
CASSANDRA GANNON
HEART OF THE LIGHT KINGDOM
ELEMENTAL PHASES
BOOK SEVEN

Heart of the Light Kingdom

Cassandra Gannon

OceanofPDF.com

Text copyright © 2026 Cassandra Gannon

Cover Image copyright © 2026 Cassandra Gannon

All Rights Reserved

Published by Star Turtle Publishing

Visit Cassandra Gannon and Star Turtle Publishing on Facebook for news on upcoming books and promotions!

Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/pages/Star-Turtle-Publishing/237980429658356

Or email Star Turtle Publishing directly with your questions or to be added to our mailing list: starturtlepublishing@gmail.com

We'd love to hear from you!

OceanofPDF.com

Also by Cassandra Gannon

The Elemental Phases Series
Warrior from the Shadowland
Guardian of the Earth House
Exile in the Water Kingdom
Treasure of the Fire Kingdom
Queen of the Magnetland
Magic of the Wood House
Heart of the Light Kingdom

A Kinda Fairytale Series
Wicked Ugly Bad
Beast in Shining Armor
The Kingpin of Camelot
Best Knight Ever
Seducing the Sheriff of Nottingham
Happily Ever Witch
My UnTrue Love

Other Books
Love in the Time of Zombies
Not Another Vampire Book
Vampire Charming
The Worst Romance Novel in the World
Cowboy from the Future
Once Upon a Caveman
Ghost Walk
"Taming the Tyrant Lizard" in the
Sexual Tyrannosaurs anthology (Written with Elizabeth Gannon)
Betrothed to a Dinosaur
The Alien Who Saved Christmas

Frightful Loves
Love vs. the Ooze Monster! by Cassandra Gannon
Love vs. the Scarecrow! by Cassandra Gannon

If you enjoy Cassandra's books, you may also enjoy books by her sister, Elizabeth Gannon.

The Consortium of Chaos series
Yesterday's Heroes
The Son of Sun and Sand
The Guy Your Friends Warned You About
Electrical Hazard
The Only Fish in the Sea
Not Currently Evil

The Mad Scientist's Guide to Dating

The Window Seat Tribe
Broke and Famous
Formerly the Next Big Thing

War of Gold and Silver
Travels with a Fairytale Monster
Nobody Likes Fairytale Pirates
Captive of a Fairytale Barbarian

Frightful Loves
Love vs. The Beast! by Elizabeth Gannon

Other books
The Snow Queen
"Lust and Fury" in the
Sexual Tyrannosaurs anthology (Written with Cassandra Gannon)

OceanofPDF.com

Previously in the *Elemental Phases* Series
Recap of *Magic of the Wood House*
Caution about Triggering Content
Prologue
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Epilogue
Author's Note

OceanofPDF.com

Previously in the *Elemental Phases* Series

Good news: If you want to read *Heart of the Light Kingdom* as a standalone romance and don't care about the series' overarching plot, you can just skip this part. 99% of Kahn and Randa's relationship takes place within this book. They did share a scene in *Magic of the Wood House*, but you can follow their love story just fine without reading it.

Additionally, in every book of this series, I reiterate the key world-building stuff and explain it all again. There will be a lot of side characters you don't know yet, but they will be reintroduced. My intention is that you will understand the general backstory, even if you're encountering the Elemental Phases for the first time. You can jump right in!

Kinda Bad News (Depending on How Much You Enjoy Interconnected Series): Certain story points in *Heart of the Light Kingdom* are built on information that developed throughout the series. There are also many recurring characters who have important roles in the plot. Describing everything that's happening therefore requires references to the larger backstory.

Knowing the series' bigger world enriches *Heart of the Light Kingdom*. For the best overall reading experience, it would help to have familiarity with the previous books.

Good News Again: It's unfair to expect readers to remember all the books of this series. So I have written recaps.

If you haven't read the other books or have forgotten details of them, a free summary for each of the books is available at starturtlepublishing.com, under the Elemental Phases tab. These recaps will hopefully make the series more accessible for new readers and will refresh established readers on the ongoing plot.

I am including an abbreviated summary for *Magic of the Wood* House on the next pages, since it is the most relevant for *Heart of the Light*

Kingdom. **Please be aware that (obviously) it contains spoilers for previous events in the series.**

OceanofPDF.com

Recap of *Magic of the Wood House*

Spoilers for earlier books in the series!

Sullivan Pryce, the police chief of Mayport Beach, Florida, doesn't believe in the supernatural. He thinks the Elementals are a cult. Because his grandfather was a Wood Phase though, all the eligible Elemental bachelorettes are vying to be his fated mate, called a Phase-Match. He is frustrated and keeps arresting them. The only one he is interested in is Teja, of the Fire and Cold Houses, one of the most powerful Phases alive and someone who decidedly doesn't want a Match.

When Saxon, of the Air House attacks Sullivan, Sullivan ends up killing Sax's henchmen. Sax runs away, but Sullivan could still be a target for bad guys.

Since the Fire Phases are the Elemental's version of gangsters, they decide the best idea is to abduct Sullivan and toss him in their dungeon for safekeeping. Teja's family thinks she's making a mistake in refusing the Match, and they don't really trust Sullivan to stay alive on his own. Both Teja and Sullivan are unhappy with the plan.

Meanwhile, Reflection Phases disguised as the Fire Phases attack the Cold Kingdom. Reflection Phases can transform to look like anyone, and they are trying to make it seem like Teja's family is behind the violence. Teja rescues her cousin Freya, of the Cold House from the fighting, but a bomb goes off, obliterating the Cold Palace.

She also learns that Freya has been healing Vandal, of the Light House. Vandal was the Elemental's most famous general, before he was Banished for treason. He was injured in *Queen of the Magnetland* and went to Freya for help. Vandal used the bomb as cover for his escape, and now he's disappeared.

Teja and Sullivan go back to Sullivan's house in Mayport Beach to regroup. Randa, of the Stone House, a Phase who has been working as Sullivan's assistant at the police station, blames Teja for getting her boss

into so much legal trouble. Kahn, of the Light House and the four other Light Phases also show up, because they know that bomb wasn't set off by the Fire House. They want Vandal dead. Bickering ensues between Kahn and Randa.

After a memory-sharing with Sullivan, Teja realizes that her cousin Eian, of the Cold House, is behind the attack on the Cold Kingdom. With most of the Elemental realm still convinced they just blew up the Cold Palace, the other Fire Phases are arrested and put on trial before the Council. Sullivan shows up to give testimony exonerating them. Teja exposes her cousin Eian, but it's unclear how the Reflection Phases were involved. Vandal is nowhere to be found. All they know is he's trying to usher in someone called the Dark King.

The book ends with Daphne, of the Time House making a deal with Missy, of the Fire House for the Happiness box, one of the galactically-powerful Tablets of Fate. In exchange, Daphne promises Missy that she'll find her Match. Now Daphne has all nine Tablets of Fate. United, there's no telling what they can do. She also still has her Match, Raiden, of the Radiation House, locked up in the Smoke Kingdom.

When Missy demands the name of her Match, Daphne points over to Zakkery, of the Smoke House, the guy who's been helping her rewrite history through time travel. Zakkery is stunned and maybe a little scared, because Missy is more than a little scary.

OceanofPDF.com

Caution about Triggering Content

This book contains discussions of prior sexual assaults.

None of them are portrayed on the page and none of it happens within the couple’s relationship.

OceanofPDF.com

Prologue

And so, God's light withdrawn, we walk in darkness,
in the thick darkness of this plague.

Albert Camus

The electricity went out on the second night of the plague.

For most of the Phases across the Elemental realm, the sudden lack of light meant nothing. They were too sick to care. The illness provided its own twilight, sucking victims into the semi-conscious gloom of a disease quickly coming to be known as "the Fall." Their world was already fading. Few of the patients could do more than blink listlessly against the new, external blackness that engulfed them.

For the people who weren't sick yet or who were immune to the pestilence, the darkness made an already terrible situation worse. Their helplessness grew, as did the sense that chaos had swallowed the world.

Those who could think beyond the next breath of their loved ones saw the blackout as an omen. A dividing line. A curtain fell over their former way of life, and nothing would ever be the same. One act was over and now another had begun.

Kahn, of the Light House was not one of the Phases processing those inescapable, cataclysmic changes to his reality. In the moments before the darkness, he still clung to his old life with all the strength and determination that his House was known for.

The Light Phases were heroes or villains. Nothing in between. Just champions or maniacs. They didn't surrender. They didn't compromise. They didn't give a fuck about fate or luck or terrible odds. They fought until they won or died.

Nothing in heaven or hell could've stopped Kahn, as he marched into the Cold Palace with his sister in his arms. "Freya!" He bellowed over the din. "Where the hell are you?"

Cots filled with plague victims blanketed the entire bottom floor of the normally serene palace. The Cold Kingdom existed in permanent winter, snow always falling and its turbulent sea forever dotted with icebergs. The castle itself was constructed of glowing blue ice, which never melted. The people who lived there weren't much warmer than the environment, so this was possibly the most visitors the Cold Kingdom had ever received at one time.

Freya, of the Cold House was the foremost doctor in the realm and one of the few healers who wasn't already sick themselves. If anyone could heal Livinia, it would be her. Kahn had to believe that. *Had* to.

And he wasn't alone in his frantic hopes.

The barriers between the various Elemental kingdoms had all but failed under the unrelenting plague. No one had the strength or inclination to sustain most of them. So stricken Phases traveled to the Cold Palace from every House, desperate, dying, begging for help. One became ten, ten became dozens, dozens became hundreds. Like Kahn, they all wanted the impossible.

The Cold Kingdom held the biggest and most preeminent hospital in the realm. It was a safe haven for everyone, no matter their deeds or House, so it was open to all. The medical facilities had long since overflowed.

Now, the Cold Palace itself was filled with row upon row of cots, mattresses and piles of blankets. Everything that could've been used for a bed was turned into a resting spot for some sick Phase and the results were hardly up to Freya's normal standard of care.

Kahn made his way through the crowded space, scanning for Freya. In his arms, Livinia gave a small, pained noise. Her head was resting against his shoulder, but he wasn't sure she was conscious. She'd been fading in and out for several hours.

"I've got you, Livvy." He murmured anyway. He ducked his face to kiss her golden hair, just as he had when she was a child. "I've got you." He breathed in the familiar scent of her shampoo. "I won't let you go."

She seemed to settle again at that reassurance, but it was hard to be sure. Her whole body was ominously limp in his arms.

“You’re okay.” Kahn kept talking to her, not sure whether it was for her benefit or for his own. “You just need to hang on a little longer. We’re at the hospital.”

Technically, they were in the Cold Palace’s ballroom, which was the makeshift intake room for new arrivals. Kahn hesitated in the grand entryway, his eyes on the gilded fixtures. The juxtaposition of those fancy snowflake-shaped chandeliers lighting the sunken faces of dying Fall patients unexpectedly struck him as terrifying.

Nothing had ever really terrified Kahn before. He was a warrior. But this chaos wasn’t something he could fight. Deep down he suspected no one could. Deep down he knew his baby sister was about to die.

And it fucking terrified him.

Just for a moment, the horrors of the last twenty-four hours sucked him down. This wasn’t real. It couldn’t be. Was it all a nightmare?

Since the beginning of time, the Phases held together the interconnected processes of nature. The Elemental Houses supported everything from Fire to Magnetism to Shadows. They were so powerful. So *plentiful*. They were almost impossible to kill. They lived for eons. They could perform incredible feats.

But this plague was spreading through their ranks, killing too many to count. Just a tiny little germ! And it was poised to wipe out everything. Not just the Elementals. *Everything*. Too much depended on the Phases. If the Elementals fell, they took the rest of the universe down too. Nothing could survive without them. Nothing.

This couldn’t be happening.

Certainly not to Livinia. To any of his little sisters. They couldn’t *possibly* be dying. The girls were too full of life. Too joyful and smart and mischievous.

His sisters were his world. He’d raised them after their parents died. Now they were getting sick, one by one. He could see the girls fading, right before his eyes. …And Livinia was failing fastest. Why was it happening? What should he do to stop it?

He didn't know. Nothing was supposed to intimidate a Light Phase, but in that moment Kahn was hopelessly, helplessly terrified. He just didn't know what to do.

"Hello, Kahn." A voice said in a disquietingly calm tone, given the madness engulfing the world. It cut through the spiraling turmoil in Kahn's mind. "Not sick yet, I see."

Kahn jolted back to reality and gave his head a quick shake. His dark gaze swung over to the man beside him. He had brown hair, aristocratic features, and stood with his hands in the pockets of his pale gray suit.

The face was unfamiliar, but there was a stark white streak at his left temple. All the Elementals had streaks in their hair that identified their House. The various colors signified which kingdom they belonged to. White meant Reflection House.

Reflection Phases could change their appearance to look like anyone, so sometimes they hid their streaks to assume other identities. Most times they didn't bother. It was a part of their true self that they could hang on to, no matter who else they pretended to be. It had to be dizzying to never look in the mirror and see the same person twice.

"Yuan." Kahn muttered distractedly, figuring out the man's identity.

Yuan, of the Reflection House didn't seem to mind Kahn's clear lack of interest in conversation. Even on his best days, he only cared about what he had to say. There were a lot of egotistical assholes in the Elemental realm, but Yuan was one of the most powerful Phases alive. His ego and assholery were bigger than most.

He craned his neck to look down at Livinia and made a *tsk* sound. "Such a shame. She's so lovely."

"Freya will fix her." Kahn insisted, wanting to believe it. "She'll be alright."

Yuan sighed, still gazing at Livinia's face. "My kind values natural beauty. When we take on a face, we make it perfect. But it's the tiny flaws that mark someone as truly special. The nose that's just a bit crooked or the

mole that's placed just so. The small touches that keep you looking at a person, because they're unplanned. Nothing can quite replicate it."

Livinia *was* beautiful. Even as the sickness greyed her skin and hollowed her cheeks, there was no denying it. She'd always been a lovely, cheerful girl, who liked pretty things and playing jokes. It hurt him to see her so still, when he was used to seeing her smiling.

He might never see her smile again.

Kahn blinked back tears, clearing his throat. "I need to find Freya." He choked out.

"It won't do you any good, you know."

He did know it. "Where's Freya?" He snapped anyway.

"Around here someplace. You should find the girl a bed, before you go looking for her." Yuan waded into the nearest row of cots, scanning the occupants. "Ah, here's an empty one."

It wasn't empty. There was a dead Weather Phase on the mattress. Yuan tipped it to the side, so the corpse hit the dance floor. "Put her here." He gestured to the space he'd created.

Bastard.

Kahn hesitated half a second and then laid his sister on the cot. The fallen Weather Phase was gone. Livinia still lived. "Can you watch over her, while I get the doctor? If she wakes up, tell her I'll be right back."

She won't wake up, an insidious voice in his head whispered.

"Of course." Yuan's appearance shifted, and suddenly he looked like Kahn. Blond hair, muscular build, and black eyes. "It will be as if you never left." He sat down on the edge of Livinia's cot and ran a hand over her wavy tresses.

She made another fitful sound of distress.

"Sleep now." Yuan sing-songed in Kahn's voice and then glanced back in real-Kahn's direction. "It really is a shame. Her face was so natural. So pretty and unique."

"She's still alive." Kahn told him harshly.

Yuan got a pitying look; the expression made all the worse because it was delivered by Kahn's own face.

Fucking bastard.

Kahn should have brought Mara with him, so he'd have someone he trusted to watch Livinia when he couldn't. But his cousin was at Syllia and Aggie's bedsides. They were almost as bad off as Livvy. And Tonia, Prinny, and Roma were sick, too. The Light House had been hit hard and fast with the disease. Still, he suddenly didn't want to leave Yuan alone with his sister.

"Kahn!" Freya's voice settled his internal debate.

She came striding over, her normally prim and proper exterior frayed at the edges. Her pale bun of hair was coming undone, and there were circles beneath her eyes. Like Kahn, she probably hadn't slept in the last thirty hours.

"Oh God, don't tell me it's the girls." Her eyes fell on Livinia and her shoulders sagged forward. "Oh God." She repeated sorrowfully.

"Help her." Kahn commanded, needing a miracle.

But Freya didn't have any to give. She slowly shook her head. "If I could, I would heal her. I would heal everyone. But there's nothing I…" She stopped with a surprised yelp, finally seeing the second Kahn sitting next to Livinia.

He gave her an arrogant wave.

"Yuan." Kahn explained distractedly. "Freya, there must be something we can try to make her better. Something I can do to fix this."

"If there was anything that could make these people better, don't you think I'd already be doing it?" Freya had always been talkative, and now the frustrated words rushed out of her. "I have been pouring over books. Using all the medicines I know. I've even descended into quack treatment someone heard from someone's neighbor's cousin. I have tried *everything*, Kahn. Everything there is to try. And none of it works."

"No." He said, refusing to admit that his sister was being stolen away by some fucking invisible microbe. "*No*. There has to be…"

Freya cut him off, her voice firm and kind. “Take Livvy home. That is my advice. I will treat her here, if you want. But it’s loud and uncomfortable, and it will do her no good. If she were my sister, I would let her…” She broke off. “I would let her *rest* in her own bed.”

Die in her own bed.

That’s what Freya had almost said. That he should take Livvy home to die in her own bed. The terror was like a knife twisting in his gut.

Kahn stood in the middle of the chaos and felt… lost. For the first time in his whole life, he had no idea what to do.

“Freya!” Saxon, of the Air House came striding over. He was already one of the largest Phases, but he’d added to his impressive height with a neon-colored mohawk. “Come with me.” He grabbed her arm.

“What?” She resisted his pull. “Stop! Where do you want me to go? I can’t just…”

“To the Air Kingdom!” He interrupted. “My brother is sick. You’re going to heal him.”

“Release her.” Kahn ordered, jerking out of his cocoon of shock. “*Now*.”

Saxon sent him a dangerous look.

Kahn was happy to return it. He’d never liked the Air Phases, and he was aching to hit something. Hard.

“No one can be healed from this.” Freya wrenched out of Saxon’s hold. He didn’t exactly let her go, but he also didn’t fight her. “I was just telling Kahn the same thing. This disease has no cure. The best we can do is make people comfortable.”

“Even if she could, why would she help Hekktor?” Yuan asked casually. His appearance shifted again. Now he looked like that dead Hollywood actor, who was somehow always being spotted alive and well by the tabloids. “The Air Phases are the ones who started this plague. You should be the first to die in it.”

“What?” Kahn demanded, his head whipping towards Yuan.

“Parald, their useless king, released the plague.” Yuan reiterated. “Let the Air Phases suffer alongside all the young beauties they killed.”

He grazed a hand over Livinia’s hair. It came too close to the black streak at her temple for Kahn’s comfort. The colored markers were sensitive. Intimate. Strangers didn’t touch them. But Yuan’s hand quickly shifted away, so Kahn didn’t need to beat him to death. He had more important people to slaughter.

Air Phases.

He suddenly had a target for his anguish. Someone he could blame. Someone he could *hurt*. Red-hot fury filled Kahn, burning away all the fear and confusion. He didn’t know what to do with terror, but wrath made sense.

His dark eyes fixed on Saxon, as his pain became hate. “You did this to my sisters?” He asked quietly.

“I didn’t do shit to your sisters. No one can prove Parald did either.” Saxon retorted, but he still edged backwards a step. He was big and trained for war, but very few people could withstand an attack by a Light Phase intent on murdering them.

“There’s no fighting in my hospital.” Freya warned.

Kahn was beyond hearing her. He started for Saxon, ready to rip him apart with his bare hands.

…And that’s when the electricity failed. Power surged, making the lights flare and then dim several times in quick succession. The chandeliers flickered, highlighting the stricken faces like a strobe light.

Freya cried out in alarm.

Saxon scrambled backwards.

Yuan’s Hollywood-mask spasmed, like the sputtering electricity affected his ability to hold the illusion.

Then the power failed completely and the whole room went black.

Healthy Phases were plunged into darkness, surrounded by the dead and dying. The coughing and moaning of the sick echoed all around them, magnified by their fears and imaginations. The healthy could no longer see

the exits. Symbolically, they'd been trapped since the plague hit, and now they felt physically trapped as well. No light meant no possibility of escape.

The room descended into madness.

Anyone well enough bolted for the closest door, as if they could run from the terrifying shadows. Others squeezed their eyes shut and prayed for some kind of deliverance. Some screamed or cried or gave up entirely. Lost in the pitch-black nightmare, Phases already pushed to their breaking points panicked.

Freya was knocked off her feet by the stampede.

"*Shit*." Kahn reluctantly tore his attention away from Saxon to grab her. No one else seemed capable of it.

The psychological strain of the situation broke like a dam, exploding outward in destruction. People rushed blindly from the room, toppling cots as they went. Dead bodies and sick Phases fell to the floor.

The Electricity House usually sustained the electrical power to the Elemental realm. All the Phases in a House held their Element and could manipulate it. All the Houses depended on all the other Houses for survival. Without the Electricity House, the Weather House couldn't make lightning. Without the Weather House, the Water House couldn't deliver rain. Without the Water House, the Cold House couldn't make snow. And so on in an endless cycle.

This sort of blackout could only mean that the Electricity House was falling on a catastrophic level. If too many Phases from a House died, the Element would fall. If too many Elements fell, the universe itself would topple. The Electricity House was losing control. How many of them had already died? How much longer could they hold on?

His own powers slammed out, Light energy filling the room with an almost blinding illumination.

Kahn's gaze cut over to his sister. Livvy was still safe on the cot. Yuan had fled, but that was no surprise. Reflection Phases were useless. Kahn barely even noticed the man's desertion. He only cared about

Livinia. Satisfied she was okay for the moment, he refocused on slaughtering his enemy.

But Saxon was gone, too.

"Fuck!"

"Kahn." Freya rested a hand on his arm, before he could follow the treacherous dick. Elementals didn't do casual touches, so the novelty of it had him looking her way. "Take Livvy *home*. It's what she would want."

"I can't just give up on her!"

"You're not. You're standing beside her. She's a Light Phase. She'll fight as hard as she can to stay."

His jaw clenched, tears burning the back of his eyes. "But it won't be enough."

Freya squeezed his arm. "No. But it's important that you're with her, just the same."

He swallowed hard, trying to think.

Saxon escaped in the chaos, probably jumping back to the Air Kingdom. It was just a temporary setback, though. Now that Kahn had targets, he could track all the Air Phases and kill them at his leisure. Really make it hurt.

After he took Livvy back to her bed.

After he held her hand and the hands of his other sisters, while they fought.

…After.

Kahn nodded at Freya and headed back to the cot to grab his unconscious sister. His mind shied away from the reality of the present, but the *future* suddenly made sense.

Parald, King of the Air House, had destroyed Kahn's world. When this was over, Kahn would slaughter that son of a bitch and every single person who stood beside him. He'd have blood-soaked, excruciating revenge. He'd make all the monsters pay.

That plan gave him some foothold back into sanity and held the desolation at bay. If he felt terror, so would his enemies. If his sisters suffered, they'd suffer more.

He couldn't stop the illness killing his family, but he could sure as hell stop the Air House.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter One

Come in my dear,
From the harsh world,
That has rained elements of stone,
Upon your tender face.

Hafiz

Two Years Later

Randa, of the Stone House was beautiful and cultured and composed. When she sat on one of the wooden crates that the Light Phases were using as chairs, her ankles were neatly crossed. When she spoke, her accent whispered of the best finishing schools in the realm. When she adjusted the hem of her long human-style skirt against the filthy floor, not a speck of dirt attached itself to the drab fabric.

And when she hired assassins, her voice was cool as a spring breeze.

"I need you to kill someone." She said calmly.

Kahn's jaw tightened. He'd suspected that was why she'd come. There was nothing else a woman like this would want from the Light Phases.

Rysimer, King of the Light House, had clearly *not* been expecting her words.

But a lot about Randa was catching the Light Phases off guard. She'd just shown up at their fortress and politely asked for an audience. It had been --frankly-- bizarre. Very few people ever came to see the Light Phases. "Feral" was the word that got tossed around about them, most often. Sometimes "savages." Sometimes "feral savages."

The Light Kingdom was an endless forest, with ancient trees hundreds of feet high. Ironically, it was so sunny and the jungle grew so thick, that the residents of the kingdom lived in perpetual gloom. The dense

canopy of vegetation blocked the daylight and made infrastructure a challenge.

Buildings were functional for defense, but not pretty to look at. Electricity was sketchy, and the water (when it ran) was usually cold. No stores. No movie theaters. No art museums, or coffee shops, or whatever the hell the other Phases did to pass the time.

Aside from getting into fights with each other, there wasn't much in the way of entertainment for the Light Phases. There were only five of them left.

They'd already told each other every halfway-entertaining war story they knew, and they only knew war stories, so conversation was on repeats. They were all men and they all liked women, so there was no one to fuck. Their enemies were dead or hiding, so battles were few and far between.

In short, the Light Phases were bored. They were always interested in a diversion. Especially when the diversion looked like Randa, of the Stone House.

All five men had assembled to hear her out. How could they not? Not only was she something new in the endless expanse of identical days, but Parald's former mistress was also quite possibly the most gorgeous Elemental alive.

Her chocolate-colored hair was smooth and glossy, with an olive streak at the temple marking her as part of the Stone House. There was a rich, golden hue to her flawless skin. Her eyes were a deep brown and framed with long lashes. She was too slim for typical Elemental tastes, but her willowy frame made her every move look like a goddamn ballet. Or at least how Kahn imagined a ballet looked. He'd sure as hell never been to one.

From the outside, the woman was perfect. …Too bad her insides were such a heartless mess.

Kahn now spent his entire existence angry, but few beings alive pissed him off more than Randa. It didn't make much sense, since he barely knew the woman. Still, every time he laid eyes on her, he started seething. How could someone so beautiful be so empty?

He watched her from the shadows of the Light Castle's throne room. "Throne room" was too fancy a name for it, really. It was a large, plain space in a large plain fortress. The Light Kings hadn't built their home for entertaining. It was built for warriors to discuss war.

Rysimer would most likely be the last of the Light Kings. Like all the remaining Light Phases, he was large and blond. His face often wore a serious expression, because he was worrying about the future. Making his dead parents proud was vitally important to Rye. Finding a strong queen. Protecting the ruthless legacy of the Light Kingdom. Ensuring the universe didn't fall, because the Light House died out. He spent his time agonizing over unsolvable problems. He hadn't yet accepted the fact they were all screwed.

"Who do you want dead?" Rye asked Randa suspiciously.

"Does it matter?"

Kahn snorted in disgust. "Not to someone like you." He muttered, crossing his arms over his chest. "We're a little more picky."

Randa warily glanced his way. She always looked at him like he was a rabid dog on a weakening chain. That pissed him off too.

She cleared her throat and turned back to Rye. "I don't see why we need to have a conversation about my reasons for hiring you. I simply want you to do a job for me. This is what you do professionally, yes? Kill people for other people?"

"We kill *certain* people, for certain *other* people. Not *all* people for *all* people." Daven interjected from his position in the doorway.

Randa flinched at the sound of his voice and whirled around to glare at him like she hadn't seen him before. "Must you stand there?"

"Stand where?"

"Behind me. It's impolite to lurk where someone can't see you during a conversation."

Kahn frowned at her slightly-panicked-but-trying-to-hide-it tone, something tickling the back of his memories. But the brief flash of insight quickly faded into the shadows.

There was a lot of darkness in his mind and it blocked out most everything else. He'd fought the Air Phases for years, and that gave him some purpose, but now there was little point in it. Parald was gone. Kahn hadn't been the one to kill him, much to his regret, but the bastard was still nothing but a lifeless, headless corpse. It felt unsatisfying. Unfinished.

Without revenge to sustain him, Kahn was spiraling. He'd been mostly dead inside since the Fall, but now his very grip on civilization was waning. Kahn spent most of his time roaming the ancient structures of his homeland. There was a constant and growing pull to wander deeper into the forbidden reaches of the forest.

Alone.

It was how many Light Phases chose to meet their end, over the centuries. They cut ties and were absorbed into the jungle. "Gone Wild" the old folks had called it, back when Kahn was a boy. Escaping into the endless trees sounded so peaceful. He knew if he listened to its lures he would die, but still the Wildness called. And he was beginning to answer.

Daven rolled his eyes and made a show of shifting into Randa's line of sight. "Fine. Sorry." He held up his palms in surrender. "Geez, I might as well go hang out with those Agora snobs, if this is how it's going to be. I had no idea women like you were so fussy about manners."

"Women like me?"

An "Oh shit, I just said something wrong" expression flickered over Daven's face. Kahn recognized it well, because he'd worn it plenty of times himself.

Kahn was infamous for saying wrong things. Inadvertently, consistently, and epically. Putting his foot in his mouth had always been one of his defining personality traits, much to the dismay of his family.

Daven blinked at Randa. "Yeah, you know… uh…" He floundered under her imperious stare and looked over at his brother for help.

Mannus bravely took up the cause. "Right. Women who… um…"

"Women who fuck monsters for money and power." Kahn supplied helpfully. "How much did Parald pay you, anyway? How much is it worth to sleep with a sociopathic madman, who wiped out most of our kind?"

Randa stared at him silently.

Kahn stared back.

Rysimer cleared his throat, trying to get the conversation on track. “Look, Randa, the point is, we’re going to need more specifics before we make a deal with you. Who is this guy you want dead?”

The woman’s attention flicked back to him. “Someone I’m not fond of.”

“But why do you want him *dead?*” Julius stressed. They were all asking questions, but he was truly the only Light Phase who gave a damn about the “whys” of violence. The rest of them focused on the “whens,” “wheres,” “whos” and “hows.”

“He’s sending me flowers.” She said mildly. “At least, I assume it’s him.”

“Flowers?” Why was that a problem? His sisters had loved flowers. Didn’t most women?

Julius shook his head. “Don’t you think killing somebody you ‘assume’ is sending you flowers might be a bit extreme?”

“No.” Randa intoned again.

Kahn grunted, not entirely disagreeing with her. Just because someone hadn’t hurt you *yet*, was no reason to let them off the hook. “You believe it’s a threat?” He surmised, considering her reactions.

“I *know* it’s a threat.” Randa assured him flatly. “A bouquet arrives every night.”

“Maybe you’re paranoid. Maybe he just thinks you’re pretty.” Kahn said it in a deliberately snide tone. Although, who could blame the bastard? She *was* pretty. His eyes traced over the smooth waterfall of her dark hair, unable to help himself.

Looking at her, the Wildness quieted. He wasn’t sure whether he liked that or not.

Randa didn’t respond to the barb, and that just pissed him off more. “This person is going to die, gentlemen. If not by your hand, then I’ll hire someone else.” She folded her fingers neatly in her lap. “I would prefer to

do this job myself, actually. It's *always* better to do things yourself. But he's a soldier and I'm not. Outsourcing seems wise."

Kahn scoffed. "I thought you didn't know exactly who he is? Now you say he's a trained soldier?"

"I have a strong suspect in mind."

"A 'strong suspect' is enough to move forward with an execution?" Julius still didn't look satisfied with her reasoning. He was finicky.

"When my life is at stake? *Yes*. I've never been fond of the man anyway, so I'm hardly hand-wringing over his fate." She lifted a shoulder in a dainty shrug. "That's where you come in. My understanding is that your House is the best hunters and killers in the realm."

"In *any* realm." Daven corrected.

Mannus nodded in a rare show of agreement.

The brothers had been born just forty-eight years apart, so they often functioned like twins. They even looked alike. While Julius was almost pretty in his handsomeness and Rye's angular face showed off his brooding, the brothers were boyishly charming, complete with dimpled smiles. Before the Fall, they'd been far and away the most popular of the group, because they loved a good party.

"If you're so skilled at your jobs, it should be an easy task for you to hunt this person down and kill him." Randa concluded, as if she wanted them to fix her plumbing. "I don't ask that you like me. I don't ask that you agree with me. I just ask that you work quickly and with as little mess as possible."

"Right." Rye still looked like he half-suspected this was an elaborate trick. "So, uh, how do you want this guy… finished off, then?"

"Oh, I leave the details entirely up to you." Randa brushed her hair behind her ears. Her hands looked like they'd been made to play the piano and pour tea. Kahn's eyes followed every graceful movement. "I'm sure you have better ideas than I do on the mechanics of it all."

Daven nodded like her words were insightful. "Good thinking. You'd be surprised at how many people try and micromanage us on jobs.

Slows everything up when amateurs get involved."

"*I'm* never slowed up by *anything*." Mannus retorted. The two of them argued constantly, so it was no shock that he instantly took the opposite side of his brother.

"You are to!"

"Am not!"

Julius spoke louder to be heard over the bickering, still trying to save Randa from her murderous impulses. "Are you *sure* you've thought this through, Randa? What if you're wrong about this guy?" He tapped his chest. "If you make a mistake, you'll carry the stain of this choice for the rest of your life."

She didn't look impressed with that warning. "I'll take my chances."

"You could go to the Wood House or your buddy Sullivan Pryce or some other do-gooders for protection." Kahn challenged. "Instead, you're asking us to be your bodyguards. Why?"

"I don't want bodyguards." Randa's emotionless brown eyes met his. "I just want Saxon, of the Air House dead. And I believe that you do, too."

That got all the Light Phases' attention.

Hell yes, they wanted Saxon dead! Parald was gone, but there were still a few Air House stragglers left.

The idea of slaughtering Sax was enough to stir even Kahn's interest. He'd hated that bastard ever since Sax had fled the Cold House rather than fight, when the electricity went out. Saxon was in hiding, though. Everyone knew it.

"Bullshit." He pushed away from the wall and stalked closer to her. "Why would Saxon be sending you flowers? He has bigger problems than dating."

Half the realm was looking for Sax, because he'd attacked the Water House, nearly killed Sullivan Pryce, and, according to rumors, was in league with Vandal, *formerly* of the Light House. Vandal had been

Banished for his countless crimes and was now a fugitive. He was on everybody's shit list, because he was trying to usher in some big war.

"Saxon was my Match's much, much younger brother." Randa explained with the serene expression of a Gianisha statue in a church. "Before Hekktor died, they were close."

Kahn frowned. That was why Saxon had been in the Cold Kingdom, during the Fall. He wanted Freya to cure his brother, who must've been Randa's Phase-Match.

A Match was every Elemental's ultimate goal. Their true mate. The person born just for them. The one they would love and care for the most. The one whose powers would combine with theirs and make a new whole. That happened during Phazing. The couple had sex for the first time and their individual energies connected into a perfect connection of connectedness. Or some shit.

None of it mattered now.

With so many Phases dead, the odds of finding your one-and-only Match were infinitesimally small. Bad luck, since Phases couldn't have children outside of a Phase-Match.

The universe was only a few heartbeats away from annihilation, because the Houses couldn't replace their populations. No baby had been born since the Fall. Only two pregnancies had been reported. The Elementals were in a slow extinction.

In desperation, some of the Phases had turned to humans. It seemed the two species had been interbreeding for a while. Some Matches had been found in the human realm, so that gave most Houses hope. Not the Light Phases, though. They were brutal warriors, lived in a backwater kingdom, and knew nothing about culture. Elemental women avoided them like they carried the Fall. Human women would be the same. All five men knew it.

"So you suddenly need your own brother-in-law murdered?" Julius persisted, still frowning at Randa.

"It's not sudden. As I said, I've never been fond of Saxon."

“No one’s fond of Saxon.” Daven put in, like her words made a lot of sense. For once, Mannus didn’t argue. Saxon was a massive, murdering, mohawked son of a bitch who got his kicks hurting anyone smaller than himself.

Kahn scoffed, still not buying Randa’s story. “Too bad you didn’t find your bloodthirsty side when you were playing bondage games with Parald.”

For whatever reason, that taunt bothered her more than the others. Randa’s whole body went still, except for her hands. Those clenched in her lap, so tightly that her knuckles went white. Brown eyes met his again and Kahn knew he was the villain in her version of this story.

The JTBA.

That’s what his sisters had called it… back when he’d still had sisters. They’d all thought speaking English was fun, because it hadn’t caught on as quickly in the Light House as it did in other Kingdoms. Even the universal Elemental language had been frowned on by the old timers. The Light Phases were one of the few Elemental Houses with their own dialect, which they made sure no outsiders understood.

The girls had had a similar idea. They’d created all kinds of English abbreviations as a secret code between themselves. Kahn had been forced to learn that human language just so he could keep up with all the acronyms being tossed around.

JTBA: Jerkoff to be Avoided.

Mother *fuck*.

“Leave the girl be.” Julius chided in the Light House dialect. He shifted between Kahn and Randa, just like Kahn had done when some JTBA started hassling his little sisters. “This is getting us nowhere.”

Kahn’s jaw clenched. Not at Julius’ sanctimonious preachiness. He was used to that. But it pissed him off that Jules had stepped in front of Randa. Shielding her from Kahn, like she was his to protect.

Was Julius trying to claim her?

“Do you think to claim Randa for yourself?” Kahn demanded in their language, before he could stop the words.

Julius shot him a thoughtful look. “No.” He said, also in the Light Phase tongue. Only about ten people in the universe still spoke the language, and Randa wasn’t one of them. “But the woman is frightened of you. Is this who you are now? A man who scares harmless girls?”

His sisters flashed through Kahn’s mind again. The six of them fearlessly climbing all over him as he tried to work. Rolling their eyes when he lectured them on dangers. Painting his fingernails while he slept. Playing pranks on him and then giggling madly when he got mad. Making his life a beautiful chaotic mess and never even once worrying that he might harm them.

Kahn had never hurt a woman. *Could* never hurt a woman. Not so long as he loved his sisters and he would love them with his dying breath.

“Fuck you, Jules.” Kahn snapped in basic Elemental and stomped back to the shadows.

Randa exhaled in relief when he retreated.

Rye tried to take control of the conversation. “Why do you think Saxon is following you, Randa?” He leaned forward in his throne, which was really just a sideways crate. The Light Phases didn’t care about niceties like furniture. Not even in the throne room. “Is this some kind of weird family thing? Because we don’t get in the middle of emotional fights…”

“I have no family.” Randa interrupted with absolute certainty. “My Match died in the Fall and whoever I once knew in the Stone House has long since disowned me. There are no emotions involved. I give you my word, this arrangement will just be business.”

Kahn snorted, unable to help himself. “Bet you say that to *all* the guys.”

Her eyes narrowed in his direction. “Only the ones I hope to never see again, once their work is done.”

“And if we kill this asshole for you… How are you going to pay us?” Kahn demanded, since it seemed like no one else was going to bother.

They were all too fascinated with this woman to treat her like they would any other client. "What the fuck do *you* have that we could possibly want?"

Besides the obvious. Gaia, she was pretty…

Randa arched a brow at him. "I'm going to help you gentlemen get the only thing that you *really* desire."

"And what's that?"

"I'm going to help you find your Matches."

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Two

Graffiti is the most common type of property vandalism.
Graffiti is often the first element in a spiral of decline.

West Lindsey District Council

Someone had painted the word “Whore!” on her front door again.

At least it was written in the Elemental language, this time, so none of her human neighbors could read it. That was *something*, she supposed. These days, Randa took her bright-sides where she could find them.

“Don’t need to ask which house on this street is yours.” Kahn muttered from behind her.

Randa’s lips thinned. For some reason, Kahn, of the Light House was the person who irritated her the most. Whenever she was around him, she had to remind herself that she possessed good breeding, and impeccable manners, and it would be beneath her to punch him in his arrogantly attractive face.

The Light Phases were barbarians. What did she care what barbarians thought of her? What did she care what *anyone* thought?

As soon as this business with Saxon was taken care of, she’d never have to see another Elemental again. She would be someplace where no one knew her and she could live in peace. The whole human realm was out there, promising anonymity and a fresh start. A real home. All she had to do was pick a spot.

Omaha, Nebraska.

Cairo, Egypt.

She schooled her features into a calm mask and glanced over at her possible employees. The Light Phases wanted to see one of the bouquets for themselves before they agreed to kill the man sending them to her. She was willing to oblige.

“This way, gentlemen.” She headed up the front steps of her small house, ignoring the graffiti. Unlocking the door’s four locks, she gestured for them to go inside. “Please, have a seat in the living room.” She grabbed a fresh can of spray paint from her foyer table, shaking it as casually as possible. “I’ll be right with you.”

They ignored her. Of course they did. Arms crossed over their chests, they stayed on her lawn, studying her vandalized door with varying degrees of curiosity, irritation, and bafflement.

The Light Phases looked ridiculous standing in Mayport Beach. They were too big and fearsome for a small town full of pastel bungalows. Their long golden hair and watchful eyes did not blend into the coastal scenery.

Since she was stuck with them though, she was going to be civil.

Randa was *always* civil.

“Seems like people in this neighborhood don’t like you very much.” Daven told her in a thoughtful tone. At least she thought it was Daven. He looked a lot like his older brother, so it was hard to be sure.

“No one in *any* neighborhood likes her.” Kahn corrected. “She burned all her bridges when she sided with Parald.” He glared over at Randa and gestured to the graffiti. “You have to expect people will come after you when your boyfriend commits genocide.”

“Maybe I’m just advertising.” Randa retorted, abandoning civility. It was difficult to stay composed when she was dealing with Kahn’s black eyes following every move she made.

And why the hell did she even notice his eye color?

Kahn sighed like he was being the soul of reason in the face of impossible odds. “If you’re going to live without the protection of your House, you need to take better precautions.” He persisted in an exaggeratedly patient tone.

“I don’t have a House. I provide for my own protection.”

“Well, you’re doing a piss poor job.”

“I’m alive, aren’t I?” She had to fight for each day, but it was better than the alternative. She wasn’t beaten. Wasn’t broken. She was *alive* and she’d stay that way.

Randa was indestructible.

Julius cleared his throat. Scientifically speaking, he was the handsomest of the men, but somehow she kept forgetting he was even there. Kahn overshadowed everyone else. “Job could find a House that would take you in, Randa. It would be safer. I’m sure…”

“*This* is where I live.” She interrupted, pointing to the cottage. “It’s small, but it’s *mine*. I pay the rent, and I live how I please. No one is going to drive me away from it, until I’m ready to go.” Speaking of which, she was totally ready to go. Once she had everything arranged, she was walking away from all the Phases and never looking back. “Now, would you please go inside?”

Randa didn’t like standing outside like this, where everyone could see her. It made her feel exposed. She instinctively scanned up and down the street, looking for anybody who might want to harm her. Which was pretty much every Elemental alive. Gaia, the sooner she got out, the better.

Paris, France.

Ottawa, Canada.

“You want us to find out who wrote this and kill them, too?” Mannus offered, ignoring her prompting. (It was almost definitely Mannus.) “It wouldn’t be hard.”

“If I wanted you to kill everyone who’s ever called me a whore, you’d have steady employment forever.” She glanced pointedly at Kahn. “Then, you’d have to commit suicide.” Since they weren’t going inside without her, she shut the door again. “It’s fine. I’m immune to insults.”

Kahn seemed to take offense at that remark. Lord only knew why. “Is something still an insult if it’s true?”

“I’m not sure.” She retorted, unable to stop herself. “Do you feel insulted when I call you a brainless asshole?”

Kahn’s eyebrow arched.

The rest of them chuckled.

“I begin to like this girl.” Rye told no one in particular.

Randa gave the spray paint can a more forceful shake than necessary. She shouldn’t be antagonizing Kahn. The Light Phases were a law unto themselves. If Kahn decided to hurt her, the others would let him. Hell, they could murder her and barely anybody would even notice.

When the monsters came, no one would save Randa. That lesson had been taught to her the hardest way possible. She had to take care of herself.

Taking a deep breath, she turned back to the door and got to work. She’d become very good at spray painting, so it didn’t take long. In less than two minutes, there was a thick coat of paint over the graffiti, and the door looked presentable again. She didn’t even get any stray drops on her hands. It truly was a wondrous product. Humans should be proud they’d invented it.

All things considered, Randa much preferred humans to her own kind.

Daven watched as she set the empty can down next to three other empty cans she’d neatly lined up on the porch for disposal. “This happens a lot, huh?”

“Of course it does.” Kahn was back to complaining about her failings. “The woman is a blatant target, sitting out in the open like this.” He gestured to the bungalow. “It’s a miracle that she’s lasted this long.”

Randa ignored them and opened the door again, avoiding the wet paint. “Can I get you something to drink?” She offered and headed towards her kitchen. The house was cozy, with the kitchen and living room divided by an island. “Do any of you like tea?”

Probably not. Light Phases surely preferred murky liquids that no one in the civilized world had drunk since the Vikings were sailing around. Mead, maybe. Or grog.

Still, her grandmother would roll over in her grave if Randa failed at her duties as a hostess, even if her guests were Light Phases. Viola, of the

Stone House always said that good breeding should never waver in the face of boorishness.

It was hard for Randa to live up to the ideals set by her very patrician grandmother, but she always tried. She kept her emotions under control and rose above her own vulgar instincts to throw something at the dickheads surrounding her.

Proper manners were all that separated civilization from savagery.

"We're not thirsty." Julius said for all of them. He was the only one who even tried to be polite.

The Light Phases trailed into her tasteful home, not looking thrilled by their surroundings. No doubt they were confused by concepts like carpeting and tables. Moving in choreographed precision, they began searching every room as if maybe she was plotting some kind of trap. It was incredibly rude, but what else could you expect from barbarians?

Julius looked out all the windows, disrupting the double layer of tightly drawn plastic blinds. Rye opened drawers and cupboards, scanning the contents for Gaia-only-knew-what. Daven surveyed her linen closet like he'd never seen a bed sheet before. Kahn examined the books on her alphabetized shelves.

Randa refused to react to the blatant invasion of privacy. Let them look. There was nothing for them to find. She owned nothing that mattered. Nothing that could be used against her. If need be, she could walk away from everything in her life and not even blink.

That didn't mean she liked messes, though.

Despite her best efforts, her lips thinned in annoyance as Mannus began rooting around her desktop, mixing up the pens. "Do you mind not doing that?"

He looked over at her in genuine confusion. "Doing what?"

"You're putting the felt-tips in the ballpoint canister." Was he raised in a barn? "I have them organized in a very efficient way." Everything in her house was organized in a very efficient way. "Please don't mess it up."

Mannus glanced at Daven and rolled his eyes.

“All these are travel guides to human cities.” Kahn reported, scanning the neat row of book spines. His profile was stunning. It frustrated her that she noticed. “That’s all you seem to own. Why?”

“You can read? What a nice surprise.” Randa was annoyed at herself and him, so it was easy to forget she was wary of pissing him off. …Especially, because it was so satisfying to piss him off.

Kahn flashed her a sideways glare. “Are you planning a trip?” He gestured to the travel guides again, not rising to the bait.

“I live in the human world now.” That wasn’t an answer, but he probably wasn’t bright enough to notice. “It’s important to know everything I can about it, don’t you think?”

“I think it’s stupid to live here, at all.”

“Why? The humans have been kinder to me than the Elementals.”

“Maybe because they don’t know you, yet.”

God, he was annoying. “*No one* knows me.” She bit off. “Certainly not you.” Randa had spent her entire life alone, in all ways that mattered.

“I know that you lived in the Air Palace and I know that the Air Phases murdered my whole fucking family!” Kahn roared. “What else is there to know? Tell me. I sincerely want to hear it.”

Rye rolled his eyes and moved to intervene before Kahn’s volume shattered the windows. Julius grabbed hold of his arm, stopping him. He leaned closer to Rye and whispered something that Randa couldn’t hear. Whatever it was, it seemed to startle Rye. Something like astonishment flashed over his expression, and he stopped trying to interfere in the argument.

Kahn didn’t appear to notice, all his attention on Randa. “Well?”

“I had nothing to do with the Fall.” Randa told him quietly. “I’m sorry about your sisters, though. I didn’t know them, but I’m sure they were lovely and deserved far better.”

“No shit they deserved better.” Kahn snapped, shoving away from the bookcase with restless energy. “Maybe you didn’t start the Fall, but you

sided with the man who did. That's close enough."

Randa smiled without humor and determinedly changed the subject. "Are you sure I can't get you some tea? Or coffee? It's no trouble."

"I don't want any fucking coffee." He paced around, not giving up on his insults and prying. "Your Match also died in the Fall, didn't he? How the hell could you shack up with the man who killed him? What would your Match say, if he were here?"

"If he were here, Hekktor would tell me he'd like some coffee."

Kahn wasn't satisfied with that truthful answer. "Most Phases who lost their Match die, too. They can't go on alone." He shrugged expansively. "But you seem just *fine* with Hekktor being gone. That says a lot about your relationship."

"Does it?"

"Do you even care that your Match is dead?"

"I miss him."

Kahn studied her, trying to read her face. "Maybe people don't know you, because there's nothing to know." He finally speculated. "Maybe you're just a pretty shell with nothing inside."

He wasn't the first person to suggest that. Sometimes Randa wished it was true.

"Maybe." She kept her expression blank, even as her anger threatened to boil over. "Or maybe my insides are just solid… fucking… stone."

That claim seemed to catch his interest. It was probably the cursing. He used more vulgarities than anyone she'd ever known, so it made sense that he responded to them quicker than normal words. "Stone?"

"I don't break. I *endure*. Like granite. Nothing shatters me. I get up and I keep going. I've survived things you would *never* have survived. I'll survive Saxon, too. And I'll survive you. I get beaten, but I'm *never* beat. I'm indestructible."

Kahn blinked.

So did the rest of the Light Phases.

Randa took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down. No one else made her as angry as Kahn. In some bizarre way, she liked the rush of emotions that came from sniping at him. Liked releasing all of the feelings she usually repressed. Liked saying exactly what she felt like saying and watching him react.

But that wasn't smart. Sooner or later, his reaction was going to be violent. Engaging with Kahn was a mistake. Part of surviving was picking your battles. Life had taught Randa that at an early age.

No good could come from talking to these men. They were simply here to do a job for her. They were tools. Nothing more. She needed to keep them occupied and under control until Saxon was dead. Everything else was just asking for trouble.

"Would you care for some dinner?" She tried in a milder tone, hoping to get things back on track. Eating would keep them busy for a while. They were so massive that dinner was probably a time-consuming affair for them. Usually featuring some poor creature cooked on a spit and eaten whole, no doubt.

That actually worked to distract them. The Light Phases all glanced at each other and then back at her. "We have our own supplies." Julius finally said.

And that's when Randa remembered that their House didn't eat food made by outsiders and they didn't share meals with people they didn't trust. That's why they had refused the coffee, too.

She wasn't worthy.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Three

The society of women is the element of good manners.

Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

Randa refused to be hurt by the Light Phases snubbing her hospitality. She no longer gave other people enough power to hurt her. She just had to keep reminding herself of that fact.

"I'll just make food for me, then." She decided mildly.

"When are these flowers you're worried about getting delivered?" Rye asked, filling the awkward silence.

"They'll show up around six."

"You sure?"

"Very sure." Grandmother Viola would have agreed that Randa had done enough to be cordial. "If you want to wait, you can sit in the living room."

Not even they could evade that order. The house wasn't very big. Their only other options were the two bedrooms, the one bathroom, or the kitchen. They reluctantly sat down on her cream-colored furniture and began eating what looked like jerky.

Randa breathed a sigh of relief that they were finally staying still. "I'm hungry, so you'll have to excuse me."

She flicked on TV for them and tuned it to one of her four channels. She disliked spending human money on things she didn't need, so her television wasn't smart, and she didn't get cable. She didn't need those extras to watch her favorite program, anyway.

"I hope you like reruns of *Antiques Roadshow*." How could they not? It was the height of entertainment.

"What's *Antiques Roadshow*?" Kahn demanded, as if he was still expecting a trap. He was cramped into an upholstered chair, making it look

like it was the size of dollhouse furniture.

The man really was… massive. If Randa was the kind of woman who was attracted to huge, muscle-bound barbarians, she might have admired the intricate tattoos encircling his thick forearm, or the way his tawny hair hit his broad shoulders, or the unparalleled width of his chest.

Luckily, she was much smarter than that.

"*Antiques Roadshow* is this." Randa pointed at the TV.

In almost comical unison, the Light Phases' heads tilted, regarding the show with hypnotized wonder.

On screen, a human woman was explaining she'd found an ugly vase in a dumpster. The appraiser assured her that the ugly vase was *really* a stunning example of something-or-other and very valuable. The woman couldn't believe it and said so. Repeatedly. A graphic popped up, telling the audience that the ugly vase was worth between twelve thousand and fifteen thousand human dollars. Then, the entire process started over again with an ugly painting.

Randa wondered if she should start searching local dumpsters for twelve- to fifteen-thousand-dollar vases. She could certainly use them. With her luck, though, all she'd find was rats.

Sighing, she went back to the kitchen. Cooking was the only area of her life where Randa felt she had real skill. Most Air Phases had no respect for culinary endeavors, looking down on anyone who so much as turned on a stove. But Hekktor had liked cooking and taught her how. Now, she practiced her skills with as many human ingredients as she could afford.

On Sundays, Isaacs came over and she made a big meal for them. The rest of the week, there didn't seem much point in preparing large dinners just for herself. It wasted human money. Randa was far too practical for that. She would need all her savings for her new home, wherever it might be. Usually, her dinner was a bowl of microwaved soup.

Usually.

She began piling ingredients on the counter, topping off the stack with one of the T-bones Isaacs liked. It was supposed to be dinner on his

next visit, but he wouldn't mind if they had pot roast instead. So long as it was red meat, Isaacs was happy.

The smell of grilling steak soon filled the small house.

The Light Phases morosely ate their jerky, watching her cook. Randa was not a woman who smirked. It showed poor breeding. Still, it was hard not to take some small measure of delight in the annoyed muttering emanating from the living room.

"What kind of animal does that meat come from?" Daven asked after a while.

"A cow." She added more butter to her steak.

The Light Phases regarded her with a total lack of comprehension, and Randa realized they had no clue what a cow was. "They're large, four-legged, herbivores with spots." She explained. "Very delicious."

More muttering.

"Isn't that the animal the Fire House is always plotting against?" Daven wondered.

"The Fire House plots against everything." Mannus retorted. "Who can keep it all straight?"

"Are cows hard to hunt?" Rye wanted to know. Maybe he intended to go out and spear one for himself.

"You don't hunt cows." Lord, the Light Phases really did need to get out more. They were backwards, badly-groomed men, who rarely interacted with other Phases and avoided humans altogether. They might as well come from another planet.

Finding them Matches was going to be a colossal challenge.

Even the Light Phases realized that their dating prospects were dim. They'd agreed to *maybe* help her with the stalker. If they did, Randa would help them find mates. It was a straightforward plan, but she could tell the Light Phases were already braced for its failure.

None of them seemed excited or were asking her any questions about prospective women. It occurred to her that they didn't want to get their hopes up. They were scared to start believing it was possible to have

Matches of their own. That kind of self-defeating attitude would only manifest bachelorhood.

Randa would need to take command. Every aspect of dating needed to be outlined and presented to them in idiot-proof language. Otherwise they'd screw it up. A good first lesson would be explaining some very basic facts about human culture. Like what food was.

"The humans breed cows for meat and milk. They're domesticated."

Kahn scoffed, as if not hunting your food was pathetic. Those black eyes stayed on her and not the TV. If he was quizzed about it later, Randa had no doubt he would've been able to recount every move she made when preparing her meal.

Randa pretended not to notice.

By the time *Antiques Roadshow* was over, she had fresh green beans, hot cornbread, and a medium steak. Randa neatly folded her napkin, poured herself a glass of iced tea, and arranged her silverware like she was getting ready for a banquet. Cost aside, she really should cook for herself more often. It was relaxing and pleasant to sit down to a freshly made meal. Like with so much else in life, if you didn't take care of yourself, no one else would do it for you.

She set up her meal on the island, ignoring the Light Phases' gloomy looks.

"My mother used to cook a dish like that." Julius remarked, watching as she poured honey on the cornbread. "Out of *lryee* seeds and cream."

Rye nodded and chewed his jerky with a marked lack of enthusiasm. "Mine, too. I had forgotten about that. It was always my favorite as a child."

Randa made an "um" sound of polite disinterest and ate her cornbread.

Kahn crossed his arms over his chest, glowering at her. "You cook like this every day?" He demanded, suspecting that she was trolling them.

“I did when Hekktor was alive.” She cut off a hunk of steak with a flourish that would’ve done any cooking show host proud. “Just sometimes, now.”

“When is ‘sometimes’ exactly?”

“Well, when I have company, I, of course, prepare a nice meal and offer it to them. It’s only polite.” She gave a philosophical shrug. “My grandmother Viola would expect me to be cordial, even to the Light Phases.” She popped the bite of steak into her mouth. “Too bad you weren’t hungry.”

He brooded while he watched her eat. “Your grandmother didn’t like Light Phases?”

Did anyone like Light Phases? Randa doubted it. “My grandmother valued good breeding.” She murmured diplomatically.

Kahn’s eyes narrowed.

Randa still didn’t smirk. …But it was a struggle.

“Cooking in our House is very ritualized.” Julius interjected, eyeing the T-bone like it was a *Playboy* centerfold. “It’s safer that way. No one can poison us.”

“Considering your personalities, I’m sure that’s very wise.”

Kahn pinched the bridge of his nose, muttering something to himself in the Light Phases’ guttural dialect. Randa didn’t need to speak the language to know it probably wasn’t flowery compliments about her personality. Rye sent Kahn another odd look though, so whatever he was grumbling about must have been at least somewhat unexpected.

“Light Phases prefer to sleep in secret places, for the same reason.” Julius continued, disregarding the byplay. “Even Matches often have two rooms.”

“Well, that’s not unusual.” Randa said, before she thought better of it. “Hekktor and I never shared a room.”

Kahn’s head snapped around to look at her again. “You didn’t sleep in your Match’s bed?” His tone was somewhere between an accusation, hopefulness, and surprise. God knew why he cared.

Unless it *was* unusual to have separate rooms…?

Randa had never really considered it before. She'd always been painfully shy, so she'd never had any close friends growing up. Good manners were the scaffolding she used to communicate, and ladies didn't quiz other Phases on their sleeping arrangements. How would she know what was typical?

Her parents had had two rooms. Of course, they'd detested each other, so perhaps they weren't the greatest models of proper Match behavior, either.

Randa cleared her throat and tried to backtrack. "Hekktor was an older gentleman. He needed plenty of rest. I imagine our sleeping arrangements were similar to what Light Phases do."

"Hekktor was an Air Phase, though. Sleeping separately isn't part of their culture."

"Oh, Hekktor was very well-traveled. He had many customs picked up from lots of various places."

Kahn scowled at that calm response. Before he could ask something that she had no intention of answering, the doorbell rang.

Randa hesitated for a beat and then forced herself to lay down her fork. Dabbing her mouth with a napkin, she looked over at the clock on the wall with studied casualness. Five after six.

Madrid, Spain.

Bangkok, Thailand.

Randa took a steadying breath. "That would be the flowers." She stood up and headed for the door, hoping they couldn't hear her heart hammering.

The Light Phases got to their feet, clustering around the small entryway. They had their hands on their swords as she unbolted the various deadlocks and chains securing it.

"Do not harm this human delivery-boy." She warned, her eyes on Kahn. "His name is Steve, and he's only nineteen years old." To an Elemental, that was infancy.

“You know him?”

“Of course I know him. There’s only one florist in Mayport Beach. You think I didn’t go there and ask them who’s sending me bouquets? They don’t know anything, so just leave him alone.” Out of habit, she opened the door far enough to accept the flowers and not one inch more. “Good evening, Steve.”

“Hi, Miss Randa.” He was a pudgy, tawny-haired youth with happy green eyes. “I got another one for ya.” He handed her a huge arrangement of white lilies, a big smile on his face. “This secret admirer of yours sure don’t quit!”

“Yes, he’s very determined, isn’t he?” Randa balanced the flowers against her body to fish a tip out of her pocket. It wasn’t Steve’s fault she hated even touching the damn things. Randa had a fondness for humans. They were harmless and vulnerable. She always tried to treat them with care. “Do you have any clue who’s sending these, yet?”

“Nope. They’re all ordered online and super mysterious!” He looked delighted by the possibility of romantic intrigue. “Mostly I deliver flowers for funerals and weddings, ya know. This is *way* more exciting than that. The whole shop is talking about it. I guess ‘cause you’re so pretty, this guy is nervous to…”

He stopped short.

Behind Randa, Kahn had moved into the narrow slit of the doorway. She could feel the heat of his body. Somehow, she knew it was him, rather than any of the others. Usually, when someone stood behind her, it triggered panic. With Kahn, she didn’t feel that. She felt… safe.

Randa mentally cringed at her own stupidity. This whole situation was clearly affecting her mind.

“No more flowers come to this house.” Kahn told Steve. Since the Light Phases mostly spoke in Elemental language, his accent in English was much thicker than Randa’s. It somehow made Kahn seem even more attractive.

And more menacing.

Steve gulped and took an automatic step back.

Randa flashed Kahn an angry look. “I told you not to scare the boy.” She snapped in Elemental.

“You told me not to hurt him.” He retorted in the same language. “I didn’t, did I?”

Randa drew in another deep breath and refocused on Steve. Her smile was strained, but reassuring. “Is the singles mixer still happening on Saturday?” She asked in English, striving to hide her temper. The human boy was related to half the town. He knew all the local events.

“Huh?” He got out, his attention still locked on Kahn’s massive size.

“At the Wastin’ Away Bar and Grille.” Randa prompted. “Do they still host singles mixers on Saturday nights?” Isaacs had forced her to go once. He liked bars. Well, at least the “bar fights” part of them.

“Umm… yeah. At eight o’clock.” Steve nodded.

“Excellent.” There were sure to be some eligible women there for the Light Phases to look over as potential Matches. Her plan was moving forward.

“Are you going?” Steve’s eyes lit up. “Wowza, a lot of local guys will be excited to see you there.”

“I’ll just be chaperoning…”

Kahn reached around her to slam the door shut, before Randa finished talking. She made an aggravated sound and glared up at him, again. “Would it kill you to be pleasant?”

“No, but it might kill *you*. Don’t take the chain off when you open the door. In fact, don’t open the door, at all. It’s not safe.”

“That’s ridiculous. I’m not going to leave people standing on my porch…”

“If it has to be answered, one of us will get it.” He interrupted, gesturing towards the other men. “You have us here to be your bodyguards, right?”

“No, that’s *not* right. I don’t need bodyguards. I can protect myself. I simply hired you to kill Saxon.”

Kahn ignored that indisputable fact. “Just let me see the damn flowers.” He grabbed the crystal vase away from her and Randa was grateful to let it go. The bouquet made her feel dirty. Kahn carried the elaborate arrangement over to the counter and set it there for all the Light Phases to see.

Five black gazes scowled at the white lilies.

Kahn ripped the enclosed message free of its plastic stand and shredded the little envelope to get at the card inside. “‘I can’t take my eyes off of you, my flower.’” He read in a furious voice. “*Fuck*.”

Rye glanced over at Julius. “The woman’s right. This is a threat.”

Julius nodded grimly.

Mannus and Daven grunted, in apparent agreement for once.

Kahn crumpled the note up in his hand and turned back to Randa. His expression was hard and ice cold. “We’ll kill him for you.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Four

No small portion of the elements of national character can be, and are, formed in the kitchen.

James Fenimore Cooper

The Light Phases were now her houseguests.

Randa wasn't even sure how it happened.

They'd just refused to leave her tiny bungalow after the flowers arrived. They'd slept in her living room and spare bedroom, muttering to each other in their guttural language. No doubt they'd been complaining about her, since she'd declined to go hide in the Light Kingdom like they wanted her to. Repeatedly.

Two of them had stayed awake all night, in shifts, watching out for the others and ensuring that their "exposed sleeping positions" weren't attacked by Randa. They hadn't said that reasoning out loud, but she understood it. Maybe their uncomfortable accommodations would inspire them to work faster.

Randa was mentally creating an optimal schedule of events that got all five of them out of her life in a matter of days.

This morning, Daven and Mannus were off looking for Saxon. Rye was investigating the flowers. Julius was in the Elemental realm, doing something or other. Randa would take them all shopping for some acceptable clothes that afternoon. They'd need to clean up their appearances to attract respectable women. And it wouldn't kill any of them to get a haircut.

Tomorrow, she would parade them in front of eager humans at the singles mixer. Hopefully, they would all find a willing Match and that would get them off her sofa and floors. If they were as good at hunting as they claimed, they'd resolve the stalker mess by early next week. Then it would all be over. Randa would never have to see any of them again. The timeline was straightforward and doable.

In the meantime, she would endure.

Which was easier said than done, considering Kahn was sticking close to her. Randa wasn't sure why. She'd told him she could take care of herself. As usual, he'd ignored her and done what he'd wanted, though. She would have been more comfortable with any of the other men trailing her, but no one had given her an option. Kahn said he was staying with her and all the others nodded, like that was a foregone conclusion.

But, Randa could endure that, too. When you were indestructible, you could endure anything. Soon Kahn would be gone and Randa could vanish into the vast human world, without anyone noticing she'd even left.

Berlin, Germany.

Seoul, South Korea.

Kahn pulled a box of cereal off the shelf, knocking three other boxes to the floor in the process. Every human in the grocery store aisle was staring at him. Kahn didn't seem to care. He ripped open the front of the box, obliterating the happy cartoon leprechaun, and frowned in confusion at the waxy bag he encountered inside.

"How the hell am I supposed to eat this? It's sealed in plastic."

Randa closed her eyes, mentally counting to ten. "You're *not* supposed to eat it. Not until you buy it, anyway. I told you that, when you wrecked the peanut butter section."

"Why would I buy something if I can't taste it first?" He pulled a huge knife from his belt. "I found out that I like peanut butter, didn't I? I have no idea if I like this, yet."

"That's not the way it works…" She trailed off with a sigh as he stabbed the blade through the plastic bag and sliced it open. Marshmallow pieces flew everywhere.

Bringing a Light Phase into a human store was like setting a T-rex loose at a petting zoo. It was a miracle they hadn't been kicked out of the supermarket already. Randa imagined the stock boy hovering at the end of the aisle was supposed to be stopping Kahn's mayhem, but he was too scared to try.

With good reason.

Kahn was the size of a continent. His dark green tank top and camouflaged pants accentuated his powerful body, giving him the look of an action star from a war movie.

Not that *she* noticed his appearance, because Randa wasn't drawn to lustful savagery, no matter what her grandmother had believed. She'd never felt lust in her life. But *others* surely took note of Kahn's perfect physique, and long golden hair, and the interesting tattoos encircling his wide forearm.

Less civilized people might find him appealing.

"This will do." Kahn decided, crunching on a mouthful of dry cereal. "See? I tried it, liked it, and *now* I'll buy it." He pushed six boxes off the shelf and into the already overflowing cart. "Makes total sense."

"What do you plan to buy all these groceries *with?*" Randa asked, gesturing to the mountain of unhealthy, too sweet, quasi-food he'd picked out. "They only take human money here. Do you have any? Because I can't afford six hundred dollars' worth of special snacks for you."

Technically, she hadn't even invited Kahn on this trip. But she always did her grocery shopping on Friday mornings, because it was her day off. Randa didn't let anything derail her schedule, if she could possibly help it.

She'd told Kahn that she was going out and he'd insisted on coming, too. He claimed that the Light Phases needed supplies for their "stay in the human realm." That sounded like an ominously vague timeline to her, and their stubborn refusal to eat her food was *almost* hurtful, and Kahn made her very uncomfortable for a variety of reasons. But she'd endure.

Randa had agreed to let Kahn tag along, because it was easier than arguing. If the Light Phases wanted to eat prepackaged, pre-cooked, untouched-by-Randa food, they were going to be the ones paying for it, though. She was on a budget.

"The Wood House gives everybody human money." Kahn scoffed and it was a fair point. The Wood House could perfectly replicate anything paper, so manufacturing cash was simple for them. Anyone who asked could have as much as they liked. "We have buckets of it, at home. Why is that even an issue?"

“Because I don’t take money from the Wood House.” Randa didn’t take anything from any House. She pushed the cart down the aisle, towards the Pop-Tarts. Gaia knew, Kahn was going to want Pop-Tarts. The wheel of the cart squeaked as she walked along. “I earn my own paycheck and it’s *real*. I have a job at the local police station.”

Kahn glanced at her, looking annoyed. As usual. “Mingling with humans isn’t safe. It’s why we’ve avoided it for thousands of years.”

“Yet, you’re here looking for a human Match.”

“Hopefully, she’ll only be part human. A small part.”

“Personally, I trust humans more than the Elementals.”

“I don’t trust anyone.”

That was actually a wise comment. She decided to ignore it. “Just keep your stuff separate from mine, so we can each pay for our own food.”

It shouldn’t be hard. All she was buying was a pot roast, milk, store-brand yogurt, and four cans of tomato soup. (They were on a two-for-one sale.) She arranged them in the child’s seat portion of the shopping cart, giving the rest of the space to Kahn. She had a few more things on her list, but there was going to be plenty of room in her section.

He spared her carefully selected items an irritated glare. “You need to eat more.”

“I’m fine.” She stopped by the Pop-Tarts and surveyed the labels. “Do you like strawberry or cherry?”

“I don’t know what those are.”

She tossed both in the cart. Then, she added a blueberry and a cinnamon apple. At this point, what did it matter? If he wanted to waste money and overdose on sugar, who was she to stop him?

Kahn still wasn’t done critiquing her small array of purchases. “You’re too thin.” He picked up the roast, squinting down at the label like he was trying to understand what it was. “This looks substantial. You should buy five more and eat them. That might help.”

Randa’s gaze narrowed. She’d always been slim, while the Elementals tended to prefer curvier women. Her grandmother had been

quick to tell her that, whenever Randa lost a pound or two. She didn't care if Kahn found her attractive. Obviously. She was completely fine with him thinking she was skinny and unappealing.

She snatched the roast from him and slammed it back into her section of the cart. "I'm buying *one*." She bit off. "Which I am going to cook on Sunday and serve to Isaacs, with mashed potatoes and organic carrots. *That* stuff," she pointed at the pile of ketchup bottles, Flaming Hot Cheetos, and gummy bears he'd picked out for the Light Phases, "is what you need to be concerned about. Just be glad Phases don't get heart attacks."

