

Last upon a time...

A silhouette of a person standing on a pile of rubble, looking out over a city in flames under a dark, stormy sky.

# ARMAGEDDON

URBAN FAIRYTALES FINAL CHAPTER

Erik Schubach

ARMAGEDDON  
URBAN FAIRYTALES

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## **Table of Contents**

- Chapter 1 – Gathering
- Chapter 2 – Looming Threat
- Chapter 3 – Seattle
- Chapter 4 – Evacuation
- Chapter 5 – Incoming
- Chapter 6 – Deployed
- Chapter 7 – London Calling
- Chapter 8 – Silence
- Chapter 9 – Down Under
- Chapter 10 – The Gates of Seattle
- Chapter 11 – One Big Lizard
- Chapter 12 – London Has Fallen
- Chapter 13 – Know My Wrath, Know My Pain
- Chapter 14 – Seattle Burning
- Chapter 15 – Night of the Red Hood
- Epilogue

## Chapter 1 – Gathering

One of the girls called out, “Parker!”

I had to grin as I responded, “Coming Mandy!” It was still so odd to me that whatever magics she had encountered in Neverland had reverted her to a teen, no more than eighteen or nineteen when she and Robyn had returned to us five weeks ago. And Mandy had a fluffy wolf tail now.

I covered my mouth to stifle the involuntary snort as I opened her door on the cabin of the ancient Sea Devil we were all on as the tall ship swayed in the wind while we sailed through the sky, the sails mind-boggling full in contrast to the wind we were sailing against.

Mandy was sitting on the edge of her bed with a razor-sharp dagger on her lap, a new pair of pirate dungarees sporting a hole in the seat as she held a needle and thread uselessly, a pleading look on her face as Tinkerbell was having a good belly laugh on the little bird swing fastened to a small wardrobe cabinet, sparkling fairy-dust sifting to the floor as it shook loose from her as she shook with humor.

Ok, there is just so much control you can exert to make sure someone didn't feel they were being made fun of, but... come on... a giggling fairy. I chuckled too, finding it almost a relief to see I could still smile with the end of the world as we knew it about to come about.

Amanda looked up at me with the disaffected teen glower that every girl was issued in their teen years. It was tempered by all the experience and knowledge of someone much older, someone who has seen and dealt out too much death.

She growled like the wolf inside her and snapped at Tink, “Why are you even in here? Shouldn't you be bugging mom at the ship's wheel or something?”

The giggling fairy buzzed over to her, and as she landed, attained human size in the blink of an eye and the sexy as hell fairy kissed Mandy's cheek with a playful grin and said as she became fairy sized again and buzzed off out the window, “Fine, grumpy grump butt, love you.”

Amanda smiled almost against her will since she still liked to project the stone-cold emotionless killer facade she had when she was an adult. It didn't work well now since it came off as cute and brooding now. She squeaked

out as the shimmering kiss on her cheek seemed to absorb more into her skin rather than fade away, “Love you too, you annoying glow bug.”

Then she turned to me. “Oh god if we all live through this, since mom married her, she'll be my mom too forever. How embarrassing is that? She already dotes on me and it is as embarrassing as fuck.”

I automatically said, “Mandy, language.” Being so used to chastising my Ella for the same, and I admit I'm starting to see Mandy as a teen she appears, though I know I shouldn't.

She grumped out, “Sorry,” then added, “I'm not a kid.”

I nodded as I stepped up to her to kiss her cheek. “I know, I know, and I'm sorry. It's just, I forget, with you looking all...” I motioned to her and shrugged in apology.

She smirked and said, “You're one to talk, miss glamour to the nth degree.”

I looked down and then blushed. Even after all these weeks, I wasn't used to the random body shuffling between me and my love, Ella Marie. We swapped consciousness between our two bodies, the third of us a passenger in one or the other, except a brief time every day when all three of our bodies were manifested. I woke up this morning in Marie's body. The body of a genuine French Countess of old.

I knew I should get as much done as I could before our short time apart expired for the day and I became a passenger in either my own Parker's body or Ella's since we had learned that it wasn't quite as random as we first thought. Whoever last wore Marie's body would be the next one locked away in the minds of one of the other two.

God, it was confusing, and amazing being with both aspects of my love. But I still wasn't used to being in someone else's body, so I was always more than a little relieved whenever I wound up in my own. Hell, Dorothy had certainly done a number on us, it is both a blessing and a curse. But damn if I didn't look good in my Marie's form. I found myself blushing at the compliment she paid in her retort.

It only took a few days for everyone to get used to it, and found it easy to tell who was in who's body. Since Marie had a distinct French accent, Ella had her Cockney British accent, and my American accent even though I insist I don't have an accent. I do admit to purposefully not speaking at times to keep people guessing.

I sat and sighed as I studied at the young woman who looked every inch a pirate from storybooks now and held my hands out in resignation. “You’re going to have to learn to do this yourself sometime, lady.”

As she put her pants in one of my hands and handed over the needle, she gave me the cheesiest of toothy grins, her slightly elongated, pointy canines glinting as she said, “But not today.”

I smirked. “Not today, brat.”

She looked around as she stood, her hand absently touching her hip. “Be right back.” And she flew out the small window. I still found it amazing that she had learned to fly in Neverland, and as long as she believed she could, then... well... she could.

I shook my head and started sewing a little hem around the hole in her pants for her tail. A moment later, Mandy stepped in through the door, sliding her short cutlass into the scabbard at her hip. She looked sheepish as she said, “Left it in the crow’s nest.”

Rolling my eyes I prompted, “One of these days, you’re going to have to tell us the entire story about what happened to you in Neverland. It’s like you’re still you in there, but at the same time, you act like a teen and a pirate. Hell, you and Hook both believe she’s your mother even though you know she technically isn’t. And, ‘the Lost Boys put the whammy on us,’ needs more explanation.”

She nodded slowly and said, “Maybe one day. But in my heart and mind, Wendy truly is my mom, more than my biological mother had ever been.”

I finished up, bit the thread off and held her pants out to her with a wistful smile. “I can see that and how happy it makes you both... and that...” I was aware of the pants falling through my hand to the floor as my time expired, and I blinked when I found myself kissing Ella in our cabin below decks.

I, we, hesitated when Ella’s voice said in my head, “No, that’s Marie, love. Though a moment ago it was me.”

I snorted when Ella’s body said, “Oui.” I snuggled into the back of Ella’s mind, almost snorting a second time over the fact that I was in my own body now, just not in control. So I just sat back and sighed as they started kissing again. I’ve got the weirdest love life ever.

My two mates snickered and stopped kissing. As Marie explained, “We had just cleaned up and were getting a change of clothing, when we

accidentally fell into each other's arms, my Parker.”

I sighed. I loved when she said my name, as it came out as Park-air in her delectable French accent.

Ella said as I felt us stand, “It is time to get to the fuckin' daily planning meeting. If you would'a told me that there would be a gathering of Avatars this massive just a few years ago, I would'a thought you daft.”

Marie and I chastised in our minds, “Ella, language.”

I felt a mischievous smirk on our lips as she said, “Oh sod off you plonkers.” I poked at her in our mind and knew I'd probably be smiling just then if I could. I loved her feisty nature, it was one of the things that first attracted me to Ella-Marie, well that and how smoking hot she looked in...

“You know we can hear you, Parker?”

“Fuck.”

They giggled. “Language, Parker.”

Ok, I deserved that. I snuggled back in and went along for the ride. I looked out of Ella's eyes as we entered the main gun deck with all the cannons, where a long table had been set up for our daily planning meetings. And it was an awe-inspiring sight to see, with a dozen Avatars and their keepers. The most powerful assemblage of women ever in the mortal realm. I always felt so out of place amongst them, but I loved them all, they were my family.

This... was the gathering.



## Chapter 2 – Looming Threat

We looked out a gunport before taking our seats. The questioning looks around the table had Ella raising a hand in greeting, “Ella, with Parker on board.” Then needlessly she pointed at Marie, in Ella's body and supplied, “Marie.”

Everyone turned to Red... could we call her that anymore? I mean, Mari had... well she had died and the mantle of the Red Hood had passed to Evelyn, who was sitting at the end of the table with Rapunzel, though they shared the cloak now, it is like they needed to wear it from time to time, being the source of their power.

Then again, our leader, Maireni Damaschin, now held half of the power of the Scales as Daria beside her held the other so she was even... more than she had been before.

I had to smile that after Ella supplied who was who for the rest of the day, everyone just took it in stride like it was normal now, three women sharing two bodies. I guess it was no more odd than the gun deck being filled with characters from books and fairy tale princesses.

Ella growled in her head at me, “We're not fuckin' princesses.” I could taste her amusement as she silently added to me, “Well unless we have Marie with her legs up over her...”

I blurted, “Ella!” Ok, if I could smile, I'd have been smiling at her chuckling amusement at how easily she could rile me. She liked to come off as so rough and uncouth all the time, but I knew it to be the act it was, for inside she was a gentle loving woman, with a fire inside of her that drove her to protect those she saw as her family.

Mari said, “Wendy tells me we'll reach Seattle today. Daria and I can feel the approach of the five Elders much more intensely as we near, and Masika agrees that it more likely their arrival is hours or days away than weeks or months.”

Ella turned us to look at the reclusive Elder, Titania, who had left their collective when they strayed too far from their path. She has lived hidden away in Neverland, under the guise of the Voodoo Queen Masika, the Sea Hag of Neverland since the day she turned her back on her own kind.

I felt us smiling at Mandy who had sat next to the woman with ebony skin, her head laid on her shoulder as her hand absently held Robyn's in the seat on her other side. It was so strange to see not only Amanda treating the being older than time like her grandmother, but seeing Robyn with those large fairy wings sticking out from between her shoulders, and how her skin glistened with fairy dust.

I was still trying to wrap my head around the reality-bending power of the Lost Boys' make-believes. Whatever their imaginations could think up, became reality. And Hook... Wendy had an artifact, her hook, that allowed her to focus that power to devastating effect as she could rework reality with it. This vessel, a living piece of Neverland itself, was an example of how much power Wendy wielded. The Lost Boys' imaginations had no power outside of Neverland except while on the ship which acted like Neverland territory.

I felt us sigh as we kicked off some large clown shoes before we looked over at Dot and flipped her off. Dorothy of Oz was the other new addition to our group, and she and Ella had a tumultuous relationship of mutually assured destruction. They were worse than a couple of siblings in their good-natured battle of wits and wills.

Dot, was volatile, having the power of the four Cardinal Witches inside of her, the good and wicked fighting for dominance, making her unpredictable as well, keeping you guessing if she was going to hug you or turn you into a toad or worse at any given moment, since she, like Hook, had the ability to bend reality on a whim.

Outside of Masika and Snow, the two literal goddesses in our group, Hook and Dot were the most powerful. But not the most dangerous. That designation would have to go to Red, as she not only had power, but she was the most skilled battlefield tactician of the group and could utilize things we couldn't even imagine in the environment around us to devastating effect in any engagement. She was the fourth Red Hood and held the mantle longer than any for a reason.

She said with her vaguely Romanian accent, “We're on the cusp of a war to save the mortal realm from being wiped clean so the Elders can start over with a blank slate, and still we have no plan other than, as Ella eloquently puts it, to kick some Elder ass, when they arrive.”

Then she looked over at Masika and reminded us almost accusingly, “Titania, will not interfere with the hordes of the armies from other realms that the Elders bring with them... and will not attack the Elders herself unless it is to defend herself. Leaving our greatest weapon, useless against the enemy.”

I could feel the gaze of the Elder as she inclined her head at Mari and said with a sweet smile and laying a finger on the side of her nose, “You've known that from the first. I am here to chronicle what befalls the mortal realm, though I break my own convictions by providing you with information, which is only fair, as they have spies in your realm that supply them with similar intelligence. There must be a balance.”

I saw Red fight that last statement, as one of the Scales, she felt a driving and almost overwhelming need inside to create a balance of good and evil in our realm. But unlike the last scales, the brothers Grimm, she and Daria could resist it.

For a moment I wondered about the brothers' fate. For as annoying and manipulating the fucking Grimm brothers were, they did help tilt the scales in our direction before they were called to stand before the Elders for judgment.

Daria placed a calming hand on Mari's, which I noted was clenched into a fist on the table. “There are no weaknesses you can share of your people? I know it is a lot to ask, to betray your own kind.” I saw the look that Daria McQueen sometimes got, when she was breaking something down analytically, like a police detective when she was looking for some slight inconsistency in a story.

The sly smile on Masika's face as she asked, “Besides hubris, and losing their way? No.” She started braiding Mandy's hair as she absently said, “With few exceptions, all the realms deemed imbalanced by my people have fallen to a reset. We wield too much power, and should not be deciding the fate of other realms.”

It was Snow who nodded slowly, her white hair cascading down to pool over her shoulders, small white antlers poking out the top of her head. “Exceptions like my Gardens, Oz, and Neverland.”

Masika turned to face her, smirking. I felt almost as if Snow, or perhaps just her Perchta aspect, was the only person who the Elder saw as an equal

here, and you could almost feel the power radiating between the two goddesses at the table. “Yes, like your Gardens.”

Gretta smirked back and said, “So you do have weaknesses.”

They silently stared at each other for a few seconds before Masika blinked and looked away, back to Red. “Yes, there are those who we found remarkably... resilient, and were able to dissuade us from crossing their realms.” She looked amused as she looked around. “Most of whom are here today.”

Mari perked up but it was Daria who voiced the question, “Most?” Then like a puzzle piece clicked into place for her she seemed to nod to herself and asked, “Why is it that whenever your people are denied, they open portals into the demon's hell dominion? They seem to use demons to punish the realms who displease them. They must know that if they were stopped in these realms, the demons would be too... unless...”

Rose chuckled from where she sat in the corner, away from the table, thorny brambles and vines pulsating, coiling, and writing around her as she cocked her head at an unnatural angle. Her voice was barely above a hiss, “They fear them.”

I prodded Ella in our head and she relaxed and allowed me control for a moment as I looked at Rose and made a show of tilting my head up before releasing control of our body back to my Ella. Rose's eyes widened a little as she tilted her head back to a normal human angle. I was proud of the progress she has made since we met, to regain her humanity, and take on more human mannerisms.

The Elder straightened for a moment as if offended, but then inclined her head in acquiescence as she said, “That may be true. We had found the hellish realm of the demons early on, just off of the mortal realm, when we numbered seven. But there were so many demons, and so many varied magics that we could not cow them, and we lost one of our own when they swarmed us as we retreated. Never had we been met with such ferocity and single-minded purpose of a race to destroy, to kill, and to corrupt. So our one self-imposed rule was to never open a path to their realm again. It is mostly isolated, with only three realms touching it.”

Daria nodded and said as she counted off on her fingers, “The mortal realm, Oz, and Neverland.” She smirked and challenged, “Which is why

your brethren didn't use demons to punish Perchta when she refused passage through her gardens.”

Masika gave a crooked smile as she finished braiding Mandy's hair. “Precisely.”

Mari provided, “And now that Neverland is sealed away behind the Nothing, and Oz stopped the demons there, that leaves our realm as the only gateway to the demon realm.”

The Elder inclined her head and glanced at Illya, who was looking uncomfortable with all the talk of demons, as she was one. Belle pulled her into a protective hug. She looked to be trying to catch up with whatever Red and Daria were thinking.

She asked in her soothing, gentle tones, “I must be missing something here. Masika, would you mind terribly telling the story of your people again?”

The woman moved her tightly braided rows of beaded hair back over her shoulder as she smiled sadly. “Not at all, child.”

She looked at Amanda as the girl stood, gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, then gave Robyn one on the lips as she told the group while she started to fly toward the stairs to the upper deck, “I'll go spell mother at the wheel. She'll want to be in on any new planning.” And she was gone.

Masika looked after her fondly, and I wondered if the magics that had affected Wendy and Robyn were actually influencing her, an Elder, as well, or if she was really fond of Mandy. They really did act like grandmother and granddaughter.

The woman seemed to settle in her chair as she contemplated her words. “Long before many of the realms sprang into existence, when time itself was just a concept, a race of great beings walked the roads of the fabric of existence between the new, budding realms. My people, the Elders.”

Her eyes focused out into the void as if she were reliving the memory. “We took it upon ourselves to document the development of these new realms, as new worlds and new peoples developed. The seven, now six, Elders were the chroniclers of so many new civilizations.”

A shadow cast across her dark features at the next. “As with many civilizations, some were poisoned with the thirst for power, even if accumulating that power destroyed everything. And time and again, for every realm that lived in peace, and communed with the nature around

them, becoming one with it, there were ten which ended in tragedy. Entire civilizations were wiped out, and in some cases, entire realms fell, leaving a hole in the fabric of all things.”

Thoughtful emotion colored her words as she sighed. “The Elders, save me, decided that it was not just their way to simply record the rise and fall of these fledgling realms. They believed it to be our responsibility to shepherd these realms, and to stop the poison of corruption from spreading.”

Reality seemed to ripple with power as Masika waved a hand in the air, and with the tinging of a tuning fork, light erupted from the table, and a projection encompassed the gun deck. I shivered as I tasted the sheer magnitude of the magic being used, and it felt as if we were sitting inside of creation itself, a void with so many sparkling lights like stars, but somehow, I understood each star was a realm, shining with life.

A lumbering form turned its back on others who were gathered, and I could feel the magic shaping my understanding, and that form took on that of a woman, shoulders slumped, leaving a group of these titans, these Elders, her back to us as she stepped out into the wilderness of the void between all of these budding realities. It was Titania in her Masika form.

The woman almost growled out, “They assigned wardens to each of the new realities. Scales who were to make sure that a balance was kept between the lightness and the dark, believing that only by maintaining a balance could the realms the Elders oversaw truly reach their potential.”

Her expression was full of sadness and compassion as she shook her head and exhaled. “I fear they have forgotten themselves, and that same corruption they despised has crept into their own minds. They lord their power over others now, and woe to any who oppose their view of how realms should progress. They even tried to impress their will upon the other realms that existed before the Elders. But found that for all their formidable power, some realms either had a power they didn't understand and could not combat or some that were actually created by beings that were more powerful than themselves as you have so aptly pointed out.”

She gave Red and Daria a knowing smirk.

Then flashes of battles of incomprehensible scale flickered all around us. Some, the Elders walked away from victorious, some with them licking

their wounds, and there were extreme cases where entire realms fell. Reset to a clean slate as they put it.

One had that familiar golden brick path leading up to a city made of emerald crystal. I had in this short time almost forgotten just how beautiful Oz was. I watched as the Elders were denied, and wound up leaving that land battered and beaten in retreat.

Masika narrowed her eyes as she watched, then added, “The mortal realm has been in flux in recent years, and the Scales there were hard-pressed to keep a balance as the realm sought its own equilibrium which is something other than the balance the Elders require. For too long the shadow of evil was consuming the realm, but the Avatars became an overwhelming force, a natural defense against the sickness enveloping the land. Too powerful for the Elders to allow to exist.”

She inhaled deeply and we watched as the Elders started moving again, walking the roads between the realms, a dimly lit, far away realm their destination. The magic impressing upon me that it was the mortal realm.

Her voice was a whisper. “So now the Elders are moving, to reset the mortal realm, wiping out the civilizations here because it doesn't fit their template. They yet punish the Scales after their power was stripped. And are incensed that the new Scales of the realm refuse their masters.” She winked at Mari and Daria at that.

I tried to blurt something out, forgetting I was just a passenger in this body, Ella chuckled and voiced my question. “You say the old Scales, the fuckin' Grimm brothers are being punished by the Elders for helping us?”

The power in the room faded and it felt as if we weren't being smothered by it anymore as Masika nodded gravely. “My people have forgotten their way, and it is petty vengeance they seek against Wilhelm and Jacob. They wish to break them, but even without the mantle of power that had been bestowed upon them, they've proved to be surprisingly resilient and verbally... combative.”

Then she sighed. “They bring them in chains to witness the folly of their machinations as the mortal realm falls.”

For as much of a pain in the ass the brothers have been for us over the years, I had to admit that I kind of liked them. They had been playing the long game, manipulating things within their power to align the Avatars for

this moment. I may not agree with their methods, but they, in their own way had been protecting our reality and preparing us for this.

Then the woman straightened her flowing skirts and placed her hands in front of her, prim and proper as Hook strode in, her heavy buccaneer boots clomping menacingly with each step. The feel of her magic seemed to cast the room in shadow, the temperature dropping a few degrees as she peered out from the shadow of her pirate's hat, candlelight glinting almost impossibly bright off the hook that adorned her left arm where a hand should be.

I had to give Wendy kudos for projecting an imposing and foreboding figure, Tinkerbell riding her shoulder. But then the woman known as Captain Hook broke the illusion by suddenly smiling brightly, and kissing Masika on the top of her head before slumping down into Mandy's abandoned seat. She chirped out almost cutely, "Ladies, what'd I miss?"

Katiana, our Goldilocks, who I had thought was sleeping, since she sleeps more than she is awake, to store up her rest for manifesting her power, said in her Slavic accent, "Titania was just telling us about all the times the Elders got their posteriors handed to them."

Wendy just nodded and smirked, causing Masika to shake her head without looking at her. "I helped, child, do not forget that."

There was the grief of someone losing the one they loved in her tone and Hook reached out with her good hand to clasp her shoulder. "Of course."

Then Wendy asked us, "So besides creating complementary, balanced fighting teams, and all the endless sparring... do we still not even have the start of a plan on how to defend the mortal realm? Do we have allies, do we even know where they may step through so we can be there to meet them?"

Mari chuckled as Dot pointed at the pirate Captain, nodding her agreement with her frustration as she absently moved her fingers in looping patterns, causing a pile of cannonballs to turn into inflatable beach balls and rubber ducks.

Wendy tapped her hook on the table in warning, the sound of it like a magical tuning fork in my head, the taste of it dangerous and virtually limitless as she said, "What did I tell you about messing with my ship?"

Ella had us grinning in anticipation, as mind-boggling as Dorothy's powers were, with the power of the Four Cardinal Point Witches of Oz coursing through her veins, we've already witnessed a standoff between her



and Hook once before on this very subject. And to everyone's surprise, their reality-warping magics seemed to be at the same incredulous levels and they canceled each other out. It was good to see that no matter how powerful you were, there was always someone else who could match or surpass you.

I was still curious if Snow, in her Perchta aspect, could match their power. But she was much more mature about the whole thing, and saw them, as she saw us when she was manifested, merely like children who needed to be shepherded. She left all the heavy lifting to... Snow looked at me and asked, "Parker?"

I sighed as Ella just relaxed, relinquishing control to me as emerald energy started crackling around Dot, her eyes aflame with wicked green energy, as Wendy started to raise her Hook. I stood and moved between them as they stepped from the table, my hands out, the crystal tone of my voice ringing out, "Girls, for fuck's sake, let it be. We have bigger things to worry about now besides which of you has the bigger magical dick."

The space fell completely silent for a moment in a pregnant pause before it exploded into laughter and giggles while I just blushed. I said meekly, "Sorry, I'm getting a bit of Ella bleed-through here. But really girls, sit, please."

Dorothy's rage face faltered then without warning she broke into a smile. "That's why I love this one, always so sensible."

I sighed, knowing the others saw me more as the Den Mother of the group and they always looked to me for guidance, so they could remember what it was to be human, though it was getting harder and harder for me to remember myself.

Mari said as the two oil and water titans sat, "I'm starting to get some ideas now with this last piece of information. And as Baum shared, Seattle has become a nexus in recent years with all the supernatural activity that has occurred there, so that is currently our best guess."

Masika inclined her head and said, "I can feel their march, and they are close... closer than I anticipated, and once they are on the precipice of the veil between the roads and this reality, I'll be able to tell you more precisely their destinations. I fear they will arrive as in the past, at various points to spread any resistance thin."

I sympathized with the woman, the pained look on her face telling the story. She felt she betrayed her kind, even though she was first slighted and shunned by them. But she still kept to her convictions that she would not step in with more than information unless she herself was threatened by her brethren.

It was a tightrope the Elder walked and not one of us envied her her position in all of this.

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## Chapter 3 – Seattle

We slid from the sky, with a fighter jet escort, and slipped cleanly into the waters of Puget Sound, by the West Gates of the walled city of Seattle. The first steps of a plan we had to defend the mortal realm, but it seemed weak, as we had no intel on the movements of the incoming enemy, so it basically consisted of, step one, wait to be attacked, step two, Hulk smash.

Our current problem was only exacerbated by the government's recent distrust of the Avatars who had just recently freed the world of the lupus contagion, then again from Styche's attempt to create a new demon contagion to convert the world for demon rule.

There are groups within the government who believe that anyone as powerful as us need to be controlled, contained, or worse. That is the gratitude we get... suspicion. There are more who believe they... we, are heroes, which is the only reason we're still allowed our freedom... to an extent.

We've been trying for months to warn them of the approach of the Elders but trying to convince distrustful people that the end is neigh remains frustrating. My blood had run cold when we were over Seattle when I saw they haven't evacuated the city like we had pleaded.

Mari huffed out as we saw the destroyers moving up to port to flank us, and military vehicles coming up the coast toward the pier we were heading to. “For fuck's sake.” Even though we were all incensed, it still made me smile to hear her use one of Ella's favorite curses.

Masika asked in confusion, “What is it?”

Rachel was growling, it started subsonic, then up into the audible range, echoing the wolf inside her as she spat out, “Not what... who.”

Daria's growl sounded even more frighteningly like her own wolf form as she added, “Special Agent Mattias Pike.” The collective sigh of exasperation in our group would have been humorous if millions of lives in the city... my city... weren't at immediate risk. Only Dot, Toto, Hook, and Tink shared Masika's confusion.

I nudged Ella and she relaxed for me to explain. “He's one of the government officials who thinks we are more of a threat than an asset to the

people here in the mortal realm. It is the minority of people in the military who think like him that is putting all the people in the city at risk now.”

Dorothy started to crackle with emerald power, and I could see the wicked in her overwhelming the good as she said, “If that is all, we just need to eliminate him for the rest to listen.” The scary thing is, I knew what Dorothy was capable of when protecting those she saw as her own, and her aunt and uncle, her only living family were here in our realm. She was serious about eliminating the man, permanently.

I reached out and my hand became crystal as I grabbed her arm to prevent her from flying off to wipe out all the approaching vehicles... and ships. Even with the protection of my crystalline form, the raw power coursing around her started to sizzle and crack my hand. “Dot, don't. That would just prove him right and turn the others against us and they'll never listen, and all the innocents in the city will...”

I gasped, not able to hold control of my body anymore with the inadvertent damage my body was taking and I staggered before Ella took control again. This caused Dorothy's eyes to widen as the green flames in them extinguished as her feet hit the ship's deck as she steadied us. “Parker! Are you...”

Ella shoved her away. “Back off, you wanker. Always one extreme or another with you, just cool your jets.” Causing Dot to huff and turn away, and I found us taking off the big clown shoes and red clown nose we were suddenly wearing.

Heh, Ella being the voice of reason. She thought to me, “Hey, I can hear you you know, Parker.” I gave her a mental hug then sat back and just watched events unfold through our eyes. I was so very tired. I don't know how Marie was able to stay in control for a full fifteen minutes at a time, I felt as if I had just run a marathon... in heels.

We just watched for a couple of minutes as the vehicles approached while we dropped anchor, then police and SWAT vehicles started streaming out the giant, permanently open silver veined city gates to the docks, and harbor patrol boats started up nearby.

