

What would you do
if your world was being invaded
before your eyes ...



THE AWAKENING

A DARK PASSENGER NOVEL



L. C. AINSWORTH

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L.C. AINSWORTH

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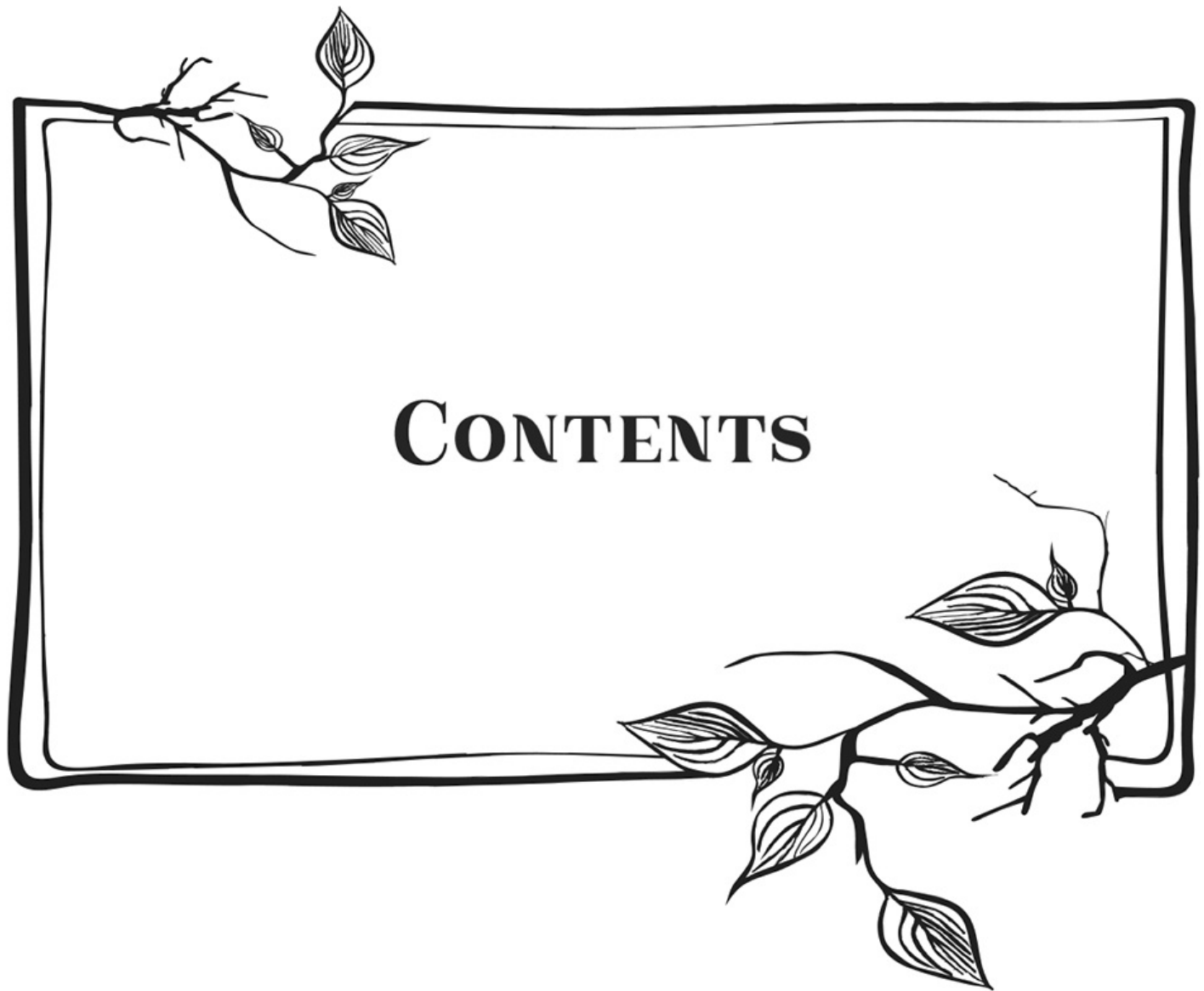
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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 8

CHAPTER 9

CHAPTER 10

CHAPTER 11

CHAPTER 12

CHAPTER 13

CHAPTER 14

CHAPTER 15

CHAPTER 16

CHAPTER 17

CHAPTER 18

CHAPTER 19

CHAPTER 20

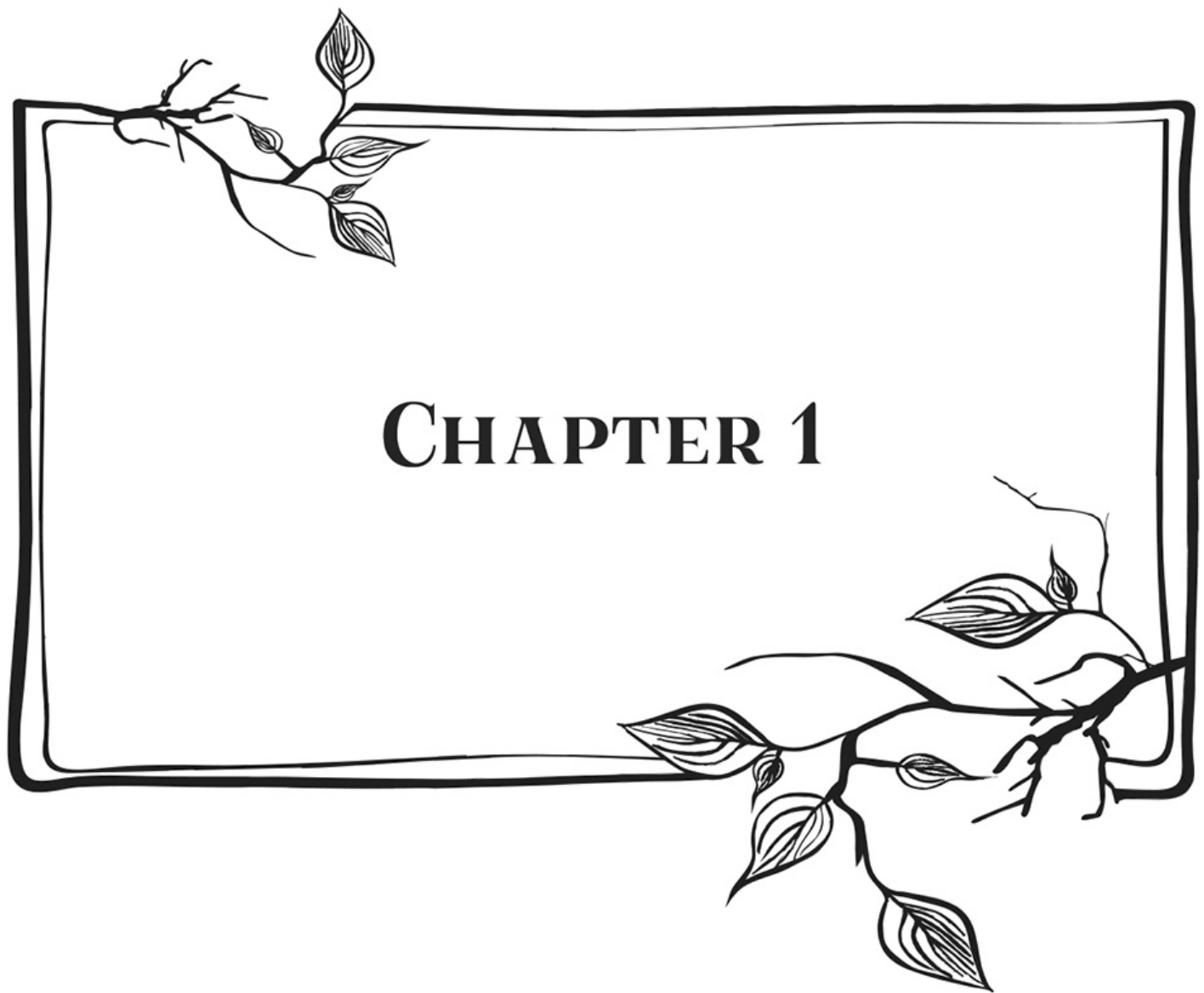
CHAPTER 21

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This book is dedicated to my sister/best friend, and my gorgeous nephew. Without you, my dear sister, I would have never had the courage to write this book. Thank you for supporting me, not only morally, but financially.

I am forever grateful to you.



CHAPTER 1

Bernard Farage was standing in front of Primrose Cottage. He remembered the first time he laid eyes on it. It had been the beginning of autumn, and the village of Gateway Hill had just started to transform itself into a picture-perfect orange-and-yellow garden. Right in the middle was the beautiful, three-little-pigs-worthy, cute stone cottage with a thatched roof.

The garden beds were packed tight with plants. At first he had been puzzled by the informal crowding of the large variety of flowers all around the garden, but then he realised that the mix of perennial flowers with foliage plants was what had turned that cottage into the village's prettiest dwelling.

Except this time he was not getting the usual tingling of pleasure he got every time he opened that gate. Primrose's sweet pink stone path to the wooden door, once so picturesque, was slowly turning into the path to the executioner.

He stood in front of the door, his heart racing and sweat starting to drip along his temples. For the first time, he regretted his sense of style. He had always been a big fan of three-piece pinstripe or chalk-stripe suits and always wore a fedora hat. This time his hat and his suit were burning him, and he couldn't stop sweating. He was about to turn back when the door opened.

Oh, for heaven's sake, he thought while shrugging his shoulders.

He already had his back to the door and was not quite sure how to explain his presence, but he had been caught trying to leave and decided that he had no other choice but to turn around. And so he did, wearing his best smile.

Standing at the door was a skinny gentleman in a brown suit; Farage only knew him as Bob. Bob was pale, with dark circles under his eyes. Farage had always wondered what his function was in the house.

With his slow voice, Bob asked, "Can I help you?"

"I would like to see Her Highness," said Farage.

Without a word, Bob slowly opened the door wide, then stepped back and waited.

Farage reluctantly stepped inside the cottage. He slowly walked through the narrow beige corridor with the royal's shih-tzu showing him the way.

When he walked into the small living room, he took a moment to look around him. On the left wall was an old red-brick fireplace with a large rustic oak beam above it, and above that were three handcrafted blue-and-white wall plates. An elegant seventeenth-century bureau was at the right of the fireplace. On the floor was a beautiful eighteenth-century red Persian rug, and on the left of the room was a stunning handmade marquetry dining table made of burr-walnut, with matching chairs. The table was set for tea with a Victoria sponge cake, a few watercress sandwiches and a fine china tea set, which almost matched the wall plates.

The royal was sitting in a mid-nineteenth-century upholstered armchair of large proportions in Carolean style. It had American walnut veneer over a beech-wood frame.

Farage's heart always raced when he laid eyes on the royal, with her smooth olive skin, her long dark hair, her penetrating dark eyes, her high cheeks and her plumped and pouty mouth.

She has a face to launch a thousand ships, he thought.

He was also extremely attracted to her oversized bosom, her wide hips and her long legs, which she loved to cross and uncross in front of her. That day, she was wearing a high-necked, long-sleeved and backless see-through black dress with a short train. He thought she looked spectacular. He wouldn't have expected a woman of her size to be wearing such a revealing outfit, but her confidence and the unapologetic way she was flaunting her generous curves was what made her the head-turner she was.

She approached him very slowly, wearing a small smile on her face. She was barefoot. When she reached him, she gently touched his right shoulder and walked around him, still touching him. She couldn't help the little smirk of contentment when she noticed his breathing accelerating. She loved how easily people became aroused around her. She eventually walked around him and came back full-circle, facing him.

"Why are you scared of me today? What is wrong, my dear Bernard?" she said while playing with the black lace around her right wrist.

“Your Highness,” he said in a trembling voice, “the vicar has refused your offer. He is demanding that we leave the village immediately, or he will be forced to call the authorities.”

She took a big breath, walked a few steps backwards and said, “Very well, show him how serious we are. Dispose of the boy.”

She was no longer smiling. Even her gait was no longer seductively swaying; it was straight and firm like a soldier’s. She turned back and sat on her antique armchair, both her arms resting on the chair’s arms.

“Darling, can you come in here?” she yelled without taking her eyes off Farage.

A teenage boy, skinny, short and Middle Eastern, appeared from the other end of the cottage, his short and wavy hair shining and his dark eyes staring at Farage arrogantly.

“Go and get a poisonous fly for our friend Bernard. He is in desperate need of one.”

Without uttering a word, the boy walked out of the living room and started climbing the stairs opposite.

“I will take care of it personally,” said Farage.

“No, you won’t. Find a human who has not yet proven their loyalty to us to our satisfaction,” said the royal while getting up from her chair. She then slowly approached him and said, “After the deed is done, reward the human and inform our dear vicar that unless the entire village is handed to us, you will personally organise the pied pipers to land on their doorsteps. Do I make myself clear?”

Farage nodded and suddenly heard footsteps. He turned around and saw the teenager standing behind him.

“Here you go,” said the adolescent.

He extended his arm and opened his palm. Farage noticed a small tattoo on his right wrist. It was round, with outlines of the silhouette of what seemed to be a face. It was the royal family’s insignia. The only people allowed to wear it were their most trusted and loyal local servants. Farage realised that he was facing one of them.

The royal family had been enslaving humans for centuries, and rumour had it that the descendants of those humans were immediately born into slavery. Since his arrival on Earth, he had yet to meet one of high rank, until this day.

The slaves were ranked from the lower caste to the higher caste. The lower-caste slaves were those with no value other than for use in scientific experiments or human behaviour studies. They were just given the bare minimum to survive, because their life expectancy was so short.

The caste just above the lower caste was considered necessary for manual labour and nothing more. They, too, were given the bare minimum but were allowed to live in their own homes, unlike the lower caste, who were kept in confinement.

The lower-middle caste were used for their intellectual prowess, and they were given better accommodations than the lower castes, and also bonuses during religious holidays.

The higher-middle caste were also used for their intellectual prowess, but due to their intellect being far superior to any other caste's, they were kept in relative luxury and given a chance to join the higher-caste rank.

The last caste was the higher caste. They were slaves only on paper. They had willingly offered themselves to the royal family, and no one was above them, besides the aliens themselves. They were extremely wealthy and had control over all other slaves and took their orders directly from the royal family and no one else.

Farage grabbed the transparent box holding three flies and brought it to eye level. They were miniature robot flies infused with poison. Their technicians had designed them especially for use on humans.

He bowed to the royal, who nodded, signifying the end of the meeting, and left. The royal then turned to the adolescent, still sitting on her chair with her arms resting comfortably on the chair arms, and said, "Watch his chosen one closely. If they refuse to execute the boy, or if anything goes wrong, I will expect you to finish the mission for them."

The boy nodded affirmatively, then left the room, following the same route Farage had taken.

The next day, Farage was back in J. C. Maxwell Academy, the boarding school where he had been working for years. He was looking around the dining room. He had spotted Nigel Weatherford, son of Gateway Hill's vicar, Norman Weatherford. He turned to a skinny, pale blonde woman with brown eyes and wearing an animal-print dress. He asked her, "Are you ready?"

She nodded yes, then opened the palm of her hand. In it was the transparent box. She opened the box and an already moving robotic fly flew away. The poisonous fly had been the preferred method of killing for the group in order to avoid the attention of the police and shed doubt on the victim's family's claim that their loved one had been murdered.

Despite her repugnance at killing a child, Candice Dujardin was determined to carry out her mission. She had already given up too much; an additional dead child wouldn't change much. It went without a hitch. After the food stations had been opened and the students had made their choice, they sat down. As soon as they sat down, they noticed a fly circling around the youngest students' table. A few of them tried to chase it away by waving their hands, and it seemed to have disappeared. A few minutes later, the fly reappeared, landed on the young Weatherford, then flew out a nearby window.

Weatherford had just started to eat his salad when he turned red and grabbed his throat, struggling to breathe. The boy next to him grabbed him just as he was falling from the table bench. Other students got up and tried to help, carrying him and laying him on the floor while the other students ran to get help from the teachers. It was unnecessary. They had watched the scene and were quick to respond.

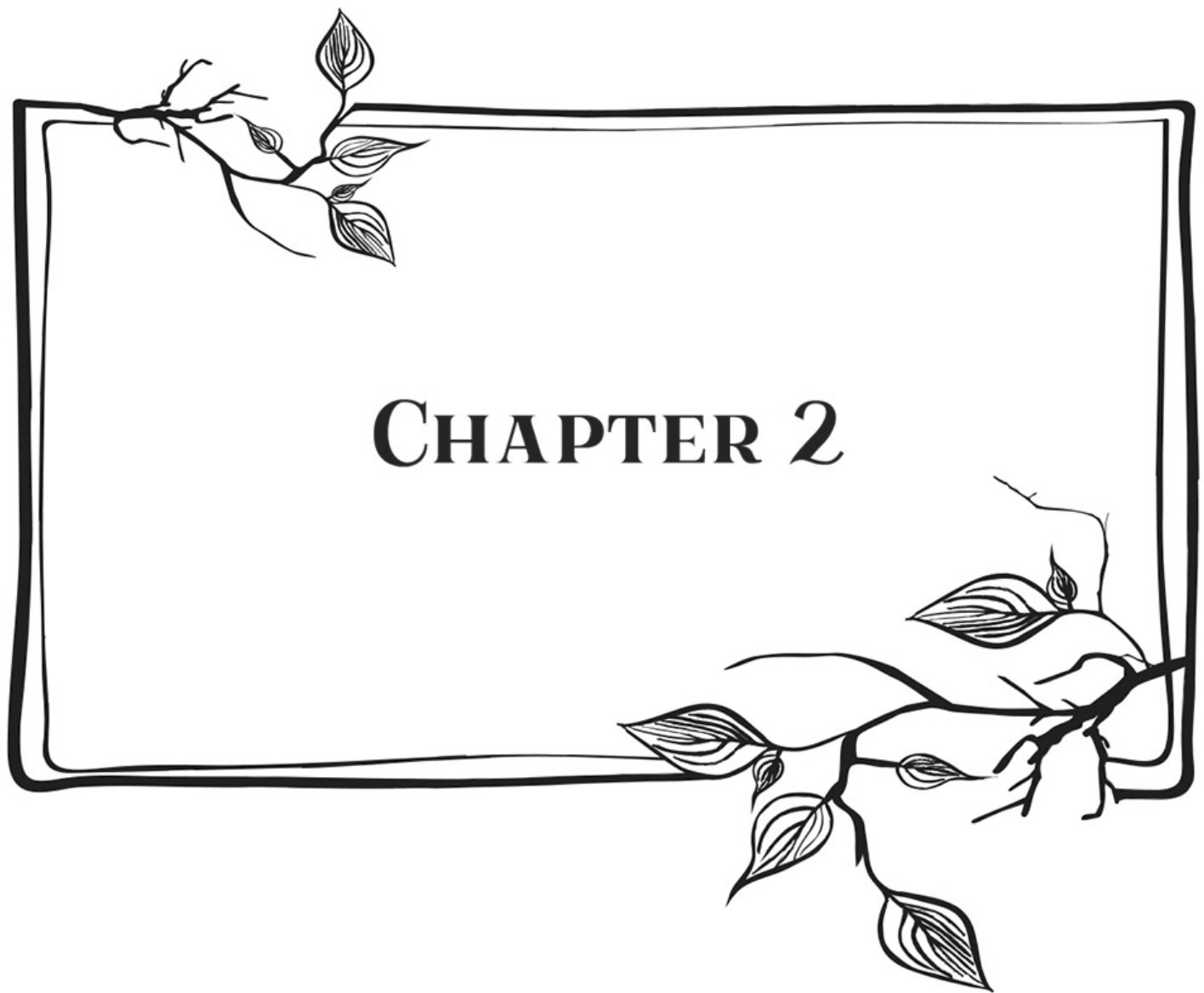
Weatherford was still clinging to his friend's hand, his eyes filled with fear. He eventually pulled his other hand up and grabbed his friend's shirt. Then he fell on the floor while his friend tried to get hold

of him. As soon as he hit the ground, he lost consciousness.

Other staff members took the students away, and they all watched the paramedics come in and examine Weatherford. Dujardin was still supervising the hit; she watched a paramedic leaning over Weatherford. He raised his head, looked at the school staff facing him and shook it negatively. Weatherford's art teacher screamed and slowly slipped down all the way to the floor and covered her mouth with her hands. Others came down to her level and tried to help her up, but she pushed them away. The paramedics transported the little boy's corpse to the ambulance.

Standing at the back of the room, watching silently, was a young boy. His dark eyes met with Dujardin's brown eyes. She raised her head in defiance and he smiled. *She is officially one of us now*, he thought.

The next day, the vicar, with the assistance of the village mayor, allowed the group to take full control of Gateway Hill.



CHAPTER 2

As difficult as it was for us to leave Yanara, we were pretty excited to be sent to Surrey. We had heard from our family members how beautiful Surrey Hills was, but we were not prepared for what we saw. The region was stunning. The land and the trees were still green when we arrived in September, but we could already see some patches of orange and yellow announcing autumn's arrival.

Most Yan children graduated from school at the age of sixteen and started military service for two years. The members of the Ten, however, were sent to Masani boarding schools and only attended military service during the summer, so their military service was extended. This required them to start FIST, our fighting skills training, at the age of fourteen for boys and ten for girls, which was the case for my sister, Amelia, and me. I, Diana Amara Boubu Korsning, was from the sovereign duchy of Yanar, and a member of the Ten, Yanar's ruling families.

The sovereign duchy of Yanar was born a thousand years ago. It was created by Yans from all over the world who had to flee their countries after being persecuted for having supernatural powers. The Yans acquired their powers thanks to an event that happened in a parallel dimension to Earth.

Unbeknown to human beings, a world called Hendu, which was technologically much more advanced than Earth, had become aware of its existence.

The Hendus, in an attempt to cross over to Earth and gain more information about humans, tried to create a breach between their world and Earth that would allow them to cross over. The result was not what they had hoped for. Instead of allowing them to cross over, the experiment created an explosion so strong that it destroyed one of their own neighbouring planets.

The energy deriving from the destroyed planet broke a tiny part of the veil separating Earth from Hendu and infected ten per cent of Earth's population. The humans infected by the energy deriving from the exploding planet in the parallel universe developed supernatural powers and decided to call themselves Yans.

The tears in the veil separating the two universes appeared in a few parts of the world at the same time. The locals only reported seeing a bright light that came over them, and nothing else. It wasn't until after they started procreating that they realised that their children were different from other children. They were taller, stronger, smarter and even more beautiful than the others; they stood apart from everyone around them, even their own parents. After some time, they realised that after the girls began their menstruation, they started to develop supernatural abilities.

As time went on, the locals started to fear these extraordinary children more and more, so much so that the families whose dependants were showing any sign of Nephilim-like qualities were relocated to the edge of each village.

Eventually, tension started to erupt between the gifted and the non-gifted, with some non-Yan inhabitants believing that the Yans' abilities were a gift from the gods and that the villages should be run by them and not the actual lords of the land.

Fearing for their standing in the community, some lords tried to exterminate the Yans and burn their homes, while in other places Yans were simply chased out of their homes with torches and pitchforks. In some places, the Yans and their families managed to flee, but in others, the mobs were met with deadly force and killed. In retaliation for the attempts on their lives, the Yans destroyed the lords' homes and fields, then left and built their own society.

For fear of being attacked and chased on their way to their new land, they lived as nomads until they could find a place to call their own. They would stop their wandering just long enough to replenish their provisions and sell their skills. Slowly but surely, they started to hear of others like them, searching for a land of their own. They gathered together whenever they could and left signs for others to follow.

They eventually settled on a series of islands in the Pacific Ocean and in time were joined by other Yans. It took us Yans over a hundred years to all be together, but we eventually found our way to our promised land.

At first Yanar was only inhabited by Yans. Years and years of silence and no contact had made the memory of enhanced people nothing but a legend, and people forgot all about their existence until

eventually non-gifted individuals started coming to the islands, explorers sent by kings and queens in search of riches and gold for their sovereign. Not wanting to be invaded by non-gifted individuals, the Yans destroyed the explorers' boats, and the explorers were given a choice: remain in Yanar forever with no contact with the outside world, or death. They chose to remain and protect the secret of Yanar's inhabitants.

Eventually, they adapted and started families with the Yans. However, after a while, it was discovered that in some families, although one of the parents was Yan, the children were born with no special abilities at all. They could be Masani, the name given to non-gifted individuals. However, these children would still carry the blue genes, the genes from which Yan powers came, and therefore could produce a Yan child with abilities.

Being cut off from the world allowed the Yans to forge a society adapted to their gifts, and unlike the rest of the world, nothing happened to hinder their scientific progress, which allowed them to become very advanced. They advanced so quickly, and their numbers grew so rapidly, that they decided to colonise a large part of the Arctic and named it Yanara, which was my hometown.

The Yan power holders were divided into six groups: water, air, rock, fire, energy and omni. The Yan culture was based on two principles: strength and intellect. The long journey that the Yans had had to make in order to find a home and then later establish their society made them realise that humans were not far from animals when they felt threatened, and threatened was what they felt every time a group of travelling Yans came close to their villages or cities. To avoid being slaughtered and having their children become what their enemies were, the Yans established a code of conduct. No matter where they were or how many enemies they were facing, those rules needed to be lived by.

Although very few boys were born with powers, the Yan males could still receive powers if they were transferred to them by a blood relative. That action was called genetic transfer and was only allowed in cases of extreme necessity, like a war, because genetic transfers could be lethal to the receiver. That power was to be retransferred to a female relative after the war to avoid the power being wasted.

Unlike the girls, the Yan males could not transfer their power over to their descendants, because powers were transferred from mother to child. All powers were pretty common, except for one: fire. The fire power was not only extremely rare but also did not discriminate. When the gene appeared, it could do so in a boy or a girl. It was also considered a sign of danger, because the fire power only revealed itself in cases of great peril for the Yans.

The First World War brought more Masanis to the shores of Yanar than ever before. Generally, it would have been inhabitants of neighbouring islands seeking a better life, or just adventurers, but this time the Yans had soldiers at their doors. The general council knew that with their numbers growing, they couldn't allow that many aliens to remain with them, and killing all of them was out of the question, so a decision was reached: they would return the captured soldiers to their homeland, and an invisible wall would be built around all Yanar territories to stop all non-Yans from entering.

Just as they finished building Yanara, the city in the Arctic, the council, knowing how evil and greedy Masani governments could be, prepared for war and had to accelerate the move to the Arctic. As it turned out, the war council was right. As soon as the soldiers returned to their homeland, it did not take long for their governments to send boats and planes to Yanar, and the Yans were ready for them.

What happened next was unexpected for both sides. The fight had barely started when the Yans realised how easily they could win over the Masanis. Much to their chagrin, the Masanis were quickly defeated. The Yans had prepared themselves for a possible David versus Goliath scenario, but it was baby David versus Goliath. The Masanis were hundreds of years behind the Yans in technology, not to mention their lack of any supernatural attributes. The council returned the soldiers to their governments and destroyed their planes and boats with a clear warning: come back again, and face the total annihilation of your countries and your inhabitants.

From that moment on, the Masani governments kept trying to get in contact with the Yans. Eventually, the general council realised that the lack of contact with the Masani world was a weakness on the Yans' part, and they agreed to have diplomatic relations with them, which were delayed by the Second World War.

The horrors that resulted from World War Two convinced the war council that the Masanis were nothing but savages unworthy of their friendship, and the military budget and research for better weapons was tripled in preparation for a war with the Masanis, if it ever came to that. The general council and the council of interior affairs disagreed, so a compromise was reached.

After the war, embassies were opened in many countries, and a small, regulated number of immigrants were allowed to move to Yanar and live among the Yans under strict conditions decided by the council of interior affairs. In return, the same would be allowed for Yan families in all countries where a Yan embassy was located. A few families were sent to the Masani world in order to watch their progression more closely and report on their way of life and culture from a ground-level perspective. The settlers were forbidden from using their supernatural abilities in the Masani world. It was also forbidden to share technology with them.

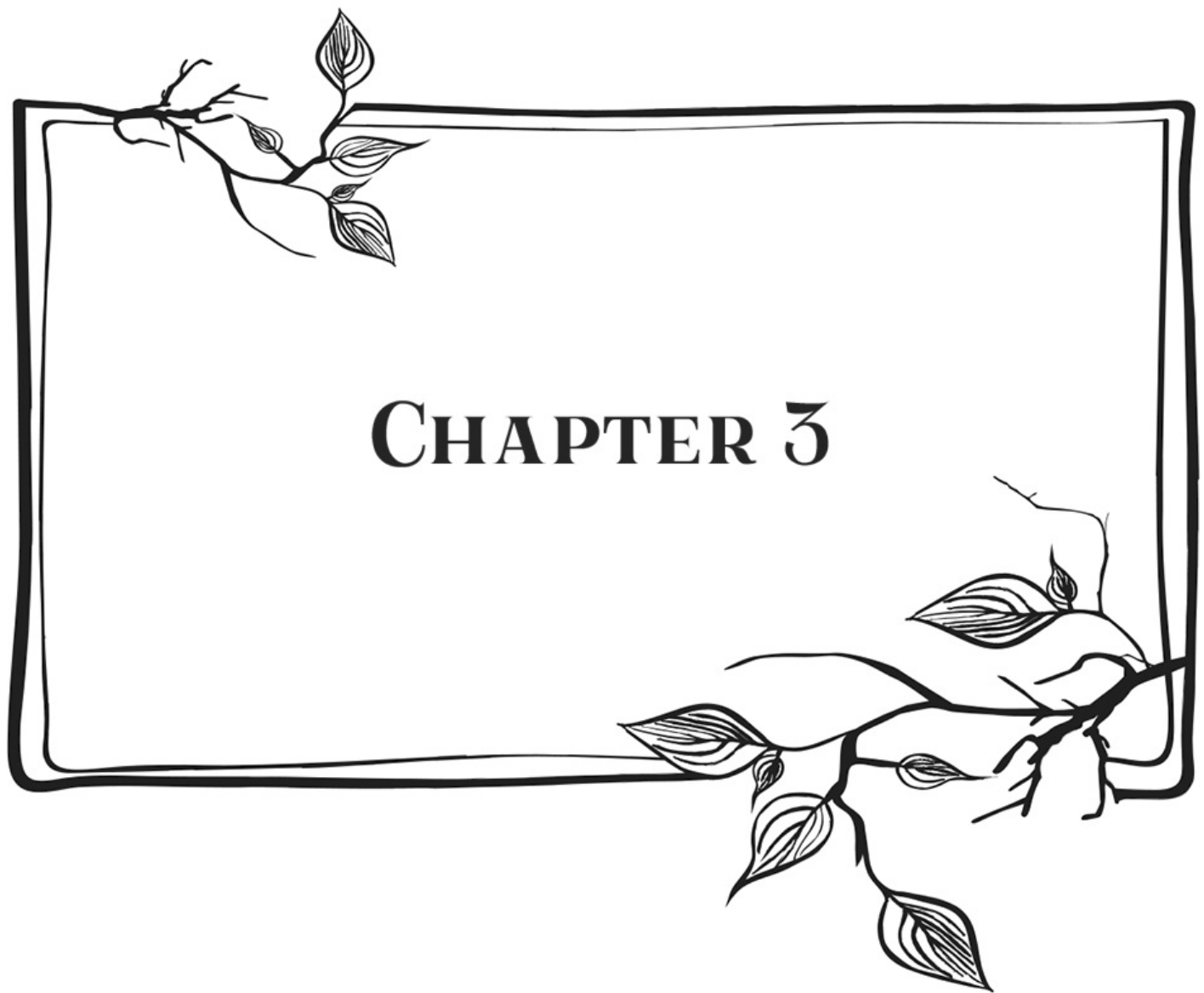
The news filled many Yans with joy; the desire to go and see their ancestral lands was a call they had wanted to respond to for centuries, and now the opportunity was presenting itself.

The migration was carefully planned to respect the agreements made with the Masani governments, which was fairly easy because the Masanis were so curious about the Yan world, and so hopeful to benefit from their friendship with the Yan government, that the agreements signed were quite relaxed.

Arriving in the Masani world felt like arriving in the Stone Age to the Yans, but it was otherwise agreeable. It went so well that before the Yan general council realised it, they had representatives all over the world. With the Yan culture being very different from other cultures, the immigrants had to open their own schools and live in the same neighbourhoods as each other to preserve their culture and

teach the new generation about the Yan way of life, as well as return to Yanar for a visit as much as possible.

The news of the superhumans' existence spread everywhere. Hordes of people surrounded Yan embassies to get a glimpse of the Yans and tried to get a visa to visit Yanar, but with no visas allowed, the fad passed. It was also impossible to know who was a Yan or not without being told, although many movies were made about Yans.



CHAPTER 3

In Yanar, graduation year was called the year of ascension. This meant that any child holding a graduation certificate was ready for an adult life. After my graduation ceremony, my mother called me into her office. I knew that it was an important meeting, because she looked very serious.

She explained to me that they had uncovered some irregular disturbance in some parts of the world.

“What kind of disturbance?” I asked.

She said that it was the kind of disturbance that could breach the veil separating us from the parallel world.

That was worrying. Yanar was already at war with an alien race who were trying to invade Earth.

My father was leading our space forces, and he had the alien fleet cornered just past Uranus, but I was worried that we may not have had much army left on the ground for a two-front war.

“If I didn’t know better, I would think that the Masanis have found a way to cross to the other side,” she said. “But I do know better, and I know for a fact that they do not possess such technology, let alone the necessary powers to do so,” she added.

All this time it was as if she was talking to herself, staring at her desk. She finally raised her head, her blue eyes looking straight at me, and said, “That is where you come in. Although you are only fifteen, you have managed to graduate and are now officially ascended, and I have had very good reports on your performances in FIST.”

My mother wasn't one to give her children compliments, so I was pretty surprised and happy. I sat more comfortably on my chair and stared back at her with a proud look on my face and a cheeky grin.

She said, “I'm going to send you to the UK. The strongest reading has been detected in Surrey. I need you to investigate the anomalies, find out what or who is causing them and report to me. Do not engage with anyone. Your job is to report, not to stop the perpetrators.”

“Very well, Mother,” I said.

“You will be going with Amelia. She hasn't reached the age of ascension yet, but with your brothers at the front and me busy with the general council, I'd prefer her to be with you. Make sure she is safe, and keep up with her training.”

“Yes, Mother,” I answered.

“You will also be going with the Wu twins and a few other Yans. Their parents have volunteered their services in case of trouble. They know nothing about the mission, and I'd prefer that they remain in the dark. The only person you will clue in is Pam. Do you understand?”

I nodded yes, but inside I was thinking, *Hell no. I'll clue Alex in. Pam will do it herself, anyway, and if any of the other Yans happen to be my friends, I'll clue them in too. Sorry, Mother.*

“You can go now, child. It's almost time to chat with your father,” she said.

The meeting was over. Yan parents were not known for their affectionate ways towards their children. The Yans believed that if parents showed too much affection towards their children, it would make the children weak, and therefore lower-quality soldiers.

Couples, however, were very affectionate towards each other, to the point of embarrassment for children sometimes. Public displays of affection towards a partner were very common in Yanar.