Kahn's eyes snapped to her face, and his head tilted, like maybe he'd misheard her. "Isaacs? Of the Air House?"

"Yes, of course. What other 'Isaacs' is there…?"

Kahn cut her off, his voice rising with each incredulous word. "You're cooking for Isaacs, of the Air House? Are you out of your *fucking mind!?*"

Humans edged out of the breakfast aisle, dragging their children with them.

Randa's mouth thinned. "The yelling and cursing is beginning to get out of hand, Kahn." She grabbed some maple syrup from the shelf, because he would need it to go with the eight boxes of frozen waffles he'd already selected. "The key to blending into the human world is to actually *blend in*." She tried to push the cart around him, but he shifted into her path.

"Look." He took a deep breath, and she had the strange feeling he was trying to reign in his temper. "Inviting Isaacs into your home is a bad idea. He's a bad person. He's done bad things." His tone suggested she had the IQ of a very dumb rabbit.

"We've all done bad things."

"Yeah, but his are *worse*. Of everyone in the world, why would you want to hang out with Isaacs?" He paused. "How well did you two know each other in the Air House?"

Randa didn't appreciate the insinuation. "Are you asking if I slept with Isaacs? Because that's none of your business."

"You hired me to protect you! It's my business if you're hanging out with deranged killers."

"I did *not* hire you to protect me." All she wanted was Sax dealt with, not bodyguards. Why was that so hard to understand? "And Isaacs is not a deranged killer. He's my friend. I've seen him at his lowest points. He's seen me at my lowest points. We don't judge each other for it." She made the sentences short and final. "We both understand what it takes to survive."

Kahn switched to a different tactic. "Everybody hates you, right? Maybe it's not a great idea to hang out with one of the few people they actually hate *more*."

"They can hate me all they want. But no one tells me who I can be friends with. Especially not you."

"I'm not telling you who you can be friends with. I'm just telling you Isaacs is a horrible friend to pick."

Randa stared at him for a long moment. "Isaacs is coming to dinner on Sunday." She said, and the words were unequivocal.

"Fuck!" He threw up his hands. "I think you'd date that son of a bitch just to spite the world. I've never met anyone more obstinate…"

It was Randa's turn to interrupt. "I'm not dating Isaacs!" She shouted, pushed past the brink of good manners. "I've never slept with him. I simply enjoy cooking a nice meal for someone who doesn't despise me, alright?"

Kahn stopped ranting and stared down at her.

Randa scowled back. "Isaacs is *nice* to me. And I can be myself with him. And I know that he's not going to hurt me. So, I *will* have dinner with him. If you do anything to interfere, I will fire you and find someone else to kill Saxon."

Kahn's head tilted, like he was trying to see into her thoughts.

Selina, Kansas.

Perth, Australia.

Randa looked away, dragging in a deep breath. “If you want to obsess about someone’s dating life, I suggest you start with yourself.” She went on stiffly. “This afternoon, we’ll give you all makeovers. The Light House needs to look respectable by eight o’clock tomorrow night. It’s a daunting challenge that requires hours of work.”

Kahn frowned. “What happens at eight o’clock tomorrow night?”

“The singles mixer.” She edged the cart around him and this time he let her pass. “I’m sure I mentioned it.”

“I’m sure you didn’t.” He scowled down at the cart, like he was now trying to diagnose the source of the incessant squeaking.

“I spoke about the singles mixer to Steve, right in front of you.”

“Who’s Steve?”

“The flower delivery-boy. Remember? Anyway, it’s the perfect place to meet women. I promised to find the Light Phases Matches, and I will drag all five of you to every dating event in town until that happens.”

Kahn blinked like he’d forgotten all about their deal. Which made no sense, since it was the only reason he was here, wasn’t it? He put a hand on the cart to stop her moving forward and bent down to fiddle with one of the back wheels. “You want to go out tomorrow?” He translated warily, his eyes on his work.

“Yes. There will be a gathering of available women at the Wastin’ Away Bar and Grille. We’re going to look them over and see if any of them catch your interest.”

“They won’t.” He spun the wheel, nodded to himself, and stood back up.

“You have no idea if they will suit you or not until you try.”

He snorted, not even bothering to respond to that logic. “You can move the cart now. I fixed it.”

Randa pushed it forward and frowned when it rolled silently along.

Damn it.

“I’m good with mechanical shit.” Kahn told her with a shrug.

“Wonderful. Some women like that in a mate.” Randa preferred doing everything herself, but there was always a market for muscular men who could fix things. “Mayport Beach has been at least partially accessible to our realm for ages. All kinds of people around here might have Elemental DNA and be able to Phaze with you. We still don’t know exactly how it all works with humans. You need to keep an open mind.”

Kahn seemed dubious, as he fell into step beside her. “It would be safer if you avoided gatherings. Let the others go hunt for women, and I’ll stay home with you.”

“And leave them alone with a bar full of humans?” Randa rolled her eyes at that idea. “No. The Light Phases will get nowhere without me to bridge the culture gap. It would be a bloodbath.”

He grunted.

Randa hesitated, because she highly doubted he’d made the offer to forego looking for his Match out of concern for her safety. He’d be the first one to laugh if she was vaporized by a meteor. Maybe Kahn was uncomfortable with the idea of mingling with strangers. Gaia knew, the Light Phases weren’t the most socially adept group.

Against her better judgment, Randa found herself identifying with his wariness. She was terribly introverted. Her grandmother had always been exasperated with her shyness, but Randa couldn’t help it. The fewer strangers she talked to a day, the better the day was going.

“I know it can be awkward to meet people.” She said with much less hostility than she usually felt towards him. “It’s alright if you’re nervous. I would be too, in your place.”

Kahn gave her a sideways look. “I find it hard to believe that you *ever* get nervous.”

“That’s because I’ve learned to mask it. At least I try. But if I were in your place, I would be horrified to go to this singles mixer. Isaacs made me attend one once and it was a nightmare.”

“You went to a bar… where people attempt to meet Matches… with *Isaacs?*”

Randa frowned at his strange tone, feeling the need to defend her friend. “Isaacs likes bars. He’s very social, he just hates everyone. Or they hate him.”

It was hard to tell who started the animosity, in a chicken-and-egg kind of way. Isaacs’ very aura seemed to set off conflict. He didn’t even have to *say* anything to start a fight. It just sort of happened.

“Anyway, I quickly saw that these singles mixers are torturous.” Randa went on. “You need to communicate with someone… have them get close to you… come up with answers to their questions, when you don’t *have* answers to their questions…” She trailed off with a shudder.

Kahn seemed interested in her words, which was a change of pace. She must be on the right track with sensing his anxiety. “What kind of questions do you think they might ask?”

“About your past, of course.”

“About prior relationships?”

“Exactly. So, I really do understand your hesitancy, Kahn.”

“Because you wouldn’t want to answer any questions about *your* prior relationships.” He summed up.

Randa blinked, realizing that he’d just tricked her.

“It’s not like the truth isn’t already out there for everyone to see.” Kahn persisted, back to trying to read her mind with the intensity of his stare. “What are you hiding?”

Randa was quiet for a long moment.

Kahn waited.

“We should get bacon.” She finally decided. “I have a feeling you boys will love bacon.” She headed into the long aisle that ran across the back of the store, by the dairy products. “And that cheese that comes in a can.”

His expression darkened, stomping after her. “Why are you so goddamn hard to have a conversation with?”

“You don’t want to have a conversation. You want to have an interrogation.” She corrected. “And I have asked you to stop cursing around me, so I’d appreciate it…”

A flying egg pelted Randa, cutting her off mid-word.

Randa stopped short and looked at the gooey yolk dripping down the front of her baggy tan dress.

Not again.

“What the fuck…?” Kahn yanked her backward protectively, surveying the damage to her clothes. His face somehow grew even angrier. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.” She dug in her purse for a tissue. “It happens all the time.”

Kahn blinked. “People throw eggs at you, all the time?”

“Of course.”

His jaw tightened. “Wait here.” He went stalking down one of the aisles. Two seconds later, he came back with Raj, of the Color House caught in his grasp. The boy was struggling mightily to free himself from Kahn’s grip.

“What are you doing? Let me go!” He was half-Kahn’s size, so his flailing wasn’t doing much good.

Kahn dumped him in front of Randa. “This one threw it.” He announced.

“Are you on her side now?” Raj screamed up at him.

“Of course he’s not.” Randa interjected, before Kahn could answer. There was no sense in putting him in the line of fire. “Kahn mostly agrees with you, as a matter of fact. Don’t take your anger out on the Light Phases. They hate me, as much as you do.”

Kahn shot her a glare, for no reason except he liked glaring.

Randa disregarded his surly attitude. “But you’re causing a scene in the human realm, Raj. And for what? To make me feel bad?”

“Because of you and Parald!” Raj cried, his face twisted in agony. “The Fall took *everything* from me.”

Randa sighed. “I can only imagine your pain. But I had nothing to do with the Fall…”

He cut her off. “Parald did! And you were his whore. You’re as bad as he is.” Tears filled his eyes. “Your own Match died in the Fall, and you belonged to his murderer.”

There were a lot of things Randa could say to that, but none of it was anyone else’s business. When she’d initially left the Air House, she’d talked to Job and the Water Phases. In the months that followed though, she’d found herself less and less inclined to share any part of her life. Her introverted tendencies and the other Phases' constant hostility made it easy for Randa to just stop explaining. They wouldn’t believe her. They wouldn’t care. She would just stay quiet and endure. Because she was leaving all of them behind, very, very soon.

Manchester, England.

Tokyo, Japan.

“Let him go.” She told Kahn, ready to be done with this spectacle.

Kahn ignored her. “Did you spray paint her door?” He snapped, his attention back on Raj.

“So what if I did?”

“So I will skin you from the feet up, if you come near her again.” Kahn made it sound like a blood vow. “Stay away from Randa. I lost as much as you did, but I don’t disgrace my family’s memories by attacking women. What the hell is wrong with you?”

Raj cringed a bit, but stayed defiant. “She hasn’t even apologized! You know that, right? Not *once* has she said she was sorry.”

“You used to help Lansing and Chason and their loyal Reprisal jerkoffs do all sorts of underhanded shit.” Kahn retorted. “Have *you* ever apologized?”

“That’s different!”

“No, it’s you being a fucking little hypocrite.” He stabbed a finger at Raj. “Get out of my sight or humans will be mopping your entrails off the goddamn floor.”

Raj didn’t have to be told twice. He went dashing towards the exit. They were probably lucky he didn’t jump back to the Elemental realm in full view of the morning shoppers.

Kahn ran a hand through his hair, looking pissed at the world. “Maybe *he’s* your stalker. I could kill him, just to be sure.”

“Leave him be. He’s young. It helps him to have someone to blame.”

He sent her a quick frown. “And you’re okay with him blaming *you?*”

She focused on cleaning off her dress. “I’m used to it.”

Kahn was quiet for a beat. “I don’t agree with him, you know.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You told Raj that I agreed with him, about hating you.” It sounded like an accusation. “I don’t.”

“Of course you do.” Randa tilted her head, confused by his angry denial. “You don’t throw eggs, but you agree with the sentiment behind it. You blame me for what Parald did.”

“I blame you for sleeping with Parald, knowing what he was and what he’d done.” He muttered. “I don’t blame you for the Fall itself.”

“Last night, you said basically the same things that Raj was saying today. The same things *everyone* says.”

Kahn’s jaw clenched. “Except Isaacs.” He reminded her snidely.

Randa gave her dress one last swipe with the tissue, ready to change the subject. “What people think doesn’t matter. None of it matters. Very soon I’ll be…” She stopped, surprised that she’d nearly told him her plans to leave Mayport Beach. Why had she done that?

“Soon you’ll be *what?*” Kahn pressed when she trailed off.

“Nothing.” Randa gave her head a shake. “Forget it.”

His eyes narrowed.

Randa pointedly ignored his suspicious frown. “Shall we check out? I’m going to need to go home and change, before I take you shopping for human clothes.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Five

**Wild men in wild places, fighting cold, heat, starvation, thirst, barrenness,
facing the elements in all their ferocity, usually retrograded,
descended to the savage,
lost all heart and soul and became mere brutes.**

Zane Grey

Kahn had spent the vast majority of his life surrounded by women.

So why the hell was Randa so hard to figure out?

He couldn't read her. Those cool, dark eyes would stare at him and he had no idea what was going on in her head. It was her fault for being so pretty. It distracted him. He couldn't focus on learning what Randa was thinking about because he was too busy wondering if she was thinking about *him*. Pathetic.

"You're staring at her, again." Julius told him quietly.

"I'm supposed to be watching her, aren't I? It's what we were hired for."

"Well, if *I* was watching her, the way *you're* watching her… something tells me that you wouldn't be happy about it."

"Shut up, Jules."

The two of them were speaking in the Light Phase dialect, waiting for the others to be done with their clothes fittings. Elementals were bigger than humans, and Light Phases were bigger than most Elementals. That complicated things when it came to dressing. Finding them suitable human costumes to lure potential Matches was taking hours.

Randa had brought them to a shop that specialized in clothing for "robust men," which offered a wide array of garishly-printed fabrics. None of the Light Phases wanted to wear clothing so bright. They were hunters. They liked to blend into their surroundings. Randa kept making them try things on until they gave in, though. The woman was relentless.

Kahn shifted uncomfortably in his new shirt. He harbored a deep suspicion that Randa had assigned him the worst outfit in the store. It had idiotic little alligators on it. None of the other Light Phases had to wear idiotic little alligators.

If he was forced to wear strange animals on his clothing, he'd prefer a cow shirt to one with alligators. Light Phases knew the monstrous carnivores from every dimension, so the weak delicious animals seemed far more exotic. Whatever cows looked like, it *had* to be preferable to stupid, smiling reptiles. Unless…

He looked Julius' way. "Are cows reptiles?"

"That question bodes well for dinner."

Kahn sent him a graphic finger gesture.

Julius grinned. "So, how *did* the trip to the food market go?" He asked, like he already knew the answer.

Kahn crossed his arms over his chest, wondering if the damn shirt would rip. It felt suffocating. He asked to go up a size, but Randa looked at him like he was crazy. "The woman refuses to use the Wood House's human money. That is why her home is so small and probably why she is so thin. She buys supplies only with her own funds."

"Why?" Julius was baffled. "The human money is just paper. The Wood House gives it away freely to anyone who asks."

"Maybe it's the *asking* that stops her. Randa is stubborn. She will plunge into an abyss, rather than reach for a hand to pull her free of it. I believe that's why she came to us for help and not to Job. She likes that she's trading us something. She doesn't want to owe anyone."

Julius considered that. Unlike Kahn, he looked good in his new human clothes. The dark slacks and floral shirt suited him. Why did he get the best outfit? "I did some digging around the Council today. Job wasn't there, but Tessie was. She's instructed me to quote, 'be careful' with Randa."

Kahn made a face. "So don't stab her?" He translated sarcastically. The Light Phases didn't have the best reputation, but they weren't crazed maniacs.

…Well, except that Banished psycho Vandal, but none of the others counted him as a member of the Light House. In fact, they planned to behead him, at the earliest opportunity. He was number five on their Must Kill list. That was a high position. It was a long list.

"What the fuck does Tessie think we'll do? Cannibalize Randa?"

"I think she thinks it's possible." Julius shrugged. "I also got pushback from the Fire House about Randa being around us. Sullivan Pryce likes Randa and the Fire House dotes on Sullivan Pryce. They want to know why we're so interested in her."

"None of their business."

"They're Fire Phases. Given a chance, they'll *make* it their business."

Possessiveness flared from out of nowhere and Kahn didn't bother to shake it off. "Randa came to *us*, not them. They can back the fuck up."

Julius didn't argue. "The Water House wasn't happy about it, either. Nia told me to leave Randa alone, as if I was a threat to her." He was clearly insulted. "When have I ever been a threat to a woman?"

"Did the Stone House warn you away?"

"No. They disowned Randa long ago. Seems her Match was not to their liking."

"Assholes."

"Exactly."

"She had no choice about her Match." Kahn snapped, like Julius was arguing the matter. "What did they want her to do? Renounce him?"

"In a word… yes. She's very desirable. From what I gather, she was set to be a queen. It's all rumor, because Jerrod the former Stone King died in the Fall. I suppose he wanted to bind with her and she refused."

Kahn grunted, Binding was the Elemental equivalent of a marriage. Not as momentous as a Phase-Match, but the next best thing and you could choose the person you Bound with. Of course Jerrod would want to choose Randa. She was the most beautiful woman in the realm.

“Binding with the king would have raised her family’s status beyond their wildest dreams.” Julius went on. “Randa refused and went with her Match to the Air Kingdom instead. Her family never spoke to her again. Most of them died in the Fall.”

Kahn considered that and realized he would have done the same damn thing, if he’d been in Randa’s place. He would give up everything for his Match, without a second thought. He still didn’t believe he’d ever have one, obviously. But if he *did* she would be the center of his world.

His eyes went to Randa.

“Hekktor and Randa’s relationship was a subject of much gossip.” Julius continued.

“The dearly departed ‘older gentleman.’” Kahn mocked, even as his eyes followed Randa’s graceful movements around the store.

She was holding up shirts in front of Daven, her expression reflecting deep, artistic thought. Daven stood still for the torture, because he didn’t have a choice.

“She wasn’t lying about the ‘older part.’ Hekktor was about six millennia old, when they Phazed. She was only ninety-three.”

Kahn winced. Even for Elementals, that was quite an age gap. “No wonder she didn’t want to share his bed.”

“According to people they worked with, back before the Fall, Randa and Hekktor were an ideal partnership. She couldn’t have been more considerate of his frail health and he adored her. They met while working in the same office, in the Agora. He was a file clerk. She was his secretary.”

“Probably a lecherous old bastard.”

“If he was lecherous, he was *allowed* to be. Randa was his Match. They could play all the dirty office games they wanted.”

Kahn didn’t like hearing that. At all. Just thinking about it made his energy feel heavy and dark. “A woman who looks like *her* was Matched to some ancient middle-manager? Does that seem normal to you?”

“No, but I don’t question Gaia’s will.” Julius shrugged. “I’m going to snoop around the Air House tomorrow and see if I can discover anything more concrete. Something to help us find Saxon.” He paused. “Hopefully, Randa doesn’t have more outings like this planned for us, before the singles mixer, and I can sneak away.” He plucked at his not-*that*-bad human clothing in distaste.

Kahn was still fixated on Randa’s dead Match. “If Hekktor was Saxon’s brother, I’ll bet you he was a dickhead, too.”

“Maybe, but he’s gone. We need to focus on the living.” Julius nodded towards the clothing racks, where Randa was now fussing with Mannus’ collar. “I’m not sure why, but your energy changes around her, Kahn. We all feel it. That must mean something.”

“It means she pisses me off.”

“I don’t think that’s…”

“She says Isaacs, of the Air House is her dearest friend.” Kahn interrupted. “Did I tell you that? She threatened to fire us all and take her chances with the stalker, rather than cancel her plans with that son of a bitch. She wants to *cook him dinner*.”

Julius cringed.

Kahn grunted in agreement.

“In the Stone House, cooking doesn’t carry the same weight that it does for us.” Julius tried. “Do not take it so personally.”

“She believes that all the Light Phases hate her. I watched her deflect Raj, of the Color House’s anger away from me and onto herself, because he thought I was taking her side in an argument. She assured him that we detest her.”

“Did you tell her that isn’t true?”

“I told her I do not blame her for the Fall. Only for sleeping with Parald.” Kahn lifted a disgruntled shoulder. “After that, we didn’t talk very much.”

He’d attempted some conversation after they returned to her house and put away the food, annoyed with her silence. Randa had answered

graciously, with as few words as possible. No one could have accused her of being even slightly discourteous, but that just made him angrier. The woman wouldn't even argue with him!

As soon as she could, Randa had fled into her room, looking relieved to be free of his savage presence. Like she was scared he'd freak out and assault her. But *Isaacs, of the Air House* got invited to goddamn Sunday dinner. She'd bought special food for the man. She planned to cook it for him, and serve it to him, and share it with him.

It was infuriating.

The Light energy surged in agitation, causing the store's overhead lamps to flicker.

Julius sighed. "How do you always manage to say the wrong thing, Kahn? Are you under a curse to be an idiot or something?"

"Sometimes words come out different than they sound in my head! Alright? I'm just trying to understand why Randa was with Parald. It doesn't make any sense!"

"And you ended up insulting her. Again. Would you have encouraged your sisters to talk to a man who spoke to them like that? *No*. You would have beaten the dickhead to death and then…"

Kahn cut him off, because that was far too close to his own thoughts. "This is *her* fault, not mine."

"How could it be Randa's fault? She's been perfectly cordial to everyone."

"It's an *act*. She uses manners like weapons. She hides behind them. I never know what the fuck she's thinking, because she's so damn busy being *cordial*."

"What difference does it make? You just have to babysit her, not learn her innermost thoughts. You don't even like Randa, remember?"

Kahn's mouth thinned. "I don't want to be alone with the woman anymore." He declared with a scowl. "We need to divide the duties differently. I will investigate Saxon, and *you* can accompany her places. I'm tired of her being so fucking polite to me."

“You were the one who insisted on being with her today. You said the rest of us would be too easily swayed by her.”

“Well, I’m changing my mind!”

Everyone else in the store shot him wary looks, startled by his volume.

Randa caught his eye and frowned disapprovingly.

Kahn slouched a bit and waved a hand towards Julius, blaming him for causing a scene.

Randa didn’t seem convinced, but she refocused on Mannus, who was pitching a fit about how few pockets were in his new human pants. They were yellow. Even yellow was better than alligators.

Julius wasn’t perturbed by Kahn’s yelling. He was used to it. “Alright. Well, I’m happy to spend time with Randa. It’s been years since I had a female to talk to”

Kahn was silent for a beat. His gaze cut from Julius to Randa and then back again. “No. I’ll stay with her.” He finally decided. “You’ll be too easily swayed.”

Julius’ mouth curved.

Kahn watched Randa, as she continued to fuss over Mannus’ tantrum. She had been way less understanding about Kahn’s complaints, and he was the one wearing fucking alligators! Instead of telling Mannus to stop acting like a child, Randa gave a conciliatory nod, like she was listening to his bullshit.

It didn’t seem fake. It seemed like she actually cared that he was upset. Would a genuinely heartless person care about Mannus being distressed over the lack of pockets in his human pants? Kahn doubted it.

He doubted so much about his initial impression of Randa, of the Stone House.

His eyes followed her as she selected a different human mating costume for Mannus. She moved like every step was a dance. Against his will, something deep inside of Kahn began to calm. The savagery that was always on the edges of his consciousness faded a bit.

Being near her soothed places he hadn't even known were raw.

Maybe that was the issue. He'd gotten used to being half-feral. He had to relearn the lessons his sisters had taught him. Only instead of centuries, he needed to process the changes in a matter of hours. It was uncomfortable and it pissed him off. Kahn *hated* to be wrong.

And he was wrong about Randa.

Julius was right. He never would've allowed any man to talk to Tonia or Prinny or Syllia or Aggie or Livinia or Roma with anything but respect. *Kahn* had never talked to them with anything but respect. They had loved him. Looked up to him. Trusted him to be their champion and protector. They would expect him to be *better* than this.

Kahn sighed and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck.

The jungle still called in his head, fighting against civilization. He hadn't realized how fragile his toehold in society was until Randa. How far he'd fallen into Gone Wild. For the first time in years, he pushed back against it.

What the fuck was he doing, being angry at this girl?

Whatever she'd done, Kahn had no doubt done worse. *He* was the one with the problem, not her. He should apologize to her. He should assure her that he didn't hate her. At all. That he actually found many things about her… appealing. Then maybe she would start to like him a little bit, instead of always watching him with such…

Randa's graceful movements through the clothing racks came to a jarring stop, interrupting Kahn's thoughts. Rye had walked up behind her, whining about his aggressively tropical shirt. (He should suck it up. Kahn would've gladly worn palm trees over alligators.) Randa jolted at Rye's unexpected approach, her shoulders hunching. Her body instinctively tensed, as she spun to face him and scrambled backward an awkward step.

From out of nowhere, Kahn thought of his sister Tonia.

His brow furrowed.

Julius didn't notice. "We've all done things we regret." He mused. "I think we should move on from the past. Randa is bothering no one here

in the human realm. She doesn't seek out conflict. She seems to be actively avoiding it, unless threatened."

"She's hiding." Kahn whispered.

"She is being stalked by someone." Julius reminded him. "It makes sense that she'd hide."

It was more than that. "She has bolts on her doors and plastic on her windows. She's afraid of being attacked."

"Obviously. Saxon is out there somewhere, and she's threatened by him."

Kahn grunted, his mind working and his eyes fixed on Randa.

Feeling the intensity of his stare, she glanced his way and frowned again.

He frowned back.

She rolled her eyes and turned her attention to Daven, who was trying to figure out Velcro. Somehow he'd gotten tangled in it.

"When you're in the Air House, find out how long she was with Parald." Kahn heard himself say.

"You'd be happier if she only lived with him for a few months? Is that it?"

"No." Kahn said honestly. "I think the shorter time he had her, the worse it will be."

Julius squinted, not understanding that. But then he hadn't spent his life surrounded by women. He'd never held Tonia while she cried. Kahn had. And he was beginning to remember more than he wanted to recall.

Shit.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Six

O presumptuous man! The compounds are composed of elements, and the elements not.
O presumptuous man! Here is a fine reflection.
We must not say that there is anything which we do not see.
We must then talk like others, but not think like them.

Blaise Pascal

The Reflectionland was not a pleasant place to visit.

Like most kingdoms in the realm, the environment was greatly impacted by the power of the Element. In this dark and hard-edged place, that meant the landscape cast endless Reflections.

The rocky terrain hid obstacles both smooth and sharp, dangerously camouflaged in their surroundings. The moon was always full and high, reflecting the bright, cold light that it stole from the sun. The imposing palace was made of polished obsidian, forbidding and black, and filled with mirrors.

Millions of mirrors.

If a surface could possibly have a mirror attached to it, the Reflection House found a way to make it happen. The resulting interior design was a cross between a kaleidoscope and a funhouse. It played tricks on the senses, because you couldn't be sure what you were really seeing. …You just knew everyone else was seeing *you*, endlessly reflected in every direction.

It was designed and built to intimidate.

Job, King of the Earth House was hard to intimidate. Only his Match could truly unnerve him, and that was because Tessie was delightfully unpredictable. He never knew what to expect. Job was the oldest Phase alive and the leader of the Elementals, but Tessie had him wrapped around her finger.

Yuan, King of the Reflection House did *not* have Job wrapped around his finger.

There were some in the Elemental ranks who complained that Job played favorites. Maybe that was so. He wasn't a flawless leader. No one could be flawless and still have emotions. His Match had taught him that.

Job accepted that his emotions played into his partiality. He wanted peace and prosperity for everyone. He saw protecting the universe as his personal mission. If he had to, he'd sacrifice his own life to ensure it.

…But he loved his family more than all the rest of the universe combined. He'd lived most of his eleven hundred years without anyone to love. Now that he'd created a family for himself, he was desperate to keep it.

His family was small. There was Tessie, his Match, obviously.

And Cross, Job's biological nephew. Cross would soon be a father. He'd Phazed with Nia, of the Water House, and their impending child was Job's pride and joy. The Water Phases --Ty, Nia, and Tharsis-- were all family to Job. He considered their happiness a top priority.

Since Gion, of the Air House had Phazed with Ty, Gion therefore got included on Job's list of relatives. Although, Gion was a difficult person to care about, at the best of times, and no moments spent in Gion's company were ever "best." Still, he was family. Job saw potential in the boy.

And finally, there was Kingu, Job's other nephew. Kingu was Tessie's sister's son, so he was new to Job's list of loved ones. Kingu had Phazed with Hope, of the Fire House, which sort of made the gangsters of the Fire Kingdom Job's in-laws. (God help him.)

At Christmas, Reflection Phases had targeted the Fire Kingdom. They'd tried to frame Kingu's family --*Job's* family-- for an attack on the Cold Kingdom. Job didn't appreciate that, so he'd come to the Reflection Palace to ask Yuan some questions.

He had no intention of instigating conflict. Calm and rational were Job's defining character traits. He dressed like a banker, with his white-blond hair pulled back into an elegant queue. Never in his life had he started a fight. But he also wasn't going to let threats against his family go unanswered. Yuan would cooperate with Job's investigation, willingly or not.

Unfortunately, Job had told Tessie where he was going, and his Match had told Nia, and Nia had told Cross, and Cross had told Gion. Then, Cross and Gion decided to help Job with this visit.

And with the two of them "helping," the whole day became more stressful.

Cross stood beside him in the Reflection Palace's Great Hall, staring at the walls, where hundreds of duplicate Crosses stretched out into eternity. None of the dark-haired, scowling doppelgangers looked happy. "This place is creepy." He told Job, loud enough that his voice echoed off all the hard surfaces. "And I grew up in the Shadowlands, where "creepy" is a lifestyle brand."

Gion stayed slightly behind them, watching the back of the room in case Reflection Phases decided to attack them from the rear. Why would Reflection Phases want to attack them from the rear? Job had no idea, but he was sure Gion had plenty of theories. The man lived a life braced for ambush.

"You should have insisted that Yuan come to the Agora, Job." Gion said for the millionth time. "Make him stand before the Council and explain why there were Reflection Phases pretending to be Fire Phases in the Cold Kingdom."

"The Council requested Yuan's presence, and he didn't show up." Job reiterated patiently. "That's why I decided to come and find him."

"I don't like it." Gion grumbled, unappeased. His long black cape swirled around the tops of his boots. "I don't like Yuan or this land or whatever underhanded shit the Reflection Phases are involved in. And I especially don't like being away from my Match for a whole afternoon, while we deal with it all."

Gion's devotion to Ty was his most redeeming quality.

"We should all go home. Just send men to arrest Yuan and be done with it, Job." Cross recommended.

"Arrest him for what? It's not illegal to ignore the Council's summons unless it's an official inquiry. We don't have enough evidence that Yuan's *personally* done something wrong to hold an official inquiry.

The Reflection Phases who attacked the Cold Kingdom are either missing or dead. Nothing ties back to him."

"He's the king of this shithole." Gion rolled his eyes, like Job was being ridiculous. "It *all* ties to him."

"I agree." Cross agreed. The two of them agreed with each other a dismal amount, these days. "The man is *obviously* guilty. Why waste time with an investigation to prove what we already know?"

"Because justice requires more than just strong intuition."

Gion was unmoved by that bedrock of jurisprudence. "Didn't you say being on the Council means I have to help prevent crimes? Well, basic crime prevention means preventing criminals from committing crimes by killing them before they act."

"That is *not* what crime prevention means." Job corrected.

"Hesitating to end our enemies is how Vandal got away." Cross weighed in. "Although, that's at least eighty percent Chason's fault for not slaughtering him before we even got there."

"We should've killed Chason, too." Gion had yet to forgive the Magnet King for kidnapping Ty. "Life would just be so much easier with fewer assholes roaming the streets."

Job realized he was probably going to have to live forever. Gaia only knew what kind of havoc Cross and Gion could create if he was gone and they seized control of the judicial system. And the two of them would *absolutely* seize control. "The Council doesn't execute people, just to make things easier."

"You want me to do it?" Gion offered. "Because I'm fine with executing assholes."

"Fewer assholes would be a good thing. Decapitation as community service." Cross gave Job a persuasive nod, like he was trying to talk him into stopping for ice cream on the way home from school.

Job rubbed his forehead, which was, for him, a colossal display of outward emotion. He felt a great deal, but exhibiting those feelings was

still a work in progress. “Recall how we discussed that I would let you two come, *only* if you didn’t make this meeting difficult.”

Gion and Cross frowned at him in baffled unison.

“We’re not making it difficult.” Cross defended. “Killing Yuan would be easy.”

Job shook his head. Yuan’s powers weren’t offensive, but they were vast. “He’s one of the most powerful Elementals alive.”

“So am I.” Gion scoffed with casual arrogance. “And so are you and so is he.” He gestured towards Job, then Cross. “I promise you we can take him.”

“What scary powers do Reflection Phases even have?” Cross made a derisive face. “So they can look like anyone. Big deal. Just so his fake-face is connected to a fake-neck, we can behead Yuan and get on with…”

“You’re plotting to behead the king?” A cold voice interrupted. “If you are, I shan’t follow his wishes to escort you to him.”

Job turned to see a liveried man enter the Great Hall, not through either doorway, but through a hidden panel in one of the mirrored walls.

Job assumed he was Montro, Yuan’s butler. It was hard to be sure, since Reflection Phases changed their appearance on a whim. Like all the Reflection Phases he had a slick, almost plastic perfection about his features. Trying too hard to look “naturally beautiful” was the kingdom’s favorite pastime. And the more they worked at it, the farther away they got.

“That guy just said ‘shan’t.’” Cross whispered to Gion. “Like with no irony at all.”

Gion nodded bleakly.

“We’re not here to cause trouble.” Job assured Montro, ignoring his nephew. “I just need a few moments with Yuan.”

Montro sniffed. “Very well. This way. He’s in the butterfly enclosure.”

“Butterfly enclosure?” Cross murmured to Job, as they made their way through a maze of mirrored corridors. “That’s literally *Silence of the Lambs*. I told you Yuan was a psycho.”

Job didn't bother to point out that the bugs in *Silence of the Lambs* were moths. He was smug about understanding the reference, though. Tessie had been exposing him to human movies, and now Job considered himself a bit of a film buff.

Montro led them into a huge room with a sizable glass structure in the center. He pushed open the door of the strange little house, revealing rows of plants. Job realized it was an indoor butterfly garden.

Brilliant butterflies danced around colorful blossoms and a water feature bubbled in the center. It was surprisingly serene. But Job's Earth energy could feel the struggle it took to create the habitat in such a hard-edged kingdom. The overhead grow-lights and the highly fertilized soil were the least of the effort. Making the Reflection Kingdom hospitable to delicate insects must've taken an incredible commitment on the part of its king.

Gion looked around the carefully maintained environment in palpable distaste.

A butterfly flitted past Cross, and he swatted at it like it was a mosquito.

Job grabbed his arm before Cross could squash the poor thing. "Do not kill Yuan's pets."

"Bugs carry disease." Cross argued, as if Elementals were always succumbing to butterfly-induced illness and he alone could save their suffering people.

"Job!" Yuan called, making his way through the rows of vegetation. Today, he looked like Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars*. Job had seen that movie, too. "Good of you to drop in… even if it is unannounced."

Pretending not to hear things was one of Job's most useful talents, so he disregarded the criticism. "Thank you for seeing us, Yuan."

"What do you think of my hobby?" He waved a hand around with a proud smile. It was *almost* Mark Hamill's boyish grin, but not quite. There was something too-perfect about it. "It's a celebration of completely natural beauty."

“If it was natural, you wouldn’t need to lock the butterflies inside of it.” Gion pointed out.

“The butterflies are lovely.” Job assured Yuan, before anyone else could remark on Gion’s less-than-flattering opinion. “I just had a few quick questions about those Reflection Phases attacking the Cold Kingdom.”

“All the perpetrators of that ugliness were killed.” Yuan lamented, taking off his gardening gloves. “The bomb saw to that. Questioning them will be difficult, I’m afraid.”

“I realize they’re dead. I’m curious to know why they signed on for the attack in the first place.”

“Well, I imagine whoever hired them paid handsomely.”

“The attack was designed to aid Vandal, of the Light House, who is currently a fugitive from the Council. Anyone who hired your Reflection Phases to help in his escape would therefore be considered a traitor.”

“You should ask the Light Phases. Vandal’s part of their House.”

“The single time they met him, Vandal locked Kahn in some kind of force field bubble. They’re obviously not in league with each other. We need to know who Vandal is *actually* working with and what his plans are. The dead Reflection Phases might’ve left some clues.”

Yuan sent him a droll glance. “Clues? Will you carry a large magnifying glass and wear a deer-stalker hat to search them out?”

Job wasn’t in the mood for bullshit. “I’ll have written authorization from the Council.”

“This is *my* kingdom, Job.”

“And it’s bound by laws, like everyone else’s. We’re not making the mistakes of the past, where every House did as they pleased. I’d prefer your approval to search the homes of the dead Phases, but I don’t need it. The good of the realm supersedes everything.”

Yuan pretended to consider the request, although they both knew it wasn’t a request. “I suppose you’re right.” He finally relented. “You can search whatever you like. My kingdom has nothing to hide.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course. Whoever hired my people needs to be found. He or she got them killed, after all. And for what? To help a *Light Phase?*” Yuan snorted. “Those cave dwellers could never appreciate real beauty or sophistication.” His eyes (which were Mark Hammil’s eyes) flicked towards Cross, as if he was mentally adding him to the “all brawn, no brain” category too.

Cross smirked back at him and reached over to pick an elaborate blossom from a random plant. It was striped like a tiger and looked very, very rare. “Mind if I take this?”

Yuan’s mouth (which was really Mark Hammil’s mouth) thinned in annoyance. “That is a teslova orchid. My butterflies love them. They only bloom once a decade.”

“I grabbed it just in time, then.” Cross held it up for Gion’s inspection. “What do you think?”

Gion shrugged, as if he’d seen far more impressive teslova orchids. A butterfly fluttered near his arm, and he shuddered in disgust.

The boys really were spending *way* too much time together. It would only lead to anarchy, tears, and violent reprisals.

Rather than cause a diplomatic incident, Job held out a hand and let his Earth powers sink into the teslova orchid plant. He coaxed energy to the roots, drawing it through the long stalk. A new bud quickly formed, promising another yellow blossom.

Yuan didn’t look happy at the show of power. “What are you doing? Nothing artificial can taint my butterflies. They don’t typically like orchids, so I have to raise my own strain of particularly vivid blooms.”

“The orchid is genuine.” Job assured him. “It will naturally bloom in a few days. Now, we’ll leave you to your work. I’ll be sending a team out to conduct a search of the homes this afternoon.”

Yuan gave Job a dismissive flick of his wrist, all his focus on the plant. “Do what you want. Just stop bothering me about it.” He was clearly more invested in his butterflies than in his dead citizens. “Oh and please ensure that the Phases coming to ‘investigate’ are from suitable Houses, will you?”

“Suitable in what way?”

Yuan gave him an unimpressed look, not backing down from his snobbery. “‘No Fire Phases’ would be a good rule of thumb.”

“That won’t be an issue. Victims can’t take part in the investigations of their assailants. That wouldn’t be ethical.”

“Victims? *Ethical*? Those thugs?”

“The Fire House was nearly Banished for crimes they didn’t commit.”

“Yes, well, they committed plenty of others. I don’t want them here. Or those primate Light Phases, either. Or the Metal Phase morons. Or those warring imbeciles in the Smoke Kingdom. In fact, *all* the warrior Houses are filled with violent oafs and should stay away.” Yuan flashed Cross another pointed glare. “I don’t want riffraff in my kingdom.”

Cross flicked him off.

Job was patient and even-tempered, but he didn’t stand for anyone slighting his nephew. “Who is the Dark King?”

Yuan lost his superior expression. “What?”

“Before he died, Eian said Vandal was going to rise up and usher in the Dark King. So, I think *that* fucking coward --who’s hiding behind flunkies and attacking innocent people-- is the one I *really* need to find.” He arched a brow. “Any idea where he might be?”

Yuan looked nonplussed by Job’s uncharacteristic swearing. “Of course I don’t know! …And there’s no reason for you to be using foul language around my butterflies.”

Cross cackled at Yuan’s Butterfly-Dad indignation.

Even Gion snickered. “Hell, Job. It’s not often you aren’t the biggest prude in the room. Congratulations.”

“Leave.” Yuan snapped, embarrassed by the laughter at his expense. “All of you. Right now!”

“Of course. Thank you for your time.” Finished with his official/unofficial visit, Job ushered Cross and Gion towards the door,

grateful to be leaving the Reflection House. “The Council of All Houses appreciates your cooperation.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Seven

There's still an element about [her] that worries me. That withdrawn quality.

America's Next Top Model

"I'm *not* cutting my hair off." Kahn informed her, a hunted look in his eyes.

Randa's gaze flicked to the long, thick mass of braids and golden shininess. "Fine." She agreed a bit too quickly. "I'm sure there'll be plenty of foolish women at the singles mixer, looking for disreputable mates."

He didn't seem like he quite believed it was that easy to convince her. "Shorn hair is considered a dishonor in my House." He stressed, still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Such a paranoid man.

"I understand."

"It must reach my shoulders to be considered appropriate for a warrior."

"I get it." She switched from Elemental to English, so the human hairdresser could follow along with the conversation. "His hair needs to stay long. But maybe we can make his whole barbarian style seem… intentional?"

After the clothing store, she'd dragged the Light Phases to the Mayport Oasis All-Inclusive Day Spa and Salon. The desert-colored interior was filled with everything anyone would ever need to beautify themselves for a mate. Since the Light Phases wanted to attract respectable human women, they needed to put in an effort.

And for what the complete package of treatments cost, they'd better not screw it up.

Presently, Julius had his face slathered in green goo. Rye's feet were being scrubbed in a bubbling vat of water and tiny fish. Mannus and

Daven were getting manicures in contrasting (yet somehow still matching) colors: death black and corpse white.

Kahn was having a consultation with a hair stylist.

“Your look is already great.” Andre told Kahn. “Untamed, but in a hot boyfriend way, not a sleazy deadbeat way.”

“Hot?” Kahn repeated, like he wasn’t sure what the word meant in that context. The Light House really did need to get out more.

Andre nodded distractedly. He was a human in his thirties with dreadlocks and the intense focus of a true genius. Kahn was seated in the barber chair, while Andre stood behind him. He fiddled with Kahn’s hair, studying it in the wall-sized mirror as he visualized possibilities. “We’ll stay long, but give you some shape. Sound good?”

Kahn looked at Randa. “Does that sound good?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“How do you feel about adding more highlights?” Andre asked Kahn.

Kahn kept looking at Randa. “How do I feel about highlights?”

“His natural color’s so striking.” She told Andre reluctantly. “Do you think he really needs them?”

“No, but more could help balance out this one.” His thumb ran over the black House designation at Kahn’s temple.

Kahn jolted.

Phases were particular about their House designations. The colored markers grew naturally and were more sensitive than the rest of their hair. Touching them was usually sexual.

“Um, that highlight’s probably enough.” Randa assured Andre swiftly. “And the braids are… religious? We need to keep them, too.” She gestured to the knotted sections decorating Kahn’s thick hair. The Light Phases all wore them, so she had a feeling they were a cultural thing.

Kahn watched her in the mirror, his shoulders relaxing as she worked to respect his wishes.

“How about adding layers to the rest to help bring out his eyes? Would you be okay with him losing some volume?” Andre had apparently given up on asking Kahn’s opinion and had elected her the boss of the appointment. It was a good call.

“That would be great. Thank you for all your suggestions.” Andre was so young and friendly, she couldn’t help but want to pat him on the head. Humans were just adorable! “I’m sorry to be so restrictive. I know this is your job.”

Andre waved it aside. “If I had a man who looked like yours, I’d be particular about his hair, too.” He winked at her and headed off to gather supplies.

Randa’s face flushed red. Her horrified eyes met Kahn’s in the mirror. “I think he thinks we're a couple.”

“Yep.” He didn’t seem worried about it.

Randa was worried about it. She had no idea why she was so embarrassed by the misunderstanding, but it burned inside of her. “I’ll correct him, when he comes back.”

“Does it matter what he thinks?”

“Of course it matters! You’re supposed to be finding a Match and…” She was suddenly morbidly aware of how close she was standing to Kahn’s barber chair. “I’m going to go supervise Julius.”

“No!” Kahn protested before she could flee. “*I* need you.”

She edged backward another step. “For what?”

“Moral support.”

“You don’t like my morals.”

He frowned in self-disgust. “I’ve been difficult with you. I get that.”

“Do you?” She doubted it.

“I do. Saying the wrong thing is my default setting.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Do better, then.”

“I will. I won’t be an ass. I swear.” Dark eyes met hers, willing her to believe him. “I don’t like the idea of my hair getting cut. Stay and help me get through it.”

He almost sounded sincere. She still didn’t forgive him, but it was enough to sway her resolve. Calling herself a sucker, Randa sighed and settled into the chair next to him.

Kahn’s expression brightened, pleased that she’d acquiesced. “Thanks.”

“It’s fine.”

She wasn’t sure what she was supposed to say next, so she focused on the paintings hanging on the walls. The spa had a subtle southwestern theme, which didn’t make much sense in Florida, but was still pleasant. The art depicted the Ancient Puebloan dwellings at Mesa Verde National Park. They reminded Randa of the Stone Kingdom, which also constructed their buildings on cliffs. She’d grown up fearless of heights. Huge canyons, no railings, and long balconies had been the norm in her House.

The painting to the left really reminded her of Heart Stone Academy. It made her miss her grandmother. She pretended to study it, hoping Kahn would just ignore her.

Kahn did not ignore her.

He shifted so he was sitting sideways, facing her chair. He seemed far more interested in talking to her than in his makeover. “Are you really going to make me wear that dumb shirt with the alligators?”

Her head snapped around in shock. “It’s Lacoste.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means *yes*, you have to wear it. It’s tasteful and expensive.”

“I don’t like it, though.”

Just that fast, he was back to being difficult. “It doesn’t matter if *you* like it. It matters that *girls* like it. Finding you a Match is the only goal here, and you look amazing in that shirt.”

Kahn stared at her. “You think I look amazing?”

Randa stifled a wince, unwilling to admit how devastatingly handsome she found him. (Not that she was *attracted* to his handsomeness. She just noted that he was factually handsome. It was a scientific observation.) "I mean… You could definitely look worse." She muttered, not meeting his eyes. "The shirt will help you attract the right sort of woman."

"The kind that wants little alligators?"

"Someone *respectable*. Who will not just use you for sex. Who is ready to find a partner. Who will treat you well and have an emotional connection to you."

Kahn kept staring at her.

Randa frowned. Polo shirts were entirely proper attire for a casual human outing. Even Randa's grandmother would have approved, if she hadn't died before they were invented. "What?" She demanded when he stayed silent.

"Just… you really are trying to find us Matches."

"Of course I am. That was the deal."

He shrugged. "I kind of thought you'd just pawn us off on the first willing human you saw and wash your hands of the whole damn mess."

"Absolutely not. I have every intention of seeing you all in real relationships with suitable women. Even if I have to move your mouths like puppets, so you don't say dumb things to the poor girls."

And even if some tiny part of her cringed at the thought of him with someone else. Gaia, that really *was* embarrassing. What was wrong with her?

Kahn arched a brow. "You get that we don't *choose* Matches, right? It won't matter how 'respectable and suitable' the girl is, if she's not the one fate chose for me. Isn't that how it was for you and Hekktor?"

Randa wasn't wading into that quagmire with him. She tried not to think about Matches at all. The topic produced an uncomfortable mix of fear and longing that she'd just as soon avoid.

“We don’t know all the ways Phazing might work with humans.” She temporized.

Kahn wasn’t so easily deflected. “I appreciate that you don’t want any Light Phases used for their bodies.” He pressed. “Do you feel like you’ve been used for *your* body? Because no one should have treated you like that, Randa. I can kill whoever did. Seriously. Just give me a name.”

“I don’t wish to discuss *my* love life. I’m only here to facilitate *yours*.”

Kahn opened his mouth to argue and then reconsidered. “Okay.” To her astonishment, he stopped hunting for answers and settled back. “We can discuss anything you want.”

Why was he being so reasonable all of a sudden? It had to be a trick.

“You’re wearing the shirt with the little alligators.” She reiterated firmly, in case this was some tactic to avoid presentable clothing.

“I’ll wear what you tell me… Although the shirt does strangle my arms.”

Against her better judgment, Randa’s attention went down to his massive bicep. Her gaze slipped to the long length of his forearm and the strength of his thick wrist. Then, to the width of his calloused palms, which could probably…

“They’re memorials.”

Her eyes slammed back to his face. Oh God. She’d just been caught ogling his arm like it was pornography! “What?” She breathed in guilty shock.

“The tattoos commemorate my parents and my sisters. It’s tradition in my House. Light Phases get them as reminders of those we lost.”

He thought she was looking at his tattoos? No, she’d been too busy objectifying his muscles and fantasizing about his hands. Since she wasn’t a total idiot, she quickly agreed with his mistake. She’d much rather he think she was nosy than a sexual predator.

“Right. Your tattoos. They’re very,” she scrambled for an appropriate word, “bold.”

The tattoos seemed like words in a language she couldn’t read. Something about the arrangement of them struck her as beautiful. They represented a hidden part of Kahn that she’d never been allowed to see before. It was right there on his skin, but also locked up inside of him.

“I have more than most Light Phases.” Kahn studied his arm, as if he was observing the dense ink through her eyes. “Usually, it’s just names or prayers. I kept adding to mine, though. I got caught up in grieving, and they were an outlet.”

“They remind me of poetry.”

“They *are* poetry. You must have read a lot of poems to recognize that.”

“No, I haven’t.” She said a little too quickly.

Kahn looked skeptical. “Well, I wrote these very bad poems during a very bad time.”

“What are they about?”

“Being stuck alive and alone, with my heart dead in my chest.” He summed up bluntly, like he wanted to push her away.

Randa knew exactly what he meant, though.

“Surviving.” She whispered, understanding the sentiment completely. Understanding Kahn far better than she had just five minutes before. “Going on, when you’re ready to quit. When you have nothing but broken pieces of yourself left, and somehow that has to be enough.”

His brows compressed, as if she’d surprised him. As if he hadn’t considered that interpretation. “Yeah. I didn’t intend for the words to translate that way, but… Yeah. They’re about surviving.” He moved his arm, like he suddenly felt exposed.

“Your family would love them.” She assured him quietly. “They’re a memorial about strength.”

Moisture filmed Kahn’s eyes, and he blinked rapidly to clear it away. “Thank you.” He got out hoarsely.

She gave him a small smile.

Something softened in Kahn's face as he studied her. He nodded to himself and cleared his throat. "Okay. So, I've obviously fucked things up between us, right from the start. I've been…"

"Hey, Miss Randa!" A cheerful voice called. "Wow, I didn't know you came here."

Randa and Kahn were yanked out of their strangely companionable bubble, their heads whipping around to look at the newcomer.

"Hi, Steve." The flower delivery boy stood in the middle of the salon, leaning on a push broom and wearing a *One Piece* t-shirt. He beamed his toothy smile, and Randa couldn't help but grin back. She loved humans.

Kahn noticed her expression and glared at Steve like the kid had challenged him to a duel.

Randa disregarded his bad attitude, her attention on the teenager. "Do you work here *and* the flower shop?"

"Yeah, my grandma owns this place, so I help out three days a week. My uncle owns the roller rink, so I'm there twice a week. At night, I'm a busboy at my sister's restaurant. And I work at my parents' flower shop every other day." He leaned in closer. "I used to work at Home Depot, but I saw some really strange things happen there. Like street magicians with swords and capes, doing shows in the aisles. My mom made me quit, when I told her. She thought maybe I was on drugs."

Those "street magicians" were Gion and Chason. Idiots.

"Wow, you're a very busy guy." She infused her voice with warmth. "How do you fit school in?"

"We're off for the holidays, until next week. I'm saving for a better computer. The set-up's expensive, but *so* worth it. It'll be *way* faster for gaming and the graphics card…"

Kahn didn't care about the upgrade to Steve's video games. "Did anyone come into the flower store today and mention Randa?"

“Uh, no. Your,” Steve sent a cautious look in Rye’s direction, “friend stopped by earlier and freaked my dad out, asking a lot of questions. *A lot*. But no one else mentioned Miss Randa.”

Randa sighed. “Tell your dad I’m sorry, Steve.” She shot Kahn an exasperated look, holding him responsible for the campaign of terror. Technically, Rye was the guilty one, but Kahn would do as a representative for *all* Light Phases.

Kahn looked frustrated that he was being blamed. “Just don’t deliver any flowers to her house.” He warned Steve, jabbing a threatening finger at him. “Or else *I’ll* be the one stopping by to talk to you.”

Steve held up a palm like he was swearing to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, so help him God. “I won’t. I promise.”

“Good. You can leave now.”

Steve scampered away, eager to be out from under Kahn’s dark glower.

Randa made an aggravated sound. “Must you be so mean to that boy?”

“I don’t like how the human gawks at you.”

“He’s about five seconds old!”

“His thoughts are plenty grown up. I guarantee it.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t know why I even bother with you. You’re going to believe what you *want* to believe, regardless of reality.”

“*You’re* the one who wants to live in denial. I’m your bodyguard and I’m telling you that Steve could be dangerous.”

“No, he is absolutely *not* dangerous, and you are *not* my bodyguard. I have told you fifty times, I hired you to find Sax, not to protect me.”

“It’s a free bonus service.”

“Of all the ridiculous…”

“I’m finally back.” Andre came hurrying over with an armful of supplies. “Sorry. I was waiting on fresh towels. We ready to do this trim?”

“Thank goodness. He’s all yours.” Randa got to her feet, marching off to check on Mannus and Daven.

“Randa, come back.” Kahn ordered. “It’s not fair to be mad at me when I’m right.”

She scoffed and kept walking, weirdly grateful that Kahn had returned to being his normal difficult self. Being pissed at him felt a lot safer than their brief moment of closeness.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Eight

From that instant, too, she melted in quietly amongst us, and was no longer a foreign element. Though always an object of peculiar interest, a riddle, and a theme of frequent discussion.

Nathaniel Hawthorne

By the next evening, Randa was ready with her battle plan.

"Before we go to the singles mixer, I've prepared a list of things to do and to *not* do around human women."

The Light Phases had spent the day investigating whatever it was they needed to investigate, patrolling around the house like Saxon might spring out of the microwave, and reducing her backyard birdhouse to dust with concentrated Light energy. (They claimed "dangerous, rabid creatures" were infesting it. It was a squirrel, which luckily escaped disintegration.) They also ate a lot of prepackaged human snacks. Oreos were a particular favorite.

No new flower bouquets had arrived, which was a huge relief. This was the second night in a row with zero sign of her stalker. The Light Phases must have been doing something right. …Impossible as it seemed.

Randa had been issued a laptop by the police station, because she worked from home on Saturdays and Mondays. In between transcribing files for her job, she'd devoted the afternoon to creating an informative slideshow. Sullivan wouldn't mind the extracurricular computer use. Especially if it kept the Light Phases from wrecking the town.

"It's important that you act as though you belong tonight." She told her unruly charges with all the gravity of a general preparing for war. "We can't risk any mistakes, so pay close attention."

The Light Phases were crowded onto her living room furniture, staring at her with various degrees of excitement and apprehension. They all seemed more invested in their bride hunt today. Randa suspected that Kahn told them she intended to keep her word. She'd promised to find them Matches and she would. ...Or kill them trying.

Mannus and Daven were all but bouncing on the sofa cushions, ready to hit the town like twin tornadoes.

Julius had borrowed a pad of legal paper from her desk and was poised to take notes.

Rye was fiddling with a knife, no doubt longing for something to stab and eat raw.

Kahn was staring at her, with a strange expression on his face. His new haircut was spectacular. Andre had earned every cent of his eye-watering tip. The golden strands fell around Kahn's face and shoulders in carefully controlled disarray. Before, he'd looked like a barbarian. Now, he looked like a barbarian with incredible cheekbones and a trust fund.

Worse, for the last twenty-four hours, he'd been markedly less hostile. Even after their argument at the salon, he stayed respectful and considerate. Not in a fake way. Like this was the *real* Kahn, previously hidden beneath all the mistrust. Like now he was showing her who he actually was at his core.

And this version of him called to her.

That realization panicked Randa. His attention was even more unnerving than his antipathy. The strength of his dark gaze made her antsy in some way she couldn't quite explain, so she was ignoring him completely. Her therapist would call it avoidance. Randa just called it smart.

"Okay." She finished hooking the computer up to the TV, pleased to have a visual aid for her battle plan. The Light Phases needed all the help they could get. "Let's begin with some 'don'ts.'"

She clicked the spacebar on the computer, advancing to the first PowerPoint slide she'd prepared. "Rules" was written at the top in red, and there was a picture of a stop sign behind the bullet points.

Randa gestured to "don't" number one, which she'd typed out in bold font. "Do not kill anyone tonight."

Julius wrote that down.

“What if someone attacks us with a sword?” Daven wanted to know. “Then can we kill them?”

There was still a long way to go before these guys could effortlessly blend into Mayport Beach’s singles scene.

Randa sighed. “No, Daven. We’re just going to a bar. What are the odds that you’d be attacked by swords in a bar?”

“Fifty-fifty.” Mannus gave a seesawing hand gesture. “I mean, if we go by our history, anyhow. Half the time we just get into fistfights.”

Rye grunted in agreement. “I like it better when it’s swords.”

“No swords. No fighting, at all.”

“The slide says ‘no killing,’ not ‘no fighting.’” Julius argued. “I already wrote it down.”

“There will be no violence *of any kind*.”

The Light Phases all squinted at her, like she was shouting nonsense at the sky. Apparently, a night without bloodshed seemed improbable to them. Considering the cultural limitations of her audience, Randa lowered her expectations.

“Just… don’t kill anyone.” She clicked the spacebar again, refusing to be dragged into their madness. “Rule two: Do not kidnap anyone. Even if you think she’s pretty. Even if you think she’s your Match. Even if you think it’s a really, really good idea in that moment. *No*. You can’t abduct a prospective bride.”

“What if my prospective bride *wants* to be abducted?” Daven pressed.

“Then she’s probably a Fire Phase and you can do better.” Randa clicked the spacebar. “Rule three: You must pretend to be human. Do not tell anyone you’re Elementals.”

“What if a girl asks me if I’m an Elemental? She might be my Match. I can’t lie to my Match.”

“You’re never going to *get* a Match, if you keep interrupting Randa with dumb questions.” Kahn snapped at Daven. “She’s trying to help us. Keep quiet.”

Randa was shocked that he'd weighed in on her behalf. "Thank you."

Kahn glanced at her for half a second and then quickly looked away again. "You're welcome." Clearing his throat, he awkwardly shifted on the couch.

Randa kept staring at him. Was he blushing?

"What did you say about the kidnapping part?" Julius asked in confusion. "That's *not* something we should do, right?"

Randa jolted. "Right. All of these are 'don'ts,' remember?" Quickly refocusing, she gave Julius an encouraging nod. "Humans *don't* like to be abducted on their nights' out."

Daven opened his mouth to offer an opinion.

"No." Kahn warned him flatly.

Daven closed his mouth again.

"I'm never going to remember all these damn 'don'ts.'" Mannus flopped his head back with a defeated groan. "The rules are too confusing."

"No telling people we're Phases. No abducting Matches. No fighting with swords." Julius recited, reading his notepad. "You should write them down, like me."

Randa believed in positive reinforcement for her students. "Great effort, Julius. I'm very impressed with your dedication."

Julius preened.

Kahn shot a feral scowl in his direction.

"So what *are* we allowed to do at this bar?" Rye complained, restlessly flipping his knife.

"I'm glad you asked." Randa advanced to the next slide, which featured a yellow happy face, red kissy lips, and a silhouette of a couple holding hands. The program was old, by human technology standards, but it still allowed her to add clipart graphics to the presentation. She might have gone overboard.

Kahn's expression seemed to soften, as he looked from Randa to the colorful screen.

"Here are some 'do's' for you to remember tonight." Randa pointed to bullet-point number one. "*Do* be approachable. Laugh at women's jokes. Be nice. *Smile*." She sent Kahn a pointed look. "Some of you will probably need to practice that, since it will be a totally new expression for you."

His lips stretched into a picture-perfect grin. "I'll practice with you."

Holy moly.

The smile totally transformed his face. Even when Randa told herself it was just a cuddly façade over concrete, she couldn't look away. She'd truly never seen a more attractive man in her whole life.

This was awful!

When Kahn wasn't being a scowling dumbass, he made her insides all warm and tingly. It was some kind of magic that she couldn't explain, but --*wow!*-- did she feel it. How did he do that? Did it work on everyone? If it did, human women would be swarming over him like locusts.

That thought reined in her wild fantasies.

Right. She was supposed to be matchmaking for this dickhead. Inexplicable annoyance filled her and she went back to being angry at him.

"Yes, that's fine." She muttered at him, careful not to look at his shiny grin. You didn't stare into the sun. It burned your eyes. "Anyone else want to practice their smiles on me?"

"No, they're not going to do that." Kahn decided before the rest of them could answer.

The other Light Phases' gazes all went to Kahn. Then to Randa. Then back to Kahn. None of them smiled.

Kahn crossed his arms over his chest, looking pleased with himself. "You can go on to tip number two, Randa. I'll practice that one next."

Why did that sound like a threat?

Ignoring the weird sensations he'd caused in her body, she pointed at the screen. "Second tip: Pay for everyone's drinks. You guys have a lot of money. Use it to buy plenty of alcohol for the women. They will think you're wealthy and generous. They will *hopefully* be too tipsy to notice any non-human mishaps you have. They will all gather around you to get free booze, and you can meet more potential Matches. It's a win/win/win situation for you."

"I can buy you a drink." Kahn seemed pleased by the idea. "Do you want one now?"

"What?" She blinked. "No, of course not."

Kahn's glowy smile vanished.

Mannus and Daven exchanged a sideways look.

"Acts like sharing food and exchanging drinks are important in Light Phase culture." Julius interjected, as if he was trying to help Kahn. Gaia only knew why Jules would be invested in a dating practice session.

Randa snorted, because she hadn't forgotten how they'd refused to eat dinner with her. "They're important to *all* cultures. But I can buy my own drinks."

Kahn sullenly sat back, unhappy with her refusal.

Randa would *not* be sidetracked by the way his spectacular arms stretched the sleeves of his hated "alligator shirt." (She still couldn't believe he'd wanted a larger size. Had he even looked in a mirror?) "Next tip: Ask the women questions. Be interested in their lives. Engaging in conversation will be vital tonight."

"What's a good question to ask?" Julius already had his pen poised to write it down.

"Well, that depends on what you want to know about her."

"How many men has she killed?" Rye volunteered, because sure… *that* was the perfect icebreaker. "I'll ask that. Hopefully, it will be a lot. My parents would expect me to find a truly merciless queen."

"Um, I probably wouldn't start with that question. Maybe just ask where she works and how she likes it." Randa looked back to Kahn. "We

should practice this one. Pretend I'm a woman at the bar and you've come up to me. How would you say hello?"

"Hello."

"Perfect!" She glanced at the others. "See how well he did that?"

All four of them nodded in deep concentration.

Kahn smirked, like he'd conquered Everest.

"Now what should you say next?" She offered a hint, before he could get it wrong. "You should ask me about my job, right?"

"You work at the police station." Kahn watched her closely, his dark eyes curious. "Do you like it?"

Randa brushed her hair behind her ear, and actually considered that question. "I do like it. I enjoy helping humans."

His brows drew together, going off script. "Just don't be alone with any of them. They could be dangerous."

"Okay, you don't need to warn the woman about hidden perils in her life. I know you guys love security and fighting, but…"

"Humans *can* be dangerous." He interjected seriously. "Stick close to me, once we get to the bar."

"Yeah, stay in sight of us, Randa. We'll keep you safe." Mannus chimed in.

The others all grunted in agreement. Whatever treacherous happenings befell the singles mixer, they seemed determined to protect her from them. She refused to feel touched by that. The Light Phases were only there because her life was in danger. She'd hired them. They didn't actually care about her.

"You don't even like me." She reminded them, mostly for her own benefit. "And I don't need bodyguards. Focus on finding Matches."

Kahn muttered a curse.

Julius glanced Kahn's way and quickly back to Randa. "We're not used to socializing, so *some* of us come off as harsher than we intend. But we do like you. …All of us."

Randa instinctively looked towards Kahn.

His gaze locked onto hers and he slowly nodded.

Her lips curved into a very small smile. She couldn't help it.

Kahn released a long breath, still gazing up at her.

Randa quickly turned back towards the TV. "Um, right. Anyway, I've prepared a human backstory for you." She advanced to the next slide, which showed a parrot and a palm tree. "You're from the Amazon."

Their blank expressions told her they had no idea what that meant.

"It's an area of dense forest, like the Light House. It will be easier for you to remember, if we stick as close to the truth as possible. So, if a woman asks about your life, just say 'I'm from the Amazon' and then quickly change the subject with a question about her hobbies." She cast hesitant look Kahn's way. "Do you want to practice that part?"

"I'm from the Amazon." He said obediently. "What are your hobbies?"

"I like cooking. And I read a lot of travel books."

"Why travel?"

For no reason at all, she answered truthfully. "The human world has vast cities, where people don't even know each other. Somebody could move into one unnoticed and begin their lives again."

His eyes traced over her face. "You would always be noticed, Randa."

She blinked at him.

"Do we really have to say *all* this to the girls in the bar?" Mannus whined. "Because I'm not going to remember it."

"Yeah and when do we mention that we have Light powers?" Daven frowned at the TV, looking for that part of the presentation. "Should we just show them?

"No!" Randa said swiftly. "Don't use any Light energy around the humans."

Humans would be confused if the Light Phases flicked the bar's lamps off and on by snapping their fingers. Humans would be *terrified* if they used laser blasts to fry people's retinas. Light powers were very versatile and very scary. That poor squirrel was probably traumatized for life.

"I think girls would be impressed with what we could do." Daven pouted.

"Or they'd run away screaming for the cops."

"Yeah, but Sullivan *is* the cops. He's got our back. He's a Wood Phase! They've got everybody's back. It's worth the risk, I say."

"Rule three was *don't tell people you're Elementals*. That means no powers tonight." Randa backtracked the slides so they could read that part again.

Daven sighed in disappointment.

"What about memory sharings?" Mannus tried. "We can't control when they happen. When you find your Match, they just trigger and show you parts of their past. She could be looking at my memories, and I could be looking at hers, as soon as we shake hands. That would freak her out, if she thought I was human."

"Most memory sharings aren't instant. They occur after the initial feelings of Phazing start. So you'd have time to be sure she was your Match before you tell her that you're an entirely new species. You can wait for the opportune moment." Randa couldn't stress that enough. "*Trust me* on this. Supernatural abilities are not a great conversation starter."

Julius summarized all that on his notepad. "First, we ask about women's jobs. Then, we say we're from the Amazon. Then, we discuss how many men they've killed. Then, we wait for an opportune moment to inform them we aren't human…"

"You can't ask how many people they've killed as the second getting-to-know-you question." Randa interrupted.

"Third?"

“You don’t need to ask it *at all*.” Why was this hard for them to understand? “Odds are a human woman in Mayport Beach hasn’t killed anyone.”

All five Light Phases frowned in startled dismay.

“They haven’t killed *anyone?*” Julius repeated, as if maybe he’d heard her wrong.

“The Queen of the Light House has always been a warrior. My mother would haunt me from the afterlife if I let someone soft and useless carry her mantle.” Rye looked genuinely troubled. “This crop of females could be lacking. Maybe we should search some other town, where natural feminine bloodlust is sated.”

“Mayport is the spot where Elemental DNA is most present in the human population. Ty’s been studying it. This is your best chance to find Matches.” Randa insisted.

“Have you killed anyone?” Kahn asked out of the blue.

Randa’s mouth dropped open. “I just said we didn’t have to practice that part!”

“I know, but you’re aware that I’m an Elemental and I’m aware that you work at the police station. It now seems like an appropriate getting-to-know-you question for us.”

“It wouldn’t be appropriate for humans, though. Why are you practicing ‘getting-to-know you questions’ on me that you wouldn’t ask a human?”

“Because I want to get to know *you*.”

She gazed into his dark eyes.

Kahn gazed back.

“I… almost killed someone once.” Randa heard herself say. “When I’d just turned ninety-three, I froze a man with my powers. He deserved it. Afterwards, I debated whether or not I should finish the job, but…” She trailed off. “My powers aren’t very strong. And he ended up freeing himself, without me ever making the decision.”

“What do you think your decision would’ve been?”

“I think I would’ve killed him.” She whispered.

Kahn clearly had more questions, but he didn’t push her. “So you’re a warrior, then.” He declared. “Maybe the only one in this town, from what you’re telling us about the weak humans.”

She scoffed. “I’m hardly a warrior. I can’t fight Saxon by myself, can I?”

“You don’t need to. That’s why I’m here.”

Once again, Randa was completely out of things to say. She could only stare at him, wide-eyed and a little panicked by her own instincts. When Kahn was kind to her, she had the horrible impulse to get closer to him. When had she ever wanted to be close to *anybody*? What was happening to her? Was she losing her mind?

Kahn slowly smiled, as if coming to a decision. “So that’s settled.”

“What’s settled?” She got out faintly, losing track of what they were even talking about.

“You. Us.” He waved a finger in a quick circle to encompass the six of them. “We all agree, right?” He glanced towards the others and they nodded. “See?” He looked back to Randa. “It’s settled. You’ll never fight anyone by yourself. Not ever again.”

It was a crazy thing to say. She didn’t believe it for a second. … Except something inside of her melted forever towards the incorrigible, uncivilized Light Phases.

Damn it.

She refused to let them upset her life and her plans. It was too big of a risk. …It was just difficult to remember that when a certain grouchy asshole was smiling at her.

Steeling her resolve, Randa very deliberately turned away from Kahn. “Next up on our presentation,” she clicked the spacebar, “how to ask a woman for her contact information. Social media is obviously a great way to connect with humans, but the internet can be confusing. … Especially for you, I’m guessing. For tonight, we should stick to phone numbers.”

“What’s *your* phone number?”

Randa wasn’t about to tell him. “It doesn’t matter, since you don’t even have a phone.” Human smartphones were becoming a fad with Elementals, but the Light Phases weren’t a group to follow trends.

“I’ll get one.”

“Kahn, stop talking over the class.” Julius said mildly, not looking up from his note-taking. “Some of us haven’t found a girl yet, so we’re still trying to learn.”

Kahn kept looking at Randa. “Your number?” He prompted again.

“Why would I want you to have my number?”