As the lines of cars arrived I felt us smirking as the Seattle PD vehicles stopped the progress of the military vehicles led by unmarked black SUVs, and those Seattle Harbor patrol vessels interposed themselves between the Sea Devil and the oncoming destroyers. Even though the modern military

vessels didn't know they were outmatched by the pirate ship we stood on. There was only one weapon in the military's arsenal that might stand a chance against the Sea Devil, but I was pretty sure that even Pike wouldn't dare nuke one of the county's most populated cities.

We glanced back to Daria who was holding one of the cell phones Snow had spelled for us to be able to work around strong magic for a time. She smiled as she handed the phone back to Snow and shrugged as we all looked at her, one of our brows was cocked and Dar just shrugged. “What? I still have pull in the SPD.”

I sometimes forget that my friend, someone I hold in my heart as a dear as a sister, is the cop hero of Seattle. I mean, I remember all the press and hype when everyone thought that Detective Daria McQueen had died helping the Red Hood kill one of the Marcus brothers, one of the Alpha werewolves which had terrorized our world. Hell, I had that same hero worship. Then to find she had survived, and become the Red Hood's hell hound just raised her higher onto the shoulders of the city's citizens.

Where the local police department has a bit of contempt but grudging respect for my Ella, knowing her background as Ella Deathbringer and the destruction she leaves in her wake when she takes on evil, they show nothing but respect for one of their own. The hometown girl does good effect.

She sighed and looked to her mate, her love, her wife, and Mari exhaled and said to the group. “Shall we go see what fresh new hell awaits us, ladies?”

## Chapter 4 – Evacuation

When the ship was secured, we all watched as Wendy, Robyn, Mandy, Tinkerbelle, and Gretta all just stepped off the railing of the ship as a gangplank was lowered for those of us without the ability to fly, or create a stairway of living kelp under our feet like Snow, to get to the docks.

As we descended the gangplank, I smiled internally at the kerfuffle at the end of the pier. Where Liandra King, the lead detective for the Seattle Police Department, and the big Chief of Police of Seattle, Alex Mendez, were arguing with a bunch of suits who were pouring out of the arriving SUVs and soldiers exiting the military vehicles.

And of course, right in the middle of it all was Special Agent Pike from whatever black-ops government agency he was from. Last time I believe he claimed it was the Department of Agriculture or some other such nonsense.

We could hear his yelling all down the pier as Detective King and the handsome Hispanic Chief of Police with his salt and pepper hair stood in front of him unphased. As tensions raised when the military saw our approach and started to raise their weapons, the SPD officers all snapped theirs up to ready positions facing them, and the more menacing automatic rifles of the SWAT team who were fanning out joined them.

A helicopter swooped over the silver-impregnated walls of the city, searchlight flooding over the confrontation, and I could see SWAT members hanging out the doors, their weapons trained on the military personnel.

Ella muttered, “This is gonna turn into a right clusterfuck fast.”

I didn't even bother chastising her for her language because I agreed as we approached, Pike's tirade was loud enough for even those of us without wolf hearing to catch. “Stand the fuck down, this is official federal government business. The paranormals have grouped up and are moving on the city now, they flew in without FAA approval and ignored our fighter jet's warnings to land at a military base for detainment.”

He bared his teeth like a wild dog at us as we joined the police officers who were protecting us.

Belle didn't stop with us, she just stepped past officers with their weapons trained on the soldiers, placing hands on their shoulders and giving them a sweet smile as she moved between the two opposing forces.

I felt us cross our arms over our chest and a smirk spread into a grin on our face as the woman didn't even flinch when the soldier's weapons all moved toward her. Oh come off it, I saw a couple of shoulder-fired missiles in the mix too. They'd do as much damage to themselves as their target at such a close range. Idiots. What I knew about the military could fit in a thimble with room to spare, but even I knew that.

I glanced over to where Rose was restraining Illy from running to her girl, with her vines and brambles that held potent neurotoxins that could kill instantly unless she made a concerted effort to mitigate the effect that would put someone to sleep for days or more. But it wasn't even an inconvenience for Illy, our incognito demon unicorn.

Belle lifted her hands slowly toward both groups and smiled sweetly, that alone coming from someone who looked as beautiful and innocent as our girl was enough for some of the soldiers to point their weapons at the ground.

But then she spoke as she touched the feather of Perchta which had burned into her skin where she had worn it on a chain around her neck for so many years, and a wave of peace and calm rippled out from her, "Please, be calm, be at peace. We are here to warn the city of the approach of an enemy even we may not be able to face."

We basked in the feeling of peace we knew we could never have, and it hurt my heart to know that we Avatars and keepers would never know true peace like that. We had learned through the Grimm brothers, the reason we keepers gravitated to our Avatars and fell in love so quickly. We shared a soul and being with each other which literally completed us.

When most of the two forces hesitated and then lowered their weapons, the rest followed and Pike exploded. "She's warping our minds, can't you see that? They are dangerous!" He made a motion to some of the other suits behind him, "Detain her!"

Then the man froze when Amanda, Rachel, Daria, Eve, and Red all growled menacingly. I could feel the growl before I could hear it as it rose up from subsonic levels. But above them was a growl that sent shivers down my spine.

I turned slowly to see that Rose had released Illy, whose growl was putting terror on the faces of the humans closest to us, her eyes steaming red coals. Rose cocked her head unnaturally at Pike and gave him a little

wave with a satisfied smirk. The man paled. I think he was moments from an unfortunate accident in his shorts, Rose was the only one of us who truly frightened the man and it seems she hasn't lost her touch.

Then he found his voice as he pointed at Illy. "Is that a demon? Are you consorting with demons now?" He turned to Mendez, still pointing at our Illy. "See? They're dangerous, now stand the fuck down and let us do our job."

To his credit, the Chief of Police sighed and put out his hand. "I assume you have arrest warrants for their arrests? If not, then I'll have to ask you and your doom troopers to back off and leave my city until such time that you..."

"We don't need a fucking warrant."

That was the last straw for the Chief's patience and he snapped, shoving his face in Pike's and said, "We are a country of law and due process, so yes, you damn well do need arrest warrants for these women who have saved the people of this city on multiple occasions. So unless you want me to physically kick your ass all the way back to whatever black-ops site you call home, you'll shut the fuck up and back the fuck off."

He turned to the soldiers. "You better be damn sure you're on the right side when you follow men like Pike here against the people who rid our entire planet of the lupus contagion."

A general stepped through the ranks and looked past the line of police to us then to Pike. "Shouldn't we be talking with the Avatars about this threat they are sharing before we come in guns blazing?"

Pike turned to him and said, "You'll do as ordered or..."

The general smiled coolly at the Special Agent and held up a phone. "That's a great idea, shall I go over your head to verify my orders?"

Pike narrowed his eyes, I could see he believed it a bluff, but the General sighed and looked to be about to make a call... possibly to the Vice President, or the President herself. But a black vine snaked past everyone and a thorn jabbed Pike's neck as Rose said, "What an annoying little man. We do not have time for this. Sleep Matthias, let the adults speak now."

Then she was giggling as she retracted the vine back into herself as the man crumpled to the ground. Detective King rushed to him to take his pulse, "Is he...?"



Mari sighed and said, “Asleep. Depending on Rose's mood, I'd say a day or three. Now can we dispense with all of this unpleasantness? A threat is impending. We've been trying to get the government to listen for weeks but can't get our official contacts to take us seriously, Seattle needs to be evacuated because we fear it will be ground zero for the battle to save our reality.”

Heh, she didn't beat around the bush, that's why we loved Red.

She added, “We don't care if you think we're a threat or not, because everyone will be wiped out of existence by this new enemy if we don't act. And not to put too fine a point on it, but you can't stand against what is coming, so it is time to put your petty prejudices aside and get the civilians as far away from here as possible. Then pray to whatever gods you might, that we Avatars can stand against the oncoming storm.”

The General asked, “Why didn't you contact us to warn...”

Daria interrupted. “Because, General, as she said, our 'official channels' have been stonewalling us for weeks. Most of the groups assigned to be our liaisons are mostly staffed with people like Pike, who see us as the threat and them our watchdogs. We haven't been able to get through to anyone of consequence and it may be too late now. So we flew here since Seattle is the most likely spot for the enemy to attempt to establish a beachhead in our reality.”

The man looked around, at the Seattle PD arrayed protectively around us and held up his satellite phone. “Then let's make the call I was suggesting.”

We all just stood back a little so our magics wouldn't interfere with his unspelled phone, and the man dialed a number, putting it on speaker and a familiar woman's voice came out through the static hiss of the magic so close to the phone, “Hello Micah? To what do I owe the pleasure? Or is this business?”

He shared quickly, “Madame President. Unfortunately, this isn't a social call.”

She sounded resigned and a bit weary, the weight of her job apparent in her tone. “What backwater country is trying to blow their neighbors into kingdom come today?”

The man chuckled. “It's the Avatars.”

I heard a rustling like she had stood from wherever she was sitting, her response quick and filled with concern and anticipation? “The Avatars?” I

understood before I was... well before my Ella-Marie put the whammy on me, making me a paranormal by necessity, and before Dot had us playing body roulette, I was awed by the stories of the Red Hood and Gretta Snow too. Now I could hear that same reverence in the voice of the most powerful woman in the free world.

Our leader spoke, Mari's voice full of respect, "Madame President, this is Maireni Damaschin..."

The President interrupted. "The Red Hood."

Mari stiffened and supplied as she looked over at Eve. "One of them."

"I thought only one existed at any..."

"Long story, ma'am, just suffice it to say that after some magical shenanigans, I share the mantle with another at this time."

The general added helpfully, "The Avatars have been trying to get word through official channels for weeks about an impending threat to..."

Ella supplied sweetly and innocently, "The whole bloody world."

He shrugged at the phone like she could see and finished, "But they have met with... resistance, so have taken matters into their own hands."

President Hendricks huffed out in exasperation. "Pike... If congress would get off their asses and dissolve those god damned doomsday departments, we wouldn't have these types of problems. It is like they go out of their way to make others who are not like us into enemies. The Avies saved our collective asses on many occasions, I think that affords them a certain amount of trust and latitude."

Avies? I haven't heard that one before. Then again, I was sort of stuck in Oz for a while. And I could feel the frustration in her tone. The previous administration had divided congress and divided the populace about us. Those who felt anyone with powers like us shouldn't be allowed to be out walking free, and those who realize that the world will always have those more powerful than others, and accepted us for what and who we were.

That still didn't stop all of them, on both sides of the subject, from passing so many laws and regulations restricting the use of 'extra-normal abilities'. Stopping just shy of having us either register our powers, imprisoning us, or having us walking around with tracking anklets and guards. That's just what people like Pike wanted.

Yet here we were, again putting our lives on the line for those who barely tolerated us and those who didn't, when we could all just hide away

in Perchta's Gardens while they were all wiped from existence... all because it is the right thing to do regardless of if they hated us or not.

I smiled to myself at the officers standing between us and the soldiers. At least we've won over my hometown. I did an imaginary fist pump in our head and Ella chuckled.

So I just snuggled back into Ella's head as the threat was laid out to the President of the most powerful country in the world. By the time it was all said and done, it had been adequately impressed upon them the dire circumstances and the fact that even we might not be enough. We didn't share that Masika was one of the Elders who were almost here.

The President was saying, "We need to inform the other nations, and Seattle needs to be evacuated immediately." Then she asked, "What if the elders arrive somewhere else instead?"

Red sighed, it was our worry as well, and Masika had informed us they will likely split up as they arrive. "Then we deal with it as we can. Our information indicates that Seattle may be just one of many locations chosen for a beachhead, but we won't know anything more until they are about to arrive. Our contact has an informant embedded in their ranks."

We were relieved that the President didn't push us on who was providing our intel. I can't see it going over very well us saying, "Oh, just one of the all-powerful beings bent on our destruction, and we suspect her informant is the ghost of a little girl who died a few centuries back. You know, the normal channels."

The President said, "General Lance, I want you to be the point of contact for the Avatars. We need the National Guard and the Seattle Police and Emergency Services to coordinate a full evacuation of Seattle and the surrounding area."

She added, even though it wouldn't matter if we failed, "A hundred-mile perimeter."

Rachel stiffened at that and it took me a moment to realize that was likely the minimum safe distance for troops from a nuclear blast, even though nuclear fallout can drift for hundreds of miles and even in some cases, around the world in the jet-streams.

I knew you could survive a one-megaton blast around twenty-two miles out; Discovery Chanel documentary I watched before I met Ella-Marie; but most nukes were multiple times that powerful.

Part of me morbidly wondered if they would have the capability of hurting the Elders, beings capable of wiping out entire realities, or if they would just piss them off more. Probably only Snow, Hook, and Dot would survive from our group if that happened here.

Then I watched in wonder as the two groups who had been at odds with each other just minutes earlier started frantic coordination to plan the biggest evacuation in human history, around three million people needed to get outside the safety perimeter and we didn't know when the enemy would arrive.

The general pulled Red and Snow aside to talk more in-depth about the enemy capabilities and our own defensive capabilities. I sighed heavily in our head, hating that all this talk of war was necessary and inevitable. It was going to be a long few days as plans were worked and reworked for us with any chance of defending our world sat, feeling useless because any plans were moot until we knew where to meet the enemy.

And within hours, the evacuation began and Mari left the General to talk with his superiors and she looked over at Illy and Belle, as Daria, in her huge hell hound werewolf form settled under her mate's fingertips. "Can you two come with us?"

Rapunzel looked up from her cell, where she was playing that silly game she was addicted to, Platypus Wars, and asked, "Where are you going?"

Mari gave us the smile of an Apex predator, chilling me to the bones as she said simply, "Contingency plan, I need to make an inter-realm call and summon a demon."

What!?

Gretta's shocked reaction that slid into a smile which matched Masika's had me wondering if the world had gone mad around us and I was just slow to pick up on it. What did they know that the rest of us didn't?

The last straw was my own girl smiling for us and saying, "Right. I knew I liked Red for more than her looks."

I grumped out, wishing I had arms I could cross over my chest and a lower lip I could pout out. "Hey, what am I? Chopped liver?"

She said in our head, "Don't get yer knickers in a bunch, love, that's my job. Just wait until morning." It was so suggestive, my incorporeal form heated and I knew I'd be blushing if I had a face, or blood, or a pulse... Ella snickered and I felt her love wrap around me to keep me safe. I sighed.

Then squeaked when Marie joined in with her French accent, “Oui, my Parker. Just wait until morning.”

I was going to die happy, wasn't I? And wasn't Marie supposed to be the nice one?

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## Chapter 5 – Incoming

It was going to take the better part of a week for the evacuation to finish, it wasn't like the last time where we only needed to evacuate Seattle's inner city of just under a million people. All the surrounding cities needed to be evacuated too.

Most were being sent east, over the Cascade Mountains to temporary tent cities being set up in the middle of Washington state. Some were being shipped south to camps outside Portland Oregon, and Canada even agreed to let evacuees up into the Vancouver, British Columbia area. They still had huge refugee centers outside of their walled city they had set up for former wolves after the werewolf curse had been lifted from a third of the world's population.

They, like many of the other great walled cities throughout the world, had started the herculean task of dismantling the walls that once protected the Clean Bloods but were no longer necessary. Only a few cities, like Seattle and London, were going to keep them as monuments so that people didn't forget the centuries of terror the full moon had wrought among the people of Earth, and that of we are not vigilant, something like it could happen again.

And here we were... already at 'again'.

My love liked to point out that there was no rest for the wicked. Which of course got Dot cackling like a madwoman, or like a wicked witch at the very least. Why did I dread when she was in a playful mood? Now I know why the people of Oz all cringed when they heard she was in a good or mischievous mood. You never knew what she'd do to 'help' people when her help always had a side helping of wicked coursing through her veins from the power of the two evil Cardinal Point Witches she had killed.

And sometimes it actually was humorous... if you weren't on the receiving end of it that is.

We were assisting the setting up of defense lines since the military refused to let us stand alone if we were fighting for the lives of everyone on the planet. It was a little disconcerting when some countries... including ours, shared that they had experimental weapons that were proving effective against paranormal entities.

Had the black site prisons like the one Rose allowed herself to be held in borne fruit? And other countries had been developing weapons against us as well? What was wrong with people? At least they were coming clean now that everyone's lives were at stake.

Mankind's biggest failing was that we feared anything different, anything we didn't understand. But did that have to make us irredeemable in the eyes of races like the Elders? Were we really the evil we sought to fight?

Even though we were still in our eight-hour window of being in separate bodies, Marie and Ella had both stopped what they were doing and looked my way. I felt my cheeks heat as I realized that no, we were not evil as my girls both fought true evil inside themselves every day but they chose love. They chose good. And as much hate and violence mankind is capable of, we also treasure love above all else, so the Elders are wrong. And we were going to show them that, even if it was the last thing we did in this existence.

Rapunzel glanced over at the sandbags that soldiers of six different countries who have flown in, were stacked in front of all types of military equipment. Then she asked Masika, "Umm you showed the military types the glowy projection thing about your people walking through oceans as big as mountains? Their bags of sand aren't going to do much."

The hidden Elder shook her head, and said, "Our forms don't mean anything, and adjust for the circumstance. When Elders marched on Neverland, with lands divided by oceans, they had to be like the mountains themselves that rose from that ocean to make the islands. And the humans... they know not of me, child. The others in your group wish it so."

The others gravitated toward us where we were bunching up and we all froze when we heard an echo of a memory from a forgotten thought calling out Titania's name, just as a little girl in a tattered skirt came running out of nowhere as she faded into existence, "Titania, they come!"

I whispered, "Isla?"

She glanced my way, her frantic look wavering as she smiled and curtsied. "Ella."

I looked at my hands. Ahh, I forget which body I wake in sometimes. I shook my head and opened my arms and said, "Parker."

Then the ghost of the little matchstick girl rushed into my arms, and I was surprised I could touch her in Ella's body. Then again, Ella and Marie

had been infused with the magic of the amulet that had cursed them, to begin with, so after so many centuries those dark magics must be in their blood.

Isla was cold as ice, which made me feel the vice on my heart again as it brought her tragic end to mind again. Freezing to death, surrounded by people in their warm houses, the people who turned a blind eye to her and left her to her fate on the streets so many centuries ago.

The others gathered around, and the ones who could hugged her, the others greeted her. It was fitting that the spirit of the little girl who had befriended us all, and who was to oversee the Scales for the Elders, was actually working for Masika, to prevent the mortal realm from becoming less than a memory.

The Voodoo Queen looked at the semi-corporeal girl with fondness and asked, “What is it, child? I can feel them almost upon us.”

Isla moved over to her, and said in earnest, in tones that belied her outward appearance, reminding me she has seen so much more than any man or woman could ever dream of, “Lapetus comes with the others, I ran as fast as I could along the path between worlds. They know the defenders of the mortal realm congregate at their arrival spot, so he has ordered them to split up, and emerge at the confluence points before the moon is full.”

She looked over her shoulder, her eyes widening as if she could see the Elder's approach, and the frantic look told me that it was sooner than we were ready for. Then again, could anyone possibly be ready to fight for the very existence of their reality?

Robyn landed next to them, her large fairy wings moving slowly behind her as she stated, “Tonight is the last night before the full moon. Confluence points?”

Masika held her hand out, palm up and a globe spun up which looked exactly like the Earth, complete with moving weather patterns. It looked a little too real, and I wondered if maybe it was the world and we were somehow both here and above it seeing it like this. The power of the Elders truly frightened me, and that is saying a lot since I'm friends with an actual goddess.

She spoke. “The pathways between realms is more a construct of the power of creation and destruction both.” An amber flow of energy appeared to strike the small Earth. I am sensitive to magic, and I felt the metaphysical



world around us shudder and shake, and I gasped at the pressure of it, then smiled because it tasted of cloves and cinnamon and burnt paper... Titania's magic.

But it also frightened me because it proved my earlier feeling of this representational Earth because the wave of invisible power stuck at the same moment that amber stream hit the small spinning planet in her palm.

We all leaned in, except for Snow, who had partially manifested her Perchta form, and simply nodded as if this were something every young child should know. Rachel slapped her lightly on the back of her head and it just amazed me that she could make the goddess not take herself so seriously, and the love in Perchta's eyes for one of the last werewolves on the planet was a physical thing.

I understood it all too well. Gretta Snow and Perchta were one being after the goddess had sacrificed her power to save the human she had come to love. So Perchta lives on as part of our friend, and together they had fallen for the sometimes overbearing wolf. Like my Ella-Marie had been, they were two parts of a whole, so it shouldn't surprise me every time I saw that love shining through this woman who was as old as time and nature herself.

At that thought, she was gone. One instant Perchta was there, the next a large white crow stood, and it flew up to land on Masika's shoulder to peer at the globe in her hand. I poked at her feathers. "Hey, you're crowding her, woman."

The crow rolled its eyes then hopped onto my arm and I stepped back. I nuzzled her soft downy feathers, and I could feel the buzz of incalculable power pressing against my cheek.

Then the Elder went on as the globe grew as she dropped it to spin in the air in front of us. She indicated where the stream touched the planet and said, "The path seeks the weakest point in the reality to break through. In this mortal realm, there are countless stars and countless worlds, but Earth was the weakest point."

She walked around the globe to where the torrent of energy was striking the Puget Sound area here in Seattle. "But it takes an enormous amount of power to break through the veil. "Fractures form, and the power leaks through these cracks."

Amber lines formed, circling the globe in a network of jagged cracks. “This power bleed through is what allows so many varied augmentations to your peoples, it is the source of what you refer to as magics.”

This is the source of what made us... Avatars and Keepers?

She went on, a smile on her lips when her eyes swung to me. Could she read my mind? My eyes widened and I looked away, to the spinning Earth. She chuckled and said, “Weak points, in reality, occur where many fractures overlap. And these points change when more of the bleed-through energy is consumed. Which is why Seattle is currently the weakest point between realms. Many magical battles have occurred here in recent times.”

Evelyn, who was always so outgoing before she became the new Red Hood, stepped forward and said with excitement as she pointed at the fractures in a semblance of her old sarcastic and bubbly tones that was so good to hear, “Lay lines! You're talking about lay lines.”

When we had lost Mari to death for a time, before the Scales woke her from that eternal slumber, Eve held onto crushing guilt after she was drawn to the cloak of our fallen leader and felt the compulsion to don it. The magics within it, transferred the lupine curse to her, creating a new champion.

She thought we would all fault her, thinking she sullied the memory of Mari. She didn't understand that we loved her, and who could fault her if the cloak thought she was the most worthy to carry the mantle of the Red Hood and the power it possessed. And even after Red returned to us and they now share the burden of the curse, she was rarely outspoken anymore to anyone but her love, Rapunzel.

Masika smiled and nodded as she touched one of the amber cracks and a pulse of raw power swept over me as the globe pulsed. I glanced around and nobody else seemed to notice except Gretta, who ruffled her feathers.

The huge ferocious-looking hound beside Dot, who stood at my chest level moved up to examine the globe. Snow hopped from my arm to the shoulder of the beast as Toto examined the cracks. I absently dropped a hand to sink into her fur and froze, forgetting she wasn't the hell hound she resembled, but our friend. I had been Daria's keeper while Mari was... dead. And it was how I connected with the grieving wolf, it had become instinctive I guess.

Toto didn't seem to mind, but someone whispering in my ear, causing a frightening chill to ripple down my spine had me withdrawing my hand, "Hello, Parker."

I swallowed hard and turned to give a sheepish look. "Hello, Dorothy." A jealous Dot is a dangerous Dot.

She cackled at my wavering tone, and she shoved my shoulder. "Just messing with ya."

When the world felt to have dropped two feet, I barely got out, "For god's sake, Ella," just as a huge whump of released earth energy was released and Dot went tumbling back to freeze in mid-air as she was surrounded by crackling emerald lightning.

Ella, in Marie's body, growled out, "Don't go intimidatin' the lady now, Witchy-Poo, or I'll be givin' ya the what for!"

Dorothy gave her a positively wicked smile and they charged at each other. I slid between the two titans who could level me in the blink of an eye, my hands held out between them. "Girls! Can you two behave and listen? It seems we've run out of time and Masika is sharing something important. I swear you're nothing but a couple of children."

They both looked anywhere but me as they said, "Yes Parker." "Yes, love." Then my clothing ruffled at the barest twitch of Dot's finger as she turned back to the globe with mock attention. I looked down then felt the burn of a blush on my cheeks. The unstable witch had dressed me like some sort of overtly sexualized schoolmarm. I felt something on my head and reached up and sighed as I pulled the thick-rimmed black glasses from where they were pulled up to the bun my hair was styled in now.

Ella cut off a snerk as she was looking me up and down appreciatively until she realized she was wearing a full clown costume with those oversize clown shoes again. She started cursing under her breath as she started to pull it off.

An amused looking Elder said, "If you children are done." She touched Seattle on the globe and the lay lines pulsed again and where multiple lines crossed around the world, those crossings pulsed as well.

She started the globe slowly spinning. "Currently, there are nine confluence points, the five strongest, making the weakest points for entry, are these." Five of the crossings glowed brightly.

Rapunzel said, "I'm just going to..." She snapped a picture of me on her cell with a cheesy grin on her face. Oh lord. She had just discovered Twitter while we were in Kansas, and she has over a half million followers already. I was going to be a meme, wasn't I?

Nicole, the first Wolf Hunter, came to my rescue as she stood in her honest to god suit of shining silver armor, leaning on her silver sword. "Really, Raz? Do you think this is the appropriate time?" Just when I was going to thank her, she grinned and scrunched her head to her shoulders, "Send me a copy?"

Ok, I was going to die of embarrassment, but then I realized I was in the body of one of my loves at the moment so I raised a finger as my cheeks burned with the heat of a thousand suns. "Me too?" What? I'm only human and Ella is smoking hot, I wanted to know what she looked like in librarian mode.

As if I wasn't already blushing myself out of existence, Masika cleared her throat. We all quickly gave her our full and undivided attention as Marie, in my body, stepped beside me and slowly, sneakily, took my hand. I knew we'd be sharing that picture in the future if we actually survived this.

The Voodoo Queen of Neverland pulled the locations closer somehow in our vision through the globe hadn't changed in size... how was that even possible? Mari pointed at one. "Tokyo." Then another. "Cairo."

Daria in one step to her side flowed from wolf to human so smoothly I wasn't really sure when it happened. "London and Sydney."

Gretel finished when I didn't see any more, "And Seattle." Ah.

I voiced what none of us were saying since we had assumed... no hoped, that we could face the enemy together, combining all our powers to fight something we were ill-equipped to stand against in the first place. "We'll have to split up." Splitting the party was never good in Dungeons and Dragons, how could it possibly be good here?

I looked around, and I could see the math on everyone else's faces, as most eyes fell on the three who stood any chance against an Elder... Hook, Dot, and Snow, since Titania would not raise a hand against the other elders more than the information she has shared unless they themselves make a move against her.

Three, and we had five locations to somehow cover if we could even reach them in time as we had only until nightfall here in Seattle. We...

couldn't win.

This fact didn't seem to even slow Red as she stepped into the world as it dissolved into fluttering butterflies of all things. “Right. We need to break out into teams. Snow, Wendy, do you have a way we can deploy?” She looked at Titania. “Unless it wouldn't go too much against your code to ask?”

The dark-skinned woman contemplated this and then inclined her head, making me feel bad for her. She was stuck between loyalty to her kind and her conscience. It was a dangerous tightrope she walked and I didn't envy her at all. I put myself in her place if I were asked to help stop my friends and family, the Avatars if they had lost their way. How far would I go, and how much help would I give the ones who had to stop them and still live with myself, even though I knew it to be the right thing to do.

Without a word, I stepped up to her as she pushed her tightly braided and shelled hair over her shoulder, and when she looked questioningly at me, I just engulfed her into a tight hug. She stiffened for a moment, then relaxed and returned the hug almost desperately as she whispered to me, “Thank you, child.”