But now here I was, about to embark on a secret mission, and my mother was showing that she cared about my wellbeing by making sure that I would not be alone in Surrey.

I eventually found out that Amelia and I were being sent to a boarding school called J. C. Maxwell Academy. It used to be a Catholic boarding school but had been donated to Surrey County Council, and it was the best school in the vicinity of the anomaly recorded by the Yan science council.

The reason given to the UK government for choosing J. C. Maxwell as the school to send me, the future leader of Yanar, to was that J.C. was a very popular school among our people. The UK government was concerned by the lack of security around Amelia and me at J.C., but they were told by the council that as long as no one knew that we were members of the Ten, there was nothing to fear.

It wasn't difficult to convince the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Although J.C. had become a non-religious school, they had maintained the high level of standards implemented by the previous

owners.

It did not take long for us to get to Gateway Hill, the village adjacent to the school. The village had actually been built to provide accommodation for the workers and their families during the construction of the school. Then later it was used for the school staff and their families.

As time went by, more and more people moved to Gateway Hill, and by the time the school was donated to Surrey County Council, the village had become a town on its own and was no longer associated with the Catholic church or even considered an extension of the school grounds.

Gateway Hill was even more picturesque than I had thought. It was situated between Bowlhead Green and Milford. I had heard that since changing its name from Ceaster to Gateway Hill, the village had been attracting a large number of visitors, which was not unlike what I was witnessing.

There seemed to be a lot of people visiting. If I hadn't known better, I would I have thought that there was a conference of some sort happening. When we stopped and asked around, we were told that it was often that way in autumn, when they had all kinds of attractions organised by the town hall to occupy visitors.

We were also told that the village had been renovated to make it look like you had stepped back in time. They were right. Its reputation for its honey-coloured seventeenth-century-lookalike stone cottages with steeply pitched roofs was not exaggerated. It was stunning.

Gateway Hill had been built around Thursley Lake, which meant that the lake cut through the middle of the village. Each side had a similar concentration and scale of development.

Despite the beauty around me, I couldn't help but feel a pinch in my heart. The sea of tourists had just reminded me of my beloved Yanara and its incessant crowds, but as soon as we left Gateway Hill, the most spectacular and terrifying view we had seen so far was standing in front of us: J. C. Maxwell Academy, more commonly called J.C.

It was beautiful, surrounded by dense woodland that looked like an enchanted forest without the fairies. Sometimes I think that if someone had listened very carefully, they would have sworn they had heard the wind singing as it was passing through, following us all the way to the school.

The whole building was built on a hill, almost like it was dug in. The entrance was in the main court, which was built in the style of a Spanish monastery. After crossing the main court, we ended up in front of a three-storey building.

The ground floor was made of arches that let us see into the classrooms. The first floor was also made up of classrooms, and the second floor was where the staff could rest and have their tea. The entire building was white, but inside the building the walls were covered with tiny green and blue tiles, giving an underwater feel. The middle court was reserved for sport activities. After crossing the court, we could go inside a building with multiple rooms made for all types of activities like fencing and swimming, as well as culinary classes and dance classes.

On the other side of the building, there were different courts for outside sports such as football, rugby, basketball, tennis and so on. The top-level court was where the second entrance was located, as well as the dormitories. The dormitories were large, ancient four-storey buildings decorated in what could only be described as an Italian style. The left side was for the boys, and the right side was for the girls. The dining room, library, study rooms and relaxation rooms, as well as playrooms, were all on the ground floor.

I had expected to find some greenery inside the walls, but it had exceeded my expectations. The most surprising thing about those trees was that some of them were fruit trees, but as we found out later, it was forbidden to pick any of them, and a biblical sin to eat any. The school headmaster himself had forbidden it, and many students had theorised at the time that he might have wanted to avoid a lawsuit in case of an accident happening.

Another thing I had noticed was that most of the day students were from Gateway Hill. Our school was a boarding school, but it obviously took in a lot of students from the village. As perfect-looking as the school was, there was something very strange about it. My mother was right; something was in the air. It was up to me to find out what.

I had felt a disturbance in the air as soon as I got to J.C., and every day since. As clean and fresh as the air was, it felt heavier on the skin than London's, which was a lot more polluted. I could also feel a chill, as if I had landed in Mordor, and Sauron's eye was watching me while sucking up the good energy that surrounded us.

I had expected to be sharing a room with my sister, but that was not the case. The rooms for students aged sixteen and over were for two students maximum. Although I was only fifteen, I was in the same grade as sixteen-year-old students, and ended up being placed on the same floor as them.

The room was small and a disappointment. There were two single beds, which did not make me happy, because I loved to roll around in my bed. The other annoying thing was the size of our cupboards – clearly, they did not intend for us to bring a lot of clothes. Although we would be wearing a uniform, no one would keep it on after classes.

The walls were magnolia, which made me happy, and we had been told that although we were not allowed to change anything in the room, we were allowed to put up posters and decorate as we wished, as long as we did not damage the original paint. There were also two small study desks with enough space for our laptops, and one window with a view onto the main court.

I would have been very upset, if my sister had not been on the next floor with girls of the same age and who seemed to be lovely. The younger girls were four per room and from ages twelve to fourteen. The décor was exactly the same as ours except that they had much bigger rooms and more cupboard space.

I was amazed by the dining room, and the menu we were offered was impressive. It was obvious that the place used to be a Catholic school, because the baroque style was not understated. The dining room

had four arches painted in gold, and each arch had a different food station. The first was the meat station, the second was seafood, the third was salad and vegetables, and the last one was the sides and other accompaniments.

I had expected long tables like in Cambridge University colleges, but that was not the case. We instead had rectangular wooden tables next to each other. The room was vast, with a high ceiling painted in gold, and the doors were big dark wooden doors with red curtains. The floor was carpeted, and it was dark red like the curtains. Behind the curtains were very large sixteenth-century windows. A large table at the front of the room was reserved for the teachers, who got a sit-down meal.

I was about to complain that there was no dessert station when we were told by the other students that unlike other courses, the dessert station would be brought out later and was always a disappointment in taste and portion size.

Typical, I thought. As usual, my favourite part of the meal is the worst.

I wasn't sitting with my sister, Amelia. She had chosen to sit with her new friends, so I sat by myself and was quickly joined by a familiar face. It was Hogan MacConraoi Croise, a childhood friend of the family and a fellow Yan.

Hogan looked like what I expected James Bond had looked like as a teenager. He was tall and had olive skin like a French-man or an Italian, dark hair, dark eyes and a square jaw. He was considered to be quite handsome, and he knew it, which made him a bit fond of himself, but he was a very good person nevertheless.

I had never been so happy to see anyone in my life. I screamed and hugged him. Then I started pushing him and hitting him playfully. I couldn't believe he had not told me that he was going to attend J.C. on the day of my goodbye party.

He kept laughing and admitted that it had been a very hard secret to keep and that he had begged his parents not to tell mine that he would join Amelia and me, because he wanted to surprise me.

I suddenly realised that Hogan's mother had signed up her son to back me up in case I needed help, and he didn't know anything about it.

I could only hope that he would not be too angry. Hogan was a Greek Yan. Greek Yans were Olympians, which meant that they worshipped Greek gods.

Their gods allowed them to dedicate a lot of their time to fun and parties but not much more, especially not towards preparing for unscheduled battles.

History had proven that not telling an Olympian in advance that he might be facing a battle was a very big mistake. I could only hope that when the time came, Hogan wouldn't direct his anger towards me.

He introduced me to his roommate, named William Evans Clarke. I was almost star-struck; he was the best-looking guy I had ever seen. He was gorgeous. If I hadn't known better, I would have sworn that our god Thor himself was standing in front of me. He was tall, fair-skinned, muscular but not over

the top, and had striking deep-blue eyes and long golden-blond hair. I was pretty sure that there were countries where being that good-looking was illegal.

To make matters worse, I couldn't think of anything to say to him. I wanted to sound cool and relaxed, but everything was happening so fast, and the best I could do was to get up and give him my hand to shake. He took it and said, "Nice to meet you," and we sat down. I nodded and gave him the world's most forced smile. He smiled back and I almost fainted.

The boys' dormitories were the same as the girls', from what I understood, and it felt great to know that we would be able to hang out together quite often. It took two days for my roommate to arrive. Her name was Scarlett Ramsey Sneddon. When I first laid eyes on her, I was quite surprised; she looked like the Japanese manga character Georgie.

She was wearing a gorgeous grey-and-white autumn swing dress with short sleeves and two black strips, one under her chest and the other just over her hips, which made her waist look tiny despite her size-fourteen frame. She had very long blonde hair with big curls. She had big blue eyes, rosy cheeks, which were a little bit curvy, pink lips, a big smile and, uncommonly for a Masani girl as far as I had noticed since leaving Yanara, didn't have make-up all over her face.

She was a bubbly and sweet girl, and we hit it off right away. I was over the moon; the sense of dread I'd felt when I had arrived at the school was completely gone. I was starting to feel that the year was going to be fantastic, and I was right; the school was starting to look like a primary school reunion to me.

I soon realised that Pamela Rafnkell Wu was two doors down from me. Pamela and her brother Alexander, most commonly known as Pam and Alex, were former classmates of Hogan and mine. Pam was a very good violinist, and Alex a talented pianist. Pam was a tall girl with long dark hair.

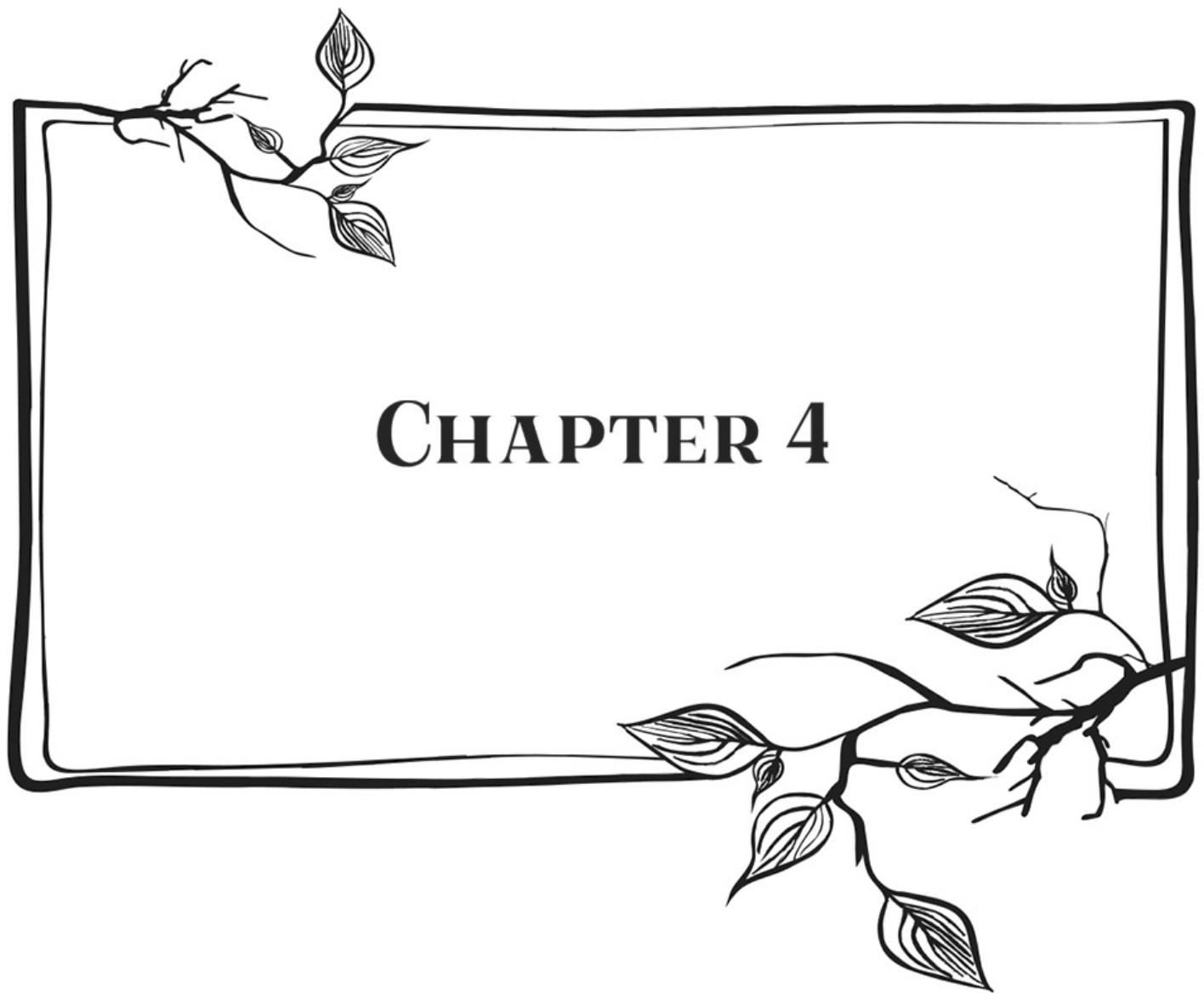
She was one of the most beautiful girls in J.C.. She was actually so beautiful that every time we were on holiday in the Masani world, we would often get asked if we wanted to do modelling, or were given business cards by some photographer. In my case they would often say that I would be suitable as a plus-size model, which was ludicrous, since I was only a size twelve and considered quite small compared to the Yanara standard.

Pam's twin, Alex, was very tall as well, and unlike me they were from Yanar City. Yanar City was our capital and was in the Pacific, and it was quite hot all year long, which meant that they were used to wearing almost nothing at all. In Yanara we said that southerners were wealthy because they never spent a penny on clothes except for swimwear, and, of course, as the good southerner that she was, here was Pam wearing a gorgeous light-brown floral-patterned short jumpsuit with a halter-neck and open back.

She looked stunning. I did not regret wearing my embroidered bohemian backless V-neck dress with long sleeves. I would have paled next to her otherwise.

Pam's roommate was a Masani girl named Delphine Crawley Longchamp. I liked her immediately. She was short and curvy, not what you would call pretty, but she had a ton of charm. And when she

smiled, her face lit up, and she suddenly started to look like the statue of Fjörgyn in Yanara, with a cheeky personality to go with it.



CHAPTER 4

The school was great. The few students that we had really gotten to know were lovely people. I had updated Pam about our mission, but she agreed with my mother. She asked that we inform the boys only if it was strictly necessary, so that was what we did.

I was really starting to enjoy the Masani way of life. We knew so little about the Masani world, and everything sounded and looked so strange that we complained to other Yans.

We were advised by older Yans to watch something called “reality TV”. As shocking as it sounded, the Masanis, it seemed, documented every aspect of their lives and played it on air for anyone to see.

As entertaining as it was, I must admit that it did damage my opinion of the Masani culture slightly. Their reality television reinforced my belief that the Yan culture was far superior. After Scarlett and Delphine discovered that we were watching reality TV as a reference to their culture, they were horrified.

They both gave us a list of programmes to watch that would be more educational, as well as a list of movies, which became my favourite.

In Yanar we did not have television or cinemas, and being introduced to it convinced me that the first thing to do in Yanar when I became duchess would be to introduce moving pictures to the duchy.

But in the meantime, as much as I had promised not to, I was still watching reality television, with my favourites being *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *Counting On* and *MasterChef Australia*.

The honeymoon did not last long. A few weeks after we arrived, while in chemistry class, we heard a commotion. Teachers were called out of their classrooms and asked to go get help. We did not know why. I was terribly curious. What could have possibly been so bad that all the lecturers had to go off and run after who knew what?

Our lecturer came back in, and I thought that we were about to find out what happened, but all he said was that we were to be confined to our rooms. School was interrupted, and our parents were called, so instead of having a seriously good time gossiping, we had to promise them to behave and stay in our rooms.

Salvation for my bruised curiosity came from Amelia, whose French class was opposite the scene of the commotion. I was worried about her, so I went and picked her up, which was when I got all the information I needed.

A fourteen-year-old boy had climbed up one of the fruit trees and fallen and died. His name was Wade Allen Tillerson. It did not take long for us to realise that it had become a media sensation. We learned that his father was deputy commissioner of Scotland Yard and that he had lost his mother a few years ago.

The most troubling thing was that his mother, Joan Carter Allen, had killed herself by jumping off a building. As much as I was sad for Mr Tillerson, I couldn't help but find the death of his son very troubling, especially as he had died from a fall as well.

A few days later, Amelia came to find me in my room and told me that she was bothered by something she had found out about Tillerson's death. I shared with her my discomfort about the similarity between his and his mother's deaths, and she agreed with me.

That afternoon, she told me that a student who had been sitting next to a window facing the tree from which Tillerson had fallen had seen a plastic bottle being thrown just before the fall. He hadn't thought much about it at first, but after further thought, he had realised that Tillerson must have thrown it before his fall.

Normally, I would have dismissed the information. The "witness" was none other than my sister's friend Sorel, a horrible little troll with a very vivid imagination and a talent for putting his nose where it did not belong. But that information, if it was true, would add some serious juice to my theory that something very weird was going on in the school.

After a few enquiries, I realised that for the first time, Sorel was right and had been telling the truth. Not only was he not the only one who had seen a bottle in the air, but before we knew it, all sorts of rumours had started to fly around the school about Tillerson's death, and from what I could figure out, this was not the first time that the angel of death had visited our school.

It was, however, the first time that the dead student had been the child of a wealthy and influential person. It was as if a light had gone on in my head. My entire body was telling me, *Yes, I knew it.*

I knew something was off with the school, even if I still couldn't say what, and I hadn't seen any evidence of anyone doing anything, so why not concentrate on something else?

I decided to conduct my own investigation in order to validate or debunk the multiple rumours I had heard. The idea was tingling my body all over. I liked being in school, but I was starting to find life in a boarding school a bit dull and slow, so any new event was like Yule had come early for me.

I called Hogan after that and asked to meet with him after school. Although Hogan was a very sardonic person, he was also a very good friend and, just like me, loved playing Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple, so I knew he wouldn't make fun of me. To my dismay, he showed up with William. As soon as I saw them, I wanted to scream, "NOOOOOOOOOOO!"

From the moment I had met William, my heart had stopped listening to me. Every time I got near him, my heart would start racing, my legs would go weak, and I would feel unwell. Unfortunately for me, he was always with Hogan, and with Hogan being a very good friend of mine, I had no choice but to endure being around William.

Things got a lot more complicated when Pam, Delphine, Scarlett and I attracted the attention of the resident popular mean girls of J.C. They would magically appear whenever we got together in main court, sitting under a tree, or in Gateway Hill, trying to enjoy ourselves.

We shared a lot of classes with the mean girls, and for some reason, they would always find a way to sit behind us in class and make a point of the fact that we were the topic of their conversation.

In Yanar we were not used to having our looks and behaviour criticised constantly. Most mean comments would usually be about our academic performances or fighting skills. Here the jibes felt very calculated. The girls would talk among themselves and say things like, 'although we were quite beautiful, we most likely would not make many friends, because we gave off a vibe that suggested that we were snobbish and uptight'.

They would also say that they couldn't understand why Pam and I would want to be around fat and plain-Jane girls like Delphine and Scarlett. They would add that they could only conclude that we had low self-esteem and that being around less attractive girls made Pam and me feel better about ourselves.

Those statements were cruel and unfounded. Scarlett was very cute, and Delphine was as bright and sparkling as a star. And to be honest, Delphine and Scarlett were much more attractive than they were, and after I had mentioned the comments to a few classmates, they agreed with me.

Most of the time, I wanted to get up and confront them, but Pam kept stopping me. She didn't want to acknowledge their presence and believed that the biggest insult we could give them was our indifference.

I disagreed. Delphine might not have cared about what the girls were saying about her, but Scarlett did, and I had to console her in our room every day. If we had been in Yanar, I would have given the

three bullies a well-deserved beating, and everyone around us would have applauded.

In the Masani world, however, violence was considered unacceptable, so Pam had made me swear not to hurt the bullies, and it was taking a lot of self-control on my part to listen to her and follow through with my promise.

I found out pretty quickly that the ring leader was William's ex-girlfriend Pollard. The story around school was that they had ended their relationship right before school broke up last summer and that she had spent the entire summer taking selfies to remind him of what he was missing, but he had not shown any interest.

I was eventually shown the selfies she had plastered all over social media. The truth was that if I hadn't been shown the selfies, I would have searched the internet myself after hearing all the buzz that those photos had generated at J.C..

I was ashamed to admit that I was dying to see the photos. As low as it might sound, I was secretly hoping that they would be embarrassing and make her look like a fool. When I was finally presented with them, they did not disappoint me at all.

The photos were quite raunchy and suggestive but nothing improper, and probably no one would have made a big deal about them if they had not been interpreted as being taken and posted in order to win back William. Because everyone had surmised that the selfies were posted as a message to William, they made her look desperate.

I have to admit that if I had taken that much time making myself look that sexy and beautiful, I would have been extremely frustrated to be ignored by the object of my affection. In all the pictures, her hair was flawless. I did find that she was wearing too much make-up, and she was pouting in all the selfies. Why? I had no idea, but otherwise, she looked super-hot.

In all her poses, she was wearing gorgeous bikinis. I recognised them as being Lua Morena's designs. Morena's designs were very popular in Yanar because her aunt was a Yan from Wahine, a city in the south of the duchy.

In all the shots, Pollard's tan was perfect, and every pose showed her curves, especially her boobs and her derrière. Clearly, she had been hitting the gym as well, because her body was perfectly toned.

Just as Pam and I were about to ask my classmate what all the selfies could possibly have to do with the horrible way Delphine, Scarlett, Pam and I had been treated by the girls, we were told that after Pam and I had arrived at J.C., William had said, after seeing me and while standing next to his ex-girlfriend, "Wow! She is stunning."

As soon as I heard that, I turned red, and Pam turned to me and gave me a smirk. She knew that I was very happy to hear that, but I had to pretend that I didn't care. I didn't want my classmate to know about my feelings for William.

I shrugged my shoulders and said, "Well, now I know why she hates me."

So, seeing Hogan walking towards me to talk about the investigation, and realising that he had William with him, I was caught off guard. It would be the first time I saw him since I had learned that he found me attractive, and I didn't know how to act around him.

My other worry was that as much as William had been hanging around Hogan since school started, he had been attending J.C. since he was twelve years old, like seventy per cent of the students there. That meant that by the time we arrived, most students had already been divided into cliques, and William's ex-girlfriend Eugenie Scott Pollard was part of his clique, which meant that they were destined to spend a lot of time together.

Not wanting to let my feelings get in the way of a good mystery, I mentioned my suspicions to the boys, and all that I had been told by Amelia. The boys didn't have much time to chit-chat, but they promised to get back to me by the weekend.

Seeing William just reminded me that I had a problem named Pollard. I knew I was obsessing too much about her, but when we had first arrived at J.C., we were warned about the worst bullies at the school, and her name was mentioned.

We had heard from Delphine and Scarlett that the previous year, a student had attempted suicide because of Pollard and her friends' incessant bullying, which had caused the student to leave J.C. and William to break up with her.

The three girls were also arrested for bullying, which carried a six-month community sentence, as well as a fifteen-thousand-pound fine to the victim from each girl. The victim's family also took out a restraining order against the girls, and they all had a criminal record.

The gods have been generous was all I could think. I was glad that bullying was taken as seriously in the UK as it was in Yanar.

It did not take me long to realise that my chances to ever be with William were from zero to none. I was convinced that with a reputation like hers, there was little chance Pollard wouldn't spoil any attempt of mine to approach the boy she liked.

Because Hogan had become so close to William, we had started to spend time with William as well. The result was that William's other friends got into the habit of joining us. It was obvious that even though they were no longer a couple, they still belonged to the same group of friends, so it seemed like they were always together, and she was acting as if he still belonged to her.

I started to dread having to spend time with Hogan and William. I knew that spending time with them meant spending time with his ex-girlfriend, and I really didn't like her.

In all fairness we were also a clique, and by *we* I meant the Yans of the same age group. There were six of us: Hogan, Tristan, Pam, Alex, Hassan and me. Hassan's real name was David Mulumba, but anyone who grew up with him called him Hassan because he always compared himself to Hassan Schneider Bouba, a famous gladiator in Yanar.

Although people knew about the existence of Yans in the world, besides our embassies and a few publicly known official Yan institutions, they couldn't tell the difference between a Yan and one of them.

The students certainly didn't know that there were any Yan students in J.C., but our attitude and our cluelessness towards simple Masani ways of life had started to make them suspect us of being Yans.

Little things, like a simple introduction in a social gathering, were totally different in Yanar. In Yanar asking a stranger for their name or where they were from was extremely rude. Until a person volunteered the information, no one could ask them for it.

What Yans did was introduce themselves and hope that the other person reciprocated. If it didn't happen, then the message was clear: they had no interest in striking up a conversation with you.

When we had arrived in J.C., the students had kept asking for our name and where we were from. We took it as an insult, and it resulted in a lot of verbal arguments, to the point where they all stopped asking and waited to be approached by us.

The other thing was our lack of knowledge when it came to music or movies or even popular hang-outs. It was pretty clear to them that wherever we were from, it was very removed from what they called "the civilised world".

Despite our shortcomings, it did not take us long to become popular in J.C., but not for the same reasons as in a Yan school.

Being popular in a Yan school was not the same as being popular in a Masani school. In Yan schools, popularity was based on your academic and FIST performances; students became popular only after gaining the highest distinction intellectually and in FIST, and for nothing else.

People like William and his friends, who were popular because they were good-looking and had a chance to go to the Olympics or make a national team, had no value in Yan schoolyard hierarchy.

As terrific as we all were, we were not the greatest at our Yan school, so for Alex, Hogan and Hassan, being popular at J.C. was a dream come true. Actually, Hassan was in heaven; he had really struggled at our previous school. His FIST skills were quite poor, but he was a great athlete when it came to Masani sports, so being in J.C. had restored his confidence and even flattered his ego in a big way. He had started believing that he was handsome, despite our repeated attempts to make him realise that he looked more like Stephen K. Amos than Chadwick Boseman, and we were being polite.

He failed repeatedly to realise that the thing that raised his profile was not help from the gods but the simple fact that he was friends with Alex and Hogan, two of the school's hottest guys. J.C. had a large group of what I called "the sea of morons". They were girls who seemed to think that being around Hassan would get them closer to the pretty boys, but I knew that wouldn't be the case.

That unexpected turn of events made me very reluctant to admit Masanis into my group of friends; we could never figure out who truly liked us and who was just using us to get closer to the boys. Pam and I eventually started to become so detached and cold towards non-Yans that they ended up nicknaming us "the Vulcans", because Vulcans were known to be cold and difficult to impress.

Not having heard from Hogan about the death of Wade Allen Tillerson, I assumed that he was not interested in the investigation, but I was wrong. He eventually got back to me, showing interest, and demanding more information than what I had emailed him with. Unfortunately, I didn't have any more. I, too, had been wrapped up in my new life at J.C. and had spent all my time going down the list of movies I had been advised to watch.

We decided to meet on the lower ground, just under the biggest tree on the school grounds. A lot of students liked to sit under it and have picnics. After I had told the boys what I had been up to, they were pretty excited and agreed that we should try and find out more about the previous deaths that had happened in the school.

Once again Hogan was with William, so I decided that since Hogan wanted to include William in everything, I would do the same with my Scarlett. I had decided that I would wait until they were near me to announce to them that my roommate would be joining us, but then suddenly Hogan tensed up.

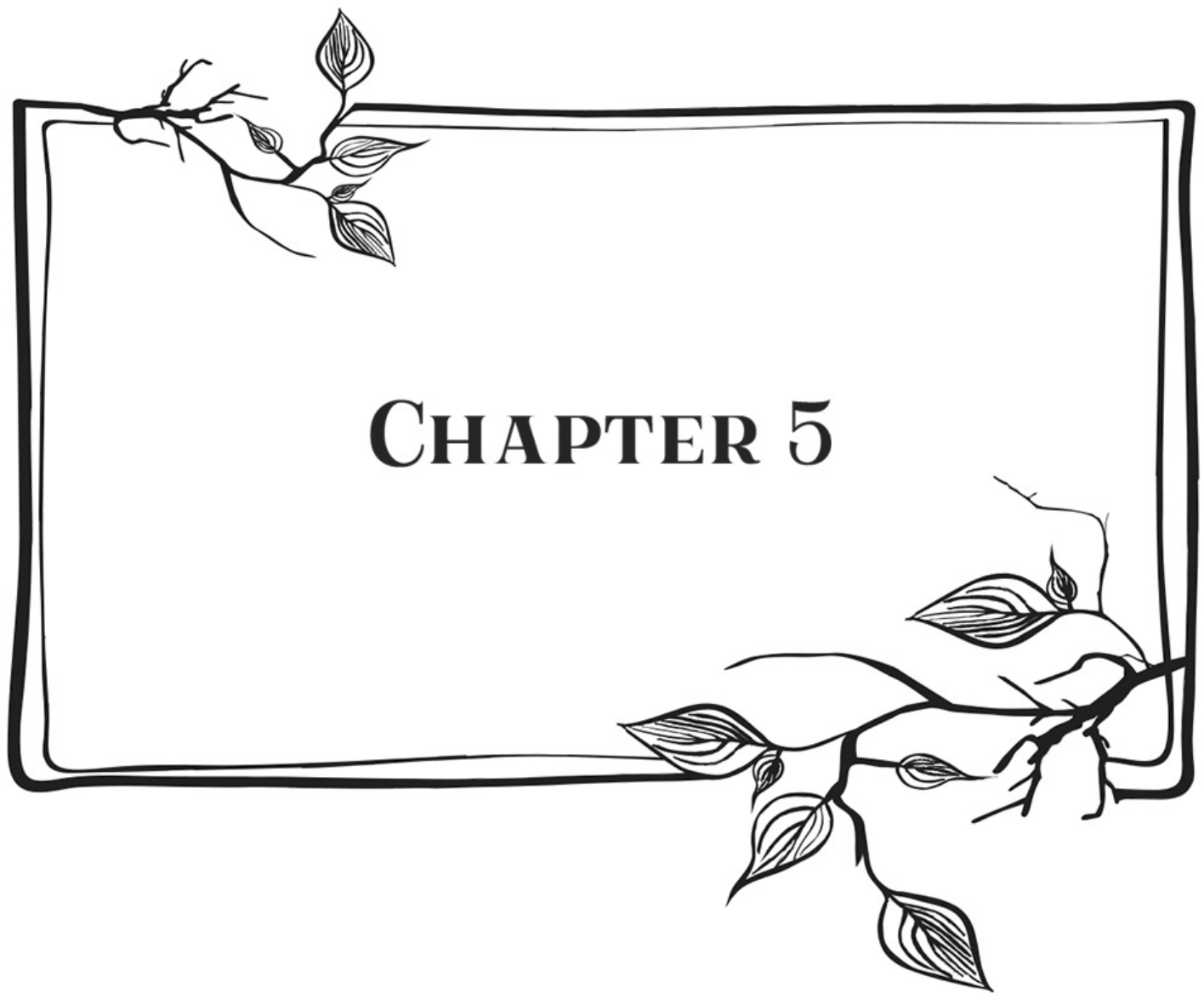
I would have dismissed it if I hadn't noticed a smirk on William's face. Something was going on, and I thought I knew what. I had asked Scarlett to join us, so I could only assume that she was coming towards us and he had seen her. I was not a patient person, so I just said it. "Let me guess," I said, facing Hogan. "You fancy Scarlett."

He turned red and started to mumble something, only to stop. I turned around, and there was Scarlett standing behind me, smiling, looking very angelic. She looked so incredibly cute and sweet that I could see why Hogan was smitten.

After a few awkward moments where Hogan did not say a word, we finally got Scarlett up to speed. Luckily for us, the weekend was approaching, so we were allowed to go down into the village. We got to the local library and took apart the newspaper archives. We found out that almost every three years, at least one student had died in the school, and all these deaths were always "accidental". A drowning, a fall from a tree or a cliff, an allergic reaction – either way, it was like the school was asking for a sacrifice, and one was given to it.

Of course, William saw no reason to think that the deaths were not accidental. He and Scarlett were the resident positive thinkers, and she agreed with him, but I was determined to prove my point. I pointed out to him that we should research the names of the students and try and find a common link between them. The problem was where to find such answers. Half-term was near, and we would be able to go home, so we decided to each keep a list and do our research in the comfort of our own homes.

We also needed to get as much information as we could about the students, and the place to do that was their files in the school archives. Our only problem was that getting any-where close to the record office would require a serious magic trick, unless we got help from someone else. In the Yan world, we had all the equipment required to get all the information we wanted. All I needed was a tracker, but mine was in London. A tracker is a technology capable of tracking anyone on earth including in Yanar by accessing any technology available. Not having access to mine, I decided to ask for Tristan's help.



CHAPTER 5

Tristan Miah Dorincourt was one of my favourite people. He had big brown eyes, cute curly hair and gentle ways. He was also my favourite partner in FIST, and the one with the most distinction in the subject.

We had a FIST wushu, which was a FIST school, in Guildford, which we had been attending since we arrived. William had been attending with us, Hogan having secured a pass for him from the council, and had been doing well.

I had tried to obtain one for Scarlett, but Hogan vetoed it. He was scared that she would get hurt. Now that I knew why, I was definitely going to ask Scarlett if she was interested in FIST. Unlike Hogan, I did not believe that she was a frail creature that needed to be sheltered.

Although Tristan was a great fighter, I did not need his fighting skills, I needed his knowledge. Tristan was the only Yan I knew that could hack a Masani computer. The rest of us were not that good when it came to Masani technology.

We finally came to the decision that Tristan and I would sneak into the office while Pam guarded the door, and Scarlett was to be the lookout from the corridor. Hogan and William had to be benched

because they made such a big deal about Scarlett's and my safety that I lied to them and told them that the operation had been cancelled.

The reason we had to have access to the student files from the academics' offices was because we had tried hacking into it from our rooms, but we had realised that for some reason the server used by the headmaster and the deputy headmaster was separate from the rest, which meant that we would have to break in to the office and copy the files.

I ordered some lock-picking tools on Amazon, which amazingly came without the school staff confiscating them, and thanks to YouTube, we had trained for a week and were finally ready to break in to the office.

When we arrived, we realised that we had brought a lightsabre to a knife fight. We thought Masani computers were ancient, but this one had been built when Jesus was still alive. It was even equipped for floppy disks and not memory sticks.

We would have cracked the password and taken pictures of the files we wanted, but the office was also locked, and we did not have time to pick two doors successively before being called away by Pam because the caretaker was approaching.

That first failure was a wake-up call for us; life was a lot harder than on TV, and we needed to be better prepared for the unexpected. We realised that if we were caught, it could mean suspension for all of us, and we risked being grounded for ever by our parents. Caution had to be our middle name; this operation would be tried one more time and no more, for our own sakes.

All boarders pretty much knew that Arnold the caretaker was always drunk and passed out by ten p.m.. All we needed to do the following night was to meet near his room, wait till we could hear him snore and make our way to the headmaster's office. I could see on their faces that the others weren't very happy with the plan, but after I challenged all of them to come up with a better one, they agreed to try mine.