“So we can talk.”

“Even when we talk in person, all you do is complain at me. Maybe I don’t want to hear you nagging all the time.”

“That’s fine. We can text.”

Randa rolled her eyes.

“Give me the first three numbers, at least. I can’t call you if I only have three numbers.”

“And then you’ll let me get back to my presentation? You’ll be satisfied?”

“Absolutely.” The best hunter in the realm smirked at her. “For now.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Nine

She said he fairly frightened her, he was so superbly elemental.

Harry Leon Wilson

"Holy shit."

Randa stoically ignored the woman's breathless exclamation. She'd been hearing the same words off and on all evening, as humans entered the Wastin' Away Bar and Grille and got a look at the Air Phases.

It didn't surprise her that they were drawing stares. The five of them towered over the humans, their warrior bodies shown off to perfection in the tighter fit of their new clothes. With their long golden hair and dark eyes, they looked like champions from some gladiator war. And they were buying everyone drinks, as if money was just paper.

Which, to them, it was.

As a result of the Light Phases' beauty and largesse, the singles mixer was packed with women. Positively *packed*. It seemed like human females were texting pictures of the Light Phases to their friends, and their friends were racing to the bar to see them in person. Then texting pictures to *their* friends, who raced down to see them in person…

It was an insane loop of gasps and giggles and whispers of "holy shit!"

On the plus side, the Light Phases had dozens of lucky bachelorettes to choose from. Randa doubted they'd ever been so popular with the opposite sex. Respectable ladies in the Elemental realm would have crossed the street to avoid barbarians from a backwater kingdom. Here in Mayport Beach, the Light Phases were being treated like rock stars.

Unless they badly screwed it up, they could all try Phazing with multiple women, multiple times tonight.

Her eyes slid over to Kahn, who stood with his back against the wall and who was drinking beer straight from a bottle. (Gaia forbid, the

bartender mix them a drink, because who knows what mysterious poisons it might contain.) He seemed uneasy about the entire situation. Not that Randa had been paying him any specific attention. Of course not. She also hadn't noticed that he looked *incredibly* attractive, in a barbarian sort of way. Possibly, more attractive than any man had ever looked in the history of maleness.

Nope. She was merely chaperoning the Light Phases, and he was a Light Phase.

That's why she knew Kahn had talked to exactly one woman and that conversation lasted eight seconds. He had asked what time the mixer was over. The woman had smiled flirtatiously and told him one in the morning, but he could leave with her right then if he wanted. Kahn had blinked in surprise and muttered, "no."

Then, his eyes had slipped over to Randa. She'd arched a brow at him. He'd scowled and stalked off to get another beer. That had been twelve minutes ago, over by the pool table, on the left-hand side of the room, near the picture of Jimmy Buffett.

Randa had barely noticed the interaction.

She took a sip of her club soda. She wouldn't have ordered anything at all, because drinks were expensive, but the bartender had insisted there was a two-drink minimum. She'd paid for both of them herself, which had put Kahn in a lousy mood.

Well, a *worse* lousy mood, anyway. He'd been glowering at people since they'd arrived. Grandmother Viola always said well-bred people suffered with a polite smile. It was why Randa had had a politely suffering smile fixed to her face all evening.

A petite redheaded girl had Rye cornered and wasn't letting him escape. Everyone in Mayport Beach knew Tallulah Jayne Atkins. She had a lot of money and a lot of free time. She spent both partying nonstop. She liked drinking on the beach, wearing tight clothes, and dating a new boy every week.

There wasn't a chance in hell Tallulah Jayne was interested in Rye for anything other than meaningless sex. Therefore, it was a waste of time

for Rye to be talking to her, when he was supposed to be looking for a serious, committed Match.

So why did he keep talking to her?

Maybe because Tallulah Jayne wasn't letting him get away. She was tiny, but tenacious. Some gorgeous blonde girl tried to slink over and catch Rye's eye, but one venomous look from Tallulah Jayne had her scampering off again. As her thick file at the police station attested, Tallulah Jayne Atkins didn't like to be crossed.

Rysimer watched the terrified blonde retreat and then refocused on Tallulah Jayne with an intrigued expression.

Tallulah Jayne smiled sweetly, pretending she didn't have a reputation for being a stone-cold, steal-your-boyfriend-and-then-dump-him-for-laughs bitch. "So where are you from?" She asked Rye, curling a tendril of red hair around her finger.

Astonishingly, he remembered their cover story. "We're from the Amazon." Rye reported to Tallulah Jayne, raising his voice to be heard over the music.

"You work for Amazon? I order from them *all* the time."

Randa literally groaned.

Rye looked confused. "Do humans work for rainforests in this realm?"

"Amazon owns a rainforest? My God, they are like *so* eco-conscious, right?" Tallulah Jayne didn't seem to care if he was from South America, South Africa, or the South Side of Chicago. She was just after his body. Like a sniper dressed in vivid pink and sparkly jewelry, she was laser-focused on her target. "Hey you wanna go back to my place?" She offered, with a come-hither smile. "It's really big. …Like you."

Rye hesitated. "You're inviting me for sex?" He guessed.

"Uh-huh." Her gaze slid over his body, already looking for buttons and zippers so she could strip him faster.

"Do you suspect that you might be my Match?" He asked her seriously.

Tallulah Jayne gave an envy-filled frown at the mention of another girl. "Like from a hook-up site? You were matched on a blind date?"

"I don't think my Match is blind." He considered the possibility for a beat. "Well, she *could* be. That would be fine. I would welcome her, vision or not."

"You had a vision about her!" Tallulah Jayne's lips parted. "OMG, I have visions, too! For real, it's why I moved to Mayport. I get these flashes of insight from the universe and I follow them. And I'm always right! I guessed almost three numbers in the Powerball last week."

"Powerball? Is that a weapon?"

Randa drank more of her club soda and wished it was vodka. It was hard for an Elemental to get drunk, but it certainly couldn't hurt to try.

The Light Phases were screwing this up. Badly.

Julius was standing by the windows that overlooked the Gulf of Mexico, consoling some woman who'd been drunkenly telling him about her loser ex-boyfriend for the past twenty minutes. He patted her shoulder like a crisis counselor, and it was clear they weren't going to be Phazing.

Daven and Mannus were holding court by the bar, buying round after round of drinks and flirting with every girl they saw. The two of them were the most popular of the five men, because they'd apparently forgotten all about the goal of finding their Matches. They were perfectly willing to just have a boisterous night out.

At the rate things were going, all the Light Phases would be single and sleeping on her floor for the foreseeable future. Randa shook her head in exasperation. Everything was situated perfectly for them! She'd given them makeovers, and made that PowerPoint, and the bar was filled with willing women, and *still* the Light House couldn't…

A human male sat down at her table. "Hi." He said with a smirk.

Randa blinked.

"I'm Ben." His smile was glistening white, but it was like he'd practiced it too much in front of an oily mirror. "I saw you sitting over here alone. Can I buy you a drink?"

Randa stared at him in confusion. “I have a drink. I have two drinks, actually.”

He glanced down at her glasses. “Club soda?”

She nodded. “It was the least expensive option on the menu.”

He scoffed. “You don’t come here a lot, do you?”

“No. I’m just here to babysit *them*.” She didn’t bother to point out who “them” was. You’d have to be as blind as Rye’s-possible-Match to miss the Light Phases.

“Well, I’m glad you decided to come tonight. Your friends might be stealing all the attention, but they left the most beautiful girl here all alone.”

Randa looked around for the most beautiful girl, already preparing to hustle her towards Mannus and Daven. She’d shove that pretty woman into their path and…

Oh. Wait.

Randa suddenly realized Ben meant *her*. She glanced back at him in surprise, feeling uncomfortable. Hang on, what was happening here?

His greasy smile widened, sensing her unease and enjoying it. “You work at the police department, don’t you?” Ben snapped his fingers, trying to recall her name. “Randy?”

“Randa.”

“I knew it! I’ve seen you around town.” He leaned closer to her, breathing in her perfume and licking his lips. “You’re hard to miss.”

Randa leaned backwards, not liking this at all. “I’m very busy, right now.” She told him, hoping he’d take the hint.

He didn’t take the hint. “I plan parties for a living, so I’m always around gorgeous girls. But they’re all fake and hollow. You, though? *You* are something real. Something special.” He pointed at her nose. “Come on. I want to show you my boat.”

“I’d rather not.” She tried as diplomatically as possible.

Ben didn’t seem to hear that. “It’s nearby, at the marina. We can walk down there together. What do you say?”

“I say ‘no.’”

Frustration flickered. “One ride will change your life. You know you want to see me shirtless and tanned at the helm. And I sure want to see you shirtless and tanned, down below…”

Wham!

A massive palm slammed onto the tabletop, causing the glasses to jump. Ben and Randa looked up in perfect unison to see Kahn looming there.

For no reason at all, Randa’s growing trepidation vanished. Safe. She instantly felt her tension lessen, and she knew she was safe.

Ben’s face tightened, taking in the massive, glowering barbarian. “This is a private conversation.”

“That’s now over.” Randa informed him firmly. “Please leave.”

Ben’s face grew red, infuriated by the dismissal.

Kahn’s head tilted to one side. Black eyes pinned the human, as if he was already picturing his body at the bottom of a deep, dark hole. “Run.” He said simply.

Ben wasn’t an idiot. He fled, shooting angry, humiliated looks over his shoulder.

Kahn grunted in satisfaction at his victory and sat down in the abandoned chair. Crossing his arms over his chest, he settled into the seat, as if he had no intention of moving for the rest of the evening.

Randa considered her options. “Thank you.” She murmured.

“I told you to stay close to me tonight. This place could be dangerous.”

“I don’t think Ben was a threat. Just annoying. And he’s gone now, so you can go back to mingling with potential Matches.” She didn’t even care that he was here to pick up women. Not at all. Nope.

Kahn grunted again.

Randa was acutely (and maybe-more-than-scientifically) aware of how very, very handsome he was. She should have let him get a larger-

sized shirt. All the women in the bar were watching him with hungry expressions.

Including her.

Off balance, she picked up her club soda and took another sip.

Kahn didn't seem to notice the awkwardness. He lounged there, taking up space and glaring at every man who scurried past her table.

Randa carefully put her glass down, next to her other glass. Then she adjusted it a quarter-inch to the left. Then she picked it up again. "Have you spotted any humans you might be able to Phaze with?" She asked just to fill the silence.

"What do you think?"

"Well, just because you don't feel sparks right away, doesn't mean it won't happen. Sometimes you have to touch. Or spend time together. Or some particular moment happens that awakens latent Phazing energy."

"Is that what happened between you and Hekktor?"

Randa's lips thinned at the question. "Has it occurred to you that it's in bad taste to continually bring up someone's dead Match?"

"So?

"So, Hekktor and I are none of your business."

Kahn snorted, like that was ludicrous. *Everything* was his business.

"We worked together for many years. It was perfectly natural that we'd develop feelings for each other. We held them in, because of my age. But when I turned ninety-three and could legally Phaze, we decided to act on our long-dormant desires." That was verbatim the way Randa always explained their relationship, although she wasn't sure why she was explaining it to *him*. "We were very happy together."

"So you loved him?"

"Of course! He was like a father to me…" She stopped short, knowing she'd just screwed up.

How in the world had she said something so stupidly unguarded to Kahn? Randa was always so careful about every word she spoke. Her

fascination with the man disrupted her equilibrium. Her eyes cut over to him, ready for taunts and snide remarks.

Kahn gazed back, not saying a word.

Randa frowned a bit, surprised and suspicious of his restraint. "Hekktor was very kind to me." She painstakingly centered her drink on its coaster. "I was always safe with him. And he taught me things. That's what I was trying to say."

"What did he teach you?"

"Cooking. Sometimes we played canasta."

Kahn studied her. "And you had separate bedrooms, because he was an older gentleman."

"Yes. And we were both fine with that." She picked up her club soda again, just for something to do with her hands.

"Hekktor was 'fine' with his beautiful young bride spending her nights away from him?"

She set her glass down with more force than necessary. "That's not how it was, at all! And you said yourself that Light Phases don't share bedrooms either, so I don't see why…"

Kahn cut her off. "You never Phazed with him." It was a statement, not a question.

Randa's lips parted. "What?"

"You never Phazed with Hekktor. Did you?" Still not a question, more like a challenge.

"He… had health issues. He couldn't… He was unable to…" Randa felt herself turning red. "Hekktor and I had a *wonderful* relationship and a deep connection. Why am I telling you anything about this? You're just going to twist it all around to attack me."

"I'm not going to attack you. Why are you always so suspicious? I just want to *talk* to you."

"Why?"

“Because I’m curious about your life. About *you*. Because…” He trailed off for a beat. “I’ve been wrong.”

She hadn’t expected him to say that, and it only made her more suspicious. “Wrong about what? …Well, besides *everything*.”

His mouth twitched. “About everything.” He agreed in a grudging tone. “But mostly about you. And I *hate* being wrong, so I’m trying to fix it. I’ve been trying since that hair salon, but I keep fucking it up, and you get even madder at me. I told you, I always say the wrong thing.”

Was that a Light Phase version of an apology?

Randa watched Kahn from the corner of her eye, trying to decide how to respond. “Is that why you offered to buy my drinks?” She guessed.

He blew out an annoyed sort of breath. “I just want you to like me a little.”

This *was* him trying to apologize. He wasn’t quite succeeding, but she appreciated the attempt. Against her better judgment, Randa felt herself relenting a bit. “You could say you were sorry for insulting me all those times. That would help.”

“I *am* sorry. You have no idea how much I regret it.”

“And for prying into my relationship with Hekktor.”

“That one I’m *less* sorry about, but…”

“And for cursing so much.”

“Okay. Fair. My language isn’t…”

“And for getting me banned from the supermarket, because you attacked that artichoke display.”

“I didn’t know they were vegetables! They looked like hand grenades, and I was…”

She cut him off again. “I can keep going and going with all the reasons you owe me an apology. We’d be here for hours.”

He stopped defending himself and held up his hands. “No, I admit that I’ve screwed up plenty. But, if you forgive me, I can make it up to you.”

“How?”

“I’m not really sure. I’ll think of something, though.” He made a face. “With my sisters, I usually bribed them until they’d forget I was an asshole.”

“You must have made them rich.” She deadpanned.

“They didn’t care about gold. It was clothes they were after. Those extortionists had the best wardrobes in the realm.”

That made her smile.

Seeing her amusement had the tension drained from his massive shoulders, and he shook his head. “I had to build them extra closets. I swear to Gaia.”

“What were their names?”

“Livinia, Syllia, Aggie, Roma, Tonia, and Prinny.” Just saying their names made his face soften.

And for the first time Randa wasn’t afraid of him, at all. No one who loved their sisters as much as Kahn did could be bad. “You don’t need to bribe me into forgiving you. I’ll call it even if you tell me about them.”

Kahn liked that offer.

“Livinia was beautiful. That was the first thing people noticed about her. But when you really got to know Livvy, you saw she was so much more than that. She was incredibly smart. She could outthink anybody. Syllia loved sports, so she was always jumping and running. I never saw her walk. Aggie was boisterous. Funny. God, she was so funny.” He shook his head, like he’d recalled some private joke. “Roma was the quiet one. Gentle. Always interested in making sure everyone else was happy. If there was a disagreement, and there were *always* disagreements, she tried to smooth it over. Prinny was the baby of the family. She wanted to try everything at least once, so she instigated most of the trouble. We all doted on her.”

“And Tonia?” Randa prompted when he skipped over her.

He blinked rapidly and cleared his throat. “Tonia was fearless. She never gave up. And she loved drawing.”

“Your sisters sound like they were very happy and very loved.”

“They were.” He paused for another beat. “I don’t get to talk about the good times with them. The others,” he gestured in the general direction of the rest of the Light Phases, “I think remembering the *before* is hard for them. It’s hard for all of us. But sometimes it feels like my sisters didn’t even exist. Like I just imagined them. When I talk about them, it makes them real again. They’re remembered.”

Randa nodded in understanding. Sometimes everything that happened before Parald seemed like it was a dream. She nudged her extra club soda closer to Kahn and then picked up her own. “Here. I’ll buy *you* a drink.”

“Who poured that?” He demanded with a sudden scowl.

“The bartender.”

“You can’t eat or drink things given to you by strangers.”

Randa rolled her eyes and drank her club soda. No. She definitely wasn’t intimidated by him anymore.

Kahn gave a growl of irritation. “You’re pointlessly defiant.”

“And you’re being an asshole again. Stop it or I’ll go back to not forgiving you.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. (Stupid alligator shirt. She would *not* look at his arms.) “Did you forget someone is threatening you?”

Damn it, she was looking at his arms. “Saxon is hardly going to come to a singles mixer.”

“That human dickhead who was just bothering you, then. He could’ve given you that drink to drug you.”

“Ben? He didn’t give me this drink. He isn’t the bartender.”

“They could be in it together.”

“You’re paranoid.” Randa pronounced firmly. “I’m confident my five unwanted bodyguards will keep me safe from plotting humans. The bossy, scowl-y one promised they would.”

Kahn wasn't pleased about having his own words tossed back in his face, but he didn't grab the drink from her hand, either. He must've decided to pick his battles.

There was a beat of silence.

"So… you work at the police station?" He asked instead.

She squinted at him, wondering if Elementals could get drunk after all. "You know that I do."

"I *know* that I know it. You said to ask women about their jobs, and so I am." He sounded embarrassed, yet not ready to back down. "I was going to ask if you had any siblings, but that wasn't part of the slideshow, so I didn't know if it was allowed. I don't want you to get upset and leave."

He was making an effort to keep the conversation going.

Randa found she wasn't opposed to that idea. "No, I don't have siblings." She tried to think of something innocuous to say about her family. "My parents were a Match, but they weren't particularly loving. They both preferred to find other partners."

Kahn's jaw sagged in genuine shock. "Your parents bedded other people, *after* their Phazing?"

Well, that was a blunt way to put it, but… "Yes. I was the product of one of the few times they were together. Mostly, they just liked to hurt and avoid each other." She smoothed a wrinkle from her dress. "I understand why you and the other Light Phases want Matches, but you should know that the unions don't always end well."

"Is that why you never changed your name to 'Randa, of the Air House?' Having a Match seemed temporary to you?"

"No, it wasn't about Hekktor. I just never felt comfortable in the Air Kingdom. I didn't want to claim it as home. Of course, the Stone Kingdom never felt much like home, either." She was still searching for a home. "The only person I was ever close to was my grandmother Viola."

"The one who hated Light Phases?"

"Just the ill-mannered ones."

"That's all of us."

“Not everyone appreciates barbarians, I suppose.” Randa lifted a shoulder in a fatalistic shrug. “Grandmother believed in proper behavior, no matter the circumstances. Most of her life, she was headmistress of the Heart Stone Academy. I was raised there, while my parents were… occupied.”

“The finishing school? It was a fancy place fancy people sent their daughters to learn how to be fancier, right?” He looked her over. “Yeah, I can see you growing up in someplace like that.”

Randa immediately took offense. “I’m not fancy.”

Her outrage seemed to amuse him. Not in a mean way, but like he found her objection cute. “Sweetheart, you’re the fanciest woman I ever met.”

The sound of his chuckling was an aphrodisiac. Randa’s breath got strangled, and her cheeks felt hot, and her eyes started to burn, because she’d forgotten to blink. Every time he grinned at her, her body went into some kind of melting, liquefying seizure.

This wasn’t just noticing a handsome face or a muscular body. This was so much more than simple attraction. Was she lusting after Kahn, of the Light House?

Alarms sounded in her brain. Without stopping to think, she bolted to her feet.

Kahn instantly sobered. “Randa, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything…”

“It’s fine. I just need to go to the ladies’ room.” She edged backwards.

“Hang on, I’m supposed to ask the girl for her phone number before she rushes off.”

“I already gave you the first three digits. That’s plenty.”

“How about just the next two numbers? That can’t hurt.” He smiled coaxingly, and the impact of it magnet-wiped her brain.

Holy shit!

“Seven three.” Randa blurted out.

Then, she all but sprinted for the restroom at the back of the bar. This was terrible. A disaster. She could not feel lust for Kahn. In her whole life, she'd never felt lust. She refused to believe it was happening now and with *him*.

Randa burst into the ladies' room, her sensible heels sliding on the tile floor. She was dressed in one of the practical dowdy dresses she wore to work, and it felt stifling. Like she could barely breathe in it.

Mumbai, India.

São Paulo, Brazil.

A human was standing by the long vanity mirror. She looked over in concern, as Randa slammed the door and then leaned against it, trying to calm her racing thoughts.

"Good Grief, Randa. Are you alright?" Dr. Ashley asked in that familiar calm voice that had been guiding Randa for months.

Randa heaved out a relieved breath. Perfect timing. Her therapist was here.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Ten

**A woman's love is always, at first, a pure element of the soul,
and has no care nor thought for the body.**

Henry C. Wright

"I'm lusting after a very annoying man." Randa blurted out to Dr. Ashley, still leaning against the door. "What should I do?"

Ashley blinked. She was in her early forties, with blonde hair and a "You can do it!" attitude towards everyone. Not only was she Mayport Beach's only therapist, she was also an AA sponsor. After getting clean from her own drug addiction, she now devoted herself to helping other people fight their demons.

Randa had two therapy sessions a week with Ashley. Since Ashley was a human, Randa hadn't told her *everything*, of course. She couldn't explain about the Fall or the Elemental realm. But she was able to share her feelings. She'd been skeptical when Ty, of the Water House had first suggested therapy, but she found that talking did indeed help her sort through her emotions about her capricious parents, and Hekktor's death, and her time with Parald.

Dealing with it all made Randa feel stronger.

Ashley returned to fixing her lipstick in the mirror, even as she obligingly launched into the rhythm of one of their usual sessions. "Being attracted to someone is a new feeling for you, but it can be a very natural step on your journey. We talked about your tendency to close yourself off to people."

Randa was too anxious to listen to that. "But what should I do?" She repeated frantically.

"What do you *want* to do?"

"Ignore my lust for Kahn." Randa pronounced without even stopping to think about it. "Ignore everything about him. It will be much easier. When he smiles, it gets me all confused."

Ashley nodded in understanding. “Physical attraction can be confusing, at times.”

“Exactly! So you think I should just ignore it, right?”

“What do *you* think?”

“I think… I mean… I’ve never felt lust for anyone before.” She swallowed. “So why is Kahn making me feel this way?”

“Maybe there’s something about this Kahn person that is speaking to you on a level other people haven’t.”

“Why would that be?”

“Only you can answer that, Randa.”

“I don’t have any answers!” Ashley was always asking questions that Randa didn’t have answers to. “Why hasn’t this lust I’m feeling happened with anyone else?” Her eyes narrowed, as a new realization dawned. “What if it *never* happens with anyone else?”

“Would you *want* it to happen with someone else?”

Randa cringed. “No!”

Ashley watched her closely. “It’s okay to experience your memories, but don’t let them drag you down.”

“It’s not that. I’ve *never* been sexual. I don’t even like being touched.”

“And that’s okay. But it’s also okay if you’re now curious about sex. Just stop and consider why? What do you think this means?”

Randa hesitated, because the thought of Kahn touching her didn’t make her skin crawl. How odd. What *did* that mean? “…I don’t know.”

“Visualize calm and clarity.” Ashley shut her eyes, pantomiming an expression of deep soul-searching. “Guide yourself to the answer.”

Randa closed her eyes and did her best to visualize. The thought of sex had always made her uncomfortable. And *that* made her feel like she was broken somehow, because she wasn’t experiencing the world in the way that other people did.

Phases often slept together, although they could only experience Phazing with their one-and-only Match. But whether through Randa's innate nature or the result of her grandmother's prim teachings, the idea of intimacy left her feeling awkward and cold.

Around Kahn, she felt anything but cold.

All of a sudden she was visualizing. Kahn's mouth slanting across her lips. His big, warrior's body, pressed up against hers. Hands caressing her breasts, while he whispered dark, dirty, loving words into her ear and smiled like she was the only woman in the…

Randa's eyes popped open again. Holy moly!

She forced herself to think through her instinctive panic and took stock of her body's response. While her heart was pounding, it wasn't from terror. It was anticipation. Her stomach was jittery and her nipples ached, and her core felt damp.

Holy *moly!* None of this had *ever* happened to her before. It was intriguing but strange. Strange but intriguing.

She returned to Ashley's earlier question: Did she want these sensations to stop? When she'd waited for so long for them to start? Even if it was *Kahn*, the surly, glowering, barbarian, she was feeling the feelings for, wasn't it worth considering them further? This could be her only opportunity to experience lust.

"Kahn is… complicated." She finally told Ashley, picking her way through her own thoughts. "But the idea of sex doesn't feel as frightening to me as it did before."

"Well, that's progress, right?" Ashley beamed. "Randa, you should feel so proud of yourself!"

Randa smiled a bit. Desire was better than fear, no question about it. Maybe she *was* making progress. She'd done the work to heal, and it was paying off. No one could break her. Not even Parald. She was indestructible!

Ashley moved closer to her. "There's no wrong decision. Whether you sleep with this man or not, is totally up to you. The goal for you is simply to make choices that you authentically *want*. Not to just blindly

react, because you're triggered by the past. Take all the time you need to get to a place where you're comfortable."

"Yes." Randa seized on that. "I need time."

Lots and lots and lots of time. Maybe on some other continent. Were there any cities she could visit in Antarctica?

"Talking to this Kahn guy would be a good place to start." Ashley suggested encouragingly. "Communicate some of your feelings…"

"God no!" Randa interrupted in horror. Communication was *not* her strong suit. "I can't *ever* let him know I'm attracted to him! That would be humiliating."

"That's your fear talking." Ashley counseled kindly. "Ignore the negative emotions and think about your new goal. I'm hearing you say that you want to explore your attraction to Kahn."

"Yes. *Slowly*."

"Good! But how can you do that, if you don't tell him you're interested?"

"I haven't figured that part out yet, but I'm sure there's a way."

"You could ask him out for coffee."

"On a date?" Randa gasped. "No, I *can't* just ask Kahn on a date."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm still trying to figure out if I hate him or not!"

"Well, that's what dating's for."

Randa opened her mouth to respond to that, when a crash echoed from out in the bar, followed by the warble of a mortally injured jukebox. Shouts and screams and the unmistakable sound of fists hitting flesh left no doubt that a bar fight had broken out.

"Oh no." Randa whirled and ran back out of the bathroom.

She quickly scanned for the tallest figures in the bar, trying to determine which of them was behind the altercation. It only took her half a second to spot the troublemaker.

Julius.

The crying woman's ex-boyfriend had arrived. He clearly didn't appreciate Jules comforting his former love and neither did his twenty-three buddies.

"Good Lord." Ashley murmured, coming up behind her.

The crying woman who'd kicked off this debacle was now screeching, "Gas-Tank baby, *stawpppp!* You never listen to me. Julius, you see how he never listens to me?"

Gas-Tank wasn't listening to her. He was too busy trying to kill Julius with a hammer. He swung wildly at Julius' head and ended up hitting the silver Christmas tree that the bar hadn't taken down yet.

His equally tough-guy friends were already fighting the other Light Phases. They were all wearing motorcycle club jackets, which probably meant they were used to being the biggest badasses in the room.

Only they weren't the biggest badasses in *this* room. Dear God, this was going to be a massacre.

Randa's eyes automatically scanned for Kahn. She didn't know why she bothered. What could possibly happen to the man? He was massive and trained to kill. Still, she didn't relax until she spotted the big dummy in the fray.

Her eyes landed on him just in time to see Kahn throw two bikers through the wall, simultaneously. One guy was gripped in each hand, and he tossed them both like they were darts. The drywall collapsed around their bodies.

Then, he turned and hit Ben. There was no reason to punch him, since the human was literally just standing there looking disgusted and superior. Kahn plowed his fist into Ben's jaw simply because he could. He knocked the human to the floor, scattering several of his teeth against the hardwood like dice. Kahn stepped over the prone man with a satisfied grunt.

It was worrying that Randa found it all a little hot.

As if he could sense her nearby, Kahn's dark gaze unerringly found Randa in the crowd. "There you are!" Relief flashed on his face. Maybe he'd been searching for her, too. "Didn't I tell you to stay close to me?"

"Didn't I tell you no violence tonight?!"

"You said no killing. Nobody's dead. Yet."

Randa threw up her hands in frustration.

"It isn't safe for you to be away from me. I'm coming to… Hang on." A biker leaped onto Kahn's back with a knife in his hand. Kahn promptly shattered the guy's jaw.

Mannus and Daven's whoops of joy had Randa's head turning to find them. The brothers had launched themselves into the fray, like this was their favorite part of the night. They were each fighting three men.

Nearby, Rysimer hit a bearded man so hard the guy did a literal flip in the air.

Rye's flirty, one-woman fan club swooned over his prowess. "Looking good, boo!" Tallulah Jayne sipped from a drink decorated with paper umbrellas. "Aim for their knees. That'll drop the bastards."

Rye shot the woman an impressed look and seemed to come to a decision. "How many men have you killed?"

"Like two? But no one can prove it." She smiled, dimples flashing in her rosy cheeks. "I'm Tallulah Jayne, btw. Both names, no hyphen, and 'Jayne' with a 'y.'"

"*All* of that is your name?" Rysimer asked in surprise. "Is it a title?"

Tallulah Jayne blinked at him. "No, it's --like-- the most famous line from my show. Guys always love it when I use it on them. Wait…" She tossed her hair in a spoiled huff. "Don't you recognize me? I'm *Tallulah Jayne Atkins.* I was a big TV star."

"I've never beheld any television films, except *Antiques Roadshow*." He paused. "I did not see you on it."

"So, you don't even know who I *am?*" She planted a hand on her hip. "Why have you been paying attention to me all night, then?"

“I did not know your very long name or the details of your television life. …But I believe I know *exactly* who you are.”

Tallulah Jayne gazed up at him, and her usual man-eating expression turned almost vulnerable. “You *do* have visions.” She guessed quietly.

“I have powers. Not visions.” Rye reluctantly glanced away, because he needed to go break some guy’s leg.

A different biker ran towards Rye from behind, and Tallulah Jayne casually tripped the man with her designer-high-heeled foot. The would-be attacker went careening forward, cracking his head on a tabletop, sending beer bottles crashing. He collapsed in an unconscious heap.

She wrinkled her nose in distaste and stepped back from the spilled beer, so it didn’t get on her cute shoes. “Dickhead.” She muttered. “Stay away from my new boyfriend.”

Rye looked downright enraptured.

“Tallulah Jayne’s helping someone?” Ashley sounded more surprised by that than by the brawl. “Tallulah Jayne never helps anyone. This is real growth for her.”

“She’s going to eat him alive.” Randa muttered.

Ashley opened her mouth to respond to that, but the words seemed to die in her throat when she caught sight of Julius’ heavenly face. “Holy shit.” She whispered, gaping at the Light Phase’s golden beauty.

Randa’s eyebrows shot up, sensing an opportunity to unload one of her charges on an unsuspecting woman. Ashley was a respectable potential Match by anyone’s measure. “Julius is single. I’ll set you up with him.”

Maybe the evening didn’t have to be a total disaster, after all. Ashley stared at Julius as if she’d never seen a man. “Me and *that* guy?”

“Sure! He’s very nice.” *For a Light Phase.* “How about dinner on Monday night?”

Ashley paused, obviously searching for an excuse. Unfortunately for her, she couldn’t concoct one before the window of believability closed. “Um… I guess?” She agreed without much enthusiasm.

“Wonderful!” Randa was pleased with her matchmaking prowess. At least the evening hadn’t been a total loss.

Meanwhile, Julius was trying to reason with Gas-Tank. “This is all unnecessary.” He told the man, dodging the hammer swings without much effort. “I have no designs on your mate. …And you’re holding that weapon *completely* wrong.”

Gas-Tank wasn’t in the mood for fighting pointers. He roared and charged at Julius, again.

Julius elegantly sidestepped the assault, resulting in Gas-Tank running straight into the edge of the bar. He doubled over it with a winded *oof* of pain. Julius didn’t let him catch his breath. Instead, he bashed the human’s skull against the bar top, knocking him cold.

“I don’t believe you’re ready to be a true partner for Gina.” Julius shook his head, visibly disappointed. He looked over to the crying/screeching girl. “You see that, yes?”

“But I *love* him.” Gina wailed.

“You said yourself that you make poor choices when you’re around him. Is this what you see for your future?” Julius waved a hand at the ruined bar.

“No, but…”

“What about your dream of becoming a vet tech?”

Gina’s shoulders slumped, the fight draining out of her. “You’re right, Jules. I know you’re right. I just… I’m going to take your advice and be on my own for a while. I can’t do this shit with Gas-Tank forever. Especially since he’s going to prison, again. Visiting him there --like-- wrecks all my weekends.”

Julius nodded gravely. “You’re making the right decision, Gina. I’m proud of you.”

Randa was much less emotionally invested in the human drama. Her eyes kept seeking out Kahn. It was *not* hot watching him fight against so many men and win. She was *not* lusting after his swinging hair and

clenched jaw. She was *not* swooning over the fact that his attention was mostly on her, ensuring that she was safe in the brawl.

Kahn clotheslined someone else, but his gaze remained locked on Randa. "Stay against the wall, sweetheart."

"None of this would be necessary, if you guys had just listened to my slideshow. My instructions were very clear. I used bold font and clip art!"

"I haven't broken any rules! I read Julius' notes, since he's your star pupil. I made sure that I knew what you wanted. This isn't… *Fuck*."

Some random biker guy ran in Randa's general direction. If he planned to attack her, she wasn't particularly concerned. He was just a human. Also, he didn't get very far. Kahn grabbed him up and sent him sailing through the front window with a lot more force than necessary. Glass exploded, adding to the noise and mess.

Kahn didn't care. Now he looked genuinely pissed. "Okay, I'm done with this shit." He prowled towards Randa. "Don't move."

"That window will cost a fortune to replace."

Kahn ignored that news. He drew some imaginary barrier on the ground and began defending it. Behind him was Randa. In front of him was everyone else. He stood there and mercilessly flattened anyone who got within ten feet of her. They approached, and he intercepted, again and again.

"That's Kahn." She told Ashley with an exasperated shake of her head.

"Oh."

Piles of victims quickly formed a half-circle around their position by the wall, but none of them got close enough to touch either woman. Kahn ensured the men were unconscious before Randa even saw most of them coming. He was like a sentry with a surly attitude and incredible forearms.

Randa watched him move, reluctantly entranced. She was *not* warmed by how protective he was. She was *not* impressed with his quick thinking and skill. She was *not* worried that he'd be hurt.

Ashley blinked at the havoc. “Well, Kahn’s not quite what I expected. But he is very… um…”

“Barbarian.” Randa finished when words seemed to fail her therapist. “He’s very barbarian.”

“Yeah, that’ll work.” Ashley agreed, surveying the chaotic scene.

The jukebox was busted. The furniture was destroyed. The other patrons were either rushing for the exits or filming the battle with their phones. (Except for Tallulah Jayne, who continued to follow Rye through the mayhem, drinking her girly drink and cheering him on.) The bartender was on the phone, no doubt calling the cops.

Sullivan was just going to *love* this. She’d be lucky if she wasn’t fired.

Kahn glanced over his shoulder at her, scanning her up and down. “You okay? You’re not hurt, right?”

“Just my eardrums. Are fights always this loud?”

He grinned. She did *not* feel the impact of it like a physical caress. She did *not* want to smile back. Her heart had *not* softened towards Kahn, of the Light House.

If she felt anything at all for the man, it was just lust.

Simple lust.

She just had to keep repeating that to herself.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Eleven

The Elementals have awakened!

The Invincible Iron Man

Sullivan Pryce, Chief of the Mayport Beach Police Department, had been up all night dealing with the Elementals' chaos.

Again.

When the Phases first arrived in town, he'd been convinced they were a dangerous cult. Situations like this made him wonder if his initial impression hadn't been right.

Granted, most of the witnesses from the bar agreed that the bikers had started the fight. The scores of breathless women interviewed on the local news had swayed public opinion, painting the Light Phases as handsome victims of an unprovoked attack. Repairs were already underway at the Wastin' Away Bar and Grill. And Gas-Tank and the other members of his gang were now in the custody of the state police.

Well, the ones who weren't in the hospital.

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement had warrants on them for a whole list of crimes, including drugs and attempted murder. They'd been causing problems a couple towns over for months. Already, plenty of people in the area were calling the Light Phases heroes for stopping the bikers' reign of terror.

Sullivan wasn't exactly ready to throw them a parade.

Since he'd Phazed with Teja, of the Fire and Cold Houses, Sullivan was used to brawls and bloodshed. His in-laws were the Elemental equivalent of gangsters. In the Fire Kingdom, things burned and people got kidnapped with alarming regularity.

The shit he tolerated from the Fire Phases was because they were *Fire Phases*, though. He didn't have to endure law-breaking from any of the rest of the Houses. Honestly, he didn't even tolerate it from the Fire

Phases. He locked them up, too. The Plexiglas cells of the Mayport jail were constantly filled with Elementals who'd pissed him off.

This morning, that was the entirety of the Light House.

Four pairs of black eyes fixed on Sullivan, as he meandered in to release them from their very justified confinement. There weren't enough cells for all of them, so he'd doubled them up. Mannus and Daven were having a push-up contest in their cell on the far right. Julius was pacing around the middle one, while Rysimer was lying on the cot staring up at the ceiling with a thoughtful expression on his face.

And in the cell on the left, Kahn sat on the floor. He was the only Light Phase not awake. Instead, his head was lulled to the side, resting against the bottom of the cot, his chest rising and falling in deep slumber.

Huh.

Sullivan wasn't an expert of Elemental culture, but he was pretty sure the Light Phases weren't supposed to sleep with other people in the room with them. They were paranoid assholes. But Kahn seemed peaceful, dozing beside Randa. She was asleep on the cot, locked in the cell with him.

Randa was *not* under arrest. Sullivan was protective of the girl. She worked for him. More importantly, he'd never known her to even raise her voice, let alone break the law. She'd done nothing wrong last night.

But Kahn had thrown a fit when Sullivan suggested Randa go home by herself and get some rest. Sullivan had seriously considered tasing the jackass to get him to shut up. Before he could, Randa had taken matters into her own hands.

"I'm too tired for this." She'd announced in an irritated tone. "I'll just stay here, too. Alright?" She'd glared over at Kahn, daring him to protest.

Kahn hadn't verbally agreed. The surly jackass was incapable of agreeing with anyone. …But he had stopped complaining, which was answer enough.

Sullivan had shaken his head. "Randa, I'm not going to…"

“I’m not leaving the Light Phases here alone.” She’d interrupted and marched into Kahn’s cell. “And I’m not going to let them be railroaded into prison.” She’d climbed onto the cot.

“No one is railroading them anyplace. You know that’s not how I do things.”

“I *do* know that, yes. But I also work here and I know that the human legal system isn’t perfect. I need to watch out for the Light Phases. They’re my responsibility.” She’d daintily removed her shoes, aligning them under the bed.

She hadn’t seen the five Light Phases stare at her with varying degrees of surprise and affection. Sullivan saw them, though. And he knew right then their savage House had been tamed by the woman.

Kahn had cleared his throat. Last time Sullivan had observed them together, Kahn had been an asshole to Randa. He was an asshole to everyone. Whatever had happened between them recently, it had completely flipped the guy’s attitude towards her.

“Is this place safe for you, Randa?” He’d somehow made his voice gentle. It was a miracle his vocal chords hadn’t snapped from unexpected stress.

“Of course. We’re behind plastic. It’ll be fine.” She’d glanced his way. “Is it going to bother you, having me in this cell? I know Light Phases have a hard time resting, when other people are in the room. Sullivan has a cot in the back, where he sleeps sometimes. I could stay there…”

“No!” Kahn had interrupted, visibly cringing at the idea of her sleeping on Sullivan’s bed. “You stay right here with me.”

“Fine. We’ll just wait until morning and deal with whatever charges are pending against you.” She’d sent Sullivan a pointed look. “By the way, I’m taking a personal day tomorrow.”

“Understandable.” Sullivan had agreed sourly. “You’ll be busy pawning your jewelry to pay their bail.”

Randa had sighed like a martyr.

With her in the cell, Kahn had stopped throwing a tantrum about being arrested. He'd been docile as a lamb, allowing himself to be locked inside.

Sullivan had been instantly suspicious. "You sure about this, Randa?"

"It's fine." She'd pulled the blue police-department blanket up over her body and settled down to rest. "I doubt I'll actually sleep, of course. But Kahn's harmless."

There had been some scoffing from the other Light Phases.

Kahn's eyebrow had arched, but he didn't argue with Randa's assessment.

Sullivan did. "There are guys in the hospital right now, who probably won't agree that he's 'harmless,' if they ever get out of surgery. Since when are you so trusting, Randa?"

"I'm not. I just…" She'd looked perturbed by her own confidence in Kahn's gentlemanly behavior, like maybe it caught her by surprise. She'd glanced his way.

Kahn had stared back at her quietly.

"Well, the Light Phases and I are working together." She'd decided. "They'll honor our deal, because they're professional people and no one would hire them if they attacked their clients." She'd nodded at her own logic.

"What's the area code for your phone?" Kahn had asked randomly.

Randa had rattled it off with a distracted sort of frown, still trying to figure out why she wasn't fleeing from the madman sharing her cell.

Sullivan was wondering the same thing. "Why did you hire the Light Phases?"

"They're looking for my dead Match's brother." She'd muttered. "The point is: Kahn's not going to touch me. Are you, Kahn?"

"You have my word, I will not put a hand on you." Kahn had replied, his tone oddly serious. "…Until you want me to."

She'd looked at him in shock.

Kahn's mouth had curved a fraction of an inch.

Randa had flushed a bit and rolled onto her side, so she faced the wall. "You shouldn't even try to be funny, because you have an abysmal sense of humor." She'd pulled the blanket up higher, blocking them all out.

"I'll let you know when I tell a joke." Kahn had retorted mildly.

The other Light Phases had exchanged knowing glances.

No, Sullivan had realized, Kahn wouldn't harm her. The Light Phases weren't homicidal maniacs. Well, they *were*, but not towards innocent women. Especially, not towards *this* innocent woman. Kahn had never seemed less threatening than he was gazing at Randa's cocoon of blankets, wearing a small smile on his lips.

Still…

Sullivan had leaned in closer to the dickhead. "I'm going to be working at my desk all night, dealing with those biker dip-shits. It's about ten yards away. I've got a gun that will kill your kind. If I hear one whisper of complaint from that girl, I will paint my station walls with your brain matter. Understand?"

Kahn hadn't taken offense. "It's good that you think to protect her. It's needless now that we're here, but it's still appreciated." He'd praised, in the Light Phases' not-quite-normal English. Maybe they sounded less weird in their own language. Or maybe they *always* sounded weird. It was hard to be sure.

The other men had nodded, like Sullivan's murderous threats pleased them too.

"Damn Cult." Sullivan had muttered and stalked back out to deal with the state police.

That had been six hours ago and finally he was getting the latest Elemental crisis under control. Now, he was ready to get them out of his jail.

"Good news, hoodlums." He increased his volume to wake up Kahn. "You're free to go." As he spoke, Sullivan's gaze automatically

swung over to Randa. He'd checked on her every twenty minutes or so, all night. Like all the other times, she was safely sleeping.

At the foot of the cot, Kahn jerked awake. Tension radiated off of him, as if he couldn't quite believe he'd fallen asleep. His head snapped up. His gaze swept over Sullivan, apparently judged him benign, and then quickly settled on Randa. His hand came up to rest on the mattress next to her foot, and he blew out a breath. Sullivan could feel the waves of relief rushing off of the man, when he saw that she was still safely beside him.

Satisfied, Kahn leaned back against the wall, his eyes watchful, but calm.

Randa made a dismayed noise at Sullivan's loud salutation and buried her head under the cot's pillow. Contrary to her belief that she wouldn't actually sleep with the Light Phases in the room, she'd been slumbering for hours.

Sullivan didn't know all the details of her past, but he'd put together a general picture of it. He'd worked in law enforcement a long time. Randa was normally so wary of everyone. He would've bet she'd be fully awake at the sound of a man's voice. The fact that she stayed in bed, not even looking his way, must mean that she felt safe in the cell.

Why wouldn't she? *No one* was getting near Randa with Kahn sitting beside her.

Sullivan gave a speculative grunt. It didn't suck that she suddenly had a psycho bodyguard. Even if the Light Phase was a touchy bastard, at least he made her feel secure.

"Has Job come to rescue us?" Mannus wanted to know.

"The charges against you were dropped, once the bar was reimbursed for damages."

Mannus' forehead compressed. "Did Job pay for the damages?"

"Nope, I did." Tallulah Jayne Atkins popped up behind Sullivan, even though he'd told her very clearly to wait in the lobby. "I'm *super* rich."

Rye's expression shifted into something like satisfaction. "Oh, yes." He murmured. "I *do* recognize you." He got to his feet, admiring her sparkly mini-dress. "Hello, woman."

"Hello, boo." Tallulah Jayne positively preened under his approving smile. There was a ridiculous bow tied around her curly red head. "So, you're a violent criminal, huh? That's crazy attractive on a guy."

"Oh, for goodness sake." Randa reluctantly rolled into a sitting position, pushing her dark hair from her face. "Rye, you're supposed to be looking for a *respectable* Match."

Tallulah Jayne flashed her a quick, competitive frown. "Aren't you the valet here?"

"I'm the Police Station's receptionist. You just *think* I'm the valet, because you're always handing me your keys and telling me to park your car, whenever Sullivan calls you down here."

"OMG, yes!" Tallulah Jayne snapped her perfectly painted fingers in recognition. "You're the girl who scratched my Ferrari!"

"This is Randa, of the Light House." Kahn interjected flatly. "And she can do whatever she wants."

None of the other Light Phases argued with the name or the sentiment.

Randa looked between them in surprise. "Randa, of the *Stone* House." She corrected.

"The Stone Phases are all useless and weak." Kahn shrugged them aside. "You are better off with the Light House. We settled this yesterday evening. I told you, it is you and… us."

You and *me*.

He'd clearly started to say "you and me." Everyone heard it, except Randa.

She rolled her eyes, like she thought he was joking again. Only Kahn still wasn't joking. Neither were the other Light Phases, who were nodding along with his pronouncement. Insane people didn't have much of a sense of humor.

“Who is ‘your Ferrari?’” Rye asked Tallulah Jayne suspiciously, either doing Kahn a favor by drawing the room’s attention or just unable to stop himself from quizzing the annoying redhead. “If he sought to claim you, Randa was right to gouge scratches on him.”

“He’s not a man, Mr. Alpha-Macho-Possessive-Guy. She scratched my *car*.”

“Oh.” Rysimer relaxed. “A Ferrari car. Of course, I know that name. Like Lamborghinis, yes?” He smiled, smug about impressing Tallulah Jayne with his encyclopedic automotive knowledge. “I admire human vehicles. If yours is damaged, I’ll get you a replacement.”

Tallulah Jayne perked up. “Can it be pink?”

“Just tell me what you wish to have, and I’ll gladly buy it for you.”

The words were a Cupid’s arrow straight through Tallulah Jayne’s mercenary heart.

“I’m not a valet.” Randa insisted to Tallulah Jayne before Rye dropped six-figures on a Barbie-Mobile. “But I *am* a temporary Matchmaker. I’m helping these five find respectable, serious relationships.”

“This woman is very serious and respectable.” Rye gestured towards Tallulah Jayne with obvious pride. “Last night, she took down an assailant twice her size.”

“She is small for a warrior.” Julius mused. “But her eyes are vicious. She’s clearly been trained well.”

“She is not an assassin. She works inside a television box.” Rye explained, like Julius was simple. “Her bloodlust is a natural, feral instinct. A rare gift. Of all the human females, she is clearly the best.”

Tallulah Jayne fluffed her hair. “Nobody can argue with the truth.”

“She just wants sex from you, Rye.” Randa insisted.

Rysimer shrugged. “We can certainly start there, if she desires.”

“Oh, I desire.” Tallulah Jayne winked at him.

“This is ridiculous. That girl is only after your body, and you hired me to find you *real* Matches.” Randa paused to rub her eyes, still waking up. “Speaking of which, Julius, you have a date tomorrow. I forgot to tell you.”

“A date? With who?”

“How did he get a date and not me?” Daven complained.

Randa kept her attention on Julius. “You’re going out with Ashley, my therapist. She’s smart, kind, responsible, and pretty. She’s blonde, with blue eyes, and she’s about forty years old…”

“Forty!” Julius interrupted in a scandalized voice. “She’s a baby! We may be desperate for Matches, but I refuse to date anyone who isn’t yet ninety-three.”

“Humans come of age earlier than we do.” Mannus chimed in. “A girl last night told me so. She cannot have a beer until she is twenty-one. But it’s legal to fuck her at eighteen.” He shrugged. “It’s a very odd system.”

Sullivan massaged his forehead in frustration. “There’s still time for you to forget this whole thing.” He told Tallulah Jayne. “You can probably get your money back for the bar repairs.”

Tallulah Jayne ignored Sullivan’s advice, her gaze flicking between the Light Phases. “Hey, Sully? Remember when I tried to shoot that guy on my lawn, and you stopped me?”

“Which time?”

The Elementals were the biggest pain in his ass, bar none. But the *second* biggest pain in his ass was the spoiled, mean girl beside him. Tallulah Jayne was the wealthiest person in town, thanks to the residuals from her TV show. She’d been a child star on *Tally’s Time* where her character was adorable and sweet. The actual Tally was *not* adorable and sweet. She was a viper in designer spandex.

After the show was cancelled, her career had floundered. She’d done some horror films and celebrity dance-off reality shows, before ending up in Mayport Beach. No one knew exactly why a former starlet had picked a small, sleepy Gulf Coast town for her retirement-at-thirty. She’d

just built an ultramodern McMansion, which didn't fit in with the vintage bungalows, and spent her aimless, partying, troublemaking days at the local bars.

"The time when that big mafia-looking bozo set my palm trees on fire." She explained, narrowing it down for him.

"Alder." Sullivan nodded, because that day was seared in his memory. It was the first time he saw his Match. Teja came to bail out her nephew, and Sullivan's life had been forever changed. "I think technically his sister Missy torched your yard. She didn't like the way *Tally Time* ended on a cliffhanger."

Which reminded him, he needed to track Missy down. He hadn't seen her in days, which probably meant she was up to something horrible. Now that he was related to the Addams Family, Sullivan needed to keep an eye on the supernatural fiends.

"When you arrested whoever-he-was, he was shouting that he didn't have to follow human laws, because he *wasn't* human." Tallulah Jayne went on in something like triumph. "At the time, I was too mad to really see what was happening."

"What was happening was Missy and Alder incinerated your palm trees."

Tallulah Jayne wasn't buying it. "I grew up in LA. Crystals and horoscopes and reincarnation… I was setting the trends for *all* that spiritual crap, but I wasn't getting any real feedback from the universe. I was starting to think maybe it was all just an excuse to wear teeny sports bras around." A career in acting made her an expert in dramatic pauses. "… Until *it* happened."

"It?"

"I was doing my astral projection class, about two years ago, and I had a sudden metaphysical flash of insight."

Did Sullivan want to know? He probably didn't want to know. "What's astral projection?" He asked anyway.

"It's bullshit." Tallulah Jayne waved it aside. "The point is, I had a vision of this place. Of this dumpy little town. Something told me Mayport

Beach was a gateway to my future."

"Before the barriers between our realms fell, this is the spot where the veil was the thinnest." Rysimer interjected, listening to their conversation with deep interest. "This is the gateway you felt, Tallulah Jayne. You no doubt have Elemental blood within you, and it called you here."

"No doubt." Sullivan deadpanned.

"My manager and my agent and my makeup artists all said I was out of my mind moving to Florida. I turned down a role on that Hulu show about strippers to be here. But I knew…" She tapped her temple. "Oh yeah. I *knew* I was right. I listened to my third-eye."

"You don't *listen* with eyes, Tallulah Jayne. I don't care how many of them you've got."

She grinned in excitement, uncaring about Sullivan's opinion on her paranormal senses. "Just tell me the truth. I can handle it. These guys are an ancient vampire sect, right?"

"We are Elementals." Rysimer volunteered proudly. "A species which controls the forces of nature itself. We come seeking mates."

"My God, I *knew* he needed to get laid." Tallulah Jayne breathed. "I'm telling you, Sully, I'm totally psychic."

"What you are is pronounced 'psy*cho*.'" Sullivan diagnosed.

"Rye, you are completely ignoring the 'don'ts' from my PowerPoint presentation." Randa protested.

Rye's attention stayed on Tallulah Jayne. "I'm Rysimer, King of the Light Kingdom, and I am interested in Phazing with you, woman. As I watched you ferociously fend off the other females who approached me in that tavern, I realized you are something special."

"Oooh, you're a *royal* vampire." Tallulah Jayne bounced over to Rysimer's cell. "So, you've for real never seen my TV show, and you still think I'm special? Is it because I'm so hot?"

He shook his head emphatically. "No, I told you, I wish to pursue you, because you possess a ruthless and calculating nature. This is

necessary for a Light Queen."

"But you *do* think I'm hot, right?"

Rye looked confused. "Your temperature has nothing to do with my interest."

Randa gazed towards the sky, seeking patience. "She's asking if you find her physically attractive."

"Oh!" Rysimer nodded at Tallulah Jayne. "Yes. Very much so. We should have sex to see if you are my Match."

"Baby, I am *so* down with that. We can go to my place and…"

"If you're his Match, it's like a marriage." Randa interrupted flatly. "He'll want you to live in his kingdom, which is a jungle without water heaters or clothing boutiques."

Tallulah Jayne hesitated. "Let's try a date first." She suggested to Rye.

Kahn scoffed.

Rysimer ignored him. "If you want a date, we will take Julius' girl." He assured Tallulah Jayne instantly.

"You can't have my date." Julius argued. "What would you even do with her? She is too young."

"I don't know what we'll do with her, but Tallulah Jayne wishes to have her."

Tallulah Jayne frowned. "Like a threesome? God, I haven't done that since my twenties."

Mannus and Daven perked up at that conversational tangent.

"You're getting this confused." Randa explained, before things took a turn towards the porno. "'Date' can be a noun and a verb in their language. The person *and* the event. You take a date, *on* a date."

"Well, they cannot take *my* date on *their* date." Julius proclaimed righteously. "Not without me to protect her from Rye's small, vicious woman."

Kahn nodded, like that was a great point. “Tallulah Jayne might eat her or something.”

“Gaia, I hope so.” Daven mused with a happy sort of sigh.

“I’m not vicious.” Tallulah Jayne protested, one hand laid across her chest in outrage.

Sullivan side-eyed her.

“Oh fine! I am, but not to Dr. Ashley.” Tallulah Jayne flicked a dismissive palm. “Why would I bother? She’s not nearly as adorable as me.”

Julius wasn’t backing down. “If word gets around to the other humans that I allowed a young girl to be terrorized, I wouldn’t get another date of nouns *or* verbs. I will babysit Ashley to keep her safe. It will protect my reputation amongst prospective Matches. Human women are difficult to lure.”

“I could lure many.” Daven boasted.

“You could not.” Mannus retorted.

“Could to! It’s easy if you know what females desire.” He arched a smug brow. “Several offered to mate with me last night, if I just gave them that human paper money.”

Randa dropped her forehead into her hands, like she was already exhausted. “Gaia, help me.”

Kahn shot her a concerned look and then glowered at Sullivan. “Enough. Let us out of here. Randa wishes to go home.”

“I absolutely do.” Randa agreed. “If we’re not being arraigned, I’m going to take a shower and sleep until midafternoon and try to forget I know any of you. Then, I’m going to make dinner for Isaacs and…”

“You’re still cooking dinner for Isaacs?!” Kahn interrupted at a shout. “Why? It’s a terrible idea.”

Sullivan unlocked the doors to the cells. “I agree with Kahn.” (Which was honestly terrifying.) “I’ve met Isaacs and he’s bad news. Chason threw a car at him once.”

“Well, that’s Chason’s issue, not Isaacs’.” Randa marched out of the cell and towards the lobby of the police station. “Besides, I make him dinner every Sunday. It’s tradition.”

“I don’t like this tradition!” Kahn stormed after her, with the other Light Phases tagging along.

“I can’t come to dinner tonight.” Tallulah Jayne flounced beside Rysimer, the bow flopping around in her hair. “I have this emergency yoga appointment. But Dr. Ashley’s my therapist! So, I’m sure she’d be okay with you and me crashing her date with that complain-y guy.” She pointed towards Julius. “That’ll work, right?”

“It’s not ethical to double date with your psychologist.” Sullivan informed her. “It’ll blur professional lines.”

“So, I’ll fire her. Whatever.” Tallulah Jayne beamed up at Rye, dimples cutting into her cheeks. “Take me someplace expensive, okay? I’m totally worth it. And make sure you bring me flowers, but don’t let Julius bring any for her. *I* want to be the special one.”

Rysimer’s typically brooding face lit with a wide smile, like Tallulah Jayne’s spiteful demands were just the cutest thing ever. “Of course, I will shower you with gifts. You’re a queen. …Although, flowers are not an ideal choice for our courting rituals. The local human florist is being frequented by a sociopath.”

“Okay. Jewelry, then. Even better.”

“Randa!” Kahn shouted. “You cannot just ignore me.”

“Obviously I can, because I *am*.” Randa stopped to collect her purse from her desk, in the large room that served as the police station lobby and offices.

“Even someone as dim as the human knows this is a bad idea.” Kahn swept a hand towards Sullivan.

Sullivan sat down at his own desk. “I heard you punched out somebody’s teeth last night, Kahn. It’d sure be a shame if I tracked that Ben guy down and persuaded him to testify against you in court. Probably be hard to win your girl if you were behind bars.” His gaze cut meaningfully towards Randa. “Alone.”

Kahn's mouth thinned, but he didn't push it. The Light Phase must really have it bad, because he *always* pushed it.

"Ben Foster?" Tallulah Jayne flipped her hair. "I know him."

Rysimer wasn't thrilled with that news. "You do?"

"Sure. Blond? Dresses like he gets off watching his fourth wife have sex with pool boys? Owns a boat?" She cocked her head. "What do you want him for?"

Rye flashed Kahn a quick look. "We may have to kill him."

Kahn grunted in agreement.

"Oh." Tallulah Jayne shrugged. "Well, if you do, can I have the boat?"

"Of course."

"Can we paint it pink?"

"No one's killing Ben!" Randa said angrily. The girl showed a lot more emotions around the Light Phases. "Why in the world would we kill Ben?"

"Because we don't like him?" Daven guessed. "Whoever he is."

"This man's testimony could get Kahn imprisoned by the humans." Rye pointed out to Randa, like it was obvious and had nothing at all to do with Ben knowing Tallulah Jayne. "Sullivan just said so. Ben should be punished for that affront."

"Kahn hit him for no reason!"

"He was drooling all over you." Kahn reminded Randa, looking pissed off at the memory. "That's a fucking good reason, in my book. For all you know, he could be your stalker!"

Sullivan sat straight up. "Hang on. What stalker?"

"Nothing." Randa looped her purse over her shoulder, avoiding his eyes.

"What goddamn stalker, Randa?"

She sighed. “Someone’s been sending me weird flower bouquets, alright? The Light Phases are helping me look into it, though. It’s all handled.”

Sullivan looked towards Kahn. “This is why she hired you? Why you guys are asking the other Phases questions about her?”

“You’re asking other people questions about me?” Randa gasped in outrage. “Who? Where?”

Kahn hesitated, knowing he was in trouble. “Julius went to the Elemental realm and…”

Randa didn’t let him finish. “Damn it, Kahn! You have no business digging into my life!”

“I didn’t! I’ve been with you the whole time. It was *Julius*.”

Julius opened his mouth to protest. Then he sighed and closed it again, taking one for the team.

“I’m sure you were *all* in on it.” Randa hissed at Kahn, while gesturing towards the other suddenly guilty-faced Light Phases.

Kahn didn’t answer that, probably because he knew it would only make the situation worse. “Randa thinks Saxon, of the Air House is stalking her.” He informed Sullivan, instead. “We’re going to stop him, because he’s a dangerous, amoral asshole.”

“Yeah, I picked up on that when the guy tried to kill me.” Now, Sullivan was pissed. He scowled over at Randa. “You should’ve told me that bastard was threatening you. How does Ben fit in?”

“He doesn’t. Kahn just *wants* it to be Ben, so he’d be proven right. He wants everything to go his own way.”

“What has gone my way lately? If things were going my way, you wouldn’t be cooking dinner for Isaacs!”

“If they were going *my* way, you wouldn’t be poking your nose into my past!”

“I’m trying to protect you from dangerous stalkers, like Isaacs and Ben!”

Randa threw up her hands in aggravation.

“I still don’t get who this ‘Ben’ person is.” Daven whispered to Mannus.

“He is Ben Foster, our nefarious human enemy. We’re going to kill him directly after we kill Saxon and then steal his pink boat.”

“Sax has a pink boat?”

Randa’s furious eyes stayed on Kahn, color high on her cheeks. “Ben is *not* stalking me! I never even met the man before last night. Why in the world would…?”

The door to the police station slammed open with a violent jostling of the little bell, cutting off Randa’s angry words.

Steve, the kid who worked at the florist, dashed in wearing a worried expression. “Chief, I think you’d better come down to the flower shop, as fast as you can.”

“*This* boy again? You see how he shows up everywhere you are?” Kahn asked Randa, because somehow he thought it was a genius idea to start yet another argument. “He could be the stalker.”

She made a clenching motion with her hands, like she was imagining wringing the Light Phase’s neck.

It was so unexpected that Sullivan nearly laughed. He’d never seen his ladylike secretary so worked up. Honest to God, if Kahn wasn’t already so arrogant, Sullivan would thank him for dragging Randa out of her quiet shell.

He got to his feet, forcing himself to focus on Steve. Kahn’s suspicions aside, the kid was not a criminal mastermind. His T-shirt had SpongeBob on the front. “What happened to your parents’ shop, Steven?”

“Somebody wrecked the place!”

“Vandalism?”

“No, it was like payback, I think.” Steve reported in dire, excited tones. Any crime in Mayport was big news, and he was at the center of it. “We put up a sign in the window that said that we wouldn’t deliver anymore flowers, without the sender providing ID. ‘Cause of what Miss Randa’s,”

he shot Kahn a wary look, "*friend* said about not wanting any more mysterious bouquets going to her."

Kahn grunted, pleased that his orders were being followed.

Steve hurriedly went back to recounting his morning. "Anyway, I got to work, and everything *seemed* normal." He told Sullivan with great importance. "But then I went into the back room, and there's this big crash! I ran out to see what happened, and the window is busted. The same one that had the paper on it, about no more deliveries from any secret admirers." He nodded, pleased to have reached the crescendo of his harrowing tale. "Someone threw a brick right through it."

"I had a secret admirer once." Tallulah Jayne announced, because she always needed to be the center of attention. "I'm pretty sure it was Timothée Chalamet."

Sullivan had no clue who that was. He didn't sound local. "Did you see anyone suspicious outside?" He asked Steve. "Anyone about seven foot tall, with a mohawk maybe?" Sax would be hard to miss in a crowd.

"No way." Steve shook his head, his eyes wide. "Nobody like that. Just the regular people, who I always see walking by in the mornings. We're right next to the coffee shop, so the same folks walk by every day. Miss Peabody. Dr. Ashley. Mr. Quigley. Mr. Foster. Mrs.…"

Sullivan cut him off. "Ben Foster?"

"Ah ha!" Daven cried, like he'd just single-handedly solved the case.

"The human with the pink boat." Mannus agreed grimly. "I knew it."

Steve's eyebrows lifted. "Um… Yeah, Mr. Foster was there, for sure. He's one of our best customers."

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twelve

We've arranged a civilization in which most crucial elements profoundly depend on science and technology.
We have also arranged things so that almost no one understands science and technology.

Carl Sagan

"We don't know that Ben is the one stalking Randa." Rye leaned against the condominium's wall, watching as Kahn carelessly ripped through the human's belongings. "We could be destroying the home of an innocent man."

"If he's innocent, he'd be here to prove it."

Rye looked skeptical. "You just hate Ben because he showed interest in Randa."

"He didn't 'show interest in her.'" Kahn sneered. "He was *salivating*. His slimy human eyes crawled all over her." To Kahn's mind, that was more than enough justification for tracking the asshole down.

Unfortunately, Ben seemed to have vanished without a trace. His condo was a complete blank. Ben had a view of the Mayport Beach Marina off his third-story balcony, but there was nothing about the rest of the boxy space that hinted at any personality. No clutter. Nothing out of place. Not a single indication as to where Ben might have gone.

Kahn detested the guy even more for wasting his time.

He shredded Ben's leather sofa cushions, fruitlessly looking for clues about the man's whereabouts in the stuffing. They'd torn apart every room in the condo and found nothing, thus far. It pissed Kahn off.

"I'm just saying, it's far more likely that Saxon is the stalker and that Ben is a distraction."

Kahn shot him a look. "Ben had his slimy human eyes on Tallulah Jayne, too."

Rye gave a grudging nod. “Yes, but I’ve risen above my annoyance over that. I don’t believe the human is a threat to Tallulah Jayne. I don’t believe *anyone* is a threat to Tallulah Jayne. She is a primal force of nature, unstoppable in her relentless cruelty. Nothing can stand against her adorable and ferocious might.”

Kahn grunted, unable to argue with Rye’s smitten prose. That human woman was scary as fuck. “You really believe that she’s your Match?”

Rye smiled. “I do. I begin to feel the Phazing energy already.”

Finding your Match meant a mix of physical and metaphysical changes. Your powers would start caressing each other. Deep feelings would develop very quickly, so you could provide love and care for your partner. A memory sharing occurred, allowing you to understand your Match better by witnessing key moments of their past. And obviously, there was the intense sexual need to complete Phazing and combine your individual energies into a new whole.

Kahn was glad that Rye got to experience all that. He was also jealous, because why shouldn’t Kahn get to experience it, too? And he was frustrated, because he didn’t imagine experiencing it with some faceless stranger.

No, he imagined experiencing it with Randa.

The woman wasn’t even speaking to him. Last night, he’d felt like they were making real progress, but then Isaacs had ruined it all. Randa was cooking that bastard dinner! Kahn couldn’t believe it. Who cooked dinner for an Air Phase? Randa, that’s who. Now she was angry that Kahn was angry, and so she was back to ignoring him again.

Kahn had decided to let Mannus and Daven act as her bodyguards, while he and Rye took over the stalker investigation. If he wasn’t in Randa’s presence, he couldn’t mess anything else up with her. Maybe she’d forgive him faster. It was worth a try.

Being away from her was harder than he’d anticipated, though. He was antsy to see her again, even if she was frowning at him. She had a beautiful frown. Everything about her was very, very beautiful.

And very, very good.

It was shameful how badly he'd misjudged her. Randa could never conspire with Parald. She was gentle and kind, even when people didn't deserve it. She defended the Light Phases. She evidently saw some redeeming qualities in Isaacs. For Gaia's sake, the woman had protected Raj, of the Color House after he threw an egg at her in the grocery store!

Speaking of which, as soon as Kahn was done tracking down Sax and Ben, he was going after Raj regardless of Randa's forgiving heart. That little bastard was going to bleed and scream and bleed again, until he learned a valuable lesson. Once his broken body was dumped in the Agora as a warning to others, no one sane would attack Randa, of the Light House ever again.

"Are you listening?" Rysimer demanded.

"Yes."

Rye rolled his eyes, knowing Kahn was lying. "I *said*, there's a picture over here of Ben with flowers."

Kahn's focus shifted, and he quickly crossed the room to look at the framed photo on the sterile, white wall. Ben was smiling like an idiot, surrounded by other smiling idiots, in front of a large archway of multicolored blossoms.

Kahn frowned. "What's this? A human wedding?" One of the females wore a white veil. He was pretty sure that signified a marriage ceremony. Looking around, Kahn saw similar pictures on display, only with different fancy-dressed humans. "Why is he attending so many weddings? Can humans have multiple Matches?"

"I think he plans the ceremonies." Rye was now rustling through papers on Ben's desk. He held up an envelope that read "Foster Event Coordinators, LLC." "He helps with weddings and parties. That explains why he frequents the florist shop."

Kahn grunted, not appeased.

"It's part of his *job*." Rye stressed.

"Convenient."

“For God’s sake…” Rye muttered, like Kahn was being unreasonable. (Which he *wasn’t*. Ben was guilty of something. Kahn just needed to rip apart the human’s life until he figured out what it was.) “Look, here’s Ben’s phone.” He tossed it over to Kahn. “Do you know how to use one of these? See if that’s enough for you to clear his name.”

Kahn was good with technology. He’d always been mechanically inclined. In addition to weapons, he’d built countless gadgets for his family. Silent hair dryers. Portable record players. Laser-sighted hunting spears.

He hadn’t invented anything recently, though. Not since the Fall. He suddenly realized how much he missed it.

Kahn turned the phone around in his hand, admiring how sleek it was. Very practical design. Intuiting how it worked took no effort. The phone opened with a code. Using different spectrums of Light energy to analyze the glass surface of the screen, he saw which numbers had been pressed recently. After that, he only needed one guess to unlock it.

“69,-69,-69. Ben is such an asshole.”

“Still doesn’t make him a stalker.” Rye argued. “Still, it’s strange for a human to leave home without their phone, isn’t it? They seem pathologically attached to them.”

“I don’t blame them. This is useful.”

Kahn scrolled through Ben’s recent messages. At first, none of the stored information struck him as out of the ordinary. Just random women begging him to call them back and wedding vendors asking for details on upcoming nuptials. Ben hadn’t answered any of them.

“Anything?”

“No, just…” Kahn stopped when the name “Ty Waterhouse” popped up next to some texts about planning a last-minute party. “The Water Phases hired him.” Curious, Kahn scrolled through the messages. “Ty wants to move Gion’s birthday to Mayport Beach.”

“Gion’s having a birthday party?” Rye seemed skeptical. “Does he know that?”

