we are talking of the same person that I should tell you nothing about... for now.’, as she said this, Lady Graciella slowly started to go back into the mist again. “But you will understand most things very soon, I assure you. This fateful journey of yours will lead you to many answers... At least the answers *you really* need.’

‘Wait! You cannot just leave me here! Not without telling me more about the vision and the people in it! Not without explaining to me how exactly that vision relates to my mission! And you most certainly cannot leave me alone on this completely unknown place!’

‘Oh, my dear child... is the place really *that* unknown to you?’ The last thing Nathaniel saw of her was her smile during these words. And the last thing he heard was: ‘I assure you once again, prince Nathaniel. Everything will come to its place - one way or another. Including the right arrangement of the paths of other people - and not only people - that this fateful journey of yours aims to bring to balance. Including this amazingly different, yet amazingly close place to you...’

Then she disappeared. Not even her silhouette was visible anymore.

Nathaniel was alone. Once again. With his eyes wide opened and staring not at a dragonfly lady anymore, but at the evening skies... and the beautiful shining double rainbow that had appeared on them during the conversation of the prince and the magical woman.

Double rainbow, strikingly resembling the ones he used to see in his native lands.

“Well, at least the pebbles on the beach are not too hot!”

Nathaniel got to this conclusion while walking on the shore with his shoes off. It was easier for him to move forward in that way - not that he knew where he was moving to. He just... walked... and walked. And some feelings, alongside some knowledge, made him believe that he was going west.

West of the unknown, tho. At that kind of exotic place that so naturally combined astonishing beauty with mysterious, almost dark vibe.

Soon it literally became dark, as the evening turned into night and the sun had to swap places with the moon and the stars.

“At least I know that I am still on Earth... I hope...” Nathaniel changed his statement that included different usage of ‘at least’. ‘But... what is that wild place? Is it somehow connected to... *those* strange places?’”, Nathaniel said to himself.

After the last long vision, the prince was more confused than ever - and he didn’t even have the chance to ask Miss Graciella some questions that occurred in his mind during it. Like what were those lands where Harmony and Finn came from, before going to Arbortrium? London, Paris, Belgium... Austria, Bulgaria!? Other places that were mentioned, like Copenhagen, America? Not even single one of these names was familiar to Nathaniel.

The prince wanted to learn more about Harmony and Finn themselves. About Arbortrium itself – that so unusual kingdom, separated in all those strange Stages of Senses... Something quite different than what he had always known for the world now and the world before - well, maybe because at least Arbortrium was, let’s say, confirmed not to be that same much wider world Atlantis was once part of... or was it? However, even if it wasn’t, there was another question in sight - *when* were all those events happening? Those places in the visions? In what year? And what was the year in the place he was currently exploring? Was the word ‘year’ even accurate enough to measure time here and there?

At one point Nathaniel got *really, really tired* - of walking and of thinking about all these topics. So, he started looking for a place to hide for the night, The wide forest, which was still standing on his left during his wanderings on the beach, didn’t seem safe enough, yet for now it probably was his only option if he wanted to build some kind of temporary shelter.

The man found some dry wood branches and arranged them on a special place between the first trees next to the beach. He also took a lot of fresh grass, determined to at least try turn it into a pillow for his head.

Neither the branches were good enough for a roof nor the grass was good enough for a pillow. But the exhausted body of Nathaniel Terek couldn’t take anything for granted. He just laid down in this improvised hut and, as his blonde head touched the green leaves, his blue eyes looked at the beautiful night sea. Slowly his eyelids closed while his mind was thinking of the unexpected attack of the monster creatures, of the even more unexpected ambush... and of the kidnapping of his dear mother. Before falling into deep sleep, the prince also thought about the peculiar places he had visited during the visions in the places of Very Special Fair Magic - and not only them. Of the marvellous supernatural beings that he had met for real - the ancient god and the talking dragonfly lady.

And, of course, of *her*. He still couldn’t explain it but after all those other unforgettable events Nathaniel still couldn’t stop constantly reminding himself of that other special girl with a magical voice... She had fully possessed him.

Then he heard her song again. In his dream. This time – in his human language.

About magical dreams she was singing, too:

*Kiss the waves of that precious river - and then go,
Follow them, follow these fresh waters down the flow.
And just when you feel you are all alone,
Swimming against the currents, the sand, the stone,
Then, just then you listen to my voice - and allow yourself to get lost in it.*

*Among all the voices of the shadows in your mind,
Befriend this one and recognise
This touch of eternity we could create,
The shades of a figure without a shade...*

Nathaniel would listen to this song forever.

He would follow that wonderful direction of the woman without a doubt...

Follow the vague mist he saw instead of seeing her...

And sing along with her, too...

But he couldn't. He just woke up.

"No!" The young man shouted. "She... she was so close!"

Nathaniel closed his eyes, with the burning desire to go back into that same dream. Of that astonishing reality in the world of dreams...

He didn't fall asleep again - not in this night. And this time he could blame nobody for the lost connection with that irresistible woman.

"Damn it!"

After an hour of tossing and turning in the 'bed', Nathaniel got up. He clenched the fists of both his hands, then he tried to become calmer, so he took a deep breath and made a few steps on the beach, then he stopped and looked at the night sea. The man allowed himself to fall into the pleasure of that gentle touch the breeze gave him - and he stood in that position for several minutes, like a steady statue.

Then he took a deep breath again and started walking in the same direction as earlier.

"A vision... an ancient god... and a peculiar dragonfly woman...", as he was heading into the unknown again, Nathaniel started whispering these things to himself, trying to connect the pieces of the complicated puzzle of his current adventure.

Sometimes he stopped to sit, to take a deep breath and prepare himself for more walking. During one of these quick breaks, he found something interesting. To be more precise - he *saw* something interesting and then took it in his hands to explore it. It was a small grey pebble. At first sight the pale inscription on it was barely visible, especially during night, but the man succeeded of reading it at least part of it.

'Is this... an arrow?'

Yes, it seemed like an arrow - yet, what was surrounding it seemed quite unclear, even if carved in a more visible way. There were some letters - or maybe symbols - over it. Nathaniel was not quite sure if they represented the Cyrillic letters 'Д' and 'Т', or maybe the second one was 'Б'... Then it felt completely possible that the first one was actually the Greek 'Δ'... or maybe it was just a triangle?

More questions without an exact answer. But should they have an answer, actually? Or Nathaniel just kept getting crazier and crazier because of the other events? Did he just started imagining things?

'I think I should go, staying on one place makes things even more complicated,' the prince said to himself, then he stood up and took a few steps, while at the same time he kept the interesting stone in his left hand.

Then... Nathaniel fell.

It happened on a strange place of the shore where the surface of pebbles became rugged - so the prince had to put more efforts into walking on it. He couldn't expect (but maybe he should've, considering everything happening recently) that at one point his feet would step into a hidden hole and his reaction wouldn't be fast enough to help him stay on the beach.

However, the fact is that, with a loud scream, Nathaniel fell into an underground hollow. He hit his left leg and his right shoulder - but he was not fatally hurt. The strange pebble flew somewhere and got lost but the man had more serious problems now - that this hole, unlike the other one where he had fell earlier, was nearly five meters deep and he didn't seem to be able to get out of it easy.

After allowing himself to shout some not so nice words in the dark, Nathaniel started looking around for something that might help him. There were some big stone cubes - but they seemed too heavy to be moved by one person. There were also some strong metal chains.

Strong metal chains?

Nathaniel quickly realised that he hadn't fell into a natural hollow down the beach. It was... an old building. A structure built by men. Possibly hundreds or even thousands of years ago...

'Here's to your new unexpected archaeological experience, Nate,' the prince joked on himself, then he started walking forward in the dark.

This is when he naturally wished the flashlight of his hyper phone was still with him - but sadly, the smart device was left in his flying car after the collision of the vehicle with the invisible wall. But this was also the moment when he was amazed by the fact that he actually didn't need his phone's light here. Because, as he approached the barely visible staircase close to the point where he fell... automatic lights turned on over him. They were not too strong, but they were completely enough for him to see his path.

'Amazing...', once again, he whispered to himself as he was slowly walking down the stairs and exploring the place. "Probably this was one a place powered by solar panels - and some of those solar panels are still out somewhere up there, on the surface, catching the touch of light..."

Some of them probably were - but others weren't. This is why in some sectors of that abandoned underground building the dark was still consuming almost everything around - to the next place where the light was brought back by some others still working solar panels - so Nathaniel couldn't complain about the visibility anymore.

Yet he was completely confused about what this quite modern and well-preserved structure was used for - until the realisation about its actual purpose suddenly hit him in the face.

As deeper as Nathaniel went, as gloomy the setting became. It did not take a long time for the prince to recognise the type of the rooms he was surrounded by and to find some inscriptions that labelled the sections around.

The rooms were cells. And the inscriptions were as of a prison. But what was even more shocking was that the same inscriptions were written in the exact same language Atlantis used during the years of Nathaniel's parents' reign.

"No way...", the man whispered, as some memories also appeared in his mind all of a sudden.

He *knew* this place. He had visited it. Once in his teenage years his mother had brought him here - because she wanted to present to him one of the most scary and dangerous places (apart from the forest of the microtyphons, of course) that the city contained. The place where the criminals of Kale were held.

This was the main prison of Kale.

And it was not fully abandoned...

A sudden noise startled Nathaniel. There was something else on that place. *Somebody* else...

‘Finally... You are here...’, a trembling, deeply excited voice echoed in the corridor.

‘Who is there!?’ the young prince shouted.

‘Don’t be scared... Just come to me... I won’t hurt you. Please, prince... don’t abandon me... I need your help to get out...’

‘You... you need me? You know me?’, Nathaniel asked while he slowly walked towards the cell in the end of the corridor - where the silhouette of a human was moving behind the bars.

‘Yes, prince Nathaniel. Quite a while ago I had a magical vision of you coming. Someone sent it to me and this is how I know a lot about you, my friend. And you know a little bit about me, too...’

As the free man got closer to the one in the cell, their eyes looked at each other - and then the prisoner finally stepped into the light.

He was a middle-aged man with grey hair and long beard. His bright blue eyes made him look kind and honourable - and at the same time they looked somehow familiar to Nathaniel. *He* looked familiar to Nathaniel.

‘Who are you?’, the prince asked, not knowing how much of a shock the answer of the older man would be:

‘I am Bromley. Bromley Wenlic, the famous bard of Arbortrium.’

XV

The Prisoner

Yes, he really looked like Bromley Wenlic.

His voice sounded like the voice Nathaniel remembered from the visions.

His face gave the same kind of impression as the one of the talented bard.

But he was older. A lot older than that fresh young man from the woods - at least with twenty years, maybe even more.

So strange...

‘Bromley, the bard? The Fellow Pal?’, Nathaniel asked while his eyes started blinking. Trying to recognize someone he never actually met in person was not something he had to do every day - especially if the appearance of that someone had changed that much. ‘It’s really you... But why... why do you...’

‘Why do I look that old and weak? Well, time has a significant contribution - the place I’ve been living in the last twelve years, too.’

He looked around himself and took a deep sigh. In a moment like this his sad blue eyes also gave a hint about the burden on him.

‘Twelve years?’, Nathaniel was shocked. ‘You’ve been locked in that cell for... twelve years!?’

‘To be fair, part of the cell is destroyed so sometimes I also go to some other cells around me - the one on my right and another one downstairs,’ Bromley’s finger pointed something in the dark. Nathaniel couldn’t see it clear but there was really some kind of destruction there. ‘But I have been locked inside the walls of this same abandoned prison for twelve years, indeed. It is good that the wizard who locked me here, so I could follow my destiny, had given me a magical bag with unlimited foods and drinks.’

‘A wizard?’

Nathaniel was surprised. Could that wizard be the same man Lady Graciella didn’t want to talk about? The fourth partner in the unusual group of her, Evangeline and Apollo?

‘Yes, his name is Didacus - or *was* Didacus, because, sadly, I think that something might have happened to him nine years ago, when he was supposed to come unlock me.’

‘Why would he lock you just to come again three years later and unlock you?’

Another deep sigh on Bromley’s side, another sad look on the face of that usually bright, positive bard.

‘The story is too long - but I will share it with you if you need it. Well, I think that it is important for me to share it with you because maybe this is the way to make you believe in my good intentions and trust me enough to help me get out of here.’

‘Well, maybe... Let’s try it’, Nathaniel decided not to promise anything, yet his desire to get more details on at least this man’s journey to that gloomy place was too strong for him to reject the suggestion of the bard.

So, Bromley Wenlic took a deep breath and prepared himself to tell the very exciting (although quite disturbing in some moments) story of what happened to him after he, Harmony, Finn and the little not-so-present turtle disappeared.

‘The dramatic change of my path started when I had to part ways with The Strangers from the Old Castle’s Gates - I understand that you are now familiar with them and later you will

understand where I got this information from. I guess that it would be no surprise to you that the unwanted separation between me and those to whom I was meant to be Fellow Pal happened while that unusual tree woman, Evangeline, was talking. The last thing I remember before the bright light embraced and thus completely possessed us was how expressive her voice was - and how impressed Harmony and Finn seemed while listening to it, even for a few seconds. Then the dazzling light abducted us - and when I opened my eyes again, I was alone. On a much darker place. Much darker and much different than everything I've ever seen in my life.

It was in the core of a big and quite strange tree - later they'd tell me this type of tree is usually called 'banyan'⁴. The tangled stems of it were at least thirty - and they were very high. I had the luck to be a thin young boy back then - so I succeeded to climb some of them and slowly sneak on the other side.

As I looked around, I realised I was in a forest so atypical - at least if I try comparing it with the one in Arbortrium where I like to hide and spend some time alone - that I would have to wander through its peculiarity for a long time in order to research it and learn more about its kind - and how could I keep myself safe in it while I am looking for my way out. But soon I found out that I wouldn't have to, after all - because there *he* was. The wizard.'

'He just... appeared in front of you, in the middle of that strange forest?', asked Nathaniel.

'Yes - not even a minute after I got out of the banyan tree, I saw him in the distance. He was standing not too far away, so I could easily reach him and look closer at him. He was the typical - at least typical for the views in Arbortrium - wizard. Long grey hair, long grey beard, a dark robe with a hood. He looked at least sixty years old- but his strange yellow eyes gave his appearance not only a younger, lively look, but also emphasised on how non-ordinary and supernatural he was.

When I got closer to him, the magician smiled a little, then said to me with his deep voice:

'Hello, dear Bromley Wenlic. It's been a long time - you are a fully grown big man now.'

'I am sorry but... do we know each other?', I asked.

'Yes, of course. Well, you may not remember me, but I saved your life when you were a little toddler. There were some dark, very dark forces who wanted you dead - because they were afraid of how your role in some upcoming events could dramatically change the things for them.'

I was quite surprised. Why would anyone think I am *that* special? Me, the orphan who had always been known mostly for his passion for lyrics and music? Was there a prophecy of any kind?'

'Oh man, of course there was a prophecy', Nathaniel said in a mocking way. 'One for me, one for you, one for anyone around - such a memorable way for a person to stand out as a marvellous hero in a story.'

'Well, to be fair, my friend, the magician never used the exact word 'prophecy' for my particular case', Bromley surprised the sarcastic prince. 'But he explained what he meant in a pretty detailed way:

'I mean, Bromley, that you have always been a very special child - since the day you were born. Your parents were among the bravest people living on these lands. They fought against the tyrants that ruled everything that their eyes could see. Those wolves in sheep's disguise, who have always used their deceptive charm to make other people believe in their false intentions... they could fool many, but not your parents - sadly, this is what cost those two young lovebirds their lives. Since that day you were the next target of the rulers - they didn't want any heir of their enemies to stay alive. They and their rotten souls were afraid of any kind of vendetta - and

⁴ banyan, or *Ficus benghalensis* (lat.) is a fig tree with many trunks. It usually grows in tropical and subtropical zones.

they were ready to do everything to prevent something like this. So, they ordered their closest thugs to find you and kill you quietly, without much noise. This is when, like I already said, someone had to save you - and that someone was me.'