This time everything almost worked like a charm. We met at ten in the corridor. It was funny how being up and running during a time of day when we were very likely to bump into draugr, a Yan zombie, could feel so normal in a very old construction like our school. In those days, the buildings were constructed with very high ceilings and large corridors, so even though there were a few of us, it still gave us the chills.

Crossing the main court with Scarlett and Pam was invigorating. It was so cheeky to have been able to do it twice behind William and Hogan's backs that I was like a child in a sweet shop. It was a bit chilly outside – but filled with excitement, we could barely feel anything.

When we opened the door, our hearts started beating again. Somehow the mood was different from the previous night. We were holding each other, looking around as if we expected someone to come out of the dark corners. And dark corners they were that night. Scarlett kept looking behind us as if she was expecting something to come out of one of them.

Despite the dismal aspect of the corridors, I couldn't help admiring their beauty as well. The beige corridors looked more carroty, and the portraits inside the paintings seemed to follow us with their eyes. I was starting to have thrills.

We heard a very loud noise. It was like the hissing of a snake followed by a loud sound, almost like a lion's roar if the lion had a sore throat.

Our hearts stopped. That was it for us, I thought. After watching a large number of horror movies, I had become an expert on the walking dead, and here I was, about to face my worst nightmare, when suddenly Pam just started giggling and said, "By Freya, for a second I thought we would have to face Zhong Kui."

"What do you mean, for a second? Looks to me as if he is still coming!" I said in an angry voice.

She laughed and said, "No, you silly. It's Arnold snoring."

I was about to answer her in a sceptical tone of voice when I realised that she was right; it was Arnold snoring. I dropped Scarlett's hand, and she burst out laughing, then had to stop when we realised that we could have woken him up.

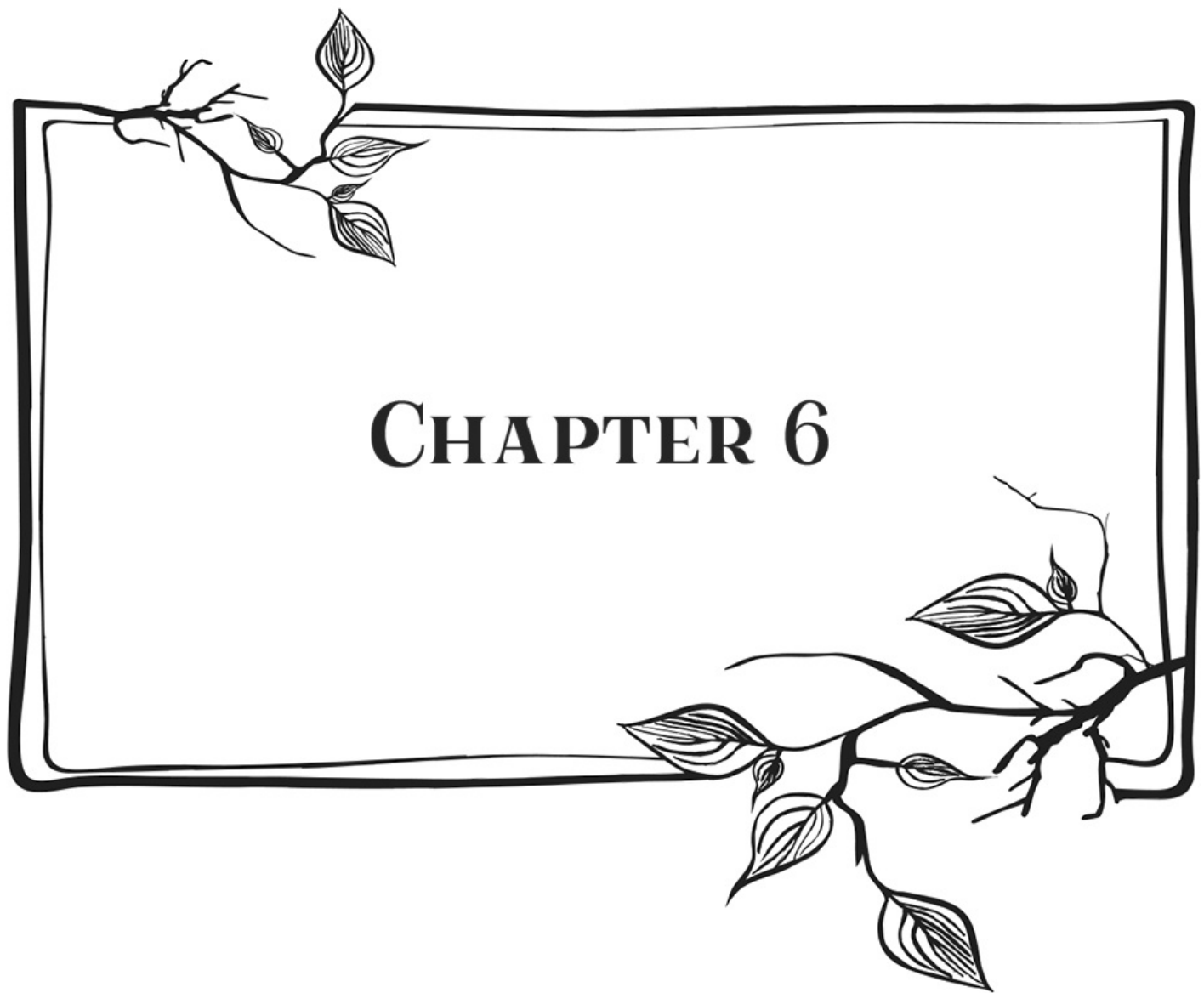
We finally met with Tristan, who rolled his eyes when we told him of our almost encounter with Zhong Kui, but unfortunately, unlike most Yans, he did not care much about folk tales. Tristan and I got into the office, retrieved all the files we needed and we all went back to our rooms.

The next day, we decided that since we were all going home at the end of the week, it would be better to work on the files in the privacy of our own homes.

Scarlett being from Hereford, we told her that we would update her as soon as school resumed. For the rest of us, it was easy; we all lived in duchy quarters in west London, so being able to meet and share our findings wouldn't be a problem.

I knew William was from Cardiff, but as much as I wanted to invite him to join us in London, I didn't have the courage to do so. My only hope was for him to be invited by Hogan to spend the autumn half-term with us, but that did not happen.

It turned out it was pure revenge on Hogan's part. He had been hoping that I would invite Scarlett, but I hadn't, therefore denying him the pleasure of knowing her better, so he had done the same to me.



CHAPTER 6

So there we were, back in sunny London, as the Scots called it, but this time we weren't just children happy to be home, we were investigators with the freedom to investigate the mysterious deaths happening in the south of the country.

Amelia and I started working, taking a look at what we had, which without Mahlam – the Yan equivalent of the internet – would have taken us a long time, because we had gathered information dating back twenty years. All we needed was to find out which of these students had passed away on school grounds. I could have done it myself, but I wanted my gang with me, so I called the twins, Tristan and Hogan over for the results.

When we were in London, we all resided in Draycott Place. It was purchased by the members of the Ten the first time they came to London, after World War Two. Draycott Place was made up of a group of red-brick, five-storey blocks of flats with massed parallel chimneys on the roof, extending to two storeys on the side of the building and another one above it.

The buildings formed an enclave, with a beautiful garden in the middle, to our delight. The formation of the blocks of flats made it feel like we were living in a commune, which was the reason that some people started referring to it as home rather than Draycott Place, like the rest of us.

The best part about living in Draycott Place was that we were all part of the commune. The worst part was that, just like a commune, there was no way to keep secrets from anyone, especially friends who did not attend your school but did grow up with you, but we managed to keep them at bay.

Amelia and I loved our library. Our parents had decided a long time ago to convert our playroom and our living room into a giant room that we called the library because of all the books. Unlike most people, Amelia and I absolutely adored the feeling of touching old books. We had absolutely loved the idea and insisted on helping with the decorations, but they had obviously refused. The library had a very high ceiling with paintings of Thor and the Valkyrie battle scenes from Ragnarök.

The reason the ceiling was so high was because the playroom was the room on top of our living room, not the next room, which was our study room. In order to create the library, they'd had to break the ceiling and install a beautiful vintage cherry-wood spiral staircase with vintage wooden balusters and a solid black wooden handrail.

The Draycott Place buildings were old, so the architecture was preserved outside and in to give it a vintage look. All the rooms were vintage, and our library was no exception. The furniture was antique velvet sofas from Australia that my mother adored, but I wanted leather ones. She had them placed all over the room to give it an eclectic look and maintain the vintage feel of the room.

The walls were beige but decorated with pictures of our Viking and Fulani ancestors, as well as encased Viking and Fulani weapons and art. It was a representation of what Yanar and our family was all about.

Now that we were home, we needed to talk about the anomalies. We had found no sign of anomalies in the school or even in Gateway Hill, and Pam and I decided to inform my mother of our findings and our desire to close that investigation. My mother agreed. I was glad that we had found nothing, because the murders were a lot more interesting, and I wanted to devote all my time to them.

But before anything, I needed to come clean to Hogan – I had taken his beloved with me to retrieve the data behind his and William's backs.

He was walking towards me, and that was the moment that I decided to tell him how we had obtained the information in our possession. He was furious that I had lied to him, but he was especially outraged about the fact that Scarlett was put in danger.

I had to admit that my feelings were a little hurt. Was I not his beloved friend and, as such, deserving of his worry as well? That did not seem to be the case.

I was watching him walking back and forth in his room, panting and mumbling. "I can't believe you. Typical Viking – stubborn, short-sighted and reckless. I should have seen that coming," he said.

At that point, I'd had enough, and replied, "Excuse me, typical Olympian – authoritarian, entitled and full of himself."

He turned to me with his eyes and mouth wide open as if he was shocked at my very accurate description of his tribe.

“Are you serious?” he said. “You are the one who took my girlfriend on a night-time adventure without my consent and put her life in danger. Anything could have happened to her.”

“You are resting my case for me, *Olympian*,” I said with a taunting tone. “Because she is a Masani girl, you immediately assume that she cannot defend herself against any unforeseen obstacle, but unlike you Olympians, we Vikings tend to trust our fellow warriors, and I knew that she would be fine.”

I knew I should have stopped talking, but I couldn’t help myself, so I continued by saying, “Besides, she insisted on coming with us, and unlike the Olympian that you are, we Vikings never say no when someone asks for an opportunity to help protect the weak and earn their place in Valhalla.”

He sighed in despair and came to sit next to me, but I wasn’t even sorry, and I gave him the option of refusing to continue with the investigation, and stay in his wing, or get over my lie and join us. He joined us.

Getting the names of students who had died in the school wasn’t hard with my tracker. We found out that once every three years, a student died in an accident at J.C., but for the last five years, strangely enough, it had been every single year.

As puzzling as that was, what was even more disturbing was the fact that they were all scholarship students, with the exception of Wade Allen Tillerson.

We stared at each other. We wanted to say something, but no one knew what to say. Then suddenly Pam pushed Tristan away from the computer and sat in his place. She started rechecking the names of the dead students, but unlike what we had done earlier, she took down the names of their parents and then checked these names against their occupation history.

It paid off. From what we gathered, all these parents, who used to be from modest backgrounds, were now among the UK’s most successful and influential people. They had thriving businesses – businesses that had only started to flourish after the death of their child.

It made no sense. What did the school have to do with these people, and what could the school possibly gain by getting students killed? The other troubling thing we noticed was that all these students were under thirteen years old, except Wade Allen Tillerson.

I was starting to have a funny feeling that we were dealing with a cult we had heard about many times when we were young. No one had really ever told us much about them; it was more schoolyard gossip. They were more part of urban legend, I had thought.

The Yan communities all over the world had told stories of another community living outside the norms of Masani communities. They had attracted enough attention from local governments to be classified as a cult.

When I informed the group of what I was suspecting, I expected Alex and Hogan to make funny remarks, with Tristan and Pam backing me up – but to my surprise, it was Tristan, along with Pam, who

looked puzzled. The others, however, seemed to know exactly what I was talking about, and agreed with me. They had suspected it as well.

That was when Hogan said that he had proof of the cult's existence and practices. We all knew that Giovanni Barth Croise, Hogan's uncle, was a photojournalist and that he had been travelling the Masani world since the first day we met him. What we didn't know was that on one of his trips, he had been warned against a cult operating in Benin, more precisely Cotonou, where he was based at the time, and recruiting new members.

He found out that one of their practices was to sell the soul of their most brilliant and favourite child to an entity in exchange for money or success, or both. After selling the child's soul, that child would die within a week.

Not believing the story, he had asked for proof, and he was told that a week earlier one of the city's most respectable community leaders had been arrested on suspicion of her husband's murder and that although they had not found her husband's body, they did find a skeleton in her closet.

She had no children, but she had adopted her sister's only daughter after her sister's death and had raised the child, but the child had been kidnapped at the age of eleven.

To their surprise, when they entered her bedroom, they found the eleven-year-old niece, who had been missing for a decade, in the closet, not having aged a day. When they called her name, her mouth opened, and gold coins started coming out of it. Her aunt was immediately arrested and died the same day in her cell from what seemed to be a heart attack.

When Croise told them that he did not believe the story, they bribed one of the arresting officers, who agreed to show him the video – they had recorded the interaction with the child at the suspect's home. He paid off the officer for a copy of the recording and took it to the general council.

Under normal circumstances, we would have rolled our eyes, but the fact there was a video changed everything. When we pressed him to find out what had happened to the little girl and why she was spitting gold instead of anything else, Hogan admitted that he had never actually received the story from his uncle. He had overheard his uncle tell his mother about it, and watched him give his sister the recording to present to the general council. When Hogan had tried to approach the subject with any of them, they had shut him down and forbidden him from mentioning it to anyone.

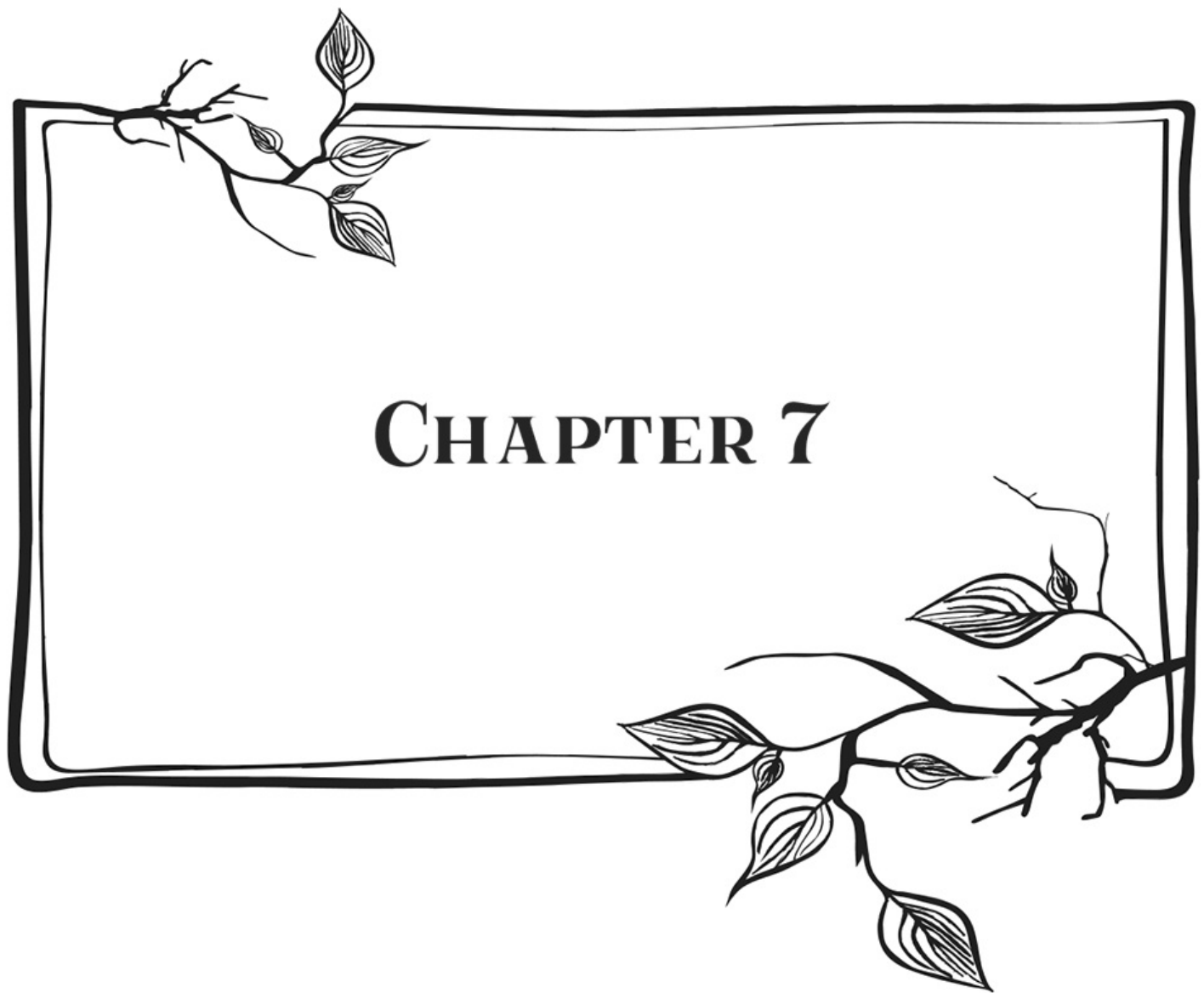
We tried to use the tracker to find more information about the subject, but without the name of the cult or the name of the family involved in the story, it wasn't possible. Hogan and I decided to relate the story to William and Scarlett when we went back to school, despite the strict objections from the others.

To explain our decision, I told them that in my opinion, since the heroes of the story were Masanis, William and Scarlett being Masanis as well gave them the right to know what was lurking in their society. The reality was much simpler: Hogan and I just wanted to include William and Scarlett because they had become part of our lives, that's all.

Pam pointed out that telling them the result of our research would mean that we would have to make our technology accessible to them, which was forbidden by the council itself.

I defended our decision by explaining that allowing Masanis to use our technology might have been illegal but that William and Scarlett were unlikely to blab about it, so the council would never know.

Reluctantly they agreed to us disclosing it to our friends, and Pam decided that she should also let Delphine know. As she was her roommate and a friend, it was only right.



CHAPTER 7

The return to J.C. was filled with anxiety, not only because we were going back to the lion's den but also because the first day back was also the day of Aethelflaed, Lady of the Mercians. On that night, the school had a costume ball – 900 AD attire required.

The next Saturday and Sunday was the festival of the Lady of the Mercians, where the entire school, as well as the entire country, was decorated in Aethelflaed's colours: a red flag with a yellow dragon.

I should have been excited – I loved festivals and balls – but I wasn't. If it had been up to me, I would have celebrated Aethelflaed's festival in London, in the comfort of my quarters. The entire way back to the school, all I could think about was that William had not asked me to the ball, and I had been forced to say yes to someone I didn't even care about.

I had managed to keep my composure while in London, especially while ordering our outfits. Although the fashion style during the tenth century was very understated, Pam had been adamant that we all had to have the outfits cut a little more fitted to our bodies, which annoyed me.

Pam was a southerner, but I was a northerner and in the north we dressed for warmth and comfort – so as much as I loved looking at body-hugging dresses and sexy dresses, when I was forced to wear them, I always felt awkward, ugly and gauche.

My inside dress was white, with an ivory overlay dress and a splash of gold all over with golden borders. Pam's dress was light green on the inside, with a dark green overlay dress and gold border.

Pam also made me order a light-pink inside dress with a dark pink overlay and velour border, and Pam had ordered a light-yellow inside dress with a dark yellow overlay and a white velour border as a backup for the ball.

For the festival, I put my foot down and bought our outfits off the rack from a costume shop, but in exchange we agreed to allow the seamstress to make them fit perfectly. And there we were, three tenth-century outfits for the entire festival, and a list of wooers I for one did not want.

In Yanar, crying was seen as weak and pitiful, and weakness in a girl was deemed unacceptable. Girls were simply not allowed to cry for anything except at a funeral, or at least not in public. My case was different. I was a cry-baby, and there was nothing I could do about it. Every time I thought of William not asking me to the dance, I felt an uncontrollable urge to cry.

Then anger took over. How could I be so weak? I was nothing but a pathetic fool with feelings unbecoming of a member of the Ten. I walked towards the bathroom mirror, stared at myself and realised that I was a strong, beautiful and powerful member of the Ten.

Most guys in the school had asked Pam and me to the ball. I had had my pick of J.C.'s crème de la crème. Since William didn't want to accompany me to the ball, he was no longer worth a second of my time, I thought. I promised myself to never think of him or even speak his name ever again until Ragnarök.

Scarlett arrived just in time to get ready. She was so late that Pam was already in my room with Delphine, helping me with make-up. She told us that her train from Hereford had been late and that she and William had barely made it to the school in time. When I heard that she had been on the same train as him, my heart jumped and I hated myself for it.

Scarlett brought out her costume from her suitcase and after she was dressed, we realised that we had a problem. Pam and I had not only had our outfits custom-made but had even changed the style slightly, and they looked divine. Delphine and Scarlett, however, had bought theirs online, and they looked a little bit like they were wearing potato sacks. Delphine, being the champion that she always was, just shrugged her shoulders and pinned the sides from the inside to make it slightly more attractive, but Scarlett burst out crying. Despite our encouragement, she refused point-blank to leave the room. I knew that we were wasting our time, so I left the others trying to help her and went to Hogan's room. I knew that he was the only one able to get Scarlett to come to the ball with us.

When I arrived, William was there. In my haste, I had forgotten that William was back as well and ended up face-to-face with him. I couldn't help but smile; he had clearly ordered his outfit online, and looked comical in it, but he was still so cute that my heart jumped. I remembered that I hated him, so my smile turned into an evil look, and without a word to him, I turned to Hogan and informed him that his date was refusing to leave her room.

Hassan came in at that very moment and said, “Seriously, Di, couldn’t you wait for Will downstairs? What’s wrong with you?”

I wanted to punch him, but instead I answered, “I am not Will’s date. I was invited by Achilles. I’m here to get Hoggy, if you must know.”

“Achilles? Are you serious? I hate that guy. Why are going with him?” he said.

“Maybe, just maybe, because he is one of the hottest guys in school. He adores me, and he asked me with a bouquet of my favourite flowers.”

“Why didn’t you just come to me? I would have preferred to go with you rather than with Lizzy,” he said.

“Well, why didn’t you ask me?” I replied.

“Er, because I thought Will was going to ask you,” he said.

At that moment, we all turned to William, who said to Hassan without a single glance towards me, “I did ask her. She never answered.” He spoke in a very cold tone of voice and gave me the coldest stare I had ever seen. I could feel anger coming from him. I turned to Hogan, and I could see disappointment in his eyes as well.

I was flabbergasted – the nerve of those boys, especially William. I ignored them and turned to Hassan and said, “Do not listen to him. He never asked me to go to the ball. You can ask the girls.”

“What?” said William. “Not only did I ask you, but I even did it with a bouquet of flowers – white roses, white lilies and white lilies of the valley, because I know that they are your favourites – and I left a note asking you to go to the ball with me. But I got no answer.”

“Wait. Achilles’s bouquet was made of the same flowers. Where did you leave the bouquet?” I asked.

“I gave it to your housemistress to place in your room,” he said with a calmer voice while slowly walking towards me.

I placed my right hand on my eyes. It was obvious that Achilles somehow had replaced the card with a note of his own, and I had fallen for it. I had been surprised when I realised that Achilles knew my favourite flowers, but I had assumed that he had done his homework. It was now very clear to me that he had stolen William’s flowers and card. It wasn’t surprising; Achilles was an arrogant jerk, and if I had not been so mad at William, I would never had agreed to go to the ball with him – but now I had and I needed to rethink everything.

William took me in his arms and removed my hands from my face. He took his hand and pulled my face up, stared straight into my eyes and said, “Did you really think that I wouldn’t ask you to the dance?”

I turned red because that was exactly what I had thought, plus for some reason, I felt really shy being in his arms and hid my face in his shoulder. I could have stayed there forever, but Hassan broke the charm as usual by saying, “Well, if she wasn’t going with you, who did you ask?”

I felt William tensing up, so I looked up, and his face was all red. I felt a movement behind him and pulled away from him just in time to see Hogan pulling an embarrassed face and trying to make a quick exit.

I started to have a funny feeling inside, but I did not have the courage to ask the question that needed to be asked. Luckily for me, Hassan was devoid of such a weakness and walked towards the door, leaned on it as if to stop anyone from leaving and said, "So, who is it?"

William tried to take me back into his arms, but I refused. I really wanted him to answer, and then he said, "I asked Genie and she said yes."

I heard Hassan gasp behind me, while I froze. I didn't know what to say. He had asked his so-called ex-girlfriend to the dance, and she had accepted. Clearly, they were not over each other. I felt like such a fool. What was I doing there? Why had I even come to their room? Why hadn't I just stayed in my room?

I didn't know what to do, and my head was starting to spin all around me when suddenly Hassan grabbed my hand and got me out of there. William made a move towards me, trying to stop me from leaving, but Hogan stopped him and said, "Let them go. You can deal with that later. For now, we have a jerk to hunt down and some serious scores to settle."

Noticing how down William looked, Hogan put his hand on his shoulder and said, "Chin up, mate. It's going to be okay. Let me talk to my girl, and then I'll get back to you and your problems," he said, leaving the room.

Hassan walked me all the way to my room and had the courtesy to stay silent the whole time. However, when we got to my door, he stopped me, turned me towards him and said, "Look, it is absolutely my place to point out that having feelings for a guy that is already taken is absolutely unforgivable and lame. I love you, and because I love you, I am begging you to stop humiliating yourself around him and forget about William for good." He then grabbed my head, put his forehead on my forehead and said, "Any guy in the school would love to date you, if you could just give them a chance. It is not because he looks like Thor that he is the god of thunder or worth the attention of the prettiest girl in school. If we were at home, you would never have sunk so low." He then grabbed my arm and said, "Get a bloody grip, and kick him to the kerb." He then forcefully released me and left.

He was right; I needed to get a grip. I had humiliated myself long enough, and it was my lack of self-worth that had allowed losers like Achilles to play a prank like that. I decided to get revenge on him the best way I knew how: I would challenge him to a fight and give him the beating he so rightfully deserved.

While I was standing in front of my door, lost in my own thoughts, I felt a presence behind me and turned around. It was Hogan. I had forgotten that he was meant to come and speak to Scarlett. I got out of his way, pulled out my arm and waved it, signifying that he was welcome to go in, but he didn't.

On the contrary, he hugged me and said, "Hassan is a great guy, but he can be a jerk sometimes." He then took my face in both his hands and said, "Do you trust me?"

I raised one eyebrow, signifying that I was hesitant to answer, so he said, "Do you trust that I would never let anyone make a fool of you or hurt you?"

I nodded my head, meaning yes, and then he said, "He likes you, a lot, so please don't write him off. And I know you; you will want to strangle the Athenian, but I am begging you not to touch him. Give Will enough respect to let him deal with the problem. Please, Di, promise me."

Normally, I would have refused. I don't usually let anyone make a fool of me, but I was so happy to hear that William liked me that I agreed to stay away from Achilles and followed Hogan inside.

Pam, Delphine and I left him with Scarlett, and we headed to the hall of the main building. Stations had been placed, and drinks were being passed around. The boys were all going towards the girls they had asked to be their date.

I was a bit uncomfortable. I didn't really know how to act around Achilles when he came to me, so I was hoping that he wasn't around yet. Pam had no such issue. John, her date, had appeared as soon as we had arrived, and taken her away.

Enrique, Delphine's date, came and took her as well, so before I knew it, I was all alone. For a second, I felt like standing alone was quite uncomfortable, until I realised that on the other side of the room, Eugenie Pollard was standing alone as well. She was looking all around her, searching for someone, searching for William, who strangely enough was nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly Scarlett appeared next to me, alone. I turned to her and asked, "Where is Hoggy?"

She shrugged her shoulders and said, "I don't know. He told me to stay with you. Apparently, he had some things to deal with, but he promised to be back as soon as possible."

That sounded very suspicious to me. I started looking around, and I noticed that the Greek pack wasn't around either. The Greek pack was what we called Achilles and his friends. They were all Greeks, all from Athens and always together, like a pack of wolves. Tonight there was no sign of any of them, and that was very strange.

I saw Hassan being the social butterfly that he always was, and he was flirting with the school's least recommendable girls.

Unlike the rest of us, Hassan had always found the school bad apples fascinating and was very attracted to them, and it was among them that I found him. Their choice of outfits clearly showed that they knew nothing about Aethelflaed, one of England's greatest heroines, because they were off by at least a century when it came to their clothes.

I ignored the frowns I saw when I approached them, and turned Hassan. I expected to receive the cold shoulder from the girls, but I got it from the boys as well. I wasn't surprised; I had made no secret of what I thought of them, and I wasn't planning on apologising any time soon.

I dragged him away with a wave of protestation following us, but I was unaffected. I took him outside and said, “Where are they?”

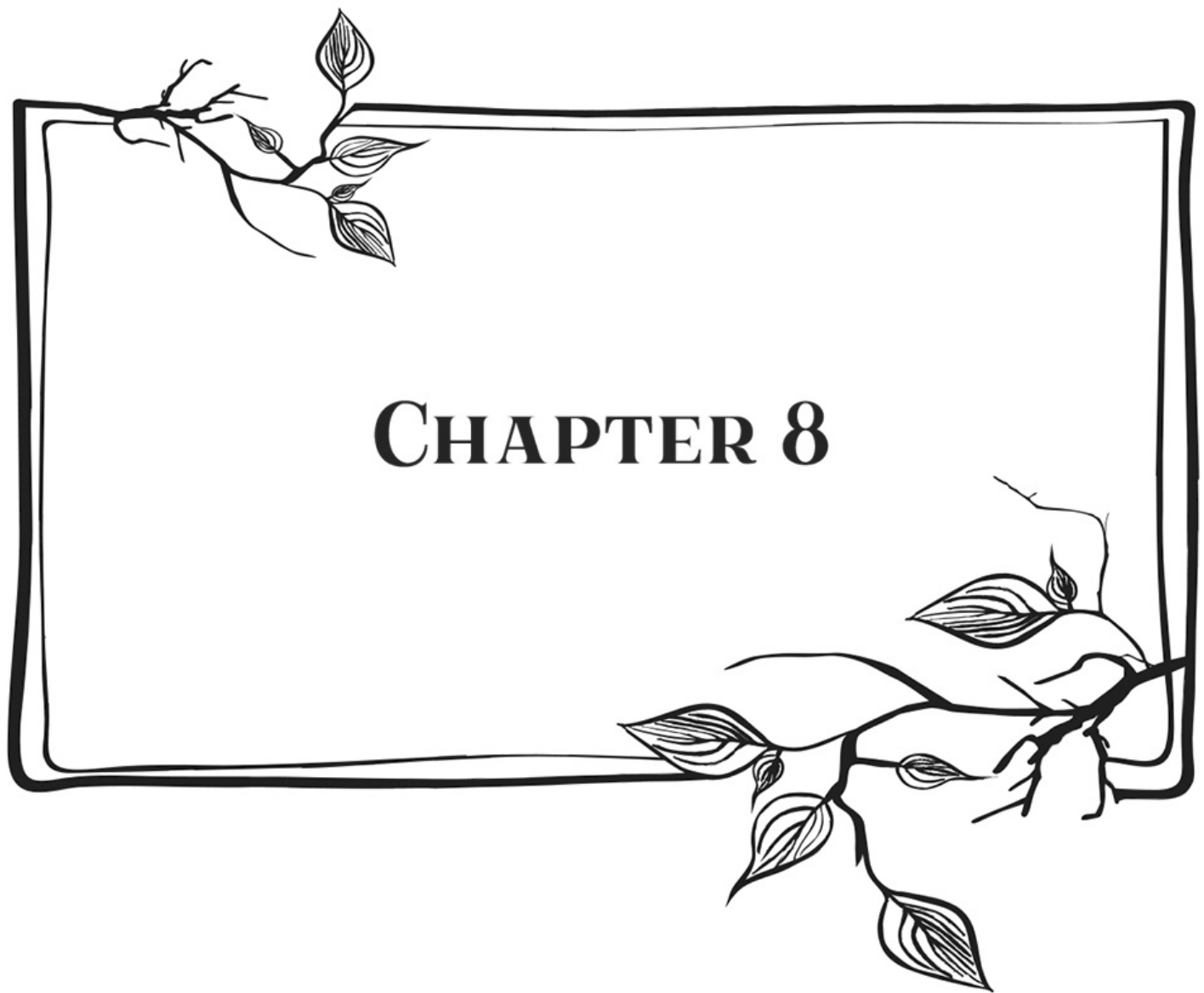
He smiled; he knew exactly who I was talking about. He came really close to me, leaned over me and said, “He is making sure the Athenians know not to mess with him, and took Hoggy as a backup.”

As I was standing with my mouth open, he turned around and left. I was very tempted to leave and go back to my room, but I looked at my outfit and selfishly decided that I would go to the ball, and maybe William would be fine and would join me eventually.

I arrived just when everybody was being escorted to the ballroom, where the dance was starting, but I couldn't help but feel guilty. In Yanar, friends join friends during battles, and here I was, not being able to help William give Achilles the correction he deserved, because I had promised Hogan I would stay away.

I had a lot of fun. Pam and I were the queens of the ball with our sensational outfits, and everybody, girls as well as boys, wanted to dance with us. The LGBT club had encouraged people to dress the way they wanted rather than as their gender stipulated, so we ended up with some girls dressed like gents, and some boys dressed like ladies. It was fantastic.

The only dark cloud was that after a few hours, I noticed Pollard leaving in tears with her friends trying to console her. She did not deserve that. It was Aethelflaed's festival. As girls, it was one of the most important holidays for us because it showed that even in a world where women were nothing more than slaves and property, a woman had risen up and saved her entire country. As much as I wanted to help her, I knew that I couldn't. I could only hope that the next days would get better for her.



CHAPTER 8

The next day, after a fantastic night, we texted the boys to find out what had happened, but they refused to tell us. Achilles, however, wasn't so coy with the details. According to him, William and Hogan had met him and his friends, and William had demanded that he stay away from me. When he refused, William pushed him, and that was when a member of school staff intervened and separated them. They all got banned from the ball, and they considered themselves lucky.

I thanked him for his information and was happily starting to get ready to go to town when Pam burst in and said that we needed to keep Delphine, Scarlett and the others updated about what we had found while in London. She was right; festival or no festival, we still had a problem on our hands.

We all met at the Magic Wrap, and I was very happy to realise that Pam's choice of costumes for us was fabulous. We were once again the best dressed in Gateway Hill. We looked so cute that the owner gave us our favourite sandwiches, The Balboa and The Toby, for free.

After the debrief, we all agreed that a few questions about our investigation needed to be addressed. Why our school? What was the connection? And was this going on in other schools as well? But these were questions that we might never get answers to.