“Nope. Ty says it’s a surprise.” Kahn gestured to one of the texts. “It can’t be a coincidence that Ty is reaching out to this guy. We should take this with us to see who else contacts him.” Kahn had told Randa he’d get a phone. If he stole this one, he was keeping his promise. Also, he wanted to play with it. “Maybe he’s targeting Phases…”

Energy cracked in the room, and then Job was there. The Earth Phase’s green eyes looked around Ben’s too-clean living room, settling on Rysimer. “We need to talk.”

“Whatever it is, we didn’t do it.” Rye protested, because Job always showed up to lecture when there was a problem. “Look for someone else to blame. We’ve been right here in Mayport Beach for days.”

Job arched a brow. “Except when Julius is in the Elemental realm, investigating Randa’s past.”

Yeah, that was another reason Randa was mad at them. Kahn sighed in frustration.

“We’re protecting Randa.” Rye insisted. “Ask her yourself, if you don’t believe us. She hired us, because someone is stalking her.”

Job frowned. “Who?”

“Maybe Saxon. Or maybe the human who lives here.” Kahn waved a disgusted hand around the condo’s white interior. “He’s been party planning with Ty, so who knows what he’s really up to.”

“Party planning, most likely.” Job said dryly. “It’s Gion’s birthday.”

“Either way, we’re going to find him *and* Sax. Give us a couple days and Randa’s stalking problem will be solved.”

Job silently weighed that explanation. “Your House can be very… intense. It’s good that you’re helping Randa, but I don’t want the Light Phases scaring her, even inadvertently. She deserves to feel safe.”

“We don’t scare Randa.” Rye bragged. “She likes us. We like her, too. We’re keeping her.”

Job eyed Kahn, still suspicious. Everyone knew about his hatred of anything and anyone associated with Parald.

“Randa’s joined the Light House.” Kahn announced.

“She said that?”

“*I* said that.”

Job studied him. “Randa’s great-grandfather was an Earth Phase, so I take some personal interest in her welfare. She could come to my kingdom. I’ve told her this, but I can be more assertive about it. I don’t want her at risk.”

“No one will hurt Randa.” Kahn refused to even acknowledge Job’s offer. “You have my word.” Randa wasn’t going to the Earth House. Not ever. She was staying with the Light Phases. She was staying with *Kahn*.

Job nodded, accepting that pledge. “Alright. A new kingdom will be good for her. Jerrod, of the Stone House did an abysmal job of protecting his subjects. Randa has had a difficult life, because he was a weak ruler.”

Kahn saw an opening to gather more information on Randa’s past. “Did her parents want her to Bind with Jerrod?”

“I don’t know. I recall them as cold, socially-conscious people, so it wouldn’t surprise me. They would’ve enjoyed having their daughter as a queen.”

Kahn gave an irritated scoff. “Randa wouldn’t have enjoyed it.”

“No. And Jerrod was King of the Stone Kingdom, so he should’ve seen to it that she was safe from her parents’ manipulations. Instead, she ended up in the Air Kingdom and…” Job trailed off with a sad shake of his head. “It’s my fault, too. The Council should have stepped in and deposed Parald before the Fall even began. We’re not making that mistake again. We need to be proactive about eliminating issues before they spread.”

Kahn opened his mouth to ask more questions, but Rye cut him off.

“How did you even find us here, Job?”

“I asked Julius, when he started questioning me about Randa, and I realized you were bothering her.”

“We’re *protecting* her.” Kahn stressed. “And we’re going to keep on doing it, so everybody had better adjust.”

Job tilted his head, like he was seeing more than Kahn meant for him to see. “Just be very careful with her.” He walked over to the window and peered out at the marina. “Have you two heard anything else about Vandal?” The segue seemed random, except Job was never random.

Kahn and Rye scowled in unison.

Vandal was not their favorite subject.

The Light House only bred heroes and villains. Vandal was their biggest villain. The former general had been the greatest military commander in Elemental history. Then he grew disillusioned. Angry. Jealous of the Council’s power. In the end, Vandal had been Banished from Elemental society, after attacking the Agora and attempting to seize control for himself. That should’ve been the end of his tale.

But now he was back and plotting anew.

Since Vandal was the second oldest Phase alive, he’d been tossed out of the Light Kingdom before Kahn was even born. He’d met the son of a bitch, though. Vandal had kidnapped Kahn’s cousin Mara, trying to get her to translate some ancient writing for him. Chason, Mara’s Match, had chopped off Vandal’s hand. Kahn had blinded Vandal in one eye. It still didn’t stop the bastard from getting away.

Vandal was massive. He was trained in combat. He was not giving up on his dumbass mission. (Whatever it was.) The man was a danger to the world. It was why there were only four people higher than him on the Light Phases’ Must Kill list.

“If we’d heard anything about Vandal, you’d already know it, Job. And he’d already be buried in a shallow grave.” Rye said succinctly.

“Kahn was taken prisoner by him.” Job arched a brow. “Do you remember anything that might be helpful to us?”

“I was mostly unconscious.” Kahn scraped a hand through his hair, annoyed all over again that he’d been caught off guard by Vandal. “Plus, he had me in some kind of energy bubble, so I couldn’t escape. Supposedly, I invent it in the future. I’m guessing he kills me to get it.”

Rye’s jaw ticked. “That traitorous fuck should be dead fifty times over.”

Kahn's eyes stayed on Job. "Vandal ransacked my home, stealing sketches and ideas I had for other inventions. I'm not sure whether any of it will help him or not."

Job put his hands behind his back, military "at rest" style, looking pensive. "There's no telling what other technology he has access to. Vandal's not only trained in warfare, someone gave him guns from the future. Things we've never even heard of could be at his disposal. Killing him will be complicated."

"He's got a head. We'll chop it off. End of complications." Light Phases were natural problem solvers.

Job almost looked amused. "Very direct, Kahn. It's a good plan. Hopefully, we can implement it in time. Vandal spoke of a day of darkness and light on the horizon. I think he's moving towards some goal, and we need to stop him from reaching it."

Rye was in full agreement. "The Light House is eager to stop Vandal from doing *anything* he wants to do. But we can't leave Mayport Beach, yet. Especially not Kahn. Randa wants to stay put, and he's going to do whatever she wants."

Rye wouldn't tolerate a separation from Tallulah Jayne, either. That coward wasn't bringing *her* up to Job, though. Nope, he was letting Kahn take all the heat. Typical.

Job glanced away from the window to meet Kahn's eyes. "I'd like Randa to find stable companionship. To grow closer to someone who understands what she's been through. Isaacs, for instance, might be…"

"She's not going to '*grow closer*' with Isaacs!" Kahn interrupted, his temper sparking at the very idea.

"Kahn…"

"No! If you want me to 'understand' something about Randa's life, then you'd better just tell me. Otherwise --fuck you-- I'll find out on my own. I've got time. I'm not going anyplace."

"It's obvious you have strong feelings for Randa." Job observed, unperturbed by all the swearing. Cross and Kingu were his nephews. He was used to it.

Kahn lifted an uncomfortable shoulder. “So?”

“So, do you even know what the feelings *are?*”

“What does it matter? I’m feeling *something*, and it’s telling me to stay with her.”

Job looked curious. “It’s just strange. Usually, only Matches stir up such intense, complex emotions so quickly. And she already had a Match.”

“I don’t give a shit.”

“Fair enough.” Job seemed amused by that dead-end of a response. “I have no real objection to you spending time with Randa. But if she has a negative reaction to the Light Phases’ continued presence, you’ll have to back off.”

“I’m not going *anywhere*.” Kahn repeated in a lethal tone. “Randa came to *us*. Not you. And we’re not moving from her side until *she* tells us to go.”

Rye crossed his arms over his chest, backing up Kahn’s assertion.

“And if she does tell you to go, you’ll leave her be?”

Kahn considered Job’s question. “Yes.” For a while. Until she calmed down enough to talk to him again.

“Very well. That’s how we’ll approach this, then. Just try not to ruin things by being too… you.”

Rye grunted. “Damn good advice. Kahn, write that down.”

Kahn flipped him off.

“Fight your compulsion to always say the wrong thing. Listen to Randa. Be patient and supportive. That’s my advice. And don’t murder too many people.” Job hesitated. “Unless your target is Saxon.”

“He’s a walking corpse, whether he’s the stalker or not.” Kahn assured him. “Sax scares Randa. *No one* gets to scare Randa. Not ever again.”

“She’s right to be scared. Saxon’s dangerous.” Job rubbed at his forehead, looking troubled. “Getting rid of him will save lives in the long run.”

Kahn blinked at that very un-Job-like remark. Typically, the Earth King liked to color inside the lines. Now he was okay with the Light House hunting down stalkers and ending them without a trial? Job must be really worried about the state of the world, if he was skipping pages in his precious law books.

Rye also seemed surprised. "Is this you being 'proactive about eliminating issues before they spread,' Job?"

"Saxon attacked the Water Palace, with my entire family and *my Match* inside." Job said flatly.

Yeah, okay. That explained it.

"Even without my personal feelings influencing me, it would be clear Saxon has to go. So does Vandal and probably the Dark King. Our enemies are growing and plotting. We're running out of options to protect the future."

"Maybe you've just been hanging out with the Fire House too much." Rye suggested. The Light Phases and Fire Phases had a longstanding, mostly-friendly, sometimes-deadly rivalry.

Job's face stayed sad but determined. "I've always done everything I can to keep peace. To avoid taking lives. But at a certain point, you must stop bad people from doing bad things. *Emphatically* stop them. Otherwise, they'll keep doing bad things forever." He met their eyes. "And allowing that would make us nearly as bad as they are."

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Thirteen

As a final element to muddy the waters, there are the vandals.

Walter A. Goffart

After a nap and some dinner prep, Randa was back at the police station for her shift. She'd told Sullivan she was taking the day off, but practicality won out. Her job was important and she needed the money.

She diligently worked at her desk, while Sullivan dealt with the mess at the floral shop. The Light Phases milled around the otherwise empty office. Mannus and Daven read through arrest files, laughing uproariously. They'd been with her all day, asking questions about human crimes and trying snacks from the vending machine.

Julius sat across from her, pondering the eternal mysteries of a stapler. He'd shown up half an hour before, looking contemplative, so Randa could only assume he'd spent the morning doing things she wouldn't like. Probably poking through every aspect of her past.

Kahn wasn't there. He'd gone with Rye to investigate Ben's condominium.

Which was fine.

Randa's fingers hit letters on the computer keyboard harder than necessary. If Kahn wanted to waste his time searching a condo, she wished him well. If he refused to listen to reason, it was none of her business. If he didn't want to spend the afternoon in her company, she didn't care a bit.

Bastard.

Things had been going so well! Why did he have to mess it all up?

"So, about Kahn…" Julius said abruptly.

Randa's head snapped up, half-afraid he'd read her thoughts and picked up on her tragic obsession. "What about him?"

“He isn’t so unreasonable to deal with, once you get past his unreasonable parts.”

Randa stared at him.

Julius cleared his throat and set the stapler back down on her desk. “What I mean is, Kahn never listens the first time. He’ll usually argue until you either agree with him or you give up entirely.” Julius paused. “But he’s also very, very smart. So, when he’s wrong, he’ll eventually realize it. He’ll reevaluate his position. He’ll learn. And that’s when you see the best of Kahn.”

Randa supposed there was some truth to that. Kahn seemed to have changed his opinion of her. Over the last couple days, he’d gone from insulting to downright protective. “When will he realize he’s wrong about Ben?”

“When he finds evidence that the human couldn’t be your stalker. Until he has irrefutable proof of Ben’s innocence, he’ll keep digging into his life. It’s just the way Kahn is.”

“And when will he stop digging into *my* life?”

“Probably never.”

Randa made an aggravated sound.

“Not because he doesn’t trust you.” Julius rushed to say. “He would *never* have fallen asleep beside you, if that was the case. You’re one of us now, like it or not.”

She did like it.

Randa collected travel guides, looking for someplace that fit her. She’d never found it before. But the Light Phases somehow fit.

Being around them felt more like home than anywhere else she’d ever been. That probably showed her mental decline, since she knew it wasn’t real. They wouldn’t even eat dinner with her! She wasn’t fully accepted by them, no matter what they claimed.

“It’s just when Kahn decides to care about someone, his devotion can be a bit…” Julius trailed off, looking for some vaguely positive way to finish that sentence, “passionate.”

“Pushy.” Randa corrected.

“That too. But he’s lost everything else he ever cared about.” Julius’ eyes stayed on hers, willing her to understand. “It closed him off and made him angry, every minute of the day. So to see him so invested in you? Smiling at you? Talking with you? It lifts a huge weight from all of us.”

Randa’s attention slipped over to Daven and Mannus, who were blatantly eavesdropping now.

Daven nodded. “This is the best Kahn’s been since the Fall.”

“Since before the Fall.” Mannus corrected. “He’s *never* been this reasonable. I don’t think he’s killed anyone in days.”

“That’s what has us concerned.” Julius tacked on.

Randa looked back at him, her eyebrows soaring. “You *want* Kahn killing people?”

“We want him to stay like he is now. The *real* Kahn. But it’ll only last if he’s with you. He’s too close to Gone Wild.”

“What’s that?” Randa asked before she could stop herself. She could hear the worry in Julius’ voice, and it made her stomach knot. Was something wrong with Kahn? …Besides all the obvious things?

“The older generations would whisper about it, back in the Light House.” Julius ran a hand through his blond hair. “When civilization lost its grip on a warrior and the forest called. Their energy begins to turn primitive.”

Randa’s breath caught in horror. “His energy is failing?”

“It’s jagged and out of control, just like he is. He’s,” Julius shrugged, “losing heart. When a warrior is Gone Wild, they’re swallowed up into the jungle, never to be seen again. Maybe they live out there, untamed. Maybe they die. But they aren’t a part of the world anymore.”

Daven and Mannus seemed uncharacteristically grave. They clearly suspected it was just a matter of time before Kahn disappeared like those lost warriors.

“Kahn is close to vanishing.” Julius summed up, confirming her terrible fears. “If you break him, it will be the end. I’m not saying it to scare you or pressure you. I’m saying it so you’re careful with him.”

“I have no intention of ‘breaking’ Kahn. I don’t think I could, even if I wanted to.”

“You could.” Daven and Mannus chorused.

Julius kept going, as if he’d spent time mentally preparing this speech and now he wanted to get it all delivered. “We *do not* want to lose Kahn. And you’re the key to making him better. We all see it.”

That sounded wrong. This Gone Wild thing seemed like a mental health issue and not a physical one. Mental Health issues weren’t dealt with by expecting someone else to “make them better.” Dr. Ashley would never let that fly in therapy. You needed to work on healing *yourself* from the inside out. It’s what Randa tried to do every day.

Julius leaned closer to her over the width of her desk. “Maybe you could placate Kahn a little? Don’t upset him. Cancel the dinner with Isaacs.”

“Absolutely not.”

Julius’ forehead furrowed in dismay. “But…”

Randa cut him off. “*No*. That would be the worst thing I could do. If Kahn is suffering from this Gone Wild thing, then he needs to face it. Not suppress it. He needs to confront the problem and fight back against it, so it doesn’t pull him under.”

It was a lesson Randa had learned in a dungeon and one that had kept her alive ever since. It was how a person became indestructible. She’d help Kahn master it, too. He had to stay alive. Anything else would break *her*.

“If Kahn ’fights back,’ there’s a non-zero chance he’ll kill Isaacs.” Julius said bluntly.

“Kahn might threaten that, but he won’t really do it.” Randa scoffed. Kahn *wasn’t* out of control. He was just stubborn and wounded and needed some support. “Getting through this dinner without hurting

Isaacs will give him confidence that he hasn't Gone Wild yet. Trust me. Self-regulation is very important."

"We could decapitate Isaacs and solve this whole problem." Mannus loudly whispered to Daven.

Vienna, Austria.

Marrakesh, Morocco.

"No one is decapitating Isaacs. He's done nothing wrong, and he's coming for pot roast. None of you get to dictate my friends."

Julius made a skeptical face at her defense of Isaacs, but resisted sharing his own feelings on the Air Phase. "It's not just about Isaacs being dangerous. That's not what we're objecting to."

"Although that should be enough." Daven muttered.

Julius ignored him. "You making dinner for *any* man would piss Kahn off. He can be very volatile when he's pissed off. He might not be able to 'self-regulate.'"

The Light Phases didn't want to eat her food themselves. They simply wanted to veto who she served it to. Because that made so much sense.

Randa crossed her arms over her chest. "There is a difference between helping someone and enabling bad behavior. Let Kahn navigate his feelings, and he'll make the right choice."

"What if he *doesn't*, though?"

"Of course he will! Kahn can do anything." Had they met the man? "In fact, he's *already* doing it. You said he's made huge improvements in a few short days."

Mannus, Daven, and Julius all frowned in consideration. The other Light Phases were worried about Kahn, but they couldn't strip him of agency or lower expectations. It wouldn't help him at all. Honestly, Elementals needed so much more awareness about mental health.

"You're the one who's been making him better." Daven argued.

"No, *he* is the only person with the power to do that."

Mannus wasn't convinced. "So what? We just stand back and let him go Gone Wild?"

"No, we're supportive. Which means no 'placating,' because it's disrespectful. Communication and respect are how people build equitable, lasting relationships." Randa paused. "…Not that Kahn and I have a relationship, of course. I just mean in *general."*

Julius' mouth twitched up, his shoulders relaxing. "Of course." She hadn't said exactly what he wanted to hear, but he didn't seem angry. He seemed thoughtful.

Mannus and Daven exchanged a look. "Dinner's going to be a murder circus."

"Yep."

Randa's patience reached the breaking point. She jabbed a warning finger in their direction. "You had all better behave tonight or I will kick you out. *None* of you are on my good side today." Her eyes swung back to Julius. "Don't think I've forgotten you've been asking questions about me in the Elemental realm. You had no right to…"

The phone on her desk rang, interrupting her rant. Randa quickly snatched up the receiver. She was in charge of the non-emergency line, which mostly consisted of people looking for lost cats and complaining about parking tickets. Still, she always took her job seriously. "Mayport Beach Police Department."

"You bitch!" Saxon's voice screamed from the other end of the line.

Randa's heart stopped, her frantic eyes finding Julius'. "Hello, Sax." She said as calmly as she could. With her free hand, she stabbed at the speakerphone button so the Light Phases could listen in.

All three of them were already on their feet, circling her desk. Dark expressions marred their faces. In that second, she remembered she'd hired these men to kill for her.

Saxon continued bellowing. "Whatever plan you've got in your stupid, bimbo head, it won't work."

"You're the one who's been threatening *me*."

“You don’t know what ‘threatening’ is. My brother was too soft on you. He never saw you for who you really are. ‘Oh, Randa deserves flowers!’ ‘Oh, Randa deserves chocolates.’”

“Flowers? Are you the one sending them?”

“You don’t deserve *anything*. You’ve always been a spoiled idiot, only good for fucking. You never learned your place, even with Parald.”

Randa winced.

“Where are you, Sax?” Julius asked, stepping in to shield her. Daven and Mannus were scowling at the phone like they wanted to leap through it and beat Saxon to death.

Sax chortled. “I knew it! I *knew* she was behind this. Did you think I wouldn’t find out that you’re searching for me, Light Phase?”

“You’re a criminal. Everyone’s searching for you.”

“Not like Randa is, though. That slut’s obsessed with me. I’ve always felt it. When Hekktor was alive, I’d watch her strutting around and I’d *see* how much she wanted me.”

Randa shuddered in revulsion.

“You know that Light Phases always find who we’re looking for.” Julius told him, his tone reasonable. “Why don’t you agree to meet with us? We’ll talk and maybe we can iron out this misunderstanding without any violence.”

“Fuck yourself. I’m not dumb enough to meet with you brainless apes. *No one* can find me.” Sax thought he was the smartest person in the world, so he talked and talked and talked trying to prove it to everyone else. He craved respect like a drug. “I’ll stay hidden until I’m ready to strike.”

“Who are you planning to strike? Randa?”

“I am the greatest Air Phase who ever lived! Not Gion. Certainly not that little shit Isaacs. *Me*. Everyone will see it soon. The Dark King is going to ensure that I finally have the position I deserve.”

Randa’s lips parted. “You’ve seen the Dark King? Who is he?”

“You’ll find out along with everyone else, when we reclaim the realm from the weaklings. He’s already elevated me to his right hand. He knows I can get things done!”

“Like what?”

“Things that your precious Light Phases have no idea about. With me and Vandal helping the Dark King, nothing can stop his rise. He’ll set the whole universe straight. Just wait and see what we’ve got planned.” Saxon hung up with a bang.

“Vandal would never work with a moron like him.” Daven muttered.

“He could be lying.” Mannus allowed, in a rare show of agreement with his brother. “But Job will still be pissed to hear that Vandal and the Dark King might be plotting something big.” He paused. “Well, as pissed as Job ever gets, anyhow.”

Randa slowly hung up the phone, trying to hide the way her hands shook. A few months ago, that horrible conversation would have sent her into hysterical tears. Being surrounded by the Light Phases made her feel safe enough that she could endure Sax’s voice, though. She wasn’t going to fall apart.

Daven and Mannus shifted closer to her, like they could see her struggling. They didn’t press her about it. They just stood there, trying to reassure her with their presence.

It worked.

Randa took a deep breath. “Sax didn’t admit to being my stalker. What does that mean?”

“Nothing. We’re going to kill him either way.” Julius leaned down to meet her eyes, his expression comforting. “Just like we’ll kill anyone else who threatens you, or who disrespects you, or who you just don’t fucking like.”

“I never asked you guys to be my bodyguards.” She muttered, determined not to depend on them. Reminding herself she was mad at them.

“You don’t have to ask. We will *always* keep you safe.”

“Because you still think I can fix Kahn?”

“Because you are *Randa*. You belong to the Light House. And we protect what’s ours.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Fourteen

He knew how to make himself comfortable,
and it was an important element in his comfort to be seated
next to the only persons in the place with whom he should care to associate.

F. Marion Crawford

Isaacs, of the Air House was never the most popular person at the table.

Usually, he was only allowed to share someone's dinner on sufferance or because he was too strong to get rid of without a fight. *Other* men got smiles and friendly receptions, while Isaacs fought for whatever was left over. He was used to it.

Today, though, he wasn't the outsider. Spending Sunday evenings with Randa was always the high point of his week, but this was even better than usual. Now, he had an audience to see that he was welcomed someplace nice and clean, like an honest-to-God person. That he was *liked*. In fact, he was the only man present who the hostess wanted around.

As he'd always suspected, being special felt *awesome*.

He lounged in his seat of honor at Randa's island table, thrilled with all the food she was setting out for him …and even *more* thrilled that the Light Phases had to sit there and watch him eat it.

He wasn't exactly sure why the other men were in her home. When he'd asked Randa about it, she'd just muttered something about helping them look for human Matches.

Isaacs wasn't really buying that, but he also wasn't pushing it. The Light Phases sure as hell weren't guests. That was all that mattered, for the time being. *He* was the guest, and he intended to enjoy his elevated status.

"Smells great." He told her truthfully. Ever since he'd lost his eyesight, Isaacs felt like his other senses had been growing more acute. The pot roast's aroma was incredible. "Thank you, Panda." He held up a hand as Randa passed by, and she gently brushed her fingers across his palm.

It wasn't a sexual touch. Isaacs and Randa saw each other in a completely platonic light. But Isaacs was a physical person. He craved contact, even though he rarely got it. Casual touching was frowned upon in the Elemental world, and Isaacs was hated by pretty much everyone alive. (And some people who were dead.) Nobody got close to him.

Randa sensed his struggles. If Isaacs put his hand out, she would usually respond. She was leery about anyone touching *her*, but she didn't mind touching him.

Kahn apparently minded. A lot. He let out an animalistic growl of warning from his position on the couch in the living room.

Huh.

Isaacs frowned slightly. That was interesting.

"Must you call me 'Panda'?" Randa asked with a long-suffering sigh, fixing a plate for him. She either didn't notice Kahn's attitude or she was ignoring it. "Do you want gravy?"

"Absolutely, on both counts. Best friends always have cutesy nicknames for each other. I saw it on a human sitcom. I call you 'Randa Panda,' you call me 'Super Genius Sexy Man.'"

"How about I call you 'Super Annoying Jackass Man'?" She was smiling. He could hear it in her voice. Randa was one of the few people in the universe who smiled at him. "Meat is at twelve." She set the plate in front of him, the food organized like a clock face. Because she cared enough to organized his food like a clock face.

"I've always fucking hated that fucker." Kahn bit off to the other men in the Light Phase language. The five of them were eating boxes of something that smelled a lot like untoasted cherry Pop-Tarts and brooding over Isaacs' hot meal.

"You're pissed about that phone call." Julius soothed, in the same dialect. "This is why I told you to avoid Randa, until you calmed down. She expects better from you than…"

Kahn cut him off. "I'm pissed about a lot of shit, *including* Isaacs! I should have slaughtered him long ago, regardless of Mara's objections. I *know* he did something to Soniham."

“No one could prove it.” Rye muttered. “We tried for years.”

“Because Isaacs is insidious. Of *course* he knows how to get away with murder. Isn’t he on our Must Kill list?”

“Number four.” Mannus piped up helpfully.

“We had to cross him off. We’re not supposed to kill Air Phases who denounced Parald.” Daven reminded them. “The Council says there’s been a truce ever since Amarna took over the Air House.”

“I didn’t agree to that.” Mannus argued.

“Regardless, Isaacs is a tricky son of a bitch, even without his sight.” Rye continued thoughtfully. “It’s why we were never able to slay him. You’ll have to plan it out, Kahn.”

“Or I could just stab him in the head.”

“I told you, sharing food means nothing in the Stone House customs.” Julius said, around a grudging mouthful of cold toaster pastry. “Or to Air Phases. Isaacs isn’t claiming the woman. They’re friends. Just calm down and eat your tart-pop.”

Isaacs glanced at Randa’s face, even though he couldn’t see it. His eyes picked up movement and colors, but it was like someone had affixed wax paper to all the details. It was a blur. Still, he knew exactly what she looked like. They’d come through hell together and, here on the other side, he’d learned how very special she was. How quirky and generous and kind.

How much she deserved some happiness.

His damaged eyes flicked over to Kahn, thinking.

“Have you decided on a cake design, yet?” Randa asked, taking a seat on her end of the island and disregarding the Light Phases’ muttering. She seemed determined to pretend they weren’t even in the house. Isaacs was happy to oblige.

“I’m thinking Care Bears.”

“Care Bears.” Randa echoed. “For Gion’s birthday.”

“Yep. Maybe with sparkles.”

“I’m not doing a sparkly Care Bear cake for Gion.”

Isaacs pouted. “Unicorns, then? Rainbow bunnies? It’s got to be something sickeningly, repulsively cute.”

“Absolutely not! I want to do something *nice* for Gion. I don’t want to be part of any sickening, repulsive pranks or whatever else you might be plotting. I want to make peace with him.”

“Pleeeeease?” He drew out the word in his most pitiful voice. “I won’t do anything for the party that Ty doesn’t approve. I swear. Just one little adorable cake. For me?”

Randa sighed. “I’ll compromise on penguins.” She still didn’t seem enthusiastic, though. “They’re kind of formal, at least. Does Gion like penguins?”

“Loves ‘em.”

“Alright, well, I’ll need to do some sketches before I bake it. Then, I’ll bring it with me to the Water House for the celebration.”

“Oh, terrific news on that front! Apparently, holding it in the Water Kingdom is a no-go. That girl from the future warned Chason about Gion’s birthday, and it spooked everyone.”

“How is that terrific news? It sounds ominous.”

“It’s going to be terrific for the *party*.”

“What did the girl from the future say?”

For whatever reason, Daphne, of the Time House kept showing up to meddle in the past. Isaacs wasn’t sure how it worked, since traveling from the future should have killed her. But she seemed intent on preventing some coming danger for the important players. That was probably why she’d never shown up to talk to Isaacs. He wasn’t important. He just worked with those heroic fucks, because…

Huh.

Actually he had no idea why he worked with them. Boredom, maybe?

“I don’t know what she warned Chason about exactly. And she’s never directly talked to the Water House, so I couldn’t eavesdrop.” Isaacs

paused. “Well, maybe she’s talked to Tharsis. I can never be sure what he’s up to.”

“Surely he’d mention it if a time traveler had contacted him.”

“Thar never mentions anything except Pokémon and canceled reality shows.” Isaacs shrugged the matter aside, because the future didn’t concern him. He’d probably be dead before it arrived. “Anyway, Ty was worried about all the vague portents of doom, so she moved the birthday to the human realm. She even hired a human party planner. He flaked out on her and isn’t returning calls, so *I* volunteered to take over. I’ve already found us a new venue.”

“What sickening, repulsive, completely inappropriate locale have you chosen for poor Gion?” Randa asked dryly, because she knew him very, very well. “The closest sewage treatment plant? A funeral home?”

“No, of course not. That wouldn’t be festive, at all.” Isaacs smirked a bit. “Gion deserves a birthday party to remember. So, I reserved…” he held up his palms and spread them in a wide arc, revealing his grand, artistic vision, “Happy Applewhite’s.”

Randa choked on a bite of food.

“Human internet reviews all rave about the place. You can bring the cake there, right? It’ll be perfect.” He ate his pot roast, making an effusive “ummmmm” sound. “God, Panda, *no one* can cook like you. This is the best meal I’ve ever had.” He paused meaningfully. “And the most amazing part is… I know you made it just for *me*.”

He swore he could hear Kahn’s blood pressure redlining.

Randa didn’t notice. “I’ve seen the commercials, Isaacs. I’m positive that Gion doesn’t want to celebrate his birthday at Happy Applewhite’s.”

“Relax. He’ll love it! He’s got a great sense of humor. Look at that Darth Vader cape he wears everyplace.”

She rolled her eyes. He could tell. “Just out of curiosity, when he goes whining to the Water Phases, and the Water Phases go whining to Job, and Job *Banishes* you… where will you be living?”

Isaacs grinned. “Here with you, of course.”

“Of course.”

Isaacs’ powers could compensate for his impaired sight. He knew where everyone was in the small house. He kept the air energy constantly circulating, like a kind of radar, letting him pick up on every minute movement. So he very clearly felt Julius put a hand on Kahn’s shoulder, keeping him from lunging off the couch and going for Isaacs’ throat.

Julius leaned closer to Kahn, lowering his voice. “Randa wants a relationship based on communication and respect. Stay calm and show you can provide that.”

“Isaacs is the one fucking things up, not me.”

“She will not see it that way. At present, he is more welcomed here than we are.”

Isaacs smiled smugly.

They kept speaking in the Light Phase language, which was kind of funny. Isaacs’ great-uncle, Gyvo, had been a Light Phase. He’d been a miserable old bastard, but growing up Isaacs had been forced to spend summers with him.

Kahn might have known Isaacs was fluent in the dialect, except the males in the Light Kingdom had detested Isaacs. …Which honestly was typical, regardless of where he went. Even as a kid, Isaacs found it hard to connect to people, especially other boys. It almost always led to fights. Fuck knew why. Probably because they were all assholes.

Instead, Isaacs preferred to spend his time with girls. *Nice* girls. Sweet, serious, rule-following members of the opposite sex. Who didn’t feel the need to get into pointless pissing contests, and who enjoyed playing puzzle games, and who kept him in line whenever he threatened to go too far into villainy. They didn’t care if he could prove himself in sword training. They just wanted to talk about complicated fantasy novels.

As a boy, instead of dealing with the miserable little Light Phase Tarzans running around the thick jungle, Isaacs had hung out with Kahn’s studious cousin Mara. And Mara *loved* languages. She’d taught Isaacs way more than he’d ever wanted to about their guttural dialect.

Not for the first time, he thanked Gaia that his handful of friends were all intelligent women. You just learned so damn *much* from them.

"Before I go making up the guest room for you to move in, you should know that living in the human realm requires restraint." Randa told Isaacs in a wry tone. "You hate restraint. The first time your favorite food truck closed down, you'd be wanted for murder."

"All the more reason for you to do the cooking." He argued. "And I'll be at your beck and call every evening to try out recipes. A loyal audience of one. It's the *least* I can do."

Randa laughed.

Kahn snapped. He shook off Julius' restraining hand and vaulted to his feet, tossing aside his box of Pop-Tarts. Isaacs braced for confrontation, but the Light Phase stalked past him, prowling into the kitchen. Cupboards slammed open. Drawers slid out and crashed closed. A steady stream of muttered curses was audible to everyone.

Randa continued to ignore him. "So, how's Nia's pregnancy going?" She asked Isaacs determinedly.

Kahn marched over to the island, dumping a plate and silverware onto the tiled surface.

"Nia's great." Isaacs assured Randa, munching on a perfectly cooked carrot. Hopefully, they really were good for people's eyes, because his could use all the help they could get. "She's thinking of calling the baby 'May,' because she and Cross met here in Mayport Beach."

"How sweet."

"That damn Air Phase will drive Kahn to Gone Wild." Rye muttered to Julius.

Isaacs pretended total ignorance.

"This is why we all needed to be here tonight." Julius agreed. "Randa believes he can self-regulate. I'm not so sure. If he's not plotting to kill Isaacs, he's plotting to kill Ben."

Who the hell was Ben?

“Kahn always does the most self-defeating shit.” Rye concurred. “Murders will frighten Randa away. Why can’t he just follow proper courtship rules, like I am with Tallulah Jayne?”

Who the hell was Tallulah Jayne?

Julius sighed. “I am trying to trust in Randa’s assessment, but she might have too much faith in his control. Perhaps we should jump him out of here.”

“Don’t fucking try it.” Kahn snapped in the Elemental language. “I am ‘self-regulating’ just fine.” He seized one of the tall chairs, flipped it around so he straddled it, and sat down directly next to Randa.

Everyone stared at him.

Except Isaacs. He just ate more pot roast, enjoying himself immensely.

Randa gaped at Kahn. “What are you doing?” She blurted out in astonishment, forgetting to ignore him.

“Eating.” He took a piece of pot roast for himself and thudded it onto his plate. “Why? Do you have a problem sharing your food with me?” It was a direct challenge.

Randa was quiet for a long moment, watching him. “No.” She finally decided.

“Good.” He defiantly shoveled some pot roast into his mouth. “Because, I…” He stopped short, as if something had surprised him. “Goddamn.” He quickly ate some more. Then, he shook his head like he wasn’t sure whether to be happy or furious. “You made *this*,” he pointed to his plate, his gaze still on Randa, “for *him?*” He made an incredulous gesture in Isaacs’ direction.

“Who else would I cook it for? Isaacs is my best friend.”

“I’m a lucky man.” Isaacs said and meant it.

Kahn slanted him an undoubtedly feral look. Then, he leaned over and grabbed the entire platter of pot roast.

Randa’s eyebrows climbed as he upended *all* the meat onto his own plate.

“My God…” Julius whispered in something like awe. “She was right.”

“Rye, can Kahn take all the food for himself?” Mannus whined in the Light Phase dialect.

“He just did.”

This was seriously the funnest dinner Isaacs had ever attended. “Randa’s got a real talent, doesn’t she, Kahn? I told her she should go to one of the humans’ cooking schools to learn more of their recipes. She’d enjoy it.”

“Those schools are too expensive.” Randa demurred.

Isaacs scoffed. Human money was easy to come by unless you were determined to make it hard. “For Gaia’s sake, *I’ll* pay for it. Your pride gets in the way of logic sometimes.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I can survive just fine on my own.” Randa continued to watch Kahn. “Um… Would you like some potatoes, Kahn?”

“What are those?”

She pushed a bowl of mashed potatoes towards him in answer, apparently fascinated by the Light Houses’ idea of table manners.

He reluctantly stopped inhaling his pot roast long enough to taste them. “…God*damn*.” He heaped about five pounds of mashed potatoes onto his already overflowing plate. “What the hell could this human cooking school teach that you don’t already know?”

Randa blinked.

“Why are you not eating?” Kahn *plunked* a giant scoop of potatoes onto her plate, as well. “You’re too thin. Eat.”

“I think you’re lovely, Panda.” Isaacs cooed. Although… Damn it, he cared more about her health than pissing off Kahn. “Perhaps, you could eat a *little* more, though.”

She gasped in dramatic outrage.

Isaacs quickly held up his palms. “It’s just I can feel that you’ve lost weight, since…” He stopped short.

Randa shook her head almost imperceptibly. The Air Powers felt it. She hadn’t told Kahn about Parald. That wasn’t good. A lot of people already knew. If the Light Phase heard it from someone else, it could be an issue.

“…since you came to the human realm.” He finished with barely a hitch, shielding her secrets, even though it was a bad idea.

Randa sighed in relief.

Kahn noticed his slight pause, though. Isaacs could feel a stillness in him, now.

Shit.

“If Kahn is eating, can we eat?” Daven implored. “I want to try the potato mash, too.”

Julius shrugged. “Ask Kahn. It’s his woman who made it.”

Daven was *not* going to ask Kahn. All four Light Phases were observing him as if he was a bomb about to detonate. It was probably the smart play. You could only push a man so far before he went over the edge.

And Isaacs delighted in crossing lines. Especially when it worked as a distraction. Diverting Kahn’s attention away from his small slip was the least he could do. And if it aggravated the Light Phase, so much the better.

“Well, I’m stuffed.” Isaacs sat back, like nothing unusual was happening. “*Almost*, anyway. What kind of dessert are we having today, Panda?”

“Apple pie.” She said faintly, her attention back on Kahn and his massive appetite.

“Why, that’s my very favorite!”

“I know. It’s why I made it for you.” Her voice was sterner now, like she was catching onto his game. “That’s why I make it for you *every* week.”

“Just for me.” Isaacs said with a condescendingly contented nod in Kahn’s direction. “But you can have a small piece of *my* apple pie, Light Phase. I insist.”

Kahn muttered something particularly vile about Isaacs’ parentage. Having known his mother, Isaacs didn’t bother to take offense. Kahn was probably right about her.

Randa got to her feet, eager to escape the simmering tension. “I’ll get the pie.” She sent him a pointed look. “Isaacs, *behave*.”

Damn but he liked good girls. Ty, Mara and Randa were his best friends. They always tried to whip him into shape. It wouldn’t work, but he appreciated the attempt.

“Always.” Isaacs held up a hand as she went by, smiling as she brushed her fingers against his palm. “Thank you, Randa.” He said in a serious tone.

Randa meant more to him than basically anyone else in the universe. If he’d known her in the Air Kingdom the way he knew her now, he would have moved faster. Made different choices. Tried to kill Parald himself. It would’ve done no good and meant his own death, but if he could go back, Isaacs would do it anyway. At the time, he’d been concerned about keeping them both alive. Now, he wanted more than that. He wanted her *happy*.

If he had a chance to atone for his failure in some small way, he’d take it. Even if the opportunity presenting itself happened to be a raging dickhead barbarian.

She paused by Isaacs’ side, her fingers still touching his palm. “I made ice cream, too. You like caramel, right?”

“I like *you*.” Isaacs assured her. And he didn’t like many people, so that meant a lot.

Randa squeezed his hand, because it meant something to her too, and she headed for the kitchen.

Kahn’s knuckles clenched around the handle of his knife, clearly considering his “stab Isaacs in the head” idea. Strongly.

“It’s a bad plan.” Isaacs murmured in the Light Phase dialect, as soon as Randa was out of range. “Seducing a nice girl gets a lot more challenging after you’ve beheaded her favorite dinner guest.”

Kahn focused on him with a wrathful intensity.

The other Light Phases exchanged wary looks.

Isaacs smirked. If the Elemental realm was a high school movie, the different Houses would all represent different cliques. Job was *for sure* the class president. The Fire House were the hoodlums who broke into lockers and mouthed off to the teachers. The Magnet Phases were the overachieving, ROTC recruits. The Water Phases were the bright and artsy ones, who hung out in the library and were assured full-ride scholarships. The Wood House were the All-American football team, wholesome and popular. Air Phases were the spoiled, preppy kids, picking on the underclassmen at lunch and cheating their way to straight-As. The Light Phases were the poor boys from the wrong side of the tracks, longingly watching all the respectable girls walk by. On and on, everyone had a group.

Except the dropouts.

The dropouts blew-off graduation, because they’d already figured out it was all a crock of shit. They were weirdos, who wore weird clothes, and liked weird music, and didn’t fit in with anyone. …And they were okay with that, because --fuck this town-- they were outta here the minute they turned eighteen. In the meantime, they hung around the parking lot to mock the assholes who still woke up in the morning and went to class and tried.

That was Isaacs.

The Elementals’ very own dropout.

People tended to underestimate a dropout, because he’d squandered his future. But from the outside looking in, a disgraced loner managed to see a hell of a lot. Even one with screwed-up eyes.

Kahn very carefully set the knife down, like he wasn’t sure he trusted himself not to use it on Isaacs in some grisly way that was sure to

ruin dessert. “We should talk, Air Phase.” He snarled, also using the Light House tongue. “Alone.”

“Absolutely.” Isaacs agreed with cheerful menace. “Just as soon as I’ve had my pie.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Fifteen

**Now, by the light of the lamp, it was possible to see his smile distinctly;
it was very complex, and expressed a variety of emotions, but the predominant element in it was
undisguised contempt.**

Anton Chekhov

Kahn glowered at Isaacs, hating the man for more reasons than he could even count.

Isaacs grinned, nothing but arrogance and craziness on his face.

The two of them were standing on the front walk of Randa's house, each one braced for the other one to attack. Sadly, Kahn *couldn't* attack the smug little shit. Randa wouldn't like it, and he wasn't inclined to have her pissed at him. (*More* pissed at him.) Also, he needed information that Isaacs held. No one in the Air House told Julius details about Randa and Parald. Any mention of their former king had the average Air Phase shutting up and shutting down.

Isaacs wasn't an average Air Phase, though. He was the most dangerous Air Phase alive.

To Kahn's mind, he always had been. It wasn't just jealousy messing with his perceptions. Saxon might be the House's most wanted criminal, but he was really just a gigantic thug. Amarna might be the Queen, but she was too clever to do anything incredibly stupid. Gion might be the strongest, but he was tamed by his Match and his new life in the Water House. Even before that, he'd had some lines he wouldn't cross.

But Isaacs had nothing to mitigate his psychotic ideas and criminal violence. He was unconstrained chaos and villainy, wrapped up in a mocking smile. The fucking lunatic would burn down a room he was standing in, if he thought it would piss off his enemies.

And he was only getting worse.

As an Air House soldier, Isaacs had at least had some kind of parameters for his life and behavior. Since he'd lost his eyesight, he did whatever the hell he wanted with an almost suicidal glee. Kahn's cousin Mara had always favored the man, but even she was worried about his descent into anarchy.

Isaacs had no House that would claim him. No family. No Match. No… *anything*. Someone with nothing to lose was almost always on the edge of Gone Wild. The phrase came from the Light House, but the phenomenon it described was universal to Phases. Maybe to humans, too. Someone with no ties to civilization, throwing off rules and relationships in favor of savagery. Disgrace, despair, destruction, death. It was as predictable as the dawn. Isaacs was on the "destruction" stage. He would no doubt annihilate himself and anyone in close proximity very soon.

Kahn didn't want the crazy son of a bitch anywhere near Randa. Unfortunately, he didn't have much say in the matter. …So maybe he could use Isaacs instead.

Isaacs made a speculative noise, as if reading his mind. "You're planning to claim her." He deduced. "Interesting."

"I want you to answer some questions."

"She likes hydrangeas and dark chocolates. Her favorite movie is *Now, Voyager*. She bakes a hell of an apple pie. And I don't think you have a chance in hell of getting her to fuck you."

"That's not what this is about."

Isaacs' head tilted. "You want to do more than just claim her." It wasn't a question. "A Binding maybe?"

"She's mine." Kahn said flatly.

"Randa can't give you children to help sustain the Light House. She already had a Match."

"She never Phazed with Hekktor. How did she know he was her Match?"

Isaacs made a considering face. "I imagine if you find your Match, you know it even before you Phaze. That's what people say, anyhow. Your

energy reaches for the person. Your feelings begin to get all tangled up. Your instincts scream that she's the one, even though it makes you insane to consider it." His eyes were such a light shade of blue that they were nearly colorless. Like a serpent's. They gleamed with sudden reptilian understanding. "Hey… Any of that happening to *you*, Kahn?"

Kahn wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of answering. "Why do you come around here?" He demanded instead. "What do you want from Randa?"

"I want pot roast and apple pie. Why are *you* here? And don't bullshit me about her helping you find a human Match. You're not looking at any other woman, and we both know it."

"Someone's threatening her. She hired the Light Phases to keep her safe."

Isaacs frowned, straightening. "Threatened her how?"

"Sending her flowers, with notes that say he's always watching her. It could be a human named Ben Foster."

"So kill him. Is a single human really too much for you to handle?"

"I'll handle him just fine, once he comes out of hiding."

"The Light House is supposed to be the best hunters in the realm." Isaacs declared, like he was reading Kahn's frustration. "How can some random boy hide from you?"

"He couldn't. Not on his own."

Isaacs considered that answer. "So who's helping him?

"Exactly. You ever know any Air Phases to team up with humans?"

"Good God, no! Even we have standards. Why?"

"Randa thinks Saxon is the stalker. He called her today, trying to intimidate her. He could be working with Ben."

"Saxon? Plotting with the humes and sending flowers?" Isaacs scoffed. "No. Since you're apparently incapable of tracking down *anyone*, I'll find Sax and kill him myself, just to be sure. But it's not his style. He

might drag her off by her hair, but a prelude of psychological torment is completely beyond his capabilities."

"*I* will deal with Saxon. *You* will stay out of it."

Isaacs arched a brow. "You're so commanding. Women must love that."

Kahn ignored the taunt. "No one threatens Randa and lives. The Light Phases will make sure Ben and Saxon are both dead men."

"Maybe the human's *already* a dead man. Maybe Sax killed him, for some reason. Maybe that's why you can't find him."

"For his sake, he'd better hope so. However Saxon killed him, I could make it worse."

Isaacs chuckled, an unholy sound that fed on suffering.

"Tell me about Randa and Parald." Kahn ordered abruptly. That was the real reason he'd cornered the Air Phase. Isaacs had information that no one seemed willing to reveal.

Silence.

Isaacs' face became unreadable. He didn't make some wiseass remark. He was just… quiet.

Kahn's stomach knotted. Randa was already pissed about the Light Phases asking questions about her past, and here he was doing it again. But he had a real bad feeling, and he needed to know the truth, if he was going to handle this right.

"I would like to think she was with Parald willingly." He tried, because he was fucking *praying* for that at this point. The alternative was so much worse. "Did she want to be with Parald… or did he force her?"

More silence.

Kahn squeezed his eyes shut. "Shit." He whispered, as all his darkest suspicions became fact.

"Shit." Isaacs agreed without expression.

Kahn took a deep breath, his head pounding. "How long did he have her?"

“A week.”

“*Shit*.” He brought his arms up to squeeze the sides of his head, his brain on fire with rage and images of what must have happened to her over those seven days.

“Whatever you’re thinking, it was worse.” Isaacs assured him flatly.

Oh God… Kahn crouched down, so he could rest his forehead on his knees. “I want him dead.” He ground out. “I just want him fucking dead.”

“He *is* fucking dead.”

“I want to be the one who murdered him.”

“We all want that.”

Kahn swallowed, trying to think. “And what the hell is the matter with *you*, letting the entire realm think she was in the Air Palace by choice? She’s being attacked with eggs and called a whore!”

“Job knows what happened. Gion and the Water Phases. Saxon and some of the Air House. Probably, Sullivan Pryce suspects.” Isaacs’ voice was unapologetic. “If Randa wanted more people to know, she’d tell them herself. I won’t break her confidence.”

Tonia hadn’t wanted anyone to know, either.

Shit, shit, *shit*.

“What am I going to do?” He whispered to himself. “How do I fix this?” Kahn was someone who liked to fix things. Take them apart and make them better.

“You don’t fix it. You survive it.” Isaacs moved closer, crouching down so they were at eye level. His white-blue gaze saw very little and far too much. “That’s how you get through anything. That’s how you become indestructible. You just keep on *surviving*, no matter what.”

Randa had said something very similar, the first day the Light Phases had come to Mayport Beach. Kahn met Isaacs’ milky eyes. “You told her she could survive Parald.”

“And she did.” Isaacs smiled without humor. “You learn a lot about survival in the Air House. Randa and I have experienced shit that we will *never* discuss. We’re still here, though. Parald’s not. We won. So now we just lock up the darkness and move on.”

“You can’t exist like that forever.” Kahn knew that better than anyone. “You can shove it down, but the darkness eventually comes back up. It calls you, until you’re Gone Wild. That’s already happening to me and you. You want it to happen to her?”

Isaacs paused, as if he knew full well what that expression meant. His great-uncle had been a Light Phase. Kahn remembered that. Remembered this man as an undersized boy, with too-fancy clothes, and bookish ways, and a snotty attitude. The other Light Phase youths had been larger. Stronger. More physical. They’d tormented Isaacs whenever he came to visit. All but massacred him on the training fields. Left him bruised and lying in the dirt, at the end of endless days.

Until Isaacs’ insidious mind devised a plot to get even.

Soniham, the main bully, had simply disappeared. No one knew where. No one knew how. No one could prove who. …But the remaining boys had all known Isaacs was behind it. The Air Phase’s small smile at the memorial service had said it all.

“I’d never want Randa to be like me.” Isaacs said quietly. “I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.”

Kahn exhaled heavily and straightened back up. “So, we’ll try this my way.”

“You think you can save her?”

“I think she can save *me*.” He was sure of it, actually.

For two years, he’d been sliding into oblivion and now he had a foothold on solid ground. Determination filled Kahn, as he saw his path to happiness and warmth and a future. It led away from the dark, twisted nothingness of the jungle.

It led towards Randa.

“She’ll fight you.” Isaacs predicted, also rising to his feet.

“She will.” Who could blame her? “But I’ll win. I’m a persistent bastard.”

“I’ll help her get rid of you, if she asks.”

“Then I’ll win against you, too. You know that I’m not going to stop. What would *you* do, if you found someone who could save you?”

Isaacs smirked, his expression full of terrible thoughts. “*Nothing* can save me. I’m already Gone.”

That was probably true. “I believed the same thing, up until a couple of days ago.” Kahn told him anyway and headed back towards the house. “When you’re as lost as we are, you’ve got no choice but to hunker down and wait for rescue. Sometimes it comes.”

“Always make it her choice.” Isaacs called after him.

Kahn stopped and glanced back over his shoulder, surprised by the serious tone.

“Reach out to Randa, but never make contact unless she reaches back. That’s how I do it. She is always in control of touching my hand or offering me food or inviting me into her home. I stay still… and she approaches.”

Kahn slowly nodded.

Isaacs nodded back. “If you fuck this up, I’ll dump your body where I dumped your buddy Soniham. No one will ever find you. And then I’ll go back to enjoying my Sunday pot roasts.” Beneath the grisly threat and the admission of homicide was an offer of peace.

“Fair enough.” Kahn agreed.

With that, the two of them had just struck a tentative accord.

Becoming allies with Isaacs didn’t thrill Kahn. Isaacs didn’t seem particularly overjoyed, either. They were both more comfortable with open hostility. But they valued Randa more than they hated each other.

…And if they were going to be stuck together for the next millennium, they might as well direct their antipathy towards a more deserving target.

“How do you feel about being bait?” Kahn asked, working it all out in his mind.

“Bait?” Isaacs gestured around the Florida landscape. “To lure crocodiles or pythons?”

“To lure someone who really fucking hates you.”

Isaacs slowly smiled.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Sixteen

Whenever a large sample of chaotic elements are taken in hand…
an unsuspected and most beautiful form of regularity proves to have been latent all along.

Sir Francis Galton

Kahn walked back into Randa's house to find all the other Light Phases staring at him. "I've claimed the woman." He announced in their dialect. "She's mine."

No one seemed surprised. There was a one hundred percent probability that they'd been listening in on his conversation with Isaacs, but even without hearing the confrontation, it had been clear for days what Kahn planned to do. Even he knew that.

"You are making the right choice." Julius clapped him on the shoulder. "I see how it will be between you. Randa is the one."

"I know." Kahn said simply, because he did know it.

Julius beamed. "She had total faith that you wouldn't kill Isaacs. I wasn't so sure, but you proved her correct. She understands you."

"I *almost* killed him." Kahn admitted. "But I knew that she'd be pissed."

"See? She already helps you to be a better man." Julius nodded at that irrefutable proof of Kahn's newfound generosity. "We'll give you some time alone with your woman. We can scout the neighborhood. I prefer sleeping outdoors, anyway."

"I don't." But Mannus went trudging after him.

"We should go check on Tallulah Jayne." Rye decided in a suspiciously innocent voice. He'd stopped obsessively brooding over the future and started obsessing over the redheaded human instead. It wasn't necessarily an improvement.

"Randa said to stay away from her until your date tomorrow." Kahn reminded him. "She said to do otherwise would be 'creepy.'"

“Well, we’re not going to let Tallulah Jayne *know* we’re checking on her.” Rye rolled his eyes, like that should be obvious. “We’re going to surreptitiously lurk in the shadows outside of her home. That only becomes ‘creepy’ if she notices.” He smirked. “We will not be noticed.”

Kahn didn’t see the point in arguing. Having met Tallulah Jayne, he doubted Rye’s late-night loitering would upset her. She’d probably claim she had a vision about it. “Just make sure someone is outside *this* house, guarding Randa.”

“I’ll do it.” Daven volunteered. “Since you’re claiming the woman, does this mean we can eat her food? Because I really want to eat Randa’s food. Tart Pops are disgusting.”

Kahn considered it for a beat. He didn’t particularly want to squander Randa’s delicious meals on the other Light Phases. Granted, it was unlikely that his new mate would cook for him any time soon. Maybe ever. But if she *did* cook for him, she’d surely stop again if he left the others to starve. Her customs were perplexing.

“I will ask her if you can eat her meals.” He grudgingly decided.

“Thank Gaia! See if she’ll prepare us the cow meat.” Mollified, Mannus allowed himself to be shoved out the door. Rysimer slammed it behind them.

They made enough noise that Randa came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a small towel. She’d just finished loading the dishwasher. (The Light Phases had offered to help her. Randa had scoffed and said she didn’t have the money to replace all the plates they’d break.) “Where are the others going?”

“Checking the perimeter.” Kahn didn’t consider that a lie. They were Light Phases. They were always checking perimeters. They’d surely do it at some point that night.

Randa arched a brow, not buying it. “Rye wants to go spy on Tallulah Jayne, doesn’t he?”

“He swears he will be very surreptitious about it.”

“Good Lord.” She rubbed her forehead in resigned exasperation. “Why am I even bothering with you guys?”

“Because you know we’re idiots, who will die alone without your help.”

Randa met his eyes.

Kahn gave her a helpless shrug, hoping he didn’t say the wrong thing, for once. “The Light House has not had a woman with us in a very long time. I’m sorry we’re fucking it up by asking questions you don’t want asked, and making demands on your time, and taking over your life.”

She sniffed in irritated agreement.

“I’d promise we’d get smarter, but that might be aiming too high.” He said honestly. “I *can* promise that we will never hurt you. Because we like you, Randa. A lot. And we want you to like us back. So, maybe you could keep that in mind, when we fuck up.”

She looked at him pointedly.

“Because *I* like you. And *I* want you to like me back.” He stipulated, spreading his palms out in surrender. “Even when *I* fuck up.”

She sighed and didn’t say anything for a long moment. “This double date Rye is planning with Ashley and Julius is sure to be doomed.” She muttered in a far less hostile tone.

“Probably.” Kahn agreed, taking that non sequitur as an olive branch. He was willing to discuss whatever Randa wanted, even though he didn’t much care about Rysimer and Jules love lives.

He was solely focused on his own.

He sat down on the irritatingly tiny sofa, because it would make him seem less threatening. Kahn didn’t want to loom over her. It might cause her to fear him.

“But I didn’t kill Isaacs at dinner tonight.” He wanted some credit for that. “The others will have to follow my example of self-restraint and behave at dinner tomorrow.”

“Tallulah Jayne is the one I’m really worried about. I don’t trust her to do right by Rye. She’s so spoiled and flighty and just *awful*, in so many ways.”

Kahn couldn't disagree, but there was nothing to be done. "Rye says his energy is calling to her." If it felt anything like what Kahn experienced near Randa, there was no way Rysimer could ignore it.

Randa heaved a sigh. "I think setting her loose with Julius, Rye, and poor Dr. Ashley will lead to more arrests. Or maybe a podcast where Tallulah Jayne tricks Rye into explaining the entire history of Elementals to unsuspecting humans worldwide."

"Uh-huh." Kahn tried to concentrate on her words, but it was hard. His gaze traveled over Randa's face, struck anew by how stunning she was. She'd always been the most gorgeous woman he'd ever seen, but somehow she got more and more beautiful the longer he knew her.

"They're going to need supervision." She said, focusing intently on drying each one of her fingers like it took the utmost concentration. "We need to go with them on this double date."

Kahn jerked back to the conversation. "Huh?"

"Julius and Rye. We should go with them and make sure they don't do anything stupid."

"You and me… go on a date?"

"Well, *we* wouldn't be on a date." Her cheeks flushed. "We'd just be supervising *their* dates."

"Yes!" Kahn agreed enthusiastically, shocked by his good luck. "*Yes*, great idea." This could be an opportunity for her to begin softening towards him. Julius and Rye could do whatever the hell they wanted, and he'd focus on wooing his own woman. What were the odds that she'd suggest such a brilliant opening for him? "We should go on the date. To supervise everyone else's dates."

Randa nodded, looking everywhere but him. "I'll make reservations at the restaurant."

"You should give me the rest of your phone number, so we can coordinate the planning." He tried a smile. "I'm very good at texting."

"I doubt you've ever texted anyone before in your whole life."

That was an accurate guess, but still… “I’m good at texting *you*. Let me prove it.”

“I’m not giving you my phone number.”

“Just tell me one more digit of it, then. That can’t hurt anything. What can I do with one little digit?”

“Three.” She said with a roll of her lovely eyes. “And anyway, there’s nothing to coordinate about this date. I already know that Tallulah Jayne expects to go to the fanciest place in town. It’s down on the pier, so it will be expensive.” She sounded resigned about the cost.

Kahn was good at strategy. She’d fight if he told her he was paying for her meal, so he employed misdirection. “Rye and Jules need to pay for *both* of us.” His tone went indignant. “It’s their duty.”

“That wouldn’t be fair.”

“You’re their Matchmaker. Ensuring they don’t screw up this human dinner is part of your job. Since we’re doing this for them, they foot the bill. They must show their prospective mates that they can provide for them.” That part was usually showcased through hunting prowess and not just buying the women food, but the logic still made perfect sense.

Even Randa seemed halfway convinced. “I suppose it could be seen as --like-- my per diem?” She allowed, making it sound like a question.

“It *is* that.” Kahn agreed with utter certainty, although he wasn’t sure exactly what it meant. They were speaking Elemental, but the phrase sounded human. The exact definition didn’t matter. Getting her fed mattered, and this was the way to achieve that goal. “Would you be going to this restaurant on your own?”

“Of course not.”

“See?” He waved an “it’s all settled” sort of hand. “No one who cooks like you, wastes their time with other people’s food.”

Her eyes flicked over to his. “You really liked dinner?”

“Was I too subtle about my enjoyment?”

“No.” Her eye twinkled. “I don’t think you’re capable of subtlety, Kahn.”

He lifted a shoulder, not denying it. “It’s easier just to say what I feel. I loved dinner. None of us were fans of those cherry Pop-Tarts. I should warn you the others are going to want your cooking now, too.”

“Aren’t they scared I’ll poison them?”

Kahn heard the edges to the sharp question. Belatedly, he realized their customs had hurt her feelings. *Fuck.* “It means a great deal in Light House culture when someone prepares a meal for us and we accept it.” He rushed to explain. “It’s a sign of love and respect and commitment.”

“Trust.” Randa summed up sourly.

“*Family*.” Kahn clarified. “We only do communal meals with family. …And during courting rituals.”

Randa’s lips parted in surprise.

“Thank you for sharing your table with me.” Kahn said very formally, just as his mother would have expected him to with the girl he had chosen. “It was an honor.”

“You’re welcome.” She whispered.

“I would like to cook for you in return.”

“You cook?”

“I try. At least I used to.” Kahn gratefully steered the conversation towards something less fraught. “It won’t compare to your food, but I learned some basic recipes for my sisters.”

“Okay, then. It would be nice to share a kitchen with someone again.” Randa gave a small smile.

“For me, it would be the first time sharing a kitchen. None of the girls liked cooking, so it fell on me to keep us fed.” He paused. “Prinny liked to bake, but that was a whole different problem, because she was horrible at it. The worst possible baker you could ever imagine. She once nearly poisoned the whole family with a red frog cake.”

Randa’s expression brightened. She enjoyed hearing about his sisters. He’d noticed that the night before. It struck him that she was lonely. So was Kahn, but at least he knew what it meant to have siblings,

and his cousin Mara, and a House that cared about him. Randa had never had that experience.

"Was the cake shaped like a red frog or was it flavored with red frog toxin?" She asked with interest.

"Both." A grin tugged at his mouth. "It was a hell of a birthday."

Randa snickered the tiniest bit, and Kahn felt a rush of satisfaction. *He* had done that. He had made her happy, just for a minute.

"I didn't know the Light House celebrated birthdays." She edged half a step closer to him. "Most Kingdoms don't bother, since Phases get so many. The Water House is very intent on having one for Gion, though. I'm supposed to make a penguin cake for it. Maybe your sister would've liked that."

Holy shit! She'd moved *towards* him, just like Isaacs said she would. Kahn forced himself to stay still. "Prinny would've loved to see your cake. And she'd love Gion's party at Happy Apple-whatevers, too. Especially if Isaacs is going to sabotage it somehow. Prinny enjoyed a good prank."

His sister had never missed a chance to laugh. She'd died young, but she'd lived every single day she was here. Kahn found some measure of peace in that knowledge.

"I can't believe I agreed to go to Gion's party." Randa rolled her eyes. "He and I are not on the best terms, so I thought participating could be a peace offering. But I already know Isaacs will ensure the whole thing turns into a disaster."

"Fuck him." Kahn had no idea why Gion and Randa didn't get along, but he was fully ready to blame the smirking idiot in the sinister cape. Next to Isaacs and Saxon, Gion was the least likable Air Phase. Really *none* of them were particularly likable. "Gion's always been an asshole."

Randa shook her head. "It was my fault, not his. I was very desperate when I left Parald. I wasn't acting rationally. I lied to Gion, pretending to be his Match."

"You pretended to…?"

“He didn’t believe it.” Randa waved a hand, cutting him off. “It was so stupid. But Parald wasn’t growing bored as quickly as I’d hoped he would. And I was scared that he’d kill me, if I didn’t do as he…” She broke off, like she’d just said too much.

Kahn waited, his jaw locked.

She cleared her throat. “I think I’ll go to bed.” She quickly headed for her room. “Good night.”

Kahn took a deep breath. “My sister, Tonia, loved drawing.” He said, hoping his sisters could lead him through this. “I told you that, right?”

“Um, yes. You did.” Randa’s steps slowed. “You said she was an artist.”

“That’s right. She loved finding new spots to sketch. Tonia was always exploring. Wandering off, deeper into the forest than was safe. I would yell at her for it when she got back, but she had a mind of her own. She’d do it again and again. Until one day, she came back from the forest and she was… different.”

Randa hesitated, her hand on the knob to her room.

“Tonia stayed in her bed for about a week. Wouldn’t eat. Wouldn’t talk to anyone. When any of us touched her, she’d stiffen up or shout or jerk away. I could hear her sobbing all hours of the night.” He stared at Randa’s back. “Finally, I had had enough, and I confronted her. Demanded to know what was wrong. After an hour or so, she told me that she’d been raped.”

Randa’s shoulders tensed, but she still said nothing.

“Three men had cornered my baby sister by a river and raped her.” Kahn leaned forward, his eyes on Randa’s still form. “And she didn’t tell me. I guess because she was afraid I’d be mad at her for disobeying, in the first place. She blamed herself, even though it was *not* her fault. It could *never* be her fault that evil men hurt her. It was *their* fault. No one else’s.”

Silence.

“So after that, I held Tonia and told her that I loved her. That I would help her heal. That those men would not get away with hurting her.

I slept on the floor of her room every night until she felt strong again. It took a long time, but Tonia didn't give up."

"Did they arrest the men who raped her and Banish them?" Randa asked, still not turning around.

"No."

"They never found them?"

"No."

A pause. "Did *you* find them?"

"Yes."

She glanced at him over her shoulder.

Kahn stared back at her without blinking.

Randa nodded. "Good." She cleared her throat and looked away, again. "Good night, Kahn."

"Good night, Randa."

She opened her door and stood at the entrance for a beat. "Maybe your sister wasn't afraid you'd be angry at her for disobeying you. Maybe she was ashamed that she made the choice to live."

Kahn tilted his head, listening.

"Sometimes you have to decide whether to fight and die… or submit and live." Randa continued, her back still turned to him. "That's not easy to explain. Especially to you."

"Why especially to me?"

"Because it would be hard for someone so physically strong to understand what it's like to be overpowered. For someone so uncompromising to know what it's like when you realize that it's surrender or death. …And that you want to live."

"Surviving is the *only* choice." Kahn assured her flatly.

"Isaacs told me that, too."

“He’s right. You think I give a shit about the fight Tonia put up? I only care that she came home to me and I had a hundred more years with her. She did what she had to do to get out of there alive. That’s all that matters.”

Randa swallowed hard and turned towards him, a film of tears covering her eyes. “It’s just… you blame yourself, when you’re forced to…” She stopped and swallowed again. “You think maybe you should have fought harder, or thought of a way out, or that you did something to bring it all on. Or if your powers weren’t so wrong…”

“*No*.” Kahn interrupted. “You should’ve done *exactly* what you did. You should have survived. No matter what, you *survive*, Randa. Then you come home, tell me what happened, and I help you kill everyone who hurt you.”

Her damp eyes met his, searching.

Kahn held her gaze, willing her to believe him.

“Parald’s already dead.” A tear slipped past her guard, trailing down her cheek.

“I wish I could have killed him.”

“You would’ve had to wait in line.”

“Light Phases don’t wait in lines. We just shove everybody out of our way.”

Randa’s mouth curved, and it made his chest feel tight. “I wasn’t even supposed to be in the Air Kingdom, you know.” She swiped at her damp face. “I think about that sometimes. That I was trying to avoid one horrible man, and it led me straight to another.”

Kahn slowly got to his feet, unable to stay still. “Someone else hurt you?”

“Not the same way, but…” She lifted a shoulder in a shrug, like it didn’t even matter. Although they both knew that it did. “A long time ago, a dashing king was desperate to Bind with me, if you can imagine that. Like something right out of a fairytale.”

Jarrod, of the Stone Kingdom.

“We weren’t a Match of course.” Randa went on. “He didn’t care, though. He didn’t care about *me*. He just wanted to possess me. Own me. I wasn’t even ninety-three, yet.”

Kahn’s teeth ground together. Randa was exceptionally beautiful. And there were so many monsters in the world. Kahn would track down all the ones who ever set their filthy sights on her and make them pay.

“He never physically hurt me, so it was hard to explain how scared I’d get in his presence. My parents kept insisting that I be alone with him, and I could see he was just getting more and more…” She shuddered.

“Did he attack you?”

“He offered me a cage to live in, so I’d never escape. I *did* escape, though. My powers aren’t very strong. Stone energy often manifests… wrong. Our powers are recessive, for whatever reason. My great-grandfather was an Earth Phase. My parents said his DNA diluted my potential.”

“Nothing about you is wrong or diluted.”

She stayed quiet, as if remembering many different events, all at once. “Stone Phases can freeze people in place. One touch of our powers and they’re like statues. But with me, the effect never lasts long. It’s more of a secondary power. Even so, Parald put plastic manacles on me, so I couldn’t use my energy on him.”

Kahn cringed. He couldn’t help it.

Randa didn’t notice, still lost in her memories. “But I froze that first son of a bitch.” She said, almost to herself. “Just long enough to run away, before he could lock me in his castle. He’s the one I almost killed. I told you about that, remember. I wish I’d really done it.”

Kahn would do it for her. Gladly.

“My parents wouldn’t listen when I explained what happened. They just cared about me becoming a queen. My grandmother would have protected me, but she’d just passed away. Hekktor, though… I knew him from working in the Agora?” It came out like a question, and she sniffed back more tears. “He was a file clerk and I was his secretary. And when I

came into the office that day, he immediately saw how upset I was and offered to help."

Kahn decided he didn't hate that old man, after all.

"Hekktor was a gentleman. Very safe. Very respectable. No one ever questioned our connection." She took a few steps towards Kahn and his breath caught. "Until you."

"I'm unexpectedly insightful."

"You're pushy." She corrected tartly.

Kahn figured he could work with that, because he'd finally gotten her talking. Once she began, she didn't stop. Good. Let her bleed it out like a poison. He wanted her to tell him everything. He wanted her to know he *knew* everything and that it didn't matter. Then, they could make something new on solid ground.

"When I left with Hekktor, my parents disowned me. I didn't care. I was safe for a long time, after that. Then Hekktor died in the Fall and I was all alone." Her voice broke. "I loved him. Maybe not the way real Matches should love each other, but he was *everything* to me. Like a real father."

Kahn's head tilted.

"After he was gone, I was depressed for a long, long time. And then when I surfaced, I realized I had nowhere to turn. No other Houses were taking in Air Phases, and I was an Air Phase by marriage. My parents were dead in the Fall. None of the other Stone Phases cared. Eventually, Parald came and dragged me right out of the house. I know Saxon egged him on. He was always watching me. I *know* he suspects that Hekktor lied about us."

Kahn tried to follow all that. "Lied about… being your Match?"

"We weren't really a Match. We weren't destined for each other, and our powers didn't connect. But humans never have those things when they get married, and they seem happy enough. Hekktor and I were excellent friends and that was plenty for me. And for him. He'd never found his actual Match, so he was happy to have a companion."