'I... I am speechless. Don't know what to say!' I was confused and grateful at the same time, so I added: "But... thank you! Thank you so much for keeping me alive! Yet, I am not sure about anything else surrounding this very personal case of mine.'

'You should not thank me, Bromley - because I did what a large part of the nation needed me to do. Maybe it was too early for me back then to know if you will turn out to be that brave and strong as your parents were - so you could help me and some others like me with our quest to change everything for better. But, I believe, my sense about you and your soul didn't lie to me back then - and they don't lie to me now. As for additional detail about what is truly happening, let me go back many, many decades back in time. You know, young Bromley, that sometimes people just know what they want in their lives but at the same time they could be too hesitant about actually doing it. This is what has been happening on these lands for centuries. So, when The Portal at the Tree with Three Branches opened... hope returned in the hearts and souls of many."

"The Tree with Three Branches?", I asked with amazement. "The same Tree with Three Branches where The Palace of the Three Dryad Sisters is standing?"

"Yes, indeed, my dear bard. That special tree, being an unusual melange of three sorts of plants - including oak, ash and the type from which core you just came from, banyan - has been considered a supreme place of power in Arbortrium since the birth of the legend of the Three Sisters. The same way people here started feeling about it once it grew big and strong and The Portal became visible to everybody."

"Wait... wait... Are you telling me that *everybody* on these lands is able to see The Tree with Three Branches? That unique place that is usually visible only to the few out there who reached the highest Stages of Sense?"

I was quite shocked. For whole my life I'd listened to so many stories about that unordinary tree and how hard it would be for the living to prove themselves, in order to become worthy enough to witness its magnificence - and there he was, that strange wizard in the strange forest who claimed that there was a land where everybody had the opportunity to easily see it.

"The same tree, indeed", the wizard nodded his head with his look of a deep, wise person, then took a deep breath and explained to me: "But what is considered as untouchable in one world is not necessarily that untouchable in other. And, as you had probably already realised, we are far from Arbortrium, my dear bard - the kingdom where you were raised is in a completely different dimension than the one you were born - and where we are standing right now. Well, to be fair, that special tropical island is an addition of the mainland - an addition that was not originally meant to be here. But this is another story, and I will make sure that later we would get back to it because it is also of a great importance in our case. However, let's first get back to The Tree and its quite different importance for the millions of people here. In fact, nobody out there ever realised that this tree was standing in the border of different realms - most people in this world are still not possessing the ability to realise such extra-terrestrial things. This is why many of them, I am sure, don't perceive The Tree with Three Branches as a *tree*. They can see it without even reaching the power of the Stage of Senses 186; they can sense its historical importance as something incredible, as a symbol of salvation of freedom; they can pronounce its name... but most of them are still not able to actually *sense* it. To really appreciate it. This is why they say its name but at the same time they still don't know they are saying it. They can get close to the tree; they can examine it - but they are not able *to really see* it and know what this tree means. Their minds have never actually digested the idea of it. This is why they practically do not see it at all - they just know it is there and they believe it helps them. But most of them are not ready *to really see*.' The Wizard took a deep breath and, while looking at that totally

amazed and captivated expression on my face, continued: “Sadly, this is the reason many of those otherwise worthy people of a nation that has suffered a lot, never actually appreciated what they had. How it paved the way for them to so many unimaginable possibilities. Of course, there were some among them who were different - and the names of most of those people were written in history with the golden ink that the stem of The Tree with Three Branches provides. But, as I said, most of the other worthy ones never knew what they had in their hands. And then there were the evil ones. They were not always the rulers after The Portal and The Tree appeared - but even when the power was temporary captured by others with, seemingly, different intentions, the full potential of these symbols of good was still not fully deployed; therefore, the nation never really shined with its brightest light. This is why the forces of evil always came back and always were capable to win, using the weaknesses of people, the temptations that were buried deep into their souls and bodies. Those forces knew how to use the powers of The Portal and The Tree better than others - this is how they succeeded to capture the attention of their victims and possess their souls, sometimes with obvious lies. But the more ironic thing is that most of the evil ones themselves were also blind about the truth about what The Tree really wanted to give everybody. However, with time many of those people with unclear - or very clear and shockingly cruel - intentions won the battles with the good ones. Well, to be fair, some doings of those with the doubtful intentions led to some, let’s say, useful results. Others, sadly, ruined the society - step by step, year after year, decade after decade. Until the collapse of that society become not only more visible than The Tree itself. It became the dark truth of our recent days.’

The magician took another deep sight while I was still silent. That touching story had made me speechless - but it was just the beginning of a long journey in the way to justice I’ve never imagined about.

“Identity, my dear. Identity is what these lands once had - but they now miss because of centuries of instability, of cruelty, of lies... Nothing is completely lost, though. Just let me lead you out of this jungle - straight to the inhabitable lands of this, after all, magnificent world of people who still keep their strength and hold on to some valuable memories and traditions that make them united.”

I didn’t know what to think and in what to believe - as you probably feel the same about me, dear prince. Meeting a complete stranger who asks you to trust him - this could easily lead to a big disaster... but also to a big triumph.

So, I decided to follow the wizard, Didacus. On our way out of the interesting forest, the jungle, he told me more about that unordinary island we were going through back then - that it was not originally a part of the lands he was leading me to, until an unique and very rare event, connected with the rage of the scary god Cronus literally ‘threw’ it in the big sea that was located eastern of these lands.

“Cronus?”, Nathaniel interrupted Bromley’s long story. “Wait, when I met Apollo, the other ancient god, he also mentioned something about that mad grandfather of him...”

“I am not surprised at all. The rage of Cronus was of an enormous proportion. It created a colossal - and for some places even apocalyptic - imbalance in some realms. Mostly in the world we are now standing in.”, Bromley took a sigh, then he looked around, even though he knew he was looking at an underground cell and not to the open world up there. Then he gave a serious look to Nathaniel, knowing how he would react to the next words: “*Your* world.”

The prince trembled. He opened his mouth in a complete shock - not that the bard had told him something completely unexpected.

‘So... so this really *is* the old prison of Kale...’, Nathaniel also looked around. ‘My memories... my feelings... they didn’t lie to me.’

‘No, they didn’t. We are standing in what is left of Atlantis... *here*.’

The emphasis on the last word made Nathaniel even more confused.

‘*Here? Is there another Atlantis somewhere else?*’

‘Well, this is a very complicated question, my friend’, Bromley took a breath. ‘But let me try explaining it to you as easy as possible. Imagine this crazy god, Cronus, whose aforementioned rage had the power to destroy... and change. This is what happened when one of those days, several millennia ago, an extra-terrestrial storm ravaged a large part of this Earth...’

‘The first of the Ancient Storms...’, whispered Nathaniel, astonished. Out of a sudden he got an answer about the origin of some of the greatest natural and historical events that shaped the world he had grown in.

‘Yes, the wizard told me you are calling them that way - but for other people on other places these same storms are more familiar with their real name - The Wrath of Cronus. Yes, you heard me correctly - *The Wrath, the only wrath* - if we are talking about this particular case, of course. We are talking of *only one* event that changed everything - but since the beginning the gods have tried to fight with its consequences and even prevent some of them on time. And by ‘gods’ I do not mean only the ones of Olympus - but many others that are familiar in different worlds and different cultures. They joined forces and this is how the Wrath was, well, let me use the same word that Didacus used when he told me that same story - ‘divided’. Yes, The Wrath of Cronus was divided into different stages that created different events in different realms. In the realm we are currently standing in, the First part of The Wrath destroyed almost everything of the world - but in worlds like the one I grew up, Arbortrium, its effect did not have disastrous effect - yet it created The Stages of Senses. Thanks to the gods The Second, The Third and The Fourth parts of The Wrath did almost no damage to the other worlds - unlike your world where these same merciless parts completely destroyed almost anything around Atlantis and even some lands of it. And not only that - they literally cut some parts of the island and its surrounding smaller islands and moved them... somewhere else.’

‘Like the island of Architraves...’, said Nathaniel with quite an excitement. ‘So it really *is* still standing somewhere out there!’

‘Yes - but now it is far, far away, in an ocean that is still not examined by your world but in the world that the wizard introduced to me it is called The Pacific. Oh, and maybe I should’ve mentioned that the Architraves Island, like some other separated parts of Atlantis, was moved not only far away from their original place... but to another realms.’

‘Like the realm you met the wizard, huh? It is all clear now. The jungle where you met him was part of *that* other piece of Atlantis that was ‘dropped’ in the sea east of the lands that he wanted you to help him save.’

‘Correct. But that land, like the Portal, was also not so visible to everybody - many people still cannot visit it because, as I said earlier, their eyes can see it physically but they are still not really open to *understand* it - so they practically don’t know it is there at all. This magnificent, yet not so inhabitable part of the great Atlantis... it is there... but at the same time it isn’t - not for everybody. But those who actually succeeded to make contact with it through the centuries had left a part of its trace on the main, original land - and that trace, actually, is still considered as one of the most mythical and astonishing, yet very questionable and unresolved mysteries there, near the shores. However, let me go back to my story - and I mean *my* story. Or what happened to me after the magician led me into those original lands off the island - of course, only if all of this is still interesting to you and you are considering letting me out of my cell if the tale of my journey captures you attention - and helps you trust me?’

‘Go on,’ Nathaniel still couldn’t promise anything to the prisoner, yet he was too curious to hear the whole story - at least Bromley gave him more answers than the mighty god and the dragonfly lady.

So, the bard continued talking:

‘When we first reached the mainland, I was impressed by what I saw and felt. Starting from the traces I already mentioned, which to that date were still standing there, near the shores, even if they were only remainings. I saw a gold - so much gold... You could easily feel the contact of those seaside lands with the mythical civilization that the exotic island brought with it after its parting with Atlantis. But this was just the beginning of my interesting journey. In the following days the magician and I experienced the culture - old and new - that not Atlantis, but the people of these original lands brought there through the centuries. Some parts of the big cities amazed me - I had never seen such things before, their look and their purpose were something so distant to what Arbortrium is - or at least those parts of Arbortrium that me and my modest soul could experience in our Stages of Senses.

Then we went west - and the excitement for me got even higher. Not only because of what the culture and tradition on those lands gave me... but also because there, in the magical setting of that seemingly not so magical realm I met... Yana. The love of my life.

Oh, how beautiful she was! How magnificent!

At first, we both were shy. Until I made the first step forward in our relationship by giving to her... a heart. Not a real heart, of course - I am not that creepy - but a small stone with light green colour that looked like a combination of the anatomical version and of that romantic version people sometimes draw when they... love someone. Oh, and how much I loved her! And you know what the greater thing is? She loved me the same way. This is why she accepted the heart while her sparkling eyes and rosy cheeks easily gave me a hint how she felt. We put our initials on it and threw it somewhere out there, among the other green colours of the nature in the steep forest near the Swing of Eternity - a place where we liked to go every day. We let go of that special stone, following the path of some traditional - yet not so well-remembered these days - beliefs that such a doing would bring eternal love to everyone involved.

On the next day we were already a couple. Ready to go through everything together... to-to-to-ge-ge-ge...’

What Nathaniel saw in front of himself in the next moments - and, actually, what he saw everywhere around - was one of the most unexpected things for him in this whole story. Yes, as unexpected as meeting an ancient god and a dragonfly woman or discovering that his homeland had changed drastically.

Imagine an old TV with a bad signal - and all of those annoying interruptions in the broadcast. This is pretty much what happened to the image of the prisoner of the cell and to the dark underground prison itself - as well to the voice of Bromley.

Just for a few seconds. everything disappeared, leaving only the darkness surrounding Nathaniel.

Then he opened his eyes and heard:

‘Oh, master... you are finally awake!’

XVI

A Wrath that Keeps Going

‘Erastos?’

Nathaniel recognized this voice immediately - he’d heard it for so many years... The voice of the faithful family hologram with artificial intelligence.

‘I am glad that you are finally back here, my master. Even though ‘here’ is not what it was when you started using The Room of Fair Magic several days ago’, as Erastos said these words, his face also appeared in front of the eyes of the distraught prince.

Nathaniel started blinking. He looked around and he found out that the two of them were, indeed, in the Room of Fair Magic in Kale, Atlantis. Yet, something didn’t fit at all.

‘What do you mean by *several days*?’, he asked, as he stood up, looking at the hologram. ‘I was here in the first hours of *yesterday* - well, maybe we are so late in the night that it is considered the day before...’

‘But your journey with the ship started even earlier,’ Erastos explained, then he explained with even more detail: ‘I know you are confused, master. You really thought that you left The Room a day and four hours ago. But you never did. Even when The Room... moved.’

‘Moved!? How does a room *move*?’

‘Let me be more clear - The Room *was moved*. By a storm. The Fifth Storm.’

Oh, how this shocking news made Nathaniel tremble...

Fifth Ancient Storm. A completely new one. During his lifetime...

‘No,’ he refused to believe, as he shook his head. ‘Not possible. How could it be? How did another Storm appeared, and I felt nothing?’

‘Because you were under the influence of The Room of Fair Magic. Its special power remained unbothered during The Fifth Storm - well, in fact not exactly unbothered, because meanwhile The Storm influenced its core so much that it was impossible for anyone who was using it at the same time to wake up.’

‘But I *did* wake up! You remember? *You* got me out of the magical trance even though I begged you not to!’

‘Yes, I know what you think you remember, master - even while feeling the arrival of The Storm I was connected with your mind for the whole time,’ said Erastos. ‘But what you saw was not completely real - at least not at the beginning, nor in that part of the story that you spent in the familiar surroundings of Atlantis. The corrupted magic created the illusion that you wake up - but it didn’t create your following actions. The way you were mad at me and at your mother - it was *you*. All the things that you did when you left that room - it was also *you*, even though you weren’t in the right timeline of our Atlantis anymore. You were not in our Kale - but in an exact version of it that got temporary cloned on another place. And it was created just for you and for your journey - this is why every component of it completely disappeared behind you.’

‘No... This can’t be true...’, Nathaniel shook his head again. ‘At least my mother... she... she was completely real...’

‘Yes, she was - but she was never part of the illusion - because you being under the spell of the corrupted Fair Magic, as ironic as it sounds, involved her in your new story even without her realising that The Fifth Storm was coming. She was the only one besides you – and, actually, your friend Kibwe - who really thought that all of that was real.’

‘And what about the other ones that made me part of that crazy journey? Apollo? Lady Graciella? Weren’t they real!’

He felt the irony of insisting that an ancient god and a dragonfly lady were something real - but after everything that happened (or maybe didn’t happen) and everything that kept happening, nothing seemed impossible for the young prince.

And Erastos confirmed that he was not completely delusional after all:

‘Yes, master, they were real. Everything after you and your mind left your familiar version of Atlantis, up there on those not so real at that point ruins of the temple, was real because of the powers of the Room of Fair Magic. You transferred to those places like you would’ve transfer to them on a normal day while using the Room. And your supernatural companions were real - they, because of their supernatural origin, were able to get into your vision and try arranging the things the way they should be - they knew in advance that the Fifth Storm was coming, apparently, and they were ready for it. Maybe you are wondering how do I know this? Because they sent the information needed to my database - but they asked me to reveal it to you after you wake up - even if it is after long time of living within the worlds where you were not completely present physically. Worlds that were not simulations anymore after Apollo saved you and brought you to another place.’

‘So, everything strange I saw after I left the only familiar place of mine was real, unlike the familiar place itself?’ A new stage of irony touched the young man.

‘Yes, indeed. But you were not supposed to know any of this - Apollo, Graciella, Evangeline and Didacus had to make sure that you will not wake up to early, before your mission was accomplished – like they didn’t want you to know many other things in advance.’

‘Didacus? As the Didacus, the wizard, from Bromley’s story?’

‘The same. And, to be fair, he was the one who created this whole plan of using your delicate... position after the storm, in order to help someone else fulfil his destiny of a great importance.’