Right when we were in the middle of our discussion, I saw someone coming towards us. It was Hassan, with a huge smile on his face. He stood right in front of me, staring down at me with a grin. He bent down, put his hands on my shoulders and said, “So, Columbo, rumour in town is that you are investigating Wade Allen Tillerson’s death.”

I could have screamed. Hassan was the last thing we needed at the moment. He was the Inspector Gadget to my Penny. The list of his espiègleries was as long as the Great Wall of China, and its consequences would have been biblical if it wasn’t for Amelia, Pam and me fixing it every time, so I was in no mood to include our resident Gomer Goof in anything.

The problem was that Hassan was Alex’s partner in crime and had probably been invited by him to join us, which did not help. He was also a good and trusted friend of us all. I couldn’t just dismiss him. All I could hope was that he wouldn’t put us in a mess too deep to get out of.

Hassan was a year older than me, and we had grown up together. The year before, to celebrate my birthday, we all spent the weekend in Birmingham at Hassan’s uncle’s house. It had been exciting to get out of Yanar and spend time in the Masani world. The next day, while the others were at the Bullring, I did some shopping at the Oasis shop on Corporation Street. Hassan agreed to accompany me, and after I was done, we were due to meet with the others at the New Street Cineworld. We decided to forgo jumping on a bus and walked instead. On our way to New Street, we saw a group of girls coming our way, and he pushed me aside so the girls didn’t see me and assume that I was his girlfriend, and I went flying. Not only did he not even turn towards me to check if I was okay, but by the time I got up, I saw him flirting with the girls as if nothing had happened.

I had scratches all over my arms, my clothes were all muddy because I had fallen in a puddle of dirty water, and my stockings were torn. I was furious. I was so angry that I left and did not answer my phone when he realised later on that I had disappeared. We did not speak for a week after that.

We had been due to spend a few days in London before going home. After I went back to London, Hassan kept trying to make amends, so I decided that rather than let him suffer, I should forgive him. He took me to my favourite London sea-food restaurant. He said that it was his way of apologising for pushing me. The others had told him that I had scratches on my arms and knees because of him, so I was glad that he wanted to make amends.

When we arrived at the restaurant, the first thing he did was ask about a specific waitress. He was very eager to know if she was working there that day. I realised that he had only brought me there to flirt with that girl, and got very annoyed. My mother often said that men cannot multitask. Well, that was not the case for teenage boys. He clearly had planned to kill two birds with one stone.

After we had our meals and he had spent the entire time flirting with the Polish waitress, the time came to pay the bill. She placed it in front of him, and as soon as she was gone, he looked at me, made a sorry face and said that he didn’t have any money and that I would have to pay for the meal.

I rolled my eyes, but I had no choice. As soon as I said yes, he begged me to give him my wallet so that he could pretend that he was the one paying to look good in front of the waitress. I was so over it that I agreed, gave him my wallet, and he paid. When she brought back the change, I realised that he had left a ten-pound tip. I was furious. First of all, a tip was supposed to be only ten per cent of the bill, and secondly, the money was mine, and I wasn't planning on tipping a waitress who had ignored me all the time I was there, because she was busy flirting with my dinner companion.

When he got me home, I realised that the girl had put her phone number in his pocket. He was proudly showing it to anyone who would listen, so I grabbed his arm and snatched it from him. I made it clear to him that since it was my money that bought the food, the girl's number was also mine.

I realised too late that he would kung fu me if he had to in order to get that number, so I just sprinted away and ate the number while he was chasing me. He got his revenge on me by barging in the bathroom while I was in the shower, and peed, ignoring my screams for him to get out.

The list of his nonsense was very long, so as he was standing in front of me now, I was about to tell him to clear off when he said that he had seen Wade Allen Tillerson in the dining room, talking to one of the dinner ladies, and one of them had handed him the plastic bottle the students had seen flying and no one had recovered as far as we knew.

Scarlett, Pam and I gasped and looked at each other. That was dynamite information. I hoped Hassan was not lying to us, so I agreed to include him in our group, and while we were giving him a recap of our journey so far, he added that Arnold was missing.

On his way to join us, he had overheard some academics talking about the fact that Arnold had just disappeared and how upset they were that his replacement had not been properly vetted by the headmaster. He also said that he'd heard them say that they believed a missing-person report had been filed by the school.

The first thing we decided on was to wait until after Aethelf-laed's festival to start our investigation. It did not take long. By Monday it was business as usual. It was decided that the girls would go and find out what we could about Arnold from the A-level Yans and see if his disappearance had any connection to the cult, and the boys would try and find the dinner lady Hassan had talked about.

From what we found out, it seemed that he had no family; his family was J.C. As much as I was worried about Arnold, it occurred to me that he was not the only school employee that had disappeared all of a sudden.

I had noticed not too long ago that one of the live-out school groundkeepers wasn't working at J.C. any more, but since it wasn't the first time that a staff member had left, I hadn't paid much attention to it at the time, but I did now. I had been told that in the past, when a staff member left of their own accord, the rumours of their upcoming departure would be all over the school, even if they didn't have a goodbye party, but not that guy, and that combined with Arnold's disappearance was very strange.

That night, in my room, the girls and I started a mystery board, and we pinned up all the clues that we had found. I had learned reading Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle that every great detective kept revisiting their findings while gathering their thoughts, so I created the board to help me do that.

At the moment, we had people disappearing and students dying without anyone seeming to care or know about it. So people needed to realise that something seriously wrong was happening. Also, we needed something in writing in case anything happened to us, something to allow anyone to pick up right where we had left off, something clear and simple just in case the last man standing was Hassan.

I also started writing a journal. Whoever was to replace me needed to know exactly how I had got to my conclusions and what I was feeling at the time. Little did I know that while I was playing a modern-day Nancy Drew, steps were being taken that would result in tragedy striking our school once again.

The following weekend, we went to the Mystery Pot tavern. It had been opened by J.C.'s French culinary teacher when the school first opened, and was built based on a model of a Gaul tavern, with wooden windows, a thatched roof and a tall, slightly tilted grey stone chimney. Inside, the tables were long and wooden, with wooden benches instead of chairs, which meant that sometimes we ended up sitting next to complete strangers.

The Mystery Pot only opened on weekends and featured the best dishes of the week, cooked by students, and they were all J.C. students' original recipes. The best part was that the name of the creators was known only by the tavern owner and the school academic staff, and at the end of the year, the dish that had been voted the best by the students would get a prize, as well as its creator.

The most amazing food was prepared there, and it was everyone's favourite place to eat, along with the Magic Wrap, the best sandwich shop ever. At the tavern, we had the most amazing chicken J.C., which was one of my favourite dishes in the world. It was braided chicken breast stuffed with béchamel sauce and bacon, served on a bed of morel mushrooms and potato gratin.

We were about to leave when we overheard the table next to us. They were talking about an accident involving a J.C. teacher and her two children. They had been found dead after their car had skidded, crashed and turned over on impact. We found out that it was Amelia's teacher Ms Veronica Thompson Montoya. She was young and beautiful. I considered her the nicest, most elegant, loving, caring and academic in the whole school, and she was a local. She had been born and bred in Gateway Hill.

We ran out and parted ways with the boys. The girls went to the post office to get more information, and the boys went to tell other students we had just seen in the village. The post-mistress was telling some tourist how poor Mr Thompson had been waiting for them to come home. He had cooked dinner for them and had been setting the table ready when the police came and delivered the news to him.

That part was so sad that tears started rolling down my cheeks. I couldn't bear the thought of that man waiting for his beautiful family and finding out that the ones he was waiting for would never return.

We left the post office, and we all hugged to comfort each other. Everybody loved Ms Montoya. William saw that we were upset, so he took me in his arms and embraced me. If it had been Hogan that had done that, my thoughts would have still been on the tragedy, but it was William, and I had the biggest crush on him. Having him hug me made my heart jump, and I forgot about Mr Thompson's sadness and shamelessly enjoyed the moment.

When I saw the smirk on the guys' faces, I said, "What? I needed a hug. Haven't you ever needed a hug?" And I blushed, unfortunately.

I got the same reaction from them that people had when they heard politicians say, "Our thoughts and prayers are with the family." No one believed them, but no one dared to say that out loud either.

When we got back to school, I did my best to console Amelia. She really loved her art teacher, and I could see the pain on all her friends' and classmates' faces. It did not take long for the school to find a replacement for Ms Montoya. Actually, it was quite a speedy move, because Ms Montoya had had her accident on Saturday, and by Monday morning her replacement was already there.

Her name was Ms Dujardin. My first impression was that Cruella de Vil must have had a twin sister Dodie Smith had forgotten to tell us about. Not only that, but she looked like she couldn't spell the word *smile* and always had a disapproving look on her face. But as it turned out, she was about to be the least of our problems.

A few days after Ms Montoya's death, I started to become worried. A feeling of unease plagued me every time I went to class. I was starting to see faint shadows around the school from time to time and always during twilight.

I wasn't the only one starting to see shadows. During FIST a number of students had started to talk about catching glimpses of shadows circling the school. The older students had also started to complain about having the feeling of being watched. Seeing shadows in the Masani world was not unusual for Yans; since the cracking of the veil, it was a frequent phenomenon.

When Yanar came up with a protection shield for our territories, the sight of shadows there disappeared. At the time, the Yan population was told that the shield was obstructing the view, but the councils made it very clear that the veil was still as fragile as before. In the Masani world, however, since they had no shield, we would occasionally see some shadows in the sky, but not as much as in J.C. It was as if they were gathering around the school.

I realised that Pam and I had closed my mother's investigation too soon. She was right; something was wrong in England, and it had to do with the veil.

That very night, Pam and I gave her a full report of what we had been seeing and the increase in shadow presence around the school.

Mother told us that they had discovered a portal in Utah, United States, but they had no idea how it had been opened, by whom or why.

When we asked her what the portal looked like, she said, “For now it is just a deep, dark hole protected by a shimmering shield. We are investigating the phenomenon, but I very much doubt that it looks like that unopened. Just be vigilant and do not attract attention to yourselves.”

I replied, “Very well, Mother.”

“Very well, Auntie,” replied Pam.

Pam and I were starting to think that there might be a connection between the deaths in our school and the investigation we were conducting. We surmised that there wasn’t enough danger to prompt us to reveal to the boys the mission my mother had given us, not yet anyway.

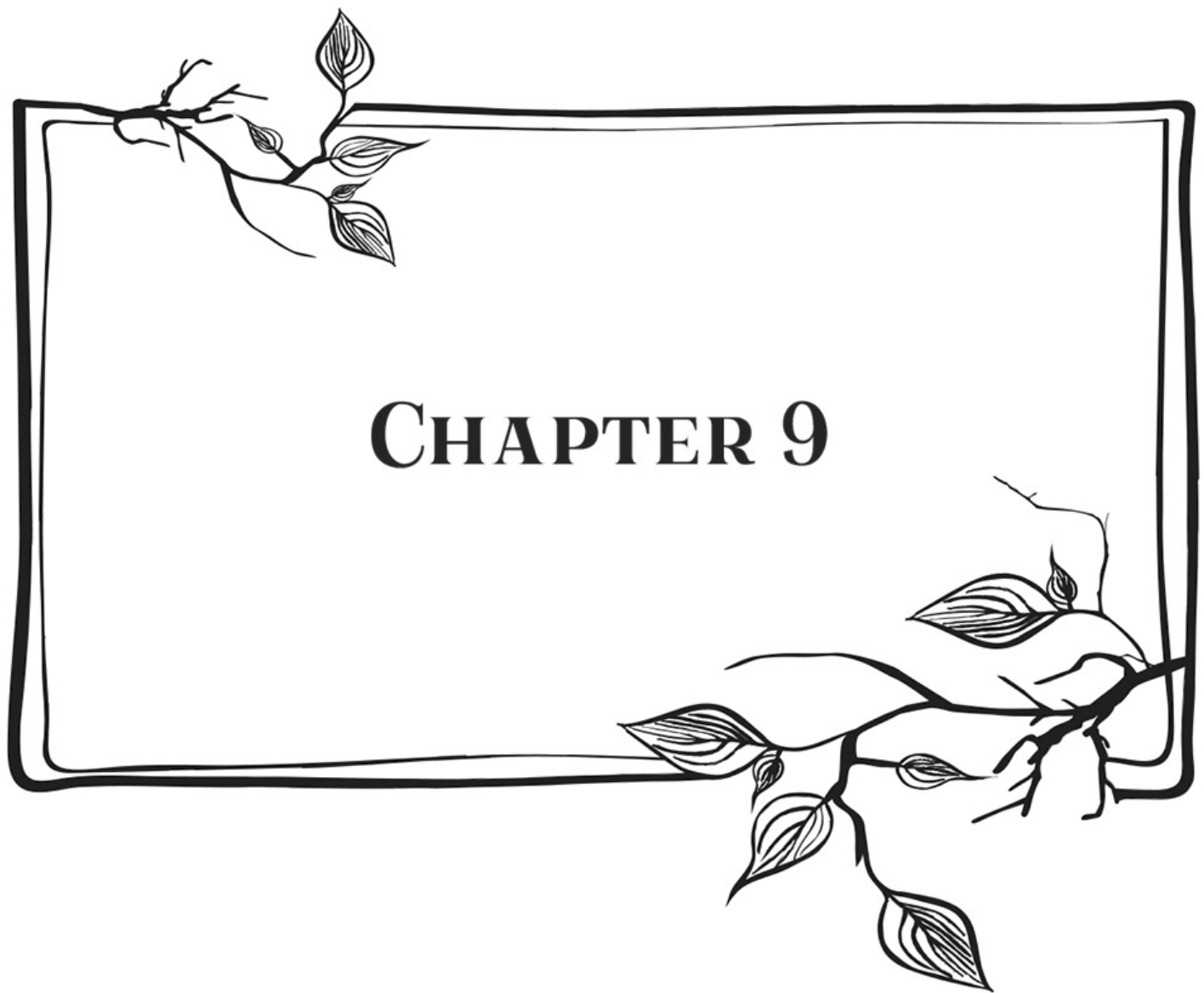
The feeling of unease in the school was taking its toll on me, and I was starting to become more withdrawn. I was missing home, and Surrey’s charms were not doing it for me any more, and the winter holidays couldn’t come soon enough.

For some reason, the large number of shadows was affecting me more than the others. I was feeling dizzy at times and I had nausea occasionally. The surprising thing was that Amelia and Alex were sharing the same symptoms. We had been to the local GP, but they couldn’t find anything wrong with us.

The good news for me was that I was getting extra attention from William, but the bad news was that William had forbidden me from continuing my investigation until I was feeling better.

The others decided to continue with the investigation into the case of the missing school staff members without Alex and me, and by doing so, they decided that it would be a good idea to talk to the colleagues and families of the missing people, whenever they had the chance to go to Gateway Hill.

They were determined to learn as much as they could about their background story, if there was one, and find where they might have gone and why.



CHAPTER 9

As much as I wanted to please William and take the investigation slowly, being part of a team meant that eventually one of us would have to do something they did not want to for the sake of the greater good. I bravely continued the investigation into the dinner ladies, which went nowhere because the boys couldn't find the lady Hassan had seen with Wade Allen Tillerson.

They had done their job diligently. The woman had definitely disappeared. The school grounds staff they had interviewed swore to them that they didn't know anything about the missing groundkeeper or where Arnold could possibly be, either.

I was on my way back to the main hall when I started to feel dizzy. I had just sat down on the stairs to catch my breath when I started burning up. It felt like a volcano was erupting inside me. I dragged myself into the closest loo and passed out.

I woke up not knowing how long I had been lying on the floor. I started walking, not realising where I was going, when I ended up in the recreational room. I noticed that Tristan, Scarlett and Hogan were there, but unfortunately, they were not alone. Eugenie Pollard was sitting with them, clutching William's arm.

At that moment, jealousy just took over me, and I wished I could send an energy ball to obliterate that girl. I couldn't believe that someone like William, who was smart, brilliant even, and had such an incredible heart, would want to be with a harpy like Pollard.

I never did understand why she was so popular. Yes, she was a cute girl, but she was so obsessed with make-up and overused it so much that it was very difficult to see what she really looked like underneath. She spent three hours doing her make-up every morning. Even a geisha did not spend that much time on her make-up, and yet Pollard did.

Everything on her was fake, from her fake eyelashes, her fake green eyes, her fake hair colour to the fake designer items she was wearing. Since we'd got to J.C., she had tried to get close to Pam and me, especially after we had become so popular. It clearly mattered a lot to Pollard and her gang, because although she obviously disliked us, she kept inviting us to every single one of their gatherings and outings, invitations that we had always declined quite rudely, I must say, and now there she was, sitting among my closest friends.

I guessed having her sitting with my gang was a punishment from Odin. Since sharing a room with Scarlett, I had attended a few Sunday services at J.C.'s church, organised by the Christian club. I was interested in finding the differences between our religions, but all I found was a bunch of similarities with different names. It must have angered Odin.

The Christian club was founded by two sixth-formers, Scott Haggerty and his girlfriend, Emily Green. They were part of Scarlett's church, called Freedom Church, and every Sunday, they watched live the Sunday service delivered from Hereford, where, like Amelia said, the mothership was based.

I finally worked up the strength to go and join the group. Then, putting on my best fake smile, I managed to be civil to Pollard but not friendly. In Yan schools, students were called by their surnames, not their first names, unless they were really close, so it was easy to know who true friends were and who were not.

As soon as I sat down, there was Pollard, and she said, "Hi, Diana."

Those words just infuriated me. How dare she call me Diana? I was not a friend to her. I was barely an acquaintance, so I said, "It's Korsning to you. We are not friends."

I noticed William's eyes on me, and I could see his body tensing up. I was also watching Scarlett, and she was really sweet to Pollard, and I couldn't understand why. Pollard had never said a word to her except to mock her religious beliefs and had so far made a point to ignore her, but then again, Scarlett was a sweetheart and religious, so quite forgiving.

William got up, took my hand and pushed me into a corner. I could see that he was upset with me. He said, "Don't do this. She is my friend. I know that you don't like her, but I need you to give her a chance."

"Why should I? You know that I hate her. Everybody in our group hates her, but you still thought it was smart to bring her to our group?" I said. "She is one of the school's worst bullies. She is awful to

anyone that she judges not good enough, and you expect me to turn my back on my friends, who have suffered her insults and horrendous behaviours, to make peace with her. How can you ask that of me?" I added.

That was a little dramatic, but I was banking on him being too much of a gentleman to notice. The reality was that I had finally realised that I was simply jealous of Pollard's relationship with William. Her being a bully was just a gift from the gods, because it allowed me to look and feel justified when I was mean to her.

He could see I was upset. I could see that he was upset. It was just too much for me and I ran crying. At that point, I just wanted to die. I hated living in the Masani world. Their world could turn the best of us into petty and useless beings. I needed to stay away from William and the feelings he was waking inside me.

When I had calmed down, I went back to join the group, and I noticed that William was holding my tablet and reading my notes with Pollard. To my surprise, my blood started boiling and my eyes started sending lightning bolts towards them. For some reason, I wanted to shout and almost scream.

"Who gave you permission to touch my things?"

I grabbed my tablet and took it from him. I felt so ashamed of myself, and what made matters worse was that I saw Pollard's eyes, and she looked really scared. She had never seen me look that angry before.

I usually had a blasé look or a bored look on my face when I was unhappy about something, but William was turning me into something I hated, and despite Pollard's multiple faults, she did not deserve me being mean to her because we liked the same boy. She really did not.

Somehow it felt like William knew what was going on in my head, because he gave me a cheeky smirk, then smiled and said in a patronising voice, "Oh, come on, she is one of us now. She might as well be clued in."

I felt bad for him; it wasn't his fault he was so hot.

Winter break was finally here, and as soon as we got to London, we were shipped to Yanara. I was glad to go home. I was even happier when I heard that Pam and Alex had been seen on the lift to my home town because they lived in Yanar City, so I hadn't expected them to be on their way to Yanara.

Yanara was the capital city of the north. It was also its biggest city. Yanara was an ice city; all the houses and buildings were built using ice blocks. The only touches of colour were the inhabitants' clothes and the lights all around the city.

Yanara was as prepared for Yule as usual. The Yule celebration was the most important of all the Norse holidays and was twelve nights long. On the night of the twentieth of December, the goddess Freya rode over the earth to bring light and love back into the world.

Yule to the Yans symbolised the start and end of all things. During this festival, Odin rode across the sky on Sleipnir, his eight-legged horse, and left gifts for the children, who in turn left him and his horse edible treats to say thank you.

It was a time for feasting, giving gifts and dancing, and we were all getting excited to dig into the festivities when we were told that it wouldn't happen this time. Instead of diving into the preparation of Yanara's biggest holiday, we were taken straight to a military training camp. The camp was hideous; the barracks were made of sheet metal, and there wasn't a hint of Yule decoration.

For a month now, most Yans at school had complained about not feeling well, myself included, and our temperature was higher, but when we had informed our FIST trainer, he had told us not worry. He assured us that it was a normal phenomenon and that we would find out more during the Yule holidays.

Now we were all packed in one of the barracks, waiting for a great announcement. It did not take long. Adam Korsning Wu, my cousin, came in and burst into flames in front of us.

We all screamed in joy and excitement. The fire power had revealed itself, and we were all here to be trained. War was upon us, and victory would be glorious.

The screams of joy did not last long. Just after Adam's spectacular show, we saw someone come in. We knew him for being one of the most famous Masanis living in Yan territory: General Grigoriy Vittorio Vasiliev, commander of our army.

Being a Masani in a Yan world was very difficult because Masanis in general were weaker, less intelligent, less educated and less advanced than Yans. Unfortunately for us, that wasn't the case for General Vasiliev.

The first thing he announced was that anyone old enough to be enrolled in the army would not take part in the Yule festivities, and secondly, we would not be allowed to see our families until we went back to school.

Thanks a lot, jackass, I thought. Yule was my favourite holiday, and instead of being on the street, dancing, we were going to train with an insensitive psycho. My brothers being in the army, I had heard a lot of stories about the general's way of commanding his troops, and none of them were pleasant at all.

The general also separated the members of the Ten from the rest of the group. As much as I understood that being members of the Ten made us more powerful, I didn't see the need to train separately, but voicing my opinion would not have mattered.

I couldn't believe that we wouldn't be able to go home. As a member of the Ten, I lived in the suburbs, and I loved it. Yanara's suburb was nicknamed the Village in the Clouds. The neighbourhood was built with blocks of ice, using a Viking village as a model, including the local temple. The foundations had been sculpted into the shape of clouds, which gave the impression that the dwellings were floating in the air. The general council wanted to feel like they were living in heaven with the gods, and they had done a magnificent job.

The training camp, however, was outside the city. I loved the snow; winter was my favourite time of the year, but even I was longing for some heat. They made us use our powers to build our own dwelling. The metal-sheet barracks were made for the officers and trained soldiers only, apparently. The rest of us “fresh off the boat”, as they called us, were taken back to the Middle Ages, and we had to learn how to survive.

It was even more difficult for the ones who were from the Yanar islands, because there was no snow there and they walked around town in bikinis all year. Training in Yanara was a big deal for everyone. Most of the armed forces training camps were located in the Yanar islands, and besides the Norse, the Scots, the Irish and the Swedish descendants, the rest of the Yans usually lived in the south because they preferred the hot climate.

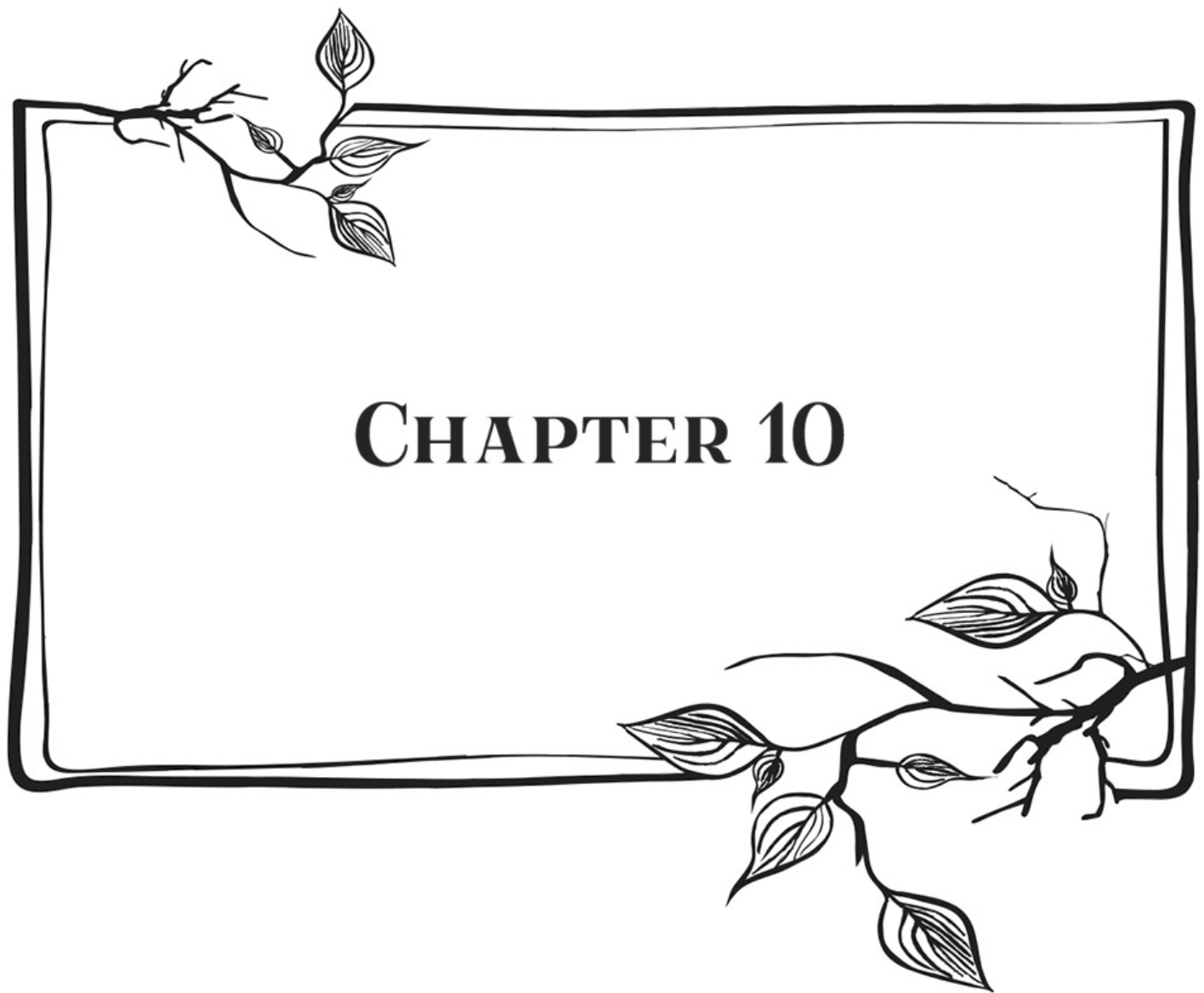
I never thought that the day when I learned to throw balls of fire with Tristan, Alex and our friend Christian Altkasei would ever exist. Although we had been separated from the rest of the soldiers, all fire power holders got to live and train with the members of the Ten because their power was as strong as any of ours, Omnis excluded.

The fire power had revealed itself, and just like in the past, as well as all the Omnis, it had awakened in some male and female Yans, and I was ecstatic to see that three of my closest male friends were Infernos.

Alex had been the only receiver of the fire power among his siblings, but after witnessing the twins Francesca and Christian Altkasei working together, he shared his power with Pam, and she in turn shared her terra power with him, which made them duals. Being members of the Ten, and therefore quite powerful, the council had no option but to allow the sharing of powers between kin until the end of the war.

So after the pain of learning how to live in a very unfriendly environment, we started to have fun with the fire power. I was an Omni, so flying was not new to me, but teaching the others how to fly with their power was exhilarating. The first time we burst into flames, we burned our clothes and were naked, but the trainers were ready with special fire-resistant clothes for us. We managed to throw blazes of fire as well before leaving and wrote “J.C.” in big on the snow next to our camp.

Something did bother us a lot: we had Yans as young as twelve and as old as fifty training. That was very unusual. The war council was definitely preparing for war on Earth, and besides Ragnarök, I really couldn't understand what kind of war could prompt them to have old Yans in training at all.



CHAPTER 10

When we got back, something had changed between us. Pam, Alex, Tristan, Amelia and I, after our military training in Yanara, had become warriors and had not been in touch with the others.

I had the feeling that they took it personally, because as time went by, spending time with William, Hogan, Hassan, Scarlett and Delphine became harder. I could feel a divide, and I didn't know whether Pam, Alex and I were causing it with our superior attitude or whether the others were, with their vexed demeanour.

Because of the training, all Yans enrolled in the army had come back to school a full month after the rest of the school. By that time, Pollard had now become an integral part of every single one of their outings and was becoming very close to Scarlett. She had even joined Freedom Church. Pollard's two best friends, Elisabeth Maori Walker and Danielle Houghton Morgan, had also joined the group, and I couldn't figure out when, but they seemed quite comfortable with my friends.

Pollard was now the new sheriff of the group, who had transformed themselves into being sassy, pretty, very feminine, flirty and popular, wearing the latest fashion and having their hair, nails and

make-up done perfectly every day. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought that we were in a *Vogue* studio.

Even when we were in uniform, you could still see their sense of style glowing through. Scarlett was loving having them around and was spending a lot of time with them. I wasn't hurt by that; Scarlett had always been very feminine. She was very much into 1950s style, and I knew that she had been longing to be able to talk chiffon and silk with someone who appreciated that sort of thing, and that wasn't me at all, but she could have at least spent a little time with me, besides when we were back in our room.

Pam was very fashionable on paper, but when she wasn't modelling, she was a little bit of a tomboy like me – jeans and trainers and no make-up whatsoever.

Like any girl dumped by her friends, I got on with my life. Every day, Pam and I would meet after class, and on weekends we would go down to the village and hang out, but things were getting very uncomfortable when we were with the other girls.

Pam and I were getting quite a lot of pressure from the other girls to get boyfriends, especially from Pollard, who was focusing on me the most. To be fair, it was obvious that she wanted William back. What I hadn't expected was that she knew of my feelings for her ex.

Bad luck for her, I wasn't interested in anyone, and I had pretty much shut down anyone who had even tried to stir me into a romantic relationship with them, and that was not weighing on me at all. I was pretty happy by myself. However, being forced to spend time with people I had nothing in common with was depressing. I was one of the few redheads in the school. I never wore make-up and hated fashion, and I was starting to stand out for it.

Clearly, after realising that she couldn't push me into the arms of Achilles or one of the popular boys, Pollard decided to attack my fashion sense, constantly making fun of my tom-boyish outfits.

I wasn't the type to apologise for being attractive. I knew that it was one of the things she hated the most about me, not having the power to turn me into an unattractive girl.

Unbeknown to her, her plan was working. Emotionally I was weakening. The truth was that even the most stunning girl would lose confidence in herself if she was constantly criticised for her outfits and neglected look, and I knew that being made to feel like Pippi Longstocking around those girls was not okay.

I had always identified with Merida, from *Brave*, because we had the same thick, long curly hair, and she was a tomboy like me, but my self-confidence was fading, and none of my friends besides Pam was noticing it, and it made me hate Pollard even more.

I started to pull back and spend my free time in my room, on my computer, and stopped answering my phone – not that I did not still have Pam to hang out with, but she was an over-achiever and always had a million activities to do, while I was pretty lazy.

Eventually, she noticed that I was going down to the village alone, and she decided that she would not let me be alone any more, so we started going on excursions together. It felt good; like being back in

Yanara.

One day we saw posters of a missing person; a young man in his twenties. We were about to walk away when I noticed a logo on the paper. That logo was the sign of the general council, which was unusual enough, but it also had the letters “ACC”, which was impossible. We had been wearing the sign of the general council on some of our jewellery since we were children – only members of the general council and their families did. The logo was also on one of my bracelets in my room, but only a Yan would have recognised it.

The Yanar general council, unlike the war council and the council of interior affairs, was made up of six members but was often ruled by five. Yanar being a meritocracy, each candidate to the council chair battled it out with other applicants, and the winner got the chair. Each chair represented one power, and with the fire power being rare, its chair was rarely occupied.

Samantha Rafnkell Wu, Pam and Alex’s mother, sat on the earth chair. Leone Croise, Hogan’s mother, sat on the energy chair. No one sat on the fire chair at the moment. Kai Opiopio, my friend Leilani Kahue Opiopio’s aunt, sat on the water chair. The air chair was occupied by Dorothea Altkasei, Francesca and Christian Altkasei’s cousin, and the omni chair was occupied by my mother, Elsef Bouba Korsning.

When we were younger, we used to attend what was called “the council members’ weekend getaway” with our families, and on each of these getaways, we would receive gifts from the organisers, like a necklace or a bracelet, a trinket really, as a reminder of that year’s getaway.

On one of those getaways, on our second day, when I had joined the other children for teatime, Hogan had been in the middle of a speech. He was telling them that we had been bound not only by the “vows of friendship” but also had formed a secret club that no one else would be allowed to enter. We were, from then on, the “alliance of the children of the covenant”, or ACC, and he added that the ACC would last till the end of time.

I had tried so hard not to react, but my eyes couldn’t stop rolling. All I could think was *Thank Odin the older kids are not here. They would make fun of us forever.*

Then he pulled out leather wristbands for us to wear. On them was the council’s logo in silver, and each power’s individual logo was sewn in with the letters “ACC” inscribed on it. He had spent the entire week designing, preparing and ordering them.

It was incredibly generous of him to give us that amazing gift. I was no longer rolling my eyes. I loved the bracelet; it made us feel so connected. He continued by saying, “We are no longer just friends. We are bigger, stronger, more connected than that. We are an alliance, and as such, we should have an emblem and codes, a secret handshake, everything that makes an alliance what it is.”

As much as the idea of being a secret society was ridiculous, the name, although quite long, sounded pretty cool and grown-up for a group of children aged between ten and twelve. Besides, Hogan had

come up with the stupid name, but he looked so pleased with himself, and the wristbands were really cool, so we agreed to go with it.

Over time I'd had to admit that the ACC logo had looked more and more brilliant, and now it was here, in Gateway Hill, on a poster.

Now I was staring at a poster of a missing man with the ACC logo on it, and it did not make any sense. The ACC only all got together when we were on holiday in Yanar or during council weekend, and it was to play pranks and have fun. With all the strange events happening in the school, I couldn't help but wonder if one of our friends was not in trouble.

The only way to have that logo attached to the poster would be to get it from one of our bracelets. After showing the missing poster to Pam, we called Leilani. Luckily, she was with Francesca, and they agreed to check if either of their bracelets was missing. In the meanwhile, we made our way to the Magic Wrap, where we knew that we would find Hogan.

When approaching the Magic Wrap, I could see the orange-and-green sign from across the street. I was nervous; I had a feeling that he would be with William, and I had barely seen him since we got back from our winter holidays. For some reason, my heart was racing. I had the jitters. I was about to turn around and leave when I heard someone calling me. I knew that voice. It was a voice I had missed like crazy. It was a voice I had been longing to hear. It was William.