Kahn blinked.

Randa scrubbed another hand over her cheek, trying to regain control. “He was very nice. Very safe and kind. He taught me to cook.” She hesitated. “He was older. I told you, he had a medical condition. We weren’t able to be intimate with each other. Everyone accepted that was why we didn’t have combined powers. We just said we couldn’t Phaze, which was technically true. We couldn’t. We weren’t a Match. But I was safe.”

How many times had she just used the word “safe?”

“My sister…” He struggled to find the words. “Tonia didn’t trust anyone to get close to her afterwards.”

“That’s exactly like me.” Randa nodded. “I especially don’t like people behind me. When I was taken from my home and brought to Parald, I was grabbed from behind. And then he…” She shuddered again. “I just don’t like it.”

“I’ll be careful to always approach you from the front.”

“It doesn’t bother me so much, when *you’re* behind me.” She admitted. “Just everyone else.”

Fuck, if that didn’t simultaneously fill him with pride and make him want to cry.

“And I’m getting stronger. I can feel lust, now. Dr. Ashley thinks that’s a big step.”

He took another deep breath, somehow keeping his voice calm. “Well, nothing can break you. You’re indestructible.”

“I am.” She sounded pleased with herself. She should be. “Did your sister eventually heal?”

“She did. Tonia always preferred women, but I think she was born preferring them. Surviving her assault just made her more open about it. Just before the Fall, she became smitten with a very smart, very argumentative girl from the Metal House. They hated each other, until they didn’t. I like to think they would’ve discovered they were a Match, if they had more time.”

“I’m glad she was happy. Someone else’s crimes do *not* define who we are. Only we have that power.”

“That’s right.” Kahn agreed. It took a hell of a lot of work to rebuild after a hit like Randa had taken and she’d done it. She was strong as granite.

He wasn’t.

Randa seemed calm and in control, now that she’d told him her story. Kahn was barely hanging on, though. His emotions were beginning to break free. He’d never been good at hiding them. Kahn squeezed his eyes shut, helpless fury threatening to erupt, now that she’d gotten through her story.

Goddamn Parald. Chason had hacked that bastard apart, and his death had still been too easy.

The lights flickered, as his energy pulsed out, wanting a target. Wanting to explode. He was so *fucking mad* that the Wildness was pulling him towards…

“Do you suppose that Tonia and I would have been friends?” Randa asked in a grave tone. “I think we would’ve gotten along famously. I wouldn’t have held her questionable choice in brothers against her.”

Kahn’s eyes snapped open, flying to her face.

Randa raised her brows innocently, but there was a spark in her dark gaze. She was teasing him! She’d seen how enraged he was, and she was trying to guide him away from the darkness, back towards the light. Back towards her.

Kahn’s chest clenched with tenderness and respect and longing and a thousand other emotions he couldn’t begin to name. His powers settled, no longer roiling with crazed anger. Now they just wanted to swirl around Randa.

“All my sisters would’ve loved you.” Forgetting to wait for her to approach him, he reached out to touch her face with the back of his hand. For the first time, his skin brushed against hers.

…And the Phazing energy went wild.

For a fraction of a second, Kahn couldn't process it. He instinctively yanked his hand back, half-afraid he'd just zapped her with static electricity.

Randa's eyes got huge. "Oh, Gaia." She whispered in terror. While Kahn stood there, struggling to think, she bolted for her room, slamming the door shut behind her.

Kahn wasn't stupid. He understood everything, but it took him a couple of seconds to accept it was real. Once reality dawned, he was running after her, shouting her name.

"Randa, don't jump!" He stopped in front of the closed door, his hands braced on the frame. "Don't jump. It's not safe for you to leave here unprotected."

Silence.

Kahn kept talking, his voice desperate. "I'm not going to come in there. I swear on my sisters' souls. You can stay right where you are and be safe." That was the word she needed to hear, so he kept saying it. "You're safe. I'm not going to hurt you. I would never hurt you. You're safe."

Still nothing.

Then, Randa engaged the lock on her door, bolting it against him.

Instead of angering him, the metallic click of the flimsy lock sent relief shuddering through Kahn's body. She knew --She *had* to know-- that a cheap lock on a hollow-core door was useless to keep him out. He could've ripped the damn thing off the hinges with one hand. She was telling him she didn't want him in her space and seeing if he'd respect the barrier she'd created.

He could do that.

He could do anything she wanted, just so she stayed in the house with him.

Kahn took a loud and deliberate step back from the door, ensuring that she heard his feet retreating. "See? I'm not coming in." He repeated, just to be sure she understood. "The door stays shut, until you're ready to open it. You're safe, right where you are."

Randa didn’t answer. But she also didn’t jump off to parts unknown. She was trusting him.

Okay.

Good.

Now what?

It was still hard to think beyond the gigantic explosions of shock and excitement and fear detonating in his brain, but he needed to figure out a strategy. Kahn ran a hand through his hair… and the impact of the situation finally hit home.

Holy shit!

It was *already* figured out. Everything. All of it. His whole life. It was back on track in a way he’d never really believed possible. Joy filled him. A feeling of rightness and gratitude.

For days, he’d harbored some tiny, persistent hope that Randa was his Match. The feeling had been building inside of him, even when he was afraid to acknowledge it. It had seemed too impossible to even wish for. A fantasy.

But somehow it was true! He’d just been handed a miracle. An actual fucking miracle. He knew that his sisters must have had a hand in it. That they’d seen him struggling and guided him to where he belonged. To Randa. To his Match.

For the first time in two years, Kahn grinned.

Holy shit, he’d finally found his Match.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Seventeen

**And, therefore, it is observable in those sprightly gentlemen about the town… that,
in the company of ladies of virtue and honour,
they are silent and disconcerted, and out of their element.**

Jonathan Swift

Kahn called in the only person he could think of who might be able to help him. Mara, Queen of the Magnet House quickly arrived at Randa's small home, grace and femininity personified in her lavender dress. "Kahny, what in the world am I doing here at this hour? Your message was very odd. I'm not…"

"I found my Match." Kahn had been sitting on the floor outside Randa's door. He bounded to his feet, quickly moving to intercept his cousin. "Randa, of the Stone House is my Match."

"Oh!" Mara's mouth parted in surprised happiness. "Well, that's incredible!" Her hands clapped together. "I don't know her, but I've heard she's *very* beautiful. Wait…" Mara frowned. "Didn't she already have a Match, though?"

Kahn ignored that and pointed towards the bedroom. "She's locked in there. Get her out. Please." He didn't care if calling his little cousin made him look helpless. He *felt* helpless. On his own, he would fuck this all up. It was inevitable.

Mara blinked. "Why is she locked in the bedroom?"

"She's scared."

"Of you?" Mara gave a soft chuckle. "Why, that's just silly. I know Light Phases can be intimidating, but…"

Kahn cut her off again. "Hang on." He headed back over to the bedroom door. "Randa?" He gently knocked. "My cousin Mara is here. I need her advice. Can I talk to her about everything?"

Silence.

“If you don’t want her involved, I can tell her to leave.” It belatedly occurred to him that Randa might not want a total stranger hearing about this situation, even if Mara was renowned for her calm and compassion. Kahn wasn’t about to break trust with his new Match. “She’ll understand if I kick her out…”

“Do not kick the Queen of the Magnetland out of my home!” Randa shouted through the door, sounding scandalized. “My grandmother would die all over again from the social embarrassment. Tell Mara anything you want. You clearly need all the advice you can get.”

“Okay, great. I don’t suppose you’re ready to talk to *me*…?”

“No!”

Kahn winced and retreated. He was in the most important fight of his life, and part of winning a war meant picking your battles. That was exactly why he’d called in reinforcements.

Mara arched a brow. “She doesn’t sound scared of you.”

“She’s not.” He slowly shook his head. “But she’s scared of this situation. She’s scared of men.” His voice held a wealth of meaning.

Mara stared up at him.

Kahn stared back.

Understanding passed between them.

Mara’s eyes briefly closed. “Like Tonia?” She guessed with a sigh.

Kahn nodded. They had both been there when Tonia was recovering. They’d both seen it firsthand. “Parald.” The name was delivered like a curse.

“Too bad he’s dead, or you could kill that bastard.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“You’ll have to help Randa adjust to you. The Phazing energy will heal some. The rest will take time, but you’ll have lots of that. Don’t worry.”

“She’s going to renounce me out of fear. I know it. Also she hates me, most of the time.”

"A lot of people hate you, most of the time. But a Match will…"

He cut her off impatiently. "Can you get her out of there? I need to see her. I *need* her, Mari."

"I'll try." Mara patted his arm and headed for Randa's door. "Randa?" She gave a soft knock. "My name is Mara, of the Magnet House. To be honest, I'm coming into this blind, and talking to Kahn only gets me so far. You've met him."

Kahn made a face at her.

Mara kept talking to Randa's door. "I'd love to speak with you and get your read on things. I give you my word of honor; Kahn will stay here in the living area. It will just be me."

Nothing for a very long time.

Then the lock on the door disengaged.

Kahn could've cried with relief.

Mara sent him a smile and slipped inside the bedroom.

***

Randa had never met Mara, of the Magnet House, but she knew her on sight. All the Elementals knew Mara from the endless magazine covers and internet articles. She was one of the most famous Phases alive, because of her Cinderella romance with Chason and because she'd recently come back from the dead.

"Hello." Mara looked nothing like her menacing cousin. They both had black eyes, but that was the extent of their resemblance. Mara was willowy and elegant, with dark hair. Kahn was a huge, blond barbarian. Her manners were also better than Kahn's. Mara stood against the deep green wall, taking up as little space in the room as possible. She clearly suspected Randa needed a lot of distance to feel comfortable.

It was a good guess.

Randa crossed her arms over her chest, wondering why she'd agreed to talk to Mara, of all people. What would it achieve? Maybe she could

make an emergency appointment with Dr. Ashley.

"I'm so sorry to barge into your home uninvited. Kahn didn't give me any details when he called. I don't think he considered the propriety of it."

Randa scoffed at the idea of Kahn considering propriety *ever*.

Mara nodded, completely agreeing with that incredulous sound. "He can be a handful. I'm more interested in *you*, though. Maybe you'd like someone to speak to about the situation? Someone who knows Kahn and what a jackass he can be?" She grinned, as if that was a joke.

It didn't feel like a joke. This whole thing felt like a huge disaster.

Dublin, Ireland.

Tijuana, Mexico.

"If you don't want to talk to me about it, I completely understand. Just, if I could tell you *one* thing about the Light House?"

Randa didn't stop her, curious about what she wanted to say.

"The Light House breeds only heroes and villains. I'm sure you've heard that before. The phrase gets tossed around a lot, because it's true. And Kahn is a hero." Mara lifted a dainty palm. "That doesn't make him less of a jackass, though. He's incapable of saying the right thing. *Ever*. He's arrogant and grouchy. And overprotective… Gaia, is he overprotective." She shook her head in exasperation. "Mechanically, he's a genius, but once he 'fixes' something it only works in some new, weird way. That can be annoying."

Is *that* what happened to Randa's TV? She hadn't been able to watch *Antiques Roadshow*, because she now got six hundred unfamiliar channels. She couldn't find PBS.

"The man is basically my big brother. So, I understand all of his flaws." Mara assured her. "But Kahn *is* a hero. Not because of his physical strength or his bravery or even his shockingly high IQ… Because of his heart. And he's lost it since the Fall."

That was so much like what Julius had said, back at the police station.

“He raised my cousins and me. By himself. And he gave us *everything*. Our family was his only focus. Since the Fall, he’s had no one to love. Even I was gone. His entire heart was ripped away and it’s made him harsher. He was *always* harsh, but now he’s close to the edge of Gone Wild.”

“The other Light Phases believe that, too.” Randa admitted.

She understood their concern, especially since she’d felt Kahn’s energy. It had brushed against hers, dark and heavy. Primal. As much as her own powers had lit up at the contact, she’d also sensed the savagery swirling inside of him. The part of her drawn to barbarians didn’t mind the ferocity.

Kahn wouldn’t lose control of it.

“You’ve seen the tattoos on his arm? They’re Light House memorials, for people we’ve lost.” Mara rolled up her sleeve to show the delicate marks on her own forearm. “I’ve been so worried that I’d have to make one for him soon. He’s lost so much, he may not be able to come back.”

“Of course he can come back!” Kahn’s loved ones had apparently been on a deathwatch for him, since the Fall. “He’s the strongest person I’ve ever met.”

“He was half-feral, when I woke up from that coma.” Mara gestured to the door and the man beyond, who’d been brought to his knees and wasn’t sure how to stand back up. “This is an *improvement*. And this is as far as I can take him, by myself. As much as he loves me, he needs more. He needs to find his heart.”

Randa saw where this was headed.

“You are his heart, now.” Mara insisted. “His family. He’ll give you *everything*. That kind of devotion can be a little overwhelming. Believe me, I know. It’s a huge responsibility to be someone’s heart, like you’re his. But you will never have to question his loyalty. Or his commitment. Or his love.”

Randa closed her eyes.

“He’s waited hundreds of years to find you. If you give him a chance, you’ll see he’s always on your side. No matter what you do or say, no matter if you’re right or wrong, no matter if there is a horde of monsters charging at you or a hangnail making you cry, Kahn will stand beside you. He will stand in *front* of you, if need be. And he will fight the world.”

“He’ll fight *me*, when I try to stop him from following me everywhere.” She already had a stalker. The last thing she needed was another one. Especially one that she didn’t entirely want to avoid.

In fact, if Randa was being completely honest with herself --the way Dr. Ashley was always encouraging her to-- she could admit that she wasn’t upset about the Match. She was just freaked out and scared. Randa considered herself to be a pragmatic person, but the idea of having a real, actual Match was kind of… beguiling.

Even with her history, she knew Matches were special. Every Phase’s most desperate hope. Deep down, didn’t she want someone of her own? Didn’t she want Kahn? She’d been attracted to him from the beginning. Maybe she should just… try? But what if she *did* try and it blew up in her face?

And it probably would. Her luck was lousy.

Randa pinched the bridge of her nose, her common sense at war with irrational hope. “It’s not my responsibility to fix any man. Not even Kahn.” She stressed, just like she had to Julius. “It’s not healthy to try, either. And probably impossible to accomplish. I can’t make Kahn better. I can’t cure his Gone Wild.”

Mara looked stricken.

“But…” Randa tried to make sense of her own feelings. “I’ll help *him* find a way to fight it. And so long as he works to heal himself, I’ll offer support.”

Mara brightened. “That’s very fair.” She agreed eagerly.

“I’ll be responsible for my choices, but he needs to take ownership of his. I mean it. He doesn’t get to walk all over my boundaries.”

Mara lifted her palms like she was about to offer a wonderful alternative to millennia of avoiding her cousin’s demanding courtship.

“We’ll put down some strict guidelines, right from the start.”

“Kahn won’t listen to guidelines.” Randa scoffed.

“He’ll listen to yours.” Mara reiterated firmly. “Judge him by his actions. Let him prove himself. And if he fails, I give you my word, he will *not* bother you, again. You can renounce him and the entire Council will back you up. He’ll leave you alone.”

Randa frowned. Mara was Queen of the Magnet House. She sat on the Council. When she gave her word, it carried weight. “You can get him to do that?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not agreeing to this Match tonight.” Randa wanted to be clear. “I might *never* agree. Matches aren’t always the fairy tales we want them to be.”

“Just keep an open mind. *Talk* to Kahn. For his sake, as well as your own. If you’re genuinely incompatible, he’ll come to see it too.”

Randa chewed her lower lip. That was a reasonable point. Kahn was smart. If they gave their Match a chance and it just wouldn’t work, he’d realize it.

“I *know* Kahn.” Mara said, like she understood she was making headway with Randa. “I used to style his hair into silly pigtails and make him read picture books to me. He scares people away with his size and his attitude, but the man is a giant teddy bear. He will *never* hurt you. I swear it on my soul.”

Randa knew Kahn wouldn’t hurt her. Not physically. Right around the time he’d told her his sisters’ names, the man had stopped frightening her.

Mara kept talking, pinpointing all of Randa’s weak spots. “Kahn needs you, more than you need him. Even he realizes that. He’s not going to do anything to hurt you or ruin his chances with you.”

Randa crossed her arms over her chest, fighting the urge to run off to Palermo or Prague or Poughkeepsie. Trying not to let panic dictate her choices.

“What do you need to make you feel secure?” Mara asked.

Randa considered everything for a beat. Weighed her options --her fears against her hopes-- and decided to stay put. For now. “If I even *think* about giving Kahn a chance, he can’t touch me until I say so.”

“Of course not.”

“And he can’t yell and shout when he doesn’t get his way.”

Mara hesitated. “We’ll work on that one.” She temporized.

“And if I tell him I need space, he’s going to have to back off.”

“He’s giving you space, right now.” Mara pointed out. “You came in here and shut the door, and he stayed away.”

That was true. Kahn could’ve ripped the door into splinters, if he chose. But instead he’d remained in the living room, respecting her boundaries. Just as she’d told Julius, Kahn was in no danger of losing control. It made her feel more confident in her decision.

She trusted him.

“Anything else?” Mara prompted.

“I want it all to be *my* choice.” She muttered, thinking back to her therapy appointments. “*I* want to make the decisions.”

“That’s fair, too. I think Kahn’s already made his decision.” Mara looked encouraged by the negotiations. She headed over to open the door, standing in the threshold. “Kahny?”

He was already looming there, looking strained. His eyes went over his cousin’s head, landing on Randa. He exhaled in relief when he saw her standing by the window. “You’re still here?” He asked, even though she was obviously still there, and if she’d left, he surely would have felt it.

She managed a jerky nod anyway, staying far back from the door.

His mouth curved, and the effect was devastating.

Randa quickly looked away from the staggering appeal of the man. “Mara says you can follow some guidelines.” She let the skepticism come through in her tone. “That you’ll listen to me.”

Kahn didn't try to shove past the Magnet Queen to enter the bedroom. Instead, he grunted in agreement. "I'll do whatever I have to do. …So what do I have to do?"

"I get to decide when we Phaze." Randa blurted out. "I'm in control." It wasn't until after she said it that she realized she'd said "when" and not "if."

His eyes widened, like he heard the word, too.

Randa winced and glanced over at Mara, hoping that she could do this better.

Mara obligingly jumped in to help. (The woman should quit her job as queen and become a therapist. She'd put Dr. Ashley out of business in no time.) "Don't touch Randa first." She summarized for Kahn. "Don't shout when you aren't getting your own way. Give her space when she needs it. Let her choose."

"Done."

Randa shook her head. "He's agreeing too fast." She told Mara. "He doesn't mean it."

"I *do* fucking mean it!"

"He's already shouting!" She pointed at him in triumph. "I told you it wouldn't work. I told you…"

Mara cut her off. "You'll need a safe word."

Randa gasped. "No, we don't!"

"What the hell is a safe word?" Kahn demanded at the same time.

No way was Randa explaining it.

Mara gamely tried. "It's --I guess?-- a human… um… code to…" Her expression creased in discomfort, as she broke it down for her honorary-brother. "If things are going too far sexually and one human feels uncomfortable, they can say a word that they otherwise would never say to alert their partner that they need a break or…"

"I get it." Kahn interrupted.

“Thank Gaia.” Mara exhaled a long breath. “So, right. I propose we take the concept and apply it to you and Randa. If she says a certain word, you need to go away from her for a while.”

“How long is ‘a while?’”

“Until she comes to get you.”

His eyebrows compressed in outrage. “She’ll *never* come to get me!”

“Then that’s her choice.”

Randa blinked, seeing the possibilities of this idea.

“I’m not giving up my Match!” Kahn scowled down at his cousin, his face furious enough that grown men would back away. “Damn it, you’re supposed to be helping me keep her, Mari!”

Mara looked singularly unimpressed with his wrath. “Show Randa that you can be a *good* Match and she’ll always come for you.” She looked Randa’s way. “Do you agree to those guidelines?”

Randa chewed her lower lip. “I should just renounce him. It would be easier.”

Kahn went very still, like he was afraid any movement might send her running.

“You can renounce him anytime you wish.” Mara’s voice was soothing, her eyes on Randa. “No one can stop you. So there’s no risk in letting him try to prove himself, before you do. You owe it to *yourself* to see if this might work.”

Randa lifted a shoulder, looking everywhere but Kahn. Mara was convincing her, because she *wanted* to be convinced. She was self-aware enough to know it, but deluded enough to go along with it anyway.

“Fine. He’ll get frustrated the very first time I send him away, and he’ll end up renouncing me himself.”

“I’m not going to renounce you.” Kahn said in a very certain tone.

She glanced at him, their eyes locking.

“I’m solid as fucking stone, too.” He told her, remembering her little meltdown the day she’d brought the Light Phases to her home. “A boulder. Once I’m rolling towards a target, I’m real hard to move off course.”

“So you agree to the guidelines, Kahny?” Mara asked him.

Kahn’s forehead wrinkled, thinking things over.

Randa held her breath.

Kahn muttered a curse and shifted his shoulders, making up his mind. “Yeah. Fine. Just tell me the safe word.”

“Heart.” Randa said, because it was the first word that came to mind.

“Heart.” Kahn agreed with a nod.

“Perfect!” Mara positively glowed with satisfaction. “Welcome to the family, Randa. Kahn will try not to screw this up.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Eighteen

After all, this is a world of rock and water and air. It is elemental.

Janet Kauffman

"Who the hell is Happy Applewhite and why is he asking me about my favorite animal?"

Cross looked over at Gion from across the table. "You have a favorite animal?" He asked around a mouthful of eggs.

As they did most mornings, the Water Phases had gathered for breakfast together. Nia, and Brokk were in the kitchen making omelets. Tharsis was reading a paperback novel featuring a shirtless pirate kissing a voluptuous maiden. Ty was brewing Earl Grey tea. It was all very ordinary.

Except for the weird text.

"No, I *don't* have a favorite animal." Gion muttered and then considered the question more closely. "…Maybe a vulture." He turned his phone around so Cross could see the screen, where a cheery message was illuminated. "This can't be meant for me. How do I tell them to go away?"

"How the fuck am I supposed to know?"

"Well, do you know how they got my number?" He paused, thinking it over. "What *is* my number?"

"I don't know that, either. First of all, I wouldn't *ever* call you. And secondly, I don't know how to work a cellphone and don't want to learn."

Historically, few Phases used phones, for many reasonable reasons. They were difficult to work in the Elemental realm, requiring several different Houses cooperating to give them a usable signal. Also, there simply weren't that many Elementals left, so not a lot of people needed to keep in touch. And, obviously, smartphones were confusing for beings who'd lived for centuries without them.

The Water House was caught up in the fad of them, though. They loved toys.

When Ty realized Gion didn't have a phone --that he had *never* had a phone, because why would he have a phone?-- she'd given it to him. "You can send me all the new security measures you're always obsessing about." She'd teased.

Gion had received very few gifts in his long life. Getting one from Ty made it invaluable. Even though the phone vexed him constantly, he fought through his aversion, because it was a present from his precious Match. …But it was a hard battle.

"I don't understand how any random human can just *talk* to me." He complained. "Why is that allowed? I only want to accept *Ty's* texts. Happy Applewhite shouldn't be filling up my phone screen with his inanity."

"Could be a 'she.'" Cross pointed out, eating another bite of omelet.

"A woman? But I'm Matched!" Gion looked back towards the phone with a scandalized expression. "Wait, is Happy Applewhite attempting to lure me in? I saw that on one of Thar's TV shows. Humans use their phone to order sexual partners."

"Really? On the shows I watch, they just used them to track serial killers." If Cross had to endure television, he preferred true crime programs. He was a morbid bastard. "I've told you before, carrying that thing around is a bad idea given all the people you kill. It makes it *so* easy to follow you."

Gion disregarded that advice, dark suspicions filling his mind. "This is unacceptable." He turned towards the other end of the table. "Tharsis!"

Thar made a vague sound, his gaze on the pages of his bodice ripper. He'd been reading it all morning, paying no attention to the other people at the table. The smut level must have been off-the-charts depraved to keep him so engrossed.

"Thar!"

"What?" He dragged his turquoise eyes away from his lurid book.

“Fix this.” Gion slid the phone over to him.

Tharsis had taught Human Culture at the Elemental University before the Fall. He knew how to use their technology. Recently, Gion had noticed Thar navigating text messages on his own phone, although Gaia only knew who the Water Phase was talking to. It wasn’t like Tharsis put a lot of effort into building new relationships.

In fact, he didn’t put a lot of effort into anything.

Tharsis was quite possibly the smartest man in the realm. He just hid it well. These days, his colossal brainpower was wasted building million-piece Lego sets and listening to podcasts on anime. He didn’t seem inclined to even leave the palace.

The Water Kingdom was a seaside land, filled with sunny weather and artistic expression. The pastel castle overlooked a magnificent waterfall that poured into a clear blue sea. Breezy verandas and Minoan-style art abounded. Considering the Water Phases were free-spirited intellectuals who didn’t conform to schedules, Thar’s laid-back attitude wouldn’t have normally raised much of an eyebrow.

…Except it didn’t seem to be a *choice*, so much as it was an abdication of trying.

Since the Fall, Thar had put exactly zero effort into anything. Hell, he barely bothered to put shoes on, most days. He existed like he was on a perpetual, not-very-interesting vacation.

Tharsis caught Gion’s phone in one hand, as it skidded down the tabletop. “What am I fixing?”

“Some woman is texting me.” Gion flicked his palm towards the device, which was now contaminated by an unwelcomed presence. “I don’t like it.”

Tharsis snorted. “A girl is sliding into your DMs? Impossible.” He scanned the message, his eyebrows climbing. “Happy Applewhite?”

“You know her?”

“Not… personally…” Tharsis allowed in a slow voice. “But I’m pretty sure it’s not a ‘she.’ It’s a robot.”

“You’ve got robots hitting on you, now?” Cross made a face at Gion. “Fucking weirdo.”

“I don’t even know any robots!”

Tharsis sat up straighter in his chair and set down his paperback. “Never mind, I can take care of it.” He began typing on the screen’s tiny keypad, and Gion resented how easy he made it look. “What’s your favorite animal?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Vultures.” Cross supplied, talking right over Gion’s denial.

Tharsis guffawed and kept typing. “How do you feel about music?”

“I’m against it.”

Tharsis’ eyes flicked up to meet Gion’s brooding gaze. “Bear in mind, I live in this house, too. I know you play the violin, when you think nobody is listening. I’m going to tell Happy Applewhite you love classic country songs.”

“I detest classic country songs.”

“You play *classical* music. Kind of the same thing. It’s right there in the name.”

“No, it’s not the same thing and you know it.” Thar lived to make things more difficult. “Just erase the robot’s number. Or maybe I should just erase *you*.”

“Almost done. Do you have a favorite color?”

“Red.”

“Not black?” Tharsis made a *huh* sound. “I would’ve guessed black.”

Gion’s attention swung towards the door, as his beautiful Match came into the dining room. Sunset-colored curls bounced around her shoulders. “Red.” He repeated with utter certainty. “Angel, come save me.” He snagged her around the waist with one arm, tugging her down into his lap. He loved that he could touch her and be welcomed.

“You’re going to spill my tea.” She laughed, but did nothing to evade his hold. Instead, she leaned up to kiss him. “What’s wrong? You look even more frowny than usual.”

“Happy Applewhite is pestering me.”

“Who’s that?”

“A robot that infiltrated my phone to ask which animal I like best.”

“Vultures.” Ty supplied easily.

“Finished.” Thar set the phone down and slid it back towards Gion. “All handled. You can thank me later, Guy.”

Gion didn’t bother to correct him about using that damn nickname. He was too busy playing with his Match’s curly hair. She was endlessly fascinating to him. A small, colorful magical creature who made him believe in happily ever afters. Ty was all he ever wanted to focus on. “What are you doing today and how quickly can you cancel it?”

“I can’t cancel it. I have a very important appointment.”

He dipped his head to speak into her ear. “There are some things we could be doing upstairs that are *more* important.” He promised.

That got Ty giggling.

Gion’s mouth curved, charmed by her.

“I’m trying to eat.” Cross complained.

Energy slammed through the room, signaling someone had just jumped into the kingdom. Gion had plastic strategically positioned to keep intruders out of his home, but there wasn’t much he could do to stop them from showing up on the patios. Not unless Ty let him execute a few and string up their corpses as a warning to others, and so far she’d vetoed that idea.

It was frustrating.

He started to rise, instinctively shielding his Match from possible danger. It was probably Tessie and Job arriving for breakfast, but if it wasn’t the trespasser had about two seconds to live.

“Honey, I’m home!” Isaacs called out, strolling through the door like he owned the place.

“Aw fuck.” Cross muttered.

Gion had to agree. Technically, Isaacs lived in the Water Kingdom, but Gion did his best to forget that fact. The Air Phase came and went without notice, so sometimes weeks would go by without seeing him. Gion would just begin to think he’d gotten lucky and Isaacs had perished in some painful, awful, mysterious way… but then the asshole inevitably turned up again.

“Isaacs!” Ty beamed. “Right on time.”

“Hey, Ike.” Tharsis watched Isaacs over the top of his paperback. “You ever hear of Happy Applewhite?”

“The robot?” Isaacs asked breezily and then didn’t wait for Thar to answer. “You ready, Ty?”

A terrible suspicion took root in Gion’s mind. “Wait, your appointment is with *him*?” He gestured towards Isaacs, his incredulous eyes on his Match.

“Yep. Don’t even bother asking me what it’s about. It’s a secret.” She glanced Isaacs’ way, her face alight with mischief. “Don’t you tell him, either.”

Isaacs made a show of locking his lips closed with an invisible key. “I won’t say a single word.”

“Ty.” Gion took a deep breath. “Angel, I don’t like you having ‘appointments’ with Isaacs.”

She blinked up at him in mystification. “Why not?”

“Yeah, why not?” Isaacs chimed in, forgetting (or not caring) that he was supposed to be “not saying a word” to Gion.

Ty liked Isaacs, for reasons beyond Gion’s comprehension. Since he did everything possible to keep his Match happy, Gion therefore went out of his way not to murder the bastard.

But it was hard.

Gion had been a general of the Air House forces, and Isaacs had been his second-in-command. It was a hypercompetitive, violent environment, and it was impossible to turn off the animosity it bred, even here in the serenity of the Water Kingdom.

For whatever reason, Ty seemed to think of Isaacs as Gion's kid brother, though. Like their mutual hatred was just some kind of adorable sibling game of teasing and pranks.

He fixed his icy blue eyes on Isaacs, doing his best not to blast him through a wall. "Because I don't like it when manipulative dickheads coerce my Match into a sketchy rendezvous. What the hell could you two need to meet about?"

"We're running away together to Acapulco. What else?" Isaacs mocked.

Even knowing that was Isaacs' typical, sardonic bullshit, Gion still felt Air Energy angrily swirl within him. Instantly, Ty's powers were there, brushing against his, calming him. Connecting them. Gion's energy curled around hers, soothed by her presence.

"Be careful." He warned Isaacs in the coldest, most serious voice of his life. "There are some things you can't come back from."

"Isaacs, that was going too far." Ty scolded at the same time. "Play nice."

Isaacs made a face, but subsided.

"Lady Michelle is running away with Captain Hawke." Tharsis volunteered, turning the page in his romance novel. "I think maybe he's her long-lost stepbrother. Or he could be this guy who escaped prison with the stepbrother. And now he's *pretending* to be the stepbrother, while also pretending to be a nefarious pirate, but really he's a rich duke. We'll see. I'm only on chapter twelve."

Isaacs looked intrigued and sat down next to him. "Is there an audiobook of that?"

"Isaacs and I are not having a torrid affair in Acapulco." Ty told Gion in a comforting, humoring, not-taking-any-of-this-seriously tone. "You know that."

“Obviously, I know it. But why are you doing things with him today and not me?”

“God, you’re needy.” Cross lamented. “You used to be a scary badass. What happened to that?”

Murdering Cross would end the world. Sometimes it seemed worth the risk.

“Isaacs and I are going shopping, and I don’t want you to see what I’m buying yet. That’s all I’m going to say.” Ty pointed over at Cross and then Isaacs. “You two stop provoking my Match. I mean it.”

Cross held up his palms in surrender.

“Sorry, Ty.” Isaacs said with transparently false sincerity.

Suck-ups.

“You’re going shopping?” Gion scoffed at Isaacs. “Hopefully, it’s for a new apartment. You *are* planning to move out at some point, correct?”

“Oh, you’d miss me if I was gone.”

“Let’s test the theory. Leave.”

Isaacs sighed like Gion was being a drama queen and reached out to grab a croissant from a basket on the table. “You ready to go, Ty? I’m eager to spend the *whole day* together.”

“Yes! Let me just get my list.” She hopped off Gion’s lap, kissing the yellow streak of hair at his temple. “Be good while I’m gone.”

Gion made a “no promises” sort of sound, his attention on Isaacs. He waited until his soft-hearted Match was out of the room and then jabbed a finger at his former second-in-command. “Anything happens to her, I will peel your skin off like a banana.”

“Isaacs will take care of Ty.” Tharsis said mildly. “You’re being a control freak.”

Yes. Fine. Physically, she was safe with the son of a bitch. Isaacs had trained under Gion, so he knew how to fight, and he was protective of Ty. Gion acknowledged that, but it wasn’t the point. “I’m *not* a control

freak. I just want everything done the right way, which is *my* way, because I'm *right.*"

Cross rolled his eyes.

Isaacs bounded to his feet to face down Gion. "I was Ty's bodyguard long before you Phazed with her, dickwad. She *never* got hurt with me in charge. You sure can't say the same."

"You kidnapped her and tossed her in a dungeon!"

"Only once!"

Now Gion stood up, too. "If Ty so much as chips her nail polish under your watch…"

Job arrived, interrupting the threat. There was a flash of power, and then he was striding into the room. "Isaacs." He called, his tone more censorious than usual. "What is going on between you and Saxon?"

"Uh-oh, you're in trou-ble." Cross taunted at Isaacs in a singsong tone, eagerly watching his uncle bear down on his target.

Isaacs muttered a quiet oath and rolled his shoulders. It was the same stance he always assumed when he was about to bullshit his way through a confrontation.

Gion's eyes narrowed. He and Isaacs hated Saxon even more than they hated each other. Sax had served with them in the Air Phase army. There was no way Isaacs would ever work with the man, so it must be some kind of attack strategy. "You're going after Saxon?"

Isaacs' innocent expression didn't flicker. "Nope, not me."

Gion wasn't buying it.

Neither was Job. "You wandered around the Agora yesterday evening, socializing with everyone you saw." He informed Isaacs, stopping by the edge of the table. "I've heard about it from a dozen people, because it was so out of character."

"So I can't go to the Agora?"

"You never have before, unless you're attacking it. People are worried that you're plotting something again."

“That hurts.” Isaacs lamented and took a huge bite of croissant. “I’ve turned over a new leaf. I’m the support staff for you Happy Sunshine Heroes, now.”

Job placed his arms behind his back, military at-rest style. “I find it strange that you suddenly decided to visit the most populous area in the Elemental realm and chat for hours. No disagreements. No bodily injuries. No deaths. Instead, you were buying rounds in the tavern and telling stories.”

“I was in a gregarious mood.”

“Which inspired you to loudly proclaim that Saxon is a ‘pussy with a dumb haircut’?”

“That’s his barber’s fault, not mine.”

“You told Nero, of the Weather House that Saxon is sleeping with his own mother.”

“That’s a hundred percent true. I’m pretty, fairly, almost sure.”

“Saxon’s mother has been dead since the Victorian Era.”

“And that just makes it worse.”

“You told Abram, of the Wood House that Saxon once lost a fight to an ottoman.”

“He did! I have video proof.”

“Which you forwarded to Alder, of the Fire House… who then shared it with the entire realm.”

Isaacs pretended to be surprised. “Did he? Why, that rascal.”

Cross grabbed for Gion’s phone. “Send the video to this screen. I want to see it.”

“It’s just a simple clip where Sax falls on his ass.” Isaacs defended, even as he took out his own phone to oblige Cross. (Ty had bought him a phone made for visually impaired users. The woman was much too sweet for this world.) “I can’t see it anymore, but I’m not one to deprive others of the fun. Ask Gion about it, if you don’t believe me. He’s the one who set the whole situation up.”

Everyone looked at Gion.

“I did *not* set the whole thing up.” Gion explained tightly. “Saxon tripped over a stool in the armory and toppled into a weapons display.”

“What was a stool doing in the armory and why was there a camera filming it?” Tharsis wanted to know.

“It’s a mystery.” Isaacs shrugged expansively. “I think someone deliberately put it there.” He not-so-subtly pointed Gion’s way.

“The fall drove an axe through Saxon’s shoulder and nearly took off his arm.” Gion continued, tuning out that bullshit. “The door was somehow stuck, so Sax couldn’t get out. The men with him had to sew his limb back on without anesthesia, while he thrashed and screamed. *That’s* what’s on the video.”

Isaacs nodded. “It’s a great bar story. Everyone laughed and laughed.”

“It *is* funny, Job.” Cross chuckled, happily watching it on the phone.

“How was the armory door stuck?” Tharsis asked.

“I’ve always suspected Gion rigged it.” Isaacs mused. “All the evidence sure pointed to him being the culprit.”

“*You* fucking did it.” Gion snapped, because it was obvious. “*You* shoved the stool in front of Sax, *you* rigged the camera, and *you* locked him in the armory so he’d suffer. Then you tried to blame me for all of it, hoping Saxon and I would take each other out and spare you the trouble.”

“No one could prove that at the inquest.”

“Because *you* were running the fucking inquest!”

Job ignored all of them. “Why were you trying to pick a fight with Saxon last night?” He asked Isaacs bluntly. “Bad-mouthing him in that bar is sure to lead to trouble, and you know it. Is this lingering animosity from the Air House?”

“Everything I do is interpreted as aggression.” Isaacs adopted an offended tone. “Why can’t I tell amusing anecdotes about an old

acquaintance, without it being some huge plot? I'm trying to make new friends, and you're bitching at me for buying drinks."

Gion rolled his eyes, because that was yet more bullshit. "You weren't trying to make friends. You're only ever friends with naïve women, who use their good reputations to bail your ass out of trouble."

"For your information, fuck-hole, I talked to plenty of men. I hung out with Alder, while we made fun of you and Sax. Then that Crystal Phase guy joined us, jabbering about the *Hunger Games* movies and licking dead flies off the windowsill. Oh, and he also explained the mating habits of elephants. In *excruciating* detail."

"Akkadian?" Job's eyes widened in alarm. "Dear God… Don't talk to Akkadian. Akkadian is *insane*, Isaacs."

"Yeah, I noticed that when I spent an hour with him talking about fucking elephants. Literally. Elephants who are fucking. It got graphic." Isaacs finished his croissant and dusted his hands together. "Yuan was giving that nutty bastard plenty of hints to shut up, but he just kept…"

Job cut him off. "Yuan was there, too?"

The Council's examination of the Reflection Kingdom had turned up nothing of interest, so far. Whoever the dead Reflection Phases were working for, they were smart enough to cover their tracks.

"Hell yeah, Yuan was there. At least, I'm pretty sure it was him. He apparently looked like Brad Pitt, the fucking try-hard." Isaacs reached for a coffee mug. "Anyhow, that's *another* man I talked to. See? Not just girls."

"Why was Yuan in a tavern?" Job pressed.

"Probably spying on the Fire House. Aren't you trying to prove he framed them for something? I don't think Alder even knew who he was though, which pissed him off." Isaacs snickered. "Or maybe he wanted to hear all about African wildlife." He adopted a fake Yuan/Brad Pitt-style voice. "Genuine beauty is the domain of nature and cannot be replicated, even by one as powerful as me."

Tharsis made a gagging sound. "Did he really say that? What a pompous dick."

“He has a butterfly prison that he’s real proud of.” Cross snarked. “He keeps them all trapped in a fancy, fake garden.”

Gion suppressed a shudder, his skin crawling at the memory. “Butterflies are deceitful and gross. They’re just bugs trying to trick you into not noticing they’re bugs.”

“Well, they sure can’t compete with the majestic beauty of vultures.” Tharsis drawled.

“How do you feel about penguins?” Isaacs asked Gion apropos of nothing.

“I hate them.”

“Perfect!” Isaacs beamed.

Gion glowered suspiciously.

Tharsis was intrigued. “Why would you hate penguins, Guy? Everyone likes penguins.”

“They think they’re better than vultures, in their ostentatious tuxedos, but they can’t even fly.”

Job massaged his temples, like the entire conversation gave him a headache. “Can we focus, boys?”

“I’m focused.” Isaacs assured him. “And my response to your lecture is that Yuan can blow me. …Actually, he *can’t*. My standards are way higher than his replicant ass.”

“Focus on *Saxon*.”

“Why? He’s so dull.” Isaacs waved a dismissive palm, guzzling down the last of the coffee. “So, are we done? I’ve got to go shopping with Ty.”

“Whatever you were up to last night, *stop* it.” Job summarized sternly. “There’s been enough conflict. Stay away from Saxon. And Akkadian. And Yuan. None of them are good news. Alder’s not either, but at least he’s a Fire Phase, so you know what you’re getting.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t think a repeat of last night is necessary. Our conversations didn’t blossom into a true bond of friendship.” Isaacs headed

for the door. “Not like I’ve got with Ty. Hey, Gion, don’t wait up, okay? Me and her might be out ‘til *all* hours.”

“…And he never did say what he was up to with Sax.” Tharsis pointed out in something like admiration. “Impressive.”

Gion’s jaw ticked. “Beheading him would solve problems we don’t even know about yet.”

“The man is aggravating and holds a doctorate in avoiding questions, but he is bizarrely loyal to Ty. And to you. And to this House.” Job counseled in his best Dad Voice, picking up on Gion’s mental plotting. “You can’t kill him.”

“I bet that I could.”

“Fine. You don’t *want* to kill him.”

“I bet that I do.”

Job looked towards the ceiling for patience. “Ty wouldn’t like it if you killed him.”

“I’ll buy her a puppy. It’ll be a huge step up.”

“I think I’m allergic to dogs.” Tharsis volunteered. “Better get a penguin.”

Cross laughed. Gion didn’t.

“Besides, Isaacs is becoming more interesting.” Thar continued. “He’s never had to be his own person before. In the Air Kingdom, he just had to survive. Now, he actually has to *live*.” He smiled at Gion. “And I think you care about him more than you let on, which is why you haven’t killed him yet. You two were stuck in a cage together for so long, it formed a bond. It’s fun to watch you bumble around, trying to figure shit out, now that you’re free-range. It’s like a reality show.”

“I’m glad we can amuse you, Thar.”

“Oh, me too.” Tharsis agreed earnestly.

“You know, we’re giving *a lot* of people time to figure shit out.” Gion said in a pointed tone. “How much longer do you think it’ll take *you?*”

Tharsis grinned, but there wasn't much humor in the expression now. "I've *got* it all figured out."

"Then why are you spending your time napping in hammocks?"

"Because I've got it all figured out." Tharsis repeated. "I discovered the secret meaning of life."

Gion highly doubted that.

So did Cross. "So what is it?" He asked skeptically.

"There *isn't* a meaning to life." Tharsis shrugged. "That's the secret. There's no right or wrong or fairness or purpose. It's just some stuff that happens and then you die."

Job shook his head, outright denying that theory. "That's ridiculous."

"I hope you keep on thinking that. It's a much more comfortable reality."

"There is only *one* reality, Thar."

"Gaia, if this is the best of all possible worlds, how sad would that be?" Tharsis lifted a shoulder. "Besides, we know time travel's possible, at least in short bursts. Daphne, of the Time House is apparently visiting from the future and I doubt she's the only one. Crazy General Vandal's been getting information from somebody, right?"

"Daphne could be working with him." Gion argued.

"Chason said she seemed to be working *against* Vandal. She was furious that you guys let him get away. And Daphne had never heard of the mysterious Dark King guy." Tharsis stared at nothing for a beat. "That could actually be bad news for her, since it implies the future is shifting in ways she can't predict and she's stuck right in the middle of it."

"Daphne is a complete unknown to us." Job's eyes bore into Tharsis, trying to see into his complicated brain. "We can't trust anything she says. If she has good intentions, she should come to the Council. Instead she's working *around* us. She's kidnapped Raiden. She killed Lansing. She's *dangerous*."

“To be fair, Lansing was a colossal dickface.” Thar rightfully pointed out. “Allow me to play devil’s advocate for a second: Maybe Daphne isn’t coming to the Council, because you guys are so hostile towards her. She’s busy and doesn’t want to deal with your drama.”

“Tharsis, if you know where Daphne is, you need to tell me…”

“I have no idea where she is!” Thar interrupted, looking genuinely shocked by the accusation.

“Have you been helping her?”

“No way. I’m just saying that she seems to be on our side. …And that her mere presence suggests multiple timelines and possibly even dimensions. Like a Marvel movie.”

Job grudgingly accepted his word for it. Water Phases were honest, they were just eccentric, stubborn, and always picked up for the underdogs. “If you want to discuss academic theories, you should go back to teaching. You’ve been in this stalled place in your mind for too long. Maybe you could even reopen the university.”

“All the other professors are dead.”

“You could work with some of your old students.”

“They’re dead, too.” Tharsis’ voice went flatter. “Everyone I ever taught or worked with is dead. And there is no one left who wants to learn. And even if there *was*, what would be the point, now?”

“The point is rebuilding our society, for future generations.”

Thar shook his head, like that answer was unbelievably naive. “I don’t worry about the future, anymore. There’s no reason to bother. The universe --*all* of them-- is just absolute randomness, times infinity, and nobody is at the controls.”

“If you believe that, it’s all the more reason for you to *take* some control.”

Tharsis frowned, considering that point. “You think?”

“Yes! You have to snap out of this malaise, Thar. You may not be worried about the future, but other people still worry about *you*.”

“Why?” Tharsis went back to reading his book. “I’m the only one who’s got it all figured out.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Nineteen

Two crucial elements of any team… Communication and timing.

Hell's Kitchen

Kahn stared down at the vase of blood-red lilies, rage clouding the edges of his mind.

No flower arrangements had been sent to Randa in days. Now there was a gigantic vase of them sitting in her kitchen, polluting the early afternoon air. The stalker was back.

"Did Randa see these?"

"She opened the front door to check her mail, and they were waiting on the porch." Julius ran a hand through his hair. "She's sitting out there, right now. I think she wanted to prove that she wouldn't be intimidated."

"She's *alone?*" Panicked at that idea, Kahn rushed over to peer out the open front door. He could see Randa sitting on the step, silently observing the quiet street.

He started breathing again. She was safe.

"Mannus and Daven are watching her discreetly. She's never alone." Julius assured Kahn in the Light Phase dialect. "Just let her have a private moment to collect herself."

"I left her with you assholes for thirty minutes and *this* happened." Kahn retorted in the same language. "Your advice is noted and ignored.

This was all the other Light Phases fault.

Since he was terrified of screwing things up with Randa, Kahn had been careful with what he said this morning. In fact, he didn't talk, at all. Not an ideal way to win over his new Match, but it also wouldn't get him renounced.

Instead, he'd silently watched Randa make pancakes. The Light Phases were fascinated with her cooking. She'd added chocolate, bananas,

pecans, potato chips, and any other ingredients they wanted to try in the batter. She'd let them sample whipped cream, syrup, and powdered sugar for toppings. She'd even made the pancakes into rectangle shapes, when Daven complained that "all the best human breakfast foods are square, like Cinnamon Toast Crunch, frozen waffles, and Cheez-Its."

Then Randa fried bacon. Rye nearly cried at his first bite. Mannus *did* cry.

It was a blissful experience to share a communal meal again. None of the Light Phases had had the heart to cook since the Fall. It brought back too many memories of their dead families. Eating together now felt healing. It signified their future. Randa had given them a new family to belong to.

She was now everyone's favorite member of the Light House.

Randa had seemed happy, too. She enjoyed cooking, although Kahn wasn't about to let the other Light Phases eat her food every day. First off, it was more work for her, and she worked enough. Secondly, everything she made should rightfully belong to him. He was willing to share meals with the other men *sometimes*, but there was a limit to his selflessness.

In the end, the Light Phases' simpering praise of her grew too much for Kahn. They'd huddled around Randa, stealing her attention. He couldn't join in, because he was too afraid of saying the wrong thing to even speak to her. He'd decided to take a shower, rather than punch them for fawning all over *his* Match. Those assholes were lucky Kahn was so tolerant. (Also, he didn't want to piss Randa off by ruining the feast.)

Besides, they had a date tonight that he needed to prepare for. He'd wanted to look his best. His human haircut took far more maintenance than his old one. But in the time it took him to shower and shave, Randa had been threatened by her stalker again.

Clearly, the other Light Phases weren't doing their job.

"You were supposed to be protecting her!" He raged at Julius.

Julius sighed. "Just read the card that came with the flowers. If you need a target to yell at, that'll be a better one." He handed Kahn the plain white note.

They can't keep us apart much longer, my flower.

"Shit!" The stalker knew she had protection now, and he was threatening something imminent. This was an escalation.

Julius seemed to agree, which was another terrible sign. Jules was the most levelheaded of the Light Phases. "No florist delivered the bouquet. We've intimidated every shop in fifty miles. They're all too scared to come to her door." He hesitated. "I think the stalker brought them here in person."

Kahn's anger somehow built even higher. "How did someone get past us and onto her property?"

"I don't know." Julius admitted.

"I set up cameras. Did you check those?"

"Of course. There's nothing. It's like the stalker was invisible."

Kahn swore loudly. He crumpled up the paper and threw it in frustration. Then he cursed some more.

"One day, I'm going to surprise you all by learning the Light Phase language." Randa called from the front steps. "Then, I'll know exactly what all those words you're always yelling mean."

Something deep inside Kahn stilled at the sound of her voice. The swirling anger dissipated enough that he could think. "That's my Match." He whispered to Julius. It still struck him as unbelievable. Like someone might show up, declare it all a huge mistake, and take Randa away from him. He couldn't lose her. "I have a *Match.*"

Julius heard the wonder and the fear in his tone. "I know. And perhaps you're right. She'd rather be with you than sit alone."

Kahn would rather be out there with her, too. But… "I'll say something wrong and piss her off. I always do."

"I think the woman likes being pissed off at you. Otherwise she would have kicked us out of her life days ago."

Kahn shook his head. "This is all my fault." He admitted, and he knew it was true. "I haven't killed the stalker yet. I can't even *talk* to Randa. If I was a better Match…"

“You are *her* Match.” Julius interrupted. “That is all you have to be. Randa needs you. Just *you*.” Jules slapped him on the shoulder. “Go. I will get rid of the flowers.” He headed into the kitchen.

Maybe Julius had a point. Randa could’ve been safe in the Earth Kingdom with Job, right now. Instead, she was still with the Light Phases. With Kahn. Maybe he didn’t need to worry quite so much about saying exactly the right thing. Maybe he just needed to say *something*.

Kahn ran a hand through his hair and went to his Match.

She glanced up, as he settled beside her on the front step.

He cleared his throat, hoping he didn’t ruin everything. “I’ll teach you our language. But you’ll mostly hear swearing and the other Light Phases mocking me for being so smitten with you. It’s all they’ve talked about since we met.”

“Just so we don’t talk about the flowers.” She agreed softly.

“Would you like to start learning, now? I can teach you all kinds of dirty words.”

“Maybe later.”

Kahn sighed, noting the way Randa’s arms were wrapped around herself. She definitely needed to talk. It would do no good to discuss the stalker again. Nothing new could be determined right now, and it would only upset her to rehash what they did know. But he also didn’t want Randa to retreat into her shell, all her thoughts closed off to him.

Kahn cleared his throat. “You told Julius you want a relationship based on communication and respect.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “I do want that.”

“I want it, too. So, you’ve got to meet me halfway.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I respect you. I’m the one person in your life who holds you accountable for your shitty behavior.”

His mouth curved at her outrage and cursing. Whether she learned the dialect or not, she was certainly a Light Phase. “I respect you, too. But I also want to *communicate* with you.”

Randa began to catch on to his meaning. “I don’t have anything to say about those damn flowers.”

“Okay. So talk to me about something else. I’m great at communicating. Too good, actually. Every thought and feeling jumps right from my head to my lips.”

“You’ve been quiet all morning.”

“I know. It was hard and I didn’t like it. I’m not going to do it anymore. Now you’re stuck hearing me say all kinds of shit. And I promise you, a lot of it will be wrong. Talking you into accepting me as your probationary Match was the most eloquent I’ll probably ever be.”

She didn’t look upset by that warning. “Last night you made your poor cousin give the sales pitch. That was *Mara* being eloquent.” She said in a teasing voice.

“Nope. All me. You wouldn’t talk to me. So, I analyzed how I could *communicate* my good qualities to you. Mara was the best option.” He arched a brow. “If anyone was struggling to communicate last night, it was you. You locked me out.”

She blew out a frustrated breath, not having an answer for that. “I needed to process.”

“Okay.” He agreed again and then realized he had no idea what that meant. “What’s that mean?”

“It means talking to you would get me all discombobulated.”

“Discombobulated.” He repeated, adoring her fancy words.

Randa sniffed. “Yes. Discombobulated. Sometimes I need space to think about what I want to say. I never learned how to be talkative. No one ever cared what I thought.”

“I care.”

“But you also plow right over me, when you don’t agree with my choices. Like when you were digging into my past. I *know* you asked Isaacs about it. You always think you’re right, and you convince yourself to just plow ahead. I’m quieter, but you still need to *listen*. I won’t fight the same fights with you, over and over.”

“Oh, I’m sure I’ll start new fights for us.” He muttered.

She snorted.

“I hear you.” Kahn tilted his head to maintain eye contact, when she tried to look away. “I’m sorry for not actually *listening*, though. You’re right. I got caught up wanting to know everything about you. I didn’t understand why you wanted to keep secrets. But I should have waited until you told me yourself.”

“Yes, you should have.”

“I’ll do better. I agreed to all your guidelines about our Match, and I swear I’ll follow them. I have no desire to change you. *None*. Please don’t shut me out.”

She chewed on her lower lip. “I will work on letting you into my interior life. And telling you when I need space. Healthy communication is important.”

“Thank you. I’ll work on my shitty behavior.”

Her mouth curved a tiny bit. “You know, you don’t *always* say the wrong thing.”

“No?”

“No. Sometimes you say things just right. …Occasionally.”

Kahn smiled, and they fell into companionable silence.

He enjoyed sitting beside her, watching the neat row of bungalows across the street. They were all painted pastel colors. Many of the palm trees still had Christmas lights in them. Tonight, they’d be twinkling. Somewhere, a dog barked. The human realm was more open and colorful than the Light Kingdom, but it still had moments that were strangely peaceful.

Or maybe he just felt peace because he was with Randa.

“Mara and the other Light Phases are worried about you.” She eventually said. “About you becoming Gone Wild.”

Kahn flinched, embarrassed that she knew about his problem. Of course, *that* would be the first topic she wanted to communicate about.

“You haven’t asked me about that, yet.”

“And I won’t until you’re comfortable sharing. If you want to talk though, I obviously want to listen.”

She was such a good person. Despite all she’d been through, she still had so much empathy and kindness. He didn’t deserve her. He would never give her up.

Kahn started dispassionately listing the symptoms every Light House Warrior dreaded. He wanted her to understand. “First, you begin to drift away from people. Anger comes quicker. Civilization slips away. You hear the forest calling. Eventually, there’s no will to resist it. You lose control.”

“Are there physical changes?”

“Not exactly. But Light energy grows jagged and wrong. You feel mine.”

“It doesn’t feel wrong. It feels hurt.”

“I haven’t Gone Wild, yet. I’m still here. But,” he hesitated. “I’m close to the edge. And no one comes back once they fall off of that cliff.”

“You’re not going to fall.”

“No?”

“*No*. You do have the will to resist.”

“The thought of losing myself scares me.” He whispered, admitting it out loud for the first time.

“Of course it does. But that’s how you know you’re still in control. You still know who you are and what’s important.

Kahn automatically opened his mouth to contradict that optimistic assessment, only to stop short. Randa had a point. He’d never heard of a Phase with a Match succumbing to the Wildness. They knew how important the connection was. It anchored them.

“You don’t need to worry about falling with me here.” She went on. “Stone Phases build their whole communities on the edge of cliffs. I

can show you how to balance *anywhere*. You just need to fight back against the Wildness and stay with me."

Relief rushed through him.

Hope.

For the first time in years, he felt hope. His Match would keep him safe. He wasn't going to die in the forbidden reaches of the forest. He could resist the darkness. He already *was*. He had Randa, now. Nothing else could compare to the pull he felt towards her.

"I'm going to stay with you." He agreed.

Randa flushed at his besotted tone and tucked her hair behind her ears. "Good. It will probably be hard, but you can do it. I've found sessions with Dr. Ashley useful. Humans are different from us in small ways, but like us in so many big ones. Even if Gone Wild isn't a disease they get, their methods might still be able to help."

"I would hate talking to humans about my feelings."

"It's not supposed to be fun. It's supposed to be work. Work that only you can do."

He scrubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "Even if I tried therapy, you'd be my motivation. Finding you gave me a purpose. I think you're my savior. I really do."

Her dark gaze searched his.

Kahn stared back. He had nothing to hide. She knew all of him.

Randa blew out a long breath, like she was about to jump into deep water. "I struggle with letting people in. That's why my communication is sometimes not ideal. I think I should do everything on my own. That's not healthy. But…" She fell silent again.

A full minute went by. Kahn waited. Randa was trying to say something. He wanted to know what it was, so he sat there and listened.

"Maybe if I leaned on you, you could teach me that it was safe to need someone." She became fascinated with her cuticles. "And if you leaned on me, I could help motivate you to try therapy. Then, we'd be each other's saviors. And that would be the right balance for our Match."

“Fuck yes!” Kahn burst out. He lifted both fists in victory and a huge grin cut across his face.

Randa’s head snapped around, arching an amused brow at his excited shout.

“Right. Sorry.” Kahn cleared his throat and hunted for a less exuberant response. “Um… I mean, that’s a very reasonable plan.” He tried to keep his voice calm when all he wanted to do was grab her up in his arms and never let go.

Her lips twitched upward. “I’m glad you think so.”

“So it’s a deal?” He’d agree to drink battery acid if she asked, so this ‘reasonable plan’ almost sounded too good to be true. He needed to lock it down, before she changed her mind. “You support my healing. I support your communicating. We’ll support *each other* in everything.”

He held out a palm for a human-style handshake and waited.

Randa considered it and then decided to touch him. She carefully slid her fingers into his. “Deal.”

When their skin met, their energies flared brighter. The Light powers rushed over the Stone powers, desperate to get closer to her. Searching for more. Randa’s energy didn’t push him away. Instead, it soaked into him like a salve. Soothing him from the inside out. Kahn’s grip on her hand instinctively tightened, not wanting the sensations to stop.

Randa didn’t seem to notice his desperate hold. Her eyes fluttered closed, caught up in the feel of his skin touching hers. And their powers searching for connection. And being together in the moment. Her forehead dipped forward to rest on his shoulder, and she gave a dreamy sigh.

Kahn made a low sound of approval. Just holding this woman’s hand was the most erotic experience of his life. He wanted to drag her onto his lap. He wanted to run his fingers through the smooth length of her dark hair. He wanted to hold her naked body against his and explore every magical inch of her. …But she wasn’t ready for any of that.

Instead, he lifted their joined palms and pressed a kiss to the back of her hand. His lips lingered over the silkiness of her golden skin, savoring

the small gasp she made. Memorizing the way her delicate fingers clung to his larger ones for just a moment.

Then she pulled away, her eyes wide. Like she'd just shocked herself.

Kahn reluctantly let her palm slip from his grasp, braced for her to run.

She didn't run. Randa was blushing fiery red and not meeting his eyes, but she remained sitting on the step. Thank Gaia.

Kahn swallowed hard. Touching her again would scare her away, but he didn't want this interlude between them to end. It felt too important.

He took out his phone.

Even if he couldn't touch her, there were plenty of other ways to reach his Match.

The human technology was enough to distract Randa. Maybe she wanted to keep this moment going, as well. "Since when do you have a smartphone?"

"Since I found Ben's." He began typing on his number pad. Then, he glanced at Randa. Then, he typed some more and glanced at her again.

Randa gave a resigned shake of her head. "You *stole* Ben's, you mean."

"Well, Ben's not using it."

"How did you even manage to get his phone? Have you tracked him down?"

"No, and none of his friends have seen him either. We discussed it in the group chat." Kahn answered absently, focused on typing. "Don't worry, though. I'll find him."

And if he was the stalker, Gaia help the fucker. Kahn would chop off his testicles for fish bait.

Randa's phone rang.

She shifted to take it from her pocket, sending Kahn a disgruntled look. "Is this you? Of course it is!" She pointedly declined the call. "How

many digits of my phone number did I give you? I know it wasn't all of them."

"Six, plus the area code. After that, it was just trying zero through nine for the last one."

"And you remembered them all, without even writing them down?"

"I remember everything you tell me."

Randa's lips parted in astonishment, shaken by his simple words.

Another text message *bing* sounded and a love letter emoji appeared on her screen.

Using the little pictures felt dumb to him, but he had a feeling Randa would appreciate it. Texting could give her a buffer in expressing herself, because she could decide what to say at her own pace. She wanted him to support her in communicating more freely? This was a tool to accomplish that.

Her eyes lit up. "I guess you *can* text."

He sent her more messages. *I'm good with machines. They're fun. Play with me.*

"I don't know the game."

It's easy. Just talk about anything. What are your plans for the day?

"I'm working. I'm baking Gion's birthday cake. And I have to supervise a doomed triple-date." She answered out loud. "*We* will be the most stable couple there. Consider what that means."

It means we're the best. No surprise. Rye and Julius simply couldn't keep up with him, when it came to wooing a Match.

"It means dinner is doomed." She reiterated, but she was close to smiling again.

And what are you going to wear for this doomed dinner?

She sent him a look through her lashes. "I suppose you'll just have to wait and see."

He grinned at her almost-flirting. *What should* I *wear for the doomed dinner?*

Randa leaned closer to him, her breasts ever-so-slightly brushing against his arm. It was probably an accident. His libido didn't care. Any tiny overture from her was enough to turn him into a drooling idiot.

"There's one thing I *really* want to see you in, Kahn." She admitted, sounding a little breathless.

The top nearly blew off of his head. "And what's that?" He whispered back, hypnotized.

His phone promptly *binged* with her answer.

Alligator shirt.

Kahn gave a mock groan. He toppled back onto the porch, his legs still on the steps. *You just like to torture me!!!!* He typed out some extra exclamation marks to play along with her joke.

She'd texted him her teasing response. That was all that mattered. Randa was joining the game. …Even if she cheated.

The joyful sound of her amusement surrounded him, caressing against his soul and soothing his energy. Kahn's chest expanded in awe. This was the first time he'd made her really laugh and it was his greatest triumph. When Randa was happy, everything in the world was right.

She lay down on the step beside him, her shoulders shaking with mirth. Her hand slid over to find his again, and she squeezed.

And Kahn knew he was hopelessly in love with his Match.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty

All four elements were happening in equal measure-
The cuisine, the wine, the service, and the overall ambience.

Charlie Trotter

Dinner really was doomed.

First off, it had been a huge mistake to let the triple-date happen at the fanciest restaurant in town. Or at *any* restaurant. If Randa hadn't been so discombobulated by her new Match, she would have realized it sooner.

The Light Phases didn't eat food unless the people preparing it were family.

They didn't consider any human chefs family.

Human chefs were about to cook their dinner.

Following that logic, this was about to be a very awkward meal.

Second of all, Tallulah Jayne was one of the craziest people Randa had ever met, maybe even topping one or two of the Fire Phases. Rye's date was all decked out in gold sequins, wearing the hideously expensive sapphire necklace he'd given her, and talking nonstop about herself. Rye's non-humanness wasn't weird to her, since she now believed she was psychically attuned to the universe, so she referenced the supernatural. A lot.

Which brought them to the third problem: Dr. Ashley. She was sitting beside Julius, with the look of someone gathering "bad date" anecdotes for her autobiography.

Julius continued to believe that she was underage, so he had requested a kid's menu for her. (Because of course he would understand *that* concept, but not how paper towel dispensers worked.) Randa had rushed to explain it was just a cultural misunderstanding, but Ashley seemed to think Julius was insinuating she was fat and needed tiny portions.

She might've walked out right then, except Tallulah Jayne had asked Rye what tanning options were available on his "vampire home world." Ashley seemed so perplexed by that sentence, she forgot to leave. Instead she remained there, listening with a kind of morbid fascination and probably wondering if she could have them all committed.

And then finally there was problem number four: Kahn.

If Randa was being honest, her new Match's presence was the primary reason for her nervousness. Simply *having* a new Match --a genuine Match-- was surreal. A part of her wanted to grab onto him and never let go. Another part wanted to renounce him and run for the hills.

The part that wanted to grab hold was much louder.

She wanted to stay. *Kahn* wanted her to stay.

He'd been so excited to make that deal where they'd promised to support each other. Afterwards, they'd spent the whole afternoon together. He'd stayed in the kitchen with her while she baked Gion's birthday cake, interrupted her work on police station files, and sent her eight thousand texts. She'd kept him from stealing the frosting, protected her laptop from his "improvements," and responded to all his flirty messages. Randa had never had so much fun.

It felt like Kahn wanted a real partnership. Like, he wasn't just after a picture-perfect Match. Like, he wanted *Randa* and no one else. It was the same way she wanted Kahn and no one else, although she wasn't about to admit that, yet. It was too soon.

It gave her hope for the future, though.

First they needed to forge a stable foundation, of course. And have rational discussions about their goals and expectations. And figure out how to deal with the actual Phazing part, because physical intimacy was daunting.

And of course she needed to scour her purse for snacks, so he didn't starve.

Ashley's uneasy gaze flickered between the three Light Phases. "What is it you gentlemen do for a living?" She asked, as if she strongly suspected mafia ties.

“You can’t ask about our jobs.” Julius counseled. Fully convinced that he was babysitting, he’d assumed the role of a wise and patronizing mentor. “We ask you about *your* job. Then, you ask where we’re from and we say the Amazon. Then, we don’t tell you about our Elemental powers.” He glanced at Randa. “Did she not see the slide presentation?”

Kahn rolled his eyes. “It turns out that you suck at taking notes, Jules.”

A waiter came over, thankfully preventing Julius from answering. Randa blinked when she recognized him. “Steve! I forgot you worked here.”

“Yeah, my sister just promoted me from busboy.” The teenager puffed out his chest. “It’s a *really* big deal. My new computer is practically paid for, now.”

“I’m so proud of you.” Randa mentally added another ten percent to the tip. He deserved it for working so hard.

Kahn didn’t agree. He scowled at Steve. “Do you just follow my Match around town?”

“Huh?”

“Be nice.” Randa hissed.

He subsided with a grumble, still glowering at Steve.

The human swallowed. “So…. Um… Are we ready?” He fumbled with his tablet, poised to jot down their order.

“Ready for what?” Rye demanded, suspecting a trap.

“For… food?” Steve seemed (rightfully) confused.

“I’ll have lobster!” Tallulah Jayne sang out. “Rye’s paying. Aren’t you paying, Rye?”

He nodded, like she was just the cutest little thing in the world. “I will buy you as many pets as you like, my future queen.”

“She’s going to *eat* the lobster.” Ashley intoned, her voice somehow too serious for the complete insanity of the circumstances.

Julius and Kahn exchanged an impressed glance.

“Rye’s woman truly is vicious.” Jules murmured.

Kahn grunted.

Rye grinned smugly.

Randa smiled at Steve, striving to project human normalcy. “I’ll have the small garden salad.” It was the cheapest thing on the menu.

“That doesn’t sound like enough nourishment.” Kahn shook his head. “You need more food. Do they grill cows here?”

“I’m not ordering a *steak* in this place. It will cost a fortune.”

“Rye is paying.” He flicked a palm towards Tallulah Jayne. “His vicious woman says so.” He looked back at Steve. “My Match will have four cow steaks.”

“*Salad*.” Randa repeated, glowering at her overbearing date.

“I am listening to you, Randa. I swear. But I also don’t want you to starve.” Kahn seemed distressed. “Can we compromise on three steaks and maybe a tureen of that whipped potato goo? It would be…” He stopped short. “Wait, who exactly is *making* this feast?”

“Chef Michael.” Steve piped up. “He’s very accomplished. He used to work in New York.”

Three sets of brows compressed in unison, as the Light Phases finally understood that a stranger would be preparing their meals.

Steve took a nervous step backwards.

Randa seized control, before a fight broke out. “Bring me *one* medium steak.” Yes. Fine. Kahn had a point. A filet did sound better than a salad. “And do you have any food that’s sealed?”

“Sealed?” Steve blinked.

“So that no one else has touched it. These three have dietary restrictions.” She gestured between the Light Phases.

“Um… I think we have a jar of pickles? Maybe some of those cheese slices wrapped in plastic? We use those for the kid’s meals.”

“Ashley requires a kid’s meal.” Julius interjected. “She is very young.”

“I’m forty-one.”

Julius patted her head. “Why, I would have guessed sixty. You’re so precocious!”

Ashley looked towards Steve with huge, desperate eyes. “Can I just order dessert? I really need a lot of dessert. Like, *right now*.”

“Blueberry pie, frosted spice cake, or lemon tart?”

“Yes. All of that. To go.”

“Got it.” He hit some buttons on his tablet. “So that’s one lobster, three processed cheese packets with a side of pickles, a medium filet with a garden salad, and the entire dessert menu. Did you guys want wine, at all?”

“Oh, I think alcohol is a bad idea tonight.” Randa decided gravely.

Steve nodded in commiseration and escaped to less troublesome tables, muttering about how “all the whackos come to Florida.”

“Don’t listen to her about the drinks!” Tallulah Jayne called after him. “I’ll have another mango daiquiri!”

“We’re not eating anything strange men in backrooms prepare for us.” Rye warned the table at large in a paranoid voice. “This could all be a ruse set by our enemies to poison us.”