‘Harmony and Finn, maybe? They are the once who had a great adventure in front of them, after all...’

‘Actually... no. It was not them who you had to help during your strange condition.’

‘Then who!?’

‘As I said - it was only one person. The last one you saw before you woke up.’

Nathaniel opened his mouth and started blinking again.

‘Bromley? I had to help... The Fellow Pal? But wasn’t he destined to help *them*?’

‘Not exactly. He is an important figure, indeed, but not in their adventure – at least not on the same scale. His role in their journey was more essential for his own way, he had to participate on it so he will reach his own significant path at the end - but during this path he needed some help. Like when Didacus, without even asking the others on the team, excluded him from Finn and Harmony’s journey and took him to the place the bard was once born. To the place he was meant to save. Yet, only bringing him there was not enough - as we saw, at some point he got locked in that prison for longer than expected. This is where *your role* was of a great importance. But I think that I should leave him to explain you the rest.’

‘He... is here? He got out of the prison?’, Nathaniel looked around even though he knew there was nobody else here, in this room.

‘Yes, he escaped. But no, he is not anywhere around. But we are closer to him than ever - because this time we are *physically* closer to him. This is not a shared vision anymore. This is not a traveling through the depths of Fair Magic. This is the reality, young master. And in this reality you and I, as well as part of this building, are standing on the lands he told you about. The

lands where he was born - and the lands he is meant to protect, like his parents once did. This is where The Fifth storm brought this small piece of Atlantis this time - and this is why Didacus, who was well informed in advance for your arrival, had to involve *you* in this story.'

'Oh man... I wanted some information, but this is too much...' Nathaniel said, then he got closer to the metal wall that could easily be turned into glass. Even if all of this was putting pressure on him, he felt a wave of wild curiosity arising inside of his soul. 'So... if I look outside... I will see the country Bromley was talking about?'

He said it and he touched the wall. And the wall turned into glass, allowing him to witness a captivating night scenery.

There was a hill with an old medieval fortress on it. Among the buildings inside its walls, many small houses, a palace and an orthodox church were visible at first sight.

But Nathaniel was not near the fortress at that time. He was in the Room of Fair Magic on another hill, as strange as it was, considering that the building with The Room of Fair Magic was originally situated on a completely different location. But The Fifth Storm is The Fifth Storm and, apparently, the consequences of it were inevitable.

Closer to this place, down the same hill, some ruins of other old walls were visible - probably centuries ago that kingdom or whatever it was had spread its power far outside the main city. Talking about power, today the surroundings of these two hills were full of many modern - or at least more modern than the fortress times - buildings.

Nathaniel, who had never seen something like this in his life, even in old books, was impressed.

'Bromley has to defend a nice place', he stated with a slight smile, then looked at Erastos. 'Do you have any idea where he is now?'

'Not exactly but he is probably somewhere near... the new castle', the AI hologram said, making its master surprised.

'Wait, there is... another castle?'

'Yes. But not many people know about it. However, I am among those who got that information for you, my master. That special place, where Bromley and the other rebels are trying and will be trying to restore the greatness that once was, stands somewhere North-East of where we are right now. You can use the back door to go in that direction, it will be easier and faster.'

'And then what? Search for Bromley in random locations?'

'Nothing is random, my master, nothing is random. Everything is coming on its place, even if it seems like it happens in a quite unordinary, unconventional - for some people even too bold and wild - way...'

Erastos said and then disappeared.

'Wait! Come back!', Nathaniel shouted. 'You cannot just disappear like that, without answering all of my questions! At least you are not supposed to leave without my permission... or are you?'

The thought of The Fifth Storm quickly whispered to the young prince's mind that probably the AI hologram was now a different kind of AI hologram. And this realisation had Nathaniel to sigh and accept the fact that once again he had to go in the direction of the unknown.

He went on that direction. Leaving the building from what has remained of the corridor that was once leading to the backyard and then heading North-East, through the dense forest that covered the slopes there. While passing through all the trees he couldn't help but ask himself what he was doing... Where was he going... He didn't even know the exact location of Bromley, he only knew that he would find the bard somewhere out there, in the woods. Once again - in the

woods, the place Bromley Wenlic liked to use so he can hide from everything and everyone. Only him and his lute - but this time the now middle-aged bard had a completely different mission than making music without doing too much noise to the villagers. And Nathaniel had a mission too.

This wandering through the woods reminded him of the first time he was forced to go through similar path, even if it was on a warmer location with different kind of vegetation. These memories felt like from a hundred years ago - and in some perspectives maybe they were from a hundred years ago. But for Nathaniel it was just... yesterday.

The fact that these moments were part form 'yesterday' seemed more solid by the other fact that the sunrise was close - with each minute the prince was able to see more and more of his forest surroundings. This is when the young man found a walking trail through the wild. This region was so fresh and beautiful during that time, and moments like these helped Nathaniel realise the importance of what Bromley had to do, even if many details of the plan were still not clear.

But they became clear when the prince succeeded to find the bard after all.

'Nathaniel... Prince Nathaniel, my friend, you are here!', suddenly, Bromley's voice came out somewhere from the shadows of the nearest trees.

The younger man got excited. He looked straight at the other one, just to see that he now looked even older, with completely white hair and some more wrinkles - but yet with the youthful vibe he'd always possessed. His clothes were quite different now - maybe traditional for these lands.

'Bromley...', Nathaniel whispered, taking a few steps closer to him. 'You... you...'

'Yes, I know', the bard smiled, as he touched his hair. 'I look like I might be someone's grandpa right now. But I am only several years older than the last time we met there, in that abandoned prison. They've been some very tough years, though.'

'More tough than staying in a prison cell for 12 years before that?'

'Well, actually, I spent three more years in the cell - so the total number of years without freedom was 15. But even if my soul got crushed once you disappeared and my chance of getting out was lowered... I didn't give up. Those minutes of talking with someone gave me hope that nothing is lost. Hope that I had previously thought that was lost, even after that vision of you coming - a vision that I wasn't quite sure if it wasn't just a cruel dream. Your appearance gave me strength and set me up to the ideas I should still believe, no matter what. To fight for that freedom of mine - and for the freedom of people who count on me. Who trust me to save their lands - my birth lands where we are standing right now,' with a smile, Bromley took a look at the magical forest surroundings, then took a deep breath of pleasant air before giving a glance at Nathaniel once again. 'And I succeeded. I got out because of the faith your appearance gave me.'

So this is what Erastos meant when he said that Nathaniel's role in all of this was important...

'I... I am glad that I helped...', the young prince said, trembling with some kind of joy. 'Yet, I am still not completely sure what exactly to think or to do from now on. Even if some questions are now answered, others arose...'

'Then let me try help you get the answers of them too, my friend - or at least of some of them, with which I am familiar,' Bromley said, then he put his hand on the other man's back and gently made Nathaniel follow him on the way he chose. "Talking with you would be once again useful for me - because today is a very important day for my mission. Actually, the most important, probably. But even if everything that me and my companions did in preparation for this day seems strong enough... I still have my doubts. Including the most important one - should we be doing this?"

“You are still not sure if this is the mission of your life?”

“Oh, no, no... I am sure it is”, Bromley said quickly. “I have faith in what we are doing. But I am questioning some of the moral sides of it. And I deeply care about the reaction of the worthy ones here. I mean... you know me, prince Nathaniel, even if we actually met in person only once before that day. At my early age I was that merry and carefree bard from that old village of Arbortrium. Someone who didn’t seem too important, but he was happy with it, as long as he had his lute and his music in his life. Then the things started changing. I thought that I am The Fellow Pal of The Strangers from the Old Castle’s Gates, which, of course, made my life of more importance, even if I were still not in the main role of the story. But after that... everything started changing once again. And it took me many years to get to the point where I am today. Still holding my lute but... much more special to a whole nation than I could’ve possibly imagined before...” He slowly took out that same lute from the bag that was hanging on one of his shoulders. Bromley touched the musical instrument gently, with much love, then sighed. “Yet I am still questioning what my companions and I are doing. Not because it wouldn’t help - I think it would. But because... it might be considered too radical. And that goofy bird, the cheerful bard that once was liked by many... could become a face of something both loved and hated at the same time.’

‘What do you mean?’

Bromley sighed once again.

‘Love has many faces. One of them is the face we know in our connections *to our closest people*. Like parents with their children, children with their parents... or like two lovebirds - like me and my Yana. Let me tell you, my friend, that we are now standing on *the exact same lands* where I did meet her years ago. Actually, we are pretty close to the place where we threw that special little stone of our loving hearts - and this gave us the blessing that we needed because once I got out of the prison we met again, and she was still waiting for me - with the children she had given birth to... with the twins of our love. Yes, my friend, I am now a father of two fully grown-up people - a man and a woman! But this is another story. The current one, in which I had been involving myself for many years and which crucial culmination is supposed to be *today*, is... a story of another love. The love I have for my homeland. Even if I hadn’t grown up here, I’ve felt the connection to these lands since when Didacus used that moment of change in Finn and Harmony’s journey to push me on the way of my own one...’ Bromley stopped walking for a moment, he looked at Nathaniel and said quietly: ‘Lands I am supposed to *rule* from now on.’

The prince made a gesture of surprise with his face.

‘So... this is where your fights are meant to lead? You becoming the ruler of your home country? I don’t get what might be considered wrong in this. Me myself was always trained to be a ruler of my homelands someday - and I can easily see the potential you have for the same here. You are kind and noble. You have a good soul - and the strength to be a dignified fighter.’

‘Thank you. Thank you, prince Nathaniel. These words mean a lot when they are said from one upcoming monarch to another. Yet, this is where the difference between our lands is - the territories where we are currently standing in are... well, let’s say they have been under the power of a different system. Or at least they were under that power until me and my companions succeeded to capture those who had used the powers of The Portal and The Tree with Three Branches to get what was more profitable to them, not to the nation. Opening this new stage of life here is not only a big responsibility, but it is also a thing that would probably make many people despise me. I am not sure if I will be understood by everybody in the upcoming years.’

‘I still don’t get what is wrong here. There is no way everyone will agree with everything - sometimes even the worthy ones need time to open their eyes. But you are probably giving the best chance to the people on these lands by removing their oppressors. These rulers were enemies

of their own country. And, as it seems, you and your people defeated them and are on your way to lead this place on new bright ways...'

Bromley didn't answer immediately. For a few moments, he stared at the younger men with a face of someone who was slowly getting more confident. At the end the white-haired man took a deep breath and smile.

'I know. Yes, I know all of this - but I am thankful that someone like you once again came into my life and gave me the strength I needed. There is something very special in you, prince Nathaniel Terek. You are kind and noble, too. And you are a good listener. This is how you just turned my thoughts around, during that hesitant wandering of mine. You solidified my final decision. I will go there. I will sit on the throne, and I will receive the crown. In front of the eyes of my enemies and their supporters - and for those who would applaud me for this. I will make the necessary change for my country.' He looked with thankful eyes to the younger man and put a hand of his left shoulder. 'And you are more than welcome to attend the ceremony.'

The facial expression of Nathaniel was of a very positive nature this time. He'd never attended a coronation before - whole his life he had always prepared himself for his own coronation one day.

'Let's go,' the prince nodded, then he and Bromley continued walking. But suddenly the younger man reminded himself of something. 'But before you become the monarch of these lands, and your life becomes flooded with many responsibilities... why wouldn't you sing for one more time? You know, like that merry, careless bard of the woods?'

Bromley trembled with a pleasant feeling. The idea of Nathaniel's suggestion was too sweet to be rejected.

'Do you have a particular song in mind?' He asked with a smile and the answer of the prince, who was also smiling, was immediate:

'Oh yeah, Mr. Bromley Wenlic... I *do know* which song I want to hear *in full*.'

XVII

Ballad of Bartholomeus, the Merry Minotaur

*Far away, in lands ancient of wine and goods,
once lived Bartholomeus, the merry minotaur of the woods!
Every morning, he greeted all the people with a happy roar,
He woke them and their slothful livestock to the core!*

*No, Bartholomeus didn't mean to be scary,
As this ballad tells you - he was merry.
A friendly smile, a soul so soft, a heart of gold -
Sadly, people's views of minotaurs were quite old:*

*'We should kill that monster at any cost
Before it becomes the reason for many lives lost!'
It is what that old crone, Miss Holsworth said,
Convincing everyone Bartholomeus was a threat.*

*But he wasn't - and he wanted to prove them wrong.
That is why he decided to go on a journey so long -
To save the miller's youngest daughter, Mirrabel,
Who in a bad, trustless marriage had once fell!*

*She was a rare beauty of an indisputable kind,
Thus evoked some sin longings into her husband's mind.
He was jealous of everyone who could see her face,
So one day he just kidnapped her without a trace!*

*So, Bartholomeus asked the town's witch for a spell -
She, just like him, was of a nature kind and well.
Ability to fly she gave our minotaur so merry,
And outstanding strength - both for him to carry.*

*The mythical hero of the woods fled away south.
So many people he horrified with his beastly mouth,
With his horns, his bull hoofs, his long tail,
His steps heavy that easily left a solid trail!*

*Yet, a creature like him had a useful side -
He was not afraid of darkness, of places with no light.
Feature so useful to his otherwise scary nature
That led him straight deeper into this adventure.*

*When his path of searching led him to a cave,
He had a lot of courage, a strength of someone brave.
For the sake of the girl in the cave he quickly went -
But soon a sudden pain shattered all his strength!*

*'Ouch!', Bartholomeus screamed so loud, so sad,
As his left huff got hurt so deep, so bad,
By a big pin - made of metal, sharp and thin,
Put here to prevent intruders to walk in.*

*'Who is there!?', then a sudden shout was heard -
A shout in the dark, from a place of mud and dirt;
A shout of a man - young and brave, with a lantern in hand -
And a face of hesitation when he saw our horned friend.*

*'I am not a threat, milord - please don't scream, don't pass out,'
The merry minitour was quick to explain clear and loud.
'Bartholomeus my name is, and I am a creature most mild,
Not like some of my ancestors who were quite wild.*

*For a young girl I am looking - the daughter of the miller,
Her evil husband took her - let's hope he is not a killer!
My search to this cave of darkness led me a minute ago,
Then that sharp pin my foot hurt like an arrow of a bow!'*

*'Hm,' the other man murmured - still hesitant but brighter,
'You seem like a minotaur who is dignified, who is a fighter.
I will give you a chance, my friend, a chance to prove yourself,
As we are both going on the same thin shelf.*

The miller's daughter, Mirrabel, is what we both are looking for,

*As she my true love is - from a long, long time before -
And me and my modest self are also a true love to her, I believe,
Yet, they once made her merry that cruel thief.*

*Not only her precious heart he once stole from me - that villain!
Not only my big fortune - that was left to me by my father Dillon -
But he, her husband evil, also took her, while she was screaming.
I know because I saw them – while I was at home, scheming.*

*Scheming how to break her free from him, once and for all,
Then I saw her – so tiny, so thin, abducted by her man so tall.
In that direction I ran with the speed of light,
But sadly, soon they disappeared from my sight.*

*Yet, I never gave up, my friend – their tracks I followed,
My neighbour's old horse I quickly borrowed,
To this cave my searching finally led me today -
To this cave and to you, with whom I'd like to stay!*

*To stay and to fight the evil, my friend dearest,
I have faith in you - minotaur scary, but with soul purest!
And to prove it I will give you this – a special chain –
Once around your foot we put it, it will heal the pain!'*

*Then he, the real love of Mirrabel, a man whose name was Bryton,
A metal chain brought out – and wrapped it as a python
Around Bartholomeus' injured leg – and, wow, what a wonder!
That hairy hoof quickly healed, without a banter!*

*Bryton was really a human of decency, of a noble kind.
The creepy, but merry minotaur he helped, in their way to find,
To find the miller's daughter – in which direction then they went,
Feeling like two faithful buddies, like a friend and his friend.*

*Then they found her - a marvellous beauty, even in a shell.
Mirrabel was there, in the inner part of the cave - scared but well.
Chained in different kind of chains – not the healing ones.*

Her abuser to escape she finally had a chance!