She kissed the top of my head and we released each other. Then I watched as Red strode away with purpose toward the command trailer the military had driven in to share the news.

I glanced around when everyone's spelled cell phones chimed and we all went to look, and I grinned as I cocked an eyebrow. Raz had sent everyone the picture and good lord did it do some naughty things to me, Ella should only wear this, forever. Va va voom.

Then I was knocked out of my inappropriate daydream as I shuddered... no, the world shuddered as a sense of dread filled me when it happened, again and again, each shudder more powerful... it was... footsteps! I could feel their approach now. They were so close, the Elders were incoming.

## Chapter 6 – Deployed

Everything happened so fast. Masika had shared that the more powerful Elders would choose the weakest points since it took a lot of energy to move that much power through the veil between realms. So that fact chose the locations for our heavy hitters.

Ella-Marie, in my body and me in Ella's, were sent with Dot and Toto to Tokyo.

Maireni, Daria, Perchta, and Rachel would hold Seattle.

Hook, Tinkerbelle, Amanda, and Robyn would sail to London in the Sea Devil through the veil itself with a little nudge from the ebony goddess it seemed.

And since Rose and Illya were the most deadly of those who were left, Rose, Nicole, Raz and Eve would take Cairo, leaving Sydney to Belle, Illya, Katiana and Gretel. The teams were as balanced as we could make them.

The trouble areas would be Cairo and Sydney since neither team had reality-altering magics like the others, but if the others could be pressed enough to need assistance, then the Elders would be called to the more troublesome cities.

So the edict in those three cities was to hit them hard and fast and keep the pressure on, while the other two cities' teams were to run harassing and stalling campaigns. If any group were victorious, then they would transfer over to whichever teams needed support.

The militaries of the other countries had been alerted and they were setting up bases and evacuating their people. Masika would be able to send a small number of the gathered military with their... weapons, to each site because she assured us, her people would be bringing entire armies of conscripted fighters from the various realms they lorded over.

I looked around and my heart fell. Only about eighty percent of the citizens of Seattle had gotten clear so far in the phased evacuation, that left thousands of civilians. And the other locations only had a sparse few hours for their evacuations, the bulk of their peoples would still be at ground zero when the Elders arrived there. I closed my eyes and prayed that this would not be the end of everything and that we could somehow avoid so many innocents dying on our watch.

Tentatively, I made a fist, digging my nails into my palm and my fists crystallized to protect me. Then, since some of Ella's residual abilities infused the body I was in, I tugged at the earth experimentally, my feet crystallizing and I felt so powerful with energy infusing every cell. We had learned that when we inhabited each other's bodies, we had limited use of their signature powers. So at least I would be able to do more offensively in this form than I could in my own body in which I was purely a defensive fighter.

I looked around at the five groups as we glanced at the sun, low on the horizon. Damn, they all looked so competent and dangerous, their game faces on.

Masika was drawing large glowing circles with complex symbols and runes around three of the groups with what looked like playground chalk, as Hook and her squad all flew off to the Sea Devil. While she was still crafting the circles, she absently swatted at the air behind her as the Sea Devil started rising into the air, and it looked as if it actually tore through reality. It was displays of raw power like that which seemed of so little consequence to her that scared me, thinking we were woefully outmatched.

She froze as the thrumming approach just stopped, leaving an ominous magical silence in my head, and she whispered, "They're here!" Then she slapped one of the circles before we could say anything and we were falling through the very fabric of space. I caught a glimpse of something my mind was having a problem processing before we were all stumbling on a pier in Tokyo with our military escort.

I had seen, or felt, or perceived five entities that defied my brain from comprehending, as they seemed so massive and inconceivable and the power emanating from the indistinct shapes magically blinded me temporarily with that simple glimpse. But I knew I saw motion at their bases that seemed to go on forever.

I whispered, "Titania was right, they brought an army."

The others got ready as the soldiers all started taking positions while I looked around in terror for the roads everywhere which were clogged with people and vehicles all trying to head north out of the city. Virtually everyone was still here in the gridlocked city. It was daylight here where it had been almost sunset back home.

On blocked off side streets, tanks and armored personnel carriers were heading toward our group as people started screaming at our sudden appearance. Dot looked at us and exhaled, shaking her head. She knew what I had already figured out, many of these civilians were about to die and there wasn't anything any of us could do about it.

It was best not to dwell on the things we couldn't change and concentrate on slowing, or stopping the enemy when they stepped through.

I whispered as I looked in the direction those huge presences had been standing on the pathway between realms, "Where are they? Did we get the cities wrong?" There was a pit in my stomach thinking they came through in one of the cities we thought they wouldn't.

But Ella-Marie, Toto, and Dot said in unison, "After sunset in Seattle, under the moon."

Oh.

I prompted, "When is that?"

And the world tore open a few hundred yards from us, swallowing people and buildings as I felt something huge moving toward the tear in reality as they again said in unison unnecessarily, "Now."

I normally would have made a Captain Obvious joke, but my full attention was on the diminutive figure who casually strolled out of the rift, an entire army of warriors of all sorts of alien races streaming into Tokyo behind it.

A tank swung its turret and just before it could fire, it flattened, like a planet had been dropped on it. We looked between it and the figure who had a hand up in a crushing fist.

There was no rush to battle from the enemy as they just started massing behind the woman, who looked very much like a smaller Dorothy until she looked around to all the faces of the people screaming and running as the arriving soldiers formed a wall between the civilians and the incoming force.

Then she became the doppelganger of a young Japanese woman who had tripped and was being helped to her feet by a soldier, who helped her away and told her something before she ran off into the crowd. Then this shape-shifting woman scanned the arriving soldiers and her almond-shaped eyes landed on us, on Dorothy specifically.



She said something in Japanese, then when we didn't respond she spoke in English, her eyes boring into Dorothy's, which were crackling with green flame and energy, "Oz... this is not your fight. You may go back to your realm in peace or you will suffer the fate of this realm. We have passed judgment and the mortal realm shall be purged and reset."

Dorothy cocked her head like she had heard wrong as more power started swirling around her, the world was warping around her as she had already gathered so much. "You do not belong here, Elder. It is you who shall go back to your realm, in pieces if need be."

The woman said, "I am Mnemosyne, third of the elders, you have made your choice. Now you must choose the instrument of your doom."

I couldn't help it before I could stop myself I was asking, "You're kidding right? Choosing the instrument of our doom? That's like right out of Ghostbusters. The Elders have to be more original than that."

I looked at the others and said, "Keep your minds blank, or it's the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man all over again."

Toni... Toto, in her human form, said, "Oh shit... sorry. We're in Tokyo, I couldn't help it."

Mnemosyne whispered with an almost sadistic smile, her eyes dark, "The die is cast," as she thrust her hands out and it was as if the very fabric of reality was torn out of the air in chunks around her and started swirling around her form as she seemed to start growing while she pulled into herself, the shreds of time and space forming a sort of protective ball around her... a cocoon.

I had just an instant to make a realization, the Elders... they had the names of the Titans. Was that what they were? But didn't the Titans give birth to the gods? Were the Elders more powerful than gods?

Then with screeching and warbling cries, the armies behind her started charging toward us and the soldiers who were all just staring in incomprehension, their guard down. The first salvo of green lightning from Dot, slamming into that impossible cocoon caused a shock wave that blew out the windows of the buildings around us for blocks and caused a little tsunami to ripple out into the ocean.

People all around were knocked off their feet and the first wave of Mnemosyne's hordes were tossed like rag dolls back into the tear in space.

The witch, now floating a couple of inches off the ground due to the power she was holding, asked over her shoulder, “Toto, what did you do?”

I noted the men and creatures with the Elder seemed to disintegrate when they hit the rift. Was it only a one-way portal?

Toni shrugged and almost whimpered, “I said I was sorry.” Then she made silly claws with her hands and stomped her feet. Then she was a huge hell hound diving into the second wave of fighters as the mass of distorted reality continued to swell and grow.

Ella-Marie was already diving at Dot, who caught her with magic and slung her like a missile into the middle of the incoming swarm and with a huge whump of released Earth magic, bodies went flying from where my girl had punched the ground.

That was my cue and I ran forward pulling a bit of that same earth magic into me as my feet started clinking on the ground as they turned to living crystal. I hit the first of the enemy, who looked to be what I would consider a caveman since he wore skins and carried a big club. I winced as I heard bone-crushing as a much smaller whump of released energy came from me.

Then my back started crackling as it spider-webbed into crystal when the first of the wall of bullets the US and Japanese soldiers struck. I called back, “Hey assholes! We're on your side, watch your aim!” After what we learned before this all began, I'm not so sure the bullets hitting me were accidental.

Dot took two running steps and her power swirled around her pulling the very clouds from the heavens to rotate around her and lift her high in the tornado they formed. It left a trail of destruction through the enemies, her lightning arcing out to those who got past, and Toto was picking off the stragglers with her massive jaws and claws like the two were performing a deadly choreographed dance.

Then I realized that they actually were. Those two had fought a daily war against Demons in Oz until Ella-Marie and I had helped them locate the demon who was hiding in their realm and opening the gateway to let the other demons in. In over a hundred years of fighting hordes just like this on a daily basis, they had probably forgotten more about waging war than most generals could learn in a lifetime.

I waded in, trying to get to Ella-Marie since we fought well back to back, with her doing the heavy lifting as I ran interference and kept the riffraff off

of her. Then I was blown sideways, tumbling along the ground, a crystal ringing in my ears. I rolled to a three-point stance and saw other explosions here and there in the middle of the tide of bodies. Glancing back I saw soldiers launching shoulder-fired missiles.

God damn it. They didn't care who they were shooting. I looked around and yelled, knowing she could hear, "Dot! They're heading for the civilians!" Almost half of the group coming through saw easier prey in the people running away than those who were tearing a path through their forces.

One second I was almost at Ella-Marie's side, the next I was in front of the group swarming through and slaughtering the civilians. I hated it when she did that to me, it was disconcerting. I just growled out a challenge and tried one of Ella's signature moves and spread my arms wide, forcing the magic through and out of me instead of channeling it, intending to do a spray of crystal shards to mow down a group charging me. The reality of it was that, no matter whose body I was in... I wasn't Ella. I was almost mortified when only two shards of crystal slung out to take down a particularly large birdlike man.

Oh lord, I actually heard Ella's snort over the din of battle as she fought her way toward me. She called out, "Pick up a spare, Witchy-Poo? As she vaulted off the back of a six-armed grizzly creature as it fell over dead from a stroke from my girl across its throat with a crystal blade.

Dorothy thrust a hand out from where her tornado was trying to keep the enemy off the soldiers. Green lightning formed into a large baseball bat which hit Ella-Marie so hard I could barely follow with my eyes as my loves careened into the backside of the incoming conscripts.

Just before she slammed into their lines, she thrust her arms wide and hundreds of crystal daggers sliced through dozens of the enemy, and she curled into a ball and actually bowled over a few more before rolling up to stand back to back with me. She said in her Cockney accent, "Right love, was that what you were try'n'a do now?"

It didn't even seem strange to me anymore as I looked over my shoulder to look into my own face and I rolled my eyes and defended, "To be fair, that was the first time I ever tried it."

She chuckled as we both whumped out energy into the faces of our attackers, then my body was saying in a toe-curling French accent, "Ella,

mon amour, leave our Parker alone. Eet was cute.”

I grumbled, “Great now they're ganging up on... shit!” Something hit me hard, and I was tumbling across the ground hitting civilians and enemy combatants alike as my entire body became crystal. Normally that would worry me because if I went too far for too long, I could be stuck in that form as a living statue. But not after Dot put the whammy on us, I was stronger and faster in this form, and... harder to kill.

I looked up to see a roughly human-looking man, just seven feet tall or so, with some sort of plasma cannon grafted to his left arm where a hand should have been. I yelled out, “They got space cannons or something!” He was taking aim at me again, just as a crystal shaft shot up from the ground straight under his chin and through his skull.

Then Ella was shouting, “Juice me!” And she was hit by green crackling power as she slammed her hands on the ground then grasped with her hands and screamed out a challenge to the universe as she mimed pulling the air up in front of her, and with a rumble, using the borrowed power from a witch who could warp reality itself, my girl pulled up a wall of solid stone going hundreds of yards in each direction, cutting the enemy off from the civilians. Unfortunately, dozens, if not hundreds of the horde were already on the other side.

I took a moment to admire just how good of a team, a deadly team, Dot and Ella made. They played at being annoyed with each other, but they instinctively helped each other in devastating combos against any adversaries.

Frantically I called, “Marie? I need to...” Intending for her to use some black magic to cut me a path through the new barrier so I could help the civilians. But I realized Dot had displaced me and I was already there, as a big brute like the one with the energy weapon slammed an electrified cattle prod into my gut.

I winced. It was almost like getting hit by Ella, as the prod bent and snapped, but a small chip from my gut went pinging off into the chaos, I looked up at him, as I got my bearings thanks to the disorienting location swapping Dot did with us with just a thought. People were dying all around me so it was no time to be subtle.

Slamming my forehead into the man's chest, I bounced off with a clink. Ok, plan B. “Didn't your mother ever tell you it wasn't nice to hit a girl?” I

ducked under a sweeping arm and did the one thing I had practiced in Kansas with my girls, and pulled earth energy through my body and out my hand to form a crystal blade which I thrust up into his armpit. If his physiology was anything like a human it should... he howled in agony as he backpedaled away from me grasping his arm which was hanging limply now.

I moved forward at the same rate, not letting him get any distance when I noticed something. I grabbed the oversize pistol looking thing off of his belt and just as he started to swing his good arm down on me I pulled the oversize trigger. I blinked through the gaping hole in his chest a moment before he slumped to the ground.

The twelve-year-old girl in me had me blurting out with excitement, "Space gun! I have a space gun!" And I started charging at the bad guys firing over and over in adolescent glee. Then Toto was beside me howling fiercely, chilling even my bones as we dove on the enemy.

That's when I made a realization. Oh shit. I stopped and looked at the people being attacked with my heart in a vice, then dug my hand into Toto's fur to get her attention, then started running back toward the wall, calling out to her, "They're splitting us up!"

We were fighting in three separate locations now, concentrating on stopping the enemy from getting to the civilians and the soldiers and they were counting on that. But as terrible and coldhearted as it sounds, we were trying to save our entire reality here, not just a few people here that we could, but everyone here and any other planets in the mortal realm.

But the enemy was trying to use our instincts against us and had drawn us out to basically three fronts, leaving the Elder to do whatever it was she was doing virtually unmolested. Toto slammed into my side and I looked over and she nudged her chin. I nodded and grabbed the fur on the scruff of her neck and dove onto her back.

I blinked and held on as she dashed off toward the wall, snapping her massive jaws at enemies as we passed while I grew my blade into a long javelin with residual earth magic within me. I couldn't use more until I touched the ground again.

As I speared a rather small, elf-like creature who was wielding dual glowing blades, I realized the absurd. I was jousting with a glass lance while riding a giant hell hound. I grasped her coarse fur as she leapt at the

wall and landed halfway up it, twenty feet and her claws cracked the stone as they dug in and she scabbled up the rest of the way.

From our vantage point at the top, we saw a terrifying sight. Thousands of the enemy still swarming through the gateway with only Dot cutting a swath through them between the gateway and the cocoon which had stopped growing, burning through her energy. And on the other side was Ella screaming out her challenge and taking on all comers, while the military guns were silent. Overrun.

Toto howled and our allies looked up to us. Dot turned her tornado toward us and Ella-Marie took one step toward us before finding herself almost stepping off the top of the wall with oversize clown shoes on. Toto grabbed her in her jaws gently to steady her. Then Dorothy landed beside us, the blood lust of the wicked in her putting a smile on her face.

I said in a rush, “The horde is just here to keep us busy to separate us and have us expend all our power. Tokyo is lost and we will be too if we forget that that is the enemy, not the horde!” I pointed at the cocoon, which had just started pulsating with an immense power that tasted... misguided? Is that a taste?

Toni was in human form for just a moment as she said, “Oh lord, Dotty, she's right.” Then she was in dog form as the horde realized where we were and the ones who had projectile or energy weapons started firing our way.

Then... the egg cracked.

## Chapter 7 – London Calling

Mother called out to me from the wheel of the huge ship, “Now Mandy!” And I released the anchor once we tore through the veil to arrive inside of the huge walled city of London proper, just on the other side of Tower Bridge.

As the anchor plummeted to a courtyard below, I wrapped a hand in a boatswain rope and kicked the peg from the railing. The counterweight fell, propelling me up to the crow's nest at breakneck speed while I called out, “Secure the mainsails! Drop the foresails and stow the mizzen!”

Our crew went into motion, along with the Lost Boys while my Robyn called out, “All hands, prepare for battle! Raise the gun ports, forward the twenty-four pounders.” I marveled at how quickly Robyn had taken to life aboard a pirate ship. It was something from her time and she took to it as easy as breathing. I sighed when I realized my damn tail was wagging in excitement as I watched her hovering above deck shouting orders. The US soldiers we had brought with us headed to the longboat winches.

Two RAF Harrier jets flew up to flank us, hovering. I was starting to wonder if they hadn't been told what was coming and why we were here as they slowly panned their nosecones the length of the ship before they turned away and then lowered slowly to the courtyard below to land vertically.

I looked at the city from my vantage point looking for any sign of the Elder's approach. What I saw was in stark contrast to the harried evacuation the Seattle area had been undergoing. Military and police had people heading north on every other street, while they were using the remaining streets for emergency and support vehicles and what looked like command stations.

Not everyone was leaving it seemed, as I saw one couple on the roof of an old brick building reading a newspaper and sipping tea as they watched the mass exodus of people below. London had only scant hours to prepare.

I saw just before we lowered to around a hundred feet above the ground, that the Royal Standard of the United Kingdom was rippling in the wind over Buckingham Palace. “What the actual fuck? The Queen was in residence? What the hell were they thinking? She needed to be evacuated now!”

I thought back over the history of England, specifically the past hundred years and sighed in resignation. Did King George run when the city was under siege by the Blitz? No. Did he run when Hitler dropped a thousand wolves from planes into London on a full moon in operation Lupus Pacification? No. Did Queen Elizabeth run when the gates of London herself were being overrun when the Alphas declared war on the world? No.

On that thought, I looked to the Tower Bridge and the two twenty-foot bronze statues adorning the towers. One of the Red Hood, looking down into the city, her cape billowing behind her as she took aim below with her famous crossbow. The other, Daria, in her hellhound guise, preparing to leap onto the deck of the bridge below. Honoring the Day of Defiance, when the Red Hood had arrived as the gates were failing, and rallied London to hold off the assault of compelled wolves in human form.

I exhaled in resignation, realizing that no... the Queen would not leave London until each and every person had evacuated.

I leapt and flew down to the woman that I couldn't see as anything other than my mother, thanks to the make-believes of the Lost Boys and... I'm not apologetic in any way... my and Wendy's own imaginations which in Neverland or on the Sea Devil, has the power to change reality with a make-believe.

I gave her a toothy grin and hip bumped her away from the ship's wheel to take it myself and lock it down. She snorted and kissed the top of my head. "Scamp."

I did a silly shrug and realized again that I was acting like the teen I appeared. That was the only annoying thing about how things turned out for me. No, I take that back, I looked back to my tail which had a mind of its own as it swished to broadcast my playful mood. That damn tail that the Lost Boys refuse to imagine away, just like my elongated canines that were about half the length of my wolf form fangs I am told.

Where I think I can live with being stuck in my second round at being a teen forever, the tail broadcasts to the world that I am not human, and I am different than everyone else. But at least it isn't as bad as my love got. I glanced over to Robyn, with her large fairy wings, and the pointed ears of the last living Elf which she used to be able to hide under her hair, are somehow always exposed, poking out of her hair on full display as she is



flying. And she didn't look a day over nineteen... lucky... I looked eighteen at most now.

I whispered with a lustful grin her way, “I believe in fairies, I do, I do.” As I clapped lightly. A bell tinkled and her wings sifted a large amount of dust to the deck. She spun around with an angry look, scanning the sailors until her eyes landed on me. I swung side to side innocently and her aggravation turned to patient love as I winked at her.

Then I blurted, “Ow!” as Tinkerbell flicked my ear as she landed on my shoulder.

“Mandy! Behave.” I lowered my eyes and whined, “Yes ma'am.”

“I got dust all over the clean counter when you did that just to tease your girl.”

I nodded in remorse then looked up and cursed, “Fuck!” Because she was my mom's wife since their wedding in Kansas, the magic had me thinking of her as my stepmother, and subordinate to her. I was done being a beta to anyone... fucking make-believes!

She laughed, knowing what my frustration was. It was like the tinkling of bells chiming, and it was easy to see how she got her name. She kissed my cheek and I knew her lip prints would stay there for quite some time before the sparkle faded. “Sorry, it is just so much fun playing house. You are the best stepdaughter I've ever had.”

“I'm the only stepdaughter you've ever...” Doh! She was doing it again. I sighed. “You're shameless. If I didn't love you so much, you'd be bug splatter on the Sea Devil's windshield.”

She giggled as she hopped off my shoulder, and “bigged”, becoming human-sized long enough to lay a heated kiss on Wendy before shrinking in an instant to buzz away to the railing. I truly enjoyed the dreamy and smitten look on Wendy's face as she watched the trail of sparkly fairy dust settle. I liked seeing mom happy.

She checked her flintlock pistol load and patted her saber. This was my cue as I checked my bandoleer, pulled the twin flintlocks to check the loads, then my knife and cutlasses crossed on my back.

Then pulling my leather buccaneer jacket aside, which had a cartoon skull and crossbones with its little pink and purple bow embroidered on the left breast – fucking Lost Boys – I drew my dual pink Glocks, crossing my arms to pull the slides back and clearing them then slamming the butts

down on the row of rapid-loaders across my chest then slid them into my shoulder holsters.

Wendy chuckled, “Seriously, baby girl? Do you really need to be a walking armory?”

I mock thought on it, then nodded enthusiastically. I had been a specialist in the Issaquah Police department and former special ops before I got my ass wolfed by the lupus contagion. Now I'm stuck looking like a character from some young adult coming of age adventure romance book, but that doesn't mean I'm any less deadly.

I had been the weapons specialist for the Avatars before the whammy, and my body doesn't change who I am or my training. I was... a rustling came from my jacket pocket. My eyes went wide and I put a finger to my lips and shushed the baby alligator I had put in there. What? He's just so cute. Oh for fuck's sake. I knew it was juvenile but I didn't want to get rid of him.

Robyn landed in our group with her modified sling for her bow and magic arrow quiver hanging at her hip instead of over her back where it gets tangled with the wings. Her other shapely hip had a buccaneer's cutlass hanging from it.

The four of us looked at each other and nodded as one. Wendy called out, “Mr. Meriwether, you have the helm.” Then we dove over the edge and flew down to the group of officials that looked to be gathering below.

As we swooped down it looked to be an assemblage of military and civilian law enforcement and... I sighed... a few suits. I hated suits more than anything. They always had some secret agenda that didn't always coincide with doing the right or moral thing. I looked up to see the longboats being lowered with the US military reps and soldiers that sailed the veil with us.

The two suits with us had their eyes on their British counterparts, I sighed in disgust, I'm sure they'd make beautiful babies together. I aborted a snort. Robyn slapped the back of my head as we landed. Hey, if she knew why I had almost snorted, then she was thinking the same thing. The brat.

A silver-haired man with a well-groomed mustache stepped forward. All the medals and regalia on his chest told me he was definitely in charge. He tucked his cap under an arm as he strode up to us with the rest. “Right then, you'd be the Avatars we were told were coming. I'm Brigadier General

Alton Greene. Nasty mess this, I wish we were meeting under more ideal circumstances.” He offered a hand and shook our three hands, then backpedaled and almost tripped over his own feet when Tink bigged in front of him and offered her hand with a silly grin on her face.

The man straightened his uniform and said, “Sorry, was just a bit startled there. Pleased to meet you, miss.” Tink shook his hand, and shook, and kept shaking until I kicked her ankle and she let go of his hand, giggling before zipping off to mom's shoulder back at her proper fairy size.

The man said in wonder, “Oh my.” Then composed himself. “I've the pleasure to have met the Red Hood before. Amazing woman that one. At the gates just there on the bridge on the Day of Defiance. The United Kingdom owes the Avatars a debt we cannot hope to repay.”

Mom reached up and tipped her buccaneer hat down slightly in acknowledgment then said, “Wendy Darling... Captain Hook of the Sea Devil,” She turned to us. “My daughter, Amanda Danes, and her mate and Avatar, Robyn of Locksley.” Then she nudged her chin to the woman who was laying on her shoulder head propped up on her elbows, watching in fascination. “My wife, Tinkerbell of Neverland.”

He inclined his head to each of us. And he motioned to his colleagues, “We're all interested in what intel you have for us on this impending threat. We've been in constant contact with the White House, but it seems they are not being as forward with the information as one would hope. Politics at a time as dire as implied seems to be counterproductive.”

Robyn nodded and said, “My Mandywolf has a military background and will fill you in as much as we know. But be assured, whatever you were told is not sufficient to understand what is coming. The Elders will not stop until our very reality is wiped from existence.”

The General took a half step back, his hand dropping halfway to his sidearm as he blurted, “Wolf?” Then he closed his eyes and calmed himself. “Terribly sorry, years of fighting werewolves, you see. Of course. You are one of the few remaining wolves. I should have known, miss.” Then he narrowed one eye when he saw my tail tuck up behind me.

He grinned like a loon after that and called back over his shoulder, “A wolf has finally made it past our gates.” A nervous chuckle rippled through the gathered officials.

Then he made an ushering motion. “Miss Danes, the command tent is being set up this way.” Then he cocked his head. “A little young to have military experience aren't you?”

Tink just giggled her silver bells at me as I sighed and trudged along with the others.

I kept checking the clock on a tripod in the tent as the discussions went. And as unprepared as they were, they had been flying in support troops and artillery since the word first reached them. It was all so very efficient. Then I said in a hoarse voice as I stood, the others following as I stepped out of the tent and strode toward the Sea Devil, “Time's up.”

Sundown in Seattle was a few seconds away. We weren't ready, London wasn't ready... the world wasn't ready. And if we were going to fall today, we sure as hell were going to let them know they had been in a fight.

And the buildings just down the next block started crumbling as reality bent then tore, revealing an army of beings just on the other side of it. Mother slammed her cutlass against her Hook, causing a peal of sound that sliced through the fabric of space, as she looked through the hook to see the truth of everything like none of us could ever comprehend.

She pointed at a mass of energy off to one side of the rift, which was the only thing moving out onto the streets of London. “There.”

It looked over at us, somehow knowing exactly where to look as mom stepped in front of us all. Then it morphed into a man in pirate garb. And I could see a little bit of all those around us in him. He was taking on human form to deal with us. He knew what pretty was because I would have called him a beautifully rugged man if I didn't know what he truly was.

He actually hesitated when he saw mom standing tall, imposing, and defiant as she pulled her hat down to shadow her face. Then his confusion left his face as he spoke. We shouldn't have been able to hear him as clearly as if he were standing next to us at this distance... I mean, I could with my wolf hearing, but this sounded like he was in front of our faces as he asked in a tone full of curiosity as he stared intently at the hook on mom's arm. “Guardian of Neverland? Did your realm fall to our punishment? If you fled to the mortal realm, then you chose poorly and have not learned the folly of crossing us. We have judged a reset necessary so the mortal poison does not spread.”