Ashley grabbed a breadstick from the basket in the middle of the table. “I should be so lucky.” She lamented and took a huge bite, sourly chewing.

“Did a human male make this?” Rye asked Tallulah Jayne, grabbing her mango daiquiri away.

“No, the girl at the bar did. The one with the hideous blonde highlights.” Tallulah Jayne paused and glanced over at Ashley, whose hair also had blonde highlights. “I mean they’re hideous on *her*. They’re great on you, of course. They really slim your face.”

Ashley chewed her breadstick. “Remember how we’re working on not dragging other women down to lift yourself up?”

“It was a compliment! I think it’s brave how some girls obviously don’t care about their looks. I wish I could be that way, but,” she shrugged helplessly, “I’m just too pretty.”

“I should not have said no to the liquor.” Randa muttered to Ashley. “Sorry about that.”

Ashley snorted in amusement, before quickly regaining her professional composure.

“No drinking for *any* of us. Not in this treacherous place.” Rysimer examined the daiquiri like he was investigating a particularly complex mystery. “No eating either. It’s not safe.”

“It’s not?” Tallulah Jayne blinked at him. “Wait, do you guys only digest blood? …And pickles?”

“No, he’s just mistrustful about anyone else touching his food.” After emptying half her purse onto the tabletop, Randa finally excavated a granola bar from the depths. She reached over to place it on Kahn’s bread plate. “Here you go.”

He gasped in amazement. “Thank you, Randa.” He reverently picked up the granola bar, holding it at eye level to marvel at the artistry of the cellophane wrapper. “I will treasure this forever.”

Randa couldn’t quite contain her mirth. “It’s not an heirloom, Kahn. It’s *food*.”

The sound of her amusement had his head whipping around. His lips parted in amazement, as he gazed at her smile. Every time she laughed, he seemed dazzled by it.

Still chuckling, Randa plucked the granola bar from his hand. “It’s grains and nuts and honey. And it’s safe for you to eat, since it’s still sealed.” She tore open the end of the packaging for him. “See? It’s good.”

“Yes, I see everything good.” He was looking at her though and not the granola bar.

“Do you have another of those honey grain logs?” Rye asked hopefully.

“If she does, it’s also mine.” Kahn took a bite of the granola and hummed like it was ice cream, dipped in ambrosia, dipped in bacon. “*My* Match is providing *me* food.”

Rye pouted.

Tallulah Jayne glanced at Rye. “I have gum, if you want.”

“Is it meat-flavored?”

“Pretty sure it’s peppermint.” Her tiny nose wrinkled. “Do they make meat-flavored bubble gum?”

“They should. It sounds delicious.”

Tallulah Jayne leaned closer to him. “I’m sure *your* meat is delicious.” She breathed in a sultry tone.

Ashley gazed up at the ceiling, mapping out an escape route through the air conditioning ducts.

As Randa worked to scoop all her belongings back into her purse, Kahn spotted her phone, lying flat on the table. Unlike so many Elementals these days, she didn’t carry it to be trendy. Sullivan issued it to her for work emergencies, so it was an older, utilitarian device.

The one that Kahn fished out of his own pocket was much sleeker and more expensive. Ben had great taste… wherever he was.

Bing.

Randa eagerly read the screen.

You’re so beautiful.

She smiled. Earlier, he’d offered to “set things up better” on her phone, and she’d happily handed it over. Her ancient smartphone was now working like a high-end, brand-new, much more expensive model.

And s*omeone* had added the contact information “My Magnificent Match” to identify Kahn’s number. Kahn was gifted at electronics. And sneakiness.

She glanced up at him through her lashes, pleased that he thought she looked pretty. She’d donned her most flattering dress for their date. She hardly ever wore it, because the bold red color used to make her feel

too visible. Now, it made her feel powerful. She'd even added a fancy hair clip and a pair of heart-shaped earrings to her ensemble.

She'd wanted to impress him.

Randa sent him a message back. *You look nice, too. For a barbarian.*

Reading her response, Kahn's grin turned luminous. He clearly loved that she was responding to his playfulness. *Still a barbarian, even in your favorite shirt with the hideous alligators?*

Randa made a sound of appreciation. She really did love that shirt. *Always a barbarian. It's your eyes. And your hair. And the way your shoulders are the width of a doorway.*

Are you ogling my body? What would your grandmother who hated Light Phases say? It's shocking. I'm shocked!!!!

Grandmother Viola would not *be shocked. She always predicted I'd be lured by lustful savagery. Stop luring me with your incredible arms and I'll stop ogling.*

Instead, Kahn took a quick picture of his gigantic bicep and sent it to her. The man was incorrigible.

Randa steadfastly refused to respond to his desperate bid for attention, even as she saved the photo as her phone's wallpaper.

Kahn chuckled.

Rye was still attempting to translate Tallulah Jayne's blatant come-ons. "When you say 'meat,' are you referencing my penis?"

"Yes. Yes, I absolutely am." She confirmed. "You've got a penis, right? I mean, we can work around it if you've got --like-- a sex-tail or something."

"Our species are anatomically compatible." Rye assured her, obviously fascinated by the woman. "What is a sex-tail?"

"Like mermaids have! Where does the penis even go during mermaid orgies?" Tallulah Jayne tapped her temple. "Think about it. There must be some sex-tail action happening."

Rye gasped, as if he totally saw her brilliant point and she was a genius at mermaid zoology.

Are mermaids real here and having orgies? Kahn texted Randa.

I hope not. You'll hunt them.

Kahn made a considering sort of face, mentally deciding on what weapons he'd need for an aquatic safari.

"Do not discuss objectionable sex-tailed happenings in front of Ashley." Julius protested. "*This* is why I had to come to protect her. It's all wildly inappropriate conversation for her delicate ears."

Rye looked subdued. "Right, right! Sorry, Ashley. You'll understand the mermaid talk when you're older."

"Doubt that. …But, it's fine." Ashley assured him, although she was clearly miserable. Not because she was too innocent to be exposed to sea-themed sexual innuendo. Because dinner was an unmitigated disaster for any human trying to make sense of it. "I'm really here in a professional capacity for Tallulah Jayne. She insisted she needed therapeutic support tonight. I'm just… taking a lot of notes for our next appointment."

"I knew you wanted her to come." Tallulah Jayne stage-whispered to Rye. "Paying for an after-hours session was easier than firing her."

He couldn't have beamed wider if she'd singlehandedly discovered gravity and rainbows and kittens all in one day. "You are so wise."

"Dr. Ashley is our therapist." Randa reminded Julius, before Tallulah Jayne and Rysimer made everyone nauseous with their cooing. "And she's an *adult* in this culture."

"Of course she is!" Julius smiled humoringly. "Is that what you want to be when you grow up?" He asked Ashley in an avuncular tone. "A therapist? Or maybe an astronaut? Or a warrior protecting your realm from nightmarish death creatures?"

Ashley rubbed her forehead, no doubt questioning every single part of her professional life. And her personal life. And whatever other lives she had.

“Do a lot of nightmarish death creatures live on your planet?” Tallulah Jayne asked Rye, oblivious to her therapist’s suffering. “Because I don’t want to be queen of gross stuff.”

“Any creature you don’t like, I will exterminate.” Rye offered gallantly. “But if the Light Kingdom worries you, it is an easy land to rule from afar. After we Phaze, we will live wherever you wish.”

“Aspen! I’ll wear cute ski clothes, and you can fight polar bears or whatever. It’ll be so fun!”

“Just tell me where this Arctic kingdom is, and I’ll claim us a castle there.”

Tallulah Jayne squealed in excitement.

Kahn looked down at Randa, intrigued by the instant success of Rye’s dumb promises. “Do *you* wish to live in an Aspen-land castle?”

“No.”

“You sure? Because I’m positive I can conquer it.”

She was positive he could conquer the entire state of Colorado. That wasn’t the point. “I’d like to *see* Aspen, but I don’t want to live there. It’s just one place. I want to go everywhere in the human realm.”

“We can visit all the human cities you desire.”

She sent him a skeptical look. “Really? You’d want to do that?”

“I want you to laugh and be happy. With me. Everything else is details.”

Randa stared up at him, not sure what to say.

Her energy had no trouble responding, though. She felt her Stone powers reaching out for Kahn. It rubbed against his Light energy, wanting to get as close as possible. It was kind of embarrassing, but Randa couldn’t draw it back. Now that she’d found her Match, the biological need to Phaze was taking over.

Luckily, Kahn didn’t seem distressed that her powers were curling all around his. His eyes fluttered closed, as if he relished every second of their contact.

His powers were vast and there were jagged edges to them. Darkness festering where only Light should be. Julius and Mara were right. Kahn was barely hanging on to civilization. His energy was wounded. It wanted to lash out at the world. It wanted to protect Kahn by not letting anyone else close.

Except *her*.

Kahn's powers craved Randa. They wrapped around her own energy, like the Stone powers felt safe and healing. The ominous shadows inside the Light energy lifted. Kahn's powers moved against hers in some perfect, instinctive way, sending a shiver of desire through her body.

Kahn liked that response. A low sound of pleasure rumbled from his chest, and it made Randa's insides squeeze. She wanted to hear it closer to her ear and…

"Okay." Tallulah Jayne clapped her hands, breaking the spell Randa was under.

She jolted and looked over at the human.

Kahn cursed in annoyance.

Tallulah Jayne held up her palms, making a big announcement to the table. "I told myself to wait and be sure about this. But fate has *finally* brought me the rich, handsome, vampire, alien, king guy that I deserve, and I don't want to waste any time with him."

"We're immortal." Rye chimed in, because he was just so, so good at blending with the humans. "Well, practically immortal, anyway. You will be too, once we Phaze."

"And *that's* what we're going to do." Tallulah Jayne declared. "Complete that Phazing thingamajig. Right now. Because I'm ready to be royalty and to commit myself to you, Rysimer. You buy me pretty stuff, and you listen when I talk, and I think you could legit melt people with your mind. You're perfect for me!" She sniffed, touched by her own pledge of devotion. "Let's get naked, boo."

Rye didn't have to be told twice. "My queen!" He bounded to his feet and lifted her into his arms like she was Scarlett O'Hara.

Tallulah Jayne wrapped her arms around his neck, as he swept her from the restaurant.

The two of them were *a lot*.

"Maybe there's still time to save that lobster." Julius mused. "Ashley, would you like a pet to play with?"

"No, I…" Ashley stood up, seeming dazed by this entire experience. "I'm going to the bathroom. For a long time."

Except she headed straight for the exit.

Kahn sent Randa a hopeful glance. "Do you want me to carry you out into the night, while you kiss me and tear at my clothes? Because I will happily do that."

"No."

Kahn looked disappointed that she was shooting down more of his plagiarized romance ideas. "How about a pet lobster, then?"

Randa texted him a middle finger emoji.

Kahn laughed so hard his shoulders shook.

Julius was worried. "Rye's not going to Phaze with his vicious woman at our house, right?" (Randa could only assume that he meant *her* house, but okay.) "She's sure to be loud."

"Tallulah Jayne wouldn't be caught dead in a rented bungalow. She has a pink mansion on the other side of town. I promise you, she'll take him there." Randa shook her head. "I just hope Rye is safe with that redheaded tyrant."

Kahn beamed. "I love how you are protective of all the Light Phases."

"I just want to make sure you guys are safe. Just because you're big, dumb idiots, doesn't mean I'll let people take advantage of you."

"Rye will be fine. Your matchmaking was a success!"

"I don't *want* the credit for hooking him up with Tallulah Jayne. He was supposed to find a nice, respectable Match. Not someone who has naked pictures of her, that guy from those Disney Channel movies, and a

boa constrictor plastered all over the internet. And as for Ashley…" Craning her head to look out the restaurant window, Randa could see the doctor already getting into her car out in the rainy parking lot. "I just hope she doesn't fire me as a patient. I don't think her date with Julius was a success."

"She is a sweet little girl." Julius smiled fondly. "It was kind of her parents to let us babysit her on a school night."

"Ashley is an adult woman." Randa stressed for the millionth time. "Humans do *not* need to be ninety-three before you can date them."

Julius refused to accept that reality. "I'm not about to Phaze with a child." He shuddered, disgusted by the very idea. "No, if human culture is so backwards and vile, I'll Match with a mermaid instead. Sex-tails sound interesting. Find me a date with one of those finned women."

Randa gave up, dropping her head into her hands.

"You still have two other Light Phases you can find respectable, human Matches for." Kahn commiserated. "In fact, I'm sure Mannus and Daven will gladly share a non-respectable one."

Randa burst out giggling, because they absolutely would.

Kahn grinned like she'd handed him a trophy. One giant arm draped along the back of Randa's chair, careful not to touch her, but undeniably sharing her personal space. Now that their energies were freely touching, Kahn seemed to be testing physical boundaries. He sat very still, waiting for her to tell him to move.

Randa didn't tell him to move.

Kahn drew in a satisfied breath and relaxed.

Randa's misbehaving energy coiled around him like a contented cat.

…And that's when the memory sharing started.

.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-One

The weightless element that has lived within it flashes…
This essential consciousness needs no body for its travels….
There are moments when the two appear inseparable,
and others when they could be cut apart by the merest flash of light.

Charles Lindbergh

Randa was inside Kahn's memories.

Even knowing the memory-sharing was coming, because it came for all Matches, it was still a shock. She'd been dropped into reruns of Kahn's life. It was like she was really there, experiencing it all alongside him. Witnessing it and feeling it and understanding it. Kahn couldn't see or hear her, but otherwise it was painfully real.

Randa turned in a slow circle, staring up at the towering trees of the Light House jungle. Even the gods seemed young compared to this forest. It was so old and the trees were so massive, she could feel their ancient souls. After she was finished touring all the human cities, it wouldn't be so horrible to live in a kingdom surrounded by these sentinels. It was the most peaceful place she'd ever seen.

She would've expected memory sharings to be fuzzier. Water-colored impressions of distant moments. Instead, she could smell the richness of the soil on the ground and see the dew gathered on each leaf. She might as well have been standing in the actual forest.

This was Kahn's memory, so everything in it had to be something he'd noticed and filed away. It was all stored in his head. Every detail was catalogued like the world was one big engineering diagram. For the scene to be this vivid, he must retain so much more information than most people.

Kahn was smart. She knew that. But to see the intricacies of his mind illustrated before her in high definition was kind of humbling.

Her Match was remarkable. …And he was right beside her.

A younger, kind of exasperated version of him, anyway. He stood in front of a mossy-colored pond, but she could tell that most of his attention was focused on the group of girls sneaking up behind him.

At least, she *thought* they were sneaking up. It was hard to be sure, since they were making so much noise.

"Shhh!" One of them hissed, as they stomped through the underbrush.

Several others giggled. Loudly.

Randa moved to peer through the foliage and spotted seven young women. They were having a wonderful time, judging by their gleeful smiles. One of them was Mara, of the Magnet House. The other six all had golden hair, with black streaks at their temples, marking them as Light Phases.

Kahn's sisters. Obviously. They were pretty and happy and intent on playing a trick on their big brother. Randa's mouth curved, as she watched them fall all over each other in a doomed attempt to stay hidden. A peal of laughter sounded, and there was no way in the world Kahn didn't hear it.

Randa looked his way, but he was still gazing at the pond like it was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen.

"Be quiet or you'll ruin the whole prank, Syllia." The girl who'd already tried to shush her sisters stage-whispered. Loudly.

"It was Aggie!" Syllia defended, swaying from foot to foot like she couldn't keep still. (They were speaking the Light House dialect, but Randa could understand it, because Kahn had understood it.) "She told Roma a joke and…"

"No, I didn't! It was Prinny." The one who must be Aggie said. Loudly.

"Tattler!" Prinny gave her a shove, which sent Aggie into Mara and Mara into a breathtakingly beautiful girl.

"Sorry, Livvy!" Mara apologized, but now all the sisters were bickering with each other about who was being the loudest.

(It was a seven-way tie.)

Randa glanced at Kahn again and saw him roll his eyes.

“All of you shut up!” The leader of the group commanded and then quickly lowered her voice again. By process of elimination, she had to be Tonia. “Now, we’re going to do this on three, right?”

The girls refocused. “Right!” Six voices chorused. Loudly.

“One… Two… Three!” Kahn’s sisters burst out of the brush and rushed towards him, cackling with excitement. Their hands were extended, intending to push him into the pond.

Without even bothering to turn around, Kahn casually stepped to the left.

Momentum sent Tonia and Aggie stumbling right past him and into the water. Mara slipped in the mud along the bank and landed right beside them. Roma gasped and tried to fish them all out. Unfortunately, she started with Aggie, who was laughing so hard she ended up pulling Roma in instead. Syllia was athletic enough to avoid falling, but then Kahn grabbed her under one arm and Prinny under the other, tossing them both into join their sisters. They gave outraged squawks, dramatically splashing around.

Randa smiled at their antics.

“I can’t believe any of you thought you could sneak up on me.” Kahn stood on the edge of the shore, hands on his hips, looking smug and dry. “I am used to all your craziness. There is no way you’d catch me off guard…”

Livinia shoved him from behind.

Randa burst out laughing as Kahn tumbled into the water. He was so confident, most of the time. It was hilarious to see his little sisters make his life into an unruly mess.

Kahn landed in the midst of the lily pads and chaos. Livvy threw up her hands in victory. Her sisters cheered and swarmed Kahn, as he surfaced from the depths of the pond. He was grinning and trying to fend them off, which resulted in a waterlogged free-for-all.

Playful scenes shifted before her, one after another. Kahn caring for his little sisters. The girls driving him crazy. All the noise and energy of a large, loving family.

Then, suddenly, there was silence.

The funny, exuberant girls were gone. It was just Kahn, alone in the forest. Digging seven identical holes.

Randa gasped. Kahn was digging graves for his sisters, because they'd all died in the Fall. Even Mara had been presumed dead. Only Kahn had been left.

A sound of grief slipped past Randa's lips, and she hurried over to stand beside him. He didn't know she was there, of course. But she had to do something. He seemed so *alone*.

"I'm here with you." She said, because she couldn't help herself. "I'm so sorry this happened. I'm so sorry the girls were taken from you."

Kahn worked like a man possessed. Dirt covered his body, and the dark circles beneath his eyes indicated that he hadn't slept in days. Randa wished she could hug him.

She'd never been comfortable with hugging. She'd never even had a relationship where it would be welcomed. Kahn's life was the complete opposite. His whole life was hugs. He needed someone to lean on, only there was no one left to support him.

Every few minutes, he'd stop shoveling the graves to scream up at the sky or collapse to his knees, sobs shaking his body. Mostly, though, it was just eerily still. Not even the trees seemed to sway in the dim light. And he was used to so much noise.

"Oh, Kahn…" She whispered, her heart breaking for him.

The girls had showered him with affection, hardly leaving him alone for a minute. For someone used to pranks and games and siblings surrounding him, the unrelenting solitude must have been like a tomb.

"There you are." After an eternity of silence and digging, Rye came into the clearing where Kahn worked. He looked nearly as bad as Kahn, exhaustion pouring off of him in waves. "Let me help you."

“I got it.” Kahn intoned without even looking up from his digging.

Rye didn’t seem convinced, but he didn’t push it. No doubt he’d noticed Kahn was barely holding it together. “Julius is burying his parents. Mannus and Daven are finally sleeping, and I don’t have the heart to wake them. I think…” He swallowed hard. “I think we’re the only ones left.”

Kahn shoveled more dirt from the hole and said nothing.

Rye rested his face in his palms. “My God. We’re the only Light Phases left.” He dropped his hands again, releasing a shaky breath. “What the fuck are we going to…?” His voice trailed off, his eyes sharpening. “Mara will be buried in the Magnet Kingdom, right? You said Chason refused to bury her here.”

Kahn grunted.

“So then why are you digging seven graves?” He looked worried now. “You’re not planning to do anything crazy, are you?”

Randa’s eyes widened in horror.

Kahn blinked like he was coming out of a fog. He turned to count the graves, a confused frown tugging at his forehead.

“There are seven.” Rye reiterated. “You only need six.”

“I’m just used to seven.” Kahn shook his head. “I do everything for seven. There’s always seven girls, so it was automatic to dig…” He cringed, unwilling to finish the sentence.

“Alright.” Rye accepted that, but he was clearly wary. “Just so you’re not planning on using the last one for *you*.”

“I’m not going to kill myself.” Kahn’s eyebrows compressed, his grief swinging into anger. “Hell no!”

Randa sighed in relief.

“You’re sure?” Rye pressed.

“I’m not going *anywhere* until I’ve killed every monster of the Air Kingdom.” Kahn climbed out of the seventh grave, covered in dirt and seething with rage. “As soon as my baby sisters are buried, I’m going to

start hunting down Parald and his men. I survived this plague for one goddamn purpose: *vengeance.* And I'll see it fucking done."

Not the healthiest reason to go on living, but Randa was okay with it. Kahn was still in control of himself. He was grievously wounded, but he stayed functioning. He endured. His hatred of the Air House had kept him alive, when other men would've shattered. It gave him something to focus on until he could get a handle on his grief.

Randa gazed at her Match, realizing that they were very much alike.

The two of them were bloody and bruised… and unbroken. It wasn't always a pretty kind of strength. There had been pain. And failure. And moments when hope was gone. But they'd hung on through all of the suffering and come out the other side. They'd *endured,* until they found each other.

Kahn was a survivor. Just like her.

The memories shifted again. They were still in the Light Kingdom, but Rye was gone and now a new man was standing in front of her. Randa's mouth parted in startled alarm.

Vandal, of the Light House.

The psycho who'd plotted to overthrow the Elementals once before and was undoubtedly trying to do it again. He stood in the Light House jungle, while Kahn lay sprawled on the ground.

"Kahn!" Randa cried and raced towards him.

Her Match was trapped in a purple energy bubble. It was some kind of cage. Isaacs told her that Vandal had access to weapons that hadn't even been invented yet. Since Randa had never seen anything like the force field before, she had to assume it was from the future.

Randa was far removed from the political maneuverings of the Council. She had never met Vandal. …But she was suddenly the man's most ardent enemy. Whatever Vandal wanted, it was sure to be the exact opposite of what Randa was after. That was obvious, since he'd hurt her Match. She would do everything possible to help bring him down.

Maybe something in this memory would help her accomplish that. Kahn wasn't fully unconscious. He was aware enough to witness this moment and for his brain to retain it, but he certainly wasn't awake either. If the memory-sharing brought her here though, it had to be important.

"Kahn?" Randa vainly tried to rouse him, but he couldn't hear her. His eyes were only half-opened, so even if she *had* really been there and not just reliving what had already happened, he probably wouldn't have been able to respond. She kept trying anyway. "Kahn, sweetie, you have to wake up. Please!"

He didn't move.

Damn it! Her Match was trapped, and she was helpless to save him.

Randa's mouth thinned in fury. Bounding to her feet, she went striding towards Vandal, although she wasn't sure what she planned to do. This moment was already past. And even if she could've somehow interacted with the memory, Vandal would've just laughed at her efforts to physically stop him.

The former general was huge.

Bigger than Kahn and hardly anyone was bigger than Kahn. He wore a formal white robe with blood staining the front. He'd clearly been in a fight. One of his eyes was injured and the other one reminded Randa of a shark. There was no white around the edges. Just a pool of frozen ebony, narrowed in annoyance, as he spoke into some kind of electronic device. It didn't look like a typical phone, but it seemed to work like one. Was it from the future, too?

"I have done everything I was sent to do." He snapped into the device, his accent old and cultured. "The Magnet Queen will come for her cousin, and then we will have the proper translation from the ruin."

Ruin?

Randa glanced towards the circle of stones, off to the left. The rocks were covered in deeply carved writing that she couldn't decipher. Ancient Light Phases must have erected the strange monument, but she had no idea why. She doubted anyone did, considering how old it looked. Why did Vandal want Mara to translate it?

“No, she’s not dead! Try to keep up, you imbecile. This is our chance to learn more about the gate.”

If the person on the other end of the line was surprised that Mara was alive, this must’ve happened a few months ago.

“We have recruits from all over the realm.” Vandal promised whoever he was talking to. “Everything is falling into place. I’ve even taken Kahn’s sketches from his home.” He gave the papers in his opposite hand a shake. “We can use those to build our own versions of his weaponry.”

Oh, dear. Kahn *really* wouldn’t like that.

Randa edged closer to Vandal, although he made her skin crawl. Craning her neck, she tried to understand the notes he’d stolen, so she could tell Kahn. They looked like schematics to her, but not for weapons.

Judging by the drawings, they were for mechanical ballerinas. Dolls that danced and moved to music. Vandal must’ve stolen old designs Kahn had made for his sisters’ toys.

Yeah… Kahn really, *really* wouldn’t like that.

“The question is: What have *you* done to further the Dark King’s cause?” Vandal persisted. “What have *you* done to usher in his glorious rule, besides play your little masquerade?”

Who was Vandal talking to?

Tilting her head and standing on tiptoe, she tried to listen into the other side of the call. The man was loud enough that some of the words registered in Kahn’s memory. Droning complaints and a lot of “how dare anyone question my commitment to the Dark King?” posturing. Something about the guy’s tone seemed familiar, but she didn’t recognize the voice…

A sound came from behind her.

Randa whipped around just in time to see Kahn waking up. He was alright!

Relief filled her, even though this was a memory so *obviously* he’d survived it just fine. Logic did nothing to suppress her elation, as he got to his feet. Her Match looked pissed and he was still trapped, but she knew

he'd quickly get out of that force field. Nothing could keep a barbarian caged for long.

Kahn would be okay! And since this was a recent memory, and memory sharings were typically chronological, she would soon be snapping out of this strange experience. She'd be back in the real world with *actual*-Kahn. She could see for herself that he'd suffered no ill effects from Vandal knocking him out and…

Wait.

Randa's thoughts skidded to a halt, as something horrible occurred to her.

If she was inside Kahn's memories… Didn't that mean he was in hers?

***

Randa's memories floated past him.

It was a kaleidoscope of colors and moments, none of them leading directly into the next, but all of them helping to shape who she was. Kahn was fascinated to see how her mind worked. His Match experienced life so differently than he did. The sharp details of her memories were softened at the edges, but all the sensations were turned up to blast.

He could *feel* so much. Randa had empathy for everyone, and she was incredibly sensitive. Her emotions went so deep. She could be easily hurt, but she also found endless joy in the world. It humbled him.

He watched her as a little girl, playing amid the cliff dwellings of the Stone House. Built right into the sides of the soaring canyon, they were insanely high off the ground. Randa didn't even notice, as she raced along the steep edge, dark hair streaming behind her.

No adults called out for her to be careful. Instead, Kahn saw a man and woman in front of one of the stone houses, bitterly arguing with each other. Her parents. He recognized pieces of his Match within their faces. Neither one of them was paying attention to Randa, completely caught up in their own drama.

He instantly detested them.

Randa ignored her parents' squabble as if she was used to their yelling. Coming to a halt at the precipice, she balanced on her toes and looked down, down, down into the canyon.

Kahn cringed at her precarious position. Somehow she didn't fall. Lost in her own world, she nudged some pebbles off the edge just for the fun of watching them tumble. Leaning *allllll* the way over, she followed their descent with a fearless giggle.

Kahn was torn between the frantic urge to grab her back from the treacherous drop-off and grinning, because she looked happy. He loved to see her smile. There was so much brightness in her soul. It was no wonder she wanted to explore more of the human realm. Beneath her calm exterior, she craved adventure. *Life*.

The scene shifted and she was no longer carefree. Instead, her grandmother was lecturing her about how to sit like a proper lady. Randa was a few decades older, trapped in a school with uncomfortable chairs and three gray walls.

The fourth wall *wasn't* a wall.

It was a balcony without a railing, overlooking a thousand-foot drop. Unable to resist, Kahn edged closer to the end of the floor and peered down at the rocks far below. He suppressed a shudder. It truly was a wonder Randa had survived her childhood, living with this kind of architecture. It was a wonder *any* of the Stone Phases did.

He glanced back over at his Match. She looked miserable, but she focused on copying the elegant way her grandmother crossed her ankles.

"Better." Viola sniffed. "Not *good*. But better, at least."

Randa seemed pleased with that faint praise. "May I go, now?" She asked with unrestrained eagerness.

"No, you may not." Viola corrected starchily. She was the very image of a patrician grandmother, with elegantly arranged white hair and dark eyes that missed nothing. "Do you think I've forgotten about your misadventure in the library?"

As if presenting evidence in court, she marched over to her desk and came up with… a book of poetry? Kahn squinted at the title. *The Barbarian's Willing Captive: A Romantic Saga Told in Verse.*

He chuckled. He *knew* she'd read a lot of poems. She'd identified the style of his tattoos so quickly. He'd just expected her to enjoy more cultured sonnets and less racy adventure tales. The woman was a constant delight.

"Trash like this," Viola pointed to the book as if it was a dead rat stinking up the room, "is an obstacle to proper deportment. You're drawn to lustful savagery, Randa."

"I promise, I've never felt lust towards anyone." Randa seemed disappointed with that fact.

Kahn arrogantly grunted. Back in the present, she'd told him she could now feel lust. It was a huge accomplishment for him. The alligator shirt must've won her over.

Viola kept talking. "It will be your ruin, if you give into these uncivilized impulses. You must learn to repress them."

"Yes, Grandmother."

Viola straightened her immaculate dress, uncomfortable with her own harsh words. She cared about her granddaughter. She just had no idea how to show it.

For a sensitive person like Randa, it would've felt like she was bombarded with criticism. Kahn was pissed at the older woman for causing her pain. …Although, he'd been even worse than Viola, when he'd first met his Match.

Kahn cringed at the thought.

It was a miracle that Randa had forgiven him, given the horrific things he'd said and how intensely she felt everything. He could see how deeply his words must have wounded her. It made him disgusted with himself. He vowed to make it up to her.

Kahn would show his Match that she was valued. And heard. And loved.

Viola tried to soften her stance, because only a literal monster could be stern when Randa's huge eyes were fixed on them. "I won't be around forever. You'll need to know how to survive on your own. Your parents are useless, so it will be entirely up to you to secure a prosperous future. There's no time for frivolity."

Randa nodded. "Yes, Grandmother."

But her gaze strayed to the book, plotting how to steal it back.

Viola had tried to bank the fire inside her granddaughter and she'd failed. Lustful savagery called to Randa, thank Gaia. She'd been raised a lady, but she had a warrior inside of her that couldn't be contained.

Years slipped by in the memories. Fleeting images of people and places. Kahn found he enjoyed the memory-sharing. He saw how his Match had come to be and it made him feel closer to her. There were moments he wished he could change for Randa, but mostly he saw good things. That was incredibly lucky.

Kahn watched Randa and Hekktor playing canasta, a decade after she'd declared him her Phase-Match. She seemed content with her quiet life, where she read as much barbarian poetry as she wanted and cooked fancy meals.

Hekktor was gray and frail, but there was a mischievous spark in his eyes. He won the game and then made a show of patting Randa's hand in fake commiseration. Randa tossed down her cards in annoyance, but she was clearly amused by his antics. Shaking her head, she tucked a blanket over Hekktor's knees to protect him from a draft.

She loved him.

Rather than feel jealous, Kahn experienced a surge of gratitude. She was safe and happy in Hekktor's comfortable home, treating him like an aged father. He doted on her, as well. That was enough for Kahn to retroactively respect the old man. Since Kahn couldn't be with her, he was glad she had someone to…

All his warm thoughts skidded to a halt.

Suddenly, he was no longer in a dreamy, nostalgic memory. This was vivid and cold. Anxiety spiked as Kahn realized he was in the Air

House dungeon.

The stone cell was dark. Slime grew on the walls because of the dampness. Isaacs was sprawled in the middle of the floor, beaten to shit. His back was raw with bleeding slashes from a whip. Elementals healed quickly, but these wounds were festering. Like something had been done to make them last.

Kahn barely looked at the man. All his attention was on Randa. She was sitting very quietly in the corner, her legs bent up to her chest. A thick, plastic manacle was locked around her ankle. Her face was bruised, her dress torn, and her eyes blank.

Oh Gaia…

Kahn's stomach dropped. "Randa." He fell to his knees beside her. "Sweetheart, I'm here. I'm right here with you."

She couldn't hear him, of course. She just continued silently rocking herself.

The cell door clanged opened and someone shoved one bowl of beige gruel into the room.

"Looking good, Isaacs." Saxon taunted. His neon mohawk was the only bright color in the space. "I'll tell the boss you're ready for the next round."

Isaacs raised himself up on one arm. "I might be stuck in here, but eventually I'll get out. You'll always be trapped. You're too stupid to even know you're in a cage." He grabbed the unappetizing meal. Then, he seemed to notice there was only one bowl. He looked Saxon's way. These events were happening before he'd lost his eyesight, the snake-blue shade less milky but just as unsettling. "Where's the woman's meal?"

"I'm thinking she'll be more cooperative if she's hungry." Saxon sent Randa's silent form a smirk. "Let her work for her food." He slammed the cell door, leaving them in the semi-dark.

The hatred Kahn felt for that sick fuck scorched his brain. He wanted Sax dead, the same way he'd once wanted Parald dead. It was an all-consuming, fiery compulsion for vengeance. The inferno burned so bright that it purified his thoughts, hardening them on one path. One

monster to kill. He'd been robbed of his revenge against Parald, but, somewhere in the present, Saxon remained alive.

There was still an Air Phase monster left for Kahn to exterminate. …And he would. Soon.

Isaacs hesitated, glancing from his food, to Randa, and then back again. "Shit." He hissed and went crawling over to her. "Here." He ungraciously sloshed the bowl towards her. "Eat."

Randa kept rocking. She didn't even hear him.

Kahn shook off his rage, because his Match needed him. Even if she didn't know he was there, he had to try. "Sweetheart, please. Try to eat something."

"Woman?" Isaacs nudged her arm. "Hello?"

Nothing.

Tears burned Kahn's eyes.

"Shit." Isaacs repeated in resignation and maneuvered himself into a sitting position beside her. Cringing in pain, he lifted an arm. "Alright… we'll do it the hard way."

Randa made a sound of disgust and surprise, as he shoved a spoonful of food between her lips.

Kahn's eyebrows shot up.

Isaacs' not-so-tender ministrations jolted Randa from her daze. Kahn was grateful for that, even though she now looked irate. He'd rather see her mad than vacant.

"Are you crazy?" She sputtered, wiping at her face and scowling at Isaacs.

"I'm a *survivor*." More gruel got dumped into her mouth. "I'm going to teach you to be one, too."

Randa turned her head, trying to evade him. "*You* eat, if you're so keen on staying alive." Anger lit her eyes, and Kahn was thrilled to see it. She wasn't broken. Not by a long shot. "I would rather die than let him touch me, again." She told Isaacs fiercely. "I would rather *die* than…"

“You’re going to live.” Isaacs interrupted, like it wasn’t up for discussion. More food went into her mouth, ruthless and uncompromising.

Randa choked, spitting most of it out. “That tastes vile!”

“We won’t leave a tip for the chef. But it’ll keep you alive.”

“Why do you even care? We don’t even know each other.”

Isaacs focused on the bowl, as if it hurt him to look at Randa’s bruised face. “Earlier this week, Ty, of the Water House was in this cell. I put her here.” This time he offered the spoon to her, rather than insist that she eat.

Randa reluctantly took it, her temper fading. “Is Ty dead?” She asked in a resigned tone.

“No, Gion saved her. I figured he would. I’d just hoped he’d kill Parald, while he was at it. Instead, they’re gone and I’m in here. But I didn’t expect…” He sighed, running a hand through his hair. Blood was caked in the blond strands, creating sticky clumps. “He took you, because he’s pissed at me and Ty and Gion. He wanted a distraction and a target. I’m sorry. I didn’t expect him to pick some unwilling, totally innocent girl to victimize.”

Randa swallowed some gruel and wrinkled her nose in revulsion. “It was Saxon.” She drew in a shuddering breath. “He was my Match’s brother and he’s always hated me. I’m sure he encouraged Parald to take me.”

Isaacs considered that. “Our glorious king isn’t known for his lengthy attention span. Saxon probably thinks he can have you himself, after Parald loses interest.”

Kahn gave a furious snarl.

“I would rather die.” Randa repeated firmly.

“You can escape, before Saxon gets you. Parald’s going to beat me, again. He’s going to force you, again. He’s going to make us watch the other suffer, because we’re his toys, for the moment. But he’ll get bored. We just have to wait him out for a few days. Maybe a week.”

“A week!” Her voice went shrill, causing Kahn’s chest to knot with the need to comfort her.

He hated that she thought she was alone. That she didn’t realize Kahn was right beside her. Always.

Isaacs kept talking. “Once his attention wanders away from you, you’ll have more opportunities to escape. You need to leave the Air Kingdom. Plenty of Houses are offering amnesty to us, if we stand against Parald.”

“I’m not an Air Phase. I never became part of this House. I’m a Stone Phase and they disowned me. Where am I supposed to go?”

“To me.” Kahn wished like hell she could hear him. “Come to me.”

“Job will accept you into the Earth House.” Isaacs’ tone was certain. “Go there.”

Randa shook her head, denying the entire situation. “I can’t do this.”

“You *will*.” Isaacs insisted harshly. “Survival is the only choice. I have been stuck with that maniac Parald for a decade and I’m still here. You know why?”

Randa looked at him, her eyes shadowed. “Why?”

He leaned closer to her. “I’m indestructible.” He delivered that news like it was a closely guarded secret.

Randa blinked. “…Really?”

“Really.” Isaacs sounded so certain that even Kahn believed him. “I won’t give anyone else the fucking satisfaction of causing my death. Oh, no. I will endure, long after Parald and Saxon are gone, I promise you. No one will *ever* kill me, except me.”

Randa was listening intently.

Isaacs’ brows went up, as if he was a teacher concluding a very important lesson. “And *that* is how you become indestructible: You just. don’t. break.” Each word was spaced for emphasis. “You hang on to spite

the world. No matter what you have to do, you *survive*. You endure. One more minute, one more hour, one more day."

"I don't know if I can do that." But she ate more gruel.

Kahn let out a shaky breath. Randa had chosen to live. The strength of the woman awed him.

"You'll figure it out." Isaacs slumped against the wall beside her, his energy flagging again now that Randa was eating on her own. "Take your time. No one can be as indestructible as me, all at once." He closed his eyes, clearly in agony.

Randa shoved some gruel in his mouth while he wasn't looking.

He gagged on it, his eyes flashing open to glare at her.

Randa glared back.

Isaacs seemed to like that. His lips curved tiredly, staring at her as he chewed.

"I survived a crazy man once before." Randa almost seemed like she was talking to herself. "He ripped me out of my kingdom and brought me to his. He wanted to collect me, I think. Like an exotic animal in a zoo. I got away, back then…"

"…And you can get away now." Isaacs finished for her.

Kahn scowled. He hadn't seen her kidnapped by anyone. Damn memory-sharings. You couldn't pick and choose which events to revisit. Was she talking about Jarrod, King of the Stone House? Why would he take her to another kingdom?

"You'll survive too, so long as you keep breathing." She eyed Isaacs' chest, like the uneven inhalations worried her. "Can Air Phases die from collapsed lungs?"

"I'm okay." He didn't look okay. His head lulled against the wall. "I'm going to ignore you, once we get out of here, you know. No offense. It'll be safer for us both. And if you ever tell anybody I was nice to you, I'll deny it."

"Relax. You weren't that nice." She fed him some more gruel.

Isaacs' smile got a little bigger.

Kahn let out a controlled breath, seeing her resolve harden. Knowing that she'd come through this, because Randa truly was indestructible. She'd proven that time and again.

His Match was a warrior.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-Two

**The three great elemental sounds in nature are the sound of rain,
the sound of wind in a primeval wood,
and the sound of outer ocean on a beach.**

Henry Beston

Randa came back to reality with a snap. Her panicked gaze immediately slammed into Kahn's, hopelessly hoping that the memory-sharing had only happened to her. As soon as she saw the astonishment in his black eyes, she knew that Kahn had seen into her past.

Terror engulfed her. Instinctive and unstoppable.

Without even thinking about it first, she leapt to her feet. "Heart!" She bellowed at him. "Safe word. Safe word. *Heart*."

"Randa!"

She was already running out of the restaurant.

January in Mayport Beach tended to have beautiful, balmy weather. But it was Florida, so sometimes it still rained. Randa was so accustomed to the climate that she barely noticed the drizzle. She hadn't bothered to bring a coat to dinner, so she quickly grew damp.

The restaurant was situated on the beach. Beside it, a walkway ran parallel to the sand, inviting people for a stroll. Randa didn't stroll. She *ran* down the lighted walkway with no real destination in mind. She just followed the boards, focusing on the sound of her feet slapping on the wood. Past the pier. Past the Wastin' Away Bar and Grille. Past the marina.

Unfortunately, the town wasn't that big. After a few minutes of sprinting, she found herself at the end of the cozy boardwalk. It terminated at the Mayport Beach Municipal Gardens, which was still decorated for the New Year's celebration. Colorful lanterns festooned the trees and circular lights were strung across the path. In the misty rain, it created a lovely watercolor effect.

Randa barely noticed.

Or maybe she *refused* to notice.

Gardens were tainted for her, now. Potted poinsettias shared the open-air green space, along with petunias, snapdragons, and pansies. They were exquisite, and she didn't want to look at them. She'd always loved flowers. Currently, they just reminded her of fear and stalking.

Copenhagen, Denmark.

Sydney, Australia.

Shit! Her calming mantra of cities wasn't working, because now all she could picture was Kahn visiting them with her. Before, she'd been searching for a place to belong. Now she had one. Visiting the human cities would be fun, but none of them would ever be *home*.

Home was with the Light Phases. Home was Kahn.

Randa took a deep breath, forcing herself to see through her fight-or-flight panic. What was she doing? Aimlessly running through Mayport Beach was not a healthy coping mechanism.

She'd promised Kahn better communication. Instead, she was standing alone in the rain. Did she even *want* to be alone? No. She wanted to talk to someone, and the only someone she wanted to talk to was her Match.

Blinking back tears, she fished out her smartphone. *What did you see?* She texted him.

You as a little girl. You and your grandmother talking about being a proper lady. You and Hekktor playing cards. You and Isaacs in the Air House dungeon.

That's it? I don't want you to see what Parald did.

I didn't see that, sweetheart. Even if I had, you'd have nothing to feel ashamed of.

It would make you think I'm weak and I'm NOT.

I know you're not. I'm your Match. I think you're perfect.

I don't want pity.

I have 8000000 emotions for you, but that's not one of them. You did nothing wrong. You know that. It was all him.

Randa's brows drew together. She *did* know that. This reaction was based in trauma and not logic. She'd worked on her feelings with Dr. Ashley. She knew that blaming herself was damaging and unproductive. Parald was the only one responsible.

And he was dead.

She was glad he was dead, because he'd never hurt or rape or kill anyone else. Randa drew in a deep breath, forcing herself to be present. To use her senses and ground her body in her current environment.

The rain was wet. She could feel it and taste it on her lips. She could smell the scent of the flowers. She could see the orbs of lights and streaks of colors from the glowing lanterns reflecting off the puddles. She could hear the ocean in the distance.

She was safe. The past was gone. She was here now.

With Kahn.

You're right. She finally texted.

You're admitting I'm right? Maybe you DID have wine with dinner.

Against all odds, Randa's mouth quirked upward. *I can admit when you're right. You just almost never are. So what kind of 8000000 emotions do you feel towards me?*

Hopefully, they were some of the nicer ones.

Consider what you feel for me, then crank down the annoyance and crank up the obsession. I'll bet that's a fair approximation of my emotions towards you. We're a Match. So our feelings will match.

Randa stared at the phone, reading and rereading the message. Raindrops landed on the screen, creating magnified dots. They seemed to punctuate Kahn's words.

Matches were made for each other. Literally. The intense pull she felt towards Kahn would therefore be balanced out by his push towards her. That was the way a Phase-Match worked. According to everything from scientific research to religious doctrine to romantic poetry, Randa didn't

have to worry that she was falling in too deep with Kahn. He was getting swept under, too.

…But she was still worried.

My parents were a Match who didn't match. They hated each other.

Maybe they did match, then. They were both too selfish to fit with anybody else. Then how would you be born? Gaia put them together, because YOU are necessary for the world.

Randa snorted at that theory. *You're insane.*

Getting there. Being away from you makes me crazy. Come back. I respected the safe word. I gave you space. We can go to your house, and I'll STILL give you space, if you need it. But I don't want you out there unprotected.

Randa swallowed hard, her heart rate slowing, as her panic ebbed. Okay. He was kind of making sense. She could…

Someone walked closer to her, through the darkened pathways of the garden. She could hear their footsteps on the ground. Randa's head snapped up, wary and ready to flee. Only to see Isaacs standing in front of her.

She exhaled in relief. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for sleeping butterflies to kidnap."

Her brows shot up. For anyone else, that would be an extremely weird thing to say. Since it was *Isaacs* saying it, however, it was kind of just an average conversation.

"Are you planning to eat them?" Randa guessed with a wrinkle of her nose.

"No." He rolled his eyes, pushing the wet hair off his forehead. "I'm planning to wrap them up as a gift for Gion's birthday present. He hates butterflies, apparently. It'll be funny when he opens the box and they swarm his face." Isaacs chuckled at the potential trauma he'd cause.

"That's a ghastly idea."

“I know. It’s perfect!” His head swiveled around, scanning the damp foliage. “I can’t seem to find any of the colorful little fuckers, though. I guess they don’t like the rain.”

Even with his powers, the loss of his eyesight was a challenge for him. Randa debated whether or not to help him with his prank and decided she still owed Gion a favor. “Maybe you should get him something else, instead.”

“Yeah, I’m thinking used tampons would be a good backup plan. I’m sure I can wrap those up nice. Or maybe a severed head.”

“…Butterflies aren’t such a bad idea, after all.” Randa decided, considering the alternatives.

Isaacs grunted. “Hey, what are *you* doing out here without an umbrella? Where’s your big, bad bodyguard? I’ve heard rumors you two are a Match.”

“We have a safe word. He has to give me space whenever I say it.”

“That’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid. It’s very respectful of him. And how did you hear that we’re a Match already? Did Mara tell you?” Kahn’s cousin was friends with Isaacs, but she didn’t seem to be the type to gossip.

“No, Mannus told me. Or maybe it was Daven. I can’t tell them apart.”

“Why were you hanging around Mannus and Daven?” Randa was instantly on guard. Isaacs didn’t get along with the Light Phases. Isaacs barely got along with anyone. “What are you planning to do to them?”

“Nothing. Calm down.”

“Has some asshole saying ‘calm down’ ever helped *anyone* to calm down?” She jabbed a finger at him. “Do not hurt the Light Phases. I mean it. They’re mine.”

“I’m not going to hurt those troglodytes. I’m actually helping them.”

“Why do I doubt that?”

“Because you’re paranoid. But, I have nothing to hide. I am helping your ill-bred Match flush out Saxon, so he stops stalking you.”

“You’re *what?!*”

“I have spent the last day or so shit-talking Sax to anyone who will listen. He already hates me. Now, he’ll hate me more. Sooner or later, he’ll come out of hiding to try and kill me. We’ll kill him first.” Isaacs shrugged. “It’s a good plan.”

Randa gaped at him. “That risks your life in the process!”

“I’ll be fine. Your overbearing boyfriend will keep me safe.”

“Kahn detests you!”

“But he’s smitten with you and I’m part of the package.”

Kahn texted her again. *Randa, come back.*

Did you seriously tell Isaacs to draw Saxon’s attention? Seriously???

Are you with ISAACS?

Yes! In the city garden.

Get away from him! He’s bait for Saxon.

Apparently so and none of you told me about it! Aren’t you worried about his safety?

No.

Unbelievable.

Randa shoved her phone into her purse and moved forward to resolutely grab Isaacs’ arm. “Let’s go.”

“You’re overreacting. I’ve got this handled.” He let her hurry him along through the rainfall, though. Isaacs didn’t take very much seriously, but he tended to fall into line when Randa laid down the law.

Her phone rang, undoubtedly Kahn calling to complain at her. She ignored it, because she didn’t have time to yell at him. “Come *on*, Isaacs. We’ll get you someplace protected and far away.”

“How about Acapulco? I’ve been wanting to visit. Sunny weather. Plenty of drinks. We can even swim with dolphins, like a real-life diorama of Gion’s birthday cake.”

“I made him a *penguin* cake, not a…”

Wham!

A huge Phase jumped right onto the path in front of them. Randa’s lips parted in horror, as she recognized Saxon’s distinctive mohawk. In the same instant, two of his most loyal and bloodthirsty henchmen appeared behind her. They grabbed Isaacs by the arms, preventing him from jumping away, and dragged him towards Sax.

Shit!

Randa had the space to jump. No one was holding her. Maybe she could even run, while they were distracted. ...But she couldn’t leave Isaacs. She had to stay and help him.

“Isaacs.” Saxon drawled out in a taunting, satisfied voice. “And my whore of a sister-in-law, as well. And not a Light Phase in sight. This must be my lucky night.”

“*There* you are.” Isaacs sounded bored and a little put-out, even as the henchmen manhandled him. “It took you long enough to find me, Sax. I’ve been standing in this lousy weather for an hour.”

“Shut up!” Saxon took a menacing step forward. “You’ve been poking the bear, showing that video of me in the armory and making me a laughingstock. Well, now the bear’s awake and it’s hungry for shit like you.”

Isaacs frowned. “Back up. Who is the bear and why is it hungry for shit?”

One of Saxon’s goons gave a startled laugh, then quickly shut his mouth again when the other guy glowered at him.

Sax sought deference. Always. Isaacs’ mocking would set him off like a bomb. Randa knew it, even before Saxon lunged for Isaacs. He wrenched him away from the henchmen, grabbing him by the shirtfront.

“Stop!” Randa rushed forward and tried to pull Isaacs back, while the henchmen laughed. “Leave him alone!”

“Stay out of this, bitch. I’ll get to you next.” Saxon snapped. “You wanted my attention. You hired the Light Phases to find me. Well, now I’m here! Once I’m done killing him, I’ll show you what fucking a real man is like.”

“Such a charmer.” Isaacs drawled, as if he didn’t even notice his feet were dangling off the ground.

Randa looked around for a weapon and spotted a short metal signpost sticking in the soil. It was identifying the various flowers. That would do. She yanked it out of the dirt and swung it at Saxon’s arm. The henchman intercepted her, before she could make contact. The henchman on the left shoved her back, still laughing. He was twice her size, so she hit the walkway with a grunt.

“You’re going to give me the respect I deserve!” Saxon roared down at her. “I’m the worthiest, most powerful Air Phase. *I* should have been Parald’s top general!”

“Gion could kick your ass without even wrinkling his cape.” Isaacs said with the exact mix of glee and scorn guaranteed to produce an explosive reaction. It was a chemical certainty.

Saxon gave him a furious shake. “Gion can’t stand against the Dark King. No one can. He’s stronger than Parald was. Smarter. And I’ll be right beside him when he rises.”

“The Dark King is rising? Did you really just say that? Are we living in a Batman movie?”

“He’s not a joke! You don’t know what he’s already accomplished, thanks to me. He’s going to rule over every realm imaginable.”

“Yeah? What’s his name? Maybe I can get an autograph.”

Randa scrambled to her feet, intent on rescuing her dumbass friend. Isaacs sure wasn’t doing much to rescue himself. If anything, he looked amused by the unfolding disaster, and weirdly confident. Idiot.

Did she have enough power to freeze someone as big as Sax? Probably not, but she had to try. It was considered dishonorable for Phases to use their powers on each other during a fight, but she'd do it anyway. Sax certainly wasn't worried about cheating to win. She needed to get closer to him and touch his skin. It might be enough to buy Isaacs a few seconds to escape.

"You're not worthy to know the Dark King's name. You haven't been chosen. Not like I was." He spat at Isaacs.

"So, you have no idea who he is either." Isaacs translated. "How about Ben Foster? You know him?"

"That human's long dead. …Just like you're about to be."

Randa blinked. Ben was dead?

Sax's expression promised never-ending wrath. "If you have any last words, I'll hear them now." He hissed, vainly trying to instill fear into his sardonic victim.

"Two words, actually: I win."

Blades flashed. In unison, Saxon's henchmen collapsed. Their heads rolled free of their bodies, their necks sliced clean through. Mannus and Daven stood beside their corpses, each one of them holding a bloody sword.

"Hey, Randa."

"Hi, Randa."

Randa blinked in astonishment.

Saxon let out a roar of fury. It was impossible to tell if it was because of his deceased comrades or Isaacs' maniacal laughter. Either way, he didn't have time to draw his own sword.

Isaacs slammed a knife into Saxon's gut, twisting his wrist to maximize pain.

It wasn't enough to kill the bigger man, but it did make him bellow in agony. He staggered back a step, dropping Isaacs and looking down at his wound.

“You *really* shouldn’t have touched Randa.” Isaacs demonically grinned. Blood stained his hands and clothes. Rain poured down his cruel face. “I didn’t like that. …And her Match looks *really* pissed.”

Randa cringed as Saxon was split in two.

Stalking up from behind, Kahn slammed his sword down through the neon-colored mohawk with enough force to shatter bone. The entire top half of Sax’s body peeled apart. His left side sagged left. His right side sagged right. All the blood in the middle sloshed out onto the ground. Not even a Phase could survive a blow like that.

Kahn had cleaved the man in half.

“Well, that was fun.” Isaacs mused, using a handkerchief to clean off his knife.

“Miserable fuck, you died too quick.” Kahn savagely kicked the mangled body parts aside. “Rot in hell, where you belong.” His eyes found Randa and his relentless expression turned soft. “Sweetheart, did he hurt you?”

She shook her head, staring at Saxon’s corpse.

“Randa?” Kahn reached out to run a hand over her hair, only to reconsider at the last second and pull his palm back. “Look at me and tell me you’re alright.” He moved his head into her line of sight, so she was staring at him and not Saxon. “Only focus on me. I’ve got you.”

She gazed into the endless black of his beautiful eyes. Instantly, she felt more grounded.

“I’ve got you.” The intensity of his pledge made it a vow. In the rain, he looked more like a barbarian than ever. Nothing in the world could hurt her with Kahn there. She had never felt so protected.

“You’re supposed to wait for me to return, when I use the safe word.” She reminded him quietly. “You’re not supposed to follow me.”

“I will always come when you need me. I will always kill anyone who hurts you.” He helped her stand. “I will always lift you up.”

Some emotion that she didn’t even have a name for filled Randa. No one had ever promised her something like that, let alone proved that he

meant it. Just Kahn. Only Kahn.

Not giving herself time to rethink the decision, she stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

Her lips found his in what she'd intended to be a gentle peck of thanks. At least she *thought* she intended that. Maybe she'd been kidding herself and she'd actually intended to kiss him passionately. Because the moment her mouth met his, an inferno of desire and *rightness* ignited in her body.

This man was her Match.

Hers.

Kahn drew in an astonished breath, like he wasn't sure how to respond. A fraction of a second later, he was kissing her back, just as hungrily. His body curved around hers, like she was the most important part of his world.

Oh yes.

He'd been so, so right before. Whatever she was feeling, he felt it, too. It was obvious from the way his huge body trembled with need. A possessive growl rumbled in his chest.

Randa's lips parted, welcoming the desperate sweep of his tongue. It was like he couldn't wait to have some part of him inside of her. She kissed him back just as wildly. It was a wonder the raindrops didn't turn to steam the second they touched her overheating skin. She was burning from the inside out. It wasn't just Phazing energy driving her lust. It was him. It was *them*.

It was Kahn and Randa, two parts of the same whole.

She reached up to caress his thick, intricately braided hair. He rubbed his head against her palm, as she stroked the streak at his temple. Wanting more. Randa gave it to him, her fingers gently tugging at the sensitive black strands. Kahn loved that. His rumble of approval made it obvious.

When his arms tightened around her in response, though, Randa froze. She couldn't help it. Dark memories stirred, threatening to spill

over.

Kahn felt her tense and stopped touching her. He quickly pulled back to check her face. “Too much? Shit. It was too much. We don’t *ever* have to do something you’re not comfortable with.”

“I’m comfortable with you. I’m just new at this.” She licked her bottom lip, savoring the lingering taste of him. “I’ve never kissed anyone before. I need practice.”

“You’ve never…?” His eyes widened, processing all the implications of that. “Holy *fuck*. You’re a virgin.”

“I’m not. I told you that Parald…”

“That doesn’t count.” Kahn interrupted with total surety. “You were never with anyone by choice?”

“No.”

“Then you’re a virgin. How the hell is that possible?”

“I’m demisexual with introverted tendencies. I discovered it in therapy.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I only feel desire for someone I’ve formed a genuine emotional connection with, and it’s hard for me to form genuine emotional connections. You’re the first.”

His mouth stretched into an arrogant grin. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Randa echoed with an exasperated roll of her eyes. He looked decidedly too smug. “And you’ll be happy to know that I like kissing much more than I anticipated.”

“Good. We can practice anytime you want.”

The other three were pretending the kiss hadn’t happened. Or possibly they were genuinely too busy bickering to even notice it.

“Just admit that you screwed this up, Mannus! The plan was to question Sax, so we could find out if he was the stalker.” Daven nudged the bisected body with his boot. “You weren’t supposed to kill him.”

"*Kahn* did that, not me." Mannus contradicted.

"I got Sax to talk about the Dark King, like I was supposed to." Isaacs bragged. "Although --just as I predicted-- he knew nothing important. That moron was useless until *literally* his dying day."

"He told us Ben is dead." Daven reminded him.

Isaacs made a "who cares about *that* guy?" sort of face. "I said *important*. Although, I *also* totally predicted that Sax murdered Ben, come to think of it. I'm fucking amazing at investigating shit. Sullivan should hire me for the human police." Sloshing through the rivers of blood and rain mixing on the pavement, he nonchalantly went back to looking for butterflies.

"See? Isaacs questioned him. Keeping Sax alive after that was never the plan." Mannus told Daven, unwilling to back down.

"Yes, it was so the plan! We were supposed to follow Isaacs around, keeping back so Saxon didn't see. Then, we grab Sax when he shows up and interrogate him for information about the stalker." Daven glanced Isaacs' way. "Didn't you and I discuss that?"

"Honestly, I don't know *who* I was talking to. I still can't tell you guys apart."

"We look nothing alike!" They chorused.

"You weren't worried about Isaacs, because you already had the Light Phases watching him." Randa realized, blinking up at Kahn.

"Of course. You value him, so we protect him." Kahn wrapped an arm around her shoulders, moving slowly so she had time to retreat. She didn't retreat. Instead, she leaned against him. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head and let out a shaky breath. "You're sure you're okay?" He murmured into her hair.

"I'm fine. I'm happy Saxon's gone. Seeing someone hacked to death just… surprised me. For a second it was like a horror movie."

"Get used to it. You're a Light Phase now. Pretty soon horror movies will be too tame for you." Mannus said cheerily.

Kahn flashed him an irritated look. “Would you just get rid of the damn bodies, so she isn’t traumatized?

Mannus grew concerned. “Is Randa traumatized? Hell, we can bury Sax on her front lawn, so she can see the grave every day and know he’s still dead. That’ll help.”

Daven nodded.

”That’s very thoughtful, but I’m *fine*.” Randa stressed. “Please bury him somewhere else.”

The brothers exchanged a look. “Sullivan’s yard?”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

Randa refused to listen to that idea. If she listened, she’d have to stop it, and she was too emotionally exhausted to stop it. Instead, she leaned against Kahn. His body felt unexpectedly wonderful against hers.

“I’m glad that the whole stalking nightmare is over and none of you were hurt.” She ran a palm over Kahn’s arm, trying not to ogle his muscles. “How did you hide a sword at the restaurant?”

“I invented cloaking technology for the blades, using Light energy to change the refractive properties of metal. It lets us take our swords everywhere.”

She blinked at his casual explanation. “You’re so good at inventing things, Kahn.”

“I haven’t been. Not for a long time.” He gazed down at her tenderly. “But now I’m getting ideas again. Being with you inspires me.”

Randa chewed on her lower lip. “I saw Vandal in your memories. He took some of your drawings. He said he was going to make weapons with them, but I don’t see how. It seemed like your designs were mostly for dolls.”

Kahn shook his head in disgust. “Weapons are all Vandal can think about, but I make more than just tools of war. I create things for the people I care about. Those are my favorite inventions.” He arched a brow. “What would you like me to make for you, my Match?”

She ran a hand over his chest. “I have everything I need.”

“But I can give you more. I *want* to. I can start with something small, if you’d rather. I have a lot of ideas to improve your phone.”

Her phone was already perfectly functional, but Randa didn’t want to discourage his creativity. “You can improve my phone, any way you like.” She snuggled closer to his side, feeling safe. “If you could *un*-improve my TV, that would also be great. I miss *Antiques Roadshow*.”

Kahn chuckled and gave her a squeeze.

“Sorry! Steve wouldn’t let me leave until I paid for the food we didn’t eat.” Julius came running up, his eyes taking in the gory crime scene. “Hey, great! We can scratch Saxon off the Must Kill list.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-Three

See how we balance both masculine and feminine elements in this modern bedroom!

Rate My Space

Daven had a point.

Logically, Kahn should have questioned Saxon before he killed him.

He couldn't bring himself to regret what he'd done, though. Sax put his hands on Randa. Scared her. Threatened her. Added to what Kahn had seen in the memory sharing, it meant that Saxon's death couldn't come fast enough. Waiting would have given him another chance to terrorize Kahn's Match.

He'd needed to show Randa he'd always keep her safe. That no secrets Saxon held meant more than avenging her. He couldn't punish Parald, because the bastard was dead. But he could make sure Saxon paid the price for both of them.

So, Kahn was at peace with his actions. Satisfied. He'd finished what he'd set out to do and now his revenge was complete. After two long years, he'd finally purged the Air House monsters.

His phone *binged*.

It was just after midnight. Daven and Mannus were digging graves (probably at Sullivan's house), Julius was on patrol duty, and Rye was off Phazing with Tallulah Jayne.

He lifted the phone and smiled when he saw "My Sweetheart" pop up. That's how he'd saved Randa into his phone, because it was true. She was his whole heart. His Match. His everything.

You're thinking too loud. It's keeping me awake. She'd texted.

Kahn chuckled and craned his neck up to look at her.

Randa was lying on her bed, while he was on the floor beside it. He hadn't been stupid enough to ask for a spot on the mattress. But he also

wasn’t stupid enough to leave her alone, just when he was finally making some headway. Randa hadn’t objected when he’d stretched out on her tasteful, neutral carpet. She’d just handed him a blanket, like she’d never expected him to sleep anywhere else.

Kahn felt pretty smug about that.

His Match trusted him. And he trusted her, too. The Light House custom of Matches having different rooms was over. He couldn’t tolerate being away from Randa. He imagined it would be the same for the other Light Phases, when they found their mates. The Fall had changed them all. Left them traumatized. More separation was the last thing they wanted. Kahn was perfectly content to share a bedroom with Randa forever.

Even camping out on her floor suited him fine. He’d slept in far more uncomfortable places, even with the too-soft pillow. He liked the deep green of her bedroom walls. It reminded him of the Light Kingdom’s jungle. He felt calm surrounded by the familiar color, and the gentle sound of the rain hitting the windows, and the herbal scent of his Match’s nighttime skin lotions.

Sadly, he couldn’t actually see Randa, even with the three nightlights she had blazing. She was hidden under the covers, as if the cream-colored fabrics were impenetrable walls. Instead of feeling safe though, she must’ve been feeling lonely. She was reaching out to him.

He promptly answered. *I’m not used to having a pillow. It’s very soft.* Annoyingly soft, actually. Light Phases were much more accustomed to the unforgiving ground.

I could get you a brick from the yard, if you’d like.

He sent her an eye-roll emoji, then a laughing emoji, and then a skull. He wasn’t sure how to convey “pretending to be offended, when I’m actually smiling,” so he was kind of winging which little pictures would work.

The combination must have been a good one, because it sent her into a fit of giggling.

Kahn loved that sound. He loved making her laugh. He *really* wished he could see her. Luckily, the light of the phone illuminated her tent

of blankets and showed her silhouette, and his imagination took it from there. He could vividly recall exactly what she was wearing. No other woman in the universe could look so alluring in a plain cotton nightgown.

Keep talking to me, sweetheart. It'll help me relax with this marshmallow under my head. Tell me why you're awake.

Randa hesitated and began composing a reply. Dots appeared and then vanished again, as she reconsidered. Finally her message arrived.

Are you going to stay in Mayport, even though Sax is gone?

I'll stay for as long as you let me. Probably even longer.

She snorted. *Ass.*

You know you're stuck with me.

A pause. *I should have done more to protect Isaacs from Sax tonight.*

There were 3 trained killers there and still you went after Sax with a little garden sign. Mannus had provided Kahn with a terror-inducing recap. With the brothers lurking in the shadows, Randa hadn't been in mortal danger, but it still made Kahn break out in a cold sweat to consider it. *You did plenty.*

No, I need to get better at fighting back.

I can teach you self-defense. He quickly sent her a video link entitled "How to Throw a Punch Without Hurting Your Hand." That was a straightforward lesson for her to start with. He'd already watched the therapy videos she'd sent him, so he figured she'd appreciate him reciprocating. Matches helped each other. *Watch this. We can train together later.*

I'd like that. I don't ever want to feel helpless again. Another pause. *Do you think Saxon killed Ben because of me?*

No.

Sax was stalking me. He could've seen Ben approach me at the bar and been upset. So he killed Ben out of some twisted jealousy.

Kahn considered the idea. It wouldn't explain Ben's abandoned phone, but it did fit a lot of the other evidence. No way was he telling Randa that, though. It felt like one of those things he'd say, and then everyone would slap their foreheads because he was so dumb.

Randa kept going. *You were probably in danger too, Kahn. If he knew we were a Match, Sax would've targeted you, just like he did Ben.*

Being your Match is worth any risk. Besides, Sax was never a threat to me. No one is. I'm too damn incredible.

Randa gave a soft scoff.

It's true! I'm exceptionally skilled. Extraordinarily strong. Always right.

You weren't right about Ben being the stalker.

Kahn made a face, still unwilling to let go of his favorite theory. *Maybe he's not really dead. Maybe he's faking.*

Randa threw a pillow at him.

Kahn laughed. *Fine. Sax and Ben aren't that interesting, anyway. Tell me what else is on your mind.*

She sighed. *The memory sharing.*

Okay, that was promising. Kahn hunted for a reply that would keep her communicating. *I'm sorry it upset you.*

I'm glad it happened. It just made me feel exposed. All my life, I felt like no one really knew me. Only now YOU do. Because you've been inside my head.

He did know her. He knew that even with just three feet between them, Randa felt more secure texting him. The screens allowed her to open up without any self-consciousness. Kahn was fine with that. (For now.) It was why he'd introduced the idea, in the first place. He just wanted her to keep letting him in. He wanted to listen to everything she had to say.

You've been inside my head too.

Kahn, everything I saw there was good. I promise. Even in your worst memories, I saw how deep you loved your family.

He hoped she knew that he loved her just as much. Feelings developed fast in a Phase-Match, but it was more than that. He fell for her long before he knew she was his mate. The woman owned him.

He was afraid that saying any of that would scare her, even in the safety of a text. He settled for a heart emoji. Then he made a face, feeling like a dumbass.

Randa seemed encouraged by it, though. *I could see in your memories that you like touching. I can learn to do that more. If you're ok with it.*

I am ok with you touching me anytime and anywhere. But only when YOU feel like doing it. He didn't want to pressure her or for her to submit to something just to please him. He wanted to be the one who pleased *her*.

This time she sent *him* a heart emoji.

His actual heart flipped. *We should redo our doomed first date.* Maybe they'd have the opportunity to hold hands this time. He loved it when she held his hand.

Dinner wasn't so doomed. I enjoyed it.

You ran out of the restaurant crying and a madman tried to kill you. You didn't even get food.

I still enjoyed it. I'd wanted to ask you out since the singles mixer, but I didn't know how. Jules and Rye gave me an excuse to make it happen.

After years of feeling forgotten and alone, Kahn finally knew what it was to be blessed. Gaia had crafted a woman just for him. Or more likely *he'd* been crafted for *her*. To fit into Randa's heart and arms forever. There was nowhere else he'd ever belong.

For future reference: I will always say yes to you, Randa.

Always?

Mostly always. Unless it puts you at risk or involves you dating another man.

Randa gave another laugh. *I can barely handle the man I've got.*

You were handling me just fine when we kissed.

Randa stopped typing.

Kahn mentally cursed. Had he said the wrong thing, again? He should have reigned in his own desires and…

His phone rang. Kahn blinked and then quickly answered, as Randa's name popped up requesting a video call. "Hey, sweetheart." He turned the volume down so the phone didn't echo.

"Hey." She whispered back. Inside her fortress of blankets, the camera showed her flushed face. She looked so angelic it broke his newly-found heart.

"I'm going to improve your camera. I still have some lenses created by the Dust Phases, before the Fall." Nothing could beat the quality of their craftsmanship. "I always want to see you as clearly as possible." Fixing up her phone was quickly turning into his favorite hobby. "How do you feel about hologram projections?"

"Whatever you want to do is fine." She answered distractedly, her mind on something else. "So, um…" She licked her lower lip nervously. "Before? I was thinking about *more* than just self-defense and the memory-sharing."

Kahn pretended to be surprised. "Like what?"

"Like… I only feel lust when I'm with you. Did I tell you that?"

Oh yeah. He vividly recalled that news. It was hard to forget a miracle. "I'm your Match. It's right that you should lust after me."

Fate and biology drew them closer and closer together. It was perfect. It was everything he'd ever dreamed of. He might literally die if they didn't Phaze soon, but that was a small price to pay for having her in his life.

"I kind of *like* feeling lust?" It sounded like a question. Like she was gauging his reaction. Like she was concerned he wouldn't reciprocate.