*“Oh, Bryton, my dearest love!” She shouted then
And her look shined with happiness – until she saw they were two men.
The human one – the king of her heart, so handsome, so bright -
And the minotaur – hairy, with horns and hoofs, a creature to fight.*

*So she screamed louder, and louder – as never before.
This is how her cruel husband found out that they were now four
And he appeared – so harsh, so ready for blood -
His presence almost felt like a deadly flood.*

*But Bryton and Bartholomeus were still at their bravest –
They freed Mirrabel of her fear and her chains – in a way safest.
Bryton with a kiss and with words of confidence and faith,
Bartholomeus with a minotaur’s strength – and with hairy fingers eight.*

*From the evil husband they all started running, without hesitating,
As he chased them – with a fierce face and with a body madly shaking.
Shortly after, a different exit of the cave they both reached
And a bright place they found – but with path so breached...*

*It was a forest – a forest with a shining river
And a damaged bridge that could make everyone shiver.
No other way was visible here, at that point,
And going forward was risky, even with powers joint.*

*Yet, Bartholomeus, our hero so big and so brave,
Was strong enough to go under the bridge with a loudest rave
And to hold it stable – so his friends could pass to the other side -
Then to let go, just when the enemy was on it, chasing after his bride.*

*By the waves most furious the husband wicked was dragged down;
His relentless flood with flood was drowned, with no dawn.
But sadly, Bartholomeus was captured by the force of the river as well –
Among those mad waves of the water, he couldn’t forever dwell.*

*He was forced to surrender – with no chance of getting to the shore,
Our marry minotaur was also carried away by the river with a hoar.
Yet, he was still happy – that the evil was defeated, the good had won.
This is how in the blue waters he then disappeared - he was gone...*

*No one on those lands ever found him, no one ever met him again -
But Mirrabel and her new husband, Bryton, never forgot what he did back then.*

*Tales for his bravery they told to everyone – and many believed
How noble of a minotaur Bartholomeus was; what he had achieved.*

XVIII

Coronation. Father and Son.

One completed story opens the way for another.

Like the story of Bromley Wenlic, the bard, who was just to become a monarch of his homeland. A breathtaking narrative that had started years before he was even born - and that would probably continue in such a fierce way in the future.

Because some people didn't agree with what he was about to become.

Because others didn't even believe it was possible for someone to become such a figure in times like these.

Because many of his supporters were ready to stand next to him and his family's goal until the end.

But on the day when Bromley entered his magnificent new palace, constructed very similar to what the palaces of older medieval times in this region looked like, and when he stared for one final time at his companion, Nathaniel Terek... the bard knew this was not the time to think about all those possibilities of the future. It was the time to make what was needed to provoke this future. To sit on the throne that decades of strength had given to him – the strength of him and the strength of everybody who had fought for this sublime moment to come. Bromley the bard had to sit on this throne and receive the crown symbolising his new gift of power.

When they entered the main hall of the palace, Nathaniel felt that he had no job walking after the upcoming ruler anymore, so he went right and paved his way between all those hundreds of supporters of Bromley who were watching at the bard with face expressions of faith, of hope. Many of them seemed like they were that tortured by life that they'd probably not survive until the next morning - but they were here, with the bright flame of their souls, yearning to witness the long-awaited win.

Not only the winners were attending the ceremony - and this was probably the most startling part of it. Next to the walls of both sides of the thrones, other people were held captives in several cages. They were the previous rulers of the lands - those whose merciless feast at the price of everyone else's lives had finally come to an end. Which made them more that furious. Fighting to get out, even fighting with each other and literally killing each other in the cages, they seemed like some wild animals - and actually, in many moments some of them really looked like beasts. And now more and more people were able to see these true colours of theirs.

While walking on the main way straight to the throne, Bromley tried to keep calm, even if the furious roar of those creatures was too strong at some moments. But he knew they had to be here to also witness - and to be fully permitted to express their feelings - the moment in which their empire of lies and cruelties comes to an end, opening the way for... another story.

Not only the remainings of the old, dishonest rulers of these lands were attending the ceremony of rage - outside of the building, many others of their still-blindsided supporters were trying to invade the building. The miraculous (and still non-visible to many) magic of The Portal and The Tree with Three Branches is what succeeded to effectively stop them - and when he finally reached the throne and turned around to take a look at everyone else in the building, Bromley knew that this supernatural power would keep defending the good in the future. Because he and his companions made sure that more and more people's eyes will be opened to realise the existence, the presence of such a wonderful magic.

Yet, in the moments before sitting on the throne, the new ruler still had his hesitations. This was so different than what he once believed was his purpose in life. But at the same time, the memories of all the years that had led him to this point, the thoughts of what his parents had suffered and sacrificed for that cause, the thoughts about the many consequences, the many

victims of the previous regimes - all these feelings filled his whole body and soul with courage. He needed one more look at the hopeful Nathaniel, who was standing there, in the crowd, and another look at the most precious gifts the life itself gave to him in his personal life - his beautiful wife Yana, their son and their daughter - to finally be *ready*. To bring a serious and confident, yet so full of compassion for his people, look on his face and... to sit on the throne. To receive the crown that was meant to pave a new (and at the same time familiar) way for these remarkable lands.

Bromley received a brand new name during the ritual of his coronation – to be fair, it was not completely brand new as it was the original name that his parents had once considered giving him before the obstacles made them leave him forever. It was the name of *Simo* - a name that meant ‘the one who hears, who listens’.

This is how a new era began. The era of Bromley Simo and his dynasty.

Nathaniel looked at the new monarch with a smile. The new monarch and his supporters. The new monarch and his family...

Never had the young prince of the Terek family imagined how exciting in a personal way could such a moment become for his own self – but it was only the voice of a man that was needed (and a specific word whispered by it) to lead him in a new – and completely unexpected at that moment - world of excitement:

‘Son...’

The prince hadn’t heard this voice for so many years... but yet he would recognize it at any time. Trembling with such deep feelings, Nathaniel turned around and saw a dark-haired man with handsome and respectful look.

‘Dad?’ The prince said quietly, while feeling like he would faint of excitement.

Reed Terek nodded with a slight smile. Then he got closer to the younger man and put hands on his shoulders.

‘You are so grown-up, my precious child... Oh, Nathaniel... I love you so much! And I’ve waited for this moment for so long!’

He hugged his son while both of them felt on the verge of starting crying.

‘But... what... what is this?’ Nathaniel, who still couldn’t know if he should believe his eyes, his ears and all the other feelings of his body, asked as he once again stared at his father a moment later. ‘How are you *here* and why?’

Reed took a deep breath and then made a face gesture that asked his son to follow him on a place quieter. They went in a small room on the right that still allowed them to see what was happening in the main hall but at the same time gave them a little bit of privacy.

‘I think that some answers can be given just when we look at the... result,’ Reed said then, while his eyes looked at Bromley Simo and his wife Yana, hugging and kissing, having some nice moments with their grown children and with all the other supporters around. Nathaniel could’ve sworn that a tear appeared in his father’s right eye. ‘The result of... the fight. And of all the sacrifices needed.’

‘What do you mean? What Bromley’s story has to do with you? With your disappearance?’ The younger man still felt puzzled. Then he took a sigh and said: ‘Look, dad... I think I now understand why you left. I was told about... my sister - by Apollo, the ancient god himself. And no, I am not getting crazy.’

‘I know, son. I know,’ said Reed. ‘Apollo is a dear friend of mine - and of our whole original family even before it was called Terek. He is one of the reasons you are here, after different events - and different forces, like him - helped you find your way to this point. And finding me. As he once helped me find... your sister. With the cost of leaving you and your mother, sadly.’

‘So... so you really *did* find her?’ Nathaniel’s voice trembled with excitement. He knew nothing of that mysterious sister, yet he felt happy to know that their father’s mission of seeking for her ended with success. ‘Is she here, in this realm?’

‘Yes, she is. Actually, she is closer than you probably think,’ Reed once again looked at the happy couple near the throne.

At first Nathaniel couldn’t understand - there were so many other people surrounding her, so many other women! But then he remembered his father’s words from a minute ago - ‘some answers can be given just when we look at the... result’. And he knew. Nathaniel knew that Reed was not talking about all the happy people surrounding the new monarchs of these lands (neither he was talking of any of the few women in the cages). He was talking about the female monarch herself.

‘Yana? Bromley’s wife?’ Nathaniel started blinking while his heart got in a crazy phase. ‘She? *She* is my sister?’

Reed nodded. A confirmation was given.

‘I looked for her everywhere in our realm - back there, on Atlantis, where the remainings of our world stood. But Apollo gave me the hint that she was not anywhere on it anymore - and if I want to follow her to the other parallel universe where she was taken, I should leave my Atlantis and risk of not getting back to you and to your mother ever again. Yes, I know how it sounds - why I would be able to jump from one universe to another and then I wouldn’t be able to go back? The answer is, once again, connected with *the Storms*. Or, as their real name is - The Wrath of Cronus. While getting deeper into the truth of those devastating phenomena, I found out that many consequences follow even in the centuries after them - and your sister disappearing and me not being able to follow her without also saying ‘goodbye’ to the world I knew the best... well, these consequences were among the worst. But I had to follow this path. And your mother agreed with me, even with sadness in her heart and soul. We decided that I should follow Yana in the world where she was taken by her kidnappers, while she, Cassandra, will stay at Kale and take care of you - and of the lands we are meant to rule. Not an easy decision - but the *right* decision.’

‘I understand...’ Nathaniel whispered while tears appeared in his eyes too. ‘I understand, dad... and... you should know that I never doubted that you are a decent man, a decent father. Somehow, I always knew that you didn’t leave us without a solid reason. And now, when I can literally look at that reason... everything seems even more logical’ Nathaniel looked at his sister and her family once again. Then he stared at his father again, with a sad expression. ‘But still... are you completely sure that there is *absolutely no way* for you to come back to our realm - now, that your mission of protecting Yana and leading her on her way is completed?’

Reed took a sigh.

‘No, son. For now, there is not a chance.’

‘But why? Well, I partially know why, of course - you just mentioned that it is somehow connected with that wretched Wrath of Cronus. But... but there’s got to be a way...’

‘The only way, my son... the only way I know that can help me get out of here is... already given to somebody else.’

‘To whom?’

Reed stared at deeply in the eyes of his son, then said tenderly, with a mild smile:

‘To you.’

Nathaniel blinked once again.

‘To me? The key of going back was given to... me?’

‘Yes,’ Reed nodded. ‘But not just the key of going back to our Atlantis – or to what has remained of it after The Fifth part of the Wrath. But the key of going *wherever you like*. Yes, I meant what I said. You possess - or at least you were given the clues that will lead you to the point of possessing - those three special parts of a unique ancient magic that can do wonders. Magic captured in three... stones. They are also a ‘consequence’ of The Wrath. But they are too hard to be found - yet me and some of my companions, with whom you have already met, succeeded to locate them - or at least locate the places where these stones were once seen. Let me explain you in detail, my son. These stones are descendants of special energy that flies through time and creates *potential*. That energy has filled them since the days when *human emotions* have touched them - and thus carved the symbols on them, turning these stones into what is called The Method of Shared Touches. Once these stones are at one place, once they touch each other and combine their power, then they start shining - and their power is full. Then you can use it to teleport *everywhere* - but just once for every millennium. And you are lucky, my child. You are lucky that no one in this current millennium has found all the stones, as some of them are created not too long time ago. No one... before you.’

‘I... I haven’t found any stones...’ Nathaniel started shaking his head in confusion. ‘Wait... there was actually some kind of a stone with something carved on it... back then, when I was wandering on the beach of what our Atlantis had turned after the Fifth Storm...’

‘That should’ve been The Pale Stone - as far as I understood, it is the only stone that was hidden on the lands of our Atlantis - and of the other versions of Atlantis through the parallel realms.’

‘Wait, so those three stones are not unique?’

‘They are unique - for each universe. Yet, they exist in more than one universe. And they are hidden on the same places each different millennium – by different people, different creatures, different forces... Currently, in the realm that we are standing right now, it is just the beginning of the third millennia BC - the same as the one you visited when Apollo sent you to what our Atlantis looks these days.’

‘So that so called Pale Stone is probably on the same place in this universe as it is in ours?’

‘Yes, it probably still is - as I told you, as far as I know, in this universe, The Method of Shared Touches is still not used in the current millennia. It is your chance, my son, Your chance to go anywhere you want.’

‘Anywhere I want...’ Nathaniel whispered, with his thoughtful look staring at the random point of the wall. ‘And meet... anyone I want?’

For some reason, his father already knew what he was talking about. *Who* he was talking about.

‘Yes,’ Reed once again nodded with head, then once again took a sigh and added: ‘You can go to meet *her*. That special girl you are in love with.’

‘I am not in... love...’ Nathaniel shook his head for some seconds, then he suddenly stopped and blinked with a confusion caused by an irresistible feeling in his heart and soul. ‘Or... am I? Am I in love with a girl I’ve never actually met?’

‘You are, I can see. And I can remember this face of a young man in love - I looked at it in the mirror after I met your mother. Our cases are more similar than you can expect, my boy.’

‘What do you mean? Haven’t you and mom met when you were traveling to distant lands?’

‘Yes, they were distant. But what kind of *lands* were they?’ Reed, who once again put hands on his son’s shoulders, looked at his eyes and smiled. ‘I heard that your mother has already showed you the beginning of my story as a child. Would you mind sharing the rest with you? At least sharing the part that you must know before going to seek for that mysterious mermaid lady...’

His son was confused.

‘Yes, I would want to know how the story goes but... don’t we need a place of Very Special Fair Magic in order to show such memories to one another? By the way, nice job of hiding the existence of such places from everyone, including me.’

‘Thanks, son. And, to be fair, this is the reason I brought you *here*,’ Reed said, giving a quick glimpse at the floor, with all of the traditional elements of the mosaic on it. ‘The same reason I gave Bromley, Yana and their companions the direction to build their new palace here - not that the path of that magical love of the two of them hadn’t already led them to this place before...’

‘This is a very special place for them, indeed...’ Nathaniel nodded, then his eyes and his mouth opened widely. ‘Oh... and now I remembered... Bromley... he... he talked to me about a very special *stone* of their love... Is it... is it possible that this same stone is...’

‘The Loving Heart Stone,’ Reed smiled, then looked at the middle-aged couple near the throne. ‘Yes, their story has always been powerful enough to create this one third part of The Method - as is the love of the other magnificent couples that create all the other versions of this stone through the different realms.’

‘That stone should be somewhere around this palace, I assume? This is where those early stages of their love had once occurred and where the two of them had thrown the stone.’

‘You are as clever as I always knew you would be - and that makes me so proud,’ Reed smiled even wider. ‘However, before you start thinking about the location of the *third* stone and going on the mission to find it and the other two, we need to go back to the memories I was about to share with you. Memories that are of great importance in those upcoming decisions of yours. In *your own love story*. Are you ready, Nate?’

The prince took a deep breath and nodded.

‘Yes, father, I am.’

Reed also took a breath, then he did what he had to do to reopen that other book in his son’s mind - and this time continue it as long as needed.

XIX

Book of Reed: The Chased One

Reed was very scared. He screamed loud, then he made a quick movement that aimed to save his life - with just one jump he slid forward and slipped between Ivan's legs even before the man could realise what was happening.

'Hey! What...' said the master of the house with a surprised expression, becoming even more angry at the boy. 'Get back here, you little intruder! And give me the rag and the locket!'

But the child did not stop even for a second - Reed left this room of the basement and went along the corridor to the left. Even though it was dark all around, he managed to move quickly without tripping or hitting any walls. With this haste, he soon found himself at the staircase, which, to his delight, was not completely darkened, because of the light that came from the opened door above. He climbed it with the speed of an arrow, then the other outside.