I turned around and watched him running towards me. He stopped just in front of me. He was panting. So was I and I hadn't even run. He raised his right hand and caressed my cheek. My heart was pounding. My head was spinning. I couldn't think straight. Then suddenly I was in his arms. He put his head on my head and whispered, "God, I have missed you," and then he kissed me.

I should have pushed him away, but I couldn't. I had fallen in love with him without realising it, and now here I was, in his arms. I should have been happy, but at the same time, what I had just seen was weighing on me, and I didn't want to bother him with it.

He held my face with his two hands and kept kissing me over and over again. The outside world had disappeared for us, until we heard someone cough. I turned around, and all I could see now was Pam's very annoyed face. She really disliked anyone going off script. Then there was Alex, aka the Joker, walking towards us, who at that very moment I wished was still in Gotham, and he stopped and stood there with a mocking grin on his face.

I turned away and was fully intending on walking away from them and straight into the Magic Wrap with the others following when Pam received a phone call.

Just at that moment, I felt like someone was watching us. I turned around and I saw Hassan staring, rolling his eyes. He had never liked William, but he wasn't who I was worried about. It was the shadow standing behind him.

William, Pam and Alex turned around when they saw the expression on my face, and they saw the shadow, all except William, which was normal because he was a Masani. Hassan must have sensed that

something was wrong, because he turned around as well, but as soon as he did that, the shadow disappeared.

Fear settled in. I saw Pam grab her brother's hand, and I instinctively grabbed William's, while Hassan ran towards us. He was pretty shaken, and he looked terrified. I actually hesitated to tell him about the bracelet, because that would just amplify his fear, but I had no choice. We were about to go in when Hassan pushed William away from me, looked straight into his eyes and said, "Don't you have a girlfriend?"

I turned red. I wanted the ground to swallow me fully. That was the worst situation. What made it worse was the "Excuse me?" that came out of Pam's mouth, and a huge laugh burst out of Alex's.

I was mortified. Here I was, having to explain myself again. I was about to do so when William said, "We haven't been together since last summer, you doughnut." He looked at me, took my hand and smiled at me, then said, "We need to talk, all right?"

My heart was melting. I could only nod. What I was thinking was *Forget talking. Let's just keep kissing*, but that wouldn't have been very ladylike. Instead, I stood next to him, my face enlivened. I was feeling overjoyed. I could feel Hassan rolling his eyes at us, but at least the dig at Hassan did bring a smile to Pam's face.

We finally made it inside the Magic Wrap, and who was sitting with Hogan? None other than Pollard. I turned to look at William. I was feeling uncomfortable. I couldn't understand why. It wasn't as if I had stolen her boyfriend. When I had met them, they were already broken up, and yet the situation was very awkward for me.

Sitting with Hogan were Scarlett, Delphine, Morgan, Walker and two Masani boys, Bilal Abadi and Antoine Brown. I didn't like them much. Actually, I even hated Abadi. He was a snake, the school's biggest gossip, and he had talked about every single one of his friends behind their backs. He looked like a South Asian Mr Bean and was the stupidest student in his class.

Everybody had good reason to hate Abadi, I had heard. When we had got to the school, we were told that the year before, Abadi had slept with someone else's girlfriend and they had been caught together. In order to avoid getting the brunt of the other students' insults, he had created a webpage vilifying the girl he had slept with, calling her a prostitute and listing names of other boys in the school who he implied she had also slept with. He had told people that she had deceived him, and he had thought that she was single. She had been so upset that she wouldn't leave her bedroom and wanted to leave the school.

Delphine and her gang had decided to help her, and they took a picture of Abadi's pants. They zoomed in on his privates and placed it on social media with a caption: "Multiple users, 50p or best offers. In case of disappointment, no refund will be given."

He woke up with offers from girls asking for his sexual services and offering him between 1p and 20p. He was "slut shamed" by all the students and left the school for a week. While he was away, his

victim's friends paid someone to prove that he had made the website vilifying her and took it to the police. He was charged with harassment, and his parents had to pay a fine.

Abadi tried to get Delphine arrested as well but could never prove that she was behind the social media attack. She realised that she had sunk to Abadi's level and admitted to the school that she was responsible. She was suspended for a week but avoided being punished further.

After his parents had begged the school not to expel him, he returned to school in shame and was made to publicly apologise to his classmates and his victim. After that, no girl ever agreed to date him again, and he had been trying to get a girlfriend ever since with no success.

Brown, however, was Alfred Enoch's doppelgänger and an A+ student. If he hadn't also been one of the most arrogant students in J.C., we could have been friends. He was part of William's old group, who had been sticking to Hogan and Alex like glue since they had arrived in J.C..

Unfortunately, Abadi had been sticking to Brown ever since he had lost his other friends, and William thought it would be un-Christian not to welcome him whenever he wanted to sit with us.

William was not aware of what had happened with the poster. Neither was Hassan, and I didn't want to talk to Hogan in front of the others sitting with him, so I signalled to him while everyone else was grabbing chairs except Alex, Pam and me.

Although we had not used the ACC's signals for years, I knew that Hogan wouldn't have forgotten them. Luckily, he was sitting next to Scarlett, and Pollard was facing the door, and the others were giving us their backs. I clutched my fist and hit my left shoulder twice, which meant "trouble", and he immediately excused himself to join us.

Scarlett and Delphine got up wearing big smiles on their faces, walked straight towards me and gave me a big hug. To my surprise, so did Pollard. I thought, *Wow, the lengths that girl will go to to look good in front of other people is astonishing.*

I didn't want to give the rest of their group the opportunity to come and kiss me, so I waved at them, grabbed Hogan, and we left the restaurant, leaving the fashion squad and co. behind, or so I thought.

When Hogan saw one of the posters, which incidentally was plastered opposite the Magic Wrap, his face turned white. He turned towards me and said, "We need to call the other holders of the bracelets and make sure that they are all right."

Alex and Pam were behind us and said in one voice, "Too late."

We turned towards them in disbelief. I said, "What?"

At that moment, I think Pam realised that I thought our friends were injured, so she quickly said, "No. They are fine, but the girls' bracelets are missing."

That wasn't good. It wasn't good at all. Then I felt an unease coming from behind me. I turned around and it was Hassan. He looked very uncomfortable. I looked straight at him and said, "What did you do?"

He gave me his most uncomfortable smirk and said very quickly, "To start with, it wasn't me."

At that point, I thought, *Shocker*, and gave him the “spill it” look. Then he said that before the start of the school, they had been hanging out in Westfield, White City, with my cousin Anthony when two older guys approached them and showed them the Yan tattoo.

Yans that did not live in Yan communities wore a tattoo of Yanar’s map on them and presented it to other fellow Yans to be recognised.

They then asked them if they had ever seen “that”, and they produced a drawing of a bracelet, and Hassan answered affirmatively. They were then asked if any of them could get their hands on one.

They looked at each other because they both knew that I had one in the Abigail ballet shoes music box they had given me for my eleventh birthday. They asked why they were interested in the bracelet, and the guys ignored the question but instead just offered them five hundred pounds for it.

Hassan and Anthony being always penniless for some reason or another, I was not at all surprised that they had agreed to take the money. They decided to meet at the same location the next day, and that very night they stole my bracelet and sold it to the guys the next day. A week after, Anthony told Hassan that he had found my bracelet in the mail box and returned it to my music box.

When I asked him what the older guys looked like, he gave me a generic description: tall, pale-skinned; one was blonde, the other had brown hair, fit, sporty-type guys, around the same age as our parents, which meant early thirties. Yans tended to get married very early on because the life expectancy of power holders was fifty-five. The legal age to get married was sixteen, and we tended to have children very quickly.

It was clear from the description that neither of them was the guy on the poster. The guy we were staring at had dark hair and was young – early twenties. We had been targeted, and we didn’t know why. By we it was pretty clear that the ACC and only the ACC had been targeted. Evidently they were giving us a message, but we didn’t know what it was.

So here we were, the ACC facing a “real” threat – unlike the usual, which was being caught doing something naughty by our parents – and I needed all of us to put our thinking caps on. The truth was that I was pretty scared; they had gone to my cousin, so it was only logical to assume that I might have been their first target.

We decided to ditch the group at the Magic Wrap and make our way back to J.C. We sent Hassan to keep the others from following us. This was an ACC matter, and we really did not need anyone to witness our carelessness. When we got to the dormitories, we reviewed what we had with the ACC team on video chat. They might have been thousands of miles away, but this issue concerned them as well. We had stolen one of the posters and showed it to them, but none of them knew the man in the picture.

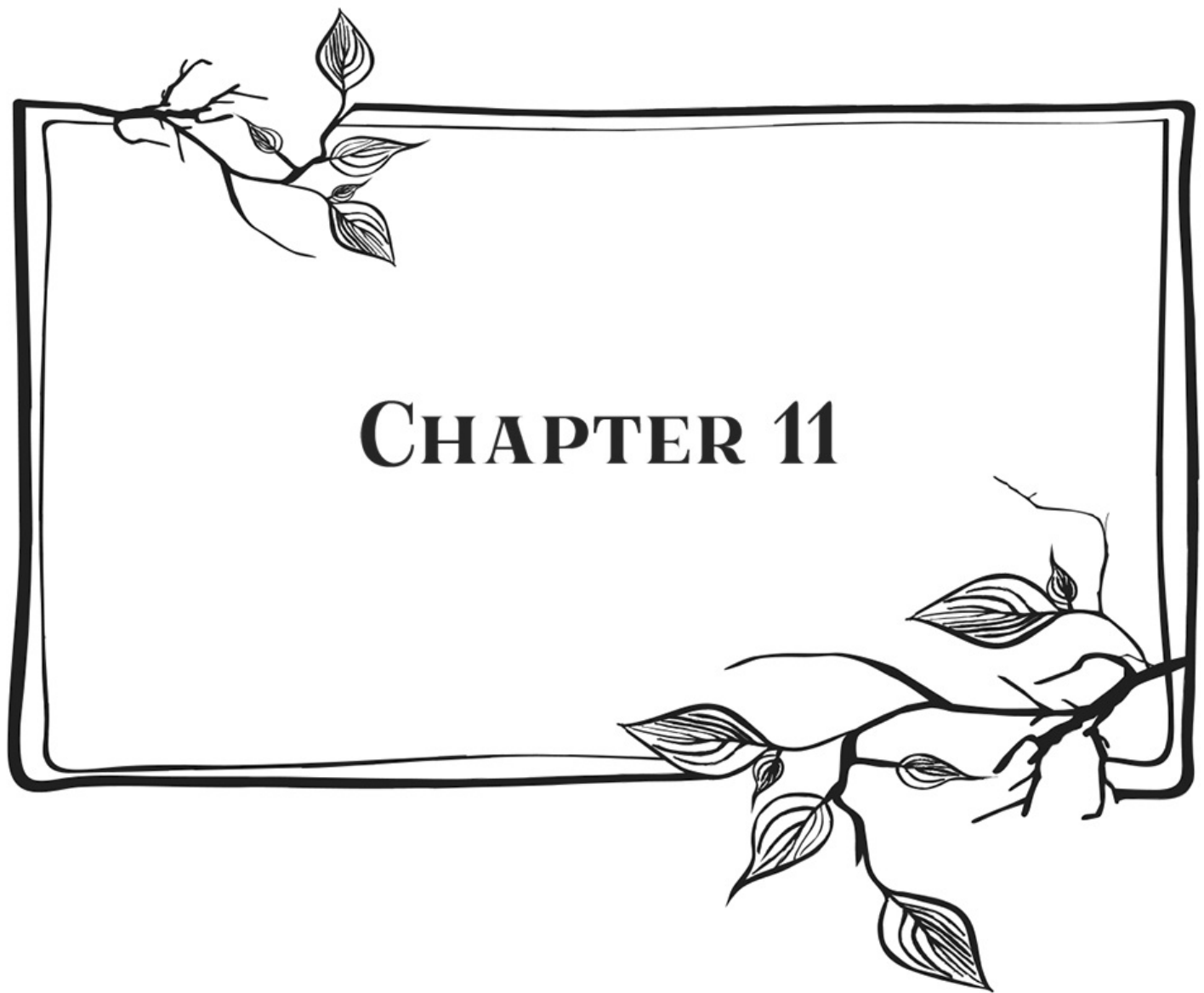
We checked if we still had our bracelets and realised that Pam and I had had ours stolen as well, which meant that mine was stolen twice. That also meant that all the ACC girls’ bracelets were gone, but the boys still had theirs. We could only conclude that whoever was behind this knew exactly who we were and how the power system worked among the Yans.

After returning downstairs, we found Hassan, William, Scarlett, Delphine, Pollard, Walker, Morgan, Brown and Abadi sitting together and discussing the multiple deaths in the school. I felt like the gods had fallen on their heads. What were my friends still doing with these guys? What exactly did I have to do to spend one hour around my friends without them?

I couldn't watch them any more. I went back to my room and Pam followed me. She knew I was angry, so to cheer me up, we started working on our investigation of the deaths. Our theory was that the school had been created as some type of sacrifice altar for some unknown deity, and in exchange, whoever agreed to the deal was rewarded with a lot of money, as we had discovered.

Another puzzling thing would have been the location, if we hadn't known about the portal. Pam and I deduced that if we took it at face value that the deaths were in the same location as the anomaly and it could not have been a coincidence, then we had a big problem.

That would only mean that the cult members were the ones that were creating the anomalies, and since the shadows were circulating around the school, we could only assume that the cult had been created by aliens.



CHAPTER 11

Spring half-term was here, and I couldn't bear the thought of being away from William, so I nursed the idea in the others' heads to invite our dear friends to stay with us. It was decided that we would invite everyone to London with us. The girls would stay in the Korsning wing, and the boys would stay in the Croise wing.

Actually, Hogan tried to mix it up by having Scarlett stay in his wing, but churchgoer Scarlett politely declined the invitation, so she came with Pam, Delphine and me. Pollard, Walker and Morgan tried to get themselves invited, and so did Abadi and Brown, but I refused and forbade Hogan to even entertain the idea of inviting them.

When we arrived at Draycott Place, the guys were very impressed. They had never been into a Yan's house, and they were very shocked and amazed by the amount of antiques in the rooms, especially the weapon room, where there was a display of progression from the first Yan weapons to the ones in use today.

Yanar was extremely advanced, and although we were not allowed to use our technology outside our territories, in our communities we did use it, especially in the house. Everything was electronic, computerised, and we even had an AM – an automated maid.

After running into some family members and having to say hello to everyone, we immediately dived into our investigation. No matter how bad seeing our insignia on a poster was, the school was the real treat. Something was going on, and it had a link to the school, so we decided that an investigation into the school's history would be very informative.

We agreed that we had to find out everything about the school since it had been donated to Surrey County Council, and its first headmaster. We had come to the conclusion that nothing could happen in a school without the headmaster being a part of it. If he had had any objection or disagreed with anything, he would have done something by now, so he must have been part of the problem.

We had been in Draycott Place for a few days and were having the time of our lives. Even Hassan and Tristan had been staying with us, and William and I were getting closer and closer. We were like two lovebirds cut off from the world and would go up to the roof every day and watch the sunset. I couldn't have wished for better.

One day, while watching a movie in the movie room, we were told by the AB – automated butler – that a few people wanted to see me. When William and I got to the door, we realised that it was Abadi, Brown, Pollard, Morgan and Walker. Apparently, after realising that they would not be invited to join us in London, they had accepted Abadi's invitation.

Abadi, from what he told us, lived in south-east London with his parents and five siblings. His father was a wealthy businessman, and his mother a doctor. They had a nice large property in Greenwich. Apparently, after cruising the internet, they had easily found out where Draycott Place was and decided to drop in for a visit.

As soon as they arrived, the girls made it clear that they would rather stay with us than with Abadi's family, citing that Abadi's parents were very strict, so they had not been enjoying themselves there. So there they were at our door, all smiles. I unashamedly asked Abadi how he knew about Draycott Place, and he told me that he had gotten the information from Hogan.

It did not take long for him to admit that Hogan had invited them to pop in for a visit any time. After leaving them in the hall, where everybody had gathered since their unwanted arrival, I grabbed Hogan's hand and dragged him away from the group. I said to Hogan in Yan, "*A swayti quinadje na? Dume a do wada ha do bey mabbe?*" which meant "Have you lost your mind? What are you doing here with them?"

He turned around, smiled at them, then turned to me and said, "*Bey handinimen pat. halah timmi. Jotacam atchube be nasta,*" which meant "They already know about us. The game is up. Just let them in."

I was adamant that none of them could stay with us, so Hogan and William had to convince them to go back to Abadi's house.

Alex had complained many times that one of the wall panels in his dormitory at J.C. was loose, so after being ignored by everyone, including us, when it came to his accommodation problems, he had decided to fix it himself before he left for half-term.

After pulling the panel out, he noticed that there was something hidden inside the wall. When he pulled it out, he realised that it was a diary. There was no name, but due to the fact that it was in a room that was in the boys' wing, we guessed that the author was a boy of similar age to us. He read it as soon as they arrived in London. The author had written about a friend of his and someone called Luke, who had passed away in suspicious circumstances mid-term in the school year. The friend's name was Lillian Paterson.

After reading the name, we Googled it and found out that her father was a very famous journalist who had covered the country's biggest stories and risked his life many times covering war-torn countries. He was also known for denouncing abuse from big companies and denouncing injustice in the work-place. He had become the go-to journalist for whistle-blowers all over Europe. We also found out that he was a radio host on a show that was extremely popular and had millions of followers.

Lillian's mother was a painter. She was known for her depictions of the human soul in colour. The attempt from some mainstream religions to close one of her events had put her on the map. She was one of the most recognised figures in the art world. Her philosophy that each person was inhabited by darkness and they should accept and embrace it was said to be regarded as very controversial. She also had a legion of fans who saw her as a visionary, and her book about her art and the force behind it was said to have been flying off the shelves.

According to the diary, every free hour she had during the week, Lillian would go to the canteen and order the same thing: custard doughnuts with hot chocolate. One day, right before Easter, they had gone to the canteen together. This time, however, her custard cakes and her hot chocolate were all laid out for her on a platter. The kitchen lady smiled at her and told her that she had anticipated her coming, so she was ready with her order.

Lillian took the platter and left, walking towards her usual seat. The diary author was right behind her. When it was his turn to give his order, he observed the kitchen lady speaking to a skinny, grey-haired man in black. They were both watching Lillian. Noticing his presence, the kitchen lady walked towards him and gave him his banana cakes and hot chocolate.

He went straight to his usual seat, which was opposite Lillian's, and told her that if he was her, he wouldn't eat or drink what she had been given. She asked why, and he pointed at the pale man in black and the kitchen lady, and told her that he had heard the gentleman ask the lady if she had given the girl the food, and the kitchen lady had replied that she had and that she was about to eat it.

He added that while he was in the middle of his narrative, they both looked towards the kitchen and realised that the kitchen lady was still staring at Lillian. Even after witnessing that, Lillian still brushed

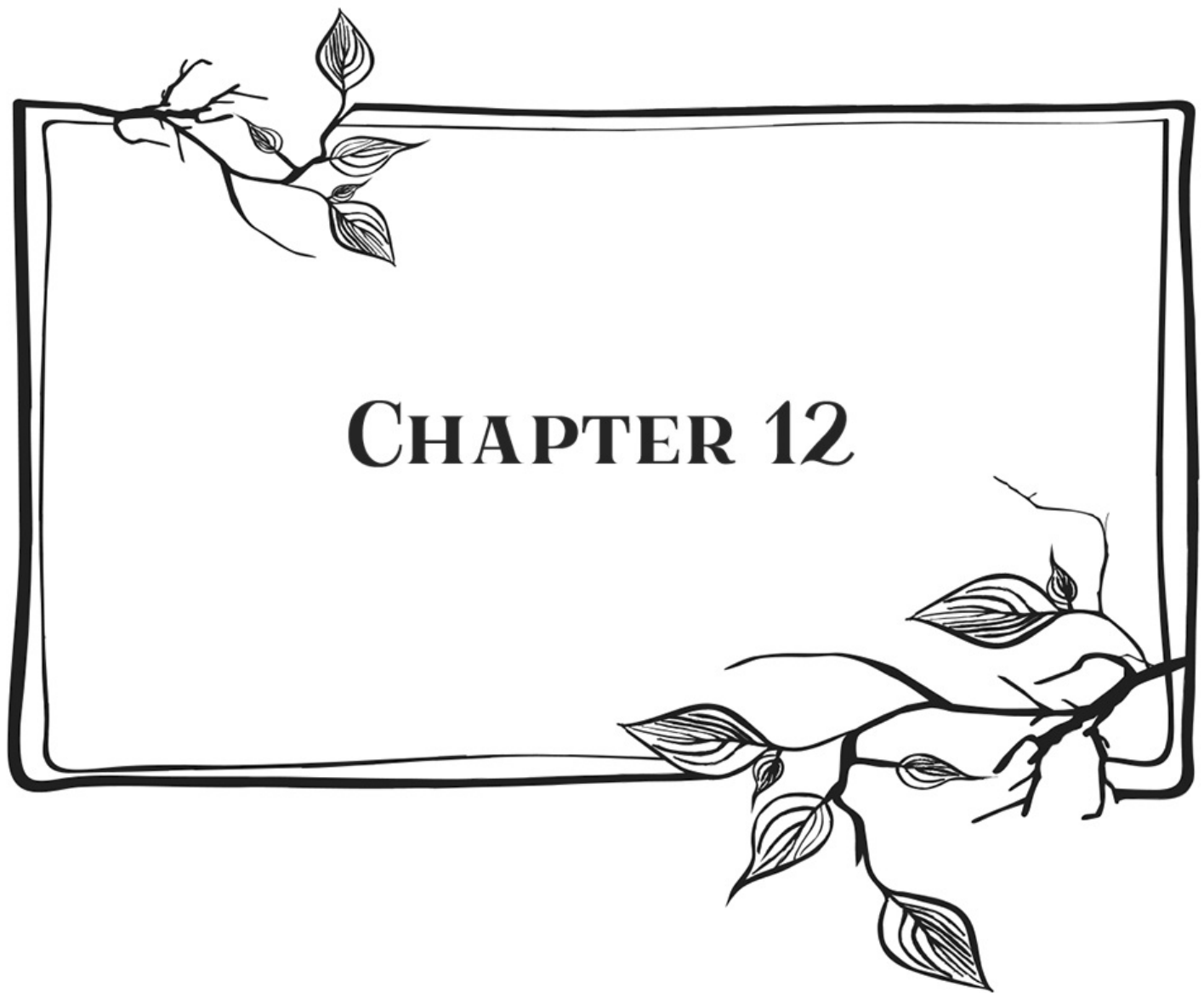
it off as if she hadn't seen anything strange. He wrote that she had told him that it was probably nothing. After the break was over, they went to class and, later on, back to their rooms.

The next day, the news broke that the very same night, Lillian had been stricken with an illness and died. He wanted to say something but then realised that it would have been pointless; although he was uncomfortable with what had transpired the day before, what had he actually witnessed? Two adults being warm and considerate to a student and watching her while she had her tea? It would have gone nowhere and only angered his parents, who would have seen it as a need for attention when all focus should be on his recently departed friend and her family.

As shocking the discovery of the diary and its very troubling content was, it wasn't as bad as what we were about to uncover. I had believed every word in the diary, and we had decided to do our own investigation on the school academic staff. As difficult as it was to find information about people, I was home, and therefore, I could use my tracker. I knew that anything out of the ordinary in their lives would have at least gotten a few sentences in the local paper, and I was right.

It turned out that one of the school teachers had lost all her children, and she had four, one after the other. They were not students at the school, but they did live next to the school. That their mother was one of the school academic staff made that discovery as sad and tragic as it was rather strange.

An image was starting to form in my head, an image where the people involved could have had something in common. I think, in a way, we all were starting to notice a pattern in the tragedies that had plagued the school. A very chilly and disturbing pattern where parents were directly involved in their offspring's deaths.



CHAPTER 12

A few days after that, we were back in school again. Half-term had been so fun it felt like it was only a weekend; being with my friends and being able to walk around London with William, holding hands and having fun, was amazing.

The next day after we arrived, when we woke up, we were told that we had been confined to our quarters and all classes had been cancelled for the day. As usual, rumours started flying in the dormitories, and I was sure the information was coming from the older children, whose rooms were on the first floor and had windows facing the school. From what we were hearing, the police were all over the building; apparently, a body had been found in the forest adjacent to the school.

After a while, we were allowed to leave our houses, but we were told that we were not allowed anywhere outside the school. Curiosity is a plague, because the road to the dining hall felt like forever. As soon as we got there, we saw the boys and ran towards them.

I was desperate for someone to tell me anything about what had happened, and my heart jumped when I saw William, but my joy didn't last long. Sitting at the same table was Pollard and her gang as usual. Hogan, Alex, Tristan and Hassan were there, as well as Scarlett, and I sat next to them, and we

found out from the boys about the killing. As horrible as the crime was, I couldn't help a sense of excitement at the thought that our investigation would be animated with such a tangible situation.

Luckily for us, the groundkeepers were expert gossips and were doing their job admirably. One of them had apparently ventured into the forest for some unknown reason and had stumbled onto the chopped-up body of an undressed woman.

Obviously not wanting to be upstaged by the death, Pollard started with a fake scared cry and jumped into William's arms, saying, "Oh my God! It's so horrible, so horrible."

I thought, *Really, Pollard, really? Into your ex's arms and in front of his girlfriend?* I just couldn't believe it.

William saw that I was staring at them. I really wanted to leave, but pride was one of my biggest sins, and it was gluing me to the spot. I could tolerate a lot of things, but being able to remain indifferent to that kind of obvious nonsense was beyond my strength, so I rolled my eyes. Obviously, Walker and Morgan saw me, but I couldn't have cared less. Hassan saw me too, and he burst out laughing, which attracted the attention of the mother of fake tears, Pollard.

Unsurprisingly, he told her, while still laughing, that I was rolling my eyes and that no one on the table was buying her damsel-in-distress act. I was frozen. All I knew was that Pollard was in William's arms, and it was driving me crazy.

The worst part was that I wasn't even mad at Pollard. I didn't like her, but it had nothing to do with her relationship with William. Actually, I had heard from her friends that she was a pretty loyal friend when you were part of her circle. The one I was really angry at was William. We were a couple; he had declared himself to me, so he should have pushed her away and tried to avoid upsetting me. I knew it was partly my fault. I had nothing to be jealous of; they were friends and I was beating myself up about my reaction to the situation, but I was only human. I really wanted to leave, but then someone touched Tristan on the shoulder.

It was William. Tristan smiled and switched places with him. I didn't know what to say. I was overwhelmed with emotions, so when he took my hand and pulled me towards him and hugged me, I just let go. I put my head on his chest and closed my eyes; then he kissed me on the forehead.

Love is a strange thing; it makes you crazy one second, and the next it sends you to heaven, and this was where I was, in heaven with the boy I loved. For some reason, Pollard, who was watching us, turned red, and it looked like she was about to lash out at us when Pam came in running.

I was surprised; she was extremely late, so late that I thought that she had decided to stay in bed because she had just gotten her period that day, but it turned out that wasn't it. She actually had new information for us. The best part came when Pam insisted that we followed her to another table because she did not want to talk in front of Pollard and her friends. They protested, but everyone knew Pam's temperament – she was very much a "cross me at your own risk" individual. I could have kissed her.

The second she said that the information she had was for Yan ears only, I froze. William wasn't a Yan, but he was part of us. More specifically, he was a part of me. Hassan, of course, couldn't have been more thrilled. If it had been December, he would have begged Odin to bring Pam a boat in recompense for that move. Anything that excluded William was good as far as he was concerned.

Tristan and Alex were getting up as well, but I saw Hogan's hesitation. He was in love with Scarlett, and spending time with her mattered a lot to him. Pam was a great girl, but she could be very automaton-like sometimes and was not a fan of a useless crowd. She had no intention of backing down, but luckily, Alex, being the happy-go-lucky person we all knew and loved, convinced his twin to allow Scarlett and William to follow us.

Pam turned towards me and raised her eyebrows at me. I knew that she was asking me to have the last say, so I told them that Scarlett and William were welcome to join but that the others would have to remain seated. A very shady move on my part, but I wasn't above passing up an opportunity to annoy Pollard and her gang.

William and Scarlett got up to join us, and we went to a table at the back of the dining room. I could sense William's anger at me and slowed down, giving him a chance to talk to me alone, and he took it. He grabbed my arm. At that point, I was seriously thinking of charging an arm tax because clearly that was his favourite move towards me every time he was upset with me.

He looked me straight in the eyes again and said, "Stop that. I am asking you to stop that. She is not with me any more, and you might not like her, but she is a good person and she deserves a chance."

I said, "Oh, really, Will? And why should I? Stop forcing me to make nice with her, and by the way, she is not my only problem. I want them all gone. I have no sympathy for any of them. I promised to be civil to them and I have been, but I do not want to be friends with them. Accept it or not, your choice. Either way, I am done arguing with you about it."

That was a cheap shot, but it felt amazing. I had finally given him a piece of my mind. I wanted the formerly fabulous, or whatever their nickname was at the moment, out of my life.

When we were done, we realised that we had been screaming at each other, and everyone near us had heard us. We were standing there in silence when Hassan said, "Ooh la la la la," and everyone started laughing. Hassan was known for his colourful vocabulary, and he used it every time a girl went off at a boy.

I felt bad for losing my composure with William and being humiliated by Hassan, the neighbourhood douchebag, as well, so I apologised. He accepted and followed me to Pam's table, where she told us what she had found out.

According to her, what had actually happened was that one of the groundkeepers would sometimes go into the forest with Arnold and meet with a friend of theirs who liked making his own wine. They would be in the woods, picking up some of the ingredients for his wine, and in return he would always carry a bottle for them.

The only catch was that they would have to look for him in the forest if they wanted to get their bottles, because he was a nomad. Our winemaker was a hermit, and after he had found every ingredient he needed for his brew, he would go back to one of his sheds and not be seen for a week or more.

The groundkeeper had apparently explained that since Arnold's disappearance, he was struggling to find Dunbar, the eremite, and was getting desperate when, just as he was about to turn around and go home, he saw something that looked like a foot. He was unsure if he should go towards it – he was not a man who liked to intrude – but what he liked even less was someone intruding in his life.

He decided that it was in his best interests to go and have a look in case he could see something valuable that he could take from what he thought was the drunken body of the missing Arnold. However, when he got closer, he realised that it wasn't Arnold drunk, sleeping it off. It wasn't some rough sleeper either. It was a pentagram facing down, made out of the body of a woman, with the head in the middle, replacing the head of the goat.

He screamed in fear and ran towards the closest road he could find. He started calling for help, grabbing anyone he could see and mumbling, "A body in the forest, a body in the forest."

Eventually, someone decided to have a look while a passer-by made the poor man sit and take some water. The man quickly came back. He was white and shaken; he could barely speak. All he could say was "Oh my God, oh my God."

A woman asked him if he had called the police, and all he could manage as a response was to nod yes.

After hearing Pam's story, I felt confined, and not knowing anything was driving me crazy, so I decided to sneak out. I knew that the boys, being the goody two shoes they always were, would try to stop me, except for Hogan and Hassan, of course. I wanted to let Hogan know about my idea, but he was sitting too far away from me, so I had no option but to leave him out of my plan.

I pinched Hassan, turned to him, smiled and said, "I need the loo. I'll be right back."

I hoped that it was enough of a clue for him to follow me discreetly, but I had forgotten that, as girls, we loved going to the loo together, and when I got up, so did Pam and Scarlett. I thought, *Darn, that's the last thing I need – the rule follower and the bible pusher.* Pam could be convinced to follow me – she was adventurous – but Scarlett would never agree to sneak out to have a look at a dead body. I decided to risk it; my curiosity was way too strong to resist.

We got to the lavatory, and I told the girls what my plan was. To my surprise, Scarlett was up for it. I guessed being religious did not mean that she was a wuss. Pam agreed to follow us, but I knew that she was only doing it to prevent me from doing something stupid. Hassan walked in and, without a word, went to the window and jumped out. That answered the question of how Hassan knew all the gossip from the girls' dormitories; simple, he sneaked in our part of the dormitories and used the ground-floor lavatory to go in and out unseen. We jumped as well and rushed straight into the forest.

Gateway Hill only had one community officer, Theresa Smith, and one constable, Nigel Anderson. Neither of them, I thought, had the expertise and the knowledge required to conduct an investigation of that sort. Yet they were the only ones around, plus some special constables from Gateway Hill, not exactly what I would call the *crème de la crème* of Surrey Police.

Interestingly enough, Constable Anderson seemed that day like someone who had seen more than his fair share of murder. I had never seen him so calm and composed. Officer Smith, however, looked nervous, very nervous actually. She was white as a sheet. It looked like she was struggling to hide her inner turmoil, probably provoked by what she had seen, but since she was still standing, we could only speculate that she was desperate to prove herself.

I got closer to the police cordon – it's amazing how being a teenager allows you to go places unnoticed and unheard. Clearly, Officer Smith was out of her depth, because she kept giving her much older colleague a “what the devil?” look. She kept asking her partner, “What do think we are going to find? What do you think we are going to find?”

That little exchange between the two representatives of the law made me think that Gateway Hill's finest officers had not been near the crime scene, even if everybody in the village already knew what was in the forest.

I could see how annoyed Constable Anderson was with his colleague. If I hadn't known better, I could have sworn that he was itching to slap her and was trying hard to remain calm. He just replied that good things happened to those who wait, and I thought, *How cheeky! Talk about being patronising.*

I had seen enough. We needed to get closer and see the body for ourselves, and we wouldn't be able to do that from where we were, so I called out to the group, and we went back to the school grounds. We came out behind the boys' quarters and followed the line where the school walls were the lowest, and climbed over.

We then rushed into the woods and finally got to the clearing and froze. We saw Officer Smith making the sign of the cross, and her colleague was seriously pale. We looked at each other, and I nodded, signalling to them that we were going in.

We started approaching carefully. We could clearly see the so-called forensic team, but when they removed their glasses and their white plastic hoods, we recognised the local medical team from Gateway Hill.

It was quite clear that the sign of the inverted pentagram had been done in advance with a spray can, then the body parts placed later. One of the people dressed in white plastic suits was saying that he thought that it must have been the work of either a deeply disturbed mind or a ritualistic, devil-worshipping killer.

Either way, it did not end well for that lady, I thought.

I then looked behind me and noticed that Scarlett and Hassan had disappeared. I turned towards Pam, and she opened her left palm and used the index and middle finger of her right hand to simulate legs

running, signalling to me that they had run away, so I turned around and stared at Hassan. Luckily for me, he turned around, and I pointed towards him and Scarlett and gave him the tangent sign. He rolled his eyes. Clearly, he was unhappy about it, but he followed through anyway.

I must say that seeing a dead corpse in real life was not what Pam and I had expected. Since coming to J.C., I had become a fan of horror movies and thrillers with gruesome death, and so had Pam, but what we saw was worse than anything we expected.

Suddenly I noticed that Constable Anderson was making his way to check on Officer Smith, who was vomiting nearby. She was sweating and shaking, which both Pam and I couldn't help but relate to. We wanted to vomit as well.