He was eager to put those worries to rest. "I feel lust with you, too. And I *absolutely* like it. You are the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen. More importantly, you are *you*. And I have been infatuated with you since

the first moment we met. I just struggled to deal with it. Emotions are not my best subject. Give me time and I'll learn the sensitive parts of this relationship."

Randa shined a smile that had all his blood rushing south. "Okay. If you give me time for the touching parts. We can support each other with this work, too."

God, she was going to kill him. "You don't need to push yourself to touch me. Not *ever*. I'm serious, Randa."

"No one is pushing. I just feel… open-minded?... about Phazing in the near future. I want it. I think you want it, too. And I know our energies both want it."

His powers were screaming for her every second of the day. He wasn't going to tell her that either, though. It was getting easier to not always say the wrong thing. He just had to think before he opened his mouth. Someone should have told him that trick years ago!

"I am happy just being with you, sweetheart. We have all the time in the world for you to feel comfortable with more."

"I'm not saying we'll *definitely* Phaze soon. I can't promise that. But I'm ready to start working on it. Tonight. If you're up for it."

"Working on… Phazing?" Yes, he was up for that. So, *so* up.

"*Practicing* Phazing. It'll take me a couple tries to get there, I think."

"We can do whatever you want. Anything, at all." She wanted to *practice?* What did that mean? Kahn tried to focus. It was hard. So was he. Up and hard. Shit! He needed to stop thinking about his dick and reassure her. "You set the pace. Just tell me what you need."

"Well," she chewed on her lower lip and he nearly groaned at the sight, "it would help if you went first. Alone."

"Alone?" His mind felt sluggish. All he could do was watch her perfect mouth.

"That way I could figure out the best… um… physical logistics, without any…" She trailed off with an impatient puff of breath, hunting for

words. “Without any triggering risks.”

“Logistics?” Kahn’s conversational skills had deteriorated to the point where he was now just repeating random words. “Of Phazing?” They were still talking about Phazing, right? His concentration was shot. It was her fault for being so dazzling.

She rolled her eyes and gave up on subtle prompts. It was just as well. Kahn was not great at subtlety, especially when he was nearly catatonic with desire. “Take your pants off and masturbate on video, please. It will help me adapt.”

“Oh!” He bobbed his head. “Yeah, we can do that. Good idea.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Sweetheart, I am *eager* to please. Tell me what you want and I’ll make it happen. Direct me.”

“Thank you, Kahn.” Randa settled deeper into her pillows. He was jealous of the too-soft monstrosities and how they enveloped her even softer body. “Do you still want me to talk to you, or would it be a distraction?”

“I want to hear your voice. Light Phases aren’t shy.” Kahn stripped out of his clothes without a drop of modesty.

Randa blinked, her eyes fixed on his bare chest. “Oh wow…”

Kahn preened a bit. His Match liked his body. He wanted to show her more of it. “How graphic should we make this film?” He adjusted the camera to show his straining erection. “Too much?”

Randa sucked in a quick breath. “No, that’s fine.” She said in a slightly strained, but very polite voice.

Kahn grinned. Snaking his free hand down his torso, he seized hold of himself. “I like it best when you stroke and twist at the same time.” He showed her what he meant, squeezing himself tight. Having her nearby was an aphrodisiac, so he tried to focus on the mechanics. His brain worked best with mechanics. “You see how I’m already leaking?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Lubrication, so I don’t hurt you. When we come together, everything will fit perfectly.” His eyes fluttered closed, imagining it.

Shit, this wasn't going to last long. Knowing she was watching made him feral. Now, he was picturing how he'd squeeze inside of her tight little body and that just kicked his arousal higher.

"I can't see your face." She complained after a moment.

Kahn obligingly switched the camera angle.

"Now, I can't see your cock."

He jolted at the word coming out of her pretty mouth, his jaw clenching. "*Fuck*." "Randa, sweetheart, I take it back. Don't talk to me. I like it too much."

"I like you, too." She teased. "This is extremely hot."

He ground his teeth to stay in control, shocked that he was so close to the edge. "Hot means attractive, right?"

"Yes."

"You are the hottest girl in existence. I think about you all the time. I can't believe I'm really yours."

The bed shifted and then her eyes were peering at him over the edge of the mattress. "That's better. Now, I can see all of you."

Better for *her* maybe. For Kahn, it was a thousand times worse. He stared up at her, his chest heaving.

Randa's dark gaze roamed all over his body in appreciation. "You are exactly how I envisioned a barbarian, when I wasn't supposed to be envisioning barbarians. Strong and proud and beautiful…"

"Beautiful?" That wasn't how anyone else had ever described him.

"You'd prefer handsome? Because you're that, too."

"I prefer 'devastating.' 'Powerful.' 'Amazing' also works."

Randa chuckled. She moved a hand down, like she wanted to touch him and then quickly retreated again.

Kahn tossed the phone aside and stretched both his arms up over his head. "I'm going to hold on to this, okay?" He wrapped his fingers around

the right back leg of her dresser. “My hands are *not* going to move. It’s safe.”

“I’m not worried you’ll hurt me. I just don’t do well with people touching me. I need more practice.”

“I’m not going to touch you. You’re going to touch me. If you want to.”

“Of course, I want to. I’m just not sure how I’ll like it.” Still, Randa inched forward again. Under her shyness, she really was an adventurous little thing. He adored that about her. He adored everything about her.

She ran a tentative finger along his arm.

Kahn’s head slammed back in ecstasy as the Phazing energy went wild. He felt it swirling all around them. A cyclone of sensation. Light powers and Stone powers trying to become one.

He hadn’t realized how deep the Gone Wild infection had grown until Randa’s energy touched his. He could feel the Stone powers buffing away the damage and restoring the broken pieces of him. She might say she couldn’t fix him, but she was sure as hell helping him fix himself. His powers were nourished and invigorated, just from being close to her.

Randa’s energy was so different from his. He had the feeling it was different from most Stone Phases. She’d said she struggled to freeze people in place with a touch. She still felt very powerful, though. Her energy was deep and rich and gliding all around him. Caressing and wanting to connect.

Phases’ energies always pulled tighter and tighter in the initial steps of Phazing. It was sacred. When they finally combined, it would be a magical feeling of relief.

Until then it was torture.

“Oh.” Randa’s expression lit up, not minding the ache to complete their bond. She seemed wholly fascinated with his body. “Never mind. I do like this!”

“Great.” He ground out, hoping he didn’t embarrass himself by coming within the next three seconds. “Can I convince you to touch my cock, next? Please?” He wasn’t above begging. It was life and death.

Randa slid off the bed, so she was kneeling next to him. That didn’t help him retain control. “Stroke down and then kind of twist?” She reiterated, remembering his instructions.

“Honest to Gaia, I don’t care how you do it, at this point. Just so your hands are on me, I’m good.”

Her delicate palm inched down, tentatively curling around him. From the look on her face, it seemed like she was bracing for a quick retreat. But after the first brush of her fingers, her shoulders relaxed. She made a noise of surprise and pleasure. “I like this, too.” Whatever she’d expected to feel, she was clearly happy to be proven wrong.

Not as happy as Kahn was though.

He shifted his hips, keeping rhythm with her strokes. “Holy *shit!*”

“Like that?”

“Yeah. Just like that.” Fireworks were detonating in his head. It had been a while for him, but he knew handjobs had never felt like this before. He would definitely remember if they did. This was all Randa.

People said that a Match made everything feel different. Better. He’d been too cynical to believe it before. He believed it now. This was like fire injected into his veins and pumping through his whole body. No wonder humans called sex “hot.” It made perfect sense.

“Sweetheart, I’m going to come in your hand, if we keep going. Do you want that?”

He wanted it. He wanted *more*. He wanted to come all over her pretty breasts and then rub it into her satiny skin. Claiming her with his scent. Because she was a virgin, raised in a finishing school, he tried to rein in his baser instincts. If he disgusted her, she might not try this again, and he already wanted to try it again.

And again. And again.

“You can come in my hand.” She sounded breathless. “I won’t be offended. I *really* like this.” Her tempo picked up, as she gained confidence. “Are you doing alright?”

He managed a tight nod, struggling for oxygen.

“You’re devastatingly, powerfully, amazingly beautiful, Kahn.” Her thumb brushed against his nipple and then she leaned down to run her tongue over it. “I love to look at you.”

Gaia, that was it. The end. He was done.

“Randa!” Kahn came harder than he ever had before. His hips arched, as she continued to milk him dry. “Fuck…” He collapsed back down to the carpet, his head spinning from the force of his release.

It took him a moment to realize that he’d ripped the dresser apart. The wooden leg was still clenched in his fists, but it was no longer attached to the base. Without that support, the rest of it had collapsed to the side. He hadn’t even noticed.

Randa gave a giddy smile, pleased with herself and all she’d accomplished. “That was a very successful practice session.” Everything that had been on top of the dresser was now on the floor. She reached over to grab tissues from the pile and cleaned off her hand. “You owe me a new bureau, though.”

He watched her with dazed eyes. “We’re going to need much sturdier furniture, if you’re *that* good at this. You almost killed me.”

She blushed and laughed at the same time. “Can I kiss you?”

“Of course. You never have to ask that. I always want to…” He broke off with an *oof* sound when she clambered on top of him.

Randa leaned down to kiss him, her body pressed against his and her knees on either side of his hips. Her dark hair created a curtain around them, and Kahn was somehow sporting another erection, just that fast. Physically it didn’t seem possible, but Randa inspired him to do all sorts of impossible things.

Her mouth slid across his, and he moaned in deep appreciation. “You taste like something tart and sinful.”

“My lip balm is cherry flavored. They come in a discount three-pack at the grocery store. Cherry, grape, and green apple.”

“I like the cherry.” He sucked her bottom lip into his mouth. “Just get the cherry.”

“I like the cherry best too. But it’s more economical to buy the mix of fruit flavors.” She sounded dreamy and turned on, even in her frugality.

“I’m pretty sure I can afford it. Just cherry.” He licked the corner of her mouth, savoring her taste.

“You hated cherry Pop-Tarts.” She reminded him.

“Because you weren’t wearing them. It’s you who makes the taste so addictive.”

“Fine. I’ll just wear the cherry. She agreed vaguely, her hands on his chest again. Tracing over his muscles. “I hope you don’t feel objectified by how much I enjoy your body.”

“Nope. It belongs to you. Do whatever you want with it.” He could live and die in this bedroom. Nothing outside of it held the least bit of interest for him. Not when he had Randa.

She pressed a kiss to the center of his chest and then his neck, before finding his lips again. Kissing should have been mostly innocent, but Kahn didn’t feel innocent. All the passion and madness inside of him was unleashed. Randa was still leery of being touched, so this was the only way he could have her. He planned to take full advantage of it.

Randa didn’t mind his ferocity. She burrowed closer to him, kissing him back just as hungrily. Her hands tangled in his hair. Her tongue caressed his. It set every part of Kahn ablaze. Even his damaged energy. The weight of his powers felt lighter than it had in years. The jagged edges temporarily smoothed by her proximity.

The woman was the best kisser in the entire universe.

Instead of just a predictable prelude to sex, Randa made kissing the main event. It was intimate. Her lips softening for him, and the small sounds she made, and the closeness he felt to her. He’d never, ever get enough.

If anyone else discovered her kissing skills, wars would be waged over her. He would have to fight off everybody in the whole world. It would be worth it. Keeping her was worth anything. He'd die before he gave her up. Even if this was as far as they'd ever physically go together, he'd be perfectly satisfied.

He wanted to make her satisfied in return.

"I can help you come, too." He panted. "I won't touch you even one second more than necessary. I'll just use my hand. Let me…"

"I'm not ready." She interjected.

But she rocked against him, a slow, instinctive undulation of desire. Her legs were still on either side of him, so the movement pressed her tight against his cock. He could feel how wet she was through the thin material of her underwear. Her core rubbed against his aching erection, overheated and seeking relief. Showing her need.

Need he was going to do *nothing* about, until she allowed it.

If this was the first time she'd ever felt desire, he wasn't about to scare her by rushing things. Kissing her was already more than he'd hoped to have, just a few days ago. And feeling her hands on him had been like a fevered dream. Randa was moving towards him all on her own. He had to wait.

"Alright." Kahn stayed still, trying not to notice the way her nipples beaded under her cotton nightgown or the sway of her breasts beneath the fabric. "When you *are* ready, I'm here."

She met his eyes, looking vulnerable.

"I want to give you everything I have." He said honestly. "And I want everything you have in return. I want your lust. And I want your trust. And I want your love. So, I can be patient."

Randa stared down at him.

Kahn stared back.

"I'm pretty sure I can give you all of that." She finally murmured. "I just need a little more practice."

Kahn smiled, suddenly feeling indestructible. “So then we’ll practice. *A lot.*”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-Four

It has all the elements I'd expect… but not in *quite* the configuration I'd be hoping for.

Antiques Roadshow

Gion celebrated his five hundred and sixty-third birthday at Happy Applewhite's Rockin' Roller Rink and Robot R'cade.

Even knowing that Isaacs had selected the location to be awful, it was shocking just *how* awful it was. Kahn's eyebrows soared as he took in the rundown space.

A wooden skating oval dominated the back half of the building, with a giant mirror ball and black lights haphazardly affixed to the ceiling. Around the perimeter was a skate rental shop, a concession area, and a DJ booth playing music that even Kahn knew was about five decades out of fashion. The arcade (correction: r'cade) machines were at the front. Pinball and Pac-Man were the only games functioning.

Birthday parties were held on a raised platform, painted in neon colors and festooned with red balloons. Tables were set with red paper plates. "Have a Rockin' Good Time, Gianne!" read a crooked banner overhead. Robots in party hats lined the walls.

Actual robots.

They were big, bulky mechanical men, like something out of a 1950s sci-fi film. Kahn had seen at least two of those movies, and both of them had ended in the robot abducting some poor woman. He shifted closer to Randa, just in case.

Who had invented these atrocities?

"They spelled your name wrong." Tharsis told Gion, in a not very helpful tone. He gestured up to the listing banner. "We should ask for a discount, *Geee*-ann."

Cross gave a choked snort, as if he knew better than to actually laugh.

Job sighed.

Gion's jaw ticked. He couldn't storm out of the colorful dungeon, though. His sweet little Match was right beside him, putting the finishing touches on the decorations.

"This place looked better in pictures." Ty remarked with a slight frown. "That party planner never returning my texts really did set us back a bit. But adding these streamers will help create a better atmosphere." She began attaching them to every available surface. (Kahn didn't see much improvement.) "Isaacs said this was the number one party venue in Mayport Beach."

It probably was. For kindergarteners.

"I'm just touched that you went to so much trouble for me, angel." Gion steadied Ty, as she climbed over chairs to stretch the crimson crepe paper around. (All the overly-festive decorations were blood-red. It was like a bar mitzvah held at a crime scene.) "Is this what you and Isaacs have been planning?"

She nodded excitedly. "I was sure you never had a birthday party before."

"You're right. I haven't."

"So you're surprised?"

The corner of his mouth tipped upward. "Extremely."

"After that unreliable party planner disappeared on me, Isaacs took over." She rolled her eyes indulgently. "He was mischievous with some of the details. But I know the games you two play are just how you show affection. We both wanted you to have a wonderful birthday."

"You make every day wonderful for me." He lifted her down and kissed the top of her head, even as his gaze scanned for Isaacs. Ty could do no wrong in Gion's eyes, but the other Air Phase was a dead man.

"Why are a dozen evil robots surrounding us?" Daven stage-whispered to Mannus. "Is Gion building an army of them? Were we supposed to buy him more as gifts? Because I didn't get him any robots. I got him a lamp."

“They’re not evil robots.” Tessie, Keeper of the Quintessence and Job’s Match interjected. “They’re just animatronics. Like life-sized toys.” She was sitting on a tabletop, fiddling with Job’s ice-cream-cone-patterned tie. Tessie was on a mission to liven up her Match’s wardrobe, so this must be her idea of “Job party wear.”

“Humans allow their young to play with evil robots?” Daven seemed horrified.

“It seems so.” Julius confirmed sadly. “Before Kahn disassembled it, Randa’s TV showed me ‘cartoons’ with robots who sing and dance.”

Kahn scowled. He hadn’t “disassembled” the TV. He was *fixing* it.

“Wall-E didn’t sing and dance. He *watched* people sing and dance.” Mannus corrected.

“Yes, he *did* sing and dance!” Daven contradicted, even though he’d apparently not seen the movie.

Sullivan looked appalled. “Will there be any singing here? Because I don’t want to listen. I didn’t even want to come.”

Kahn cringed, because singing *was* bad news.

“These robots aren’t evil.” Tessie insisted, focused on the Light Phases. “They’re cute. Look at their party hats! And why would you get Gion a *lamp?*”

“He’s difficult to shop for. I didn’t know we could buy robots.”

“I’m not singing.” Sullivan reiterated to the room at large. He was stationed beside Tessie, doing police paperwork and waiting for the rest of the Fire Phases to arrive. No one else was eager for them to show up.

The party hadn’t officially begun, so a lot of guests were still coming in. Some came in and then immediately went back out again. Chason, of the Magnet House had stepped one foot through the door and surveyed the bedazzled, creepy interior. Then he’d fled, hustling Mara out with him.

Kahn didn’t much like his cousin-in-law, but he couldn’t blame the guy. Misspelled, menacing, and kind of musty wasn’t a great combination for a party atmosphere.

…Well, unless you were Isaacs. He seemed positively exuberant, as he paraded in and helped Randa place Gion's four-tier masterpiece of a birthday cake on the center table. "Ta-da!"

The cake was perfect.

Kahn's Match had made it, so it was no surprise. Whatever she made was brilliant. Whatever she wanted was right. Anyone who didn't respect her should die. It seemed obvious.

Even if he was slightly biased (Which he wasn't. It was just simple fact.) Randa's bakery skills were objectively outstanding. He had no idea why Gion *wanted* a penguin cake, but he'd never get a better one. She'd decorated it with white and black frosting, so it really did look like a bird. It even had a little bow tie. His sister Prinny, creator of the infamous red frog cake, would've been rapturous.

Randa's stunning dark eyes went to Gion, gauging his reaction. "Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful!" Ty gushed, clapping her hands together. "Isn't it beautiful, dear?"

Gion nodded, warily eyeing the cake. "It's not ticking or covered in sludge, so I'm surprised Isaacs allowed it through the door." He hesitated. "What's it supposed to be? A vulture?"

"It's a *penguin*." Kahn interjected, ready to fight for the cake's honor. "Are you fucking blind?"

"Hey, actual blind person here." Isaacs protested.

"Shut up." Gion and Kahn snapped at him.

Isaacs flicked them off using both hands, one for each of them.

"I love penguins. It was so sweet of you to do this, Randa. We truly appreciate it." Ty said sincerely, ignoring the byplay.

"Of course. I just wanted to show how sorry I am for everything that happened before, and I hope that you can forgive me…?" Randa trailed off nervously. "It's devil's food cake with raspberry cream and mascarpone frosting."

“That actually sounds edible.” Gion eyed the cake with deepening interest, the promise of chocolate lifting his mood. “I appreciate you rising above Isaacs’ sabotage and *actually* helping with the party. Of course your apology is accepted. I am…”

The loudspeakers cut him off. Dolly Parton music started blaring over the sound system and his nanosecond of pleasure died.

Gion scowled, refocusing on his frenemy. “Isaacs, get over here.” He headed towards the roller rink so he could berate the other man without Ty overhearing. “*Now*.”

“Why don’t you go blow your candles?” Isaacs suggested nastily, but he followed Gion anyway. The Air Phase thrived on negative attention, so garnering an angry reaction would just encourage him to make the party even worse.

Could it even get worse? Kahn sent the looming square-headed robots another glance, still worried about the threat of singing.

Satisfied that her cake was well received, Randa slipped her palm into his. That was all it took for Kahn to forget everything else. Touching had already become easier for her. Practicing all night had paid off in *so many* ways. Randa tipped her head to the side, so it rested against his shoulder, and Kahn’s world was beautiful.

“I think that went well.” She sounded relieved. “Gion liked the cake.”

“He’d better. It’s the best part of this damn party.”

Randa cuddled closer to him, their fingers intertwined. He *loved* it when she held his hand. It was casual, but intimate. Casually intimate. He hadn’t even known that was a thing before he met his Match.

“So, which one is Happy Applewhite?” She asked, gesturing towards the robots.

“Probably the big one. He carries a leadership rank. His party hat has a star.”

She wrinkled her nose. “That one doesn’t look particularly happy. It looks like it wants to eat us.”

Kahn grunted at the very fair assessment. “It can start with Isaacs.”

She snickered and elbowed his side. “Behave.”

His heart expanded in his chest, the same way it always did when he made her laugh. It felt like he’d won at life.

A disembodied human voice came over the loudspeaker. “Okay, everyone! We’re ready for pictures with little Geen and his parents…”

“His name is pronounced Guy-*ahn*.” Ty corrected towards the ceiling.

The voice kept talking. “…and with me! His favorite animal. Who’s come to wish him the hap-hap-happiest of happy birthdays!” A human dressed in a chicken suit came waddling out from a back room, ready for cheers.

No one cheered.

Cross looked at Job. “That’s not a vulture.” He said with a perfectly straight face.

“We didn’t have a vulture costume.” The human glowered at Cross, as if his life’s work had been impugned. Kahn recognized him as Steve, the flower delivery boy. (That little shit was *everywhere* in this town.) “The only kinds of birds we’ve got are this or a penguin.”

Tharsis reacted like that was the funniest thing he’d ever heard.

“Penguin, penguin, penguin!” Mannus and Daven chanted in support of Randa’s cake.

Sensing (incorrectly) that the crowd was now with him, Steve plastered on a huge grin. “Time for some hugs!” He spread his fuzzy wings and looked around. “Where is our birthday boy?”

Everybody pointed towards Gion’s imposing figure and dark scowl.

The teenagers’ eyes widened in terror.

“Hugs, hugs, hugs.” Isaacs sing-songed.

“I will kill you.” Gion vowed. It was impossible to know if he was talking to the human threatening to hug him or Isaacs. Maybe both.

Sullivan wasn't taking any chances with the kid's life. "Steven, go home."

The human gulped. "But this is my side gig, Chief Pryce. I'm supposed to be running the party for my uncle."

"*Home*, Steven. Before I tell your mom who *really* stole her barbecue grill."

Steve fled as fast as his chicken feet could carry him.

"We didn't get pictures, yet." Tharsis complained. "Thanks a lot, Sully.

Ever the peacemaker, Julius waded into the fray. "Why don't we open some gifts?"

"Yeah, that's a good idea." Tessie pointed to a box that looked like it was wrapped in poisonous leaves. "Open Isaacs' first, so we can move it far away. It smells rancid."

Randa winced. "That's *not* a good idea." She whispered to Kahn. "Gion really might kill him. It's probably either kidnapped butterflies, a severed head, or tampons."

Personally, Kahn was willing to risk Isaac's life, but the jackass was devoted to his Match. He supposed that meant he had to protect Isaacs from his own suicidal stupidity. "Tessie?" He caught her eye. "I'd pick another one." He made a slashing motion across his throat.

She got the hint. Of course she did. She'd met Isaacs. "Right. Um… How about Thar's present?"

Tharsis brightened.

"What is it? A paintball gun?" Nia, Thar's twin, arched a brow. "We all know that you only ever buy people gifts that *you* want to play with."

"Everyone likes paintball, you heathen."

With all the enthusiasm of an innocent man headed to the gas chamber, Gion headed over to grab the present. He clearly suspected that whatever was in the long tube was grotesque. "You really, *really* didn't have to get me anything, Thar. Really."

He grudgingly ripped off the black, Darth Vader wrapping paper and pulled out a rolled-up blueprint. Gion blinked.

So did everyone else.

Nia and Ty exchanged a baffled glance.

"What is it?" Gion asked warily.

"It's plans to a bomb shelter!" Tharsis seemed thrilled with his gift. "It's actually right below us." He pointed towards the ground. "It's left over from the Cuban Missile Crisis era. I found out about it when I was researching your party. We can go look at it later."

"Why would I want to look at a bomb shelter?"

"'Cause it's cool? It's a *bomb shelter*, Guy."

"Right." Gion still didn't seem overjoyed, but he managed a nod. "A bomb shelter. Fine. That gift could be worse. Somehow. I guess."

He set the blueprints aside and picked up the next present, which was haphazardly covered in duct tape and paper silhouettes from a firing range. There were bullet holes straight through the box.

"This one is from the Fire House. …And it's moving." Gion sighed and looked towards Sullivan. "It's a snake, isn't it?"

"Knowing my in-laws? Two snakes."

"Why don't we open that one later." Ty nudged the Fire Houses slithering present aside and handed Gion a more respectable-looking package. "Here. This one is from Cross and Nia."

Gion arched a brow at Cross. "You got me a gift?"

"No, *Nia* got you a gift and signed my name to the card. You're welcome."

Gion tore open the tasteful silver wrappings. Inside the slim box was a sword. His eyebrows shot up.

"It's 3D printed in ultra-strong resin." Nia volunteered. "It doesn't need to be sharpened and should be very deadly against Elementals, because of the plastic. Oh, and it's designed to look like the one from *The Lord of the Rings*."

Job made a sound of approval.

Kahn grunted, grudgingly impressed. He'd read *The Lord of the Rings*. "A blade is always a worthy gift."

Mannus, Daven, and Julius nodded. Rye would've nodded too, but he wasn't there. He was still locked in a bedroom someplace with Tallulah Jayne.

Gion gave the sword an experimental twirl, still looking for booby-traps and not finding any. "Good." Relief flickered over his harsh features. "This is actually normal. Thank you, Nia. You're currently my favorite relative."

She winked at him.

"What about me?" Cross complained. "Aren't you going to thank me?"

"You had nothing to do with my new sword. *Nia* got it for me."

"My name's on the card, isn't it?"

"Gion, open mine next!" Daven called, cutting off the argument. "It's a lamp. It's green."

"The green lamp is from both of us." Mannus decided.

"No, it's not!"

Ty nudged the box towards him and Gion opened it, probably just to shut the brothers up. "A green lamp." He intoned, peeling off the crumpled newsprint it was wrapped in. "What a surprise."

Mannus and Daven beamed.

"Light Phases enjoy portable light sources. And birthdays." Julius informed the room at large. "We can come to all of your parties now and bring lamps."

Cross leaned closer to Nia. "Do *not* tell them when my birthday is." He whispered loudly.

Kahn ignored all of them because he didn't give a shit. "When is your birthday, Randa?" That he *did* care about. Everything involving his Match was vital to know.

"The 18th of September. I never celebrate it, though. It brings up bad memories of that horrible period just before I turned ninety-three." She shuddered. "My parents were pushing me to Bind with Yuan and become Queen of the Reflection House. Then, he tried to lock me in his awful castle…"

"*Yuan?* I thought Jerrod, the *Stone* House King, was the one who attacked you."

"No, Jerrod barely knew I existed. It was Yuan who was obsessed with me."

The *fuck*…?

"Then why the hell is Yuan still alive!?" Kahn felt like he was going crazy.

Randa blinked. "He's very powerful. I only escaped because I caught him by surprise and froze him with my powers. I didn't have time to kill him before he broke free. I just ran. It would've been my word against royalty if I'd reported it to the Council."

Kahn ground his teeth together. Yuan was living his life like nothing had happened, while Randa was still so traumatized that she didn't celebrate her birthday…? No. Hell, no. "You should have told me his name days ago!"

She frowned at him.

Shit.

Kahn held up his hands in apology. "Sorry. It's not about me. You can share *what* you want, *when* you want." He wasn't mad at Randa, obviously. He was pissed off at Yuan and, to a lesser extent, himself for blaming the wrong king. But it was all easily fixed. "I'm just glad you've told me now."

"I didn't *not* tell you, before. I guess…" She shifted uncomfortably. "I guess, I don't like to say his name. That's not healthy though. I'm sorry. It didn't occur to me that you'd think it was Jerrod."

"You did nothing wrong." He soothed. "And the problem is easily solved. I'll murder Yuan tonight.'

Randa's eyes widened. "No! I don't want you risking yourself over…"

Daven cut her off. "Who are we murdering tonight?"

"Yuan. That fucker just shot to number one on the Must Kill list."

"Sounds good." Mannus nodded, on board with slaughtering the Reflection King without knowing why. "Do we have time for penguin cake, first?"

Gion continued opening gifts.

Ty reached under the table and came up with a violin case, decorated with a bow. She handed it to her Match with a teasing grin. "This is from me. You'll make exceptional music on it, I'm sure. It's almost as old as you."

A genuine grin transformed Gion's face. He forgot he hated his party, enraptured by his gift and his Match. "Angel, I love it. I love *you*." He clicked open the case to admire his expensive new instrument.

Happy Applewhite suddenly moved.

The robot took a step forward. Kahn's head snapped around to stare at it in amazement. He hadn't thought that these goofy-looking animatronics were advanced enough to leave their small podiums. This one was lumbering forward at an impressive pace.

"Well, that's some *Five Nights at Freddy's* nightmare fodder." Tharsis mused.

"It's pretty high-tech for such a dump." Cross seemed morbidly fascinated. "You think it's AI? I've heard of AI."

Ty looked Isaacs' way. "I don't remember seeing this on the website."

Isaacs' head tilted, his smirk fading. "Me neither."

The other robots started walking, too. Stomping away from the walls, they fell into a loose circle around the partygoers. Everyone watched with varying degrees of confusion and apprehension.

“Are we sure this is part of the birthday show?” Randa asked warily.

Happy Applewhite’s ping-pong-ball- shaped eyes blinked open, glowing a creepy, illuminated purple.

Kahn’s stomach dropped. He knew that very distinctive color. It was the exact shade of the force field that Vandal used to hold him prisoner in the Light Kingdom. The one that Kahn himself was supposed to invent, sometime in the future.

Vandal stole all his plans and notes, according to Randa. Including those dancing dolls he built for his sisters. If you were a psycho from the future, you could make those dolls life-size. You could alter the designs so they looked like robots. You could add weapons to them, that hadn’t even been invented yet. You could take all Kahn’s ideas and use them to ambush the strongest Phases in the realm.

Fuck!

This horrible party *was* about to get worse.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-Five

The elements of the party have been ill-mixed.

Anthony Trollope

Screaming. Cursing. Sudden bursts of energy. Robots.

It was all happening so fast. People tried to jump away and couldn't. Something was blocking them. Weapons and powers were being unleashed, but the only thing to aim at was Happy Applewhite and his mechanical friends.

It was chaos.

Randa was still struggling to process it all, when Kahn swept her right off her feet. Her Match didn't bother about the fight breaking out. He just grabbed her. Typically, he was extremely careful about consent, but now he was scooping her up like she was the delicate captive in some outlandish barbarian poem. It was almost as shocking as the robots.

"Daven!" Kahn bellowed and tossed her towards the other Light Phase. Literally *tossed* her, as if there was no time to waste.

Daven reacted with the same urgency. He only held her for half a second, and then she was flying towards Julius, who stood a few feet away. "Hurry, Jules!"

"Mannus!" Julius shouted. "The counter!"

Mannus was last in the bucket brigade. He was also closest to the snack stand. A glass display showcased dozens of types of candy and a popcorn machine on one side. Against the wall were soda dispensers, a spinning rack of churros, and a menu board that promised various pizza options.

Mannus caught her and promptly heaved her right over the top of the counter.

Randa hit the sticky ground in shock, the breath knocked out of her. What the hell? She gave her head a clearing shake. The Light Phases had

just dumped her on the floor!

"Wait until it's clear and then run." Mannus ordered in an urgent voice. "No matter what you see don't… *shit!*"

Flashes lit the room. She didn't see where they came from, but she saw them reflect off the glass above her. Purple like the energy that powered Kahn's force-field cage, back in the Light Kingdom. That future technology was dangerous… and in the hands of Vandal, of the Light House.

This was not good. Very, very not good.

She risked a quick peek through the bottom of the glass candy case. Sure enough, the other partygoers were scattered around the roller rink's interior, trapped in those damn energy bubbles she'd seen in the memory sharing. There must have been one over the building, as well. That was why no one could jump out.

Phases tried to break through the purple walls of their cages, causing sparks to travel over the surface of the domes. The futuristic prisons held. Everybody remained locked up.

Everybody but Randa.

The Light Phases had protected her. Before anybody else. Before themselves. They'd instantly shielded *her*. Not because they were her bodyguards, but because they were her family. Whatever was happening, they'd reacted fast, and their unspoken decision had been to hide her away from danger.

She trusted them. Completely. She was going to do what they asked and stay down. The orders made total sense. …But she wasn't going to run. Her Match and everyone else she cared about were being attacked. She needed to help them.

How though?

Robots were stomping around. She didn't know how to fight them. She'd only seen one self-defense video! She was the worst possible choice to save the day.

"That actually worked? I'm shocked."

Randa froze as a new voice sounded in the room.

Was that Ben?

Holy shit! *Ben* was behind this mess? Average, bar creep, boat-owning Ben? Supposed-to-be-murdered-by-Saxon Ben? Ben, the missing human who she assured Kahn was not at all suspicious? God, her Match would never let her live this down. …Assuming they survived.

"I fucking knew it!" announced to the world at large, as Ben strolled in from some back room. "I *knew* Ben was the stalker!"

"What stalker?" Gion demanded. "Who the hell is Ben?"

"He's the zombie dickhead that's ruining my party." Isaacs complained.

Everyone ignored them, their attention moving from Ben to the huge figure at his side. Vandal, of the Light House. The Elementals' most wanted criminal.

Randa's eyes narrowed in fury. She hated him.

"You should never have doubted me." He intoned at Ben, his accent thick and ancient. "This has all been foretold."

Ben made a face, but didn't argue. The human looked immaculate in a gray suit and loafers. A jaunty yellow flower was stuck in his lapel. Vandal wore white ceremonial robes, his long hair styled like a Light House warrior. How in the hell did they even know each other?

Everyone inside the purple domes stiffened, as the Banished general circled their cages like a shark. "The day of Darkness and Light is here, my brethren."

"What are you doing, Vandal?" Julius demanded. "*Why* are you doing it? *How?*"

"It took some planning." Vandal assured him, answering the "how" part and ignoring the rest. "Especially after that Daphne bitch from the future started meddling in my affairs. But the Water House hiring a human event planner helped me to know when you'd all be together."

Ben lifted a shoulder, looking bored.

Kahn's snarled at him, visibly plotting the human's death.

Vandal noticed him staring. "The one who stole my eye." He pointed to the black patch on his face. "Wounding a fellow Light Phase brought shame to our House."

"You're not part of our House." Daven interjected. "You were Banished."

"Yeah and how is *kidnapping* us not bringing shame?" Mannis wanted to know.

"Because I do this for the good of us all." Vandal kept smirking at Kahn, wanting a reaction. "What do you think of my cages this time? I've improved your design. You won't be getting out of there, again."

"I think you've lost every fight for five hundred years." Kahn told him flatly. "You're stealing my ideas, because you're a failure. And you know I'm better than you."

Randa winced. Sometimes she wished her Match understood subtlety.

Vandal chuckled, but it sounded angry. "I now hold most of the Phases powerful enough to stand against me. On their authority, I'll be disbanding the Council, taking control of the realm, and ushering in the reign of the Dark King. Nothing can stop me. Certainly not you, boy."

Robots clanged around the room keeping watch with glowing eyes.

"Who is the Dark King?" Job asked, drawing everyone's attention. He was standing in front of Tessie, his hands behind his back military "at rest" style.

"The Dark King is a prophet from Gaia, leading us towards a more prosperous world. He sees the actions of that bitch from the future, trying to disrupt what is inevitable, and counters them with moves of his own." Vandal flashed Job a venomous look. "And *you* stand in his way."

"I hope so. Anyone who calls themselves a prophet tends to be an asshole."

Tessie reached up to flick Job's ear. "Don't antagonize the psycho, honey."

“Whatever you’re planning, it won’t work.” Job told Vandal, not listening to his Match’s scolding.

“It already *has* worked!” Vandal mocked. “Years ago, you Banished me for speaking the truth. But I kept faith, until the divine plan was revealed. Now the tides have turned.”

“You were Banished for attacking the Agora.”

“To depose you and the Council. The other Phases will soon thank me for starting this revolution. No one is coming to save you, Job. *No one*.”

Isaacs lifted a hand, like a kid wanting to be called on in class. “If I don’t care about any of this, can I go? I’m not one of these galactic heroes, so this crap has nothing to do with me.”

Everyone kept ignoring him.

“Vandal, Banishment has only made you more unstable.” Job diagnosed. “You’ve attacked Mara and Chason. You were mixed up in the bombing of the Cold Kingdom. You’re bowing down to some ‘king’ no one’s ever heard of. And now you’re holding my family prisoner. You have to know this won’t end well.”

“There is only *one* way this will end. Gaia will purge you from our species’ ranks. Your execution will be in public, and you will lament your betrayals. Then, *everyone* will see you for the weak pretender that you are.”

“If you believed that I was weak or that Gaia was on your side, you’d face me fairly. You’re not doing that. What does that say about your faith?”

Vandal took a menacing step towards Job, his massive fist clenched. “*Silence!* Your disrespect will…”

“Tessie is the Keeper of the Quintessence and Job’s life is linked to hers.” Nia put in, trying to distract Vandal from murdering the Elementals’ leader in his cell. “Cross is the only Shadow Phase left. Thar, Ty and I are the only Water Phases.” She gestured to her twin and her Match, who were locked in the force field with her. “Sullivan is the only part-human/part-Elemental male. There are only a handful of Light Phases left and most of

them are in this room." She arched a brow. "Killing anyone here could *literally* end the whole world."

"Except Isaacs." Mannus chimed in not-so-helpfully.

"Or Gion." Daven agreed, because *obviously* this was the perfect time to start agreeing with his brother. "There's plenty of Air Phases. Too many even."

In unison, Isaacs and Gion swiveled their heads to scowl at the Light Phases. They were both locked in a force field with Ty. She was positioned behind them, one of her hands clutched around the edge of Gion's cape.

"I only have to kill some of you." Vandal assured Nia. "The others will fall into line quickly enough, after that. Your public oaths to the Dark King will help convince the rest of the realm of the true path."

She shook her head. "Yeah, I'm not going to be doing that."

"You will. The future is already written."

How could Randa stop this madness? Her eyes scanned the room, hoping for some kind of inspiration. Gion's new sword was on the ground, but even if she could sneak over and grab it, she had no idea how to use it. Vandal was the greatest general in Elemental history. There was no chance she could win against him.

"Where are the Fire Phases and Chason?" Ben demanded impatiently. He must've had a dentist on retainer, because all four of the teeth Kahn knocked out were back in his mouth. "Where are Brokk and Uriel? They're supposed to be here, so we can deal with all the opposition in one fell swoop."

"We have Job. He's what's important. We'll have to deal with the rest of them later." Vandal waved a dismissive hand.

"Like you dealt with Missy?" Ben sneered, clearly not convinced by his partner's blasé attitude.

Job's brows compressed, which was a huge show of emotion.

Sullivan smashed a fist against the wall of his cage, enraged by the mention of his cousin-in-law. "What the hell did you do to Missy?"

“She interfered where she didn’t belong.” Vandal’s single black eye fixed on Ben. “My men will report back to us soon with her body.”

“Those hired goons have been missing for a week.” Ben retorted, sounding like this was an ongoing argument. “We sent Saxon to find them and never heard from him again.”

“Saxon is a Neanderthal. I’m not surprised he couldn’t get the job done. If you hadn’t been so focused on that Stone House slut, you could have gone after Missy yourself.”

“I’m going to kill both of you.” Kahn paced around his cell like a lion. “Exactly like I killed Saxon.”

Gion glanced at Isaacs. “Saxon’s dead?”

“Yep. Cozily buried in Sullivan’s backyard.”

“Oh good.”

That news briefly drew Sullivan’s attention. “Wait *what?*”

Vandal and Ben glowered at Kahn, like maybe he was lying.

Kahn bared his teeth at them in some horrible approximation of a smile. “Sax died screaming and so will you, you cowardly fucks.”

His deadly tone seemed to convince them of Sax’s demise. They exchanged a disappointed grimace and refocused on their argument.

“While your plan is working so far, these people are savages and idiots.” Ben sneered at Vandal. “We still have to get them on camera, either dying or joining us. I’m sure they’ll make that difficult. It would’ve been safer with more than just robots for backup.”

“The Dark King himself created these machines.” Vandal gazed at the metal sentries, as they continued to circle the prisoners. “They are more than adequate. With his technical knowledge and artistic vision, he had them built in no time.”

“*Kahn’s* technical knowledge and artistic vision.” Daven corrected. “They move around like bigger versions of those toys he made his sisters.”

“Oh, but they’ve been improved!” Vandal chortled. “They have lasers, now. A part of me misses the old days, when warriors fought with

swords and honor. But I tried a nobler approach to warfare and look where it got me." He held up the stump of his severed hand for emphasis. "So, now we use machines. And we win."

"For how long? *Your men are still missing*. The whole mission might have failed." Considering the fragility of his human body, it was shocking that Ben had no problem mouthing off to the giant supernatural being beside him.

"It did *not* fail." Vandal seethed. "My soldiers are temporarily incommunicado, but that's to be expected. They know what to do and some ditzy Fire House girl can't disrupt our plans."

"Your men ran into Missy on some super-secret mission?" Sullivan translated, sorting through all of that bullshit. "And now you haven't seen them in a week?"

"It's much more complicated than…"

"Your men are dead." Sullivan interrupted with total certainty and a lot of satisfaction.

Half the room nodded.

Vandal scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous. They're an army."

"That Missy has already killed."

Randa had to agree. She'd spent time with Sullivan's family. The Fire Phases were all psychotic hoodlums, but Missy was the worst of them all. She was like a rabid grizzly bear with less impulse control and more glitter.

Vandal should've known better than to piss off Missy. *Everyone* knew better than to piss off Missy. Some beings in this universe were so unyielding that you simply got out of their way. Too dangerous to fight. Too crazy to reason with. Missy was an immovable object.

Vandal scowled, unwilling to accept the obvious. "My men have dealt with her and anyone else who crossed them. I'm sure of it."

Sullivan didn't look worried. "Yeah, I'm sure you'll see them again… just as soon as Missy kills you, too." He shrugged. "Unless *I* get

you first. I'm holding a grudge about that time you dragged me to the Cold Kingdom, you insane Rasputin-y shit."

Vandal's jaw ticked. "You might be part Wood Phase, but you know *nothing* of real warfare. Stay out of this. You're mostly just a human."

"Your sidekick's a human too, dumbass." Sullivan nodded towards Ben.

Tharsis slowly shook his head, his expression thoughtful.

Ben was back to searching all the cages, taking note of who else was missing. "Where's Randa?" He asked suddenly. "Why don't I see my bride?"

Randa cringed even lower in her hiding spot. She *really* needed to come up with a plan. Think, think, think, think, think… She tapped her forehead in agitation, wishing she was smarter and stronger.

The other partygoers scanned around, noticing for the first time that she wasn't in one of the purple domes.

"Randa's gone!" Nia gasped in alarm. Turquoise eyes blazed at Vandal. "What did you do to her?!"

Sullivan's gaze shifted to the Light Phases, studying their calm expressions.

Job's brow arched in consideration. Or maybe it was respect. His expressions were so minute, it was hard to tell. He glanced towards the door, clearly thinking that she'd escaped.

Isaacs' attention shifted around the room, and Randa had the impression he was using his Air Powers to search for her. After a beat, his sightless eyes flicked towards the snack counter and then away again. He shifted his position slightly, so he was between Randa and Vandal. Not that it would do much good, since Isaacs was locked in a force field, but she was still touched.

"Randa doesn't want you. She wants me." Kahn taunted. He clearly intended to keep the human's attention on him, rather than let Ben go looking for Randa.

“I saw her first! I sent her flowers and spilled blood for her. She’s mine!”

“You’re already dead. I just haven’t killed you yet.”

“Whose blood did you spill?” Sullivan just couldn’t stop being a cop, even when he was a prisoner of murderous egomaniacs.

“None of your business, you half-breed mongrel!”

Ty drew in a shocked breath, as if Ben’s bigotry was far more appalling than the abduction.

“He’s upsetting my Match and stalking the woman who made my birthday penguin.” Gion told Kahn gravely. “I’ll help you kill him.”

Vandal seemed to realize that this situation was getting away from him. He should have known it would happen. It was inevitable, given the group he’d kidnapped. He wanted piteous begging, and instead he got family squabbles. “*We’ll* be the ones conducting the executions today. Publicly and with you traitors pleading with all Phases for forgiveness. Starting with Job.”

“You’ll destroy the balance of existence, if you hurt Job. Didn’t we just go over that?” Nia threw up her hands in frustration. “I thought you were supposed to be a tactical genius.”

“I can’t wait until Kahn kills him.” Cross muttered, a protective hand on Nia’s pregnant stomach. “Or maybe Missy will kill him. Or Sullivan. Whichever.”

“No, baby. *Kahn’s* killing the human. *Missy’s* killing Vandal.”

“Ben isn’t a human.” Thar said quietly.

“Missy is dead!” Vandal bellowed, finally losing his cool. The Water House could do that to people.

So could the Fire House. Sullivan smirked, looking disturbingly like his villainous in-laws. “You’ve never met Missy, have you?”

Ben jabbed a finger at Kahn. “*Where is Randa?* Tell me or you’ll be the first to die.”

“If I die today, I’ll take you with me, dickhead. …And you still won’t have Randa.”

Randa would *not* allow Kahn to die today.

Not when she’d just found him. Not when her feelings for him were building faster and going deeper than she’d ever anticipated. Not when they had a whole future waiting for them on the horizon.

She forced all the negative voices and doubts from her mind, just like Dr. Ashley would’ve instructed. She *was* smart enough. She *was* strong enough. She *could* do this. She just needed to figure it out, one step at a time.

Physically, Randa couldn’t take on Vandal and the robots. She needed to break through the force fields and rescue the others. The Light Phases could handle the fighting from there. So, how could she get them free? It was impossible to reach in and pull them out. The purple bubbles created a dome with impenetrable walls and a ceiling.

But not a floor.

The wooden roller rink under their feet *wasn’t* covered by purple energy. …And Tharsis said that there was a bomb shelter beneath them.

Randa looked down.

There was enough rock in the ground and in the concrete foundation that she could use her powers to control it. Most Stone Phases couldn’t, but her powers were wrong. Diluted by her great-grandfather’s Earth House DNA. It made her lousy at freezing people in place, but it allowed her to manipulate stone. That was her primary power, much to her parents’ shame. She could break and shape and move any kind of rock imaginable.

If she cracked the floor, the other Phases would fall through it. They’d be out of their cages. The bomb shelter had been abandoned for decades and was probably half flooded from the high water table, but it was down there. Landing in it would give the others an opportunity to jump to safety. They only needed a few seconds and some space to maneuver.

If this didn’t work, she was dead.

The grim thought flickered through her head, but it didn't matter. It also didn't matter that she wasn't sure that her powers were big enough to crack the building's foundation. Or that using that much energy would expose her hiding spot. Or that she could only target one cage at a time. This was the plan to save her Match, and she was going with it.

She was indestructible.

Closing her eyes, Randa connected to her Stone energy. Drawing it to her. Focusing on the ground. Willing the rocks to break and the soil to part. Pouring all of her power into the….

A series of cracks echoed through the room. Randa felt the ground shift beneath her.

Everyone's head snapped towards the snack counter, just as the floor under Kahn's cage gave way.

"*Fuck.*" He went tumbling into the abyss that opened up below his feet.

"Get the girl!" Vandal shouted at Ben. "She's doing this!"

Randa didn't even try to run. Her best chance was freeing the Light Phases. Even if it *hadn't* been her best chance, she still would have saved them first. They were her family.

She quickly switched her attention to Julius, pulverizing the area beneath him in one massive, panicked blow. So much of the floor fell away that it extended into Daven's dome and took him down too. They were still falling when she collapsed the ground below Mannus' cage. It was messy and drained the last of her energy, but it worked. It worked!

Then, Ben had her.

"Finally!" Reaching over the counter, he seized hold of Randa and dragged her out of hiding. "I've had my eyes on you for a long time."

Randa shoved at him, trying to break his hold.

Sullivan kicked the side of his cage. "Let her go!"

"Son of a *bitch*." Isaacs searched for a way to reach her.

“Kill her!” Vandal screamed at the robots. “Kill anyone who gets in my way.”

Tessie vanished from Job’s cage. Randa vaguely remembered that her powers allowed her to escape any confinement. She’d used the distraction to go for help. Probably to the Fire Phases. They wouldn’t get here in time. Randa already knew it.

“Go through the floor!” Nia shouted to everyone else.

Randa gave a cry of alarm, as Ben shook her. His eyes looked cold and hollow. Empty. She knew she wouldn’t be able to reason with him, just as she hadn’t been able to reason with Parald. She couldn’t even try freezing him, because her powers were exhausted from freeing the Light Phases.

“Why do you think you’re so much better than me?” For a human, he was incredibly strong. “Just because you were born beautiful? Just because you were…”

Kahn tackled him.

Her Match climbed back up from the hole in the ground and immediately attacked the man threatening her. Ben didn’t even have a chance to fight back. Kahn’s gigantic fist slammed into Ben’s face hard enough to crush bones. Again and again. It was fast, brutal, and methodical. In a handful of seconds, Kahn decimated his opponent and left Ben’s once handsome features pulverized. No human could survive it.

Vandal let out a roar of fury.

By that point, Daven, Mannus, and Julius were back on the roller rink floor, battling marauding robots. Purple laser blasts set sections of the wall on fire, as Happy Applewhite and his birthday buddies fired from their eyes. Vandal kept ordering the robots to kill, but the Light Phases were hacking through them and dodging their attacks.

Kahn shoved Ben’s body aside and glanced at Randa. “You alright?”

“It’s probably not healthy to say so… But that was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.” She informed him seriously.

“You’re a Light Phase. Of course it’s healthy.” He gave her a quick kiss. “I am in love with you. All that I could think about in that cage was that I’d never said it. So, I’m saying it now.”

She blinked. “Okay.”

“Okay.” He smiled widely. “Wait here. I have to go kill Vandal.”

Randa watched him stride past her, her heart going six hundred miles an hour. Her Match loved her! *Kahn* loved her. It was a miracle.

And now he was walking off into danger.

She shook her head to clear it. Wait. Hang on. Vandal was so *big*, and he’d been a warrior for centuries. Kahn could be murdered. She could lose him. No. She had to make sure he was safe. Even if she couldn’t fight, she could hand him weapons or something.

She suddenly recalled Gion’s birthday sword, which was still on the ground. Hurrying over, she grabbed up the blade. The 3D-printed resin was sharp and heavy. Kahn could do real damage with it.

“You wish to fight me again, boy?” Vandal taunted Kahn, stepping forward. “Wounded as I was, I nearly slayed you the last time. Today will go even worse for you. I am the greatest warrior to ever emerge from our House.”

Kahn answered by reaching behind his back and pulling his weapon free.

The two of them started battling with swords. Randa cringed at the sound of metal blades slamming together. Kahn and Vandal fought without pause. No careful circling of each other, looking for openings. No gentlemanly swipes. It was relentless, instinct-driven warfare, using blades and fists. Strategy was surely involved, but only in the service of brute force.

She gasped in alarm as Vandal’s weapon sliced a shallow cut on Kahn’s chest. One of them was about to die. The sheer aggression of the fight left no other option.

The other Elementals were still attacking the floor of their cells. Sullivan’s Wood House powers crushed the concrete by growing massive

vines straight through it. Gion and Isaacs were slamming Air into the floor like jackhammers, while Ty pressed her hands over her ears from the noise.

Once they were free, everyone else would be saved and the fight would be over. Unless they collapsed the whole building, which was a distinct possibility at the rate they were compromising the foundation.

Nia glanced at Tharsis, while Cross used his Shadow energy to create a perfectly round hole in the floor. "Did Daphne-from-the-future warn you about this? Is that why you gave Gion the bomb shelter blueprints? And don't even *try* to say it was a coincidence."

"I mean, she didn't give me specifics. I don't think she *knew* specifics. No one could have predicted the Itchy and Scratchy Land Robots." Tharsis gestured towards Happy Applewhite, whose creepy antennae were twitching around like searching periscopes. "She just texted me and suggested I get some protections in place for the party, because she felt like shit was still going wrong. So I researched this place. A bomb shelter seemed like a lot of protection."

"You should have told us." Cross snapped at him.

"No one would have listened to me. None of you trust Daphne. And doing it my way is working out okay. …Kind of." Eager to shift the blame, he switched tactics. "Besides, *Job's* the one who told me to take more control of the future."

"Nobody wants you in charge of the future, Thar." Isaacs called from his own cage.

"We'll discuss this later." Job promised dourly, as his Earth powers endeavored to reshape the ground.

Unfortunately, his progress was being blocked by the commercial-grade rug. His cage sat on a confetti-patterned, brightly-colored carpet with a lot of synthetic materials in it. Elemental powers didn't do well against synthetic materials. Job was working around it, but it was taking too much time.

Daven, Julius, and Mannus had picked off all the robots except one. Happy Applewhite refused to die. Metal arms swung at the Light Phases,

laser eyes scorching their skin and clothes. Only their powers were saving them from major injuries.

"This damn thing is evil. I told you so." Daven hacked at Happy Applewhite's arm.

"I told *you* it was evil." Mannus chopped at Happy Applewhite's other arm.

"Both of you shut up!" Julius took out Happy Applewhite's mechanical knee, toppling the robot into the nearest table.

Which happened to hold Gion's birthday cake.

All three Light Phases flinched, as the penguin-shaped masterpiece hit the ground in an explosion of mascarpone, raspberries and a little bow tie. "Sorry, Randa." They chorused.

"Focus on Happy Applewhite!" She shouted back.

The mechanized monster was already lurching back to its feet, still in the fight. The Light Phases followed it, trying to figure out how to stop something that couldn't bleed or die. Swords had been enough to get rid of the others, but this one was too strong.

For whatever reason, Mannus looked around and spotted Gion's new violin. He grabbed the instrument from its case and jammed it neck-first into the whirring gears of the robot's chest. The wood was instantly crushed, but strings and debris were pulled into the very heart of the automaton.

Gion made a horrified sound. "You couldn't have used the lamp?!"

Happy Applewhite faltered. Smoke began to pour from its joints. Its movement stuttered to a halt next to the DJ booth, its whole body twitching like it had been plugged into a fritzing electrical current.

"Shit, it's going to blow up." Daven muttered, right before it blew up.

Julius knocked the brothers out of the way, as Happy Applewhite went off like a bomb. If robot shrapnel was enough to kill Elementals, they'd all be dead. Springs and sockets careened through the air, bounding

off the purple energy cages, embedding in walls, and melting the arcade's entire record collection of bitchin' 80s hits.

Randa had no time to celebrate Happy Applewhite's destruction. Her attention stayed on Kahn. The dynamics of the swordfight had shifted. Her Match was slowly gaining the upper hand against the greatest general in history.

The merciless force of Kahn's blade had Vandal staggering back. He couldn't keep up much longer. Kahn had two hands, two eyes, and fought like a man possessed. Randa suddenly remembered Mara telling her that Kahn would give everything for the people he loved. That he would give them his all.

He loved Randa. He was fighting for her.

To protect her and their future. Kahn would win. She knew it.

Vandal knew it, too. The realization crossed his face, just before he extended his hand. A beam of Light blasted out, so bright it temporarily blinded the room.

People screamed and turned away.

Kahn staggered back with a vile curse.

Randa squeezed her eyes shut, dots flashing against her lids.

Vandal's trick was cheating. Phases did *not* use their powers on each other in a fight. It proved how shallow all his talk of honor and glory really was.

Asshole.

"What the hell was that?!" Daven bellowed, his hair slightly scorched from the robot detonating. "Light Phase warriors don't do that shit!"

"No wonder you were Banished." Mannus shouted at the same time.

"I told you, dealing with you vermin has shown me the necessity of sinking to your level, for the greater good." Vandal used the opportunity he'd created to reestablish control. He lunged at Kahn, knocking the sword from his hand with a ruthless strike.

Kahn responded by kicking Vandal hard enough to send him careening backwards. It prevented his beheading, but Kahn was still half-blind and without a weapon. He blinked rapidly to clear his vision, looking around for his fallen blade.

Randa suddenly remembered the sword in her hand. "Kahn!" She dashed forward to give it to him, entering the midst of battle.

"Stay back!" Kahn tried to shield her.

Vandal charged in from the other side, his arm drawn back to deliver a fatal blow to Kahn's neck. …And then he slipped in the remnants of the penguin cake.

He'd misjudged how slick mascarpone icing would be. Vandal stepped on the frosting, paying no heed to the fallen dessert. It was such a small mistake. He was only off-balance for one second. Maybe two. But in a battle with a Light Phase, two seconds was a lifetime.

He tripped forward, losing momentum.

Kahn grabbed the sword from Randa's hand.

Vandal tried to right himself.

Kahn spun the blade, his face set in determined lines.

Vandal's eyes widened in horror, seeing what was about to happen. He tried to lift his own sword to block Kahn's strike.

Kahn sliced his head off in one powerful blow.

Silence.

Everyone in the room stopped and stared at Vandal's body.

It was over. He was dead.

Randa's knees went weak with relief.

Kahn caught her before she collapsed, pressing a kiss to her hair. Breathing hard, he held her tight. "My Match," he informed the room, "bakes *amazing* fucking cakes."

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-Six

I like the element of surprise.

Supernatural

"How am I going to explain this to Uncle Fred?" Steve lamented, still dressed in his chicken/vulture suit. "I was in the parking lot, when I heard all this noise and I tried to get back inside, but I *couldn't*. I think it was those street magicians again." He cast a wary look in Gion's direction.

"I'll talk to your uncle. Just go on home." Sullivan gave him a pat on the arm.

"I can't go home! I have to stay hidden for at least two days and pretend to be dead. Then, when I come back, my family will be so glad to see me they won't kill me for letting this happen." Steve paused. "Can I sleep at the police station, do you think?"

"No." He hustled the teenager out, just as Melanie of the Wood House came in.

"What the hell happened here, Sully?"

"The Cult." He waved a hand at the Elementals. "What else?"

Uriel and Brokk, of the Wood House came up behind her, holding swords and birthday presents. "There was a force field blocking us from your celebration, cousin." Uriel told Gion cheerily. "We had to break it, before we could enter. Very clever party game."

"Sullivan!" Teja, of the Fire and Cold Houses shouldered Brokk out of the way, frantically scanning for her Match.

"I'm here." Sullivan stepped towards her. "I *told* you I didn't want to come to this party, didn't I?" He caught her against his chest, as she flung herself into his arms. "I'm okay, Tej." He kissed her. "I'm fine. But we have a problem: Vandal said his men killed Missy."

"He's lying. No one can kill Missy." Teja scoffed, running her palms over Sullivan's body to assure herself he was whole. "I'll beat the

truth out of him. Where is that asshole?"

"Decapitated."

"What a fucking loser."

"Yep. And while I also agree that he was a liar, Missy is clearly mixed up in something bad. I think she might have fought an army."

"Of course she did. My daughter's a Fire Phase!" Djinn, King of the Fire House strode in with his Match, Pele, and their three sons. They looked like gangsters, only bigger, crazier, and wearing Disney shirts. "She can fight ten armies and win. Hell, she *did* back in the Heat Kingdom War."

"Whoever's keeping Missy from us… we'll find them." Pele vowed. Her tone promised it would be an extinction-level event.

"Massacres will have to wait. First, this whole place needs to be burned." Gion made a face at the exploded robots, and the severed body parts, and the completely unexplainable holes blasted in the roller rink's foundation. "More humans will arrive soon, and they can't investigate this."

"Arson is against the law." Sullivan protested, but even he seemed a little overwhelmed by the forensics nightmare facing them.

Melanie, Sullivan's cousin and deputy, shook her head. "The CSI guys would have a field day, Sully. We'd never hear the end of it. This all has to go."

"But then where will I host *Job's* birthday party next year?" Tessie deadpanned, appearing next to her Match. "Hey, honey. Sorry, I took so long." She wrapped an arm around Job's waist. "I had to go to Orlando to find help. They were on the Dumbo ride."

Job's exasperated look conveyed just how "helpful" he found the Fire Phases, but he still pressed his lips to her temple. "Just so you're safe, Tess."

"She told us robots attacked, so we came right away. It's kinda disappointing that you killed them all before we got here. Robots are fun to fight." Pele poked in the rubble, hoping to find some surviving mechanical monsters to battle. "Uncle Frankie said our enemies were building robots,

so we've been waiting for this. Didn't he say that, D? At our Banishment trial?"

"He *did* say it …but Job wouldn't listen." Djinn agreed sadly. He always agreed with his Match, and he lived for opportunities to needle Job.

Tessie scoffed, because Frankie, of the Heat House was nuts and even the Fire Phases knew it. "Frankie says a lot of shit. Nine times out of ten, it's delusional."

"And one time, it's robots!" Pele waved a triumphant hand towards Happy Applewhite's metal corpse.

"Everyone should listen to us more." Djinn agreed. "Especially Job."

Job rose above the Fire House's provocations and focused on the cleanup. "Even in pieces, the robots are a problem. Burn everything here. We'll make sure Steve's uncle Fred is generously compensated for the building."

"We don't take orders from you!" Djinn objected. "We're goddamn Fire Phases. Only *we* can decide how to use our powers. And maybe we don't *want* to burn this place to the ground. Did you even think about that, you presumptuous ass?" He made a disgruntled sort of sound, deeply offended by Job's audacity. …Then he glanced over at his kids. "Burn this place to the ground."

The other Fire Phases nodded, like the idea made perfect sense.

Job rubbed at his temples.

Kahn ignored the Fire Phase pandemonium, as he headed back to Randa. The Light Phases had finished deactivating all the force fields. Kahn had also stolen Gion's new sword, because now it was his. His dark eyes moved over his Match, rechecking for injuries. "Sweetheart, are you still alright?"

"Still alright." Randa smiled, looking giddy with relief. "I'm just so glad that you're…" She broke off with a scream, as someone grabbed her.

Ben.

That little shit had *survived?*

Kahn had no idea where the human even came from. One second he wasn't there and the next he was looming over Randa's shoulder. Ben seized her around the waist, lifting her straight off the ground. Somehow his face was fixed and his clothes were clean again. All the features that Kahn destroyed were back to their normal handsomeness.

Having a male body behind her own instantly triggered all of Randa's fears. Her powers were depleted from breaking the Light Phases out of their cages, so she couldn't use them to free herself. But she was a warrior, so she fought anyway. She started yanking at Ben's arm, and struggling against his chest, and kicking her legs trying to get loose. "Kahn!"

He ran for her, shoving people aside, but it was too late.

Ben smiled and jumped them away, vanishing with Kahn's Match.

"*Fuck.*" He bellowed and fell to his knees in horror.

Bedlam once again gripped the room.

"How did *that* just happen?" Julius roared to no one in particular.

"Humans can go invisible?" Daven sounded outraged. "No one told me that! Someone should have told me that! Everybody saw he was invisible, right?"

Mannus grunted. "You can't *see* invisible. But yeah, the human was invisible."

"*Not a human*." Tharsis reiterated loudly. "Humans don't vanish and then reappear. And they don't team up with Vandal. And they sure don't jump through realms."

Kahn staggered to his feet. "I have to get Randa back." All the other questions could wait. She was all he could focus on. Without Randa, nothing else mattered. "She has a phone. I can track that."

"You put a tracker on her phone?" Sullivan moved beside Kahn, switching into his police mode. "That's disturbing and illegal without a court order."

"I told you cops tracked phones." Cross muttered to Gion.

“She has a stalker! Of course I’m going to put a tracker on her, *in case of this exact fucking situation!*” Kahn yelled at Sullivan.

“We have so many trackers on you, Sully.” Djinn patted his arm, like Sullivan was a perpetually lost dog. “So many.”

Teja nodded.

Sullivan gave up. “So, can you find Randa?” He asked Kahn impatiently.

Kahn tried to think through the technical aspects of locating his Match. He hadn’t been this terrified since the Fall. It was hard to use logic when your newly beating heart had just been ripped from your chest. “It’ll be tricky to follow the signal into the Elemental realm, but I can figure it out.”

“We don’t even know if she’s *in* the Elemental realm.” Isaacs barreled into the conversation, looking pissed. “Who *is* Ben? *What* is he? How can we find him, if we’re not sure of his species?”

Whatever Ben was and wherever he took Randa, the Light House would track him down. …And then Kahn would kill that motherfucker, all over again.

Julius pulled his sword free in agreement, reading Kahn’s intentions. Daven and Mannus were clearly on board, too. The Light Phases all wanted her back, and they were prepared to flatten kingdoms to make that happen.

“Randa belongs to Sullivan. And Sullivan belongs to us. Which means Randa belongs to the Fire House.” Pele extrapolated out with a thoughtful frown. “Better let us handle this.”

Every single Fire Phase nodded.

Every single Light Phase glowered at them.

The Fire House and the Light House weren’t enemies, but they sure weren’t friends. They both bred warriors, so violent clashes were sometimes inevitable.

“Randa is *mine*.” Kahn hissed.

“We claimed her first.” Teja insisted. “She works for Sully. That makes her ours.”

Sullivan sighed, like he knew what was coming.

“You’re trying to steal Randa from us?” Mannus shouted at Sullivan.

“No, of course not…”

Daven cut him off. “You assholes can’t have Randa. She’s a Light Phase, now. She’s Kahn’s Match!”

“Technically, that makes *him* a Stone Phase. We’re a matrilineal society.” Alder, Pele and Djinn’s son, pointed out in a superior tone.

“Even more technically… since Kahn belongs to Randa, and Randa belongs to Sully, and Sully belongs to us… Kahn’s now a Fire Phase.” Pele worked it all out on her fingers. “He has to do what we say.”

Daven and Mannus gasped in indignation.

“That is not how that works!” Julius protested. “And Randa will *never* agree to leave our House. She loves being a Light Phase.”

“Has Randa Phazed with Kahn?” Djinn arched a brow. “No, right? So, *most* technically of all, she’s still single. And she probably wants to stay that way, since Kahn just got her kidnapped by an invisible human.”

Kahn took a step towards him, eager to purge some of his fury and terror on the Fire King’s very punchable face.

Job moved between the two fractious kingdoms, before a war broke out over possession of Randa. “We can all work to find her. Kahn obviously has the biggest claim on his Match, but I’m sure he’d appreciate your help. Let’s just focus on identifying this Ben person. Or *not* person. Whatever he is.”

“Maybe he’s a robot.” Cross suggested. “There’s a lot more robots than I ever thought there were.”

Nia shot her Match an exasperated look. “He’s an Elemental. He has to be. Nothing else could have survived the beating Kahn gave him.”

“Hope’s Matched to a god.” Djinn smugly crossed his arms over his chest. “Kingu wouldn’t stay dead just because some pussy Light Phase killed him.”

Isaacs wasn’t so sure about Nia’s theory, either. “There’re a lot of creatures out there, since all the barriers came down. And I’ve never heard of a Phase becoming invisible. What House has powers like that?”

Kahn couldn’t explain it, but he knew what he’d seen. “Ben disguised himself. I didn’t sense him, at all. He was like part of the room.”

“Wait.” Job crouched down and picked something up off the ground. He slowly stood up, holding it between his thumb and forefinger. A tiger-striped flower. “I recognize this. It’s a teslova orchid.”

“Ben was wearing that thing on his lapel. Randa must have knocked it off, when she was fighting to get free.” Mannus whispered.

Kahn swallowed hard, his eyes on the delicate blossom.

Job met his gaze. “Yuan grows these in his butterfly garden.”

“Holy shit!” Cross blurted out.

Gion gestured to the flower. “Job’s right. They’re extremely rare. Yuan was all pissed that we damaged one, even though it was practically an accident.”

Yuan.

Kahn tilted his head to one side, sighting on a new target. “Yuan tried to force Randa into a Binding when she turned ninety-three.” He heard himself say from a long distance. “He was obsessed with her. She’s beautiful and he covets beauty.”

“Ben *looks* like a human, but he’s not.” Mannus breathed. “He’s a Reflection Phase. He’s Yuan.”

Daven frowned. “Can Reflection Phases turn invisible? Is that even allowed? I never heard of it.”

“Neither have I. But Yuan is one of the most powerful Elementals alive. I’m not sure what he can do with his abilities.” Job looked at Ty for answers, since she was the scientist.

“Well, if Yuan can disguise himself to look like anyone he chooses, it’s conceivable that he can also disguise himself to blend into the environment around him.” She adjusted her glasses. “Erase himself completely. Like a chameleon.”

“Like the Predator.” Tharsis murmured.

Julius ran a hand through his hair. “That’s how he snuck those flowers onto Randa’s doorstep, Kahn. He walked right by us and we couldn’t see him.”

Blackout rage crackled at the edges of Kahn’s mind. The Wildness pulled him towards the precipice, promising death and oblivion. It was the kind of fury that he wouldn’t come back from, if he let it consume him.

He’d never find his Match if he was lost in darkness.

Kahn closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath, just like those internet therapy videos instructed. Randa was enough motivation for him to stay in control. More than enough. She would fight for him. And for herself. And for *them*. She trusted him to do the same. To stay in control. He wouldn’t let her down.

Job fisted his hand around the flower in frustration. “I should have been able to prevent this. I *knew* he was involved in framing the Fire House for bombing the Cold Palace, I just couldn’t prove it.”

“Why would Ben want to frame us?” Alder objected hotly. “I don’t even know the guy.”

“There is no ‘Ben.’ He’s *Yuan*.” Mannus stressed.

“I don’t know him, either!”

“We were drinking with him two nights ago.” Isaacs snapped. “He was disguised as Brad Pitt.”

“Who the fuck is Brad Pitt? Why is *he* out to get me?”

Job held up his palms to Kahn. “Let’s stop and think, before we rush into this. We don’t know exactly what powers Yuan can employ. We need a plan.”

A volcanic calm had engulfed Kahn. Red-hot fury solidified to cold stone. Nothing could penetrate his resolve. “My plan is to have Randa

back in my arms within ten minutes." He said simply. "My plan is for Yuan to die in nine."