But as soon as Reed found himself in the living room, he faced a new obstacle. He was forced to abruptly stop his running, as he suddenly saw that right there, near the entrance and the open window, two women were standing, blocking his way without even realizing. Two women he had seen minutes ago - Madeleine and the maid, the first of whom seemed like she was waving an unfriendly 'goodbye' to someone out there. When they saw the intruder, they got a wild shock, then the wealthy one said:

'But what...'

The boy didn't wait for her to finish the sentence - taking advantage of the few seconds it took for the two women to realise what was happening, the child instantly ran to the other side, towards the next room (the one from where Madeleine had come when he had seen her for the first time minutes ago). There, on the right, there was only a staircase leading up.

Realizing that this was his only choice, the fugitive ran up the stairs until behind him the maddened Ivan did not stop, but continued to shout and curse in pursuit, while the women hugged each other in fear. But just before the scary intruder climbed the last steps to the upper floor, the little boy almost collided with another lady, much younger than the other two - eighteen or nineteen years old. She was dark-haired and blue-eyed, and she was certainly very frightened when she saw the stranger - she even screamed:

'Mom! Dad! Who is this!?'

'Someone who will soon know that stealing from me means death!' shouted Ivan, who was literally meters behind the little fugitive.

This was one of the tensest moments for the boy in this race. He seemed caught between a woman who stood in his way and a man who would tear him apart if he got hold of him. But this time, there was no way he could sneak out from between the legs of the woman in front of him, because she was wearing a big dress with a hoop...

But the child didn't give up - after a moment of thinking, his initial reaction was to simply jump to the side, towards the railing, and to push one leg onto it, literally jumping over the woman, passing centimetres to her right. Then his next action was to run to the nearest window, to climb onto the ledge and look down.

It wasn't very high, but it wasn't low either - he would probably hurt himself if he just jumped. Luckily, a nearby branch of a tree suddenly appeared before his eyes. Reed took advantage of this opportunity - he quickly put the blanket and the medallion in both pockets of his pants and took a risk as he jumped straight in the direction of the branch and grabbed it, falling down with it.

The sound of a branch breaking was loud, then a second later the child landed almost without bruises in the bushes at the beginning of the forest - his only injury was a slight scrape on the left arm. But as soon as he stood up and allowed himself to stop running for a few moments to catch his breath, he heard Ivan's still furious voice from the window above:

‘You won't get away from me!’

Before the child could even look that way, the man had already turned around, heading for the exit of his house, as he was probably afraid to do risky stunts like the recent one of the boy. Reed himself trembled. He took a quick look at the house in front of him and quickly realised that there was no chance for him to run around it and go to the village - and to the boat - on time. Not before Ivan appears on his way again.

The young boy had only one choice now. He had to enter the forest.

As unpleasant as this thought could be for him, Reed did not surrender. He stared at the trees for a while, consumed with the bad feeling that it did not look friendly at all - it looked more of a wild and gloomy. But it still was a symbol of salvation, so the boy didn't think much more and ran straight ahead. He ran as fast as he could, although the branches of all the trees and bushes around him were not very welcoming and constantly blocked his path and sometimes even scratched him. Yet, Reed didn't give up - everything depended on his strength.

A new dose of fear attacked him only minutes later, when he heard a noise of a car somewhere behind him. He looked there and found that about ten meters to the right, on a much more trodden and wider path, which he hadn't noticed until now, an older man was furiously driving his luxurious, dark car. This man was Ivan, who was now holding a big rifle. He couldn't see the boy, but he was approaching Reed. It was a matter of time before the child's whereabouts become visible and the mad man catches him - or worse...

With the growing fear that he might not get away after all, the little fugitive turned the other way and continued to run among the branches, in a completely different random direction. However, he suddenly stopped, frozen in one place by the loud crack as of a gunshot that he heard somewhere behind him. Reed allowed himself to look back again, only to see that Ivan had gotten out of his car and was now approaching him with the rifle in his hands.

‘Now let's see what happens with that poor stupid soul who thinks that I would just allow anyone entering my home and stealing what is mine!’ he shouted with a grim smile on his face and sinister sparks in his eyes.

The boy didn't know what to do. If he tried to run somewhere, his pursuer could easily blast him with just one shot. But if he stayed, his chances were even poorer. Perhaps that's why he chose the first option, which, although it seemed unreasonable, gave him some minimal possibility of escape.

Reed ran in a random direction again, being in a complete distraught about where he was heading - and if he would succeed to run far enough to not get shot. Yet, he was still determined to save himself, and so to save both of those, apparently, extremely valuable things in his pockets. So he just ran and ran and ran... while his whole soul prayed that he would outrun the deadly man who chased him.

At one point, the boy managed to gain a certain lead over Ivan. Reed continued to run until suddenly, unfortunately for him, he didn't see a small root of a tree nearby that was almost invisible in the mud. He tripped on it and fell painfully on the ground.

This resulted in a bad gash on the boy's knee and a lot of blood gushing from it.

‘Oh, no... oh, no...’ Reed started wailing, gritting his teeth and trying to stand up.

He succeeded, but as soon as he did, he found that he was no longer able to run - the wound was too deep and would prevent him from moving his leg quickly. This prompted the boy to start frantically look around for any hiding place - he even started limping around to find *anything*.

He had some luck after all - soon he saw something like a hollow at the base of a large tree. And while Reed knew the hollow in question wasn't too big to fit him all in, the kid felt that was his only option. So, he hastily stepped towards it... and then he was astonished to witness something unexpected in that same rotted trunk of the tree.

Until now unnoticed because of the withered grass, there was a remarkable creature inside of the tree. It looked like a small, recently born wolf, but its first fur was rather long and was currently... glowing. *Literally* glowing - in captivating, neon shades.

Alas, despite its astonishing magical grace, the creature did not appear to be in any good shape. It just lay there, with its eyes closed, and looked almost dead. Only his heavy breathing suggested that there was still some life left in it. The leg of the animal was sticking out to the side - it obviously had a serious internal injury, which had most likely prevented the poor wolf from moving and therefore getting food and water in the past few days.

The child, assimilating the picture before him, stepped even closer to the creature and fell on his sturdy knee before him, whispering:

‘But this... this is... a Wolf of Shining Power... I thought these species... were just a myth of the times after The First Storm...’

But before he could say anything more, he heard Ivan's footsteps approaching again, and he immediately reverted to his former anxiety. His pursuer would be here in seconds, and the only way the boy could possibly escape was to hide in the already occupied hollow.

Then, most suddenly, the young man's mind flashed with an unusual idea. The child remembered a fairy tale he had heard years ago, and it made him look with even greater excitement at the animal in front of him... and even reach out his hand to it, saying:

‘Please... let it be true... let it be true...’

Then the boy touched its fur as he wished something in his mind. The wolf did not resist, nor did it open its eyes, as it was too weak to make any movements. But once the human hand touched the fur of the neon wolf, the young man noticed with astonishment how this hand of his... disappeared. As disappeared his whole body, alongside with the body of the animal - they literally became invisible.

It was just then when Ivan made his way through the trees to the side, having just thought he had spotted the fugitive from among them. He found himself at this same place and immediately noticed the blood around.

‘So... You helped me catch you by hurting yourself...’ said the man with a smile of satisfaction. He began tapping the rifle with his hand, following the tracks and approaching the boy and the wolf

Being so close to him again was one of the scariest moments of the boy's life. At the same time, the chattering of Reed's teeth felt so noisy that at one moment the child felt that it might reveal his location to the older man - so the boy put his free hand on his mouth and tried to tame his jaw.

Ivan reached the spot where the lead of blood drops ended with a bigger puddle, then quirked an eyebrow in doubt. He bent down and peered into the hollow of the log, thinking the fugitive was hiding there, but he saw no one inside.

‘Hmm... it seems like you somehow bandaged yourself... Maybe with that rag you stole from my house!’ he shouted, then stood up and continued walking.

Ivan made his way through the next branches, then the next. But even though for the moment it looked as if Reed had finally gotten away, the child never removed his hand from the neon wolf's fur for some time. And his heart was breaking as under that fur he still felt the twitching veins of the poor creature on the threshold of its last hours of life.

To make sure he wouldn't be caught, the boy decided to wait a few more minutes... and then a few more... and a few more...

Afraid of being found, the child stayed invisible in the hollow for an hour, during which the daylight swapped places with the twilight. And since the forest seemed even more frightening at this time of day, the young man suddenly realised that perhaps it was time for him to seek real shelter.

He took another breath on this stressful day and finally pulled his hand away from the neon wolf's fur. Thus, they both became visible again.

Relieved that this time he had most likely finally gotten away from his pursuer, Reed finally allowed himself to relax and sit among the dried grasses. He tore off a piece of his garment and, gritting his teeth, wrapped it around his wound. It was difficult for him, not only because of the pain, but also because of the poor visibility around. In fact, under other conditions, in this secluded part of the forest, there would probably be no visibility, but for the moment, the light of the still alive unusual wolf was useful to the child.

As soon as he bandaged himself, the boy looked exactly at it - the lying dying creature. His sadness for its sad fate had not stopped during the whole time when he had kept his hand on its fur. The sadness and the feeling of infinite gratitude, which he could now express in words:

'Thank you... Oh, beautiful creature... you don't know how much I am thankful to you!' he even ran his fingers through its fur again but this time the two of them did not become invisible, as the child had not wished for it. 'You and your amazing magical power saved my life... and now... now it's time for me to save you...'

Although he couldn't be sure if it was possible for him to fulfil this promise to the supernatural animal in this critical condition of the wolf, the child slowly took it in his arms. Reed put it as close as possible to his own body, trying to keep the animal from getting cold and at the same time to not put any pressure or even the slightest strain on its injured limb. He looked around once more just in case Ivan was hiding somewhere around, then walked forward, making his way through the branches.

As he walked in an unknown direction, the boy hardly took his eyes off the poor creature in his arms. And he spoke to it often.

'Poor thing... who knows how much you suffered before you got to this state... and it is just the beginning of your life,' the boy said while touching its fur with gently fingers. 'Please stay strong... stay strong until I find shelter for both of us... You and your kind are strong by nature... *You* are a strong Wolf of Shining Power, do you hear me?'

He paused, thought, then added:

'No, you're not actually just a strong Wolf of Shining Power. You are the hero who saved my life, and that means you deserve a great name. And... you know, in my earlier childhood years I had a favourite fairytale character who was very brave. His name was Andotear... and since you are my brave hero today... I will name you after him! Do you like it? Andotear? Even if you don't like it, it certainly suits you.'

He said his last words with a small smile, trying somehow to revive both his spirit and the creature's. And even though the glowing wolf Andotear couldn't answer him in any way at the moment, the boy seemed to feel a tremor on its body that seemed to show the excitement of the animal somewhere in his subconsciousness... This was enough for the child to get excited and to continue whispering to the neon wolf:

‘Nice to meet you, Andotear. I guess it's time for me to introduce myself too. My name is Reed. Reed Terek.’

As he said this, he thought of the two valuable items in his pockets. He longed to see and touch them again, but he knew he couldn't let the wolf out of his arms even for a moment - it was getting colder and colder around them, and in the creature's current state, the slightest natural factor could have been fatal for it.

Little Reed continued to walk forward, trying to be as fast as possible despite his own knee pain. He knew that not only the creature's life depended on him finding shelter, but also his own - if he remained lost in that such an eerie forest for too long, he would eventually soon reach a point when it would become impossible for him to stay stable.

So he walked. And the hours went with him - one after another... Without being able to realise it, the boy stayed on his feet almost without interruption until midnight.

However, as the fatigue took over his body at some point, Reed began to wonder if he should look for another hollow like the one near the manor - and after the wondering, the decision was made. He did start looking around but suddenly his attention came across something else that had the potential to be even more satisfying...

The darkness in the vast forest was still quite depressing until a faint light flickered in the distance. At first, the child thought he was imagining something, having some kind of a forest mirage. But after a few more meters of walking in that same direction, he found out his vision was not deceiving him - the light was real.

Hope flashed in the boy's soul. Reed looked at the wolf in his arms, saying:

‘There is a chance, my friend...’

His steps got quicker, even though he could barely stand upright any longer. He had to get to that light as soon as possible to check where it was coming from. It seemed that it was not natural - something distinguished it from the light of the moon and the stars, which at times stared at him through the dense crowns of the tall trees. It was certainly different from that of the wolf, too, which was already almost completely weakened.

After walking a few more minutes, Reed finally found himself able to see where the light was coming from - a small, wooden house. As the boy realised this, he felt even more excitement and growing hope. He did his best to endure the fatigue and the pain for the next two minutes in which he reached the doorstep of the house.

But once Reed was there, he stopped for a moment. He wondered if he could trust the stranger or strangers living inside. From an early age he had learned to be careful with unfamiliar people - he could never know what someone might be up to. Perhaps because of this anxiety, the boy decided not to knock on the door immediately, but to go to the side window, to look through it first.

The atmosphere in the cottage was nowhere near as rich as that of the mansion, but even though it was modest, it seemed even cozier. There was a table with a few chairs by a fireplace. On the other side of the fireplace there was a bed.

In an attempt to take as better peek at the room as possible, Reed took a few steps on his left, never taking his eyes off what was inside. Thus, he suddenly bumped into something he didn't see on time. Into *someone*.

Startled, the child looked up and saw that it was a man who was holding firewood in his hands. He was old and white-bearded, but rather tough-looking. He was staring at the boy with a slightly closed blue eyes, as if he was assessing Reed.

Reed himself didn't know how to justify looking into the house that was probably owned by this man, so he began to shake his head and explain himself:

‘I... I'm sorry for spying on your home, sir... but my friend and I need shelter and a doctor...’

The man didn't immediately respond - he just lowered his gaze slightly, clearly getting excited as he focused on the creature Reed was keeping closer to his own body.

‘Is that a Wolf of Shining Power?’ the old man asked with interest.

‘Yes...’ Reed replied. His gentle fingers once again touched the fur of the animal. ‘I can't explain how it is possible for these mythical species to exist, but... a few hours ago I found him in this same vast forest, far away from here. He is very ill, probably dying. He needs help.’

‘So we will give him this help. Follow me, boy,’ said the man, then he left the chopped wood under the window and went to open the door, inviting the child and the wolf inside.

Reed was still not quite sure if it was safe to enter the stranger's home, but something about the old man gave him confidence. So, the boy nodded and stepped into the cottage.

It certainly felt incredibly nice to feel warm again. Reed immediately went to the fireplace and put the wolf on the small rug in front of it, then warmed her own hands on the fire.

‘Thank you, sir,’ he said. ‘You don't know how grateful I am for what you just did to us.’

The other man didn't answer, he just crouched down on the other side of the wolf and touched its fur with his own fingers.

‘It hardly shines anymore. Soon he will turn into a most ordinary dead wolf - before he has the chance to realise who he is and what his role in this world is.’

Reed blinked, confused.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Apparently you are not very familiar with these rare species of wolves, boy,’ said the adult. ‘They don't just appear on our lands. They come here with a mission.’

‘I have heard that they are much smarter than ordinary wolves and they even learn to speak a human language,’ Reed noted. ‘But I didn't know that each one of them... had a mission.’

‘Not each one but mostly those who, in one way or another, leave the safety of their usual home in the North and end up in much warmer areas like the one we are standing in now.’

‘So the Wolves of Shining Power... only live in the North? On those cold lands that usually no one goes to and no one considers as existing, because they are too far and, as I said, too cold?’

‘Why do you think they are called Wolves of Shining Power? They come from the Northern Lights. Since the day these creatures are born, those lights and the entire atmosphere of the North fills them with energy and with their amazing superpowers at birth.

‘That sounds logical... and so amazing...’ Reid said. ‘So I didn't have to worry that it might be too cold for him - it's in his nature to draw power from colder places.’

‘Maybe you shouldn't have worried about that, not that much... But for a lot of other things... you should've,’ said the man, then stood up.

He went to take a gauze, a bandage and a knife from a cabinet. He returned to the child and the wolf, then he carefully bandaged the injured leg of the animal, as he continued his conversation with Reid.