Constable Anderson helped her up and sent her back to the car to compose herself and have some water. He then got on his phone and explained to whoever he was talking to that he was worried a crime of this severity would require more than a two-person team to solve. The answer must have been negative, because he then said that although it wasn't technically his job, he would still do his best to find out what had really happened.

While I was spying on the corpse, Pam spied on the people in front of the school and followed Officer Smith to the car. From what she told me later, the officer came out of the forest and found a local Gateway Hill journalist bombarding everyone with questions, and after seeing the officer, she descended on her as soon as she saw her, like a zombie.

We knew that all of this was going to be all over the local gazette by the next morning and that the pressure to find out what had happened was on, which made our attempt to approach the body difficult, so we decided to create a diversion. While we were arguing about who would be the decoy and who would get to approach the body, we felt small stones being thrown at us. When we turned around, we saw Hogan, Alex, William and Tristan.

Tristan and Alex were trying hard to contain their hilarity, while William and Hogan looked furious. I knew why Hogan was angry – I had dragged his precious Scarlett here, and she must have run in crying – but I couldn't understand why William was angry. They approached and blatantly ignored me. William asked Pam to tell them what we had found, so she narrated everything to them, as well as our plan to approach the body.

In the end, we agreed that William would go in with his phone and record as much as he could, while we would attract the attention of the team around the body in the hope that they would chase us down, leaving the body unattended.

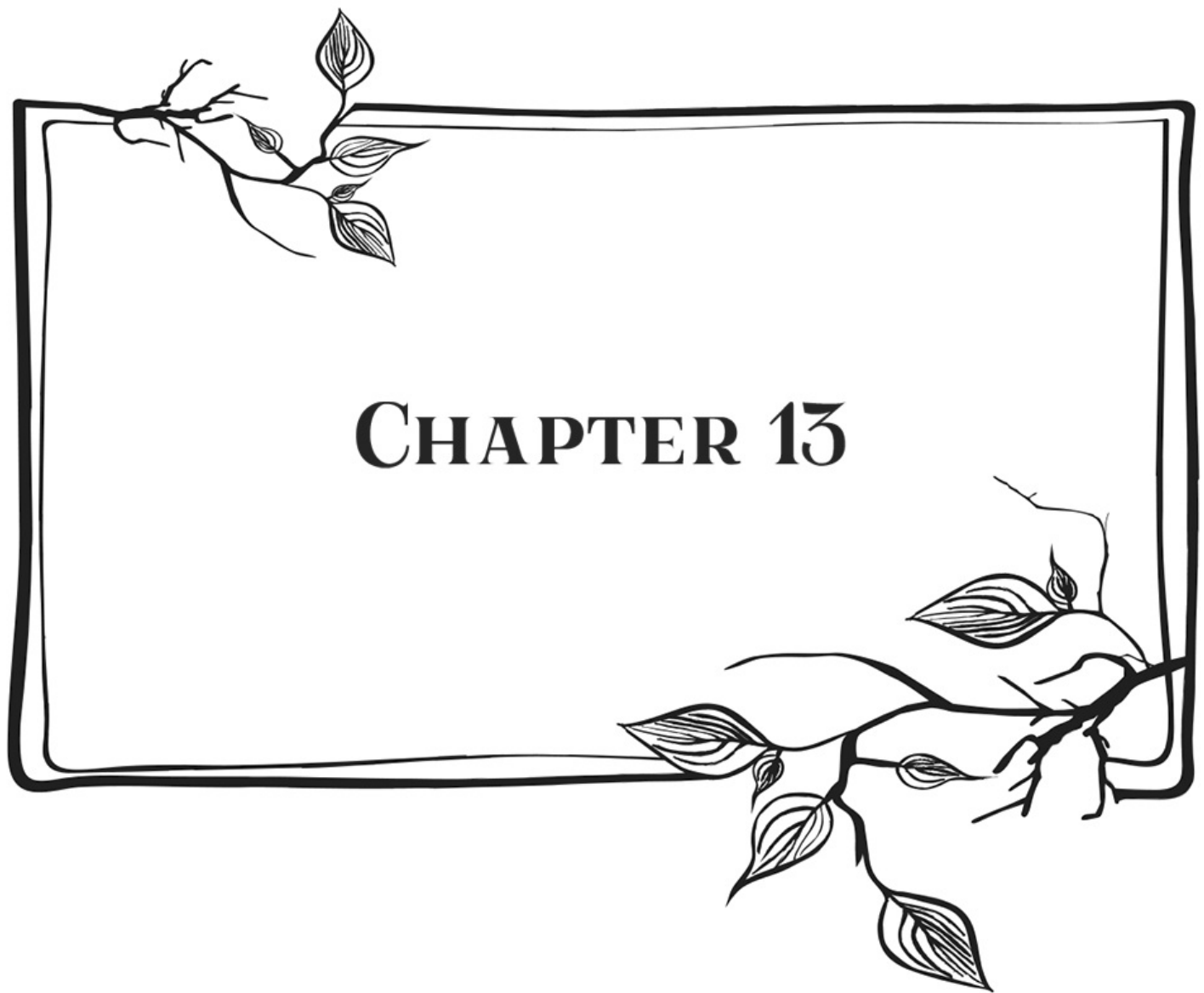
It worked. We started making noises, and they noticed us, so we spread out, running, and they followed us. While we were running, being chased around by adults, William took as many pictures as he could and, as soon as he was done, started running towards the school.

Realising that they had left the body unattended, the adults stopped chasing us and ran back to their previous position, allowing us to get back to school. I was thrilled. We had pictures and would probably

get into a lot of trouble for it, but it was worth it.

As soon as we got there, William was waiting for me. I thought, *Great, now it's my turn to be hammered*, and I was right. He was furious that I had not asked him to join us.

He was right, and I was sorry about it. I apologised and told him that he was my first boyfriend and I didn't really know how relationships worked. Luckily for me, he mellowed down, kissed me and hugged me. He simply asked me never to do anything without him. I promised to always include him. That answer seemed to satisfy him, so he grabbed my hand, and we went and joined the others to have a look at the pictures.



CHAPTER 13

The photos were horrifying. I thought that a body looked bad in movies, but in real life it looked even worse, not to mention that the smell in the forest had been horrendous. When we were children, Hassan had thrown my Bécassine doll in the sewer, and I had climbed down to retrieve it. At that time, I thought that I would never smell something that bad in my life again. I was wrong.

Unbeknown to us, Pollard had moved in behind us and seen the pictures. She screamed, and we turned around. At that point, I seriously thought that Gateway Hill was going to have a second dead body, because I fully intended to kill myself just to get away from that girl. It felt like she was always following us everywhere. Then she pointed to the picture and told us that she knew the victim.

Funny how feelings about someone can change drastically according to what you get out of them. She had been our biggest detractor, but everybody that did not like her immediately changed into those good old friends she never knew she had. Alex took her gently by the arm and gave her his seat right next to William and me.

I could see Scarlett and Delphine sitting at the table nearby with their new friends and giving me their legendary “you are shameless” look because for once I wasn’t complaining. I wasn’t going to be her

best friend, but if she had information I needed, I was willing to be as courteous as possible, so I chose to ignore their stares.

Pollard informed us that the victim was a local woman, and she knew her to have been residing not too far from our school. She also informed us that the victim was the town alcoholic and regularly verbally abused her husband and her neighbours. She had been arrested a few times for violence towards her husband and children, but also for starting fights while being inebriated. She was the ultimate local nuisance.

“And many will probably express joy and relief at the thought of her demise,” said Pollard.

Hassan, as usual, didn't pay any attention to Pollard's narrative. He was busy playing with the photos and making comments like “These photos are seriously gruesome, and by that, I mean *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*–level gruesome. This is top-level psycho movie.”

I was starting to wish that *he* was the woman in the picture. The victim had had her hair cut. The body parts were mimicking the pentagram. I saved the pictures, and by the time we realised, time had flown by and it was almost time to get back to our houses.

School was out for the day, so after we had been sent to our rooms, Scarlett invited Pollard to join us as well; she had been helpful, and I had promised the girls and William to give her a chance. *Maybe Will was right about her*, I thought.

Walker and Morgan wanted to follow us as well, but Pam and I refused. Scarlett, Delphine and Pollard started to plead with us, but I was adamant.

Walker and Morgan finally left after Pollard made them leave, and we were finally able to start to know more about each other. Actually, all I wanted was more information about what I called *my* victim, and I was hoping that Pollard could guide us towards a possible suspect.

As we got to know Pollard better, some people kept telling me that I had misjudged her. Apparently, she was the daughter of the former mayor of Guildford. She had been sent to boarding school by her mother when she was twelve to protect her from her very abusive father. After years of abuse, salvation had come for her mother from one of her father's multiple mistresses after she went to the police and accused him of kidnap and torture.

She claimed that after being tired of waiting for him to leave his wife, she had informed him of her decision to leave him. That was when he went crazy and repeatedly beat and tortured her during the course of three days until she was rescued by the postman.

That story had destroyed her father's life and career, but on the plus side, he was now the guest of Her Majesty in one of her most refined prisons. He also finally agreed to give Pollard's mother the divorce she had been asking for for years.

I was shocked but glad and relieved that her mother was finally free of that monster, but I had to admit that I had no sympathy for the mistress and her father. I had nothing but disgust for men and women who cheated on their partners or knowingly dated married people, and I thought that although

she had not deserved to be tortured, karma definitely made sure that she would think twice about dating a married man.

Pollard's bad attitude towards people who had a happy family life should have made more sense to me, but it didn't. The "Papa was mean to me, so I am mean to everybody" defence was getting old. Every psycho was always using it. So what if she was hurting? She had no right to lash out at strangers as a result.

Probably sensing that things were about to turn sour, Pollard spoke to me one-to-one. After the information she had provided, I thought that I could at least repay her by listening to her. She started by apologising about her behaviour towards the students, to which I replied that she should address those apologies to them, not me. Then she apologised for the way she had treated me.

Now I was interested because as far as I knew, all she had done was to try to force her way into my life, but it was starting to feel like there was more. She admitted that she had not liked Pam and me when we arrived, because of the attention we were receiving from everybody, and she particularly hated me because of the attention William was giving me.

She had decided to be friends with my friends just in order to pull them away from me and isolate me, but it hadn't worked. The last straw for her had been when I started dating William and destroyed her chances of ever being with him again.

She also admitted that she had a massive girl crush on me and that she had hated me for it as well. At that moment, the gossip was so juicy I almost asked her to give me a minute so I could go and spread it.

I decided to let bygones be bygones, and we hugged. Then she asked me if I could do the same with Walker and Morgan, and I flat out refused. My issues with those two were bigger than being bully enablers; I personally held a serious grudge against them. When I realised that they had never told Pollard what had happened between Pam, me and them, I enlightened her.

A few weeks after we had arrived in J.C., Pam and I had witnessed Walker and Morgan sneaking onto a bus to Guildford. At J.C., the students are allowed to go to Gateway Hill on a weekend, but only to Gateway Hill. The other towns were off limits without adult supervision. After seeing the girls do that a few times, Pam and I had decided to jump on a bus and pay Guildford a visit.

We did some shopping and were about to leave when we saw them get on another bus, so we followed, hoping to be taken to a nice market or yard sale, but that was not the case. We ended up in a place called Stoughton. It looked like a run-down area with nothing interesting to see, and we were about to leave when a group of thugs appeared and started taunting the girls.

They tried to move away from them, but the guys stopped them and started attempting to touch them. We had seen enough. There were six of them, and we didn't know if they were armed or not, but we called out to them and told them to stay away from the girls. They started to laugh at us. People across the street started to take an interest; they were all staring. I walked straight to the one who seemed to be the leader and told him to leave, and he said, "Or what?"

I smiled and said, "Take your group of human rejects and leave, or I'll break your nose."

He turned to his friends, who by now had abandoned Walker and Morgan and had started gravitating around Pam and me, and repeated to them what I had said. They started laughing, and he said, "Last chance, apologise like a good little girl, or get your nose busted."

I looked at Pam and she looked at me. We smiled at each other, and I said, "Nose it is."

He said, "All right, then," and he proceeded to attempt to punch me, but I was faster than him, and I dodged his punch. I then hit him, and all hell broke loose. We all started fighting. A guy on the other side of the street ran towards Pam and me, while others had their phones out to call the police.

But the entire time, Walker and Morgan were in each other's arms, screaming. They did not move; they didn't even attempt to help us. We could have been seriously hurt, but they clearly didn't care. They chose to stand there and watch us possibly get beaten to death.

After the last guy dropped to the floor, I walked towards them. I was furious and said, "Seriously? Seriously, you didn't come to help? Are you serious?"

They mumbled some meek apology, but I was so enraged that I punched Morgan in the face, and she ended up on the floor. I was going to do it to Walker too when Pam grabbed my hand and stopped me.

She told me to let it go, but she issued them a warning. She said, "Listen very carefully because I am not going to say this twice. Next time you are in trouble, we will let them kill you. From now on, consider us enemies. What you have done today, we will never forgive or forget. You and us, we are done forever."

We then left after thanking the only person who had come to our aid. We could hear the girls crying but we didn't care.

When I was done with my narration, Pollard was left gobsmacked. She stood there silent for a while, and I was just standing there with my arms crossed, ready for an argument.

She proceeded by saying, "It's not the same. You guys are Yans. They are not."

I was outraged. The fact that they weren't willing to lend us a hand proved that they were without honor and their standard of morality was low, and so was hers since she was defending them.

I wasted no time throwing that in her face, and she turned red, realising that her argument was not sound. Then I proceeded to remind her that Yan women, although we have supernatural powers, Morgan and Walker had no idea that we were Yans, and yet they deliberately left us to be beaten.

That, to us, was the highest level of evil. In my eyes, the girls were worse than their attackers, and I had no intention of ever forgiving them, let alone ever going to their defence, no matter how much they might need it.

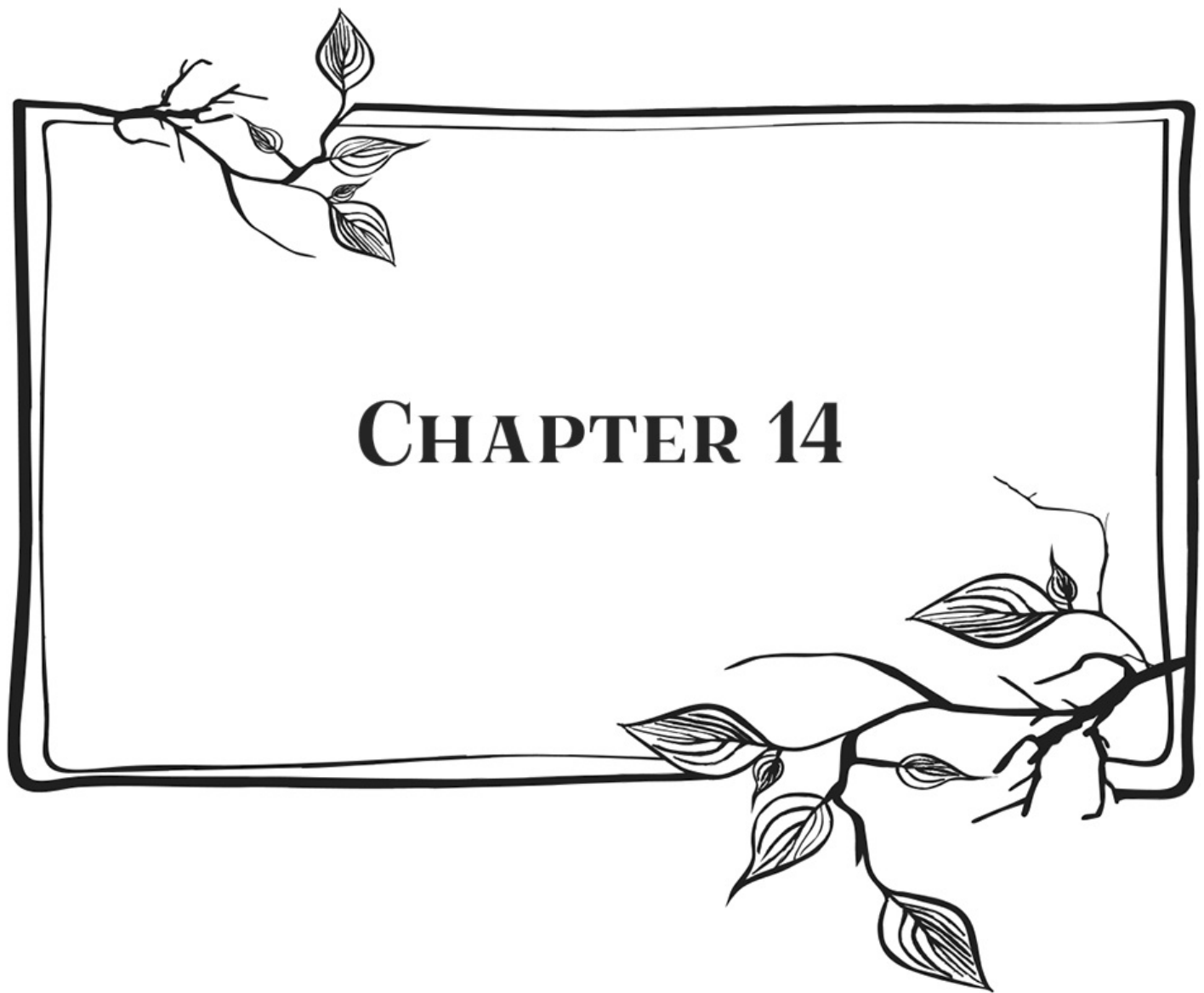
Pollard begged me to give her a moment with Pam, and she did the same thing. She apologised for her past behaviour and asked if Pam would agree to give her a chance. Pam agreed, but to my dismay, she also agreed to give Morgan and Walker a chance. I knew that Pam would try and persuade me to follow her lead, so I ran away and joined the other girls.

Over the next few days, I realised that Pollard and I also had a lot in common, like our love of *MasterChef Australia*. Everybody who knew me knew that I was a big fan of *MasterChef*, even though I couldn't cook, but Pollard not only loved the show, she was also taking culinary classes as well, and she also agreed that *MasterChef Australia* was the best *MasterChef* in the world, with the most talented contestants.

I also found out that the best food at the Mystery Pot Tavern was created by her culinary teacher. Most of the tavern menu was created during class by him, so she knew the recipe of my favourite dishes.

Her teacher was the one who had created my favourite starter, the divine avocado-wrapped prawns, my favourite main, the chicken J.C., and my favourite pudding, the J.C. cake, which was a cake made of pastry and filled with fennel crème madame. It was served as a big slice of puff pastry shaped like a slice of cake and was ridiculously beautiful.

The moment Pollard said that, I automatically turned into her biggest fan. Her dream was to move to Australia and enter the competition, and I was certain that she could give Reynold Poernomo a run for his money, or at least a good try.



CHAPTER 14

Although we were wondering why an adult had been killed this time and not a student, we put aside our investigation until the weekend, so as soon as the weekend came, Pam decided to get back to the scene in the forest. No matter how much we were trying to get into the mind of the murderer, we couldn't understand the reasoning behind such an act. Everyone except Scarlett understood the concept of killing – human beings had an infinite number of reasons behind killing – but the message the pentagram was sending was difficult to understand.

A few days later, the death of the local woman, named as Mrs Williams, had obviously become the sole topic in class and outside class for what seemed an eternity. Some of the students even claimed to have seen her ghost walking down the corridors, as if she would really bother with them instead of haunting her husband.

After much speculation about who was responsible for her death, it was announced in the newspapers that the husband had been arrested on suspicion of murder, then released on bail. Apparently, he had got tired of being abused and had retaliated. It sounded a bit far-fetched to me because if he really had had enough of being mistreated, he could have just left. Why stay and then kill his wife? It did not make any sense to me at all. Later on, it was revealed that he had an alibi and was cleared of all charges.

The story could have ended there – well, for us anyway – if we hadn't found chunks and chunks of hair at the KGB.

The KGB was an old and almost abandoned shed on school grounds. It was so well hidden that I had named it KGB after the Soviet Union security agency. The older J.C. students were known to hide in it for multiple reasons, but Pam, Scarlett, Delphine and I used it to practise our song for the Surrey's Got Talent, or SGT, competition. Every school in Surrey was allowed to send their five best talents to the competition, and the winners got not only great prizes but also a trophy for their school, but before getting to SGT, we needed to be among the five best in the J.C.'s Got Talent competition. I had not told the boys of our decision to compete. Pam, Delphine and Scarlett were fine with the boys finding out what we were up to, but I wasn't. Having grown up with Hassan and Hogan, I couldn't bear the thought of them making fun of me during rehearsals. They had done so when we were in primary school, and I was not prepared to relive that.

We had seen pictures of Mrs Williams, and the chunks of hair in the KGB were the same colour as hers. We all looked at each other. I knew what I was thinking was gruesome, and I was hoping that the others were thinking the same, but no one was talking. I could feel fear growing inside of them. It was obvious they were all reaching the same conclusion, and then Scarlett asked me whether I was going to say it or she should. I guess fear gave strength to Scarlett, because she was usually a lot more reserved than this. She was right, of course; someone had to say something, so I gave them my theory.

To me it was clear that Mrs Williams had either been held in the KGB or, even worse, been killed there. The thought of her murder happening where we were standing started to make its way through our minds. If we were scared before, now we were starting to get terrified. The reality was that if she was killed or attacked in the KGB, then had her body carried to the woods to mask the original crime scene, that could only bring forth one question no one wanted to ask: how did she end up on school property, and why? Was it linked to the missing pupils?

We left the KGB in a hurry and went to our beloved tree hang-out spot, which was J.C.'s very own yew tree. As soon as we were out of the shed, I felt a lightness inside me. I hadn't realised how heavy the air had become in the shed. The strange feeling of having someone other than my fellow students and friends in the KGB gave me the chills.

When we arrived at the yew tree, the boys were sitting around chatting with Abadi and Brown. Pam and I had decided to give Brown a chance. It was just too bad that he came with Abadi. Luckily, Abadi had to leave, and it gave us the opportunity to tell the others what had happened in the KGB. Their reaction was very unexpected for some of them; Alex and Brown wanted to go and see it for themselves.

William ran towards me and hugged me. He wanted to make sure that I was okay, just as Hogan did with Scarlett. Pollard, Morgan and Walker looked shocked and terrified, but the best reaction came from Hassan.

First he looked stunned. Then he burst out laughing, and slowly but surely, the thought of the school being the crime scene travelled to his brain, and terror was all that was left on his face. It was so good that I had to take a picture for future use.

After examining the KGB, William and Hogan, against Alex's and my strong objections, decided to inform the headmaster.

William and Hogan's position was that by remaining silent, we would make the tiny Gateway Hill police force's job even more difficult than it already was. Banking on the girls backing me up, I presented the issue to the group and lost because Scarlett gave her vote to Hogan.

There was no longer any question about Scarlett's feelings towards him. She had fallen for him, just as he had fallen for her too, and I was paying the price for their mutual attraction. In the end, Delphine decided that the only way to go about it was to send an anonymous letter to the headmaster, and we agreed.

Being the murder mystery buff that I was, I was prepared for the mission. I wore gloves while buying a new ream of printing paper and envelopes, I typed the letter so that no one would match my handwriting or the ink from my printer, and I was still wearing my gloves when I mailed it in the village. I guess watching *Columbo* had taught me a lot.

And then came the hard part: waiting for a reaction. The wait felt like an eternity; every day we would spy on the headmaster's office, and every day we were disappointed. One week passed, and we saw no constables in the school. Then a second week passed, and there was still no sign of a constable.

We could only deduce that the headmaster had not passed on the information we had given him. He had probably assumed that it was a joke. I then took it upon myself to send two new anonymous letters, one to Constable Anderson and the second one to the J.C. paper. It worked. Two days later, Officer Smith and Constable Anderson were in the school, and my letter was on the front page of the J.C. paper a few days after that. It said:

Dear sir,

Mrs Williams was murdered in a shed located inside the J. C. Maxwell school. I strongly advise you to have a look inside before the responsible parties clear it and wipe away all clues you might have found interesting.

A friend.

Very quickly the KGB was deemed a no-go zone for all, and police tape was everywhere, as well as groundkeepers, who were standing guard to ensure that no students were allowed in. Clearly, I was right about the identity of the hair's owner. They wouldn't have made that much fuss if the hair did not belong to Mrs Williams.

I expected them to fingerprint every student to separate our prints from the murderer, but Tristan reminded us that not only were our prints in the school archives, so they already had them, but also it did not seem like Gateway Hill police were even interested in solving this crime.

The school grounds were buzzing again; questions were flying from everybody's mouth. What had she been doing in the school? Had she been meeting someone? How had she got in? Why would the murderer have brought her into the school? Was the killer a member of the school board? Was it Arnold? Was that the reason he was missing? Was it one of the teachers? To be fair, I would have given anything for the killer to have been my art teacher.

And then came the sceptics. We should have expected it. They were speculating that we were just making up stories because we were bored of our lives and wanted to live the life of superheroes on TV and in our favourite comics, which was not far from the truth, except that we *had* found real evidence.

The next day, when we got up, besides the tape marking the scene of the crime still being visible, everything pretty much got back to normal. Exams were close by, so we spent most of our time studying, but not all of us.

To everyone's great surprise, a few days later the news announced that the victim's husband had passed away. He apparently committed suicide and had left a note admitting to the crime. That did not make any sense. Not only had his alibi been verified by the police, but he clearly did not care much for his wife, so why kill himself when he was finally going to start enjoying life? Or was he killed and his death disguised as a suicide? That last part would have made a world of sense.

In the end, including Arnold's disappearance, which we were now considering as a murder without a body, we were looking at three dead and no suspect. We were more than ever convinced that J.C. was ground zero for bad luck, or even worse, the headquarters of the gate between our world and hell. I had expected tension to be high in the school, and it was, but it was not because of the dead body.

It was almost time for JCGT, and everybody's nerves were shattered. Scarlett and Eugenie (Pollard had now become a friend, and we had started to call her Eugenie or Genie) had, with their parents' permission, moved in with one of Eugenie's mother's friends in the village, which gave Pam, Scarlett, Delphine and me a place to rehearse our song. I felt bad that Eugenie was not part of our singing group, but when we created the group, she had not been a friend yet.

She had created a group dance, however, with Walker and Morgan, and after watching them perform, I was pretty sure that they should have left Morgan out. She was a terrible dancer, and although Eugenie and Walker were not great, they could have made it to the top ten without two-left-feet Morgan.

The boys were also entering the competition, and since we had abandoned the KGB as a rehearsal location, they had taken it over. I was due to study, but curiosity got the better of me, and I went to spy on them. William, Hogan and Tristan were doing a song and a choreography to go with it.

The singing was average, but the dancing was amazing. It made me wish we had some choreography to go with our song as well, but when I watched Alex and Hassan perform after the other boys had

gone, that was the highlight of the year.

They had also decided to sing and dance, and it was so bad it was good. Alex was a very pretty boy with long hair, so he kept playing with it while singing. Maybe he thought it would add some panache to his performance, but it just made it worse. Alex also had that deep, manly voice that made him sound so sexy, but it was not a singing voice. When he sang, it sounded like someone was strangling him.

Hassan's voice, however, was pretty good. He was originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and they were great singers and great dancers. My grandfather was Cameroonian, and in Cameroon they said there wasn't anyone from the DRC that did not know how to sing. There was also another thing they said in Cameroon, which was that the people from DRC, although quite vain, had the worst sense of style in Africa.

Proving that some stereotypes were true, Hassan was a great singer, but his fashion sense had been borrowed from Jerry Lewis. He also had the bad habit of copying Alex in many things, including mannerisms, which meant that he was running his hand through his non-existent long hair, and the effect was hilarious. I was laughing so hard I fell on the floor and had to run and hide before they saw me.

Unfortunately, I did not see the time, and I was late to start my paper, which meant that when I called Eugenie to send the car over to pick me up, because I was spending the night in the village, it was already pretty late. I stayed and waited for the car at the library while writing my paper, but after we were asked to leave the library, the car was still not there.

I had to wait at the school gate, but there was no car coming for me. I was the only child left outside the south gate, besides a girl called Natalie whose car was always late. When my car finally came, I offered to have Natalie dropped at her house, but she declined. She said that she would rather wait; she was convinced that her car would be around shortly.

I advised her to wait inside the school instead of outside. It was windy and getting cold; I did not want her to be alone when it got dark, and she agreed. I watched her going in, and when the driver and I were reassured that she was inside the school, we left.

The next day, when I got to school, Natalie was waiting for me. She dragged me to a corner and told me the most important piece of information needed for my mother's investigation. She said that after getting inside the school, she had got a call from her father, asking her to meet him by the north entrance.

While she was on her way up, the place looked entirely deserted, but it wasn't. The headmaster was there, and she saw him going inside the yew tree. The tree was the biggest in the school, but still, the story was pretty out there. I believed her, though. I knew it sounded impossible, but I believed her. Now it was confirmed: J.C. was definitely ground zero for the anomaly. The tree was the portal we had been looking for, and the headmaster.

It worried me that the headmaster was so careless with his secret. Anyone could have seen him go inside that tree, and then I realised that Nathalie's father had been late, and instead of picking her up from the south entrance, which students used, she had been picked up by the north entrance, an entrance almost solely used by the school staff. To top it all, it had been late. The Headmaster would have expected all students to be in their dormitories, so he would have had no reason to fear being seen by anyone.

I went straight to Pam and told her what I had uncovered. We called my mother, but I was told that Mother had gone to join my father, so we had no choice but to continue watching the tree until we figured out how the portal worked.

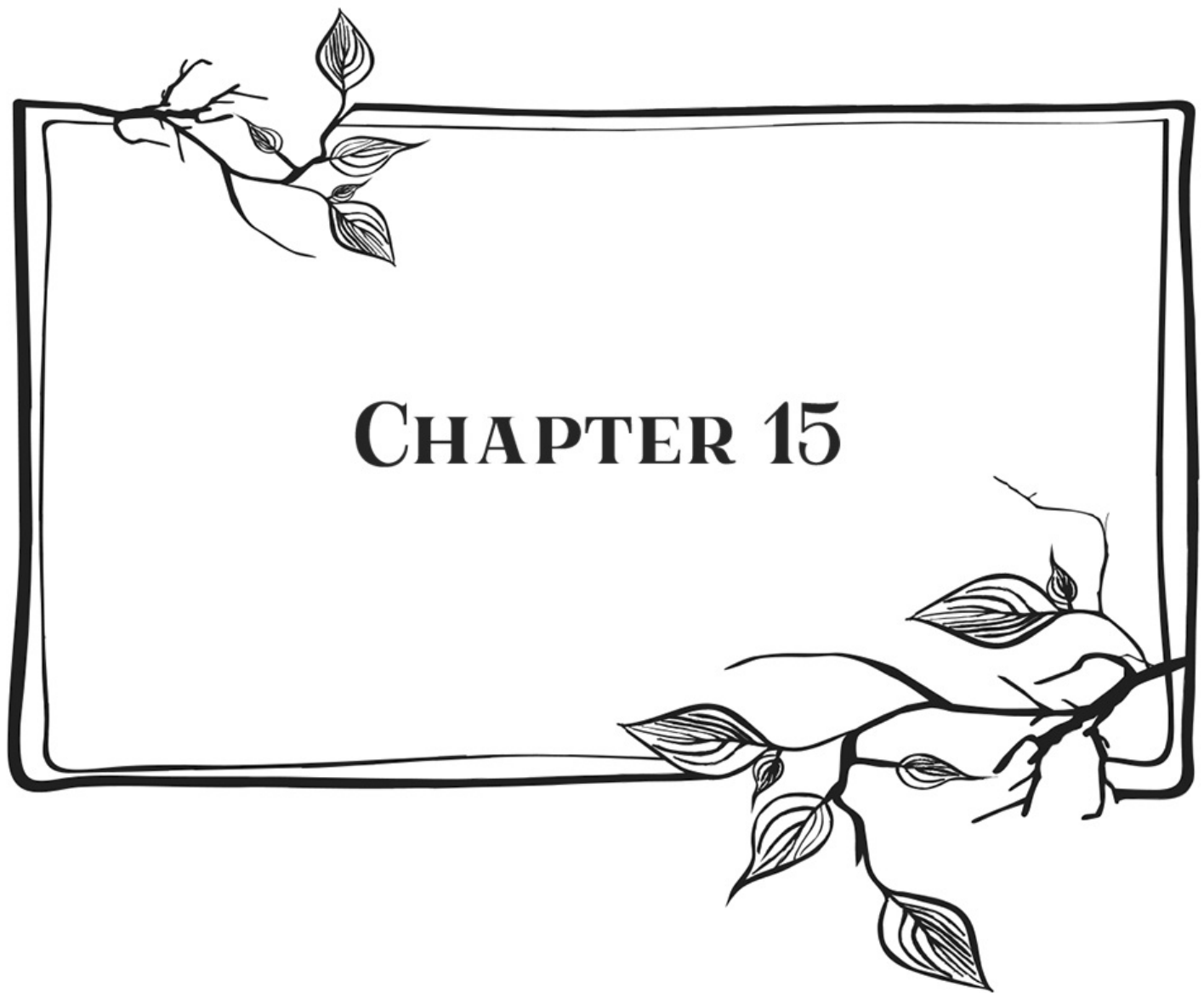
We were also more convinced than ever that the deaths of the students had a connection to the portal.

The next day, I called in a meeting at the KGB and told the others what had happened but kept my mother's investigation out of it. Something must have been in the water that day, because they believed me. It was now clear to us that the murderer was the headmaster, which explained why Mrs Williams was killed in the school.

We also had a theory as to why. We assumed that Mrs Williams had been drunk, managed somehow to get into the school, had seen the headmaster go inside the tree, and he had killed her to keep her silent. Chopping her body into pieces and placing her on a pentagram had been to confuse the police.

We were also certain that Arnold had suffered the same fate as Mrs Williams, and for the same reasons. Mr Williams must have figured out what had happened to his wife, threatened to go to the police – maybe he demanded money from the headmaster – and he lost his life as a result.

A man as evil as the headmaster was perfectly capable of disguising a murder as a suicide. Summer half-term holiday was coming up, so we pushed it forward till after we were back. Since Scarlett and Hogan had started dating, we thought that it would only be fair that we all stayed together in London during the last holiday.



CHAPTER 15

When we got back, we decided that we couldn't let the headmaster, Farage, get away, so we made a decision. We would take action and provoke a reaction from our headmaster. We pretended to be going to Scarlett and Eugenie's place but instead stayed in the school. The plan was simple; we wrote an anonymous letter. In the letter, we told him that we knew he was Arnold and the Williams's killer. We also added that we had evidence to prove it. We asked him to meet us, alone, by the yew tree at seven p.m. on Sunday.

The problem was getting to his office unnoticed and slipping the letter under his office door. We were thinking of bribing the caretaker so he would open the building door where the teachers' offices were, but instead we found the door unlocked, and the caretaker was nowhere to be seen.