"See? He's learning to be a Fire Phase already." Pele said to Djinn.

He nodded proudly.

"Kahn, take a moment to think." Job implored. "If the Fire House agrees with your plan, it's a sure sign that you should reconsider. Yuan could have taken her anywhere. Don't go without…" Job broke off with a resigned sigh, as Kahn jumped away to the Elemental realm.

Kahn had tracking skills. He had technology. He had a plan.

He was hunting his Match.

Right now.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I shall witness all the variety of appearance that the elements can assume.

Mary Shelley

Randa opened her eyes and saw Ben Foster's body.

She let out a cry of panic. Jolting into a sitting position, she scrambled away from the dead human.

Someone had ripped a hole in his torso where his lungs used to be. Ben lay on his back, his skin a mottled gray and his eyes like congealed egg whites. He'd clearly been gone for a very long time. Much longer than his death at Kahn's hands. Much longer than even the singles mixer at the Wastin' Away Bar and Grille.

Randa's first instinct was to jump away from the corpse. To find Kahn.

But there was a plastic manacle on her ankle, preventing her from using her powers. Trapping her. For a terrible second, she flashed back to Parald.

No. Parald was dead.

This wasn't the Air House dungeon. She couldn't give in to panic. She had to focus.

Her eyes frantically looked around, trying to figure out where she was. Butterflies fluttered on colorful blossoms and the walls were made of frosted glass. A greenhouse?

What in the hell?

"Ah, good you're awake." A voice said from behind her. "I apologize for knocking you out, but it was only for a moment. Working with flowers provides a variety of sedatives. Using them made it far easier to get that manacle on you. I'm not about to let you freeze me again."

Randa's head whirled around and she scrambled to her feet.

Yuan.

Or at least the way he'd looked when he'd courted her, back when she was ninety-three and he wanted to seem harmless. He wore a smarmy smile and a human-style tuxedo, like this was some big, romantic surprise.

"My flower." He crooned. "We're finally together."

Her lips parted in horror, pieces coming together. "Ben" hadn't been working with Vandal. *Yuan* had stolen his identity, spying on the Water House and getting close to Randa at the bar. *Yuan* was who she'd heard on the phone, during the memory sharing, talking about the Dark King. *Yuan* had been the one sending her bouquets. *Yuan* was her stalker.

And now he'd kidnapped her.

She swallowed hard, trying to think through her panic. She could do this. Kahn would come for her very soon. She believed that. She'd never allowed herself to need anyone before, but she could need Kahn. He wouldn't let her down.

In the meantime, she just had to stay alive.

"Don't be afraid, Randa. I have no intention of hurting you. I'm not a monster."

"Ben might disagree." She got out shakily.

He scoffed like she was being ridiculous. "I only did what I *had* to do. It's not like anyone will miss the boy. He was only a human."

Mid-tone blue eyes watched her from an aristocratic face that wasn't too handsome or too plain. His body wasn't too fat or too thin; too tall or too short. His brown hair was neither wavy nor straight. It was carefully cut into a hairstyle that was appropriate on anyone for any occasion. His voice was even and calm. Every aspect of his appearance was crafted to be non-threatening. Exactly ordinary.

And yet it was somehow still too perfect.

Something oily and false leaked through the aggressively normal façade. She'd felt it when she was talking to "Ben" at the bar, and she felt it even stronger now. There was no "actual" Yuan. He was just a reflection of other people, with no substance of his own.

“Do you even remember what you were born looking like?” She asked, because it felt important somehow. “Or have you forgotten it?”

One brow arched, as if he hadn’t expected her to say that. “I’ve lost my real face.” He admitted after a moment. “Most Reflection Phases do, over the years. We’re like caterpillars, who shed our initial form for something better. Something flawless.”

“Only you’re not happy with flawless.”

Frustration flashed. “Because it’s not *natural* beauty. Not like you possess.” He took a step closer to her, a not-quite-sane look in his eyes.

Randa took a step back. “What do you want?”

“To Bind with you. To redo our troubled past and win you over this time through. To study your imperfections and how they make you perfect. To admire you flitting around your enclosure with the rest of my butterflies.”

“None of that is going to happen. I’ll never stay in an ‘enclosure.’ I don’t want to redo our past. And I already have a Match.”

“You had one before, too.” Yuan shrugged off Randa’s emphatic tone. “Back then, I reluctantly accepted defeat. I knew Job would stop me, if I tried to take you from Hekktor. Now, I’m strong enough to get what I want. I don’t have to compromise.”

“I’ll fight you, if you try to touch me. Just like I did last time.”

“Hence the manacle.” He gestured to her ankle. “Being frozen solid is most unpleasant, so I have no desire to repeat it. Although, the effect of it really didn’t last long.” He gave her a pitying look. “You’ve always had an aura of power about you. It’s a shame you can’t do much with it. Beautiful, but useless. It’s often the way of nature.”

Useless? How did he not realize she was the one who freed the Light Phases from the purple cages? Everyone had felt her do it. Vandal even *told* him it was her. Was he just in denial? Or did he simply not care, because it didn’t fit into his sexist narrative? Either way, he’d underestimated her.

Randa’s energy wasn’t wrong. It never had been.

“This is all a waste of time, Yuan. I will never be with you. *Ever*.”

Yuan seemed genuinely confused by her refusal. “But I can make you my queen.”

“That is exactly what you said before!” Anger began to overtake fear. “You sound insane. Maybe you *are* insane. I don’t want to be your queen, and I *told* you that. Your palace is nothing but a cage.”

“You would honestly choose that cave-dweller over me?”

“I would choose Kahn over *anyone*.”

Frustration flickered across Yuan’s bland face, before he quickly smoothed it away. “You’re being pointlessly stubborn. I can give you so much more than the Light Phase. You’ll see that in time.”

“There is no ‘time.’ Not for you. Let me go now and the Council might be lenient. It’ll be much less painful than what the Light Phases will inflict, when they track you down.”

“No one is going to find us here.” Yuan laughed. “Even if somebody eventually figures out I was the one who took you, they can’t prove it. I have you safely hidden away.”

“We’re in your greenhouse!” She waved a hand around. “It will only take about ten minutes of searching for them to…”

Yuan cut her off. “Do you *honestly* think this is my real butterfly garden?”

The image of the beautiful greenhouse shifted, and something much darker was revealed in its place. Beady-eyed bats instead of butterflies. Grasping, thorn-covered vines instead of orchids. Oozing cracks in the glass, like wounds infecting the structure.

Randa jolted. Yuan controlled what the space looked like. He could make it idyllic or terrifying. None of this was real.

He chuckled at her horrified expression, pleased that he’d intimidated her.

The smug smile was all it took for her to battle down her fear. She was Randa, of the Light House. She was indestructible. “Your Reflection powers extend beyond your body?” She got out.

“They do. I wanted you to wake up somewhere lovely. If you continue to defy me, I can make your stay much more uncomfortable.”

“But how is this even possible?” She gestured around them.

Even as she asked the question, she thought of her own unique abilities. Maybe there were occasional genetic quirks in all the Elemental lines, and the Houses just didn’t talk about them. They liked to project strength. And they liked to have surprises up their sleeve.

“My family has always had exceptional talents. And I’m stronger than any of them were. The other Houses look down on the Reflection Kingdom, because we don’t battle in the streets like ruffians. But *none* of them can match my skills.”

“Interesting that you think violence is so boorish and yet you had no issue siding with Vandal. …The crazed general plotting to take over the realm.”

“He was a means to an end. With Job in charge, the power will always be in the hands of the Water House and his other favorites. I’m not one of Job’s favorites. You see how he acts about the Fire Phases being ‘framed.’” He rolled his eyes so hard he probably sprained them.

“You *did* frame the Fire Phases.”

“So what? They’re common gangsters! I’m the most powerful Reflection Phase who’s ever existed. And *still* Job would rather mollycoddle them than allow me to excel.” He expelled a bitter laugh. “He leaves me no choice. My only chance for advancement is revolution. The Dark King offered me that option, and I took it.”

“Who is he? What’s his name?”

“Does it matter? He’s just a tool for me to rise. One day soon, I’ll be leading the Council. And you’ll be at my side.”

To prove it, Yuan changed their surroundings again, so now they were standing in the middle of the Council Hall.

The fake room was so photographically precise that Randa could almost touch the ancient wooden furnishings. She automatically looked up at the elegant chandeliers and then down at the rugs on the floor. Every

single angle of the space was perfect. The pictures on the walls. The color of the moldings. The pens arranged on the desks.

Not a thing was out of place. …And it still felt fake.

Once you saw through the illusion, you could sense the hollow core of it. Yuan could replicate what something *looked* like, but he couldn't trick the other senses. The sounds and smells and feel of the place --the parts that made it special-- were missing.

Was Ben even dead?

She glanced over at his body and saw it was still there. Yes, he was really dead. His corpse was still appearing through this illusion, just like Randa and Yuan's living bodies were. The horrible sight reinforced the idea that Yuan's powers had definite limits.

"No one knows where you *actually* are." Yuan told her smugly. "Not even you. And that's the way it will stay, until I'm sure you're over your little snit and ready to rule at my side."

"It won't matter what you do. Kahn will still find me."

Yuan chortled. "That Light Phase could pass right by us and not notice. You will never be found. This is your home now. Just accept it and…"

Inside Randa's pocket, her phone gave a weird buzz. Not a ring or the *bing* of a text message, but some noise she'd never heard before.

Yuan's brows compressed. "What was that?"

Randa shrugged. Whatever the sound meant, Kahn had triggered it somehow. That much was obvious. He was always fiddling with her phone to "improve" it. Just today, he'd added a half-dozen apps she didn't need, several illicit pictures of himself, and some blinky thing that blinked.

And given who her Match was, that blinky thing was probably a tracker.

That just now occurred to her, but it made perfect sense if you understood Light Phases. Of *course* Kahn had devised a way to always find her. The man had no stops or shame.

And she was very glad about that.

She'd told him he could do whatever he wanted to her phone, and this was *much* better than a hologram projector. Once Kahn saved her, they'd have a serious talk about *asking* her before planting bugs, of course. A girl did need some privacy. Given the circumstances however, she was grateful he was so paranoid and pushy and *Kahn*.

"I heard a noise." Yuan insisted, stalking closer to her. "What are you up to?" He drew in a quick breath, as a new idea occurred to him. "Do you have one of those dirty human phones?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

He didn't believe her. Reaching out, he grabbed her arm, his fingers biting into her sleeve. His other hand fumbled in her pockets, looking for the phone.

Randa tried to freeze him in place, but the manacle made it impossible. So, she hit him instead. Balling up her fist, she smashed it into his face, just like that video Kahn sent her instructed. The cheerful host had been wrong. Punching *did* hurt her hand, but it was worth it.

Yuan cursed and stumbled back, gripping his nose. He had her phone now, but he was also bleeding. She'd hit him hard enough to make him bleed? Wow! The Light Phases would be proud…

Wait. Randa's eyes widened. It was *Kahn* who'd hurt him.

Underneath the elegant, tuxedoed façade, Yuan would be covered in bruises. He had to be. He could disguise them, but they didn't fade from his actual body. Everything about him was just a layer of illusion masking what he wanted hidden.

That realization made her reevaluate her surroundings. Wherever she was standing, it was an *actual* room. If she could see beneath the illusion, she might have a chance to run.

"Bitch!" Yuan fingered his sore nose, sending her a fuming look. "You've spent too much time with that Light Phase animal."

"He's a barbarian. Not an animal." Randa said vaguely, trying to pinpoint where she was being held. There had to be a way to break his artifice.

Yuan was focused on her phone. “I think less of you for carrying such a repellent toy. Did you believe it would help you stay in the human realm? I’m strong enough that I didn’t even notice jumping with plastic.” He tried to pry the blinky thing off the case. “What does this even do? Is it what made the noise…? *Fuck!*”

It turned out the blinky thing was not the buzzing tracker. It was some kind of defense mechanism.

Electricity arced out, sparking in the air. Kahn must have rigged it to shock anyone who wasn’t Randa. He *really* needed to discuss his inventions with her, before he attached them to her phone. There were liability issues.

Yuan’s whole body spasmed from the ruthless current. However his powers worked, the electricity interfered with them. His face became a jigsaw puzzle of mismatched pieces, like he couldn’t hold any form. His nose and lips switched places. His eyes disappeared. For one horrible second, there was nothing at all. Just smooth skin over his skull.

He dropped the phone, screaming in pain, although he had no mouth. The image of the Council Hall vanished, and suddenly they were standing in a very familiar place.

The Heart Stone Academy.

Randa would’ve recognized it anywhere. They were in Grandmother Viola’s office. The *actual* office. This was a real place.

It was deserted, of course. There were no students left to attend Heart Stone now. It sat high in the Stone Kingdoms mountains, its silent dormitories carved into ancient cliffs. Not even Stone Phases would have a reason to visit here.

Yuan must have chosen the school for its isolation and because he was caught up in some fantasy of redoing their past. He wanted to go back to when she was ninety-three and make her choose him over Hekktor. He really was insane.

And he’d given Randa her best opportunity to escape.

She took off running towards her grandmother’s open balcony.

“No!” Yuan stumbled after her, sounding frantic. Somehow, he got his powers under control. The image of the Council Hall flickered back, obscuring Heart Stone Academy.

It didn’t matter. Randa could navigate the school with her eyes closed. She squeezed them shut so the illusion didn’t distract her, using her instincts to gauge where she was in the office.

“There’s nowhere you can go that I won’t find you!” Yuan shouted, following her.

The Council Hall was familiar to every Elemental. Yuan had been there hundreds of times, so of course he could exactly copy the subtle patterns on the curtains and the exact number of imposing columns. But he’d never lived in the Stone Kingdom. He didn’t understand the cliff dwellings, like Randa did. He didn’t respect the towering stone monoliths or the unforgiving canyons below.

In pain, and frenzied, he only saw his own pretty illusion and forgot about the rock-hard reality underneath. “You’re mine! You were always supposed to be mine!”

She was navigating by instinct and memory. At the very last second, Randa shot left. Two extra steps in any direction would be disastrous. Stone Phases didn’t believe in railings, so she’d go careening off the side of a balcony she couldn’t even see.

Yuan lunged for her.

Calling on all the adventurous impulses she’d ever repressed, Randa leapt towards the invisible cliff face. For one desperate moment, she clawed at the nothingness. …And then her hand seized the bottom rung of the ladder affixed to the stone wall.

Safe.

Her chest expanded on a huge rush of air. She was safe. Once you knew where that ladder was, you could grab onto the rungs and climb even higher.

Yuan had no idea where the ladder was.

His face reflected shock, as he ran straight into the abyss. Randa turned to look at him, just as the solid ground beneath his feet vanished. For a fraction of a second, his illusion remained, and it appeared he was standing on the Council Hall's sophisticated carpeting. Then his feet fell through the fake-ground and he was plummeting.

Down. Down. Down.

He hit the stones far below with an echoing *thud*. The wind carried the sound through the canyon like a dirge.

Randa cringed.

With Yuan dead, his powers snapped off. The Heart Stone Academy flashed back into view. It was just her and Ben's dead body in her grandmother's empty office.

Randa stayed where she was, clinging to the side of the cliff. Waiting for her heartbeat to slow and her body to stop shivering. Yuan was gone. Once she figured out how to remove the manacle, she could go home. She could be with Kahn. She just needed to unclench her fingers from around the rung of the ladder…

Energy blazed through the room. Familiar. Safe. Her Match had come for her.

She could've cried in relief.

"Randa!" Kahn jumped onto the balcony, his eyes instantly finding her. "Are you okay? Are you hurt? Where's Yuan?" He reached for her, not giving her a chance to answer one question before asking the next.

"I'm okay. I'm not hurt." She hugged him back, as he carefully plucked her off the ladder and cradled her in his arms. He didn't even seem to notice the steep drop around him, all his attention on Randa. "Yuan is dead."

"You killed your stalker?" Kahn grinned with pride. "That's what you hired me to do, remember? I'm supposed to be the bodyguard. I had a plan and everything."

"I don't need a bodyguard." She whispered, clinging to him. "I just need you."

“You have me. *Always*. I love you so much.” He kissed her forehead and her hair, big hands running over her body. The touching didn’t bother her a bit. “Are you sure you’re alright? What happened? Tell me everything, sweetheart.”

“Well, to begin with, you really are gifted at improving phones…”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Love, the strongest and deepest element in all life…
how can such an all-compelling force be synonymous with that poor little
State and Church-begotten weed,
marriage?

Emma Goldman

The first human city Randa traveled to wasn't New York or Marrakesh or Lisbon. It was Las Vegas. The travel guide she'd bought about Nevada prepared her for the blinking lights and chaotic energy of the desert oasis. But nothing could've prepared her for Secret Wishes Weddings.

The "high-end" venue advertised "designer exclusive" bridal amenities, "themed suites" for "elite guests," and a "platinum level" open bar. It was Vegas' most expensive, elaborate, no-wait wedding chapel and boutique hotel. Tallulah Jayne had rented out every square foot of it for the next twenty-four hours.

All the other couples had been booted from the overwrought facility when the new Queen of the Light Kingdom whipped out her black credit card. The tears and screaming from the displaced brides just seemed to make Tallulah Jayne's big day more magical. She was gleefully chatting to her absent friend Skylar, as she flitted around the lavish dressing room.

"OMG girl, I wish you could be here for my wedding, too." She cooed into her phone, primping to walk down the aisle. "You're like my *older* sister. But don't worry, you'll see plenty of pics. I hired a photographer to update my socials." She glanced at him, beaming over her shoulder like she was starring in a tooth-whitening commercial.

The photographer- a bald-headed, silent human, with endless patience-- snapped about a thousand pictures of the pose for the internet.

Tallulah Jayne went back to ignoring him. "I'm just heartbroken, because I wanted my whole girl-crew to be part of this special moment. I've cried, imagining all my friends as bridesmaids. Really."

(She had *not* really cried.)

“I can’t help it, though. Rye says he couldn’t wait another day to wife me up.”

(Rye had *not* said that.)

“It’s been such a whirlwind. Did I tell you he’s going to build me a house in Aspen? And that he’s the king of someplace? I feel so bad for all the girls who aren’t me.… Oops! Hang on, Sky-Sky. My agent is calling, again.”

(Her agent was *not* calling.)

“Gosh, I just can’t keep up with it all!”

Tallulah Jayne *was* actually telling the truth about the frenetic pace of the last few days. Everything had moved quickly, after Yuan and Vandal died.

Sullivan had convinced the rest of Mayport Beach that a sinkhole opened up under the roller rink, severing gas lines and causing the fire. Steve’s Uncle Fred wasn’t asking too many questions, given the eight-figure check the Elementals had given him for the loss. Ben’s estate also received a hefty payout, because he was officially listed as a victim of the fire. Randa had encouraged a story of him heroically saving children from the blaze. So now he was getting a plaque at town hall, honoring his courage and sacrifice.

Job had his hands full recruiting someone non-psychotic to oversee the Reflection House. There weren’t that many people vying for the thankless task. Missy was still missing, and no one was any closer to discovering who the Dark King was. With Vandal gone, there had been some speculation that Daphne would show up, but so far she hadn’t been seen. Tharsis said she’d stopped texting him. He seemed concerned about what that meant for the future.

Randa was focusing on the present.

Dr. Ashley had recommended some therapists for Kahn. He’d picked one who’d reminded him of his sister Tonia. She offered televisits, which let him talk to her over a computer screen. The buffer of technology seemed to make it easier for him to open up to the woman. Randa could

relate. She was very proud of him for working on himself. (And for not murdering the Fire Phases, who continued to insist that he now "technically" belonged to their House.) Kahn was a devoted, loving, trustworthy Match. He fit into her life, like he'd always been there.

Also, she was pretty certain he'd beaten the hell out of Raj, of the Color House for her.

Throwing that egg in the supermarket had been the last time he'd physically confronted her, but he'd continued to make his insults very loud and very public. So, when Raj's unconscious body was dumped in the Agora, covered in blood and eggs, it sure seemed like a message that the Light Phases were done with the disrespect. The rest of the Elementals had been *much* nicer to Randa ever since.

The Light Phases themselves weren't in a hurry to go back to their kingdom. They liked the human realm. They spent their time hanging around Randa's bungalow, Tallulah Jayne's mansion, or the Wastin' Away Bar and Grille. Mostly the bar.

Rye doted on Tallulah Jayne, delighting in her cruelty and bossiness. He was convinced his parents would be thrilled he'd found such a brutal queen to rule beside him. Julius was building "mermaid traps" along the scenic shoreline. He said it was to prevent aquatic invasion, but Randa was half-convinced he was hunting one for more romantic possibilities. He kept talking about "sex tails" and "tail play." Randa planned to add a slide on "not stalking fictional creatures" to the dating PowerPoint. Meanwhile, Daven and Mannus had been arrested three times in four days for fighting humans, a possum, and each other.

Sullivan wasn't thrilled with the town's new residents.

Randa refused to quit her job to babysit the Light Phases, although she *was* considering taking some time off to travel with Kahn. They had so many places to see. But they had plenty of time. For the moment, she was happy working at the police station, texting her Match flirty messages, and sometimes cooking for people when Kahn wasn't looking. (He hated sharing her food.) Having her new family all around her made Randa feel incredibly fortunate.

Even her pseudo sister-in-law. Sometimes.

“Gotta run, Sky. Love you! Byeeeee.” Tallulah Jayne hung up and calmly went back to perfecting her lip liner in the lighted mirror over the vanity. The professional makeup artist had been kicked out twenty minutes before, because Tallulah Jayne said the woman didn’t understand contours.

Randa stood behind the happy bridezilla, watching the preparations. Tallulah Jayne had appointed her Maid of Honor, but Randa didn’t really know what the role entailed. So far, it seemed like she was just supposed to follow Tallulah Jayne around with expensive bottles of water and tell her she looked perfect every two minutes.

“How’s my makeup look?” Tallulah Jayne demanded right on cue.

“Perfect.”

Tallulah Jayne preened.

“But I’m sure Rye will agree to postpone the ceremony.” Randa ventured. The whole elopement was Tallulah Jayne’s idea, anyway. Elementals didn’t care about human weddings. Once they Phazed, they were bonded forever, so Rye already had what he wanted.

“Why would I postpone? I look perfect *today*.” She smoothed down a spiral of shiny red hair, pursing her glossy lips in the mirror. “Did I tell you this dress cost forty grand?”

The photographer took a picture. Checked it. Adjusted his lighting. Took more.

Randa gamely did her job as Maid of Honor. “The dress is perfect.”

“I know.” Tallulah Jayne planted a hand on her hip, her fingers disappearing into seventy-million layers of tulle, and found the best angle for a selfie.

More pictures were snapped of her taking the picture.

“I just meant about your friend being here.” Randa gestured to Tallulah Jayne’s phone. “If you want her to be a bridesmaid, we’ll wait for her to arrive.”

“That fake bitch?” Tallulah Jayne snorted. “She’s *never* meeting Rye. Skylar would be trying to suck his dick the second my back was turned. Grasping skank. No, she can watch us from the sidelines, along

with my other besties, feasting on black market semaglutide pills and jealousy."

Life had not provided Randa with the necessary tools to formulate a reply. She simply wasn't crazy enough. "Oh."

"That's why it's good *you're* here to support me." Tallulah Jayne continued chattily. "I know you're not going to make a play for my man. First of all, you're such a mousy little thing, he'd never look twice at you…"

"*You're* the one who picked out this maid of honor dress." The modest cut appealed to Randa, but she suspected that Tallulah Jayne selected it for its plainness. The bride saw fashion as a competition. She saw *everything* as a competition.

"…And secondly, you're in love with Kahn." Tallulah Jayne continued, like Randa hadn't even spoken.

Randa blinked.

"It's kind of pathetic how you moon over Kahn actually, but in a cute way. You're always looking up at him and smiling and…" Tallulah Jayne trailed off, taking in Randa's expression. "What? You didn't think I noticed? I notice *everything* about people. I just usually don't care. We're family now, though! I pay attention to who you want to fuck, so we can girl talk." She made a little *squee* sound of excitement. "Yay, girl talk!"

"I just…" Randa tried to marshal her racing thoughts. "Kahn and I are…"

"You *do* know you're in love with him, right?"

Randa gave a jerky nod, because she did know that. Deep down, she'd known it for nearly as long as she'd known him. It was just shocking to admit it. To hear someone say the words out loud.

"And he loves you. I can tell by the way he watches you like you're a goddess." She waggled her eyebrows suggestively. "He wants to kneel down and pray at your altar."

Kahn might look at her like that, but he'd barely kissed her since her kidnapping. He'd genuinely panicked when she suggested taking his pants

off again. She'd been practicing by touching herself and by initiating hot-and-heavy make-out sessions with him. (At least as hot-and-heavy as he'd allow.) She was in a great place with intimacy, ready to move on to Phazing. Meanwhile, her Match was back to thinking she was breakable.

"Is he good in bed?" Tallulah Jayne continued. (This must be her version of "girl talk," Gaia help them all.) "Rye is *great* in bed. Like, capital-T *The* best I've ever had. And I slept with the entire cast of that one Spider-Man movie, including the stunt guys. They're super flexible, so I've got a high bar."

Once again, Randa was flummoxed for a proper response. Heart Stone Academy Finishing School simply didn't teach conversational skills at Tallulah Jayne's advanced level.

Even though she must've had some Elemental DNA to be Rye's Match, it still wasn't clear which House Tallulah Jayne was descended from. Randa privately suspected the Fire Phases, though. They had similar amounts of modesty. For the good of the world, she just hoped Tallulah Jayne never manifested any powers.

"Kahn is an excellent kisser." Randa offered up, not sure what else to say. "Capital-E excellent."

Tallulah Jayne's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Have you two not had sex?"

Dr. Ashley was two thousand miles away. The urge to talk to somebody outweighed the fact that the only "somebody" present was Tallulah Jayne Atkins. A vapid mean girl in a wedding dress was better than no one.

"I want to sleep with Kahn, but he's hesitant. I had," Randa paused and then went with the truth, because she had nothing to be ashamed of, "an assault in the past. It's made it hard for me to be with men."

"Well, that sucks."

Tallulah Jayne's words weirdly made Randa feel better. They were commiseration about the situation, not pity for Randa. "It did suck. And the Yuan thing spooked Kahn, I think. Like he thinks maybe it triggered

me. But it didn't! Yuan was *nothing*. I've told Kahn I want to Phaze. Except he's so concerned about scaring me that he said we should wait."

It was Tallulah Jayne's turn to blink. "Wait for what?"

Randa shrugged. "Until he's sure that I'm sure, I guess."

"But you *are* sure. You just said so. And he's your Match."

"Yes."

"So, then he's *yours*. He has to do what you say."

"Well, I can't just order him into bed."

"Why not? Lord, don't let *him* set the pace. You'll never get anywhere." Tallulah Jayne made a face. (The photographer was smart enough not to snap a picture of it.) "Guys never know what to do, unless we tell them. Oh!" She brightened in sudden revelation. "Why not seduce him, right now? Catch him off guard."

In that second, Randa couldn't think of a single reason why that was a bad idea. "Right now? You think so?"

"For sure! This place is full of romance. The gift shop has pink rose petals and a dozen flavors of lube."

"I'm supposed to be your maid of honor, though. The ceremony starts in fifteen minutes."

"Honey, look at me." Tallulah Jayne gestured to her over-the-top wedding ensemble with a confident roll of her eyes. "Literally no one is going to notice if you're not there. Now, I command you to go screw your Match, immediately."

"Yes but…"

Tallulah Jayne cut her off. "Nope! Away you go." She made a shooing motion with her hand, which was weighed down by a watermelon-sized diamond. "There are a bunch of guest suites upstairs, all themed to fun, sexy-times. Pick one with a vibrating bed and Phaze him into submission. It's my certified wedding decree."

That sounded sufficiently official.

Randa nodded decisively and decided to follow her certified bridal orders.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Bloodshed and violence and savagery were the natural elements of the life. Conan knew; he could not, and would never, understand the little things that are so dear to civilized men and women.

Robert E. Howard

Randa marched from the bridal dressing room, full of resolve. She hurried up the wedding chapel's sweeping staircase and onto the second floor. Then it took her ten minutes to select the best themed room.

By that point, her burst of sexual bravery was waning a bit. It occurred to her that she should maybe change into a more seductive outfit. The green maid of honor dress wasn't very sexy. It did match the olive-colored House designation at her temple, which she appreciated. But maybe something red or lacy would be better for seducing her Match.

Unfortunately, she didn't own anything red or lacy. And if she took the time to buy red or lacy clothes, she'd chicken out completely. It was now or never.

Pulling her phone out of her dress pocket, she texted Kahn. *Suite 4. Hurry.*

Thirty seconds later, she heard him racing up the steps. "Randa!" He burst through the door, scanning for danger. "What's wrong?" He frowned in confusion when he found her standing there alone. "What happened?" He quickly checked the closet and bathroom for intruders. "Are you okay?"

Randa closed the door, sealing them in the suite. "I'm fine. I've just decided to Phaze with you."

He blinked. "Huh?"

His confusion did not help her confidence.

"I don't want to renounce you. Not ever." Randa continued, outlining all the reasons she was right to lock him in a bedroom. "We've built a strong foundation for our Match. We've practiced touching, so I'm

not triggered. I've joined your House. Stone Phase DNA tends to be more recessive, so there's even a higher chance than average we'll eventually have a Light Phase child."

Most children inherited their mother's powers, but some took after their father's. Having more Light Phases would be a blessing for the world. Not only would it help sustain the Element, but they were simply the *best*. The best people. The best House. Randa hoped all of her sons and daughters were Light Phases.

"Sweetheart, that isn't why…"

"And I love you." She rushed to finish, while she still had the courage to say it. "That's the most important reason we should be together. Because I love you and you love me back."

"I do love you back." Kahn's expression was somewhere between tender and exultant. "I love you *so much* my new therapist will probably consider it a problem."

"Don't listen to her."

"Believe me, I won't. I *can't*. My feelings for you keep my heart beating." He came closer, careful not to touch her. That hesitancy needed to change. Randa had been practicing, damn it! She wanted more touching. She needed to show him that.

"You're sure you love me?" She couldn't help but ask. "It's not just because I'm your Match?"

"I love *Randa*. And I will still love you just as much a month from now. A year from now. *Six hundred* years from now. You just went through something traumatic, and I want to support you. You don't have to rush into…"

She cut him off. "If you recall the guidelines for our Match, *I* am the one who chooses when we Phaze."

Kahn's brows drew together. "Yeah, but that was supposed to be so you could feel safe…"

"*I* get to choose." Randa interrupted again. "And I have chosen this place for us." She waved a hand around the themed space. "Try to guess

why I picked it."

Kahn surveyed the interior, which was decorated with piles of faux furs and dangling vines. The walls held close-up paintings of dragon wings in the rain. The centerpiece of the space was a bed suspended from the ceiling via chains. Magical-colored fabrics draped all around it, creating the illusion of a private tent in an enchanted forest.

His mouth curved. "Barbarian?" He ventured.

"Barbarian." Randa concurred. "Well, as close as Secret Wishes Weddings gets to it, anyway. Most of the rooms are themed to pirates or cowboys. One had robots. We're *not* dealing with robots." She suppressed a shudder. "This room is more suited to misunderstood- romantasy-book-boyfriends, rather than the *true* savages I prefer. But I'm confident we can make my secret wish work."

Kahn's forehead compressed, his smile fading. "Savages? Plural? No, there had better only be *one* savage you secretly wish for."

Randa bit back a grin at his possessive tone. That was more like it. "It's not much of a secret, actually. I've already captured the man I want." She reached behind her to lock the bedroom door. The small sound echoed through the suite. "It turns out I'm an even bigger savage than he is."

Despite his reservations, Kahn began to look intrigued. "Does locking me in this room count as kidnapping? Because I recall kidnapping Matches was a 'don't' on your computer dating presentation"

"We're past dating. We're onto Phazing, now. Please strip." She held her breath, waiting to see if he'd really listen to her.

Kahn stared at her for a long moment, like he was trying to read her mind. "You want to be in control." He finally murmured with a small nod.

"I guess so?" Her nerve began to falter again. "Unless you don't feel comfortable with this game. I would never pressure you. So if you'd truly rather wait…"

Kahn yanked off his suit jacket. Fabric ripped, possibly because Randa had insisted he buy a smaller size, so she could admire his arms. His tie, which was covered in little alligators, went flying. He pulled his human

dress shirt over his head without even unbuttoning it and tossed that aside, too. He was naked from the waist up in less than three seconds.

Randa gave a surprised laugh. He was going to let her do this! He understood what she needed. He *was* listening.

"God, I love playing with you." Kahn unbuckled his belt, then reconsidered the order of operations. "Wait… Shoes first." He toed off his battered boots (that he wasn't supposed to be wearing with his nice groomsmen outfit) and then attacked his pants again. Now, he was totally nude and smiling eagerly.

"Okay." He clapped his hands together. "I've been captured by a savage maiden in a bridesmaid dress. What does she want me to do?"

Randa had no idea.

Her eyebrows soared, astonished at how fast this was moving. Her plan was way more effective than she'd anticipated. That was bolstering news, except now she actually had to carry it out. How was she supposed to seduce him? What were the steps? She hadn't quite gotten that far in her planning.

Okay… He was naked. She should be, too. Taking her clothes off seemed like a reasonable place to start. She could do that.

Maybe.

Randa swallowed hard, more doubts bubbling. Hopefully, Kahn wouldn't mind that she was too thin… *No*. She stopped that train of thought before it could spiral. She wasn't going to drag negative body image into their Phazing. This was a sacred experience with her Match. He would love her no matter what. She needed to stay focused on that.

Right. Good pep talk. Get naked.

She resolutely unzipped the side opening of her dress. Because it was expensive --and because she was still incredibly anxious about standing around in only her underwear-- she took the time to drape the green fabric over a chair made of large, fake tusks.

"That isn't barbarian themed. It's more caveman-esque. Someone should've explained that to the decorator." Focusing on the furnishings was

much easier than deciding on the next step in her seduction.

Kahn made a strangled noise, his dark eyes glued to her body. His gaze traveled down the length of her legs and then slowly back up, stalling at her white bra. His pupils seemed to dilate.

Startled, she glanced at herself. The matching lingerie set wasn't fancy. It literally came from Wal-Mart. But Kahn was so aroused by the sight of her in it that his erection looked painful.

Randa's confidence came roaring back. Her Match didn't care that she was new at this. He was in her thrall. She excelled at seduction! Who would've guessed?

"I suddenly don't feel guilty about ogling you so much." She teased. No wonder he always looked so smug about her admiring his biceps. Having a Match who found you attractive was intoxicating.

"What did you…?" He lost track of what he was even asking, his gaze riveted on her breasts plumping over the top of her strapless bra. "Um…"

"Kahn?"

"Yeah!" He shook himself and dragged his eyes back to her face. "Right. I'm listening. What are we talking about?"

"I just wanted to be sure I had your attention." She reached behind her back to unclasp her bra, so her chest was bared for him. "Please sit."

Kahn collapsed down hard on the edge of the bed. "Holy *fuck*."

Randa had never felt so beautiful.

She dropped the bra to the floor and walked towards him. "Being a barbarian is fun." This game let her feel bolder. In command. Kahn's overwhelming appreciation was all the encouragement she needed to keep going. "My grandmother was completely right about me being drawn to lustful savagery. I've decided to embrace it."

Kahn seemed thrilled with that uncivilized choice. He groaned as she settled onto his lap, her nipples jutting into his chest, as she leaned against him. "Is it alright if I touch you back?"

“Yes.” She pressed a kiss against his jaw. “I’ve discovered I like it when you touch me, Match.”

“Holy fuck.” He whispered again. Big hands slid up to caress her breasts, admiring their weight. “You are so soft…” He gave his head another distracted shake. “Wait. Um, if I do something that scares you, you tell me ‘heart,’ got it?”

“Got it.” She wasn’t feeling scared, though. She felt powerful.

The bed swung slightly on its chains, as they moved together. The longer he touched her, the better she felt. Her skin grew warm. Dampness gathered at her core and her energy twisted in desire. This level of touching wasn’t enough, though. She had to have all of him. Lust was making her greedy.

Randa shifted against Kahn’s body, pressing her breasts deeper into his palms. “Please.” She whispered, taking a long moment to kiss him. It was an absolutely shameless, kind of pornographic use of lips and tongue. “More.”

She gasped when his grip got firmer. His eyes blazed with arousal, as he did what she asked.

She loved being in control. “I want you inside of me. Can we do that with me on top?”

“We can do that with me standing on my head, if it makes you happy.” Kahn was ready to agree to anything by that point. His hands reluctantly stopped playing with her nipples and slid downward. “I’m going to make sure you’re ready for me. Tell me what you like.”

“I appreciate you explaining things and checking in with me. That’s very helpful… *Oh!*” Her lips parted in shock, as Kahn pressed one of his thick fingers inside of her. It happened so smoothly, she could only gasp. When she touched herself for practice, it had always been on the *outside*. He was deep within her body. This felt so much better. “Oh…”

“That’s it, sweetheart.” He made a growling sound, his teeth grazing her neck. “Relax your muscles. Let me all the way in. Trust me to please you.” His free hand glided through her hair, fondling the colored

marker at her temple. It sent more sparks flaring between her legs. "You like that?"

Randa could barely think. All she could process was the overwhelming desire to move. Searching for something. "I *really* like that." She got out, her hips riding his hand.

He shifted his grip, rubbing some magical spot. "How about this?"

Her head went back in almost painful ecstasy. "Oh, I like that even more!"

"And this?" His thumb brushed higher and angels sang.

"That, that, *that*. My God, you're a genius!"

"It's all you." Kahn kissed the hollow at the base of her throat, relishing her response. "Use my hand to make yourself feel good."

Randa fell into a glorious haze. He kept varying the strength of his touch and the rhythm of his fingers and the depth of his strokes, always asking her what she preferred. He listened to her answers and adjusted to wring maximum pleasure from her body. Randa was soon so close to the edge that she didn't know what felt best. Everything he did was just erotic torture.

"Kahn!" She wailed breathlessly.

He finally took pity on her dazed state. Another finger squeezed into her liquefied sheath, joining the first. "Come all over me." He nuzzled her ear, his voice rough with desire. "I want you to mark me as yours."

Her mouth opened in a silent scream, her whole body quaking. For Elementals, Phazing was both physical and power-based. When her orgasm pulled her under, it also released her Stone energy. Randa couldn't quite hold it back as it swept over him, pulling tight.

"*Holy fuck!*" Kahn's resolve cracked. The Light powers were about to get free. She could feel them swirling against her own, seeking completion. "I need you *now*. Say yes, Randa."

"Yes." She panted desperately, her body still convulsing.

That was good enough for him. Lifting Randa higher on his lap, Kahn impaled her with one fierce stroke. "My Match." He gritted out

between clenched teeth. “Take all of me. I’m all yours.”

Her head fell forward onto Kahn’s shoulder, whining in pleasure as he filled her. So much. So deep. He barely fit and she loved it. When he was fully seated inside her, he paused for a second, his jaw locked tight as he waited for her to adjust to his size.

Randa was beyond waiting. She undulated against him, her fingers digging into his spectacular arms. “I need to come again. Make me come again. Harder now.”

Kahn loved that command. Lifting her up, he quickly dropped her back down. Again and again. Chasing his own release, even as he followed her orders.

“Those barbarian poems are right.” He groaned and laughed at the same time. “Being a willing captive is fucking amazing.” He dipped his head to suck half her breast into his eager mouth. “My savage little warrior.”

Randa came again. Harder than before. Her Match was so damn good at listening.

“*Kahn.*” This time her scream wasn’t silent. It was the scream of a conqueror.

Her orgasm triggered his. “Fuck!” His arms tightened around her and his powers surged out.

Both of them had spent years fearing their powers were wrong. But together they felt *perfect.* Randa’s powers were different from most Stone Phases, but she was okay with that. She liked what she could do. And Kahn’s energy was protective and strong. The jagged spots were already smoother. In time, they’d heal completely.

The Light energy swirled around her in a cascading dance of illumination. Glowing dots and starbursts and blasts of color. It came together with the Stone energy, the combination of the two forces like an explosion. Bright, but heavy. Intangible, but endless.

Indestructible.

Randa clung to Kahn, reveling in a new sense of unity. It was impossible to tell where she started and her Match began. Their energies had merged into one, just as Gaia intended.

Kahn seemed to be struggling for oxygen. "Are you okay?" He panted.

"I'm perfect. I'm with my Match."

"Good." Kahn collapsed backwards onto the bed, keeping their bodies connected. His eyes were closed, and nothing was moving except his gigantic chest.

Randa sprawled on top of him, a little worried that she'd knocked him unconscious. "Are *you* okay?"

"I am --without a doubt-- the most okay man in the universe." He assured her without opening his eyes. "I belong to a hot barbarian. Life is good."

She cuddled closer to him, shaking her head at his craziness. For a man who never said the right thing, somehow everything he said always sounded right.

Her palm found his, tangling their fingers together. Kahn sighed happily. He loved holding hands. So did Randa. "I think you're pretty hot, too." Her thumb traced over his knuckle.

"I know you do." He sounded self-satisfied. "How could you not? I'm incredible. It was only a matter of time before you seduced me. I was waiting for it."

Randa laughed at his teasing arrogance. "Yes, I'm sure this was all *your* idea."

"It was! …More or less. We were made for each other. I knew I just had to be patient and I'd eventually win you over. It was inevitable."

"You're never patient, Kahn. You're just a hunter lying in wait."

He grinned, meeting her gaze and letting her see all the love inside of him. "I'm not hunting, anymore. I'm captured. Completely at your mercy, Randa." He leaned up to kiss the bridge of her nose. "Forever."

OceanofPDF.com

Epilogue

I wrote this manuscript for *you*.
So you'd understand why I did what I did. So you could see that I had no choice.
So maybe you wouldn't hate me for it.

Daphne, of the Time House- "After the Fall: A History of the Dark War"

Two Weeks Ago

The Smoke Kingdom

"This whole goddamn plan is now shit! We are swimming in shit. We are *drowning* in shit. Son of a fucking fucked-up *fuck*." Zakkery, of the Smoke House paced around the dungeon with a cigarette clamped between his lips, while he strung together nonsensical, free-verse poems of vulgarity.

Daphne, of the Time House couldn't wait for him to run out of steam on his own. She was on a tight schedule. "You done with your tantrum yet?"

"I've barely gotten started! Did you think any of this through *at all?* Or are you just making things up as you go along? Huh?"

Daphne ran a hand through her sandy-colored hair. Her whole life she'd been making things up as she went along. She worked hard to hide that fact under a veneer of confidence and fast-talking, but she had a feeling Zakkery saw right through her. "I'm figuring it out, okay?"

"Figuring it out?!" Zakk repeated at a roar. "You should have fucking-A figured it out before we had *both of our fucking Matches* locked in fucking cages!" He swung an arm toward the Plexiglas cells currently holding Raiden, of the Radiation House and Missy, of the Fire House. "This was *not* our agreement, Daph."

"I *know!*" She shouted back. "I'm sorry I sprung your Match on you and then kidnapped her, okay? I didn't know what else to do. I needed the damn Happiness box, and Missy had it. You think she was just going to hand it over without a little push?"

“I think you knocked out my Match and locked her in a cage.” He snarled. “Maybe I don’t know exactly what I plan to do with the girl yet, but I sure as hell won’t let you hold her prisoner.”

“That’s super sweet.” Missy interjected in a honeyed voice.

Zakkery and Daphne flashed her identical squints, her inappropriate cheeriness distracting them from their fight. It was hard to know if Missy was crazy or *pretending* to be crazy. Or which option would be worse.

Either way, her terminable merriment hid the soul of a cold-blooded assassin and a stratospherically high IQ. Missy sat on her cot, her cherubic face as wholesome as apple pie and her shiny black curls resembling Snow White’s.

It was like looking at King Kong chained-up on stage. You just *knew* there would be hell to pay when the restraints were gone and the monster was loose.

It was a miracle Daphne had trapped Missy in the cell without bloodshed. The element of surprise had worked in her favor, but now that was gone. Once she was free, Missy’s vengeance would be the stuff of Fire House lore. And Fire House lore usually consisted of someone burning alive from the inside out.

Missy smiled prettily at Daphne’s wary expression. “Would you be kind enough to explain exactly what’s going on here?” She asked, and her friendly tone sent chills down Daphne’s spine.

“Umm…” She hesitated, wondering where to start. “Well, I’m from the future.”

“Oh, how nice.” Missy nodded as if Daphne had announced she was from Vancouver.

“No, it’s *not* nice actually. The future is a complete shit-show, so I’ve come back to fix it.” Raiden gave a snort at that pronouncement, which Daphne ignored. The man was impossible to reason with, so it was easier to just pretend she couldn’t hear his naysaying. “I’m a Time Phase and I’m pretty powerful, so I have a plan to save all of us.”

“We know each other in the future, then?” Missy inquired, blue eyes dancing with madness and murder plots.

“We *did*… until you died.”

Zakkery cringed.

“I die?” Missy made a thoughtful face. “Well, that’s quite sad. I’d planned to live forever. No wonder you’ve come back to change things.”

“Yes, I’m working to fix the past-future.” Daphne hoped that her good intentions would be enough to quell some of Missy’s bloodlust. “Zakk’s helping me with the day-to-day stuff.” She jerked a thumb at Zakkery. “He had no idea he was your Match. I just promised that I would help him find you… which I have.”

“Then you locked her up.” Zakkery seethed. His smoke-colored gaze flicked to Missy, like he still couldn’t believe she was sitting right in front of him.

Missy gave him a perky wave, which may or may not have been a taunt.

Zakkery flinched again and looked back at Daphne. “This is a disaster.” He intoned. Obviously, he was unsure what to say to Missy, so he focused on Daphne instead. “We’ve kidnapped my *Match*. How am I supposed to come back from that, huh? She’s going to think I’m a fucking bad guy!”

“You *are* a fucking bad guy.” Daphne scoffed.

He winced again.

“It’s not an insult, cat-hole. So am I! Neither of us are heroes in this story, but we’re the ones who’ll get shit done. Accept it and you’ll be a lot happier.”

“The Fire House are *always* the heroes.” Missy put in, folding her manicured hands in her lap. Her fingernails were all painted baby-unicorn pink. That was eerie as hell, considering how many lives those graceful palms had snuffed out. “And, of course, Fire Phases write our *own* stories. The endings are so much happier that way.” She gave a meaningful pause. “Except for our enemies.”

Zakkery closed his eyes in pain. “Gaia.” He whispered. “I *am* a fucking bad guy.”

“I know. The cursing alone should have clued you in.”

He rubbed his forehead like he wished he could drill through his skull. “This is the worst thing I’ve ever done.”

“We’re being bad guys for good reasons.” Daphne insisted, afraid he would back out of the deal for Missy’s sake. Phases would do anything for their Matches. She knew that better than anyone. “If we stop now she’ll die, Zakk. We’re saving her life. *Both* of their lives.” She gestured towards Raiden.

Raiden looked singularly unimpressed.

Her idiot Match and Missy were watching the argument like spectators at a tennis tournament. Their gazes went back and forth between Daphne and Zakkery as they fought, filing away every word. It set a bad precedent to bicker in front of their hostages.

Daphne scowled at them. “We should do this later.” She told Zakk.

“No, we’ll do it *now*.” Zakkery suspected how much of this plan was completely *un*planned, and he was about two seconds away from full mutiny.

Daphne and Zakk were like family. They’d been working together for years. But if Missy even *asked* to go free, he was going to switch sides and then the whole world would be screwed. Daphne needed to keep him on Team Fucking Bad Guys.

The universe depended on it.

She checked the clock. “Alright. We’ll do it now. Hang on.” She jumped into the future.

It was annoying that she had to work around the restrictions of her powers. She’d been stretching the time-jumps longer and longer, but even she had limits.

”Okay.” Daphne jumped back to the past. From their viewpoint, she’d barely been gone a second. “Go ahead, Zakk. Explain to me how we should play by the rules and let poor Missy get beheaded.”

“Beheaded? How mundane.” Missy pouted in disappointment. “I thought there would at *least* be a tiger. That would be the only death I

could accept. I think death-by-tiger has a very noble ring to it, don't you?" She looked over at Raiden, as if he might have an opinion.

He grunted.

"My Match is not getting eaten by a tiger!" Zakkery roared, like Daphne had been the one to suggest it. "*Or* beheaded. I just don't see why I can't save her in some other, saner, un-kidnapped way.

"Missy is a Fire Phase. They hold each other prisoner all the time. It's how they flirt." Daphne wasn't even lying about that part. "Missy's *not* going to hold a grudge about being locked in one little cell." …At least not against Zakk. Daphne would no doubt be feeling her wrath into the next millennium.

"She's going to *hate* me."

"Oh, she'll get over it."

That part was going to be easy. Zakkery was broodingly gorgeous, with dark hair and a lavender streak at his temple designating his House. What girl could stay mad at him for long, even in his bizarre clothes?

Perpetually dressed in Union Jack high-tops, shredded denim, and his favorite bicycle chain bracelet, his fashion sense was *interesting*, even for this time period. Mostly he seemed to like the punk-rock style because it allowed him to wear his hair long, so it covered his too-pretty face.

His smoke-colored eyes met hers. "If I go with you on this, I'm risking everything I've ever wanted." He said quietly. "You want to save the future? Well, that girl *is* my future."

"I understand." Daphne knew what she was asking. She also knew what would happen if he didn't listen. "That's why you need to trust me. If you don't, you'll *lose* everything you've ever wanted. Your 'future' will play out in a lonely shack on a hill. I've seen it." Daphne didn't even try to sugarcoat the stakes. "I swear on my life, it's true. Missy *will* die, Zakk."

Zakkery looked up at the ceiling, searching for answers up there. "Fuck." He whispered and Daphne knew she was winning him over.

"A couple of days locked in a cell is a small price to pay for thousands of years of life together." Daphne persisted. "She'd lock you up

too, if the situations were reversed. She looked at Missy. “Wouldn’t you lock him up?”

“I still might.”

“See?” Daphne waved a triumphant hand. “Any Phase would do what we’re doing.”

“I wouldn’t.” Raiden intoned. “It’s immoral, dangerous, and wrong.”

Daphne ground her teeth together and rose above his negativity, her attention staying on Zakkery. “You have to protect your Match. It’s your job. Do *not* let her out of there.”

Zakkery’s gaze flicked over to Missy, who smiled like the winner of a serial killer beauty pageant. He took a deep breath. “Okay.” He looked back at Daphne and gave a jerky nod. “You’d better be right, though.”

“I’m always right. I have it all under control.”

That was a lie. Things were spinning so far beyond her control that Daphne had no idea how she was ever going to fix them.

Against her will, she found her gaze cutting over to Raiden. She’d had her taciturn Match locked up for weeks, keeping him safely out of the fray. Not that he was *thanking* her for her efforts. So far he’d been a colossal dick about this whole abduction thing, truth be told. Worse, he knew her plan was in trouble. She could see it every time he looked at her with those gamma-ray green eyes.

Raiden leaned against the Plexiglas wall of his cell, watching her like he could read every thought in her head. Maybe he could. “What’s gone wrong?” He asked quietly.

Everything.

“Nothing.” She tried to sound confident. “The future is safe.”

“I feel very safe.” It was impossible to know if Missy was being facetious or not.

Daphne sent her a suspicious frown, not willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. “We are on the same side. Try to believe that, even if you don’t believe the rest.”

Missy's eyes narrowed, studying Daphne's face for a long moment. "Alright." She finally said. "I won't kill you, yet."

Wasn't that all kinds of reassuring?

"Missy." Raiden said quietly. "Don't threaten my Match."

She glanced at him and then back to Daphne. "Why do you have Raiden imprisoned? Does he die, too?"

"I was supposed to die weeks ago." Raiden intoned. "But Daphne believes she can change our fate."

"I *have* changed it, moron."

Her Match was a real pain in the ass, with his stupid prophecies about how they could never be together. He'd known the moment she was born. But he'd still vanished from her life, like Daphne was some inconvenient pet. She could feel him out there, while he never even visited. When he finally *did* show up, it was just to tell her he'd be dying that day. Cat-hole. Was it any wonder she'd traveled back in time to stop his martyrdom?

If he read her manuscript, he'd see that all her decisions were justified. She'd left it in his cell for him, but he probably hadn't even opened it. She'd been writing the book for decades, so he could eventually understand her reasoning. So he'd get that she didn't have a choice. Every crazy thing she'd done, every law she'd bent into a pretzel, was for *him*. Because she was trying to save Raiden's life.

All Daphne had *ever* wanted was her Match by her side, and all he ever did was break her heart. It was infuriating!

Raiden stared at her, seeing far too much. "Are you in danger?" He asked quietly. "In the future, is someone frightening you?"

"Things are just in flux. Don't rush me." Speaking of which… She checked the clock on the wall again and cringed when she saw how late it was getting. Damn it, she could never finish half of what she needed to in these visits. She'd scheduled this "Missy fiasco," so it happened over two jumps, one just before midnight and one just after, and there *still* wasn't enough time. "Cat shit. Hold on."

She began emptying the pockets of her silver jacket. Thanks to matter-compression, it could hold several cubic feet of stuff, so they were all pretty full.

"Holy Gaia." Raiden whispered as he saw what she'd been transporting.

Even Missy looked concerned, and Fire Phases sometimes set off hydrogen bombs for their 4th of July celebrations. "Oh dear… I don't think you should be playing with those."

Daphne ignored their worrywart attitudes and stacked the Tablets of Fate on Zakkery's stolen pool table. They'd appropriated the abandoned Smoke Castle's dungeon as their prison, but Zakk had decorated it with his own frat house touches. All the pinball machines and TV sets gave the rows of plastic jail cells a bachelor pad feel.

"You have all of them?" Zakkery did a quick count. "All nine?"

"Yep." It had taken her several hundred years to put the collection together, but now it was done. She was the first person in history to unite the boxes in one place. They were the most powerful objects in creation, and now they belonged to Daphne. She wasn't sure whether to be proud or terrified. She swallowed hard and looked at Zakkery. "Do *not* let these out of your sight."

His eyebrows climbed up his forehead. "Wait, you're just going to leave them here?"

"Yep." She turned to go. "Whatever you do, *don't open the boxes*."

He rolled his eyes. "Well, there go my weekend plans." He muttered and looked around for somewhere to put them all. He finally opened up the top of the pinball machine and began piling them inside. That kind of made sense. They glowed, so they blended in with the blinking lights of the game.

"Fee?" Whenever Raiden said her nickname, it sounded like a caress.

Daphne steeled herself against the melting sensation in her heart. "What?" It was almost impossible not to stare at him, given how attractive he was.

“Be careful.” He watched her steadily. “Whoever’s after you in the future… *be careful*.”

“Everything’s going to be fine.” She snapped. “We’ll all be *fine*, so long as you just do what I say.” She looked back at Zakkery. “Don’t panic if I’m gone for a few days. I got shit to do.”

“A few *days?!*”

Daphne disregarded his protest, her eyes flicking over to Missy. “You’d better not kill my Match,” she warned, “*or* yours.”

Missy smiled like the angelic-looking assassin she was. “Are you *sure* we’re friends?”

An alarm on the wall of the dungeon started blinking an ominous red. Someone had just opened the outer door.

All four of them looked towards the stairwell, which led up to ground level. The dungeon had been part of the old castle and was built below the Smoke Kingdom’s marshy surface. The palace itself was nothing but ruins now. Just a pile of burnt rocks. The underground dungeon was in perfect shape though. That was why Zakkery and Daphne had adopted it as their abduction headquarters.

Since the Fall, the subterranean space had been forgotten, but it seemed like someone had remembered it existed. Footsteps and voices echoed off the stone steps. Heading downward. Headed straight for them. It sounded like an entire army was coming their way, and Daphne was helpless to fix it.

She was out of time.

“Cat shit.” She whispered.

Missy rose to her feet. “If you can really read the future, I think you may have missed a few pages.”

“This wasn’t supposed to happen!” Daphne hadn’t seen this happen. Why hadn’t she seen this happen? Everything was changing, just as fast as she fixed it. “Ray.” She looked over at him, panic filling her.

“*Go*.” Raiden ordered. “You’re already pushing the time limits of your jumps. I can sense it. You’ll die if you stay much longer. We can

handle this."

"He's right." Zakkery slammed the pinball machine lid closed. "Leave. Now. I'll keep them safe."

"You swear it?"

"I swear it. I'll protect both of our Matches." He glanced back towards the stairs. "Or die trying."

OceanofPDF.com

Author's Note

I've never written an Author's Note for an Elemental Phases book before. The first books of this series are my earliest attempts at writing a romance novel. I published *Not Another Vampire Book* first, but I technically finished it after I wrote *Warrior From the Shadowland* and *Guardian of the Wood House*. These extended Author's Notes, explaining my struggles and inspirations, began later in Star Turtle Publishing's development.

(As a brief Author's Note on my long Author's Notes, my sister Elizabeth Gannon started the idea in her own books, because "romance novels should have directors' commentaries." I liked the idea and stole it from her.)

In any case, I should start my mini-essay by explaining that I love the Elemental Phases. They allowed me to become an author. Once upon a time, I dropped out of law school and I had no clear plan for the future. I felt lost. I had always loved romance novels, though. It was my dream to write one. So, I gave myself two months to make a real attempt at writing, rather than immediately look for a job. I had a small inheritance from my grandparents and supportive parents willing to feed me for free. I used that to fund my sabbatical. *Warrior from the Shadowland* was the result.

The Elemental Phases books are very close to my heart, but they are not my bestsellers and they are time-consuming to write. The series is difficult to structure because of the number of characters and the interconnecting plots, which arc over multiple books. This is exacerbated by my "don't plan ahead, just do what the characters want" style of writing. These books are too complicated to go without an outline, and I suck at outlines. Even when I write them, I can't follow them for long. I get too many new ideas as I work. Therefore, I get stuck a lot.

In retrospect, if I'd kept more options open when I first started this series, it would've allowed future-me to develop the story as it progressed. My life would've been easier. Instead, I decided way too much up front and got myself really, *really* stuck.

If you are an aspiring author, learn from my pain. Understand how you write best and tailor your work to fit that style. Also, (unless you are Sarah J. Maas) don't decide on an eight-book, interconnected, multi-viewpoint, fantasy-romance series as your first real writing venture.

At this point, the Elemental Phases are my passion project. I feel like I grew up with these characters. I plan to keep writing the books, headaches and financial sense be damned. Let's face it, if I were a logical, feet-on-the-ground, money-oriented person, would I be writing romance novels on my sofa? Hell no! I'd at least have a desk.

All this to say, it's been a while since an Elemental Phases book was actually published. Like, a *long* while. I am sorry that it's taken so long for me to get a new book out. Particular apologies to longtime fans who have been waiting. I just didn't know what to write, and nothing I tried worked. (And I have many, many abandoned Elemental books to prove it.) My poor sister tried to help me brainstorm, but even she eventually gave up because of my vacillating. If it makes you feel any better, no one is more annoyed than me about the delays. Revisiting the world makes me really happy, because I've lived with the characters in my head for so long.

One specific issue with this book's creation: I had to develop a plot around stuff I had already established over ten years ago. When you're writing book three of a series, it's easy to toss in details that you can't fully explain yet and be like, "I'll figure that out later." By book seven, "later" has arrived and some kind of resolution is needed. That took me a while to navigate. Not everything with the larger plot is resolved in this book, obviously, but that will happen in the next one. *fingers crossed!*

I am thankful that my former-self established Gion's birthday as a big deal. (Daphne first mentions it in the epilogue of *Treasure of the Fire Kingdom*.) That created a natural showdown location for the end. I always intended to write the party. I tried some different versions in other books that I never finished. But this one is by far the best. Happy Applewhite's is directly based on the roller-skating rink where my siblings and I celebrated many childhood birthdays. That place didn't have any animatronics, but the rest of it, from the churros on the food counter, to the strange musty smell, to the overly-patterned carpet, is lifted from my memories. On the other

hand, the penguin birthday cake came out of absolutely nowhere. It's literally the most random thing ever. I love it.

I felt like if Vandal was going to attack, he needed to target *all* the characters who'd been dealing with him in the previous books. (Well, *most* of all of them anyway. I had to cut Chason and Mara for logistical reasons. Chason would no doubt thank me.) I wanted something like a superhero movie vibe, where a villain bursts into a swanky party and kidnaps all the characters. For that, I needed a big cast. Gion's birthday became the perfect excuse to gather everyone together for some mayhem.

Making "Ben" the stalker was not actually my original intention. My first conception was that the teenage floral delivery kid would be the bad guy. But Kahn just hated Ben *so much!* The more I wrote, the more certain I became that Ben needed to be a villain. Kahn wouldn't accept anything else. And Steve worked well as a red herring/innocent victim/nepo-baby and perpetual part-time employee at every business in Mayport Beach. (In *Exile in the Water Kingdom*, he is also the clerk at Home Depot, who is terrorized by Gion and Chason.) I especially enjoyed his stint as a chicken. If I get the chance, I will write more jobs for him in future books, because torturing the poor kid amuses me.

The subplot of the Elementals dealing with technology also developed as I went along. Kahn was previously established as mechanically inclined, so I knew that aspect of his character had to be included. But somehow the idea rippled outward into PowerPoint presentations, smartphones, and robots. After I wrote the chapters at Happy Applewhite's, I had a moment of "Dear God… Frankie was right about the evil robots in *Magic of the Wood House*." I had completely forgotten about his rant until it kinda came true. Like Pele, I was impressed and a little freaked out with Frankie's prediction, although I still think he's crazy.

Aside from the Fire House and Tharsis, not many characters in this group have worked with human gadgets before, so their new fascination with owning phones amused me. All of them are just a little bit out of step with how human stuff work, but they're trying. I enjoy the idea of beings hundreds of years old struggling to use emojis. Also, I think Kahn being excited for the possibility of adding holographic projections on his phone

juxtaposes nicely with Randa's low-tech love for reruns of *Antiques Roadshow.* They're opposites who balance each other out.

I considered adding dating apps to the story. I think that would fit nicely with the idea of "illusions masking reality," which is a theme that kept popping up as I wrote this book. *Magic of the Wood House* established that at least some of the Phases use social media. So other Houses could even get involved. Maybe Randa could've explored some online dating options for the Light House, only all their profiles would end up sounding insane? Something like that. But I ultimately decided against it. I don't think it would add anything new to the plot. And it would take up pages that I needed for Kahn and Randa's relationship. The romance should always come first in a romance novel. It's right there in the name.

Luckily, the romance was actually the easiest part of the book to get a handle on. I've had a soft spot for Kahn ever since he appeared in *Exile in the Water Kingdom*. (Actually, I knew he existed even before that, because he showed up in some unpublished chapters I wrote, trying to figure out book three.) Kahn has one of the saddest backstories in the Elemental world. It's kind of the opposite of the Fire Phases, who got to keep nearly all their family in the Fall. Kahn lost most of his, so it makes sense to me that he'd be messed up by what happened and hate all of Parald's allies.

Randa also first appeared in *Exile in the Water Kingdom*, although she and Kahn never shared any scenes. She was supposed to be one of Parald's many innocent victims, who inadvertently saves the day when she and Isaacs reveal how he manipulated the Love box. Gion and Ty were never really mad at Randa for her part in trying to keep them apart, and neither was I. She was obviously a strong person to survive all that happened to her. Her character stuck with me after I finished that book.

I'm not sure when I first got the idea of putting Randa with Kahn. I think it must've been during their single scene in *Magic of the Wood House*, when Randa wrinkled her nose at his barbarity in eating a candy cane with the wrapper still on. They were such complete opposites that I knew they had potential as a couple. As I wrote them, I found that their characters are also weirdly similar at their cores, though. They've both struggled with

their “wrong” powers and survived terrible circumstances. And they both managed to pick themselves back up and keep going.

I didn’t feel comfortable tossing Randa straight into a romance with no mention of her own journey. Her sexual assault is darker than the storylines I usually write. I didn’t want to gloss over it, but I also didn’t want to make her whole life about her one week with Parald. She’s so much bigger than him. I thought therapy could help her to process her trauma, so I wrote in Dr. Ashley. This allowed Randa to unpack her feelings, before even contemplating a relationship with Kahn. Dr. Ashley also first appeared in *Exile in the Water Kingdom* as Ty’s AA sponsor.

Randa thrived in therapy, even more than I expected. I was surprised how she approached Kahn’s Gone Wildness with “I’ll always support you, but *you* need to do the actual work.” I felt like that was empowering for both of them. Randa doesn’t always get all the terms and concepts of therapy totally right, because she is filtering human ideas through her own Elemental culture. But in my head-canon, she continues to learn more about how Phases can benefit from mental health treatment and develops some Elemental-centered programs for them. She could help so many survivors of the Fall. I haven’t written any of that, obviously. But I feel like it’s happening off-page, somewhere in her future.

Tallulah Jayne Atkins came out of nowhere. I didn’t plan for her. I don’t even know why her name is Tallulah Jayne Atkins. She just popped into my head, fully formed and hijacked Rysimer for herself. When I began writing chapter 9, I didn’t anticipate any of the Light Phases actually finding Matches at the Wastin’ Away Bar and Grill. I just wanted to show them failing at flirting, because I thought it would be funny. So I wrote out some bizarre dialogue between Rye and a man-hungry redhead. And this random mean girl won me over!

Tallulah Jayne also won Rye over, which was even more surprising to me. They became one of my favorite side-story couples ever. She is completely awful and selfish in a way few of my characters are. It was fun to write her.

I actually have a chapter from an unfinished book featuring Rysimer and Bryony, of the Air House. I didn’t get far with it, because they just didn’t work as a couple. But I’ll provide a link to the abandoned concept in

the Star Turtle Publishing newsletter. Contact us at starturtlepublishing@gmail.com if you would like to join.

Often when I complete a book, there is one chapter that stands out to me as best capturing the vibe I was going for. In this book, it's chapter 14, Randa inviting Isaacs for Sunday pot roast. The initial draft of that chapter was one of the first things I completed for this story, and it helped me to stay on track with the feeling I was going for throughout the rest of the writing process.

As a side note: I enjoy cooking, although I am not highly skilled at it. I prefer to vicariously excel through my characters. It's so much simpler! The only pot roast I regularly make is my grandmother's recipe. (I'm sure she copied it from somewhere back in the 1980s, but I have no idea where.) It's very easy and surprisingly tasty, considering the canned ingredients and simple prep. Just the smell of it is nostalgic for me. I'll include it here, just because:

3 to 4 pound beef roast
4 potatoes cut into chunks (or 2 cans of whole potatoes)
2 fresh carrots cut into sticks (or 1 can of sliced carrots)
1 onion sliced into wedges
2 Tablespoons of flour
½ envelope of beef stew seasoning mix (Nan liked the Winn-Dixie brand)
10 oz can of beef au jus
12 oz jar of beef gravy
10 oz of water
1 cooking bag and tie

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Put roast in bag, coat with seasonings and flour. Add potatoes, carrots, and onion. Add the gravies and the water. Close the bag and put on the tie. Cut 5-6 holes in bag and put in oven for 2 - 2 ½ hours. The longer you cook it, the more tender it gets. (If you are leaving it in the oven for more than 2 ½ hours, cut the heat to 325.)

Anyway, back to Isaacs. One of the things I enjoy about this series is how many characters there are to play with. (This is also one of my biggest struggles with the series. Gion, sweetie, you do not need to be in every chapter, no matter what you may think.) The large cast allows for

different viewpoint characters. Isaacs is one of my favorite viewpoint characters. His "voice" is very clear to me, and his take on events is often so wrong… but also kind of right? Watching him toy with the Light Phases at that dinner, and then pushing Kahn into showing his feelings for Randa was a lot of fun for me. Isaacs shakes things up. His proactive, not-totally-bad badness got the situation moving.

The strength of Randa and Isaacs' friendship really caught me off guard. But I think they have a lot in common. They both know what it is to be trapped and they also know what it is to be all alone. Cages were referenced a lot in this book. I didn't realize that until it was finished and I read it over, but it kind of made sense. I feel like Randa brings out the best version of Isaacs. He's more lighthearted with her, probably because Gion isn't around to see it. I do think Ty and Thar are right: Gion and Isaacs both enjoy their antagonistic bond. But God forbid they ever let the other one know that! They have their hardass appearances to maintain.

The chapter I *enjoyed* writing the most was chapter 20, the triple-date at the restaurant. Subjecting Dr. Ashley to the Light Phases' chaos was cruel of me. Her doomed dinner with Julius literally made me laugh out loud. I enjoy scenes where there are a lot of characters interacting, all with their own brand of crazy. (*Happily Ever Witch* and *Betrothed to a Dinosaur* also have disastrous family dinners, if you enjoy those situations, too.) That particular chapter was so off-the-rails that I reread it, wondering if it was *too* bizarre. Then, I realized "too bizarre" is completely on brand for me and decided to go with it. Sorry, Ashley! (I'm not sorry.)

I believe the next book will be Missy/Zakk and Daphne/Raiden. My intention (currently and subject to change) is to close out this arc with that book, completing the current storylines. In future trips to the Elemental Phases' world, I'd prefer to focus on more standalone stories, because I think they would be easier for readers to jump into and for me to complete in a timely manner.

Ideally, I would like to write books for Isaacs, Tharsis, Freya, and the Fire Phases, but I have no clear plans for any of them yet. I had 80,000 words of a book for Isaacs, but it's not good enough, so I scrapped it. I will have to start again, maybe with a new love interest. He's a tough nut to crack, but that's why I like him so much.

And on a personal note, I want to say that I am very, very glad Vandal is dead. I usually like all my characters, but I hated him. I'm happy he's gone. Thank you, Randa and Kahn!

Please drop me a line if you have any questions or comments about this book or any other at: starturtlepublishing@gmail.com. The same email address can be used to sign up for our mailing list for news about our upcoming books. We also have a Facebook page, which we update fairly regularly, and a website at www.starturtlepublishing.com. I hope to see you there!

OceanofPDF.com