Then he inclined his head slightly. “I am Phoebe, second of the elders. And I grant you and yours safe passage from this realm as a courtesy since you are not of here, lest you suffer their fate.”

Phoebe? She obviously wasn't aware of the biological sexes of humans.

Wendy just put her hook on her hip and shrugged. “Nah, we're fine here, but thanks.”

Then her tone cooled enough to freeze a sun as she said, “You, on the other hand, best leave, before I hand your asses to you like the last Hook did, and send you crawling back to where you came from, licking your wounds, bitch.”

I swallowed hard. My mom was a stone-cold badass.

Then I realized something silly that actually gave me some comfort. Since the Elders couldn't enter Neverland anymore since it was protected by the Nothing, they don't know what happened there. Which told me that they weren't these omnipotent gods we feared they were if there were things they didn't know. Which meant they were fallible and maybe even defeatable. It had happened in other realms after all.

And it sounded as if she, he, whatever, couldn't tell the difference between Wendy and Masika's lover, the original Captain Hook. He recognized the hook itself. The artifact of power that had defeated them, further reinforcing the idea that she didn't understand genetic sexes of humans. We probably all looked the same to her, him... hell, I'm calling him him for now. And that made me angry that we were so beneath notice for them to learn anything about us, yet they were passing judgment?

He shrugged and said, “So be it, guardian. This realm has been judged and found impure, and the sentence is reset. You will die with...”

I snapped my wrist at my hip and fired a musket ball right between his eyes. The wound just healed up instantly and I shrugged at everyone then said to the Elder, “Eh. Didn't think so, but it never hurts to try, right?”

He thrust a hand forward as Wendy swept me behind her, her Hook humming with power as it attenuated a flood of energy that vaporized everything along the block between us and the Elder. Then the hordes started charging through the rift as chaos exploded around us when the soldiers behind us, and the Sea Devil above, started firing on the enemy. Magic backed cannonballs cutting a swath of death and destruction through the enemy.

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## Chapter 8 – Silence

We arrived in Cairo, through the gateway Masika had sent us. I looked over when my Rapunzel asked, “Eve?” I nodded, then she checked the others, “Rose, Nicole?” They nodded, Rose had a maniacal look in her eye. She seemed to enjoy the nauseating feel of folding space as she stepped away from the vomiting soldiers that came with us. None of them looked too stable just then. It would take them a few minutes to recover.

I could feel the magics recede around us. Being a minor magic user myself... darker than I care to admit to, I used to be able to only feel... or sense, dark magics, corrupted black magics until I donned Mari's cloak. Now I feel more animal than human and don't know how Red reconciled it with the dull senses of a human.

Sharing the mantle of the Red Hood with her, I could see so much clearer, smell everything around me including emotions, and actually taste things in the air that painted a bigger picture of the world around me. And I had an urge to hunt, an urge to eat... raw meat. That was possibly the worst thing, no worse was that after trying some, I craved it more... just like an animal.

After Maireni rose from the dead and reclaimed the cloak we now share, she pulled me aside to do what had not been done for her, since we were in a unique situation. She explained the curse of the Red Hood to me, sharing intimate details of how it affected her. How it did to us, what the Alphas had tried to gain with the Lycan Curse.

It in effect gave us all the strength and powers of an Alpha werewolf, but without the changing into a beast on the full moon thing. Our greater strength, awareness, enhanced senses, amplified instincts, and rapid healing made us the perfect tool to hunt the Alphas. And until all the Alphas are dead, we would remain cursed by the Red Hood to protect the world from them.

The catch? They were all dead, except one, but the curse of the Alphas was forced on him against his will and he swore to never bite anyone to spread the contagion all over again. So it was a Catch 22 for us. Let a peaceful man live and grieve, or kill him so that we could regain our humanity. I'm resigned to being this different version of myself for the rest

of my life. A life that may prove to be eternal as I can only be killed by a werewolf or the magic of the demon that originated the curse.

That is how Mari died... using her cursed blood to close the portal to the demon realm that Styche was holding open with a huge amount of his magic. And now he is dead... true dead. That leaves only our friends, Rachel and Mandy... well and Mari herself who can kill me. Or the remaining Alpha, the last Marcus brother who is in hiding now.

I am Evelyn, and I will forever be a Red Hood.

The city was abuzz with activity, but to my surprise, it all seemed to be military and emergency personnel. Had they evacuated the city in the scant few hours of warning they were afforded? I sniffed at the air as Raz laid her head on my shoulder, waiting for me to tell them what I detected.

I could smell people on the wind, millions of people, hundreds of thousands of outbound vehicles... hot sand. They were retreating south into the desert. There seemed to be some sort of massive presence approaching, then stopping... but I couldn't sense it with anything but my ability to feel magics of all sorts now.

The soldiers with us recovered enough to start moving out toward the incoming military vehicles coming toward us.

I said, "They've somehow evacuated the populace... there are stragglers here and there but somehow they've got most out of the walled city." Then I pointed. "It is there, waiting, but somehow not in this realm... about a half-mile that way, beside the river."

Rose was already swarming that way on a cloud of writhing black vines and brambles. She was our containment expert. And by that, we mean she can set up huge roiling walls of vines and brambles with neurotoxin laced thorns to keep the enemy confined to one area.

There was a cost, she doesn't think we know, but every new vine, every thorn, and branch that burst out from her core, the dark lump of blackness that is her heart, actually tears its way through her skin making it as painful as possible. That is her curse. I can smell the pain on her every single time. And it makes me think, that of all of us Avatars, Rose is possibly the bravest of us all.

But then again, we have three Damaschins in our band of Avatars, my Raz, Rose, and Mari. And they are all amazing women. It is freaky how much Mari and Rose look like each other, like doppelgangers.



We ran after our slightly off-kilter friend, as the military types met and started coordinating. A large number of military vehicles followed us. I could hear the radios, but my Arabic was rusty, I had learned some so many years ago, and it has changed in the intervening centuries. But it seemed that were following our lead and were setting up defensive positions behind us.

A newspaper rustled past, tumbling in the warm wind and I stopped it with a foot and picked it up. Struggling with the Arabic again, the huge headline was talking about evacuation. And I had to smile, wondering where they had obtained the photograph that adorned the article, of the Avatars and their keepers, standing victorious after the news of Styche's demise.

In the matter of a few minutes, we had a kill box set up, with huge fifty-foot walls of vines down to the river to funnel the enemy our way into a zone of crossfire that would give us our best chance to slow a being who walked with gods. But we had someone talked about by even the gods, Lady Thsalias. Death's Lady herself.

Her reputation was even acknowledged by the gods. Because of the curse laid upon her by demon magics, she was unkillable, and even Masika had said that if the mortal realm was reset, that even she didn't know if Rose would cease to be.

And that was good because we were possibly the weakest of the teams without her. My and Raz's magics were nothing compared to an Elder, so we and Nicole would be the ground support for Rose as we take on the forces the Elders are sure to have with them if they follow their past pattern.

The minutes ticked by, and nothing. Then sundown in Seattle passed and I could feel the mass of energy on the other side of reality moving away from us. We all stood in silence like the world was holding its breath, then it was gone.

I muttered, "Shit. It is leaving, I don't know where it is going."

Rapunzel was instantly on her cell that I was pretty sure she loved as much as she loved me at times. "Red! The Elder is moving off, we don't know where it is heading. Sydney? Ok, ok... yes, do it!"

She whipped her longhair at us, the silver leaves adorning it flashing as she wrapped the three of us and yanked us to her, she hugged us all and yelled, "Hang on, Masika is sending us to reinforce Sydney!"

Then we were falling through reality without having time to tell the soldiers where we were going. And we reappeared in the burning wreckage of a massive city, Illya roaring out in her screeching of a thousand souls, primal rage and anguish washed over us from her as we just stared in horror at the scene.

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## Chapter 9 – Down Under

I had never been to the mysterious land of Australia before. I had traveled many of the lands of Europe and Asia while fighting black magic users, but never to the new world or this land down under. Now here I was at the end of days which was prophesied by so many religions.

My Kat asked in her deep alto Slavic accent, backed by the rumbling of the bear spirits of her brothers which she held within her, “Gretel? Are you alright?” The transport here was rough, it felt as if we were torn apart just as reality had been, then reassembled at a different location. The immense well of magic I could feel from the Voodoo Queen Elder could accomplish feats such as this?

I smiled up at my muscular mate and nodded and pointed at my cheek. My big teddy bear leaned down to give me a kiss on the aforementioned cheek. Then I looked over to Belle and Illya and they nodded to us then my Goldilocks snorted at the sounds of heaving behind us.

We had the largest contingent of military personnel and vehicles in our group. We even had one of those big destructive tank vehicles that could sling projectiles great distances. It had taken a long time to travel, I had only flashes of visions and insight as we were whisked through a void with what had the impression of a pathway in it.

Something immense had batted us away, scattering the particles we had been reduced to by the Voodoo Queen, but she proved to be a match for whatever it was, as I had the impression of her collecting us where we had been scattered long and wide, before she was able to reconstitute us on this side of the barrier.

I glanced at the wrist clock gifted to me on my birthday by the always caring and considerate Parker. She looked after all of us as if we were her children though she was the youngest of us all.

I blinked when I realized too much time had passed and it was already past sundown in Seattle back in the New World. I opened my mouth to warn the others when the world before us on the other side of the city tore open, causing my ears and eyes to start bleeding from the sheer magnitude of magic it took to tear a jagged hole in the universe like that.

It was only a glance I was afforded, as it gave no warnings, at the massive creature which just clapped its hands without even stepping through the tear in reality.

Seeing the world between us and the Elder being consumed in flame and energy, obliterating the city between us, seemed to be happening in slow motion. I could see it and feel a destructive power that could tear apart continents coming at us, and we were nothing compared to it.

Kat was yelling something as she became a huge bear the likes of which the world has never seen, and she dove on me as the world was torn apart around us. I was screaming from the pressure of the magic as it tried to crush the part of me which was attuned to it as heat and energy and the power of creation itself lashed at us.

My last thought was how foolish we had been to think that we even stood a chance against these angry gods. But then it was over. My ears ringing, my skin burned and bubbled in the areas Kat couldn't cover. The weight of her bear arms around me were crushing me, and all I could smell was burned and charred flesh and hair. And my girl was still.

I struggled out from under her, in gaps in the rubble which had once been a city, and I stood on shaky legs and then shrieked in horror and agony. My love, my heart, my reason for being lay dead, half her body vaporized by the attack. She had sacrificed herself to save me. My wail was joined by another which awoke a primal fear in what was left of my awareness. And I looked over to see the huge demonic unicorn that was our friend, our family, Illya, as she roared out a cry of anguish and rage to the heavens above the charred remains of something... I threw up when I saw human bones protruding from the mess. My voice was small and disbelieving as I whispered, "Belle?"

In less than five seconds, we had lost not only the battle, but the loves of our lives and the enemy hadn't even stepped through the portal yet. It was nothing for it to do this. How could they not know they are the evil and chaos they said they sought to prevent, by destroying the mortal realm?

I was nothing to them, and wouldn't be able to even get close to such an overwhelmingly powerful enemy, but I was sure as hell going to try with the last moments of my life. I started drawing as much druidic and even black magic into my battered body as I could, beyond my limit, ignoring the

pain that would normally have crippled me. Then faltered when a voice behind me asked in horror, “Gretel?”

I spun and dropped to my knees sobbing, Raz and the group defending Cairo were here? How? Then I spun back to the enemy as it bellowed and stepped through to the smoking ruins that used to be a city of millions, an army at its feet. Rose was hissing like some sort of creature from hell as Illya's screech of a thousand tortured souls joined in. The two charged the enemy without a backward glance. I looked at the others and begged them with my eyes and a broken sob to tell me that it wasn't true. Kat and Belle were gone.

Instead shock, sorrow, then rage cycled through their eyes in an instant, then they turned their gazes to the oncoming enemy and I turned with them. We all started screaming out challenges as we followed our two sisters to meet the enemy. That creature would remember this day if we lost or not, I promised with my immortal soul that he... would bleed.

## Chapter 10 – The Gates of Seattle

Daria said simply, “They're here, Mari.”

I nodded as I felt the arrival in so many ways, through my sensitivity to dark magics, through my senses as the Red Hood as my cloak billowed out behind me in the wind, and mostly through the mantle of the Scales that the love of my life and I shared. A large piece of the Elders themselves, which held a drive to maintain balance at any cost which we resisted every day.

Something wasn't right. We had assumed they would spread out across the globe, and systematically wipe out any resistance before meeting up to combine the power of creation and destruction they held in their hands to unravel our realm.

But this... this could be bad. I felt two presences approaching the confluence of laylines, as well as the weakened and battered veil between realms that had been so abused in recent times. The likely crossover was just a half-mile inside the gates of Seattle.

It could also be fortuitous, depending on which point of entry had been abandoned. If it were one of our teams without a goddess or a reality-bending magic-user, then maybe we could combine the teams. I opened my mouth to call back to Masika.

The reclusive Elder hermit just sighed and inclined her head. I knew I pushed her and took too many liberties with her own code and moralities. She said she would not help us in any upcoming battle, yet she did acquiesce to helping us get to locations where we could face her incoming brethren.

I gave her a sad smile and a nod of appreciation. Perhaps our chances had increased from slim all the way up to unlikely. Though I had two cards up my sleeve, one that the Voodoo Queen of Neverland had surmised, and one that Daria and I were saving as a last-ditch effort.

My fist shot out when a man's voice said behind me as he leaned over my shoulder to squint his eyes to try to see what I was looking at, “It may make the difference as it is unexpect.... ow!” My strike broke Frank Baum's nose and sent him tumbling back, dozens of soldiers snapped their guns toward the man.

I held a halting hand up to the soldiers. “Stand down. He's annoying, and useless, but harmless.”

He looked hurt that I'd hit him as he reached up to wiggle the shattered cartilage and bloody mess that had been his nose a moment before. And when he let go, there was no evidence he had ever been hit as he stood and dusted his suit which looked to be something from a century prior. And all the dust and tears on it from his tumble were gone.

I hit him again.

“Ow again. What was that for?”

I sighed and said, “That was for Dorothy and the hell you have put her through. She'd have done the same if she were here... Wizard.” L. Frank Baum was just as bad as the Grimm Brothers had been for most of the rest of us. He chronicled and exaggerated the stories of Oz that he wrote about Dorothy who would one day save Oz. Always cryptic, and with enough power to do things himself but resigned to just watch as prophecy unfolds.

He nodded. “And she has on many an occasion.”

I asked, “Aren't you supposed to be protecting Oz right now, while Dot helps us fight for our very existence?”

He waved that off. “Oh pish posh, Oz is in great hands while I have come to observe with this delightful woman here.” He indicated our Elder friend. Then said with surety, “Vermillion Chrysanthemum, the delightful Munchkin protector, is ruling well during Dorothy and my absence. Until I return in either a day or seventy-two years... or maybe last week, it's hard to tell when the path to Oz does funny things to time.”

He moved over to where Masika was stringing shells onto grass twine. I didn't know where either of those things came from. She looked up at the grinning man and... well, she punched him in the nose.

“Ow! Would people stop doing that?”

She shook her head. “When you watchers stop interfering with young people's lives. Does interference sound like watching?”

He straightened his newly broken nose again and then sat beside her on the curb as another man sat on her other side whom she elbowed in the neck. The man grasped at his neck wheezing then with a popping, crunching sound, he was fine. “And a fine hello to you too Miss Titania.”

She muttered about watchers and messing around with her girl. I hadn't even seen the man arrive, and my wolf senses along with Scales abilities,

should have predicted his arrival, and I still had no clue who he was.

Baum solved that for me as I tried to piece it together myself, knowing that Masika saw Wendy, our Hook, as her child. The Wizard of Oz asked, “Uneventful trip, Barrie?” I had to blink, this was James Barrie? The man... or watcher, who wrote of Peter Pan and Neverland? No wonder Masika had crushed his trachea. It was because of this man that the love of her life, the original Hook had died.

All these watchers writing half-truths, chronicling the Avatars in so many of the realms. These were but the ones we were aware of because they dealt with the Avatars who hailed from the mortal realm. How many other watchers were meddling in so many more lives in the countless realms out there?

I looked at Daria who was looking at the men, her eyes narrowed like the Alpha wolf she was, as she growled out, “I don't suppose you are going to raise a finger to help?”

They just started stringing shells too as they gave an apologetic look. Where were all those shells coming from?

Rachel growled low and menacing and asked us, “Want I should ventilate them?” She patted her twin Sigs, and Conrad chittered a reprimand to them from her shoulder. That squirrel had no fear, and had a few demon kills of its own under its belt.

Snow placed a kiss on her wolf's cheek. “Wouldn't do any good love. They're like the Grimm brothers were, and would either step aside or heal.”

Then she leaned in and booped Conrad's nose and her eyes clouded white as she said to him in a voice that carried the power of nature herself, “This fight is beyond you little one, but you can do me an invaluable service. If things do not go well I will need the Wild Hunt. Can you please go tell the wilds around the city to prepare in case I call?”

Conrad swarmed onto her arm and chittered and chastised and then swirled down her arm and into her pocket, coming up with some dried berries packed into his mouth, and he scurried down her leg and bounded off toward the North Gate.

Daria smirked and opened her mouth, but Gretta held up a warning finger... a middle finger, to stop her. But Rachel asked for my girl, “Are you going to start singing next, and birds will flock to you?”

Her eyes, normal again, Snow smirked and said, “Flock you, love.”



I liked how Rach could still bring the playful out in Gretta. Perchta and her were becoming more and more a blended being and Gretta gave them both humanity. We all knew that one day, Perchta would be able to manifest on her own again, after she had sacrificed her physical form to save Gretta so very long ago.

We did not know if we would lose our friend when that day happened or if they would be the amalgam of personalities that have been slowly moving toward. That would be a better outcome than Rach losing Snow forever because, in their shared consciousness, Perchta has come to love Rachel just as completely as Gretta.

It reminded me so much of Ella-Marie. Though now that those two had blended so thoroughly, sharing the same form for so many centuries, they are a bit... lost? Being independent now that they can exist apart from each other at random intervals, thanks to the almost inconceivable powers that Dorothy wields. Now Parker has been brought into their odd existence and I'm embarrassed to admit, she's cutely awkward as she adjusts.

The one thing I can say for certain is that those three have given their hearts completely to each other... and it is that capacity for love that proves the elders are wrong, that the mortal realm is worthy, and can be so much more because of that love mankind is capable of.

I swayed when it felt as if a great power was pushing down on reality and just glance over to Rachel and nodded. She was the only one of us who could use the radio on her hip without shorting it, since Perchta hadn't spelled it like our cells, to be semi-magic resistant. It is so odd after all this time, for me to be able to use modern electronics. But even with her spells, most of our group could only keep our cells on for a short time before they start to, well, short.

Rachel pulled the radio from her hip as Masika and the two annoying watchers stood, their eyes on the area a half-mile away where the fabric of space started rippling and bending. She said just one word into it before clipping it on her belt again and drawing her twin Sigs, "Incoming."

The old Wall Breach sirens from the days of werewolf contagion started wailing throughout the city as soldiers started running to their ready stations. I looked at them with a mix of pride and sorrow. It was that bravery that showed another reason that mankind should be seen as redeemable by the Elders.

They had to see that these men, who had to know that there was next to nothing they could do against such overwhelming power, even though they would likely die here today trying to save the people of the mortal realm, still stood arming weapons that would be of no consequence to the destroyers of entire realms.

Then the universe itself tore, and I swear I could hear its cry of protest as a ragged hole parted reality and the power backlash I could feel from it was like a tsunami in my soul, threatening to send it tumbling away into the void again.

The sirens stopped in the city and I could hear nothing but the heartbeats of all the brave men and women around us as we held a collective breath. The silence was more unnerving than the anticipation of the Elder's arrival.

Then they came.

Two beings, who had taken a humanoid form, only fifteen feet tall, looking for all intents and purposes as the gods they fancied themselves. They looked to have stepped out of the Greek Pantheon. Looking like Apollo and Hermes complete with white togas and leaf laurel crowns on their heads. They radiated the power that Masika went through great pains to hide.

I could feel the mantle of the Scales being tugged at, confirming my suspicion that it was a part of their power that they had stripped from themselves to imbue in their vassals. And I could also feel the imbalance. Where before the imbalance skewed toward good and righteousness because all of the Avatars were in the mortal realm, it swung overwhelmingly toward corruption and an insidious poison that threatened to consume all.

If only the Elders could feel what has become of them, to see the way absolute power has tainted them, corrupted them, then they would see that this was not the way. But that is the problem when one cannot see their own flaws and believes that their way is the only way. They were just blindly moving forward with the misguided belief that was slowly rotting them from the inside.

Titania had recognized that, and she tried to convince them to abandon their ways, but when they did not listen and turned their backs on her, that is when she left the Elders to find a new way, and travel a new path.

I had to blink. Walking in front of them on leash-like chains, their arms, and legs in irons, their naked bodies beaten and bloodied, were the brothers Grimm. They looked up to see us across the six city blocks between us as the buildings seemed to be pushed aside as the world warped.

Wilhelm gave us a bloody, cheesy smile, as Jacob gave a wave from his hip the best he could in shackles. Even without their power, and mortal again, the two were irreverent. I could imagine the hell they have been giving the Elders through what looked like many sessions of torture.

The Elders' eyes both snapped to me and Daria who went wolf and settled under my hand as I dug my fingers deep into her fur. Her subsonic growl only audible to me and Rachel, though now that I think of it, Snow and Masika likely could hear it too.

They started striding toward us, the rumbling and shaking of the world around us belying the forms they had taken. That was something they had to see about themselves, they could have done as the Voodoo Queen and simply taken human form, but they chose to be more than twice the size of a normal human and appear as gods from ancient history.

They say they are here to simply reset a realm that is irredeemable, yet they chose intimidation. Should that not raise their own red flags?

As they stepped from the pathway between realms, tens of thousands of soldiers marched behind them. It was an eclectic bunch, representing dozens if not hundreds of alien or animalistic races. Some looked to be no farther developed than the Neanderthals of Earth, with clubs and loincloths, while some wore futuristic-looking armor and what could only be energy weapons.

Then General Lance stepped up beside us as we prepared to meet the incoming enemy. I looked over at him and shook my head. "Ready your men. If we cannot convince the Elders to leave in peace, they're going to need you."

He looked exasperated, and said under his breath, "I thought they were supposed to be as big as mountains, ready to consume the world. But this, this is something we can handle."

I looked at him sadly as I said, "This is just the form they choose to show us."

I placed a hand on his arm and let just a trickle of the power of the Scales unfog his eyes to see through the fake reality. I saw his eyes widen in

fear disbelief as he whispered, “Mary, Mother of God.”

And this is why I admire mankind, I had been part of it for such a short time before the cloak had chosen me to be the Red Hood. But he just swallowed, nodded, then got a look of determination on his face as he went back and started shouting orders to his men. He saw what we truly faced, and he knew the futility of it, yet he prepared to fight.

Snow took a single step toward me and with that magic that smelled of nature and earth, she was simply a white crow who landed on my shoulder. She has always amazed me with the control she had over her magics. And it also amazed me that I was friends with an actual goddess.

Rachel stepped beside us as she reholstered one weapon and placed her hand in Daria's fur as well. Then the four of us strode forward to meet the enemy through a tide of power that felt a physical thing to the Scales in me.

We met in the middle in silence, our eyes on theirs in defiance. I opened my mouth but snapped it shut again when Wilhelm said, “Hello. Nice day for a stroll isn't it?” I sighed and looked away from Hermes' eyes. It took all I could muster not to wince. From a distance, the brothers looked bad, but up close it was even worse, they had been beaten and tortured and not a single inch of them was not heavily bruised or bleeding. And their faces beat to hamburger.

He was grinning at me, looking at me through two swollen eyes. I asked, “Do you mind? We were in the middle of a confrontation of wills.”

“Oh, but of course. Don't mind us, we'll just stand here... in chains. But I don't suppose you have any food on you? They haven't fed us in months, they sometimes forget we're physical beings. Good thing the laws of nature don't work the same on the pathways between realms or we would have perished long ago.”

He was trying to keep things light, and to annoy the Elders like he was attempting by this banter, I sighed. “You two are the most high maintenance pains in the asses that I've ever...”

Hermes snapped out, “Enough incessant prattle. You Grimm brothers are the most irreverent creatures, if we didn't want you to observe the fall of your precious mortal realm today, we would have dispensed with you long ago. That we had ever chosen you to wear the mantle of Scales still eludes us.”

Rachel, knowing the game being played by the annoying brothers said as Jacob worked at some earwax in his ear like he wasn't paying attention to what was happening, "We just call them the fuckin' Grimm brothers."

Then Jacob spoke, lifting a finger that looked to have been broken and healed crookedly. "Point of fact, you never chose us for the mantle. It was Isla who recommended us. So all things being equal..."

The other Elder roared out, the windows in the buildings around us shattering, "Enough!"

We all blinked as our ears rang, and Wilhelm said, "I think I need a restroom. Haven't peed in ages and..."

With a roar of frustration, Hermes yanked the chains, sending the brothers careening through the air to tumble along the street in a tangle of limbs and chains. I winced internally without showing any outward signs of it. They were mortal now and that would have killed most men. But they staggered to their feet. Jacob said, "Ow?" And Wilhelm contemplated it a second and said, "Most definitely. Ow. But on a positive note, I don't have to pee anymore."

Apollo roared again, "Silence or I will take your tongues. Do you never shut your mouths?"

Ok, I was smirking now. Even mortal now, those two had the power to drive everyone around them mad. I voiced this to keep them off balance like this. "They do get a bit annoying, don't they?" I was motioning with my hand behind my back for them to go, to get to safety. Well, as relatively safe as they could be at ground zero.

Wilhelm said as they trudged along, limping toward Masika, dragging heavy chains behind them, "We'll just go sit down to watch and catalog our new injuries. Can bruises get bruises?" Then Jacob asked, "About that food... even some..." Isla materialized by their sides, looking as if she wished to help them along.

"Go!" I had to cover my ears at the shriek from Hermes. Then he glared at us. "This is why your kind would have never amounted to anything, and proves why there is no help for..."

Rachel asked almost innocently, "What? Because of them? They're as annoying to us as you. We could'a killed them ourselves for ya, and saved you the trip here if that was your reasoning." I had to grin, we all knew

instinctively what the others were doing, and if we could keep them off balance for...

Hermes crouched to place his face inches from Rachel and he shouted in that earth rumbling frustration. "Silence..." Then he paused, his nose twitching as he pulled slowly back, his eyes narrowing. "You stink of the demon realm."

I was almost relieved to hear the hesitation in his words. So they truly were afraid of something, afraid of the demons. Good.

Rachel covered her nose. "Yeah? Well, you need a breath mint."

I tried not to snort at Wilhelm's voice in the distance. "It's a bit drafty this time of year without clothes." Jacob adding, "Though it is freeing." Those men are the type every sane person loves to hate. But they were our annoying asses, who had saved me from eternal slumber, so a part of me was relieved that they were still alive.

Apollo loomed over me and Daria as he stepped up to us. "Scales, you have failed in your duties, this realm has been out of balance for some time now, due to the mismanagement by the prior Scales and your refusal to execute your responsibilities."

I shook my head, not blinking as the immense power of the being washed over me. "I disagree. If you could feel what we feel, it was when you stepped through to this realm when the balance torqued overwhelmingly to the side of corruption. You have lost yourselves and cannot see what you have become. Deigning to preside over all the realms as judges, jury, and executioners had perverted your original purpose, to observe the natural development of other realms. If it is their fate to extinguish themselves, it should be left to them. No matter your power, you are not gods, believe me, I know one."