So we went up the stairs, and when we got to his office, we found him kissing one of the teachers. We were shocked because we knew that the headmaster's wife was one of the art teachers at the school, and even better, I recognised the woman. It was my sister's teacher, the very married and so-unloved-by-all-her-students Mrs Dujardin. We weren't sure what to do, and seeing that the others hesitated, I took out my phone, snapped a few pictures, grabbed the note and, after adding a little message saying "My regards to Mrs Dujardin", put it under the door, and we ran away.

Scarlett and Eugenie lived close to the school, which was why we had chosen their place as the base of the operation, so we went to their house to regroup. It was still a long walk, and we were exhausted when we arrived, but we did not have much choice. In case we had been seen dropping the letter, it was in our best interests to be outside the school when the letter was found.

I had a lot to say about the so-called Mrs Dujardin. Besides being an adulterer and otherwise known as the Wicked Witch of the West, for one thing, Amelia told me that she was a horrible woman and that all the students hated her. The icing on the cake came from William, who told us that she used to have four children, but they had all died mysteriously.

Apparently, she went on holiday one day and came back alone with four death certificates. The police had found it suspicious, and there had been an investigation launched against her and her husband, even though he had not been with his family when the tragedy occurred, but they could not prove anything, so she had never been prosecuted. However, lack of evidence did not mean innocence.

The police had discovered that the children had been poisoned, but they never could find the poison or a motive for the couple to have wanted the children dead.

Mrs Dujardin was not rich, nor was the headmaster, so what possible gain could she get by selling her children's souls? It made no sense. We had already established that every single death at the school so far was for financial gain, except the last one. In that case, what were we missing?

It was getting a lot more bizarre, so I told Scarlett to go to Draycott Place for the weekend with Amelia and spend every second she had on Mahlam, the Yan equivalent of the internet. We needed to find out what was happening. She agreed and took Eugenie with her.

I told the boys to spend the weekend spying on Mrs Dujardin while I would be spying on Mr Farage, the headmaster. I forged my mother's signature and used her card to rent a cottage in the village for us in order for our investigation to be smoother, and it was; both Mrs Dujardin and Mr Farage lived in the village with their families. I was proud of myself. Who could have thought that moving into the village would be so convenient for our investigation?

William wasn't happy with the division of labour. We had decided to leave him in school because we thought that in the case of a fight, him being a Masani might put him in danger. He had not been through FIST long enough as far as I was concerned, but he refused.

Unfortunately, he was a caveman and considered his duty to be by my side in case I needed him. He insisted that he came with me, so I agreed. Actually, I was grateful, but I didn't want to tell him that. The truth was that I knew it would be so much easier if I had support. The headmaster was a terrifying man, and I didn't want to face him alone, but Yan women don't show fear, and I was always so afraid to show weakness, even in front of my closest friends.

In the meantime, our rendezvous with the headmaster was three days away. I knew that secretly none of my friends wanted to have that meeting, except for Pam, who couldn't wait to catch the headmaster,

who she had dubbed “the pig”. The truth was, except for Hassan, I didn’t want to make the boys do something that they didn’t want to do.

Mr Farage, we were convinced, was a cold-hearted killer, and it seemed that he was not playing about. After serious consideration, I was about to call the whole thing off when I had a stroke of genius. I remembered that from the girls’ corridor that led to the bathroom, one could actually see the yew tree, so I asked Delphine to spy on the tree for me. She was to remain at her post for at least thirty minutes and take pictures of anyone who showed up, even if it looked like they were near the tree by accident. The idea was to reconvene with her on Monday to discuss the results. We had decided that until we knew exactly what the situation was, we would not communicate by phone in case they were being tapped.

The first part of the plan was to follow Mr Farage around Gateway Hill over the weekend, but he surprised us. He went from his house to J.C., but we lost him as soon as he entered the school. Not knowing when he was going to leave meant that we had to wait for him to show his nose. It was incredibly boring, draining and difficult. To start with, just to make sure we were not discovered, we hid behind the trees opposite the north entrance. Then we realised that we had made a big mistake: we were using our bicycles, but he was motorised.

It did not take too long for us to realise that the only time a car could be followed by a bicycle was in the movies. By the time we counted to ten, he was gone, and we had no way of knowing where he had gone. We tried our luck in the village, and fortunately, we found him at the pub. We were so hungry that we ordered food at the same pub. Thank goodness I had had the sense to bring money. While we were eating, he got up and left. All we could do was watch him drive off.

We were too tired, so we decided to finish our meals and then cycle back to the school to check if he was there, and we found his car parked in the school car park. We were exhausted and furious at our own stupidity. For the first time, our young age and lack of experience had put us at a serious disadvantage and demonstrated to us the reason why MI6 did not have fifteen-year-old agents.

What a fiasco! We had lost him so many times that he could have killed the queen herself and we wouldn’t have known anything about it. We went home tired, disappointed and definitely defeated by our enemy, and decided to keep our little misadventure to ourselves. We just told the others when we met them that he had gone to the pub and back, but omitted the other more embarrassing details.

The girls were back by Sunday, and this time they had discovered plenty. Scarlett confirmed what Hogan’s uncle had told his sister – that there seemed to be a secret society with the ability to buy souls – but unlike what Giovanni Barth Croise thought, they were not making deals with demons and the devil.

Mahlam referenced a very powerful and dark race from a parallel universe who were being served by certain humans. They had been given an artefact that they used to simulate the death of some chosen people by the unknown entities in order for their spirits to be used as slaves on Earth or in their own universe. The so-called dead were dug up from their graves three days after burial and awoken. The

family members that had “sold” their loved ones were to make sure that the “dead” were buried and not cremated.

The humans serving them were part of a sect called the Famla. According to a book written by one former member of the Famla, the followers and practitioners of the Famla were divided into two groups. The ones who joined the sect for materialistic reasons, and the ones who sought supernatural powers.

The most frightening part of the sect activities was that human sacrifices were not strictly just meant to enrich and benefit people in this world. They also benefitted the people in the parallel world. The seekers of wealth or supernatural powers were asked to regularly offer human sacrifices. On the plus side, the sacrifice offerer had free range when it came to the method of killing. The Famla was an equal-opportunities killing-method group.

The most common method of killing used by the seekers of fortune was a poison that mimicked the appearance of death, only for the victim to be unburied and taken to work as a slave for the sect and its masters until the end of their natural life. Some people had testified that they had seen dead loved ones in other countries, only for the person to run away from them. They were apparently being put to work in factories, fields, even offices of businesses owned by members of the sect.

The seekers of supernatural powers, however, had a different way of handing over sacrifices. The sacrificed were offered to the entities alive, who in turn extracted their souls, which in turn would serve as slaves in the parallel world.

The aliens needed those souls because they were in desperate need of manpower in their own world in order to help them build machines powerful enough to be able to invade our world and escape from theirs, which was dying. They entered as souls because in this world, they couldn't enter in their human form.

Mahlam explained that the sect chose the location of their churches very carefully. The area where the church was planted usually meant that one member had a number of victims they had targeted in the area who they were planning to give as an offering to the sect. It was said that before an action made in the best interests of the sect took place, the members of the sect targeted one or more neighbourhoods.

When their studies were conclusive, they proceeded to the grid and the mystical encirclement of an area of about seven and a half miles. Once the members of the Famla had studied and mystically surrounded the area and detected their prey, they made a list of the names of their future victims and the order in which they would be executed. The list was called the red list, and it was written with a pen made of the canine tooth of the Famla's human founder. After a go-ahead from the Famla's secret headquarters, the attacks were launched.

The attacks by poison for the earthly slaves were said to be of vegetable origin and administered by a member of the victim's direct entourage seeking to join the sect by offering the victim as a symbol of a cooked dish. They would then proceed to unbury the body and wake it up by using an unnamed serum from their future masters.

The sect divided their human victims into three categories: first class, second class and third class. The first two were the most valuable.

The first group were people who shone by their high intelligence or their supernatural powers, such as Christians with the ability to speak in tongues, people with premonition powers, people with the gift of healing using the supernatural, like prayers, or people with charismatic gifts so strong that they could attract large groups to follow them, like cult leaders.

The second class consisted of people considered intelligent, but not geniuses. However, they were hardworking people who had come from nothing and ended up with hugely successful businesses, or people with average intelligence who, through hard work, had ended up top of their class.

The last group, called the third class, were just regular people with average intelligence.

Only the first two categories were of interest to the highest members of the sect. They were presented as special abilities that were of great necessity to the buyer. For example, politicians might want a highly intelligent person with the ability to spy on their opponents, or a highly trained assassin to dispose of a threat to their career.

Mahlam didn't give too much detail on how to trap a first-class human – we already knew how poison was used for numbers two and three – but he did give an example of how someone could join the sect or be tricked into giving someone as a human sacrifice after they had been offered a spot in the sect.

In the first case, the applicant himself sought ways and means to perform the sacrifice on his chosen victim. In the second case, the sect chose someone who had piqued their interest. It was said that these individuals were usually traders whose businesses had had difficulty taking off but had a lot of potential, potential that could be very beneficial to the sect. That person was befriended by a member of the sect who was in the same line of work and invited them to attend a business seminar where they might meet some investors willing to invest in their business. On arrival, the person was the object of all attention and a friendly welcome.

In order not to frighten the victims, they were introduced to investors who assured them of their interest, and they were granted a loan to boost their business. The strategy aimed to better integrate them into the sect without arousing their suspicions.

At a promised date, they were asked to specify their needs and granted their loan, but as soon as they really started to get a foot up the ladder of success, a chain of events made it impossible for the person to repay the loan on time. Generally, the person was granted an extension in cash and repayment duration, which allowed them to buy more goods.

Success was finally granted, and they were allowed to rise to a good level and integrate thoroughly into the organisation. However, since they had not been able to repay the loan on the agreed time, membership to the organisation was now required for the loan to be forgiven. At each meeting, organised at a specific time to symbolise the mysticism of the night, a member had to offer an animal

for sacrifice. Even if the attendees found it distasteful, they were now in no position to venture an opinion and accepted it as an eccentricity of their new club.

Eventually, the chosen was asked to bring a sacrifice with them at the next meeting. When they did, it was then that they found out the true meaning of the words *animal sacrifice*. It was then revealed to them that *an animal* referred to a brother, a sister, a child, a wife, a husband, a father or a mother – in short, a loved one. Then it was already too late to retreat. The person discovered that the money they had received was money for their loved one's soul.

Scarlett added that they had read about some places resisting the arrival and influence of the Famla. In some targeted areas, when a person was suspected to have been killed by a member of the sect, their loved ones had the body buried after nine days so that the body could not be used. This made it possible to unmask the sect members, who demanded that the body be buried as soon as possible.

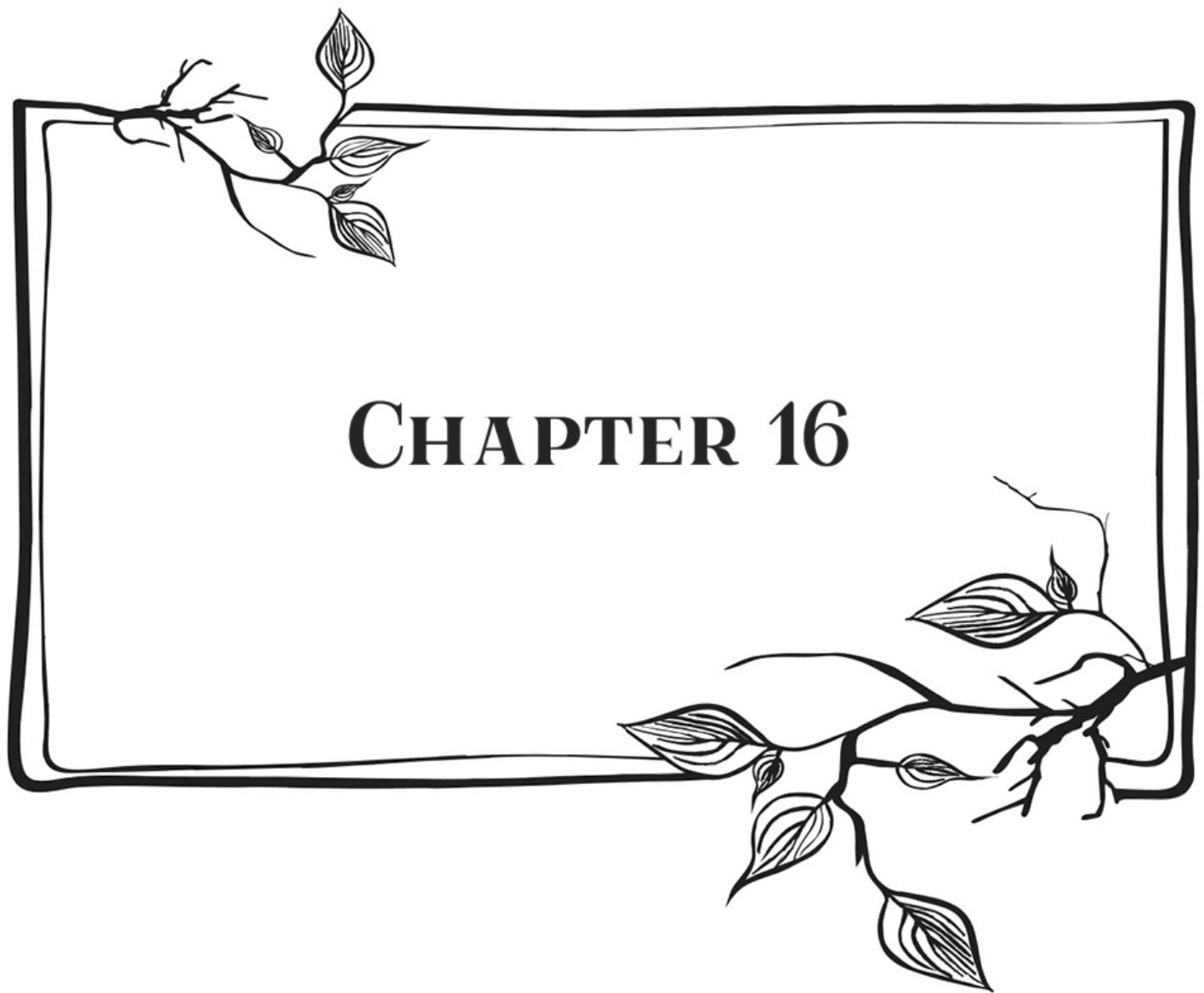
In the past, believing that the body was being resuscitated by the devil, the family of the targeted, to be sure that the body would not be used by the sect, buried it with the eyelids closed with needles and tears drawn on them, accompanied by a psalm from the Bible or any other religious text in the palm of their hands. It was believed that in doing so, it would fend off the devil and allow angels to accompany the soul to heaven.

We also found out about a most sinister practice of the sect, called the feast of wizards. This particular ceremony was reserved for a victim considered first class. The person making the offering had to mean a lot to that person, who usually was a member of their family or an ex-member of the sect for whom they shared strong feelings.

They bestowed on new members the obligation, when their turn came, to provide prey from their own family to other members. The book also added that the occult value of the member was much more important than their social position.

There were no demon deals; there was no pact with the devil either. My mother would be happy to know that we had identified the group connected to the aliens. I was also right about Mrs Williams and her husband; the display of the body in the forest was meant to mislead the authorities away from the guilty party's true intentions.

It was a lot to take in, but we did, and we now understood what Mrs Dujardin got out of her deal with the Famla; she probably received supernatural powers as well as Mr Farage. What their significant others knew about their affair, who knew? But one thing was now certain: Mrs Dujardin was part of the Famla, and she was very much a threat, and if we believed the stories written about the sect, she might have been a serial killer as well.



CHAPTER 16

The next day, the only thing occupying my mind was finding Delphine and discovering if the headmaster had come to the meeting we had set. The thought of dealing directly with cult members scared me a lot more than fighting demons. While brewing a dark cloud, I happened to spot Sonia Grant, a girl from Delphine's floor in the dormitories, and I ran towards her.

I asked her if she had seen Delphine. She looked very shocked by the question and froze. When I insisted, she said, "Wasn't she with you?"

Now I was the one with the puzzled look. Apparently, the night before, she had run into Delphine while coming back from the lavatory and noticed that Delphine seemed very excited. When she had asked her what was going on, Delphine had simply replied, "I'll tell you later. I need to speak to Diana first," and disappeared towards their study room.

I asked Grant if Delphine had a phone with her, and she replied yes.

I realised that the plan must have worked. Mr Farage had shown up to the meeting we had set, but I needed details. Clearly, Delphine was going to the study room for privacy, because no one usually sat in there after seven p.m., but I was baffled by the fact that she had not called me, and I wasn't sure if she had been found out or not. The study room was a small beige room filled with sofas of different colours

and a few low wooden tables filled with magazines and comic books. It was more a relaxation room than a study room.

I decided to check the study room just in case she had left her phone in there, or a message for me. I walked in and it was pretty dark. Someone had drawn all the thick, dark curtains. I found it quite strange because they were never drawn. I walked to the large windows, opened the curtains, turned around and saw on the wall, written in big, bold letters and what seemed to be blood, the words “Nice try”.

My eyes just glided down, following the red strip left by the running blood all the way to the floor, and underneath the message, to my horror, was the body of my Delphine.

I screamed and ran towards her. I slipped on her blood and struggled to get up while still screaming her name and crying, but I managed to get to her.

I could hear the door opening behind me and people screaming, but I didn't care. All I could see was Delphine's face, her skin so pale, her eyes wide open, and her neck open. It had been slit. I pulled her towards me and put my face in her hair. It was my fault. It was all my fault.

A crowd had formed behind me, and no one dared to touch me because I was now covered in blood. That's when I noticed Pam crying on Delphine as well and hugging her lower body. I extended my hand towards her and started to stroke her hair.

She looked up. She was also covered in blood and had tears all over her face. Then her eyes turned cold. For a second, I was worried that she was angry at me. Then suddenly she said, “Farage.”

She was right; we knew who was responsible. I could feel someone leaning towards me to grab me, and I pushed them away and started running. I had only one place in mind: my bedroom. In FIST lessons, even though they were at first given with a wooden sword, at the age of fourteen, girls lessons were given with real swords, so each of us had a few swords hidden in our rooms, and this was what I was going for.

Pam and I went in and each picked up a sword and headed for the headmaster's office. The message “Nice try” was him telling us that he had not fallen for our childish plan, and he had murdered our beloved friend as punishment. While we were running towards the school administration building with our swords in our hands, we must have looked like two crazy girls, and everyone moved away to let us pass.

We were about to climb the stairs when we saw him. He was coming towards us and was on his phone. He was staring at the ground when he stopped suddenly, raised his head, saw us and smiled. He then turned around, laughing, and started running towards the forest with us following him. We could hear some people screaming, “Stop, guys, stop!”

The voices sounded familiar, but I was in no mood to turn around. All I knew was that Farage was running away and we had to catch him.

As it turned out, he had no intention of running away to a never-never land far, far away at all. He had led us to the forest, where he clearly intended to fight us. As soon as we arrived, we saw standing

behind him Officer Smith and Constable Anderson. For some reason, I wasn't even surprised. I could see that Pam was, but I wasn't worried. Surprised or not, Pam was the best trained fighter in J.C.

Farage started to take his jacket off, walking from left to right, smiling at us. It made me even more angry, so I started to mimic him. It was not well received, because he tore off his shirt angrily, and he pointed a sword he had just picked up, and which was very conveniently lying at his feet, towards me. "Now, who's going to be first?"

Hmmm, I thought. He is pointing his sword towards me. Who else does he expect to respond? My shadow or one of my invisible guardian angels?

I turned to Pam and said, "I've got this."

She nodded, agreeing with me, and said, "In that case, the other two are mine."

I walked towards him, and he was handed another sword by Smith. I almost laughed at him. I was fifteen – not skinny, but I was still slim – and my body would not compare to a muscular man in his mid-thirties, so I couldn't wait to see his face when I brought him to his knees by using my powers.

I raised my hand and squeezed, but nothing happened. I was shocked. I didn't even have time to recover before there he was, swinging his sword at me. He missed. I could see Pam running towards Smith and Anderson, but I had my own opponent to deal with.

It took Pam probably five seconds to get Smith and Anderson on the ground. She cut Anderson across his stomach when he lashed at her, then sliced Smith's chest as she was coming towards her. She turned around at a kneeling Anderson and chopped off his head, then turned back to Smith and cut her head off too.

My case was a little bit different. Farage was strong and fast and a lot more difficult to defeat than expected. I was a trained fighter, which was keeping me alive so far, but I clearly needed more training to defeat him.

He eventually managed to get my sword to fly away and kicked me so hard I went flying too. At that second, I knew I was not fighting a Masani. He was something else, and he was no Yan. I ran towards my sword. I just had time to pick it up before Farage was over me, ready to decapitate me after ditching one of his swords. In doing so, he gave me an opening to cut off his left arm.

He screamed and fell to the floor, and by the time he realised it, Pam was already on top of him with her sword pointing at his neck.

We made him get up, and I picked up his sword just as I realised that we were alone. That was very strange. To start with, where were our friends? If I had heard that Hogan and William had been seen following Farage into the woods with swords, nothing, I mean absolutely nothing, would have prevented me from following them and helping or trying to stop them.

The second surprising thing was the reaction of the other students. It didn't matter how uninterested in things someone could be, there was no way some of them wouldn't have followed us to see what was going on, unless they had not been able to follow us.

When I voiced my concerns to Pam, she agreed, and tearing up Smith's and Anderson's clothes, we made a rope and tied Farage up. We were deciding on his wound, with Pam wanting us to bandage it and me against it. As far as I was concerned, he had killed a teenager without remorse and would have killed me too if he could have. I was more than prepared to let him bleed out, but Delphine's parents deserved the right to kill him themselves.

While we were debating, he started smiling, and before we knew it, we were flying across the field. By the time we got up, our man Farage had his arm glued back on.

That was when we knew, and it explained so much – Farage was a Hendu. Now all the shadows circulating the school and the village made perfect sense all of a sudden. They were at home and we had foolishly walked in.

Pam looked at me and I nodded yes. As a Yan, to use your power in the Masani world amounted to banishment from Yanar, but this case was different; we were facing an alien enemy. Pam raised her open palm. The ground rose as well. Then she swirled both arms, and the ground wrapped itself around Farage.

We looked at each other quite satisfied and smiled, but before we knew it, he had freed himself. He had somehow broken free from his temporary restraints. He looked at Pam and said, very satisfied with himself, "So, you are a Terrayan."

Terrayans were what we called Yans with the earth power. Terrayans could control anything that was related to soil, including in the water. They were basically Yanar's very own Mother Nature.

He then turned to me and said, "And you are an Airborn, judging by your pathetic attempt earlier to suffocate me."

He was right; I hadn't been trained in how to suffocate a Hendu, but I could always electrocute him or burn him, something he didn't know, since he thought that I was an Airborn, and clearly, he didn't know that Pam was a dual and possessed the fire power.

Having no intention of giving myself away to him, I turned to Pam and said, "Quit playing and tie him up already."

She tied him up with creepers and, to add insult to injury, gathered rocks and created his very own personal prison, and I created a wind of dirt around it for dramatic effect.

The whole ensemble was quite comical to us, and we started laughing at him. He started to wrestle, bit by bit at first, then more and more strongly, but couldn't break free. After watching him getting weaker and weaker, I couldn't help but tease him by adding, "Oh, come on now. Don't get discouraged. Haven't you heard of the saying 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try again'?"

Pam was just watching me. She shook her head and put her hands over her eyes, hiding her embarrassment and her blushing face.

He had the nerve to point out how quickly we had recovered from Delphine's death. He then proceeded to narrate step-by-step how they had enjoyed watching her die. We knew that he was trying

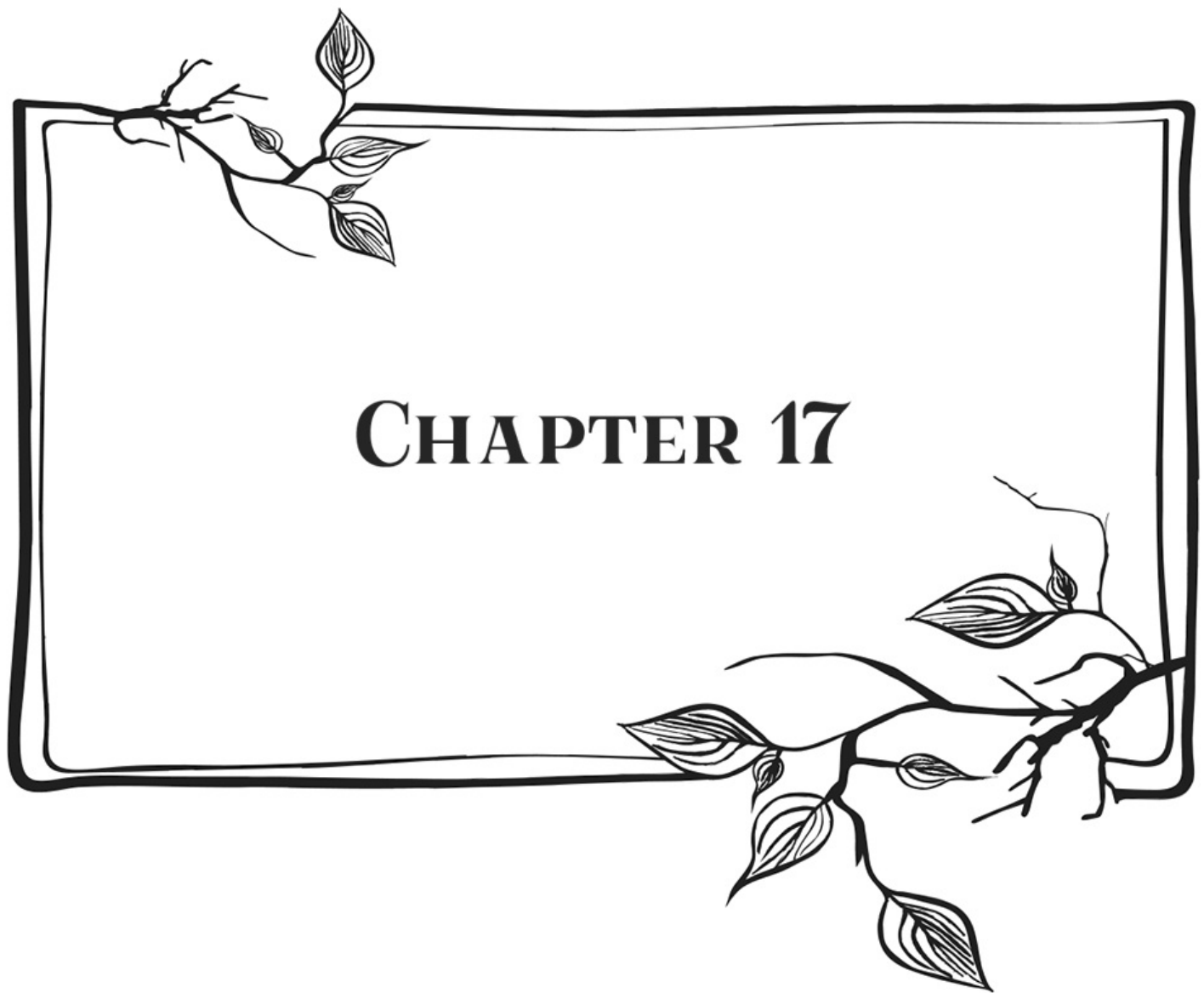
to get us to lose our cool, but all I heard was the term *we*. He was with someone. I thought that I knew that person well.

I looked at Pam and she asked, “*We?*”

I nodded and then she said, “Are you thinking what I am thinking?”

I nodded yes, so in one move, she stuffed his mouth with dirt and I floated him in the air, and we started walking back towards the school with Farage and his prison behind us. He was still wrestling, trying to get free, which was really starting to get annoying, while screaming, “Airborn, set me free! Airborn! Airborn, I’ll kill both of you, I will!”

We ignored him, and we were taking him towards the school when we heard screaming, lots of screaming, screams of fear and pain. It felt like everyone in the school was crying for their life.



CHAPTER 17

We started running towards J.C. When we finally got there, what we saw was a horror. The Yan students and older Masani students were fighting against the villagers. I must say I had a lot of respect for them. Clearly, Masanis were not as weak and gutless as I had thought. The Gateway Hill inhabitants had invaded the school and were trying to kill the students.

Pam and I looked at each other and both screamed, "The tree!"

They were here to open the portal. What we didn't know was why now, and why attack the students? Wouldn't it have been easier to come at night when no one was around?

From the way they were attacking the students, it was clear that we wouldn't get an opportunity to ask them any questions. They didn't seem to be in a talking mood either.

They were armed with knives and slashing at the students. Some pupils had barricaded themselves in the classrooms and the dormitories, and we could see the villagers pouring petrol on the buildings and trying to set them on fire.

Some of the villagers were dragging students along the ground while stabbing them. We could see blood everywhere. I turned around and saw Farage with a big smile on his face; he had known that there would be an attack on the school that day. He had planned it and was now enjoying the scene.

I was about to react when I heard an angry scream coming out of Pam's mouth. She pulled out her sword from its sheath and cut off his head. I expected to see it move, but it didn't, and then we knew – the way to kill them was to chop their heads off.

We released his body from its enclosure, left it where it was and joined the other students. I thought, *Enough with the protocol. Time for action.*

I levitated, and what I saw horrified me. There were a lot more people coming towards us. I called out to Pam and signalled for her to follow me towards the north school gates. While flying, we saw the horde coming towards us, and I knew that she would know exactly what to do.

When we got there, a body was on the floor. We turned him around, and I saw that it was Brown. His throat had been slit. We looked at each other. I couldn't believe it, but we didn't even have time to process what had happened. I just looked at her and said, "Put him in a safe place and seal the gate. We'll deal with that later."

I flew away and saw Tristan and my sister. I asked her to grab Mabel Parks Rosin, a Terrayan, and fly her to the south gate. Together they were to elevate a soil wall pronto. When I saw that she didn't understand why, I turned her head towards the south gate, and that's when she saw the swarm coming at us.

She flew away towards the south gate, and I landed in front of the boys. Our biggest problem was that there were only fifteen Yan students in the school, and in that group, only four were girls, and only two boys had inherited the fire power, so I had a few soldiers but barely enough captains to handle the problem.

Tristan and Alex were already wearing their Inferno uniforms, so I went to change quickly while they were handling the situation on the ground. I told them to send Amelia and Pam to their room to change as well because we had a serious fight coming our way. When I got back, most villagers in the school were already dead or too injured to get up.

The boys had done a brilliant job. The few villagers that remained were being finished off by enraged Masani students. I could see in William's eyes that he was not only furious but frightened. I needed to talk to him, but I didn't have the time. To understand the gravity of the situation, we grabbed our friends turn by turn, levitated with them and showed them what was coming.

They now knew what we were up against. We all knew that we needed to call for reinforcement, but before doing that, I needed to talk to the students. Not wanting to waste time, I sent Hogan, William and Alex to the north gate. They needed to know what had happened. When they got there, they saw Pam, who was waiting for me. She told them that Brown was dead and that she knew who had killed him.

They sent her to get changed and she left, but not before telling them that after elevating the wall, she had levitated to see how far the villager horde was and she had seen Abadi running towards Gateway Hill and not being attacked by the villagers. She could only conclude that he was part of the Famla and

had killed Brown when Brown had tried to stop him from melting the gate locks with acid in order to stop anyone shutting them closed and preventing the villagers entering and starting their slaughter.

Meanwhile, back at the main court, I levitated high enough for everyone to see me in order to talk to them. It was obvious by now to everyone that there were Yans in the school and that we were not a myth.

I should have had a meeting with the other Yans before speaking to the students, but the school was in chaos, so I gained some time by saying, "Listen, everybody! Obviously, we are now officially under attack by Gateway Hill. To answer the questions I know you have, let me save you some time. No, I do not know why they are attacking us. Yes, I am a Yan. I am actually an Omni, which makes me the senior warrior at this school, and yes, I do have a plan to take you home safely." That was a blatant lie. "But first I need some of you to help get the injured somewhere to be treated, and others to carry the dead where their parents can find them. I would like the A-level students to get together and organise those tasks, because the rest of us have a fight on our hands. The rest of Gateway Hill is at our gates, trying to get in. They want to kill us all, so anyone who wants to stay alive, follow the orders of the A-level students, then go and lock yourselves in your houses until help arrives. The rest of us will hold off the villagers until then. To the A-level students, I need all of you to take charge and organise the younger students, because we need your help."

They all stood there, staring at me. No one was saying any-thing. Alex and Tristan flew over and stood near me, and Alex said, "Er, I think they are in shock."

Tristan added, "Now what?"

I said to them, "Are you ready?"

They gave me a "ready for what?" look but still nodded yes, so I gathered energy in my hands, then raised my arms towards the sky, and while blasting lightning bolts from my hands, I screamed "NOW!" towards the students, and they started running towards the A-level students.

When I was done, Alex and Tristan looked at me, and they said, "What was that?"

I said, very cheekily, "Dramatic effect, and as you just saw, it worked brilliantly."

I could see Pam and the others just shaking their heads and putting their hands over their faces, so I came down and said, "We need to regroup and decide what we are going to do."

So we all decided to go to the academics lounge to have our meeting; that way we were sure we wouldn't encounter any students. We were about to leave when William said, "No offence to the Infernos, but you guys have changed and are clean. The rest of us are covered in blood."

This was when we realised that everyone was covered in dirt and blood, so we sent anyone who needed a change to their houses while we waited in the lounge for the academics. The academics lounge was a very large room made of leather sofas and armchairs in groups of four, with small wooden tables in the middle of each group. Dimmed lights made it look yellowish. The walls were decorated with portraits of previous academics and famous lecturers who had visited the school.

When we got to the academics' lounge, we realised that there were no staff in the room. We knew that all the adults had been killed first, but we had secretly hoped that a few had survived. That wasn't the case, however, and it made me extremely sad.

I was angry. We didn't even get the chance to mourn Delphine and Brown, and we didn't get a chance to mourn our teachers. As cold as it must have looked, breaking down was not an option.

After a while all the Yans were back, and so were William, Scarlett and Eugenie. She had made sure that Morgan and Walker were in their rooms, and to my surprise, Green and Haggerty were there.

I asked them what they were doing here, and they said that they would explain, but they asked everybody to sit down. Emily just jumped straight into their reason for being there and said, "Did you get our message?"

I thought, *What?*

And then she said, "We were the ones behind the bracelet logo. We have been watching you and the others ever since you got here."

Scott went on to explain that they were the product of unions between Hendus and Masanis. They were called the Hamaciel. This I did not expect. The revelation was shocking, but I was even more surprised when Scott asked that the only ones to listen to the rest of their narrative be children of the general council members, the war council and the council of interior affairs.

Yanar might be a meritocracy on paper, but in reality, it was ruled by the first ten families who had created our nation centuries ago. We were called the Ten, and they were my family, the Korsnings, who were descendants of the kingdom of Sweden, the Wus, who were descendants of the Chinese empire, the Opiopios, who were descendants of the Kingdom of Hawai'i, the Croises, who were descendants of the Greek Empire, the Altkaseis, who were descendants of the Inuit, the Boubas, who were descendants of the Fula in Africa, the Kirkpatricks, who were descendants of the Kingdom of Scotland, the MacConraois, who were descendants of the Kingdom of Munster, the Rafnkells, descendants of the Norse Greenlanders, and the Barths, descendants of the Roman Empire.