‘Oh, in that case... would it be good to keep him so close to the fire?’ The boy was worried. ‘If he is a polar animal, something can happen to him.’

‘He is a polar animal, not a snow animal - he will not melt,’ said the man with a slight smirk. ‘Not to mention he's magical. He and his kind can adapt to any temperature and feel no discomfort. Quite remarkable...’

After the man bandaged the wolf's leg, he ran his hands through its fur again, saying:

‘For so many years I have lived in these woods with the longing to come across at least one of the magical creatures that we have all heard about only in fairytales and legends... but I never expected that my first would be *exactly* this one. People in the city thought I was crazy when I scientifically calculated the percentage of probability that magical creatures were real.’

‘In the... city?’ Reed asked. ‘You lived... in a city? You mean one of the big metropolises?’

‘Yes, I did.’

‘And then... you chose to leave it to be alone in the middle of the dark forest?’ the child was obviously surprised.

‘What is so strange about it?’ The man asked, quirked one eyebrow. ‘In those huge metropolises, some people find everything they need, and others... not quite. I am of the latter. My place was just never there, even though it was rightfully mine.’

‘I have always dreamed of seeing one of those several big cities that are left in our world,’ said the child with a slight sigh and with definite flashes in his eyes. ‘But I have always lived too far from this civilization.’

‘Hmm... you seem to come from quite a distance,’ the old man guessed.

‘Yes, until recently I lived in an orphanage isolated in the middle of the fields in the area of Villain, if you are familiar with it.’

‘I know it, I have some friends there – or at least I once thought they were my friends. Why did you leave the orphanage and come all the way here? Are you looking for something in particular on these lands?’

‘Well... let's say my place wasn't in *that area out there*, just like your place wasn't *in the city*,’ answered the child. ‘They didn't treat me very well... In fact, they didn't treat anyone very well. It's a miracle that they agreed to pay me some kind of minimum wage when I asked them to clean the orphanage for some money. So I collected three bags of coins, with one of which I bought these clothes and some supplies for the journey, and with the other I paid the boatman to take me to one of those fishing villages at the other end of the forest. Alas, I didn't make it in time to pay him for the return trip with the third bag... My plans went downhill...’

‘You still didn't answer my question. What are you even looking for on these lands? Were you going to the city?’

‘No, I didn't even know that it was somewhere nearby,’ answered the boy, then put his hands in his pockets. ‘I came... for these things.’

The old man stared at the blanket and the locket. He said nothing, but Reed himself explained to him:

‘I know it may seem strange and even crazy to you that I came this far for such things... but believe me, sir, when I say that they are extremely important to me. When I was a baby, an old woman found me in a barn not far away from the manor from which I took them earlier today and where she had been visiting her sister back then. I was wrapped in this same blanket, and I wore this pendant around my neck. And, since the names ‘Reed Terek’ and only ‘Terek’ were written on them, she thought that this was my name - so she called me Reed Terek. She decided that my parents had abandoned me, so she took care of me, even when she returned to her village in that same Villain area that I mentioned to you. But, as she was very old and worried that she would soon not be able to give me everything I needed, she took me to the orphanage for my own good when I was one year old.’

He touched the objects gently in his hands and continued:

‘She forgot these two at her sister's house, whom, as I already said, she was visiting at the time she had found me - in the same mansion I visited earlier today and where that same sister

once lived. But since the manor was constantly under threat from thieves in the area, she, the sister, had hidden some of her most valuable possessions in special holes in the walls at different ends of the basement, just in case. She even had drawn maps of the dungeon for each of the possessions, including the blanket and locket, which she felt were important to her sister and the child that was found. However, she soon died, and a completely new family immediately moved into the house - it is still unknown how they inherited it, many people believe they used illegal forces to get it. Sadly enough, they just threw everything of hers in the trash, without even asking her relatives. That, of course, outraged her sister who had just returned in the area. Happily, among the discarded items she found some of the maps of the treasures hidden in the walls. She decided that I would want to know exactly where my things were. A few months ago, she brought me the map, on the back of which she had drawn another one, telling me how to get to the mansion. Perhaps she felt she had no time left so she wanted me to know everything - alas, very soon after our conversation, she also died, leaving a pain in my heart. At least I distracted myself by working at the orphanage with the sole purpose of raising enough money to be able to go to that mansion and get my blanket and locket - supposedly the only connection to my birth family...'

'So... you broke into a stranger's home?' the old man was surprised. ' And I thought you were just looking at my house.'

He laughed lightly as he said the last words.

'Oh, no, no, the cases are completely different,' answered the embarrassed boy, shaking his head.

Still smiling, the old man put a hand on his shoulder and said:

'Relax, boy, I understand. Also, I understand how desperate you are to have some rest after such an exciting day...' He looked to the side, towards the only bed in the room. - Come on, lie down and get some sleep. I will take care of the wolf.'

'But... this is your bed, sir...' said the child. 'If I lay down on it, you will have nowhere to sleep.'

'Don't worry,' said the old man, looking at the neon animal in front of the fireplace and stroking it again. 'I don't think I'll be able to blink after my long-time longings have finally been satisfied - and I see before my eyes the proof that I'm not crazy. Thank you for helping me with this, Reed.'

'I... I haven't done anything. Andotear and I should be grateful to you for helping.'

'Andotear?' The old man smiled. 'You gave the wolf a name?'

'Yes. I think it suits him.' the boy nodded with his own smile, then gave one last mild look at the animal before getting up and going to the bed, yawning.

He didn't even realise how, in his fatigue, he instantly fell asleep.

Along with his sleep came the rain outside - thankfully not too devastating this time.

The child did not wake up until about noon the next day - not because he didn't want to sleep more but because he heard the sound of wood being cut somewhere outside.

Still sleepy, Reid sat up in bed and, rubbing his eyes, looked out the window next to the bed. He saw that the good old man was outside, preparing his kindling for the upcoming evening.

Immediately after that, the boy's attention turned to his new friend, the neon wolf. He twitched with a certain joy when he saw it there, in front of the fireplace, already laid in a small,

low basket, with a rather brighter color of fur. Right in front of his muzzle there were two bowls - one with a piece of meat and the other with water. Andotear hadn't tried any of them because he was still asleep.

Although he was happy for the little wolf, Reed felt the growl of his stomach as soon as his eyes saw the food - and the saliva of a starving man settled in his throat. The child looked again at the old man outside and wondered if it would be too impertinent to ask him for something to eat, but at the end the desire was too big to be put aside - so Reed got up and slowly left the house.

The old man saw him as soon as he crossed the threshold. She smiled at him and asked:

‘You're hungry, aren't you?’

‘I...’ the boy was startled, realizing that his purpose was too obvious - maybe because one of his hands was put on his rumbling stomach.

The old man put the axe aside and approached the boy.

‘Come on, let's go back inside. I have another piece of chicken, you will enjoy it.’

‘Oh no... if you only have one left, you don't have to...’

‘Stop being so shy, boy,’ the man interrupted him, taking out a pot with a lid from one of the cupboards. ‘Probably because of my appearance you think I am strict and unfeeling - and that I do not understand how difficult it has been for you not only in the past 24 hours, but in your entire life before that. Trust me, I understand you more than you might think.’

He carried the pot to the table and placed it there. As soon as he opened the lid, the aroma of the chicken wafted around, causing Reed to swallow, hungrily. Before serving him, however, the old man said to him:

‘But first, wash your hands and brush your teeth. I have a new brush here that I keep just in case. Well... here's the case.’

He went to pull out the brush from the same cabinet where he apparently kept most of his things. He placed it in front of the child, then took a glass from somewhere on the side, into which he poured water from a tube that was by the fireplace.

‘Thank you,’ Reed said as he took the cup and the brush and went outside again as there was no sink here.

Soon he returned and placed the two objects on the table, and the old man put them away. The man invited the child to sit on one of the chairs and he willingly agreed. Then, even more willingly, he ate the piece of chicken that was served to him on a plate.

While Reed was enjoying the delicious meat, the old man sat in the next chair and looked at him with a smile. Soon, though, something else on the side caught his attention more, so he looked over as he said to the boy:

‘Apparently you're not the only one who's hungry.’

Reid looked in the same direction and was excited to notice that the neon wolf had opened its eyes. And his eyes were very beautiful - crystal blue, like the heavens.

He, like Reed, seemed quite pleased to have food and drink into his mouth.

‘He woke up!’ exclaimed the child and got up from the table to go to the animal and kneel before it.

The wolf obviously had some trust in the boy and the old man - maybe somewhere in his subconscious, it knew what they had done to save it the night before. Therefore, Andotear even allowed the child to touch him, while still enjoying the meal with obvious appetite.

‘Well... he'll live,’ stated the old man, who also got closer to the animal. ‘You saved his life, Reed.’

‘As he saved mine. But it was not just me who helped him, mister... uh...’

Reed stopped as he realised he still didn't know the man's name. The old man, for his part, smiled and replied:

‘Barnaby. Barnaby Flint. But you can just call me Barry.’

‘Okay... Barry,’ said the child, with a smile.

The two of them continued to watch and pet the neon wolf as it enjoyed his first meal and drink in a long time. At one point the old man began to gently rub the animal on a particular spot behind its head and almost in the middle of its body.

‘His wings are already growing,’ Barry stated.

‘Oh... so that part of the legend is true too... That the Wolves of Shining Power can fly?’ Reed asked in amazement and quickly touched the small swollen growths in the same place.

‘Yes. Majestic creatures, just like in legends. This hero here has a heroic life ahead of him.’

‘This life has already started. Today I say it for the second time, but last night I never mentioned that, by an amazing coincidence, Andotear saved me first before I saved him. The sinister lord of the manor from whom I took the blanket and locket was chasing me because he wanted them for himself. He was even ready to kill me, and I probably wouldn't have gotten away if it hadn't been for the magic of the neon wolf's fur. I guess I won't surprise you when I tell you that another of their many abilities is that when they touch a person, both can become invisible, as long as one of them wants it.’

‘No, you don't surprise me at all - I know everything about the Wolves of Shining Power,’ the old man shook his head. ‘I am glad that Andotear has developed this ability in the first weeks of his life, despite the difficult conditions. He is certainly a very strong animal.’

‘That's right,’ Reed nodded and continued to caress the wolf, this time on the head.

Then, Andotear briefly tore his attention away from his feast to stare back at him. Their eyes were fixed on each other for a while, and they most certainly exchanged warmth. It seemed that the relationship between this human boy and the neon wolf he had discovered was already too special.

And good Barnaby noticed this, and he rejoiced in the fact. But still, he hadn't forgotten about a decision he had made yesterday, after Reed had fallen asleep. So now he stood up and said to the boy:

‘Come on, finish what's left of your own food. I need you to help me with a job in the woods before we go to city.’

Reed looked up at him, blinking.

‘To... the city?’ he said with surprise and excitement.

‘Yes,’ answered the old man. ‘You've been dreaming of visiting one for a long time, haven't you? I'll take you there. Or are you in a hurry to get back to that mansion?’

‘Oh no, I don't think I'll ever visit that area again,’ Reed waved his hands and returned to the table.

He ate what was left on his plate, then he and Barnaby left the neon wolf alone in the house and went outside.

They went into the woods, where Reed helped the good old man collect more wood for the fireplace. It took them about two hours to complete this work, but at last when they returned to the cottage with as many as two sacks full, they felt satisfied.

In the next few minutes, they prepared for the trip to the city. According to Barnaby, it wasn't too far, but still, he wanted them to have everything they needed so they wouldn't get hungry and thirsty on the way, so he stocked two knapsacks with enough provisions.

On his way out, Reed crouched down before Andotear again and petted him with a smile. He said to him:

‘We'll be back soon, my friend. Wait for us!’

The animal didn't say anything in words, but suddenly did something that showed how real the theory was about how much smarter than ordinary wolves were the ones of Shining Power - Andotear nodded.

Finally, Reed and Mr. Barnaby finally left the house and went on their journey. They first took a small path through the forest, which after only about fifteen minutes led them out of it, leading them into vast fields not far from here.

They walked through these fields for about an hour, during which time the boy and the old man talked about many other things - about their lives before they met, about the world that surrounded them, and also about the terrible storm that had recently passed, after which Barnaby's home had remained almost intact - only part of the roof tiles had fallen, and a branch had fallen on the chimney and partially destroyed it.

Of course, a constant topic of conversation between them was the neon wolf they had both rescued, which proved the theory about the existence of such supernatural beings in today's rather peculiar world.

And so, just as it was getting dark, the two of them reached another wooded area, which appeared to be much smaller, and passed through it in no time. On the other side, behind a hill they had to climb, in the middle of another vast field, there was that special place for which Reid had longed for all his life - and the lights of which could be seen from afar, for it was reflected even in the very heavens. The city.

And the city was more delightful than the young man had ever imagined. And at odds with everything else he had seen in his few years on this earth.

It rose high up there, in the middle of the fields, only a few kilometers from here, and it had a completely different, fantastic aura. It consisted of hundreds of skyscrapers glowing in the dark surroundings with hundreds of floors - it was a type of building that Reid had only heard and read about, but not seen. Of course, even at first glance, this vast metropolis also featured a wild number of all sorts of other buildings and representatives of astonishing technology, as well as highways rising high into the air and flying over and around them with ground and flying vehicles.

The combination of all this, and many other remarkable things inside, gave the huge city the appearance of some majestic titan - so majestic that a child like Reed, who until this moment had lived in a completely different environment, could now only stay wide-mouthed and wide-eyed in astonishment, without succeeding to find words to describe his impression.

Barnaby noticed his expression and chuckled. He put a hand on the shoulder of the boy, saying:

‘You’ve really, really always wanted to live in such a place, huh?’

‘I... I...’ stammered the child, without taking his eyes off the enchanting city. - I don't know what to say. I didn't expect this place to be... *so* different from everything else.’

‘Well, it is...’ Barnaby replied and also looked at the huge metropolis. ‘After each of the Storms, humanity still managed to achieve a lot and rebuild some of the elements of its previous civilizations, and even create new ones. It is a pity that the result of all the efforts have always been concentrated mainly on this and the other several cities in what is left of the world. The rest

was more or less neglected by the great scientists and inventors who made cities like Kale... what they are.'

'Kale? Is that the name of this one?' Reed asked with interest.

'Yes,' replied the old man, then he put his hand into one of the pockets of his clothes and took out from there a rather specific object - it was something like an electronic metal card, glowing in blue colors along the edges and having the glowing inscription "Kale" on it. 'And from now on you are one of its legal residents.'

He handed the card to the boy, who stared at it with trepidation and great surprise.

'You... give me your city resident pass?' he whispered, then shook his head. 'No, I can't accept such a precious gift, Barry. You helped me enough when you saved my life and Andotear's.'

Barnaby grinned even wider and patted him on the head, saying:

'I told you not to be too shy, boy. We both know that you, not me, are meant to live in such a place. Even just the glimmer in your eyes is enough for me to see that it's in your blood to be there, among those who create the future... not among the people living in misery or among those like me who are happy in their forest solitude and in their focus on the old and legendary.'

He placed the card in the child's hand and gave it a light squeeze.

'I have money to help you go to a good school in Kale, and if we combine it with the money in your little bag, it will be even better. 'You will live with me, but you will spend most of your time in the city, where I will make sure you will have a place to stay, too. I promise you that you will receive the upbringing you need to do great things someday.'

'I... I don't know what to say...' Reed was quite emotional, he even teared up a little. 'Thank you!'

He sprang forward to the old man and hugged him tightly. Barnaby kept smiling.

After the hug, the child looked at him again and asked:

'But what about Andotear? Will I be able to take it with me into town? I know it might sound weird but... I feel like he's my best friend now... maybe because I've never had a real friend. I don't want to leave him alone in the woods where the same thing as before - or worse - could happen to him.'

'Don't worry about him,' Barnaby reassured the boy. 'The Wolf of Shining Power will stay with us, in my house. Alas, I could not let you take him with you into the city, for it would not be safe for him there at all.'