Apollo shook his head as Hermes crossed his arms over his chest as if in judgment while he spoke. "You cannot begin to conceive what we Elders can see. Your words cannot prevent the inevitable. We will reset the mortal realm, to rid eternity of this and countless other planets which have kept the realm in chaos. With us shepherding the new worlds we create, a more acceptable reality will come to be."

Then Hermes said, "Return our power to us, the mantle of the Scales will be given to our new creation."

This confirmed my suspicions about the mantle of the Scales. That it was part of the Elders' own power that they had cleaved from their own and shaped it into this driving need for balance... and that they could not simply take it from us. It had to be given of our own free will or bestowed upon others just as the Grimm brothers had given it to us before Isla took them to their fate with the Elders.

So it was a power of its own now and they wanted to unmake it to add the power back into their collective. Which gave us either a bargaining chip or a potential weapon if things went bad here. I said simply, "No."

Apollo sighed and said, "Then we will just strip it from your corpses."

Snow hopped off my shoulder and Perchta towered in front of the two Elders, virtually glowing with pure silver power, her snow-white antlers reaching to the sky. I've never seen her manifest in anything larger than human and it was awe-inspiring and a little frightening to know I had exchanged blows with her before she had the bulk of her strength back. Now, she was almost who she had been, nature herself, a goddess of both love and of wrath.

This was it, what we all had feared, she and Gretta had finally become one, and Perchta had just been reborn. I could feel it with all of my being, her power called to the wolf in me. She said in a tone that sounded like the fury of a hurricane, tamed only by her sheer will, "Elders of Xiltrylnyn, be it known that this realm is under my protection. If you and your brethren attempt to do it harm, then I Perchta, Mother Goddess of Nature and leader of the Wild Hunt will stand against you."

Hermes looked up at her and said, "This is not your concern, nature witch, return to your gardens and leave this realm to its fate."

I wondered what these Elders real names were, I just knew who they were trying to look like, so Apollo and Hermes it would be until I knew better. Though I assumed Apollo to be Lapetus, their leader.

Perchta smiled down at me and I could see Snow somewhere in those cloudy white eyes swirling with barely restrained power, and then she inclined her head slightly to me before looking back at the Elders and said primly, "No."

My eyes could barely track Apollo's hand as he struck at her. She simply, almost casually, raised a hand, and all the power he had channeled behind

his punch struck a shimmering wall of magic that tasted of nature and the creation of life itself.

They both slid back a dozen feet as the power attenuated and burst to the sides vaporizing buildings and heaving the ground, the great wall surrounding the city cracked and crumbled where the power struck it. We were all barely able to keep our feet through the shaking of the very earth itself and the cacophony of sound of rushing power and destruction.

Perchta was panting, her legs looking shaky then she smiled almost cruelly and I followed her gaze. Both Apollo and Hermes' noses were bleeding. Hermes looked almost panicked as he motioned a hand and their horde started to charge.

I paid that no mind as I smiled, feeling the predator in me rising over the fact that these Elders, who fancied themselves gods, were bleeding. Gods, do not bleed. As one we charged at the flood of warriors, snarling and bellowing our challenge as Perchta clashed with the Elders.

I swore to myself, that this day, no matter the outcome, would be a day the Elders would know they had been in the fight of their lives, as I dove on the first of the enemy.



## Chapter 11 – One Big Lizard

We stared on as the massive shell of energy cracked and fell away. Ella-Marie swept me back with an arm. “Behind us Parker.”

Dorothy looked from the creature emerging from the dissolving shell of reality with a cocked eyebrow toward her girl. Toni blushed and squished up her face as she said almost cutely, “Sorry.”

I just stared on in disbelief as Ella-Marie said, “Bloody hell, that's one big lizard.” It was, and I was a little confused too.

I know what all of us were expecting, we knew Toto had been thinking of Godzilla and all those old black and white monster movies of the giant lizard stomping through Tokyo. Apparently, Mnemosyne had used the intent behind Toni's thought to model a similar threat. I pointed at the beast as it shook its head as if to clear it and then swung its gaze to us, “Umm... that ain't Godzilla.”

As the monster roared, it hesitated at all of our confused looks. It hissed out, “I shall be your death. And when you and your allies fall, then we will reshape the mortal realm and shepherd it into what it could have been.” Its massive tongue snicked out to taste the air.

Even Dot was smashing her lips to one side and pointed at the creature, a questioning look on her face. Toto shrugged.

Our confusion seemed to enrage it as it bellowed, shaking the ground and cracking parts of the great stone wall we stood upon. “Prepare to be undone!”

Ella-Marie held up a finger. “Point of fact before we get to the undoing, but why do you look like some little girl's feckin' pet chameleon? Not saying it's a bad look on you, you really pull it off, but I thought you were trying to scare us, Meepleboop or whatever yer feckin' name was.”

This oversize chameleon pulled back a bit, looking confused, and if it wasn't fifty feet tall standing on its hind legs, the expression would have looked cute. Then it roared out, “Silence! I told you that I am Mnemosyne. You will accord me the respect that is due an Elder of Xiltrylnyn! My power quested out a reptile form when I plucked the thought from the weak-minded simpleton and this was the most prevalent one in the area.”

Toto pouted. “Hey!”

I pointed out as I noted the look on Dot's face and felt immense amounts of her reality-warping magic flowing from her, knowing now that the girls were just stalling for something. "That's a mouthful. How about we just call you Meep from Zil? No, that's too much like Invader Zim, so maybe..."

She screeched at us and started rumbling toward us, her power flaring so much I almost couldn't breathe, being a sensitive. Ella-Marie wasn't used to how I felt magic as a physical thing, and being in my body, they staggered when they felt just a portion of what I felt. The remaining buildings that had not fallen in the battle thus far, crumbled in her wake. Ok, 'now' the giant chameleon was sort of scary.

Ella-Marie, Toto, and I took defensive stances, with Toto dogging out, but Dot just smirked, a truly wicked gleam in her eyes as she made a fist and yanked at the air. Before the lizard had made it even five steps, ropes of crackling emerald lightning thicker than the trunks of the soaring redwoods in California, wrapped around the four legs and tail of the mammoth reptile and yanked it back, off its feet.

I had to cover my crystal ears as the beast shrieked in fury and agony as it was pulled up against the tear in reality, the one way portal into the mortal realm. With the sizzling and popping of flesh and screaming of the thrashing monster as its body was being torn apart, it was pulled back by the ropes of Oz magic.

It made a desperate slashing motion and the portal just ceased to be. The massive beast slumped, then crumpled, its entire backside missing, including its spine, and half of one side. I could feel the rage before I saw it in the Elder's eyes, then with almost a wheeze and flare of its eyes, the emerald lightning binding it, exploded and Dot quickly shielded us as debris flew in all directions destroying the wall and the city for a couple of blocks around. Even the great Tokyo Wall that surrounded the city, was cracked and crumbling for a couple of hundred feet.

We tumbled down to the ground, I sprawled on my butt, Ella-Marie landing in that damned three-point hero stance of hers, cracking the road beneath her, as Toto landed gracefully beside her on all four paws. We looked up to see Dot suspended in the air by her sheer will and she growled out a challenge and a tornado caught her and thrust her toward the helpless lizard.

The power in the lizard's eyes extinguished and with a wet tearing and popping sound, its head liquefied and a twenty-foot tall version of Mnemosyne, charged out of the macabre remains as she dove at Dot.

Just before they clashed, I noted that the Elder's left side was charred and bubbled, her left arm hanging loosely with a blackish goo I think may have been what the Elders had for blood, dripping from it. Dorothy of Oz had truly injured the being who believed herself a god.

I felt it an instant before it happened, I reached a hand uselessly forward as I started to warn Dot. Just as the two magical titans collided, the Elder released what felt like all her magic at once, intending to end this fight and us in one blow.

I screamed and fell to my knees as reality was torn around us in spiked, ragged waves of the sort of energy that could reshape creation itself. Somehow, Ella-Marie had moved in front of me, her magics sinking deep into the Earth itself to anchor us as the magic shockwave passed over and past us as the city of Tokyo was shredded, and torn from this reality. Millions of people torn apart in the raging torrent of power, with just a thought from the Elder. I could feel it all happening around us as the spirit of the world itself screamed in my soul.

I lay there on the ground for three shuddering breaths, before I could sit up. I looked around in horror at the crater we sat in, where one of the biggest cities in the world used to be. The ocean started roaring into the ragged, bowl-shaped depression as we attempted to drag ourselves to our feet.

Ella-Marie was yanking me up, her eyes on the wall of water roaring down toward us. "Parker, time to go!"

But then we were on the rim of the crater on the far side of a three-mile wide crater that was at least a half-mile deep. Dorothy was there on one knee, panting, her clothing singed and smoking, looking shocked as she mumbled, "That bitch can hit."

Then she looked around, and froze as she asked in a tiny voice, "Toto?" We turned and my heart caught in my throat at the bloody mass of limbs and fur. Toto was gasping as her massive canine chest heaved, trying to take in air.

She shifted to human as her eyes rolled back, and Toni... Antionette looked to be a scared child as her eyes tried to focus on the witch beside us.

“Dot?” Then her breathing stopped and Dorothy of Oz, the Witch of the Four Cardinal Points dropped to her knees and scooped her love into her arms and sobbed.

Through my tears and the pain of the vice on my heart which was immobilizing me, I felt something. Something so black and evil building that it was smothering me, I knew what it was, and it terrified me as much as the Elders, it was... wicked.

I grabbed Ella-Marie's hand and dragged her away as fast as we could go. The rim of the crater exploded into a torrent of chaotic crackling green power, like a shaft of coherent green lightning, fifty yards wide, which sought to punish heaven itself as it lit the sky as it shot past the clouds. We dove at the last instant and barely avoided being vaporized like everything inside the pillar of energy, including the body of our friend and Dorothy's one true love. The only thing keeping the wicked inside of her from running rampant. But now she was gone...

Our witch spun and screamed, emerald lightning actually trailing from her eyes, cutting through the fabric of space around her as she dove at the Elder who was diving back at her from above somehow. The tone of her scream came from something evil, something that made even the most alpha of predators turn and run as Antionette's name seemed to be burned into all of creation.

The next moment the Elder was screaming for a different reason as the two clashed, their magics tangling, and the rage behind Dorothy's slicing through Mnemosyne's like it wasn't even there, sending the would-be god tumbling through the devastation that had once been a great city, her shoulder set aflame with that green crackling flame.

Dorothy just hovered the two hundred yards over to the staggered Elder, the ground beneath her cracking open as the earth and stone beneath her actually started burning under the sheer power spiraling around her in a chaotic green storm.

I just stared helplessly as they collided, again and again, Dot slinging such powerful spells and lightning that it felt as if the world around her was dying as she sucked its essence dry. It was all the Elder could do to defend against it as she backed up, deflecting blow after blow of that sick, dark power.

I could see how the wicked could corrupt someone, and why the two wicked witches of Oz had been so feared. Here Dot had lost herself, and the look on her face was half rage over the loss of her love, and half a euphoric glee of unleashing this soul corrupting magic storm. Had we lost Dot completely?

Shuddering at the thought, I imagined that Dorothy could be just as big a threat as an Elder, judging by what I was witnessing, with an Elder on the ropes like this.

I looked to Ella-Marie and she shook her head at me. “This is beyond us, Parker. This is god-level shite. I hadn't wanted to believe us to be so inconsequential... but...” She looked at the scale of devastation, eyes red from the tears she had shed for Antoinette. I've never seen my love look so... helpless.

Then I realized that I was wrong. No matter how powerful any being is, even a god, there are limits. You can't sling around power like Dorothy was doing without some sort of cost. I could feel it with each subsequent attack, Dot was weakening. I called out, “Dorothy, you have to...” Then a gag was covering my mouth as she pushed on harder than before.

Her voice reverberated through the fabric of space itself as she told Mnemosyne, “You took from me the one thing that brought me joy, that brought me peace. And in your ignorance, you've set me free.”

She thrust her hands up and yanked down, I fell to my knees as I struggled to remove the gag like I was pulled down with the thousands of green bolts of crackling lightning that left furrows in reality as they converged upon the Elder.

Dot's voice was heard over the cacophony of deafening thunder and the shrieking of the Elder, “That's it, scream for me, little god!”

Then it was over, Dorothy dropped to the ground, panting and sweating, borderline insanity and glee in her eyes as she looked at the Elder who staggered and fell backward onto the ground, her skin burned everywhere, her clothing and hair burned away.

We just looked on and I, for the first time, was terrified of our friend. That was what she was capable of without Toto to calm her...

But then the Elder moved. She sat up and struggled to get to her feet, swaying as she started to chuckle. Her chuckle was interrupted by a cough as she spat out black ichor. Then she said, “You used most of your power,

Witch of Oz. I still hold more than you, so it is over. And after we reshape the mortal realm, we will head to Oz next. Your realm defied us, but now it will not have its defender, as you will be dead.”

We had watched our friend, our ally, give her best, and now it was the Elder's turn. Dot was only at a fraction of her power now as she was pushed back, blow after physical blow, impact after impact of barely deflected magic, and she was wavering.

The elder grabbed her with her only good, massive hand, and proceeded to slam Dorothy face-first into the ground, then she lifted her to look her in the eyes and said, “You were a formidable adversary, no one has hurt me the way you have, for that, I will remember your name, Witch.”

She started to crush my friend in her grasp, and I had never before felt so helpless, not even the time werewolves were bearing down upon me the day I met my Ella-Marie. I was going to watch yet another person I loved, die before my eyes.

That's when I felt it and realized Ella-Marie was no longer by my side. It felt as if the earth was being drawn up in massive amounts into one spot. I looked back to Mnemosyne, to see Ella-Marie standing under her, where she held Dot in her hand, dangling above the wreckage of the city.

Ella was pulling in more earth energy than I thought even possible, far beyond her usual limit as she took on a brilliant crystal sheen. I shouted out, “No!” Knowing she couldn't channel that much, it would...

Then the world shook as three things happened at once while I screamed in denial at hearing “We love you, Parker,” in my head, wishing what I witnessed not to be true. A huge spire of pure diamond crystal shot up from the ground, up through the damaged arm of the Elder, shredding it, as Ella-Marie, the loves of my life, shattered into a million pieces, and my heart died inside my chest as my girls gave their lives to save Dot's.

I blinked in that denial and disbelief as the Elder bellowed in a primal sort of pain, dropping Dorothy and grasping a bloody stump where its arm had been sheered off. I charged forward, the stone that had once been my heart filling me with a blinding rage I didn't know I was capable of.

I was slinging my arms wide as I reached the mortally wounded, vile being, who had taken my loves away from me. And a rain of huge crystal shards I had drawn through my body erupted from my splayed arms, and

slammed into the bloody wound, causing my wounded enemy to howl in a keening pain.

Dot had struggled back to her feet and I could feel her reaching for her power, what little there was and she brought the lightning again, all centered on the savagely bleeding wound on the woman who would be a god. I kept slinging volley after volley of those oversize shards, Dot's spells combining with them, causing them to super-heat and explode as they sank into the enemy.

The Elder's screaming abruptly stopped, then she tumbled back, the howling ceasing and she began to shrink. Dot stopped her assault and fell to her knees, beyond exhausted. And I could feel the power of the Elder shudder then fail. As she died, a swirling mass of sandy looking power drifted out toward Dot, and with a cruel look in her eyes, she reached out, and that dying power of the Elder was sucked into Dorothy Gale, to become part of her as the power of the witches she had killed was claimed by her long ago.

She arched her back in a spasm as her power was rekindled, then Dorothy of Oz stepped up to the corpse of the Elder, sneered and said through tears of green flame that burned through the stone and earth below her feet as they dripped, "This is for Antoinette." Then she curled her fingers and green lightning engulfed Mnemosyne's body, tearing it to pieces, leaving a charred shadow where the Elder had lay.

Then Dorothy spun toward me, cruel malice in the green lightning barely contained in her eyes as she sneered, raising her hand, energy crackling. And I fell to my knees, sobbing over the hole where my heart should have been, I could feel the loss of Ella and Marie as a physical void in my heart and mind where the reassuring pressure of their presence, which always seemed to watch over me, had been. But now they were gone, and I couldn't stop sobbing. At least I would be with them again soon. We had lost Dorothy too, and she was going to send me to meet my loves in the next life.

But the wicked witch of Oz, who had taken over my friend, hesitated, and she looked over to the crystal shards littering the debris of a once-proud city, the shards of my heart... and she blinked.

"Parker?"

Then I was sobbing into her shoulder as the Witch of the Four Cardinal Points held me, and we cried together over the loss of our only loves.

Then she stood, I felt her renewed power starting to crackle, and almost flinched away when it engulfed me too. But it didn't burn, or slash at me like I thought it might, instead it seemed to cocoon me protectively as she said in a hoarse voice, "There are more of these bastards. We have to go."

I could feel Masika's power questing for us, but before it could touch us, and bring us back, Dot did it herself. Her power was even stronger than I remembered, was it the power from Mnemosyne that she had taken as her own?

Whatever it was, she slashed at the air and my ears started bleeding when she tore a rent in reality and stepped us through to where I instinctively knew was Seattle, and straight into a world on fire.



## Chapter 12 – London Has Fallen

Robyn corkscrewed through the air in front of me, firing her bow as she called out, “Mandywolf, they are flanking the last of the soldiers.” I nodded as I saw her arrow, blessed by Perchta herself, make an impossible shot as it sliced through a projectile that was heading toward me. Well impossible for anyone but Robyn of Locksley, making her just that much more desirable and sexy to me.

I watched the explosion of flame and shrapnel and looked down to see a tall crablike being as it discarded the tube of what looked like a primitive version of a shoulder-fired missile, moments before it and a dozen enemy around him were taken out by a cannonball from the Sea Devil which exploded with the unrestrained magics the Lost Boys had imbued it with.

A human-looking woman in a trailing cloak, had waved a hand and the magic was deflected from her, all those around her weren't so lucky. She wasn't the first magic-user in the swarm. This whole battle seemed wrong to me. Our adversaries were all conscripted unwillingly to fight for the Elders or their realms would suffer the same fate as ours. While some appeared to be willing and eager participants, happily trying to inflict pain and suffering, more than once I saw fear on the faces of those trying to kill us.

There was the one young catlike female who was just cowering in the wreckage. She didn't look old enough to be fighting a battle like this. When I landed near her the abject terror in her eyes gave me pause. My morality won out over my desire to destroy the Elders and all they brought with them. I had calmed the girl, then flew her up to the Sea Devil, and assured her the purser would take care of her. The Lost Boys were fascinated with her as her tail swished in her agitation and fear.

For a bit I was worried the supply of people and creatures that Phoebe had brought with her, him, whatever, was endless, but they had finally stopped flooding out of the portal and it closed. I glanced around from where I hovered after taking out a humanoid looking man with some sort of jet pack and some kind of lightning pike, with a well-placed round from a musket-ball to one of the tanks on his back. Hey, combustibles are combustibles. And whatever he was using to power the pack, had him

blowing to bits over the field of combatants below in a spectacular burst of what looked to be plasma.

Parker and Raz would be giddy that while some combatants were almost mindless brutes, some had advanced weapons like this and even some space weapons. They'd kill for a ray gun. I paused and hoped they were ok. I hated that our group had to split up. It left us all weaker.

I snorted as a huge wall of flame ripped across from another magic user, and it was snuffed out as it hit a wall of force Wendy had brought up to protect the last few soldiers before she dove into the air to engage Phoebe directly again. Weak was not a descriptor one would use for my mom.

I exhaled shakily, a full quarter of London now laid in flaming ruin and rubble. The air squadrons had been batted from the sky by Phoebe with virtually no effort. And the more advanced races with her had silenced the heavy artillery and tanks early on.

There was a moment of panic when the suits who had come with us, had fired up some equipment that had me spasming and plummeting to the ground like a meteor, my entire being feeling as if it were on fire. Mom had barely caught me as she staggered on her feet. Even the Elder looked stunned for a moment. This was one of the weapons the covert government black ops assholes had fashioned to combat the Avatars if they felt we were any threat to them.

The asshats were disrupting magic around the device, which meant their best defenders were hobbled. The men didn't know what hit them when I fired half a clip of my dual Glocks into the device as Robyn's arrows struck it and the Elder, some of their magic users, and mom obliterated it with magic. The resulting blast killed a few of the people who were supposed to have been on our side. They brought a pea shooter to a boss fight and paid the price. Does it speak ill of me that I didn't have any compassion for their plight?

The Sea Devil climbed back up into the sky after it had lost most of its altitude from the attack.

I glanced back at the huge pirate ship that would dwarf Old Iron Sides as I hovered, cannons belching death from above, the pirate flag streaming in the wind. Half the sails were torn and tattered, small fires on the deck were being attended to and there were pockmarks of damage from the more

powerful magic attacks from a couple of their combatants and Phoebe herself.

But she was still sea and sky worthy as the Lost Boys and the former Lost Boys who were her crew, continued to fire in defiance. Projectiles and energy beams and magic rippled in the air just inches from the ship as the massive shield of magic that allowed her to sail through the Nothing which even the Elders could not enter without being erased from existence without even a memory of their ever being.

Flights of planes flew overhead marked with flags from a dozen European and African countries and hundreds of parachutes opened over London. Soldiers and military equipment coming to join the fight for the survival of mankind.

The fighter escorts were able to fire one volley of missiles and tracer rounds into the enemy horde, wreaking havoc as they brought death and destruction, before Phoebe roared in frustration and with a swipe of his hand, seemed to tear open the sky and all the planes were swallowed. They would be stuck in that place between places, the paths we sail between the many realms out there.

The Elder had originally tried to do that to the Sea Devil, telling me that as omnipotent as they wanted everyone to think they were, they didn't know as much as they thought. You can't stuff a vessel that can sail the pathways, back behind the veil. When the Sea Devil simply sailed right back out into the sky from behind the veil, firing a full broadside at him which had him stagger back a half step, the Elder looked frustrated.

I watched as Phoebe swung a blade, of what looked like some sort of coherent magical energy, at mom. It struck her hook and the tone of her magic rang like a bell that rippled across the entire battlefield, I could feel my own reality ripple as it passed and the blade... shattered into fizzling energy.

Tinkerbell, Robyn, and I flew off to defend the reinforcements that were parachuting in. Helpless and defenseless as the enemy below started picking them off one at a time. I growled low and deep. Letting the rumble of it urge me on.

I slid up beside a French Paratrooper and spun and started unloading a clip at the enemy below who had projectile weapons firing at us. She was firing an automatic rifle into the thinning mass of fighters below, far less

accurately, screaming out the challenge of a warrior, before her voice and gun were silenced.

I roared in anger as I looked over to see her hanging limply by the straps, blood covering her chest where her body armor did her no good.

Drawing my cutlass and dagger I swooped down low, my toes grazing the rubble-strewn ground as I spun through the enemy, mowing down as many as my blades could reach. Then... I collided with a wall. Well, not a wall, but a wall of muscle.

I looked up from the ground to a lizard-like being that reminded me of a gorilla. It smirked at me and cracked its knuckles and in English, or maybe it wasn't English since in my travels on the Sea Devil, the magic of the Lost Boys has somehow made it so we understood the people in all the realms we sailed through. Their version of a universal translator. "This is going to be fun, little girl."

I was seeing stars as I was tumbling into the mass of fighters when he struck me with what felt like a sledgehammer instead of a fist. I shook my head and sprang to my feet, slashing my cutlass across a fanged doglike creature's chest while jamming my dagger up under the chin of some sort of magic-user in mid cast. They fell to my sides as I sheathed the weapons then pulled out my twin telescoping batons and flicked my wrists to extend them.

I took a defensive stance as I glared at the monkey lizard, nudging my chin up, inviting him to attack. He was happy to oblige as he flung his arms wide, sending his own nearby allies tumbling around him as he charged at me.

Being twice my height and easily five times my mass, he easily knocked aside the combatants as he came. I'm sure he just saw a weak little human girl... with a tail. What he didn't know was that I... am wolf.

I dodged his first few swings by merely bobbing side to side, using my wolf speed and reflexes, giving his arms sharp hits with my batons to keep him overextending. Then I dug in with my front foot, using the same energy I used to fly to actually push me down hard to anchor me in place as my right leg flashed out to strike him halfway up his chest.

Well, I was sort of aiming for his throat, but as I said, he was twice my height and I'm stuck in this stupid nineteen-year-old body. But it still had the desired effect with my wolf strength as he stumbled back, almost

tripping over himself as he had to swing one hand back to the ground behind him to arrest his fall and stay on his feet.

I was still spinning and came around with a roundhouse as my leg snapped out to catch him on his chin. He spun and went down before struggling to his feet. He reached up and wiped the blueish blood from his mouth and looked at it as I bladed my body my batons pointed down, one in front and one behind me as I told him with a wicked grin, "You're right, this is going to be fun."

He smiled widely and charged, more cautiously this time. Then we engaged in a series of rapid-fire strikes and kicks. We moved back and forth, each taking the initiative after trading a few blows, shoving the others around us away or killing them so we could face off.

He lunged and took me off guard by feigning a kick, and one of his huge fists came swinging down on my shoulder and I growled and snapped my little fangs at him to get him to back off as I absorbed some of the impact by dropping into a roll. I lost a baton from the tingling fingers of a useless arm.

I rolled into a three-point stance, my other baton pointed toward Lizzy Boy and growled as menacingly as I could, and to my ears, it sounded like a puppy tugging on a sock. Oh how I hate the Lost Boys, let me count the ways.

He started to move toward me again to press his advantage, but then hesitated as I rolled my injured shoulder, bones making loud popping sounds as they moved back into place. I clenched my fist experimentally and smirked at his surprise. We wolves heal fast and are harder to kill than anyone might believe since our curse keeps us alive so we can suffer for all time.

For the first time, he didn't look smug as I held my hand out and made a beckoning motion, curling my fingers toward me quickly. He looked around and grabbed the arm of one of his fallen comrades and with a sickening wet tearing sound, he tore it from the corpse and brandished it like a club as he charged.

I heard human screams. Hell, I didn't have time for this chump. I pulled a Glock from inside my coat and fired once, and turned away to look for the source of the screams as the shocked look on his face went slack before he

crumpled to the ground with a new, angrily bleeding third eye in the middle of his forehead.

I holstered the gun, scooped up my second baton and collapsed them both as I took to the air, the enemy grasping at my feet as they closed the gap our fighting had made as I growled out, "And don't call me little girl."

I was sent tumbling through the air when a shock wave of power shook the world. I glanced over to see Hook and the Elder slinging incomprehensible amounts of magic at each other, as more shock waves rippled from them as they canceled each other out.

I knew that the artifact, the hook on Wendy's arm was as powerful as an Elder, the prior Hook had held them off with it before calling the Nothing with it to prevent them from ever entering Neverland again. Masika had told us once that it held the power of creation itself, but was only as strong as the will of its wielder.

Mom... she was stubborn and strong-willed. I should know, she keeps finding the toads and alligators I bring home to the ship, and no amount of whining... argh! God damned Lost Boys! I swear that one day I'll get even with them for this damnable make believe they've put on me. I keep finding myself acting like a teen.

I smirked and spun through the air as I made my way to where the newcomers were being slaughtered on one side by the horde and held off by an angry fairy trailing fairy dust that was sizzling flesh on the other side.

I pulled my Glocks and ejected the magazines, slammed them home on my rapid load rig over fresh magazines, and I landed as I started unloading into the oncoming rush of bodies, roaring out a challenge. I was hit a couple of times and hissed as my body rejected the projectiles and they plinked to the ground as the wounds healed up. I returned the favor to the armed creatures. They... didn't heal.

This gave the new coalition of troops a moment to organize as they formed up on me and my little glowing stepmom. Then they unleashed hell into the dwindling enemy. Flame throwers, automatic weapons fire, and anti-personnel shoulder-fired grenade launchers.

The world lurched around us and the ground cracked, a fissure spreading swallowing up combatants from both sides as a new shock wave, hundreds of times more powerful than the last, blew us back like straw in a hurricane.

I took flight and pushed against the energy wave and stabilized myself to see a crater, a quarter-mile in diameter where mom and the Elder had been. Now the Elder staggered to his feet and I panicked a moment before I saw Mom pushing rubble off of herself at the rim of the crater, wiping a little blood from the corner of her mouth as she grinned wickedly.

The two titans looked exhausted as they flew at each other again. Holy shit.

I flew higher and looked around the devastation at all the dead strewn about the battlefield that used to be one of the most amazing cities in the world. I saw the Queen's flag fluttering in the distance. The British really were a stubborn lot, weren't they?

The realization came to me as I looked at the damage not only to the city but the land itself with fissures and chasms heading out from the crater-like a spiderweb of scars in the Earth herself, that we were insignificant to the true struggle. What happened in this lesser conflict between the horde and mortals was just incidental. We were all just pawns being played in the bigger game that was beyond us all. The real fight was being waged by the titans, the gods, the ones with power that could wipe us all out in an instant.

As if she could read my mind, my beautiful mate flew up to my side and Robyn said, "Mandywolf, we must hold these troops at bay, to let Wendy do what must be done without interference." Then she added, "She is a wonder to behold."

I sighed then nodded and said with all the pride a daughter could have for her mother, "Yes. Yes, she is." She truly was a badass in every sense of the word.

Then I looked down and headed down to protect the humans who were regrouping again. I looked to the enemy who were themselves massing for what looked to be a final push, outnumbering the mortals ten to one, then promised as I spoke aloud for those gathered to hear, "Regardless of the outcome this day, those fucking Elders are going to know that they had been in a fight like no other."

The roar of cheers that went up told me that mankind was not as broken as the Elders believed. And we charged, clashing with the larger force, so mom could get down to business.

I picked up a weapon in the severed hand of the first man whom I had disarmed, literally, as I rolled past, and fired it. A pulse of energy burned

through two others in front of me. And if it weren't for the bloodlust and song of the hunt singing through my blood, I would have been giddy. Ok, maybe a part of me was. Ray gun! I had a ray gun and Parker was going to be so jealous. I strode forward, firing.

Errant energy from Hook and Phoebe was tearing rifts in space around them, killing the closest of combatants and tearing the very earth around them asunder. More of the city was being consumed as fissures opened to swallowed entire city blocks. The Thames was actually burning as if the oxygen and hydrogen molecules inside the water could no longer hold their molecular cohesion and separated and burned.

I winced as the humans around us fell to the superior numbers of the enemy but that number was quickly dwindling itself until at last, I went to a knee gasping in exhaustion when even my wolf stamina's limit had been reached as the last plantlike animal fell under my cutlass. Robyn landed beside me, panting and sweating herself, and Tink landed on the brim of my hat, wiping beads of sweat that looked to be dew from her forehead.

I glanced around to see that the field had been won, but at great cost. Besides the two power slinging titans that were tearing up reality, not another living soul except the three of us were left standing.

We all just stared transfixed at the two beings fighting at such a frightening scale that the very world shook and split apart around them. Did they know the damage they were doing to the very fabric of space as it tore and bled power igniting everything it touched? The early morning twilight was lit up like the face of the sun, or like by the fires of hell herself.

But even at such an unimaginable scale, their spells and blows were a fraction of what they had been when they first engaged in battle. They were tiring, and making mistakes as both of their reactions slowed as their power ebbed.

We felt helpless. There was nothing we could do to help Mom. But then I heard the roaring of thunder, realizing it was the sound of cannon-fire as the Sea Devil slid up in the sky above us, belching hellfire and iron as cannonballs backed by the magic of the Lost Boys' imagination whistled through the air and started pummeling Phoebe. He stumbled back under the weight of the barrage as magic exploded in gouts of searing flame that crackled with an unnatural energy.



Mom took a moment to place her hand and hook on her knees to catch her breath as the unrelenting cannon-fire pushed the exhausted Elder back.

Phoebe growled out in frustration and slung a ribbon of power through the air which seemed to swallow the world in its path, it collided with the magic protecting the pirate ship and it heaved and shuddered, some of the rigging snapping and fell to the deck, but it weathered the strike. It couldn't take many of those, as the magic protecting her was almost used up in the battle as it had taken so many strikes from various types of weapons from the horde. Mom would have to use her hook to recharge the mystic protections.

The smile that appeared on Phoebe's face told me he had sussed it out too as he looked between Wendy and the Sea Devil, and he prepared to lash out at the ship again. Mom saw this and she dove and took a hit from one of those dark ribbons of reality swallowing magic and gasped.

She went to a knee as her hook sung out a sour note, not able to fully attenuate the strike. "Mom!" I stepped forward but was restrained by Robyn on my right and Tinkerbelle who had bigged on my left.

A red gash was apparent on Wendy's face as she looked back at us, restrained pain in her face as she said hoarsely, "I'm going to summon the Nothing."

We all froze... if she brought the Nothing, it would swallow whatever it touched and we wouldn't even remember whatever it was to mourn it. She'd cut the mortal realm off from all the other realms forever, with only the Sea Devil able to travel through it and still exist. That told us she was at the end of her wits and wasn't sure she could prevail.

I opened my mouth to tell her not to do it, that we could regroup with the others when a shadow passed over us all. We looked up to see a huge plane with Russian markings on it passing over the area, in front of the rising sun. And something dropped from it.

We watched the single item fall toward us, what good would one... and my eyes widened, they wouldn't would they? We were down here too, and the Queen! The others realized what I had too as Mom screamed out to us, "Get to the ship! Now!" Her eyes wide and manic and I was being dragged bodily by both Robyn and Tinkerbelle up to the Sea Devil.

I watched as the nuke hit, realizing we weren't going to make it in time. But the girls slung me backward and as the blinding flash of the nuclear

blast reached me, I had just passed through the protective barrier.

My eyes wide in terror as I realized Tink and Robyn hadn't made it as the world was consumed in nuclear flame, the roar was deafening as the Sea Devil shook and bucked and spun and tumbled through the air, A horrendous crack was heard above it all as the ship heaved and her back broke as masts cracked and fell.

But all of that barely registered to me. As the heat that was making it through the magic set the sails and the deck aflame, my stunned mind couldn't comprehend that Robyn, Tink, and Mom... were...

I blinked as my eyes that had been literally blinded by the blast, and my eardrums that had shattered, healed themselves, the lupus curse doing what it did. And I looked out over the desolation, and destruction that had at one time been the city of London under the giant mushroom cloud. The sheer amount of destruction unimaginable. The Russians had to have dropped the most powerful nuclear device ever devised.

How could they have?

I looked down at the new crater that had joined the earlier, smaller one, and gasped. Mom was there, on one knee, head bent, her hook glowing white-hot as it sang out in a weak tone, as a bubble fell from around her.

The Elder was burned and bloodied as it took on a different form, limping backward away from Mom, looking around almost frantically then appeared to make up its mind and started to gather energy as it glared at Wendy.

I dove through the flames and smoke of the crippled Sea Devil to fly down toward the woman I felt in my heart was my mother, the rest of my heart torn asunder when I didn't see Robyn or Tinkerbelle. Had the Russians really killed them, the people I loved, my family?

Mom tried to raise her hook, but she was past her limit. I was about to scream out in denial as the Elder looked ready to strike her down when it staggered back as if it had been hit. It swayed and I saw in its eyes something I didn't understand, a mirror of my fathomless, aching loss of the women I couldn't bring myself to acknowledge were gone, no matter how impossible it seemed to me. Then it turned and ran, tearing a shaky hole through the veil between realms, sealing it behind.

Phoebe... was gone.

I saw the tears in mother's eyes as she shook her head at me, a small voice asking, "Tink?" I shook my head and then fell into her arms and we collapsed to our knees, sobbing as the reality of it finally struck me and my legs gave out. My mate, my love, the other half of my soul... was gone, and she had saved my life. It should have been me.

When Wendy stilled and looked up, rage in her eyes, she whispered in a tone that could have carried for miles, chilling the burnt and scorched earth around us, "They are going to pay..." She wrapped an arm around my waist and leapt into the air, dragging me with her.

I just stared at the Sea Devil, broken and listing as the crew and the Lost Boys worked on putting the fires out and cutting away the sails that were tattered and smoking, but she still floated. The moment our boots hit the deck, a gust of wind rushed through the ship, extinguishing the last of the flames and blowing away the smoke.

As mother strode to the ship's wheel, all eyes were on her as the Sea Devil cracked and moaned in protest as her back slowly straightened. The remaining sails on the two remaining masts billowed and snapped tight in the magical wind emanating from her Captain.

And then Hook called out, garnering no dissent, "Cut loose the anchors. We sail to Seattle, we sail for Tink and Robyn and all those we have lost!"

I joined in the violent cheers that arose as the Sea Devil slowly righted herself and limped through the veil between worlds. She was right, the Elders were going to pay for what they took from me... from us.

## Chapter 13 – Know My Wrath, Know My Pain

Gretel looked at me, her eyes haunted, like half her soul had been torn from her, and she pleaded with me to tell her she was dreaming with just a look as she whispered, “Eve... it killed Kat and Belle...”

Then she snarled as I felt dark magics bubbling just below her surface as she turned to watch Illya's demon form and a hissing Rose running at the enemy as they poured out of a fissure in reality around a large almost formless being who solidified into a huge humanoid form, possibly twenty or thirty feet tall.

The rest of us exchanged looks then turned as one to charge toward the oncoming enemy. My attention was on the Elder. I could feel its overwhelming magics from here, the same magics that had killed my friends and the soldiers sent with them, as well as the people of one of the most populous cities in the world.

Tangentially, as I was trying to get over the shock of losing two women I saw as sisters, I was impressed that Nicole, in her shining silver armor, was keeping up with me as I moved at wolf speed to catch up with Rose and Illya.

Both women were death incarnate, being manifestations of two of the most deadly Demon curses ever cast. Rose was even known as Death's Lady. And Illya... her demon form, that was grafted upon her innocence when she was sacrificed against her will to create the lycan contagion itself, could bring true death to a demon. Normally only a demon's own blood or magic could bring about its true death.

I pondered that as we charged, was that why Masika had implied without saying that the Elders feared the demons?

A demon's manifested form is simply a construct of the sick and corrupted magics of the creature itself. When it is dispatched, it simply returns to the demon realm and waits for another chance to break through the veil to run free in another realm. The Elders must not have figured out how to give demons a true death. It's why they punish other realms by opening a portal to the demon realm.

Rose was screaming as she flung her arms wide, those blackened vines tore out of her chest in an unending tide, the thorny brambles and vines that

dripped with the most potent, curse magic infused neurotoxin poisons.

She formed a corridor right through the incoming horde of every imaginable creature from so many other realms. Some humanoid like us, some looking so foreign and alien I couldn't define them. But it seemed that all were susceptible to the touch of death provided by the merest scratch from one of the thorns. As the vines pushed through, moving a mountain of bodies aside in front of the charging unicorn which came out of everyone's worst nightmare.

Illya stood eight or nine feet tall, her blackened flesh oozed blood and ichor, and it seemed to be rippling. Her hide looked to be made of dozens of human limbs, burned by hellfire and writhing in pain. There was agony in her bellow of rage. I could feel that rage wash over me like a wave, and it incensed me, pushed me to want to attack anything and everything. I could barely control my response even after experiencing the effect a few times when Illy lost control and transformed.

My blood went cold. There was only one person who could calm her in this form, one person who could soothe the beast... but Belle was dead now, at the hands of the would-be god we were charging. I feared for everyone if we survived. Illya could become a threat, and only us Avatars would be able to stop her... our friend... our sister.

That thought just enraged me more as we bore down upon the Elder with no resistance as the walls of sickly black brambles and thorns continued to grow upon itself. I thought I could hear weapons fire, both concussive and energy behind that wall of death as the horde tried to blast their way through.

Just as Rose's walls of death stuck the Elder and was disintegrating as fast as it was fed into him, Illya lowered her head and impacted his leg with her huge black, gnarled horn.

The bellow that came from the being was deafening as it backpedaled as fast as my mother had whenever she saw a mouse in the kitchen. It looked down in shock at its leg, eyes wide at the wound that oozed blackish blood, like it couldn't understand how it had been hurt.

It spoke, or I think it spoke, even though I more heard it in my head than from its mouth. "A demon? In the mortal realm?" It backpedaled again to avoid the raging beast as she rose up on her hind legs and windmilled her massive hooves in the air while issuing a challenge with the screams and

screeching from a thousand tortured souls uniting in the promise they would taste the flesh of their enemy soon.

He opened his hands and looked prepared to... clap? Gretel screaming, "No!" was all Rose needed as her hands lashed out and even more vines and thorns tore out of her chest, blood flying and blackening at the touch of the sickly plants that tore through her flesh. Massive woven vines wrapped around the Elder's arms, hundreds then thousands more joined them in thick trunks as the first ones began to disintegrate and snap, but... she stopped him. Her screaming seemed to have no end, just like the curse that was forced upon her.

Then he was bellowing again as Illy's horn slashed into his leg again. He tumbled, snapping the vines holding him and grabbed the demon unicorn's horn, his flesh sizzling at the point of contact and he flung her. I watched as her body was flung over the bramble barrier at high velocity. She'd land a mile or so away. How strong was this monster? And how could we stand against it?

The Elder stood tall and glared down at us as some of his horde who had devices that allowed them to fly, came flooding high over the deadly walls. Rose cocked her head at us at an inhuman angle and said, "Go kill, splat, squish the enemy. I've got the big one. The bigger they are, the louder they scream."

Umm... ok, that was frightening. I didn't have time to contemplate that as some sort of space knight fell out of the sky and hit the ground where I had been standing a moment before. Moving at wolf speed I had stepped out of its shadow in the bright sunlight and struck out with a fist as it almost cratered the ground.

I sneered as the armor, that felt to be some sort of pressure vessel; a spacesuit?; cracked under the impact. The knight looked down at the cracked chest plate then to me in what seemed to be in slow motion with my enhanced senses. Then just as it started to raise some sort of powered lance, I finished a spin and delivered a roundhouse kick to its chest. It went tumbling back into the wall of brambles that seemed to pull him inside like a hungry beast when the knight struck it.

An aborted gurgled cry was all I needed, to know that the vines had found their way through the cracks in its armor, killing him instantly. I ran at the group of adversaries who had started landing all around us.

I heard the Elder in my head speaking to us, “I am Themis, Elder of Xiltrylnyn, and it is useless to resist, mortals. Only your demon could do us harm, but this realm will cease to be when we reset it so the balance can be found and achieved again.”

It pointed at Rose and I heard myself screaming her name as a huge torrent of energy shot out from his hand to slam into Rose. The ground around her exploding and super-heated as it vaporized under the onslaught. Dear God in heaven.... had he just killed our...

I blinked, and even our adversaries paused to look at the smoking crater which held a steaming molten slurry of melted stone, when the maniacal laughter of someone whose sanity was a long forgotten memory, cackled out from inside the billowing smoke.

There are no words to describe how inhuman our Rose looked as she glided out of the crater, her clothing burned away and all pretenses of trying to assimilate back into humanity discarded as she propelled herself back up to the Elder. A carpet of vines and brambles churned under her like so many demented spider legs, moving in an unnatural gait, her eyes were bereft of whatever sanity she had tried to cling to when around us as she hissed.

Her voice was just some sort of approximation of human as she cackled out, “Do you think that you can kill me Themis? I would welcome that. I pray for that every day, but my curse ensures that I suffer for all of time. The gods cannot remove it, nor give me final peace, what arrogance you have to think that you could do what even Perchta cannot.”

Then her head pivoted almost upside down as she seemed to scrutinize the Elder and then she hissed in a tone that chilled even the Alpha in me, knowing I wasn't the biggest predator in the room as she said, “Now little godling, know my wrath, know my pain!”

With an inhuman screech, she thrust her hands forward and vines exploded from her, not just her chest, but seemingly from every pore of her body and they all impacted the still bleeding wounds that Illy had given him. And that is when I learned that gods... could scream.

Vines tore into his leg and she just kept feeding them in an endless rush as he bellowed his pain while she smiled and seemed to shudder in almost sexual pleasure as she savored the screams, and it just seemed to urge her on.

This was the Lady Thsalias of legend. The bringer of death that even the reaper fears, and I was afraid of our gentle Briar Rose for the first time since we met, the Alpha wolf in me almost wanting to bow to the apex predator of predators.

Vines started exploding from the elder's leg, slowly climbing as his power tried to disintegrate them but not being able to keep up as Rose tilted her head back and laughed in glee as her vines lifted her to look Themis right in the eye as she shuddered in delight over his agony.

I was barely able to avoid a strike to my back, reminding me that we too were in battle. I tore my eyes away from the spellbinding sight to engage the enemies that were more on the level I could face. Dodging, slapping away strikes and counterattacking.

I worried about Gretel, who slung magics that just tasted wrong. Black magic, corrupted magic, instead of the druidic magic she had trained with, to keep the addictive influence of the dark magics squelched. The rest of us formed up on her, to mitigate her use of those magics that had seduced so many to do evil. But part of me understood and was not stopping her. They had killed the woman she loved and I couldn't imagine that kind of heartache that would drive you to do anything just to feel something else, if just for a while.

I glanced over at my Raz as she whipped her nearly unbreakable hair with the hundreds of razor-sharp silver leaves in it, at the enemy, slicing them to ribbons as they closed. Dear God she was spectacular.

Some sort of vibrating spear sliced through my back and out my left side. The pain was dulled by my rage and the animalistic instincts thrust upon me by the mantle of the Red Hood. I think I shocked the insectoid being who wielded it when I slapped down with wolf strength to snap the spear in half then spun away to face him, pulling the remains of the spear from me then roared in its face, my elongated canines bared in menace.

I could feel my body stitching itself up as I lashed out, wielding my hands like claws to rake across his face, tearing off half of its mandible. I dove on it and hacked away as I shared, "Only another wolf can kill me." I saw fear in its eyes as the life left him, then I rolled off him and growled as I dove on two humanoids in futuristic armor who were trying to get at Rapunzel from behind.



I caught glimpses between opponents of the battle that raged between the Elder and Rose. The sheer amount of power he was throwing at her was staggering, but how do you kill the unkillable? Her vines took the brunt of the attacks, doing as the curse demanded of them, to keep her alive to suffer forever. And it was frightening to watch in action as she just kept throwing herself at the being, all the while, her vines were slowly eating away at its leg from inside, grinding and tearing in an unrelenting wave as they tore from her flesh to rip at his.

Once I dispatched them, Nicole called out, "Rapunzel, Eve!" We followed her gaze as she ran at us, her bloodied sword gleaming in the sunlight, a woman with hawklike wings was bearing down on our group, firing some sort of rapid-fire crossbow that seemed to have an endless supply of bolts.

We crossed arms and grasped each other's hands as the first Wolf Hunter ran at us as we crouched. As soon as she stepped into our hands we lurched up, thrusting her skyward with all our might. That woman was a thing of beauty. She seemed to almost soar in a slow somersault in the air, her hair billowing behind her like a cape as she landed on the shoulders of the hawk, woman, burying her blade down through her shoulder and into her chest. It was brutally efficient and Nicole just hit the ground in a graceful roll that looked effortless to us.

I shook my head in wonder. She, like my Raz, was human, yet she fought like an Avatar. True they were touched by magic, but they didn't use it in a fight. Their natural fighting ability was so honed that it bordered on the supernatural, and most magics just slid off of my girl.

Rapunzel spun away from an attack, grasping at her waist and pulled a rope made of her hair, with weighted silver blades tied to the ends, at the same time as I did. And we stood back to back, slinging those blades on their tethers, slashing and piercing through the enemy defenses.

I glanced over my shoulder as she looked back at me, a wicked grin on her face as she said, "Just like old times, huh scullery maid?"

I smiled back as I lashed out with the rope, the blades striking deep with my enhanced strength and reflexes as I muttered to her, "Watch it, lady, I still have a cast-iron frying pan with your name on it."

She chuckled as we separated and slid to either side of Gretel. My girl said to her, "We could use some cover from above." Like a switch was

flipped, Gretel's magics went from sickly and corrupting dark magic to magic full of life and nature as she chanted and made intricate motions with her hands.

With a rumble, the ground cracked and a rapidly maturing tree tore up through the cracks and exploded into a giant oak tree. Now the enemy would have to come at us on the ground instead of from above. I nodded once to the grieving woman. "Great job." She nodded once back with a sad smile and I was happy to feel she was leaning toward her druidic magics again.

With our backs to the trunk of the mighty oak, we took a moment to catch our breaths before we were overrun again.

My sensitive ears heard screaming over the Elder's agonized roars... something beyond the walls of deadly vines and brambles. Screams, so many screams, and the sounds of battle, of dying. Then a familiar screech of a thousand tortured souls was issued in a challenge and I whispered in building fear, "Illya." She had fought her way back to us. I could imagine she had but one overriding thought, an overwhelming need to make the one who took away her peace, her love, pay.

She was a berserker in that mode, striking out at anything in her path. I told the others as I heard crashing and crackling then massive hooves coming down to crush the thorny vines in her way. Most demons could not survive Rose's poisons and were dispatched back to their realm as their magic constructed bodies died. But Illya was no average demon. She, like a greater demon, could withstand it.

A moment later a beast of nightmares, its flesh oozing black ichor from thousands of cuts from the vines came stomping through the living wall, its great gnarled horn slashing from side to side, making quick work of the almost impermeable barrier.

She huffed, her nostrils flared, hellfire licking from her eyes. She reared up and windmilled her legs at a large bullish man who held some sort of rifle, firing uselessly at her over and over, her massive hooves crushing him to the ground like he was made of tissue, and he fell like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

She stomped then trampled his lifeless body as she lifted her head, her nostrils flaring again, then her eyes narrowed to dangerous pinpoints of red light as she saw the Elder frantically trying to get away from Rose's

onslaught. She bellowed and charged, her hooves sparking on the ground, the thrumming of her passing vibrated up through the soles of our feet.

I noted that we had all let out a collective sigh of relief and then exhaled the breaths we had all been holding.

We saw the horde was trying to follow her through the brambles, using the corridor she had cleaved through it. Many fell dead with the slightest nick of a thorn as they pushed through, but some learned from the mistakes of the others and kept themselves as small as they could in the center of the path.

I pointed. "Gretel!"

She chanted, and her eyes began to cloud white and then I smirked, this wasn't druidic magic, this was something Snow had been teaching her, this was pure nature magic, from Perchta's domain. I think Gretta and Perchta have been working on making Gretel a priestess of Perchta's ways.

Vines and trees sprang up in the path, pushing the warriors aside and into the blackened vines, killing them all, then she strained, moving her hands in grasping sweeps, as vine after vine shot out to stitch up the hole, dragging the brambles shut again, as the vines blackened from the poisons and died over and over again until the task was complete.

I assured her, "Amazing."

Raz nodded and Nicole slipped back into her centuries old speech habits. "Verily."

She gave a weak smile to us, and I could tell she was trying not to dwell on her loss, setting it aside so that she could aid Rose and Illya in getting a little vengeance for her love.

With that thought, the Elder bellowed anew and we all chanced a glance while more enemy landed around the tree to advance on us. Illya slashed her deformed unicorn's horn at the exposed tendons of his leg as Rose divided her flow of vines, half into his wounds and half to keep his hands away from our demon.

This was unfortunately bad because with her attentions divided, I could see her vines that had reached almost up to his waist, start to disintegrate. His power was able to quash them now that there weren't so many.

I was going to call out, but the Elder bellowed in rage and pain again, falling backward onto the ground as Illya buried her horn down to her forehead in his lower leg, then shook violently snapping it off inside his

skin before a new gnarled horn grew on her forehead. I realized that Rose was simply allowing Illya to get her licks in, because she renewed her own assault, trying to pin Themis to the ground so that our unicorn could maul him.

Then I ducked under a blade that was thrown at my neck and it embedded six inches into the tree trunk. I didn't wish to test the extent of the curse of the Red Hood, which ensured only another wolf could kill me, to see if it included beheading. You'd be surprised how many supposedly immortal beings can't live without their heads.

Then the battle was back on. I noted not as many fliers were coming over the briars any more. It seemed only a couple dozen were left. I wondered how many of the thousands of enemy on foot on the other side Illya had killed.

The Elder was back on his feet and backpedaling when I glanced that way again in a break in the fighting as the enemy started massing for a final push. Rose's vines were again chewing away inside of the wounds on his leg and now a blackened gash on his stomach where Illya's horn had slashed.

It brought its hands up to attempt a clap again but then Themis froze and looked staggered as he had just been slapped. Then he bellowed out an anguished cry of denial and spun away from Rose and Illya and physically tore a hole in reality and started to move toward it.

Illya slashed at his Achilles' tendons as Rose screamed in effort, redoubling the flow of vines which shredded her flesh. He stumbled and fell, and started dragging himself forward with his hands as he screamed in pain that took on the note of a cornered animal. And with a sickening wet sound, his lower leg was severed by the writhing and sawing, thorny vines, which exploded from his skin.

He physically dragged himself through the portal, leaving a long wet trail of black ichor. Illya roared in rage and spun toward us and the last of the enemy who all looked confused and at a loss now that their leader, their god, had abandoned them.

As the demon horse prepared to charge, Rose, her body twisted and contorted as she glided on spider legs made of blackened vines to her side. She rested a hand on the flank of the horse and Illya huffed and mock slashed at her. They stared at each other, like two predators acknowledging

each other, then Rose said like she was talking to a favorite pet, “No, there's plenty left to kill over here first.”

She made a waving motion with her hand and the barrier parted wide enough for our demon unicorn to see the massing enemy on the other side. The ones not aware that their false god had fled. And with the screams of the souls of the damned tied to her, her flesh writhing with the arms of a thousand grasping hands, she charged through the opening.

Rose turned toward us, her head cocked almost upside down like she was deciding what to do with us. I swallowed, truly afraid of the unhinged look in her eyes as vines wrapped her body as if to cover her bare skin in modesty as her head snapped over like a bird of prey spotting a mouse, then she charged forward on her spider-like legs at the enemy grouped in front of us, hissing inhumanly the whole way.

They never had the chance to scream.

She settled in front of us, then smiled maniacally as she said, “Hello.”

Raz actually waved from her hip, then engulfed Rose in a hug as Nicole wrapped her in her cape so that Rose could draw the vines back into her body. Me? I replied lamely, “Hello.”

With the sounds of screaming and the enemy dying on the other side of the briars, Gretel looked around sadly then in the direction Kat and Belle's bodies lay and asked in a tiny, lost voice, “Now what do we do?”

Before anyone could answer, we were falling through the fabric of space. I instinctively knew that Masika was pulling us back to her. I was expecting to arrive in Seattle in the darkness of night, compared to the midday sun here. But instead, we arrived in a world on fire.

## Chapter 14 – Seattle Burning

“Parker.”

A voice was calling out to me as I just stared dumbly at the remains of Seattle, my home, as it burned. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but desolation, and the waters of Puget Sound even burned. How was that even possible?

I had to blink. Standing on the other side of some sort of shield in that burning wasteland of rubble I was behind, I could make out a figure as the shield, which smelled of Perchta's nature magics, dissolved. A figure in a billowing, tattered and singed cloak of crimson as it fluttered in the swirling, scorching wind and smoke that seemed to be repairing itself as I looked on.