'But... I thought you yourself wanted to prove to the world that you were right about the existence of supernatural beings like him?'

'Actually, citizens here *do believe* in some paranormal creatures. But even when people have proofs for some things, they always keep doubting others - even when sometimes those 'others' are similar to what is known. Not many are the ones who just listen to their inner voice. Decades ago I might have wanted to rub some of my colleagues' noses with *my proofs* but... not anymore. It's enough for me to know that I was proven right. I don't need to prove myself to those who didn't believe me back then... and thus to endanger the poor creature's life. If it is handed over to the scientists, they will destroy it for the purposes of their researches. So it would be best for him to stay with us in the forest for now. Until... well, maybe until Kale or at least some other parts of Atlantis and the world become... different.'

Agreeing with him, Reed nodded, then looked back at the city and after that - at the pass he already had. Then Barnaby said to him with a smile:

‘Well, now, if you wish, you may use your rights as a citizen of Kale to examine it, taking with you a good old man who is no longer a citizen of Kale. You are aware that the holder of this card can bring up to three guests at the same time into a big city, right?’

‘Yes, I’ve heard of it,’ Reid answered with a positive expression on his face, as he looked at Barnaby, then took a breath. ‘Let’s go!’

And so, in the next few minutes, on the path among the fields, an enthusiastic boy and a good old man were already walking towards the big city of Kale. Heading to the place which one of them had voluntarily left, but the other one was eager to know better.

Book of Reed: Constantinople Has Fallen

More than seventeen years have passed since the day Barnaby Flint introduced little Reed Terek to the great city of Kale and thus changed the boy's life forever.

During these almost two decades, the child kept going forward with confidence. He grew up to be a young and handsome man. A man who, with the help of his patron from the woods, as well as with the help of his own impressive abilities, had managed to rise very high in the hyperarchy.

After graduating from a good school with the highest grades, Reid had continued his education at one of the most elite police academies in the metropolis. During his studies there, he had met not just anyone, but the respected chief of police in the city himself - Walter Schubert. Noticing the young man's outstanding skills that extended far beyond being a city protector, upon graduation he had personally appointed him as his right-hand man at the Kale Central Police Station, as one of the lead detectives. It was Reed that Mr. Schubert entrusted with some of the most important missions.

Our tale continues in this same period after the aforementioned seventeen years. More precisely – on the day Reed got a brand new task in one of the first working days of the new calendar year. In the early afternoon of that same day, the vast metropolitan city was as lively as ever. Tens of thousands of people and humanoids passed through most of the streets in its very center - some on foot, others in land cars, others moving along the highways that rose up to the level of the high floors of the skyscrapers, serving both people who were riding their own vehicles, and passengers of the many metro trains.

Yet, Reed used another main method of getting around Kale - that of the flying cars. A relatively new technology (less than fifty years old at that point), it had made its way into this city very fast, and many of its residents now thought of it less as of a luxury than as an everyday thing, although not everyone could afford these remarkable vehicles. The revolution in that technology was incredible - even when starting off, none of these cars needed being on any physical road from where to launch their unprecedented speed. They simply floated above a road specially built for them, to which they were invisibly bound by a complex magnetic system. A system intended to prevent them from going too far off course and causing an accident, while still giving them the freedom to travel much faster through the air.

On this rather warm day, along one of the main highways of a such type, a special car flew with a quite fast speed. Long and dark blue, with an amazing digital dashboard on the steering wheel and with functions such as voice command and autopilot, it was a smart model, one of the fastest possible vehicles in modern times. At this stage, only those working in some large institutions and a few more rich people in the city could afford it.

Happily, Reed, who had reached one of the highest positions in the police force, had been given one of these absolutely free, for work purposes. For three years it was the main vehicle he had used to get around on his missions. But this one had another feature that made it even more special – its appearance could very easily turn into that of a police car. The driver just had to push a digital button inside of it or give it a voice command, in order to make it glow in blue-red lights and begin to emit the familiar sounds of a typical vehicle of the forces.

At the moment we find Reed behind its wheel, that particular function of his police car was turned off, as the detective was in no rush for an emergency. His goal was to go to the main building of the widely popular company that developed new technologies and other scientific discoveries, "Keaton Corp", which he actually liked to visit quite often for other reasons. Other reasons called 'hobby'.

For some time, the man liked to help one of his best friends from high school, Zade Manson, who worked there. As we have already mentioned, Reed's honored skills were not limited to the things he did in his high post in the police - being an observer and assistant in the research and development of some innovations in scientific fields was another passion of his.

But on this day, the detective was not going to "Keaton Corp" with the intention of simply spending his afternoon at a pleasant place. His purpose was to check a report filed earlier today, about one of the departments in the building. It was no coincidence that his boss Shubert had sent him - he knew that Reid was well-acquainted with this building and with some of the processes that took place in it, thus making him, undoubtedly, the most appropriate representative of the police to respond to the report.

So, when Reed parked his car on the designated platform rising into the air and made his way to the entrance and then to the floor he needed, many people greeted him - and he greeted them - along the way. Security didn't even ask him for ID to let him in, neither they make him go through the special sensors that scan his body and clothes - procedures otherwise mandatory for this place. No, the relationship between Reed and most of the people here was perfectly friendly. And the reason for this was not just his interest in the studies in the building, but also his personal acquaintance with the executive director - Leonard Keaton.

Having built his company through decades of hard work, Leonard Keaton was one of the most respected businessmen in town. He was now seventy-eight years old, yet he still spent most of his time somewhere around the many rooms of this building and its several branches in the other megacities. As a responsible owner of the company with his own name on it, he wanted to personally make sure that the work here at that place is done in the best way. And in most cases, he was satisfied - not that he would treat his workers badly if he wasn't. No, Leonard Keaton wasn't one of those rude and inconsiderate bosses - whatever he had to say, he said it in the kindest and most constructive way possible. Perhaps that was the reason why most of his staff liked him, including the part-time worker here, Reed.

However, on this day Leonard was not in the building because of important work in another megalopolis. The detective knew this, and probably for that reason he didn't even stop by his office to greet him, as he probably would have done on another day. He headed straight to a certain department in the underground labs where his aforementioned high school friend, Zade, also worked. And, if he had to be completely honest with himself, as he walked up there and looked at all those familiar and unfamiliar people around him, Reid felt a bit uneasy at the idea of investigating a case in a company he was so close to. However, he intended to approach the task being the professional he was and researching what he needed to research as best as he could - of course, in the friendliest way possible to the other people here.

As soon as he stepped through the doors of the department in question, Reed found his friend at the front desk of the lobby. He was talking to the young and pretty black lady who was working in that lobby and the young detective even caught part of their conversation - words spoken by Zade to this, apparently, not entirely indifferent woman:

'... and then I'll take you out to that restaurant, what was its name... Ah yes, "Giles"! You said you had a good time with your family in it, didn't you? Ah, Reid! You're finally back!'

The scientist noticed his friend even with his peripheral vision, which prompted him to instantly turn to Reed with a wide smile and to go shake hands and hug him.

Zade was also quite a handsome man with dark hair and blue eyes. He was currently wearing the usual white lab coat, but it had a large, red stain on it. Reid couldn't help but notice this spot - it was quite voluminous and located right at the man's heart, giving the impression that he had almost been shot.

'I hope you didn't need to be rescued recently,' the detective joked, looking at the stain with a furrowed brow.

‘Ah... this? No...’ Zade waved his hand, then looked at the dark-skinned beauty. ‘Zeta and I just accidentally bumped into each other by chance a while ago, and I had just bought strawberry juice...’

‘Was it really accidentally?’ with a thin smile, the girl took a few folders in her hand and went somewhere. ‘Don't think I'm so naive, Zade. We both know pretty well that one of us planned this clash... and it wasn't me.’

‘Well...’ sighed the laboratory assistant as he lowered his head dejectedly, but a moment later he looked at the beauty with a flash in his eyes, calling out behind her: ‘Despite that fact... you'll agree to go out with me, won't you?’

Zeta never honoured him with an answer - she only looked at him with a smirk over her shoulder, then went into one of the corridors.

‘I see that you haven't changed your manner about women - you keep coming up with original-looking ways to attract someone's attention,’ said the sarcastic Reid behind him, also smiling.

‘Well, yes... things haven't changed in the few weeks me and you haven't seen each other,’ Zade said this and turned his gaze to the detective. ‘Where did you go, my friend?’

‘I had some important missions on the other side of the city. It was only yesterday that I was able to take a day off, but today I'm back on the line. My appearance here is also connected with this. The truth is, Zade, I'm not coming here for the usual reason. We got a signal about something I want to check.’

‘A signal? About *our company*?’

‘Yes. It was anonymous, but we must treat it appropriately. It is about the laboratories of this sector. Our information is about a secret compartment where illegal things are done.’

‘Oh... a secret compartment...’ Zade opened his eyes. ‘Be a little more precise, my friend. We have quite a few secret compartments here.’

‘Do you?’ it was Reid's turn to be surprised, then he winked and added: ‘Of course you have secret compartments. “Keaton Corp” is a company that always aims to make some innovations. This is how they are finally on the verge of building that strong additional electromagnetic wall at the border with the Wildest Side, after all.’

‘Well... yes... We are quite a team of innovators. We have many rooms in which possible innovations are made and tested. Some of our ideas are top secret, we don't want the competition to get to them. I don't have a pass for some of them myself – but I crave of seeing what's on the other side.’

‘In that case, maybe today is your lucky day – and I will be your pass,’ said Reed as he pulled out his police badge. ‘Are you coming with me on this journey through the unexplored wilds of the Keaton Corp?’

‘Oh... do I need to even answer!’ Zade replied, patting his friend on the back. Then the two of them started going down the hall. ‘Or at least for the next hour or so, when I'll be on a break. Let me use you as a pass and take you to those parts that have always been most curious to me!’

So, the two friends headed to some of the lowest floors of this underground laboratory. With the help of Zade's brilliant navigation and Reed's police powers, they were able to go into some of the most guarded corners of the building. They certainly saw things that they both found quite interesting, some of which they even discussed with Zade's colleagues.

The basements of “Keaton Corp” were more than extensive - some sections of them probably went under the foundations of other buildings in the area. This fact did not prevent Reed's keen eye from studying them well – just to find nothing suspicious in there.

The two friends reached the lowest level of the building shortly before the end of the one hour break that Zade had already mentioned. For this reason, as soon as they found themselves in the last room - a relatively abandoned-looking old laboratory, he remarked to Reed with his usual sense of humour:

‘Well, my friend... I'm sorry that you didn't find what you were looking for... and at the same time I'm not sorry that the police won't have to shut down the company I work for.’

Reed looked at him and smiled. Looking around, he was about to stop his research, but suddenly, his gaze caught something that caught his attention.

In a darker corner of the lab, there were various old broken chests and boxes piled on top of each other. There were quite a lot of them, so in this barely visible side of the room they could easily create the illusion that there was nothing else there... but not to the observant eye of the well-trained Reed Terek.

He walked over there, focusing even more on the corner. He found that his vision hadn't lied to him - the chests and boxes weren't just piled up there. They had blocked a sort of a stairway down.

‘What's down there?’ Reed immediately asked his friend.

‘Hmm... if I'm not mistaken, there was some old and long-abandoned warehouse. At least that's what I've heard,’ was Zade's reply.

‘I have to check it too.’

‘Well, we will need some time to move these things,’ noted the laboratory assistant.

‘If you need to go back to work, don't worry – I can do it myself’, Reed suggested.

‘Are you sure, man? I don't think it is a work for just one person but, yet, my break has already finished, so...’

‘No worries, my friend,’ Reed smiled at Zade and put a hand on his shoulder. ‘Go.’

The other man nodded, then he turned around and left.

Reed stared at all of the boxes and chests for a moment, then sighed and said to himself:

‘At least you still have time, huh?’

He then started cleaning the path on the staircase. It took him more than thirty minutes, but he succeeded – just to see that at the bottom of it there was a metal door. Something interesting was written on it with some kind of red spray paint.

‘*Constantinople has fallen...*’ Reed read it, then added to himself: ‘Hm... Constantinople... What is this supposed to mean?’

He squinted, reading the inscription a few more times, then realised that on the lower level of the door, another inscription – with much smaller letters, was written:

‘Access granted only to the ones of wild souls that have already felt the magical correlation with our mythical nature!’

Reed was totally confused. He stared at all of those enigmatic words – up and down, but they all gave no clues to him what they actually meant. So, he decided to check if the door itself was unlocked. Fortunately, it was – but once the detective realised that fact and opened the door, everything changed...

Everything *literally* changed. The dark, depressing surrounding of the abandoned laboratory staircase – it was now gone. Reed found himself teleported on a completely different place – without even knowing how this instant teleportation was possible.

The confused man was surrounded by many sand dunes – because he was standing in the middle of a desert. There wasn't a single cloud on the sky – and the sun was shining bright, so the temperature was almost unbearable for someone who wore as many clothes as Reed.

‘What the... What... What happened?’ He started saying, while his body started spinning on different sides – but without being able to find the exit.

He would've probably thought that he was going crazy if suddenly, something else didn't change his mind. Something so wonderful, so hypnotic, something that was so real that there was no chance that it was an illusion in the mind of a crazy man.

A voice. A beautiful singing voice of a woman. So tender... So captivating...

Reed couldn't resist. He started walking forward the direction of that voice. And, after climbing an average dune... he saw her.

There was a river on the other side, and the river was surrounded by many fresh vegetation. But it was not the green loveliness of the vegetation, nor it was the blue grace of the river that made Reed possessed right now. It was the magnificence of the mermaid that was now standing on a rock in the water...

XXI

Her or *Her*

‘She was there, on her own island of grace. So beautiful, so hypnotic... To break the barrier, I had to create my own island and ask her to follow me on it.’

Reed Terek, more than thirty years older, but still literally young-looking, still had that spark of a possessed man in his eyes. Possessed not by evil forces. Possessed by *love*.

His full-grown son, Nathaniel, was more than amazed after the end of that vision. He was more than shocked – for the main reason causing this shock in his body and soul had appeared in the very last moment of the vision.

‘Mom... My mother... It was... it was her!’ He shouted with an excitement, but not too loud because he didn’t want to attract attention. ‘That mermaid on the rock... that was her! My mother, Kassandra Terek! She... she is also a mermaid!’

Reed took a deep breath before he nodded.

‘Yes, son. She was once... a mermaid. And not just a random mermaid but a mermaid princess.’

‘But why... why hasn’t she told me about that?’

‘Because... it was forbidden. For both me and her. We shouldn’t speak about the core of our relationship – that we were a human man and a mermaid woman who had fallen in love, against all odds. Against all the rules we broke by simply being with each other. You see, my son, that each world has a hierarchy. And, in the hierarchy of that type of mermaids – the mermaids of the desert – humans were considered evil creatures. As evil and ferocious as typhons and microtyphons are considered in our dear Atlantis. We were the soulless animals to them – and when they found out that Kassandra and I were in love... well, it was totally expected that they will outcast her. That they will even take her mermaid powers and turn her into one of us, the humans, so that she could be nothing more than a blurred stain on their precious hierarchy.’

‘This sounds... so harsh... So evil itself...’ Nathaniel was trembling.

‘But it was a *tradition*. Something neither Kassandra nor I had the right to argue about. And my dear Kassandra... oh she was so strong even in those moments... So brave even when she had to part ways with her world so she could have her life with me, the human man. I guess this pain gave her an additional strength when we went back to Atlantis and fought for the good causes, thus becoming the king and the queen of the lands we later raised you in. Yet, for our whole lives we were not allowed to share the truth about her true origin with anyone – as she brought a great shame to her underwater nation, we were additionally punished by a special magical curse that forbid us to talk about this in front of anyone else in our world... But now, since you and I are standing in another world... I can finally talk about that burden of ours with someone else who needs to know about it...’

So much love in Reed’s look... So much tender feelings for his son were present in these moments in which he finally had the chance to share the truth with him....