Maireni Damaschin bellowed to the huge figures a hundred yards in front of her, “Is that all you've got? We're still standing right here!”

My chest tightened as I fought off a sob. That was one of Ella's favorite taunts. My Ella-Marie, who I'd never hold in my arms again. Again, my sorrow was replaced with a rage I would normally have hated, but I embraced it now, it was all I had left in this world.

I staggered when something huge tore through the fabric of space with no finesse like it took a brute force effort to make the transition. I looked up to the groaning of timbers in the air. Silhouetted against the moon that was close to being full, was the Sea Devil. It was smoking and listing, one of the main masts was missing and the sails looked tattered in the moonlight.

I saw a figure leap off of it, her left arm glowing like a silver beacon as she flew to Mari's side, the light from her hook illuminating a face filled with so much rage it made me pause.

The ground exploded in a rippling wake as Dorothy flew past me, to join them. Her power was not contained by her will anymore as that eerie green lightning wrought havoc on any matter it struck. It tasted of sorrow, loss, and blinding hatred, and my blood chilled when I realized I couldn't feel anything of Dot in her anymore. Heaven preserve us all, there was no Dorothy Gale anymore, only the wicked witch of Oz.

Again my name was being called out.

“Parker?”

I spun and snapped, feeling immediately guilty for my tone, “What!?”

Rachel, face smeared with soot and ash, looked as if she had been through a war, stood beside Perchta.

My heart seized and I looked back behind me, into the burning wreckage that had once been the crown jewel of Washington state. I audibly sighed in relief as the vice on my heart loosened slightly as I saw a huge wolf prowling the broken bones of the city taking up a flanking position on the Elders.

I apologized immediately. “I'm sorry.”

Rachel quelled the automatic snarl on her lips, pushing down her wolf tendencies to show dominance. She asked as she looked around, “Where's Ella-Marie and Toto?”

My shoulders shook once as I suppressed a sob, my cheeks wetting again, a crystal tear plinked on the ground as I refused to break down again. I just shook my head, not even able to voice the pathetic, “gone,” on my lips.

Rachel looked at me in horror as Perchta seemed to appear at my side without moving from where she had been, pulling my head to her chest as she said in a voice full of compassion and anguish, “Oh you poor child.”

She kissed the top of my head then stiffened and looked up... “But that means...” I knew her eyes were on Dot.

I didn't know what that was going to mean if we survived, like the wicked witch, Dorothy had terrorized the entire realm of Oz in what they called the Dark Years, before the Good Witches of the North and South sacrificed themselves, letting Dorothy take their power so that she could find balance within herself. If we survived, would she terrorize the mortal realm the same way? Would we Avatars have to face her as the next threat?

My heart couldn't take that on top of losing my girls. God, why did my heart hurt so much?

I jumped when Perchta released me and someone landed beside us. It was Amanda, in her pirate garb. I was hugging her in relief before anyone could speak. Knowing we hadn't suffered any more losses was... I let go of her and looked around, brows furrowing, then up toward the broken Sea Devil.

I felt a pit growing in my stomach as I glanced into a crying Amanda's eyes to see a mirror of my grief.

No.

She shook her head. “The fucking Russians nuked London. Robyn and Tink sacrificed themselves to get me behind the Sea Devil's wards in time.”

I held her until she straightened, then she looked around.

Before she could ask, I shook my head, and she whispered, “Oh, Parker.” Then she was drawing her flintlock pistols as another Elder tore a shaky, wavering portal in space next to the other three, and dragged itself through on the ground. “All those bastards are coming here.”

Spite and malice I'm not proud of feeling in myself had me sneering as I said to the group, “Not all of them.”

The look of satisfaction on her face likely mirrored mine, and I hated the Elders for showing me I was capable of such hateful feelings.

Then she was being taken away from me, as Masika pulled her to her, engulfing her in a desperate hug. Mandy broke and sobbed in muffled wails into the Voodoo Queen's shoulder. I hugged myself, feeling all alone until a cloak of white feathers fell over my shoulder as Perchta hugged me to her side. I smiled weakly up at Snow, I could see both of herself in her eyes.

Then the others stepped out of nowhere to our side. Another part of me broke inside when I realized there were too few. And Illya's demon form was screeching and charging across the ruins toward the Elders. I chilled, realizing one of the missing was Belle... but without her, Illya would...

How much pain could a heart take? How many of my girls had I lost? Kat was not with them either. As I gasped, I thought that it must be true that you could die of a broken heart. My chest hurt so very much.

I froze at the almost inhuman face before me. Rose looked so much like Red that it was scary, but now, her eyes were bereft of the sanity she had regained over the last two years with us. Her sickly pallor and green lips just added to the madness in her eyes as her head tilted inhumanly first one way, then the other.

She reached out a hand and touched my cheek as a crystal tear started to fall. She looked confused for just a moment, then she spun in realization, looking for those who were not here. Then hissing like a snake and spitting literal venom, she started flowing toward the Elders on a roiling mass of blackened vines and brambles as they lengthened to propel her on grisly spider-like legs. I hadn't even realized she had no clothing on until just then.



Perchta said to me, "I must join the others. Stay here where it is safe." Then she looked back. "Titania?"

The Elder nodded and reached an arm out to hug me to her and Mandy. Then before I could blink, Perchta was simply a white crow flying out to the Avatar Titans, to land on Red's shoulder.

I took a moment to look around. There were remains of tanks and dozens, if not hundreds of fighter jet and stealth jet remains littering the burning landscape. Not a single soul could be seen from horizon to horizon except us Avatars and the Elders, who were all feeding power into the crawling one whom I could see was missing a leg and another one who was burned beyond recognition.

I had satisfaction in knowing that they knew they were in a fight now, and now one of their own had joined our dead.

I glanced at the others. We, the weakest of our people, and I was having none of this coddling. We nodded to each other and then detached from the protection of Masika, and marched out to join our sisters.

I asked Rachel as we went, my eyes flicked around the destruction as far as my eyes could see, "What happened here?"

She shook her head and assured me, "I've been fooling myself all this time thinking I could make a difference in this fight. But what happened here... the titanic scale of this fight was that of gods. All we did was run interference with the hordes they brought with them. Mari just took their best shot, that Perchta says broke part of the Earth itself."

I nodded in understanding. I felt insignificant too, but to hell, if I was going to hide in a hole somewhere while my girls, my sisters, faced the enemy alone. We would stand and die with the women we loved to defend the mortal realm.

She cocked her head, listening, and sighed, said in resignation, "One thing I can say for the US military, 'quit' is not in their vocabulary. Even when the anti-Avatar weapons failed here, they've just kept sending in waves."

Mandy asked, "Waves?" as she flew by my shoulder. She hated being shorter than she had been before, since her return from Neverland, so she flew to keep at eye level with us all the time. And I feel bad that I find her so adorable in her new form, complete with fluffy wolf tail.

I know a badass soldier and cop, Amanda Danes, is stuck inside that shell, but I see her as the perpetual teen verging on adulthood that she appears now, especially since she makes me believe whammy the Lost Boys put on her, has her acting even younger than her apparent nineteen years. And all I wanted to do was to protect her, even though she was ten times deadlier than me on a good day.

We stepped beside Red and the others, and not one of them gave us a look or told us to get back. I felt a hand in mine and looked down, Mandy, chin high, glared at the Elders. Mari took my other hand, her eyes, like unblinking forged steel, homed in on the enemy. Then the others clasped hands. We stood in defiance, the remaining Avatars, and we would defend our home.

To punctuate that, what seemed like thousands of missiles started striking the Elders as cruise missiles and fighter jets ripped past at barely a hundred feet off the ground, kicking up flames and embers as their jet-wash stirred the ground in their passing, firing salvo after salvo of air to ground missiles at the juggernauts.

The Elders swatted the air, slapping down some missiles, and the two weakened ones seemed more bothered by the explosions all around them than the others, but I could see it was simply an annoyance to them. The one with the severed leg looked up into the air and clapped. A shockwave tore all of the planes from the air, the planes exploded into flaming debris which rained all across the hellscape.

Then what could only have been a bunker buster bomb, struck the lead Elder, who was dressed stupidly like Apollo of the Greek Pantheon of gods or something, from above. Perchta waved a hand to attenuate the blast wave and fire and debris that came our way. Ok, that seemed to hurt the would-be god as he growled and thrust a hand to the sky. Far above a fireball bloomed as the stealth bomber was torn into a million bits.

Rachel looked over to me and Mandy then nudged her chin toward the sky. "Waves."

She went on as she looked at Red, looking almost afraid of our red-clad friend then spoke as if she couldn't hear us. "She and Daria have been nipping at the Elder's heels, through all of this..." She nudged her chin around at the devastation. "They haven't been able to hit them while Perchta

protected the military the best she could. She sent most of the Elder's army... somewhere..."

She gazed over the hellscape my home had become and said, with a bit of trepidation in her tone, "Lapetus, their leader, had had enough. So instead of targeting Mari and Daria directly, he with another Elder, did... this." She whispered, "But the Red Hood yet stands. How did she survive that? She wasn't behind Snow's wards with us."

I knew the answer already. Red and Daria were the Scales, a mantle of power that came directly from the Elders. When the Grimm brothers were the Scales, I had watched them avoid attacks without any effort at all, almost casually sidestepping. They only got hit when they wanted to allow us to take out our frustrations on their noses.

So I would assume they had some sort of partial resistance to the magic of the Elders, and the power couldn't be stripped from them involuntarily or they would have already done so. Add to that the curse of the Red Hood. There were only a couple ways a Red Hood could die. Death by asshole wasn't on that shortlist.

I cut back a snort. Mari and Daria would have been a frustrating annoyance to them in any case, but the Grimm brothers found a way to weaponize the power of the Scales. I'm so very glad those annoyingly frustrating men were on our side.

We stood by our friends to lend whatever support we could and we all stood there, holding hands in a chain of defiance and comradeship, sharing my and my sisters' losses as we all watched as a hellish unicorn charged through the fires and molten rock strewn about the landscape between us and our enemy. We wouldn't be able to get her to stop, and nobody wanted to. She deserved to workout her rage on an enemy she could actually hurt since Masika had told us that demons could damage her people.

Besides, none of us could rein her in even if we wanted to. I took solace in the fact it wasn't a suicide run for her. If they were able to destroy this body of hers, she'd just be sent back to the demon realm from which her innocent blood had been used to forge her into that terrible, yet beautiful demoness. One who could provide even demons a true death. And Perchta could summon her back from the realm of the demons.

Lapetus made a hand motion as Illy dove over a pit of molten lava, a wall of debris rose up between them, and just as he was making a slapping

motion to bring that wall down on Illya, she burst through the wall, her grotesque black horn tearing the remains of the concrete wall asunder and goring the Elder's hip.

I think he was surprised as he bellowed in pain and struck at her. She snapped her oversize horse's mouth at him, her teeth elongating into blackened ichor soaked fangs as she took a chunk from the side of his hand.

He kicked at her, connecting with her flank and sent her tumbling and sliding along the ground. I took a halting half step forward still holding the hands which held me back. Rose was hissing like some sort of primordial snake as she tried to move forward to help, but Perchta gripped her hand tighter, preventing her from charging in, even her vines wrapped around Perchta's grip could not free her.

Our nature goddess looked at her with compassion. "No, not yet. Let her have this. Let her work out her anguish first."

Lapetus scuttled backward like someone would a rat or exceptionally large spider as the demon unicorn righted herself and charged again, slashing with her razor-sharp horn that could penetrate Elder skin. Another Elder looked almost afraid as if they had already tasted the horn of our girl. "It is from the demon realm."

The other Elders looked taken aback. Lapetus growled to them, "It is but one. Just send it back to whence it came, Themis."

The Elder with one leg didn't seem to be listening, his eyes were welded on Illya as she charged toward him where he sat on the ground. He was deathly afraid of our sister for some reason. Had she... did she sever his leg?

With an anguished screech, then angry growling screams, Lapetus caught Illya by her mane of grasping hands and then slammed her to the ground. She roared in pain and frustration and struggled to regain her feet, though she looked too hurt to make it. He struck down with a massive fist, and struck her back into the ground like a pile driver, cracking the stone beneath her.

My heart ached again when she didn't struggle to get up. I knew she couldn't die this way, but she could feel pain. We all let go of each other as one in an attempt to move to intercept when Lapetus raised his fist for another blow.

But we all hesitated when his fist was caught in mid-strike by... by a string of shells held between Masika's hands. She had stopped the most

powerful of the Elders with a simple string of shells as if she did it every day.

He growled at her as she wrapped his wrist once, entangling him so he could not pull his hand back no matter how hard he tried it seems. He bellowed at her, “Titania! When you left us, you swore an oath not interfere in our dealings with other realms in exchange for our tolerance of your autonomy.”

She cocked her head almost sadly at him. It looked so odd that an average size old woman was holding a twenty-foot tall man immobile. Then she spoke, “I swore that oath just as you swore to not interfere with my chosen life. But you... because of the pettiness that has poisoned you all, and your need for revenge upon realms who did not bow to the might of the Elders... you took my love from me in Neverland. Yet I still keep my word though yours is broken.”

She smirked as she released him then scooped up Illya and held the broken unicorn to her chest protectively... had she somehow grown without us noticing, or had Illya shrunk? “Even now you go against all that we Elders stood for. You have defeated this poor woman, she is no longer a threat to you, yet your thirst for vengeance, for petty revenge has you wanting to make her suffer more. When had we fallen so low as to be the very thing we despised?”

Then she smirked. “And she is no longer of this realm, as she has been marked by the demon realm forever. I shall watch over her until she can return to her own.”

Then she turned her back on the Elders. One called out in a feminine tone, “Sister...”

It was clear that some of them were torn over losing Titania from their fold. The other Elder said with soul-wrenching grief, “They've killed Mnemosyne.”

Masika's steps faltered a moment as she paused but didn't look back, saying, “You... she was the aggressor here. You all took that chance by coming here to kill every being in the mortal realm because they do not fit your template. She knew they would not simply lie down as you played... gods.” Then she took a deep breath to center herself and then marched past us carrying Illya.

I noted that neither had Illya shrank nor had Masika grown, but she was somehow cradling the immense, raggedly breathing unicorn to her. I had to close my eyes so my mind didn't break over the contradiction. Reality bending magic gave me a headache. It was bad enough when Dot did these sort of things, but to the Voodoo Queen, it was as natural as breathing, and I'm sure she wasn't even aware she had done it.

Lapetus regarded her back a moment, then huffed in exasperation as he pointed at Red. "One last time, return to us the power from the mantle of the Scales, or we will take it ourselves."

Mari smirked at him and said, "If you could do that, you would have already. You see, I've figured out the power of the Scales. It must be freely given. And if I'm right, the raw power itself can either be returned to you or alternatively the mantle can bestowed upon another duo. You didn't expect the Grimm brothers to give it to us before they returned to you for judgment."

He roared, the earth quaking beneath our feet, "Enough, we will kill you and take what is ours."

Maireni Damaschin has always had this quality about her that exuded authority and power. Some say it is the power of the Alpha Wolves or something the cloak of the Red Hood had bestowed on her, but I believe it is that she had been forged into a weapon for right over the centuries. She has seen so much, done so much, and endured so much that her will has become unbreakable.

And she inspired you just by looking at her. She took one step forward and smirked as she lifted a hand to beckon with her fingers as she said, "Then come and get it."

## Chapter 15 – Night of the Red Hood

I stepped forward beckoning the Lapetus, baiting the Elders, smirking and hoping I was right about everything. I was playing with the fate of our very existence here. I didn't believe he could do as he said as I taunted, "Then come and get it."

I have lived dozens of lifetimes, still the blink of an eye to an Elder, but an eternity when measured in the short but brilliant light of mortality that burns like a thousand suns before it is extinguished. And as Ella would say if she were still with us, I could smell a pile of horseshit from a mile away. The Elders wanted us to think them gods, but they were flawed like everyone else. Not even the one true Goddess I knew was perfect.

This is how they kept order and lorded over the other realms. Being judge, jury, and executioner. They couldn't show weakness or the other realms may realize what we already have, and rebel. Masika has already seen what has become of her once noble race of watchers. They strayed from their path and became the very thing they hated, but they seem blind to it.

If we failed here, then all the life in the mortal realm, the most expansive realm on all the paths through the veil, so expansive it had countless worlds with countless people in it beyond the tiny scope of our planet. They could do it with the power they had between them, a little less so with one of their number dead. And that is why they needed the substantial power woven into the mantle of the Scales. If they reset now, they might fail, and the power of the Scales would be lost to them forever.

I could be wrong, but I prayed I wasn't. All I had was my experience with those who would be king in my many lifetimes, and they always fell on their own swords, intentionally or not. And I had two aces up my sleeves left to play. If they were not enough, then we will have failed everyone... I will have failed everyone, and I could not allow that to happen this night. It was time for me to do what I was created to do.

They charged... I charged back.

Tonight is the night of the Red Hood.

I dodged right, pirouetting around a spire of molten rock that erupted from the ground where I was about to step, but I had already seen it happen

in an impression of the future the power of the Scales afforded me. I could feel the power weighing and measuring the outcome as it would pertain to the balance between good and evil in the realm we stood in.

It used to annoy me when the brothers Grimm used the power in that way to avoid strikes from not just the enemy but from us. And I knew how it was a minor misuse of the mantle, as it wasn't screaming in my subconscious that I must bring about balance. It was a matter of sheer will against the driving force of the magics not to act upon it to change the balance back to equilibrium, by adjusting how much good or evil there was in the world.

Grudgingly, I had to respect the brothers for how many centuries they had to listen to the incessant voices in the back of their minds pushing and nagging and screaming for it to be so. And they used it to maneuver this entire confrontation to try to either free the mortal realm of the Elder's influence or to end the voices all together if we fail here.

I twisted and turned at an almost sedate pace, closing the gap between us, keeping track of Daria with the bond of the Scales as she circled behind them stealthily. I had to smile, at our new sisters, Dorothy and Wendy, the Hook, as they weren't as... subtle as us, as they just blew through every obstacle and sliced through any spells the Elders were throwing at us.

I never thought I'd meet any humans who would be able to give Perchta a run for her money until these two arrived in our lives after we Scales sent the others, without their knowledge, hunting for allies using their distracting thoughts to guide them while on the path to Perchta's Gardens.

Rose... she was broken again, I could feel it within her, her own balance was torn from her and she radiated sorrow to match the potential for evil that coursed through the literal venom in her veins. But the way the Elder with one leg stared at her advancing in a storm of whupping and churning vines, she may be more formidable against the Elders than anticipated. I had to smile in pride, she too was of the Damaschin line like Rapunzel and me.

Our other sisters had no fear, they did not benefit from the power of the Scales as I did, yet they charged right alongside the other Avatars. I didn't have time to worry about them, they could defend themselves, and Snow and Perchta would make sure that they were as safe as we could make them.



I just needed to get close to them to pull off what I hoped would turn the tide of this battle for the survival of the mortal realm.

The song of the hunt was singing in my blood, and the power of the Alpha Wolves imbued in the curse of the Red Hood had me growling like a wolf, showing my slightly elongated canines as I whipped up my crossbow, smirking at the tip of the bolt in it as I let lose a shot.

I whispered, "A present for you," as the bolt, which they didn't even attempt to block because it was as insignificant as a bullet to them, struck home in the eye of the Female who looked to be healing burns from all over her body.

The Elder screamed in agony as the bolt which I had tipped with an arrowhead carved from demon bone, did what no mortal weapon could do as it penetrated her eye and blinded her on one side. The other uninjured one, dressed as Hermes, held her as he pulled the bolt from her eye and touched the arrowhead, hissing as he dropped it as it had bitten him. He roared, "Demon bone! They use demon bone against us Lapetus! We must combine our power now and start the reset, the mantel of the Scales be damned. We've lived without that part of us for so long that we will not miss it. They've killed Mnemosyne, injured Phoebe, and crippled Themis. It must end now, no realm has dared defy the Elders of Xiltrylnyn like this cesspool of a realm has, they must be made an example of."

Lapetus looked from me for the barest instant to look at his battered group then he growled out, "Fine. Titania has forsaken us and now we have lost another of us, and I swore that would never happen again. We cannot allow our numbers to dwindle any more. It is time for judgment, prepare yourselves, brothers and sister."

They all moved into a circle, back to back, the lamed one using a warped and twisted girder from the wreckage of the city as a crutch. I could feel them pulling power from beyond our realm, power to shatter the bonds of reality and matter that held together with the very fabric of time and space. They were using themselves as the conduit. Was this... was this how the Big Bang had occurred?

Were they truly blind to what they had become? Their presence swung the pendulum to evil, above all the brave men and women of the world who fought and died this night, above the gathered Avatars. But that was the first

ace I was to play, but only if we could reach them before they had enough power for the chain reaction of their reset to begin.

I called out, "Dot!" As I leapt into the air, and she backhanded the air with so much power that if I were not the Red Hood, would have shattered my bones. I had watched her and Ella do this maneuver many times when they were practicing attacks back in Kansas.

In their distraction as they watched me being flung toward them to cross the last thirty yards in the blink of an eye, I saw a shadow diving at another Elder as I clenched a fist, tendons creaking and knuckles cracking as Lapetus thrust a fist at me almost too fast for my wolf senses to follow, but I wasn't trying to dodge it.

I whipped my fist at his, and my much smaller fist impacted his and the world seemed to suck in on itself as power compressed between us, and I willed the mantle of the Scales from me and into him with our contact just as Daria buried her fangs in the neck of the female from the Elder's blind side.

Then sound and energy returned with a vengeance as Daria and I were thrown back by the shockwave. I felt as if my lungs were being hyper-compressed by the wave of power that was throwing me back, reigniting the world around us in flames and destruction again, most of the debris from the city now vaporized.

Perchta caught me in mid-air as Wendy looked through her hook as it shone like a star in the heavens, superheating as she caught Daria in a bubble of force, attenuating the bone-crushing force.

When the wave passed, Perchta dropped me to the ground, I landed in a three-point stance, my eyes trained on the Elders as I growled out with venom of my own, "You wanted the power of the Scales back that bad? You can have it." Instead of surrendering the raw power to them willingly, Daria and I had instead passed the mantle on to the two Elders instead. Assigning them as the new Scales so they could feel what it is that their people had become.

Lapetus blinked at me, looking shocked and confused as Phoebe stared at her hands then at her kin, her voice whispering as she glared at Daria who was now circling around them to my side, "What have you done?"

Then her eye widened as she asked almost in horror, "What have we done?"

I have to admit that this was a big gamble when the Grimm brothers bestowed the mantle of the Scales upon us, I had been dead at the time. I didn't know if when the power of the Scales left me if I would return to that state or would still live. I would have gladly given up my life if it were to save this realm and all those whom I loved, but I admit to feeling an immense sense of relief that I am still here.

I looked down to Daria as she moved under my hand and I buried my fingers in her fur, a questioning look on my face. I sighed heavily in sorrow for my girl when she just shook her massive wolf's head. It appears that she had lost the ability to shift back to human without a full moon now that she had transferred her part of the mantle of the Scales to the Elders.

I watched as Lapetus and Phoebe struggled with the new knowledge the power had imparted in them, the realization that nobody ever wants to learn about themselves, especially when they believe in their heart they were doing the right thing. How does one deal with the knowledge that they... are the bad guy?

This was the moment of distraction my sisters needed, and almost as if it were choreographed, a wall of thorn-covered black vines and brambles tore up from underground, forming a barrier around the Elders, Rose screamed in effort as the vines tore out of her flesh and into the ground to feed it. Hook was reinforcing the lethal barrier with a wall of force as Dot brought greenish lightning down upon the titans in a display of power that eclipsed anything I had seen her do before. And the magic tasted like it was almost tainted by Elder magic.

My blood ran cold at the realization that it must have been Dorothy who had killed the other Elder, as a witch of Oz takes on the power of those she kills. This information just made Dorothy more dangerous than ever in her uncontrolled state. She had been almost uncontrollable before, but now she threw around the power of would-be gods... and those gods now were screaming.

I looked at the crazed look in our friend's eyes, and the smile full of glee for the agony she was dealing out. She truly was the Wicked Witch of Oz at that moment, and that made me nervous, remembering the tales of the Dark Years of Oz when the wicked overwhelmed Dot, we might have to contain her somehow after this was over, and that broke my heart as much as her losing Toni.

The four Elders were able to take each other's hands and together they slowly pushed the universe away from themselves, forming a sphere of energy that felt as if it shouldn't exist in this or any world, and the lashing vines and lightning strikes seemed to bend out of existence around them just to appear on the other side. It was as if the shield was simply bending reality around that bubble of nonexistence.

Even Lapetus had been heavily damaged by the assault, slowly healing burns and blisters covered his skin, and he was panting in the effort to keep their defense up.

He roared out, "Enough!" and slashed his hand in the air; I could feel the others feeding him power. Perchta was suddenly in front of us, a hand raised and I felt her own power wrap around us like a summer breeze in a meadow, feeling of all things nature and warmth and protection as we were moved what felt halfway between the mortal realm and the pathways between worlds as an immense wave of power tore the world apart around us, and even in this strange phasing between two realms, we could feel the fury of the magic as it passed through us.

I swallowed, thank the gods for Snow, without the mantle of the Scales, I don't think even the curse of the Red Hood could have withstood the force of four Elders. My eyes narrowed as I saw the doubt and indecision on Phoebe's face as she lent her power. Good, the Scales were warring in her mind, calling out for balance. I knew how maddening it could be and the toll it took in one's mind to ignore the call.

She was adding to the imbalance and she was warring with that knowledge.

My eyes widened and I spun back to look at the group with Masika and exhaled in relief, the wily old Elder had done something similar to avoid the blast wave that had already reached the Cascade Mountains and brought some of the peaks cracking and tumbling down. How many towns between Seattle and those peaks had just been destroyed at the whim of brings who saw us as no more significant as insects?

Illya was still out, but she was now in her human form. That was a relief, I didn't know how we would contain her without Belle, and we already had Dorothy to worry about.

Once the last of the shockwaves passed, then we were back on barren ground that resembled flattened and polished stone as far as the eye could

see, all the debris of a great city just blown away from the epicenter where the Elder's stood, panting and gasping. They were overextending themselves, and even gods did not have unlimited power.

When Lapetus raised his hand again, Phoebe grabbed his arm. "No stop. You know this is wrong, you can feel it just as I can. Titania was right. We've lost sight of who we are, and our purpose. We are contributing to the problems here in the mortal realm, not solving them. She let go of his arm and grabbed her head between her hands. "Everything is wrong! I can't make the voices leave me alone. We..."

Lapetus growled out at her, as Hook and Dot started to spread out a bit from our group, preparing for another attack, "It is a trick, a distraction. They are using the imbalance to confuse us." He looked past us then spat out in disdain as he grabbed her hand, thrusting one forward toward Masika's group. "Take the mantle back you annoying fleas!"

Wilhelm and Jacob shuddered then exhaled as their wounds healed before our eyes. Wilhelm said, "Ah, so this is what it feels like not to be in pain anymore."

Jacob nodded his agreement, "Indeed. Refreshing. Now if we could do something about the breeze on our nethers."

"I may have to pee again."

Parker muttered, "Oh dear god, they're back."

I smiled sadly at her, glad that she could still joke when I saw that soul-rending pain in her eyes. Ella and Marie were her joy, her love, her reason for everything good in her life, and these beings had taken that from her. I could not imagine her pain.

The fog in Phoebe's eye seemed to clear as she shook her head, her other eye was mostly healed now, just a milky white sheen over it, and I noted Themis' stump had grown halfway to the ground. We had to finish this now before they all healed.

I told the others as they advanced with Perchta, "Hold."

They looked back at me and I gave them, 'the look.' telling them with my eyes to trust me. I had one last card to play, and it was the most dangerous gamble of my life.

I moved in front of the group with all the authority I could muster, pulled the red hood of my cloak back to look Lapetus in the eye across the twenty yards separating us. I felt my subsonic growl raise to audible as I regarded

him and the others one at a time then said, “You are right, Lapetus. Enough. It is time for you to leave this realm with your tails tucked between your legs. We've entertained your petty cruelty for too long. I give you this one chance to comply or you will face my wrath.”

For a long moment, there was stunned silence on both sides, the other Elders looked between each other nervously, then Lapetus tipped back his head and started laughing heartily. This got his companions to join in hesitantly.

Then he stopped suddenly, pointed glare at me. “You dare to dictate ultimatums to us? It is time to put this charade to rest. I acknowledge that you Avatars which the Scales had let infest this realm were a formidable adversary, and give you one last opportunity to leave this realm, without the combined power to...”

I sighed heavily and said as I channeled my inner Ella, “Would you just shut the fuck up you gobshite? Monologue this...” I chanted the words from an ancient language forgotten in the days the Elders were young, and ripped the talisman from the chain on my neck and threw it into the air.

It exploded into flames that stank of brimstone, and it tore a mile-long rent in the fabric of reality which shimmered and expanded. A gaping chasm in that reality expanded, and heat, rot, and brimstone assaulted our senses.

An army of demons as far as the eye could see through the portal into their hellscape stood at the ready, a single hooved demon who resembled a great horned devil stepped through to my side as I held a halting hand toward my sisters, again begging them with my eyes to trust me before they went to war against our... well... our allies.

I looked up into the hellfire eyes of the ten-foot-tall demon as he glared at the Elders, his batlike wings, dripping in black ichor and blood, slowly spread behind him to their thirty-foot wingspan as he showed his eight-inch fangs to Lapetus. I inclined my head and greeted the demon, “First.”

The first of the demons, the father of the very demon whose curse I carried, drew his eyes from the shocked looking Elders to look down at me, he cocked his head in acknowledgment. “Maireni, Bane of Styche, head of the Damned family of Damaschin.” Then he took a knee, still towering over me as he bowed for effect. “What boon do you ask of us to seal our contract?”

I smiled up at an extremely nervous looking Lapetus, as he saw the most powerful and vicious of all demons, First of the first, the ones they could not defeat, the ones who had killed an Elder in the days before days, as he bowed to me... a human.

This was my last-ditch plan. If we weren't able to defeat the Elders or make them see reason with the bestowing of the Scales mantle upon them, then as the saying goes, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

I had summoned the First before the battle to discuss the pending obliteration of the mortal realm. He was not amused by being summoned and looked confused as to how I even knew his summoning name until he saw Illya with me. He had hissed at her and she took a step toward the summoning circle that would keep him bound until I broke the circle or banished him back to the demon realm.

He actually flinched at her advance. No matter how big or scary or eternal he may have been, he also knew that she was one of the two ways that could bring about his true death. It was good to see that the king of demons was also intelligent. It was that same self-preservation I was about to play upon.

I offered, "The mortal realm is in dire danger and we seek your help."

The First cocked his head and asked, "So why do you risk your own eternal damnation to tell me of mankind's pending downfall? You do realize that no mortal has ever summoned me, and when I get a hold of you, I will let you live ten thousand excruciating deaths before I make you one of us in eternal agony for your arrogance?"

I sighed and said, "It's simple really, exalted king. I wish for you to fight by the side of mankind to repel the Elders from our realm."

He had laughed maniacally at that and gasped out between laughs, "Why should we care if someone wipes out the plague of humanity from this pitiful rock? It would leave this world like ours."

I shrugged as I stepped up to the very edge of the summoning circle, my toes an inch from the chalk. "It would be in your best interest."

He seemed to contemplate for a moment before lunging at me, his huge claws raking at a shimmering wall of hellfire and force that bloomed around the circle while he snapped his jaws at me. He didn't seem to care that his flesh, horns, and claws were all sizzling at the touch of the barrier.

He chuckled when I didn't flinch. "Ah, a predator... I smell my son's stink all over you. The one thing he almost did right was the lupus plague he besieged this realm with."

Then he moved back and crossed his arms in amusement and asked, "Convince me, and we will see for how long I torture you when I get free of this accursed circle. Amuse me and maybe I'll just make you a pet. What will you give for this assistance you ask? Your soul perhaps, tainted as is with Styche's filth."

Again I shrugged. "How about I offer your soul instead?" He narrowed his eyes and I took the biggest chance in my life. "If I break this circle so we can talk as equals, instead of imprisoning you like this, do you give your promise not to attack me..." He started to smirk. "Or anyone else, and then to go back to your realm after we are done?"

He smirked again. "A contract then? Ah, you disappoint, I thought maybe you were different than all the other mortals."

I shook my head and said, "Not a contract, just your word."

He chuckled. "The word of a demon? You truly do amuse me, mortal. I am half tempted, just to hear what you have to say." His eyes betrayed his words as he looked at the chalk circle and the world beyond me. A living world, not one consumed by fire and the overpopulation of corrupted souls.

I moved my toe toward the chalk and asked, "Your word?"

He blinked in surprise. "You're serious? You'd free me from the circle without binding me to a contract? You know the hell I could bring upon this realm."

Nodding I told him. "It would be no different than what is coming. But I offer something that you will never have if the Elders set foot in the mortal realm."

He hissed at the mention of the Elders again. I could see the stories of bad blood between the species was not exaggerated. I prompted again, "Last chance before I banish you back to your home, your word?"

He looked at me, and then blinked as I stepped through the barrier into the circle and offered my hand. "Your word."

As if this were some sort of trick, he looked at me, his eyes darted around the area to see if it were some ill-conceived trap. Illya just inclined her head at him. Then he lunged his horns down at me, roaring menacingly,



his breath stank of death, rot, and brimstone and I could feel the raw power emanating off of him in waves of unimaginable magical potential.

I didn't blink, nor flinch as his fangs snapped an inch from my face. I sighed and asked, "Well?"

The demon King paced around me, his massive hooves clomped with each step as he ran a claw around the perimeter, sparks and flames licking up from the contact. Then he stopped in front of me. "You're serious about this. Things must be dire indeed to take a chance like this. You know I could kill you now with no effort?"

I nodded. "Yes, they are beyond dire. And yes, you could kill me now, but inside the circle it would just banish you back to your realm. While outside there, is fresh air, and freedom... unbound. It is that chance of freedom that I offer."

He looked at my offered hand and said, "Done," then grasped my arm.

He studied me, not releasing me as I moved a foot back, not looking, to break the chalk circle and the barrier fell. He tensed, as if waiting for an attack, when none came he released my arm and said as he walked around the area, picking logs up with a hand to sniff them, scuffing the dirt with his hooves, taking in deep breaths of fresh air, leaned his deformed face into a cool breeze, "Speak while I still feel like entertaining your foolhardiness."

I nodded and sat on a huge stump and motioned for him to do the same. He shook his head, instead moved around, examined and smelled everything around us. He even leaned in to sniff me. I realized it was the lack of rot and brimstone that had him looking around in wonder. The First has never been summoned before, and this was his first time in the mortal realm, seeing all it had to offer over the hellscape he lorded over.

Taking a deep breath, I began as Illya stepped up behind me to lay a hand on my shoulder in support. "All the realms are locked off from your kind now except for the mortal realm, now that Neverland and Oz are secure, is this not true?"

"It is true, but what does that have to do with you wanting us to interfere in the downfall of humankind?"

Sighing I shared, "Actually, it has everything to do with it." I motioned around. "Look at this world, it has so much that your kind covets as only a dream. And it is the only realm you can reach from your own anymore."

He made a motion with his hand indicating I should get to the point. “Right now the hope is alive that you will someday break down the barrier between realms and roam the earth freely, unbound by the whims and contracts of man.”

I locked eyes with him. “If the Elders come and complete the reset then that hope will die forever and your people will truly be damned to wander your own hellscape for all of eternity. It is that hope that I offer you. If you help defend the mortal realm with your demons, then that hope remains. That is what I bargain with.”

He chuckled sardonically. “So you would have us remain slaves to the whims of man?”

Shrugging I said, “That is all I have to offer. The hope that one day you would stand under the sun and breath clean air not tainted by the brimstone of the eternal fires in your realm.”

“Your name human, so I will know who offers a poison pill for us to swallow.”

“Maireni Damaschin, the Red Hood.”

He chuckled. “Of course... I feel the power of your bloodline. The eternally damned Damaschin line. I know who you are now. No wonder Styche hated you so. Your family has been a thorn in our side since mankind summoned the first demon. So righteous, so very hard to corrupt.”

He contemplated me for a moment. “I will make this pact with you, but only if the way between our realms remains open for us to pass freely unbound to your world.”

Shaking my head I said, “No. I offer only the hope of freedom from your self imposed chains. We cannot have demons destroying everything we have built.”

He smirked and shrugged. “Without incentive, we would simply live as we had. Locked away in our own realm and...”

I knew it would be a negotiation, demons never just did something or simply accepted a deal. I was prepared and said, “I will help negotiate a treaty between our peoples. One that allows your kind to come through a portal unbound in regulated groups, but blood oaths and curses must be sworn by each traveling demon, that they will abide by the laws of our people. Any laws broken would have them banished to your realm, never to return. Any serious crimes will have them put to true death.”

He looked taken aback. “You offer free access to your realm?”

I shook my head again. “I offer that I will aid in negotiation in good faith. I cannot speak for all of mankind.”

He nodded. “So you offer nothing.”

“I offer everything, now stop getting your panties in a bunch and shake my hand.”

He hesitated then started to shake my hand. “I have free access regardless.”

We kept shaking as I said, “You have seven days a year regardless and under my supervision and under the same provisions I have already laid out.”

“On your soul.”

I chuckled, he was good. “No, on my blood.” I took a knife from my cloak and cut it across our hands. I winced as his blood mixed with mine and it sizzled into a brand of the number one.

He looked at me as he released me. “What a fine consort you would make. Dealing like a true demon.”

“I’m spoken for.”

He walked around Illya and me, hooves clomping heavily. Then he leaned down and whispered ancient words of power into my ear as he handed me a talisman. “To open the way when you need us. We will be waiting. And if you back out on our deal, your soul is forfeit to me.” My arm burned and smoked at the brand to punctuate his threat.”

“Just be there. My word is already given in blood.”

And here we were, testing the word of a demon in a battle for our realm. I replied to his question, “The boon I would ask of you is to help defend the mortal realm from the threat of the Elders.” The demon smirked at me and inclined his head in acceptance before standing. I felt the demon brand on my hand smoking as the First stepped up to Lapetus, huffing black smoke up into his face, his eyes drizzling hellfire.

Lapetus growled out, “This is not your fight, demon. We have left your realm in peace, now begone and...” The next instant, he was skidding across the ground, to slam into his companions. The First had struck him faster than my enhanced senses could follow, backed by dark, corrupted magics.

“Do not deign to command me! I have a deal to uphold with the mortals. Leave this realm and never return or my people will hunt you to the ends of

eternity... Elder.”

Ok, that right there, was a good threat.

As Lapetus regained his footing, a burning wound in his lower gut, rage painted his face, the First just made a come hither motion with a finger behind him and with the screeches of millions of tortured souls, the demons flowed through the portal toward the Elders.

There was abject terror on the other Elders' faces as they looked to Lapetus, and they turned and were tearing holes, in reality, to step through before he knew what they were doing. He roared out to them as demons started diving on him, “Cowards.” He turned as he wiped the demons off of him like bugs off a windshield, chunks of his flesh in their mouths as he followed his brethren,

That's it Lapetus, run away and never come back.

He locked eyes with me as his portal closed around him and a few dozen demons, “This isn't the end, Red Hood. There will be a reckoning, I will return.”

I growled back, “And I'll be waiting right here.”

Then he was gone. I worried about the demons that got through with him, but that was a worry for another day. Right now we had other problems.

The demons kept flooding out of the portal, surrounding us. Hissing, snapping, growling, and screeching. My sisters were pulling their power to them, and raising weapons. I had to blink. Did Parker and Mandy have some sort of ray blasters?

I turned to a grinning First, his smirking face full of malice. I lifted my hand to show him the mark of the beast. “Your word?”

He chuckled and bowed. “Of course my future bride.”

I rolled my eyes as Daria growled violently at that, “In your dreams, First, in your dreams.”

He chuckled again, then roared, the world shook from the force of it and all the demons scurried back through the portal, some with their tails literally tucked between their legs. Then he simply snapped and the portal was gone.

I exhaled loudly. “Why are you still...”

“I have to be sure you will abide by our contract. Besides, I have seven days of freedom in your realm.”

He growled when his eyes caught Masika with the others. I assured him, “She's with me.”

The First clomped over to her and they had a good stare-down before he told her, “You...”

She just made a mouth with her hand and said as she mimed, “Blah, blah, blah... threats death gloom destruction... blah blah blah.” She turned her back to him to regard us. “It is time for me to return home to Neverland.”

Mandy was almost instantly by her side and the woman kissed her forehead. “I expect you to visit an old lady.”

Mandy was crying and nodding as she hugged the woman she saw as her grandmother.

Masika looked at Wendy and said, “Dear sweet child, repair your ship and come home often, bring your baby girl.”

Hook landed by her side and hugged her almost desperately. Then the Voodoo Queen stood and held a hand out to Mandy, looking at her patiently and our weapon's specialist blushed then pulled a small alligator from her pocket and handed it to the woman.

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end as I felt power gathering. Oh god... Dot. I spun to see her about to attack our group with a huge buildup of power. Parker's voice, raw with sorrow and emotion called out as she stepped in front of everyone, “Dot?”

The wicked witch faltered, and asked as if she wasn't sure, “Parker?” There was shared grief between them that somehow got through the wicked corruption of the power in Dorothy. She stepped up to our Den Mother and the two looked at each other before hugging tightly, crystal tears falling from Parker as emerald tears that fell from Dorothy's eyes sizzled off her skin as it crystallized.

Masika addressed us all while keeping a wary eye on the First. “I wish I could undo what my kin had perpetrated here today. So many souls lost. But I held on to what I could, so as a gift to you...”

And the Elder walked away from us a portal opening before her as she whispered four words filled with immense power, “Once upon a time.”

And the portal closed, it caused a whirlwind of dust and smoke to surround us all. And a figure stepped through the smoke, looking back calling out, “This way, they're over here.”

I blinked. “Isla?” A very much alive and human little girl pulled someone through the smoky air and figures started appearing. My heart stopped as Ella, Marie, Katiana, Robyn, Belle, Toto, and Tink stepped out of the haze, dazed looks on their faces.

That's when all the tears started to fall.

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## Epilogue

On the one year anniversary of the Battle for the Mortal Realm, we sat around the table in the Avatar Headquarters, one of the first buildings constructed in New Seattle. My girl called out as we all held our glasses up over the feast, “Hey you bloody wankers, my girl has a toast, so shut your fecking pie holes.”

Then sweat as you please, Marie said in her delightful French accent which makes my knees weak, “Please, my Parker, proceed mon amore.”

I smiled at my girls, knowing I loved them more now than I had before I lost them. I would never survive that kind of heartbreak again. Both Ella and Marie looked so beautiful in their wedding gowns which matched mine, looking like... well like princesses, just don't let them hear me saying that.

Now they were mine forever, bound by holy matrimony. Though the current mortal laws see this as polygamy since there are three of us sometimes and sometimes two, but Perchta's laws of nature saw it simply as love so she, a goddess, our sister, and friend had performed the ceremony. Let's see someone dispute the word of a literal god.

The months which followed the battle were so hectic, with every military and law enforcement agency around the globe trying to get to the bodies and gear of the fallen soldiers from all the other realms. There were still thousands of stranded conscripted beings in Australia. Our own government tried to take our space guns from us. And the fallout, both political and nuclear from Russia's unauthorized nuking of London.

The blast polished land that had once been Seattle was chosen as neutral territory and New Seattle would be constructed here, serving as the headquarters for the new United Earth Alliance. It was going to be years before any sort of normality returned to the mortal realm and a single governing body was approved, especially since the First along with our Red, were negotiating treaties for free travel for the demons between realms. Believe it or not, there were even scientists and humans who wished to visit the demon realm.

I looked around to my family, the Avatars who I loved like sisters, and wiped a tear from my eye. “To my family on my wedding day, I wish a long and...”

I was interrupted by the heavy oak doors of the meeting room we were using for the reception slamming open, a figure striding through. We were all standing and had our weapons and magics brought to bear in an instant. I had my space gun in one hand, a crystal spear in the other.

A silver-haired gentleman in a tweed suit called out to us in urgency. “Avatars, I am Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Miss Holmes is in need of your assistance right away. It is a matter of...”

I holstered my weapon and the spear melted back into my hand as I held it up to the others who looked ready to flay the man alive. Just what we needed, another one of these cryptic author watchers messing with our lives. This was my wedding day!

I stepped up to the man who panted from the exertion of running and said to him as I saw humor flicker in his eye just like all the other damn watchers, “Sir, I mean this with all due respect...”

I grabbed his crotch and squeezed hard as his eyes bulged before he fell to his knees. “Fuck off.”

He squeaked and nodded once and I released him as I patted his cheek. “Good boy, now come back after my honeymoon and we'll listen to whatever you have to say.”

He fell forward onto his face, clutching his dangly bits, speaking into the floor, “Fair enough.”

The women looked at me in shock when I turned back around to join them. What? I can be crass at times, I'm not all sweetness and light. I picked up my glass and the others joined me and I toasted the same four words which brought our loves back to us, “Once upon a time.”

They cheered and we clinked our glasses. Whatever may come, the Avatars of the mortal realm would be here to keep evil at bay.

The End

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Soras

Masquerade

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### **Books in the Urban Fairytales series...**

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Ella: Cinders and Ash

Rose: Briar's Thorn

Let Down Your Hair

Hair of Gold: Just Right

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No Place Like Home

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Raven Maid: Out of the Darkness

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Open Seas: Just Add Water

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## **Short Stories by Erik Schubach**

(These short stories span many different genres)

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Lost in the Woods

MUB

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Oops!

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Case of the Gold Retriever

Case of the Great Danish

Case of the Yorkshire Pudding

Case of the Poodle Doodle

Case of the Hound About Town

**Sample chapter from my new scifi paranormal space adventure**  
**Worldship Files: Leviathan...**

## Chapter 1 – Irontown

I navigated my hovering Tac-Bike through the streets of Irontown on C-Ring, Beta-Stack. Another disturbance was reported in the bulkhead corridors. People moved out of the way as my warning beacon strobed. Air traffic was light and I considered heading above street level. This inner ring, like most of the inner rings, was inhabited mostly by Humans and a few unsavories like Sprites, witches, and a few shifters. Which is why I get dispatched here.

I usually get the shit calls, since I was Human too. Why should the Enforcers Brigade be any different than anyone else on the Worldship? Equal opportunity bigotry is the one thing leftover from the old world, that old home called Earth that is just a legend to most of us here on the Leviathan.

I've always thought the stories were just old folktales to keep us lower races in line, that idea that there ever was a place of Open Air, where machines and the ship's oxygen processing systems were not needed to keep us breathing, to keep us alive. But I have questioned it a few times when I've met a couple of the Old Earth Fae who say they were there on the day five thousand years ago when the Leviathan left the orbit of that dying planet.

And Fae... well everyone knows that the Fae cannot lie. Which makes them the best deceivers of all the races, they can spin the truth to make you believe anything they wish and not tell a single lie while doing it. And being in the Brigade, I've seen the outer rings, the lush forests and villages, and rivers that they modeled after Earth. I can almost imagine what it would be like if those forests went on forever instead of being constrained to just a mile wide strip in the fifty-mile diameter torus of the A-Rings.

It is hard to believe that each of the four A-Rings has almost two thousand square miles of space, four times that of the crowded C-Rings. Even more than the surface of the seven-mile diameter asteroid encased in the Heart sphere located... well located in the heart of the Leviathan. The workers and ore extractors there have virtually no gravity, so they can't even come farther out than the small D-Rings without requiring exoskeleton



support or magic buffs to support their brittle bone structure in the higher gravity of the spinning rings.

I went past the outer markets then parked and mag-locked my Tactical Bike at one of the many entrances to the labyrinth of corridors, living, and working units of the slums in the bulkhead spaces, assigned to the people who couldn't afford to live outside in the cities and villages crowding the ring's environmental envelope.

An advertisement for cybernetic eye implants was playing across the door, damn taggers with their interactive graffiti were getting so commercial lately. Whatever happened to simple gang tagging or art expressionism? Now it was all about making an extra token chit or two.

I tapped a code on my wrist panel, to inform engineering to come out and strip the programmable paint from the structure as I just shook my head. It's no wonder us humans have such a bad reputation for being slacker trash that's only good for reclamation for fertilizer for the farms, or sucking hard vacuum in space.

It wasn't worth reviewing the surveillance footage to track down the tagger, it was a minor offense and wasn't worth having his or her meal cards set to rationing mode for a month. That sort of thing just promotes the rash of homeless in the lower rings when they can't eat properly to stay healthy enough to work. Not everyone had jobs that made enough chit to supplement their meal cards with fresh food if needed.

Sometimes as an Enforcer, we have to choose our battles. The others from Beta Squad, either call me soft because I let minor infractions like that slide, or null because, like all humans who weren't witches or shifters, had no magic of my own. Ahhh there's that Leviathan bigotry in action again.

Speaking of... a large tiger saw me step into the bulkhead corridors and it hissed and backed off as it changed to human and slipped into a living unit. Ok, maybe the Brigade isn't as popular here in the lower rings as elsewhere on the ship, or 'on the world' as we locals say.

I checked my wrist unit again, and muttered, "Oh go suck vacuum, Bulkhead J?" Of course, it would be the maintenance corridors out by the Skin. I sighed and started jogging through the semi-crowded corridors, people moving aside as I started the quarter-mile journey. I should have just taken my Tac-Bike like the entitled asses of the other squads do, siren wailing and forcing people out of the way.

The deeper I went, the fewer people I passed, until it was only the back hall vagrants. I kicked the hoof of a Satyr just to make sure he was still breathing. What the hells was he doing down here? When he groaned and opened his eyes, he started cursing me in Old Fairy. Who used Old Fairy anymore?

I snapped at him in the same tongue, “Get up, get out, and get sober.”

He staggered to his hooves and took the bottle of spirits with him, muttering, “Fuckin' null.” Ok, apparently he spoke Ship Common too.

I snorted and sighed, then started jogging toward the reported disturbance. Could they at least have classified it? Was it just someone shitting in the corridor or someone threatening to open a breach in the Skin?

On that thought, I paused at one of the massive breach seal blast doors as I passed from the section, at a sound. I saw flickering lights around the door seams of the emergency manual door release. I stepped over, shook my head then pulled the small door open and growled out, “Hey, get out of there, now! I'll pin your wings and haul your little asses in right now if you don't make yourselves scarce. And hey! Put that linkage back! We'd all be sucking vacuum if there was a meteoroid strike and this section decompressed without us being able to operate the door.”

One of the glowing, five-inch tall humanoids with large moth-like wings hissed at me and waved me off. “Get lost, null.”

I muttered to myself, “Sprites.” Then I said as I pointed back toward the exit, “Out now, you filthy scavengers.”

Two of the trio looked up from where they were trying to pull a linkage free, their eyes shooting from my face to my scatter armor to the badge and guns at my waist. They looked at their companion then took flight, leaving a trail of that damn itchy wing dust in their wake.

The third called after them in his... or her... or its squeaky voice; I always got pronoun headache with a three sex-species like Sprites, “Cowards! We can get ten chit for this!” Then it looked at me, harrumphed, then slammed the little access door in my face. The cheeky little shit.

I yanked it open again and the Sprite had the balls to cast at me. I didn't even bother dropping my talisman reinforced visor on my helmet with a thought. The spell sparked from its finger and dissipated against my scatter armor as it lived up to its namesake.

I reached into the box and grabbed the little ass by the wings, pinching them together as I hauled it out to hold up in front of my face. What had it been thinking, even without my armor, Sprites were the bottom of the magic community food chain, right below Faeries. The most it could accomplish against a human is to sting or make a slightly uncomfortable rash with its magic.

I asked as I cocked an eyebrow, “You want me to add assaulting an Enforcer to the list of charges? If you're lucky, they'll have you cleaning out grease traps in the food districts instead of the urinals in the D-Ring.”

It swung little fists at my fingers uselessly as it dangled from its wings. “You're like all the other Bigs. If I were your size you'd be quaking in your fancy-schmancy boots like every other man.”

“I'm a woman, are you visually impaired as well as stupid?”

It growled, “Man, woman? All you nulls look the same to me.”

I sighed and said, “You aren't winning any points here.” I scanned it with my wrist unit and an ID popped up. Ah, a third gender, a pollinator, I would have mistaken it for a girl, but I could see the feminine androgyny in it now. “Graz. No surname? You're not that old are you?”

The Fae and other preternatural races became known to the humans of Old Earth when they stepped forward to help construct the Leviathan so that all the races could escape the slowly expanding sun. In those days most preternatural people had only a single name. They didn't start taking surnames until a few hundred years after the Exodus launch to Eridani Prime, the new world our people will call home at the end of our ten thousand year journey.

We were only halfway there, and I and every Human on board would never see it, only the Fae and the Vampires had the chance of seeing the end of our voyage. Us Humans were not blessed with long lives, we burned bright for just around two centuries, then died. So it would still be thirty or forty generations before a human would set foot on the Ground, under Open Air.

It harrumphed and crossed its arms over its chest, and gods be damned if it wasn't cute as hell. “My parents were traditionalists, living on a farm, and couldn't pronounce grass right.”

Answered like a true Fae, it wasn't exactly a yes or a no, why were they always so evasive? The lesser Fae could lie, unlike the Greater Fae.

I sighed and said, "I tell you what Graz, I'll overlook your little indiscretions if you just make yourself scarce and promise not to scavenge from critical emergency systems again. I'm on a disturbance call right now back at Bulkhead J, and don't have the time or desire to deal with you too, besides the paperwork is a bitch."

The purplish-pink color drained from Graz's face and it said, "Bulkhead J? The screaming? You don't want to go back there, it's..." The Sprite trailed off, shook its head and asked, "Just... it's better to walk away officer..."

I offered, "Shade, Knith Shade."

"Shade."

Letting the Sprite go, it buzzed its wings to stay in my face and asked, "You're going back there anyway, aren't you?" It actually looked scared... even though it was virtually immortal... well as long as nobody killed it.

I nodded. "It's my job."

The Sprite looked back the way I came as it licked its lips, contemplating my offer. Then it did the last thing I would expect a Sprite, which were flighty annoyances who looked out for only themselves, to do, and said, "I can show you where the screams came from."

Then it added quickly, "Not that I care what happens to another Big. Just if something happens to you, I'm stealing those MMGs you're carrying."

I snorted and patted my stunners, or Magic Mitigating Guns, as I pointed out, "Like you could even lift one, you flying rat."

It buzzed up and sat on my shoulder grabbing the edge of my helmet. "You've got a smart mouth for a Big." Then before I could retort Graz pointed, "That way." Then it muttered, "Shade means nobody." I knew that, but like everyone else, we don't pick our own names.

I sighed then started jogging in the direction it pointed. Gods... I hope nobody from the squad finds out I was taking directions from a Sprite.

[▲ Back to TOP](#)

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