But Nathaniel still had questions.

‘So... so that place where you met mom for the first time... it is in *the same world* as ours? But... I never knew that such extraordinary lands existed around Atlantis?’

‘Yes, son. They *existed*, Long time ago, before The Third Storm.’

‘Oh... so... so that hidden portal in the abandoned laboratory... it took you back in time?’

‘Yes, indeed. That portal was... hm... not just an ordinary magic. It was a magic you should deserve. As the lower label says, ‘*Access granted only to the ones of wild souls that have already felt the magical correlation with our mythical nature!*’. It took me some time to realise what that meant to my case – and how I was among those who, as it seems, deserved to access the other side of that special underground portal. And what was that so called ‘correlation with magical nature’ that I already had at that point...

‘Andotear... Your connection with the neon wolf...’ Nathaniel said with the face of a man who had just put some puzzle pieces together. ‘He was your connection to that magical nature, right? This is why you showed me not only the day when you first met mom... but also the day you arrived in the Kale region and some events led you to meeting that special supernatural being...’

‘You are so clever, my son,’ Reed said proudly. ‘Yes, this is why I showed you those two different memories simultaneously one after another – so you would have the chance to realise the truth faster than me. Andotear – whom I later started calling just Andy – was my key to the other side of that mysterious portal. The connection we two built while saving each other’s lives... it got unbreakable. Through the years he has been the best friend I could have. The human and the Wolf of Shining Power – together.’

‘Is he... is he still...’ Nathaniel didn’t know how to ask this question delicately, but he tried – he needed to know if that so special friend of his father was still among the living.

‘Yes, Andotear is still alive,’ said Reed, thus making his son feel relief. ‘His type of wolves usually lives three or four times longer than the usual ones. Of course, he is much older now – and he looks older, unlike me, because he doesn’t possess the literal immortality that our dynasty originally has. Sadly, I didn’t have the ability to transfer that supernatural power to him through our special bond, like I transferred it to you and to your mother. Yet, he looking older makes him look more respectful than his human best friend, me thinks.’

Reed said his last words with a laugh, and Nathaniel also smiled. Then the son once again sighed as he looked at the other people in the big hall, where Bromley and Yana, alongside their children, were still surrounded by the many other merry people who celebrated the new path for this country. Something in their happiness made Nathaniel both joyful and sad.

‘So... I guess it turns out that I will never have what they have, huh? ’ He then changed the topic in the conversation with his father without moving eyes in his direction at first. ‘Unconditional love. A family strength.’ This is when he looked back at Reed again. ‘Not when I am, obviously, not allowed to follow my heart, like you once did with mom. This is the moral of those flashbacks that you two shared with me, right? That if I break the rules with *my mermaid* the way you two did once... that could leave some serious consequences...’

The prince stared at his sister and her husband again. He also stared at his nephew and his niece – still with the happiness of having them and their parents as a part of his family now, but still whispering with the sadness of his own fate:

‘*This was never my story that leads to me finding her.* This was the story of me helping that new monarch find his way to the throne. I was never the main hero. I was the Fellow Pal of the Fellow Pal...’

‘No, my son...’ Reed put his hands on Nathaniel’s shoulders. He looked at his boy with that flame in his eyes that made Nathaniel a little bit more hopeful – as did the words that followed: ‘We are main heroes of our own stories all the time. Even when we help others to find their happy endings, we still pave our path to *our* happy endings. As I said previously - me creating my old island, me trying to find that mystical place where the two of us, your mother and I, would feel completed, was something of a critical importance. Sometimes getting there is just not surrounded by the usual obstacles that we expect when we are looking to our happy endings. And logic is a more complicated thing. But we get there, one way or another – this is how Bromley got there after participating in Harmony and Finn’s path before that. This is how

Harmony and Finn got there – yet I am not allowed to tell you exactly how they did this, as it is another very specific story you will find more about some day because their journey is still partially connected with yours – but they would not get there before they also help some other people in the earlier stages of their lives. You and the girl of your destiny will also have your chance, as you mother and I did.’

‘But that girl... that mermaid... she might not have the strength to leave her family behind, as mom did... And how could I ask her to, knowing what could follow? You and mom at least didn’t get ‘warned’ in advance. Of course, she knew the rules of her kingdom but meeting you was not part of her plans... yet it happened. And once something like this happens... this cannot be undone.’

‘I didn’t share with you that memories of mine so that you would quit looking for your greatest love. Neither did your mother, I am sure. We just needed you to be prepared for what might expect you and your mermaid at the end of the day. Because your mermaid, my son, is among *those types*. She is not part of a royal family, like Cassandra, but she is still a mermaid of a desert of a noble ancestry.’

‘How would you and mom know that?’ Nathaniel asked.

‘Because we both read Erastos’ archives. Erastos himself is programmed so that he would send a signal to us if anything that he finds as connected to your mother’s original family, occurs. Of course, we never shared with him anything about Cassandra’s ancestry and the way we two met – but the information about the existence and the traditions of those mermaids of the desert was not an information that we were obliged to not share with anyone. So, we put it in Erastos’ database on the day we activated him – alongside tons of other necessary data about other topics.’

‘Now I understand... He didn’t have the chance when I asked him not to cut the connection between me and the place that I had visited with the help of the Room of Fair Magic... He was coded so he would prevent me from meeting *her* before I knew what *exactly* she was...’ Nathaniel felt way different now, when more and more answers were pouring directly into his mind. ‘Yet, I am still not sure how mom would’ve helped the case by showing me your shared memories, as you two are not allowed to talk about the truth about her origin *in our world*.’

‘She would just give you the hints that were necessary for you and your clever mind to put the puzzle together. We two – Cassandra and I – never stopped looking for a way to share that information with you and your sister. Because you deserved to know about it someday – even if the mermaid powers were not part of your veins, you *had* to know what your ancestry is – like you have always known some essential details about my side of the family. Well. I suppose that after I left, looking for Yana, your mother decided to wait for the right moment to test that option of sharing with you those part of my memories about the events that led me to meeting her.’

‘I still don’t get what would the two of you expect from me after sharing that information with me? How could I really go searching to *my mermaid* now, when I know what will eventually happen if me and her follow the path of love instead of the path of loyalty to her kingdom’s traditions?’

‘Because my son... destiny is destiny. If you are meant to find your girl, you will find her – and I know how much you dream about it. Your mother and I are the proof that such a collision of different worlds doesn’t necessary leads to something wrong. It led us to your existence. To the existence of Yana,’ Reed turned his eyes in the direction of his daughter’s family, with a smile. ‘And her existence led her to Bromley and to their family, to those precious grandchildren of your mother and me...’ His look went back to Nathaniel. ‘I am sorry that for now you wouldn’t have the chance to meet her in person as she doesn’t know about you yet – because this is connected to another story about other travels through time and through different parallel universes that neither of you are meant to learn at that point. But even without being next to each other, you, your sister and her children, will always live with the strength that the blood of Terek gives to you. You all are part of a family that has always been of a great importance to some

realms even before that name, Terek, even existed. And, believe me, me myself have doubted that strength through the years in which I was walking through the misty fields of not knowing who I am and where I come from – even when some truths started pouring into me, I was still hesitant. But with time, I realised everything that I needed to feel complete – and meeting my own parents was part of that path, even though it came way later, even after I met your mother.’ The older man sighed, still staring at his son’s eyes with that ignited spark that gave Nathaniel pieces of that same confidence. ‘I am sure that you, my son, will follow my path – as will your sister and her offspring. But everything will come to its place... with time.’

The young prince listened to these so deep, so genuine words of his father, as the eyes of both were already full of tears. Nathaniel kept silence for a few moments, then said:

‘I understand, dad. I understand. But I still don’t know how I could go into that path you are talking about. I feel lost. Even after helping Bromley follow his destiny, I know nothing about the world I am standing now. I don’t know what to do from now on. Even if I decide to seek for that love of mine, I don’t know where to start from. Or how to get back at the world we apparently share – but in that other time before some of the Storms where her voice was coming from, somehow magically merging with the vision of the modern-day Architraves Island...’

‘You know, my child. I already told you, remember? I already told you about... the stones.’

‘Oh... yes...’ Nathaniel suddenly allowed that memory to go back into the mess that was in his head right now. ‘Those... Methods...’

‘The Method of Shared Touches. You already know where to look for two of them. It is now your mission to find the third one – *The 8-8 Stone*. The stone of eternity, as some others call it. I can assure you that during your journey to that current point, you were already, sort of, ‘introduced’ to its location. There was a special hint you should follow... a hint me myself know nothing about because it is *your destiny* to find the stone.’

‘So you tell me that if I find that stone – and the other two - I can just... make a wish, and finally go to *her*, to see her in front of me without any more cryptic and enigmatic ‘partial’ meetings with her amazing self?’

‘Yes. Exactly. You can turn your dream into reality with the help of those three stones – this is why me and my companions, besides from knowing what we were meant to do in order for you to help Bromley follow its destiny, decided to give you this information as a reward – and this helping you to follow the path *you* choose. You deserve it, Nate. You deserve to find her and be happy with her – even if getting to that point might be a little bit harder because of some traditions and obstacles. But you are strong, and I hope she is strong, too.’

‘But... but what about... mom?’ Nathaniel couldn’t help but remember that particular part of the complicated story that still made him quite anxious. ‘That big typhon took her... and no one told me anything else about her!’

The following sigh of Reed was one of the deepest.

‘Your mom... is also strong. Apollo told me that, wherever she was taken, she later fought that creature and escaped from its prison. He cannot help her because his appearance on her path is not part of her destiny – but he assured me that she is well...’

‘But it seems like she is all alone in an unknown place where she is a fugitive and is trying to hide from those monsters! How could you be so calm?’

‘Because I know that she would want me to be calm. Your mother is not just strong, Nathaniel – she is stronger than you expect. She will survive and she will come back to you again. Meanwhile, don’t underestimate my concern and my care for her. I never stopped searching for a way to find Cassandra, even though at that point even the Method of Shared Touches is not able to help me because me myself doesn’t know where the last stone is – this was a mission that was given *to you*, as I said. *You* are meant to combine the stones and follow your destiny.’

‘It is meant for me to choose going to the woman of my life over going to the woman who made me who I am today? To choose between the love of my life and the love for my mother?’ Nathaniel didn’t expect to be that kind of confused at the end of this part of his journey, not after he finally got so many of the answers he needed.

The gracious, caring look on the face of his father couldn’t give him the same strength and confidence anymore – and Reed knew that. It was Nathaniel’s time to make the decisions of his life. Yet, the older man could still show how much he loved and supported his son – by hugging him and saying:

‘You are meant to do whatever you do, my dear child. Even if the path is full of hard decisions, your destiny is shining. You will keep going forward and you will reach the summit you deserve, young prince of Atlantis.’

Nathaniel listened, while his body and his soul were trying to concentrate in hugging his father back instead of being scared how his upcoming decisions would affect the ones he loved.

Being the main hero never felt so hard.

But Nathaniel never stopped being brave, too.

And he never stopped following his path. This is why he started searching for the stones that could give him the power of The Method of Shared Touches.

He found the nearest one quickly enough, with the help of his instincts, his hobby interests in archaeology and, of course, with some additional help of some smart devices – and persons - including the loyal AI servant of the family, Erastos, who was already in the region because of the teleportation of the Terek manor. The Loving Heart Stone was so small, yet so beautiful that Nathaniel would probably keep it for himself forever if he didn’t know how important its meaning was for these lands – and particularly to the new monarchs, whose love story was always partially driven by the idea of what that stone symbolized. So, while taking that little piece of rock in his hands, the young prince of Atlantis already knew that one day he would return to that scenic place – and return the stone to its homeland.

For the second stone, or the so called ‘Pale Stone’ (named in that way after the fact that one of the inscriptions on it, the arrow pointing right, was so pale that it was barely seen), Nathaniel had to first seek for the equivalent of his own Atlantis here, in this parallel universe – not those parts of Atlantis that was moved here by The Wrath of Cronus, like was the one where Bromley had met the wizard, but the parts that were *originally* here. It was quite hard locating such a place, as for this world Atlantis was apparently only a myth – but once again, with the help of his senses and Erastos, as well as with the help of his own knowledge and his own memories connected with his birthplace, Nathaniel succeeded. Just to find that in this universe, the place the Pale Stone was located (on that much smaller piece of Atlantis that was now a sunny island with a completely different name), had nothing to do with an abandoned underground prison – yet some parts of the shoreline still had a familiar look, as well as some hidden (or maybe not so hidden) dangers, as it was now full of swamps and not so friendly species.

Luckily for Nathaniel, the closest airport in that part of what has apparently remained of this world’s version of Atlantis, was right next to that swamp area – and the plane that the young prince took later brought him straight to the country where the last stone was located.

Copenhagen, Denmark.

Remember the article that Harmony Hamilton was reading when her old friend Finn Trent called her and invited her on what turned out to be an adventure of a lifetime? Well, Nathaniel remembered it, even if the memory of the mentioning of the ‘old stone artifacts’ didn’t come immediately to his mind. But it did come – so the prince went to that distant place that he’d never heard about before, but something made him sure that the 8-8 Stone was there.

Soon Nathaniel found out that the city of Copenhagen was a place that he would most definitely live in – yet, searching for such a small thing in a large and highly inhabited place like this turned out to be quite a challenge. He couldn’t just dig for a special stone in that specific point from the article, as in this universe that point was a part of a big – and sometimes quite crowded – park. So, the man had to wait for the night hours and be completely cautious. Being caught in action could put his plans in danger.

But once again he, along with his clever mind and his AI companion, did the research – and the digging - fast enough. At the end the third stone was in Nathaniel’s hands – and he could finally understand why it was given this name, as what was naturally and not so naturally written on its surface strongly resembled two ‘8’ symbols, merged into one another.

The feeling of finally having these three stones made Nathaniel’s mind explode with mixed emotions. He had kept the decision of what path he would choose for the last moment – but when the last moment came, he was still completely confused. So, he started wandering through the surroundings, while the night was also still surrounding him and there was almost nobody around.

This is how he suddenly saw The Mermaid. The real statue of a mermaid, standing down there, next to the shore.

‘This should’ve been this world’s version of The Little Mermaid,’ he said to himself, then sat on the ground, facing the statue. He stared at it, or at least at this magnificent dark silhouette of it that was visible only because of the gentle rays of the moon... and he stared... wondering what would happen in both cases in which he chooses... a different mermaid.

One of them was not a mermaid anymore but she was his dear mother. Enough said.

The other... she was simply the love of his life. How naïve does this sound, doesn’t it? Nathaniel being sure that *she* was the one... The girl that he never really met but they were already connected with each other...

His mother would survive. She was strong and she was literally well, as his father said – and as Nathaniel knew himself. This was Kassandra Terek we were talking about. Kassandra Terek. A woman who has gained her strength because of... love. Same love that Nathaniel deserved himself so he could go on the same path of strength... The same love that she would approve him chasing instead of coming to help her...

Yes, she would. But was it right? Of course it was – his father had told him that... Or did he?

Nathaniel looked at the still-parted stones, then sighed. His mind kept him anxious, as the different options poured into his soul like a relentless storm. But he had to choose. And, after thinking about it once again, he found the answer. Memories poured in his mind and made him smile, like a hypnotized person who finally knew where his way should go, in order for him to earn his happy ending...

He put the stones closer to one another, thus combining them and making them shine. Then he took a deep breath and, full of a newly born confidence, made his wish.

The colourful light of the stones overtook him. For some moments, he wasn’t able to see anything, but then... he saw her.

And she saw him too. Trembling, then smiling, as he whispered with tears of pure happiness in his blue eyes:

‘Mom...’

Epilogue

Centuries Earlier

Finally...

He had reached the mermaid of his dreams. The mermaid with whom he would repeat his parents' decisions... and his parents' fate?

She was there, on her own island of grace. So beautiful, so hypnotic... To break the barrier, he had to create his own island and ask her to follow him on it.