The war council was ruled by Hawaou Bouba, Elspeth MacConraoi, Caoimhe Kirkpatrick, Alva Korsning and Eva Wu, and the council of interior affairs was ruled by Freydis Rafnkell, Dinah Barth, Nuvua Altkasei, Juliana Croise and Aoife Kirkpatrick.

At J.C. we were limited with our council members' offspring, but we had a strong group of Yans. The youngest Yans in the school were Amelia and Mabel, only fourteen years old, but besides them we had Hassan, Hogan, Tristan, Alex, Pam, and me. All other Yans were preparing for their A-levels.

Scott and Emily told us that their kind had been rejected by the Hendu community because Hendus were not allowed to reproduce with humans, so mixed couples were forced to part ways with the Hendu community and forge their own. They had adapted well to the Masani world because they could easily blend in with the psychic world. They did not have other powers except for the gift of premonition, and the Yanar councils were aware of them. Delphine was an Hamaciel as well and had been spying on Mr

Farage not because she was suspicious of him – she already knew that he was a Hendu – but because someone from the Hendu royal family had arrived on Earth and was living in Gateway Hill.

Being psychics, they had the ability to sense when a person was a Hendu, and it got even stronger when it was a member of the royal family. The royal family was able to mask their energy from Hamaciels, but they could not mask the change in the aura surrounding a village or a neighbourhood of a large city. Hamaciels were also able to see the different colours of each place. They explained that the colours got darker and darker depending on the level of evil living in the area.

I thought, *Boy, I wonder what colour Coldharbour Lane is, since Eloise is living there.* Eloise was an enemy of mine who happened to live in one of the worst streets in London.

From what Scott and Emily said, Gateway Hill was very dark, with stripes of colour here and there that could only happen when a member of the Hendu royal family was living near a portal between our two worlds. The level of darkness and the intensity of the colours surrounding the school suggested that the portal was on the school property, but they had not been able to determine where.

They expected us to be well versed in the Hendu ins and outs, but we weren't, and the disappointment on their faces was obvious. Emily stood straight up and told us, "I have to admit, I expected you to be a lot smarter than you are."

I was shocked. We all started protesting, and we reminded her that we had the highest IQs in the school and probably the whole county, and she replied, "Yes, you are all very intelligent, but not streetwise and witty, and you need to be if you expect to defeat the royal in Gateway Hill."

At that moment, the only thing I was interested in defeating was her smug face. Hassan had had enough, got up and said, "Hey, if you came here to insult us, then out of my way. By the way, I am not the one believing in an imaginary entity. Aren't you supposed to be the bible pushers of the school, on top of being half alien?"

That brought a smile to my face. I almost kissed him. He was right; they were the school bible pushers, and they had the nerve to criticise us. Emily agreed that she had been a little bit blunt, but time was of the essence, as she put it. She asked Hassan to sit down and said that there was more for us to know.

She explained that the Hendus were divided into three categories. The Firas lived in the sky and could not take human form, so could only be seen as shadows. They were often mistaken as ghosts by humans. Then there were the Yahas, who lived on land. The Yahas were witches and warlocks, and their powers came from incantations and potions. And last but not least, the Yinas, who lived underwater and were a colony of mermaids.

We were pretty aware about the different branches of the Hendus, but it had mostly been taken by us to be an urban legend, so it turned out we had been wrong.

William then asked them if Freedom Church was their community cover, to which Emily replied no. It turned out the Hamaciel community had been reaching out to different religious communities, asking

them for help to warn the public in case of an invasion, but they had been met with suspicion, rejection, sometimes even attacked, and they had had to leave the areas where they had been living.

They eventually relocated in Hereford, where they joined Freedom Church, and after being part of the church for a while, they opened up to their pastor, and his response was simply “How can we help?”

The church has been part of the fight ever since. They have reached out to other churches and religious institutions, who had also joined the fight, and they were all prepared to lend a hand any time they were called upon.

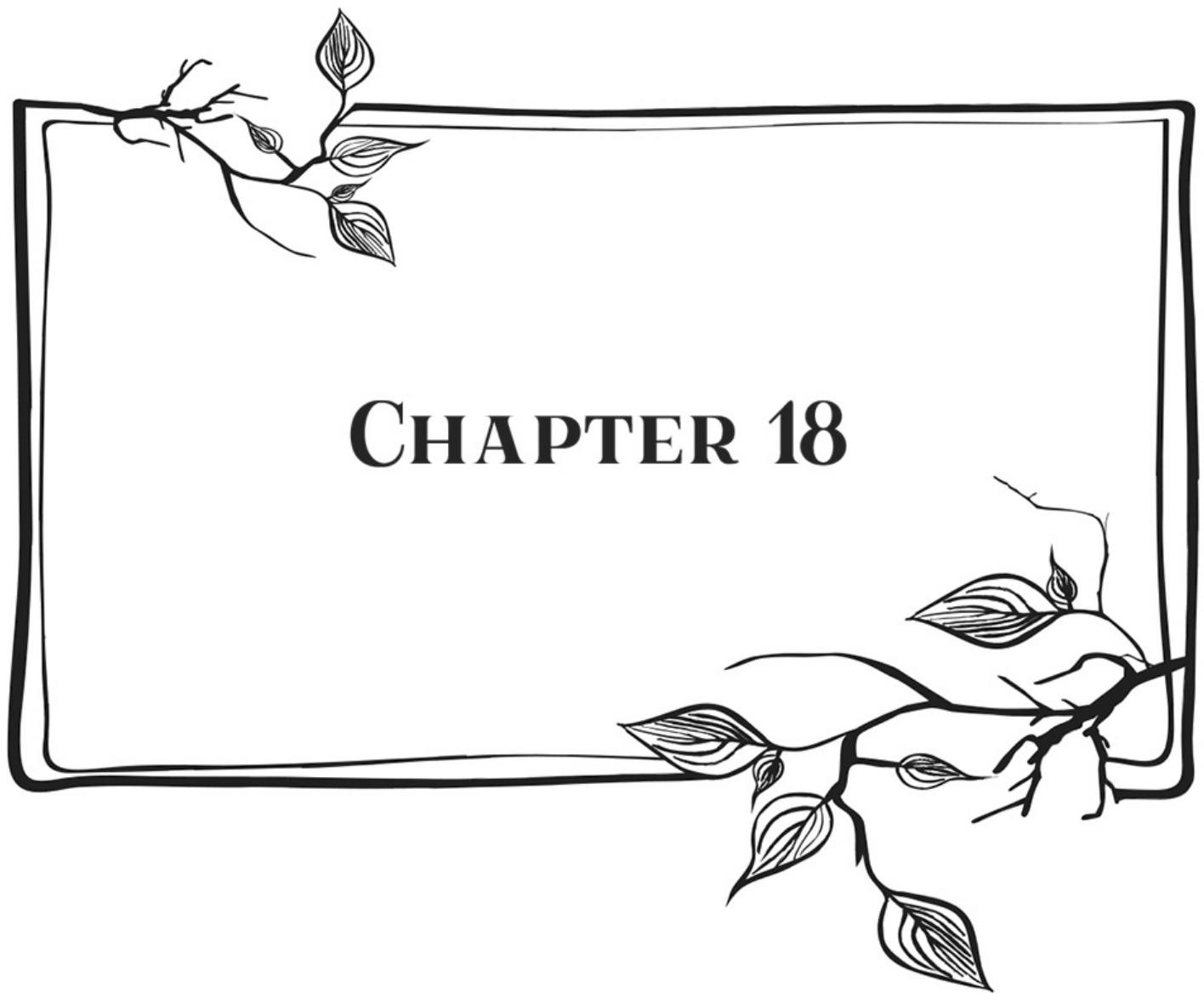
I needed to make them aware of what had happened when I had taken on a Hendu, so I got up and took Emily’s place and narrated my fight with Farage. I also added, “Farage almost beat me. The choke move does not work on Hendus, so when you are confronting them, do not attack as if you were facing a Masani. Use your full power. Do not hold back, or expect to end up in a body bag and on your way to Valhalla. Do I make myself clear?”

As usual, they were giggling, and then Hassan said, “Wait, wait, wait. To start with, I am not a Norse, and even if I was, there is no way I would ever agree to go to Valhalla. Who wants to die only to end up as another soldier in Odin’s army? Hell no.” And everyone started laughing.

I rolled my eyes and was about to scold him when Hogan added, “I agree. I’m on my way to the Elysian Fields and no-where else, sister.”

At that moment, I seriously considered blasting them with a lightning bolt, but then Tristan intervened and said, “Enough. If you can’t take it seriously, then I suggest you run back to Yanar pronto, because one way or another, we are about to get into the fight of our lives, and any insight from the only one who has faced a Hendu in combat is a must, so shut up and listen to her.”

The smile on my face was so big you would have thought that I was the Cheshire Cat. William protested. He had no intention of letting me fight with anyone and was proposing that we sit tight and wait for the police to arrive, and obvious-ly, Scott, Emily, Eugenie and Scarlett agreed with him, but the Yans disagreed and sided with me.



CHAPTER 18

We reminded our non-Yan friends that what had just happened was only the beginning and that J.C. would fall before the authorities arrived. We were in the middle of our heated argument when we started hearing gunshots. We ran outside to find out what was going on.

The courtyard was packed with students who had also heard the gunfire and had come out to check it out. As soon as the Masani students saw us, they started yelling, “What are you waiting for? Fly away and tell us what’s going on.”

I looked at Amelia, Pam, Tristan and Alex, and we nodded at each other and flew to take a peek. What we saw was unimaginable. A horde of people were attacking the police and the military. We didn’t know why the military was there, but it was, and it was being attacked.

The horde looked like zombies, with foamy drool coming out of their mouths and red eyes. They were dirty from top to bottom and holding gardening tools, and they were launching themselves at the police and the military. The last time I had seen something like this was in *Dawn of the Dead*.

I could only assume that they were not of sound mind, because the people they were launching at were not your regular, run-of-the-mill police officers; they were authorised firearms officers, and they

had soldiers with them, but that did not seem to faze the mob at all. I could see from far away that more military vehicles were coming. It looked like a war zone. These officers and soldiers had no idea what they were walking into, and they might have been massacred by now had they not been armed.

I turned to the others and said, “We have to help them.”

The look they gave me was of disbelief, but they could clearly see that Tristan, Pam and I were determined, and it was obvious that without our help it would be a slaughter, so they nodded yes. Then Amelia said, “What about the others? They are waiting for news from us, and if we don’t come back, they will be worried.”

I agreed, so I sent Amelia to go and relate to the others what was going on, and it was decided that the rest of us would be flying to lend a hand to the police, but then we saw a squadron of shadows coming towards us. They were far away, but we knew it was them, and we knew that they were in attack mode, because they had made themselves visible to the Masanis as well.

We heard a chant coming from the villagers. They started kneeling and chanting, “Fira, Fira, Fira, Fira.”

The soldiers and the officers really looked scared, so I turned to Pam and said, “Find Amelia and tell her to get Mabel, quick. Things just got serious. When you get back, I want a shield around these guys —” I pointed to the first group of soldiers and officers — “and those guys.” I pointed towards the military vehicles that had just arrived. “Quickly.”

She nodded and flew away. I turned back to the Firas. They looked like a dark sea coming at us. It reminded me of *The Evil Dead*, when Ash is relieved to see the sun out, and the demon darkened the sky to turn it into night-time again. The Firas were doing the exact same thing to us.

I sent Alex and Tristan to go and talk to the first group of Masani soldiers, while I went to the second group. They had come out of their trucks and were terrified to see me at first but calmed down when they realised that I was only a teenager.

I briefly explained who I was, but I made it clear to them that the Firas were coming to kill all of us and explained to them who they were up against. They revealed that they already knew about the invasion but that they had never faced the Firas before. I thought to myself, *You and me both, brothers and sisters.*

Their leader introduced himself as Major Paul McNamara. He was asking what I could possibly do for him when Amelia dropped Mabel near us and flew away. They looked puzzled, and he said, “What do you think you’re doing? What is that kid doing here?”

He seemed really angry, so I said with the same tone he took to talk to me, “That *kid*, as you put it, is here to protect you while my friends and I are fighting the Firas to save your lives, so a little bit of appreciation would go a long way.”

He said, “What? I forbid you to fight anyone. Pick up that child and leave right now.” Then he pulled out his weapon and told his team to get ready.

Clearly, talking to that man was a waste of my precious time, so I asked Mabel, “A *taskitty na?*” which meant “Are you ready?” And she said yes, so I flew over her and said, “Begin.”

Major McNamara, realising that I was doing something, screamed, “No, Diana! No! Come back here! No!”

His voice sounded panicked, but it was too late. Amelia and Mabel had erected a shield around the soldiers to protect them from the Firas. In order to do that, they had to kneel and concentrate their energy power to the ground, which erected a bubble-like energy shield around them. It took a lot of strength to maintain it for long, and Amelia and Mabel’s young age meant that they would not be able to hold the shield for long, so losing the battle was no option for us.

On the other side, the boys faced the same problem. They hovered over the police. The fight down there was over, and the officers were staring at them with disbelief. They eventually dived down to explain the situation to them, and as typical Masanis, they pointed their weapons at them.

They explained briefly who they were and showed them what was coming. They advised them to get back to their cars and protect themselves, but they did not do it. Luckily for them, the boys left Amelia to erect the shield while Pam was left outside the first bubble to fend off anyone trying to land. Then Tristan and Alex came and joined me to face the Firas.

They stood still and then made a face, as if trying to scare us was their intention. Then I had to admit it worked brilliantly; I was very close to running away.

We had decided to wait for them to attack us, so while we were waiting, Alex asked us, “Any last words?”

I turned to him and said, “I can’t believe that I’m going to miss the *Real Housewives of Atlanta* reunion.”

They burst out laughing, and their laugh was so contagious that I was laughing as well.

Then Alex turned to us and said, “Look, if I don’t make it, and you guys do, please tell my family that I love them, and tell Lani that I am crazy about her and that she is the love of my life.”

We turned towards him in disbelief.

“What?” said Tristan. “You and Lani together? Since when?”

He smiled and said, “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

Now I knew that I had to make it. That gossip was so juicy that not being able to spread it anywhere was almost illegal, but it looked like Tristan had an even juicier piece of gossip for us. He smiled and said, “Well, just in case I don’t make it, Mark and I broke up because I cheated on him. I kissed another guy.”

We mumbled, “What?”

Just then the Firas started to move towards us; we were close enough to them for us to feel their energy. The jig was up. We were about to fight.

“How do you want to do this?” the boys said.

“The two of you, make a sky-high wall of fire behind Pam. No one passes,” I said.

“What about you?” they asked.

“I’ll break their ranks with balls of energy. I’ll electrocute them. Make sure the fire does not go out, because it’s about to rain.”

I was about to leave when I turned to look at them once more and said, just in case, “Do not break ranks, no matter what. I’m serious.”

Alex made a move towards me and I stopped him.

“No matter what,” I added, and he pulled back.

I turned to Tristan and he nodded, and I flew higher, looked up at the sky and raised my arms up. As soon as the Firas saw me calling on Thor, they knew what I was about to do, and they attacked.

They started descending on us, and I noticed that they were not armed. I realised that they couldn’t hold solid instruments. The sky turned grey and thunder started. I knew Thor had heard me, and I dived into the middle of them by turning into a flaming human twister and started throwing balls of electricity at them.

I kept throwing energy balls at them and burning them, but there were just too many of them. It felt like forever, and they were not backing down, but my strength was diminishing, and so was the strength of my balls. Not long after that, they started suffocating me.

The feeling was unusual. It wasn’t like holding your breath. It felt like they were inside my body and were extracting any oxygen inside me. The pain was excruciating, and all I could think about was that I would never see William and my family again.

Then rage took over. I became so angry. I was not about to die that day, nor would I let any of my friends die either. I just burst into flame, and they started screaming in pain. They were burning. I turned towards the boys, and despite the wall of fire, I could see them, and I noticed that they were looking very worried.

Their wall of fire was holding, but I could see Alex making a move to come and help me, so I made the stop hand gesture. The wall of fire had to hold no matter what. I could see him struggling to obey me, but then I saw Tristan yelling something at him. He seemed to remind him what was at stake if he broke the wall.

My strength was even more diminished than I thought, because being flamed and flying among them and burning them did not last long. Before I knew it, my fire was so weak that the Firas were able to surround me and smother me. I started to scuffle desperately, and I heard the boys screaming, “Shield, Diana! Shield, please, Diana! Shield! Shield, please!”

It gave me courage, and so I did. I blasted an energy sphere around me to give me time to breathe and recover. The Firas were trying to penetrate the sphere, but they couldn’t. I knew that it wouldn’t hold for long; manoeuvring powers for a long time and at the same time takes a lot of training, and I hadn’t learned how to do either well yet.

But I wasn't the only one in trouble. Amelia and Mabel's shields were wearing off as well; they were getting tired. From the beginning of the fight, the Firas had divided themselves into four groups. One group dealt with me, another descended on Mabel's bubble, the third one descended on Amelia's bubble, and the last one tried to go through Tristan and Alex's wall.

Pam had joined the boys and had made a rock serpent that went through the wall of fire, turning it into lava and burning not only the Firas attacking the wall but the ones attacking the soldiers.

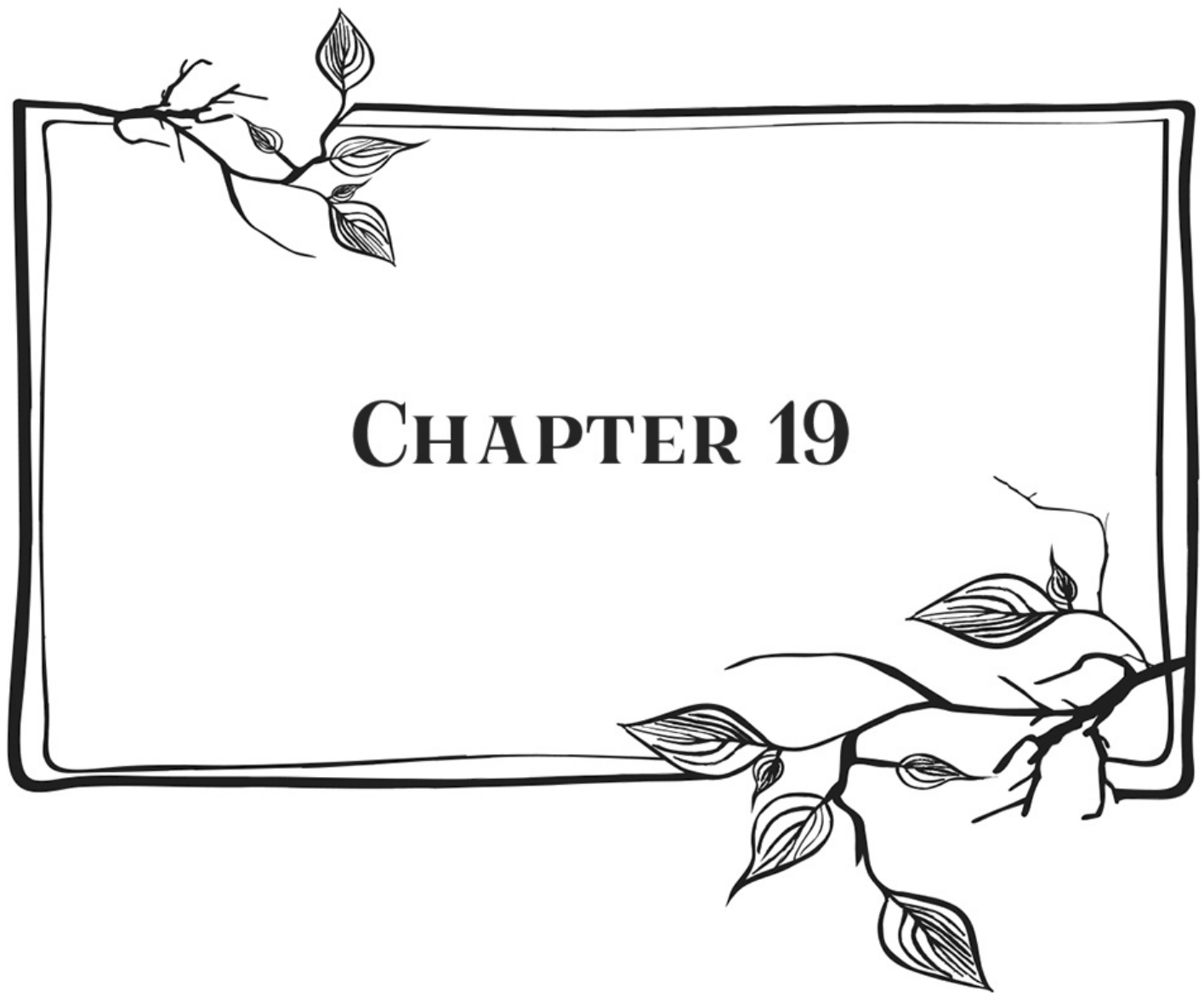
Amelia and Mabel were getting weaker. The weight of the Firas as well as the lava was getting to be too much, and the soldiers had to carry them because they couldn't kneel any longer. They were begging them to let go, promising that they would be okay, but the girls knew that if they did, then they would all die. Pam noticed that the girls were no longer supporting their own weight, and had stopped with the lava, but the Firas were still attacking the bubbles.

All seemed lost when suddenly we saw blazes of fire coming from all over. I had been descending slowly but surely, so I looked up, and that's when I saw them: a full squadron of Infernos and Airborns holding flaming swords, throwing blazes of fire, attacking the Firas. Help had finally arrived.

We almost cried with joy when we saw them. I was so tired that I fainted, but Alex and Tristan dropped the wall and caught me before I could reach the ground. Amelia and Mabel had fainted as well and were being carried by the soldiers.

Pam jumped on Alex, and they hugged while the Firas were being defeated. We came down, and Tristan helped me to sit on the floor because I was dizzy. The police and the soldiers had recovered their freedom of movement after the bubbles disappeared.

The squadron leader was coming down, and the boys realised that it was my cousin Jaimie Altkasei Bouba. They were so happy to see Jay that they screamed with joy and ran towards her. She asked what had happened, and after they had explained, she ran towards Amelia and Mabel, who had been placed next to me by the soldiers.



CHAPTER 19

The captain who had been carrying Amelia introduced himself as Captain Gerard O'Connor, and the major also introduced himself to Jay. In exchange, Jay introduced herself and informed them that she was the squadron leader. Then she introduced Flight Lieutenant Lucca Pelini Diallo. She was a Senegalese-Italian Airborn who had now also received the fire power since its appearance earlier within Yans carrying the fire gene, which made her a dual.

Also with them was Flying Officer Lulu Chikelu. It was obvious that they were surprised to see a squadron made entirely of women, and even more surprising was how young the squadron fighters were.

Jay was twenty-four, Lucca was twenty-three, and Lulu was twenty-six, but the squadron fighter ages ranged between sixteen and thirty. As older men, the major being forty-one and the captain being thirty-three, they had a bit of a problem dealing with younger officers who were essentially the same rank as them.

I realised that Jay was not supposed to be in Surrey with me. So why was she here? Jay was from the African side of the family and would never leave Africa unless it was to go to Yanar, so why was she in the UK?

We couldn't wait any more, so we asked her the reason for her presence here, and she said, "The council has recalled all off-land Yans. The Hendus have officially started the invasion of Earth, and we are to all return home immediately."

I didn't know what to say. I was shocked. If the council was worried enough to call us back, that only meant one thing: they were staying out of the fight and would allow the Masani world to be conquered. That also explained the military presence. They were aware of the invasion, and it was clear that the British government had decided to fight rather than come to an agreement with the Hendus.

Major McNamara and Captain O'Connor took the squadron officers aside and explained to them that the government had very little information about the Hendus and that they were flying blind. I overheard them, so I cut into their conversation, and I told them that at J.C., not only did we know a lot about the Hendus, but we had battled against them and knew their fighting style.

To my surprise, Jay's squadron already had all the information they needed from the war council, and all they wanted from us was to pack our belongings and make our way to Yanar.

I said, "Ohhhh," and the major, who I think hated children, told Jay, "These kids have saved our lives, and we are very grateful, but do you even know the feeling of watching these little girls giving their lives for us? My men almost had my head for it. They are trained to protect children, not be protected by them," he said. "Sorry, but Yan or no Yan, I want them all gone, and gone today," he added.

Jay smiled and said, "Do you know how old they are?"

They both sighed and said, "Go on, tell us."

So she said, "Diana, my cousin, is fifteen, and Amelia, my other cousin, is fourteen."

Captain O'Connor just shook his head no, and she added, "Major, Mabel, who shielded you, is also fourteen, and the two boys you forgot to thank are both sixteen."

The major turned red and apologised. He said, "Do not think that I forgot about them, but watching Mabel was just excruciating. Please send them home to their parents. We will personally visit them after we are done here, to thank them for their help."

She smiled and said, "I'll do my best."

Obviously, we were listening to them, but they clearly didn't care, and neither did we. As far as we were concerned, the major and the captain were just jealous of us, so we all agreed to ignore those ungrateful grumpy old bags and go back to J.C. We flew away with Pam and Mabel without saying goodbye and returned to school.

Soon after, Jay and her squadron arrived with the police and the soldiers. They found most students with their bags packed. I was not surprised to see that, but what surprised me was that the police had called for vans to pick up the students and take them home, or at least to the nearest train station.

While Amelia and I were filling Jay in with what had occurred in the school, ambulances were arriving as well, and I breathed a sigh of relief; they could take away the others, especially the dead, and clear the school of the young ones and the wounded.

When the officers and the soldiers came out of their cars, the other students, who were still in their houses and scared for their lives, realised that they not only had a large number of armed officers but also a large number of soldiers who had come to help. The students must have been a very scary picture, because the officers jumped when everyone, with their bags in hand, started coming out of the buildings, running towards them, crying, screaming and talking at the same time.

They were jumping on the officers and the soldiers. Each had a story to tell, and they were so relieved to see the authorities and adults around.

I had to admit we were hurt, really hurt. These guys had done nothing to protect them. Without us, the school would be a graveyard, and the police and the military would be on their way to Fólkvangr.

Incidentally, none of them came and thanked us. We just stood there looking at them, as if it was a movie, and then I knew. It was time to go home. I would let the others know that, after we had guaranteed that our friends were safe. The rest of the school, as far as I was concerned, could go to hell. That would teach them that when people put their lives in danger to protect and save them, those warriors deserve at least a thank you.

The police put the students from key stages three and four on buses, as well as the injured students, and sent them to Guildford under escort, so we were left with the sixth-form students only. They also had sent orders for the bodies to be removed, and I got to watch Delphine as she was making her last journey home.

We finally found our friends at the boys' house living room, where some of them had been waiting for us to explain what had happened to Delphine. They had already been filled in by Pam about Brown's death, so I started to explain how some of us had sent Delphine to spy on Mr Farage, not knowing that she already had her own investigation under way. I had come to the conclusion that, had I known that she was already investigating him, I would not have sent the anonymous letter to him and asked her to watch his response to the letter. My fear was that she had been killed because the letter confirmed suspicions he must have had regarding her spying on him.

As soon as I said that, William started yelling at me. He was already furious about what had happened on the battlefield, because Alex had been foolish enough to tell the boys in detail how the fight had gone. I had never seen him so angry before. He was furious at me. His face had turned red. He didn't seem to notice that everyone was staring at us.

He started ranting that it was typical of me to make rash decisions that in turn ended up affecting everyone who loved me and cared about me. He was right, of course. William's sense of responsibility was very uncommon for someone his age, and it did get on our nerves sometimes, but more than once, it had also saved us from a lot of trouble.

But I was too hurt to tell him that he was right, and felt too guilty about what I had done to face up to my mistake, so I just sat there with a blank look on my face. I could hear sounds around me. I was numb. It was as if I had left my body and was listening to a conversation covered by static.

When the boy you love looks at you as if you are something horrid, something they wished they had never met, it makes you feel small and unwanted. I could see his beautiful lips moving, but instead of a smile was an angry tremble.

Then suddenly my heart started aching, as if someone was slashing it over and over. Tears started to run down my cheeks. I wanted to talk, but my lips were trembling too much. I could see blurs around me, but I couldn't make out their faces. The only face I could see clearly was William's, and it looked like it was filled with hate towards me.

My surroundings started to spin, and I couldn't see or hear any more. All I knew was that I had to get out of that room, so I dashed out and ran as fast as I could, and before I knew it, I was flying. I flew as far as I could until it started raining, and then I landed on a meadow. I sat on the grass and started crying over and over again. First the authorities, then the students, and now my own boyfriend. I had really had enough. I wanted to go back to Yanara. I wanted to be home.

While I was busy with my broken heart, my friends sent Alex after me. I was told later that William had wanted to come too, but Alex was too inexperienced with his powers not to burn him while they were flying. However, he promised not to stop looking for me until dusk.

When the others returned to the living room, Emily informed them that she had found Mr Farage's diary in his office. In it was a detailed explanation on how they had killed a student just after an interaction with me.

Apparently, the student, who was a member of the Famla, had been sent by Farage to spy on Delphine, and that student had come to suspect that Delphine had discovered the identity of the royal and had taken a photo as evidence. She had been asked to go through Delphine's belongings and found a few exchanges between me and Delphine, and a few photos that she had sent me.

Apparently, the photos scared them enough that they instructed the student to retrieve all the photos that I had received, including the one with the royal in it, and dispose of Delphine. The student was unsuccessful in both cases, so they had no choice but to kill Delphine themselves, but not before eliminating the student. Farage had decided she had failed the Famla, when she went home for summer half-term, by sending a killer fly he had used previously to poison her.

Farage's actions were a direct result of our naivety. We should have been more careful, because they clearly had started to suspect us, and despite that fact, we had still acted without thinking. We should have been more suspicious of our peers. If we had considered the possibility that some of our peers could have been members of the Famla, we could have prevented anyone being killed, by not raising Farage's suspicions.

The journal did not mention the fact that we were Yans, at least not until we got back from summer half-term, which meant that Delphine's photos were what really made them very nervous. Due to our age, we shouldn't have been a threat to them, and yet we had been under constant surveillance by them, and now we were dropping like flies.

I finally went back to J.C. I saw Alex approaching; he had been searching for me and was relieved to see me in one piece. He told me that the others were in conference with Emily. He could see that I was feeling beaten. He hugged me and said, “Not too long. By tonight we will be gone, but for now someone is very anxious to see you.”

When we got to the house, I still hadn’t spoken to William, and I was worried about how the situation would unfold. Luckily, everybody was hungry, so we went to the kitchen and raided it. It turned out there was a lot of food, and I was in heaven, enjoying my sandwich, when a shadow started hovering over me. I didn’t want to look up, but I had to, so I did, and there was William, standing, staring at me.

My treacherous friends moved away and gave us the space I had never asked for. William was staring at me, and I did not know how to react. He gave me his hand and said, “Come with me, please.”

There was no way I was going to say no. I took his hand and we started walking. He asked me where we could go and talk in private, and I took him to my room. As soon as I had closed the door, he held me in his arms and apologised.

“I am so sorry,” he said, putting his forehead on mine. “I am so, so sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I love you so much. If only you knew how much I love you.” He sighed and said, “You are great, but at the same time, I want you to think of the consequences of your actions. You were right about Farage, and I agree with you that knowing more about him was important, but at the same time, if you had asked for my opinion before involving Delphine, who was clearly not equipped to defend herself against a bigger and stronger adversary, I would have advised against it. I just want you to remember that I am your boyfriend. We are a team, so please trust me a little and come to me before making any dangerous moves.”

He was right; I should have gotten a second opinion. I agreed with him, and I apologised to him for my tantrum. He then finally kissed me, and I was in heaven once again when the door swung open, hitting us in the process.

It was Jay coming towards us. She said, “Well, it looks like the Famla, on top of being a Hindu-run murderous group and a cult, is now in the kidnapping business.”

“What are you on about?” I said.

“The Famla has taken all six hundred and fifty inhabitants of Thursley village as hostages. Their message was clear: safe passage for us as long as we vacate the school immediately, leaving all dead bodies behind and allowing them to keep twenty-four students of our choice – wounded or not, it does not matter. For full disclosure, they made it clear that the twenty-four students who remain will be sacrificed, so there will be no need for any rescue attempt.” Thursley village was the closest village to Gateway Hill.

William and I were shocked. We didn’t know what to say, and then Jay said, “Well, Di, you are the senior Omni of this school; the decision is yours.”

As per Yan law, any member of the Ten who was posted anywhere was automatically given the role of leader of the area. Because there were so few members of the Ten in J.C., the role of leader fell to me because I was an Omni, so I outranked all of them.

I turned to William and said, “I don’t want to make the decision alone. We need to talk to the others. What do you think?”

He touched my cheek, put his forehead on mine and said, “Yes, I agree, and thanks for including me. I love you.” And he kissed me.

We went to the boys’ living room and luckily all our friends were there. We told them what had happened, while Jay went to inform the authorities of this new development. I told them about the Famla’s proposal and asked for their opinion. As much as I wanted to send the Famla to hell, the truth was that twenty-four people versus six hundred and fifty was a no-brainer.

It went as well as I’d expected. The Yans wanted to give the Famla the twenty-four students, and the Masanis were dead set against it. I couldn’t understand their logic. They wanted to keep the twenty-four students, then charge in and rescue the six hundred and fifty hostages.

Clearly, none of them had any idea how hard it was to defeat the Hendus, and that wasn’t even with the royal there. Odin only knew how we would manage to defeat them.

But as it turned out, the authorities did not recognise my authority and refused to listen to Jay when she tried to explain that the decision was mine and mine only.

The police leadership was made up of Surrey Police chief constable Nicola Egrave, the deputy chief constable, Grace Stephen, Detective Chief Superintendent Jana Boshier and Chief Superintendent Jonathan Sobell, who all had children at J.C. and were in the convoy sent to rescue us from Gateway Hill’s impending attack.

They were also the ones who took the decision not to negotiate with the Famla, with the complicity of Captain Gerard O’Connor and Major Paul McNamara. I had had enough of all of them, so I decided to let them hang. I informed them that they were free to refuse, but I made it clear that since they chose to undermine my leadership, I had no other choice but to leave, taking with me the entire Yan group and anyone else who wished to follow us.

Major McNamara walked straight up to me, smiled and said, “Oh, princess, you sure will be missed. Now off you go. The grown-ups have work to do.” He winked at me and walked back to join the others.

I was furious. I yelled, “Hey, morons, good luck defeating an enemy with supernatural powers, unprepared and outgunned. I’ll make sure to tell your families how your own stupidity and foolishness got you killed. With a bit of luck, when they are done hating you, they might one day remember your sorry behinds fondly.”

There was a moment of silence, and then they burst out laughing, and to add insult to injury, Major McNamara said, “Oh, Diana, I love you so much.”

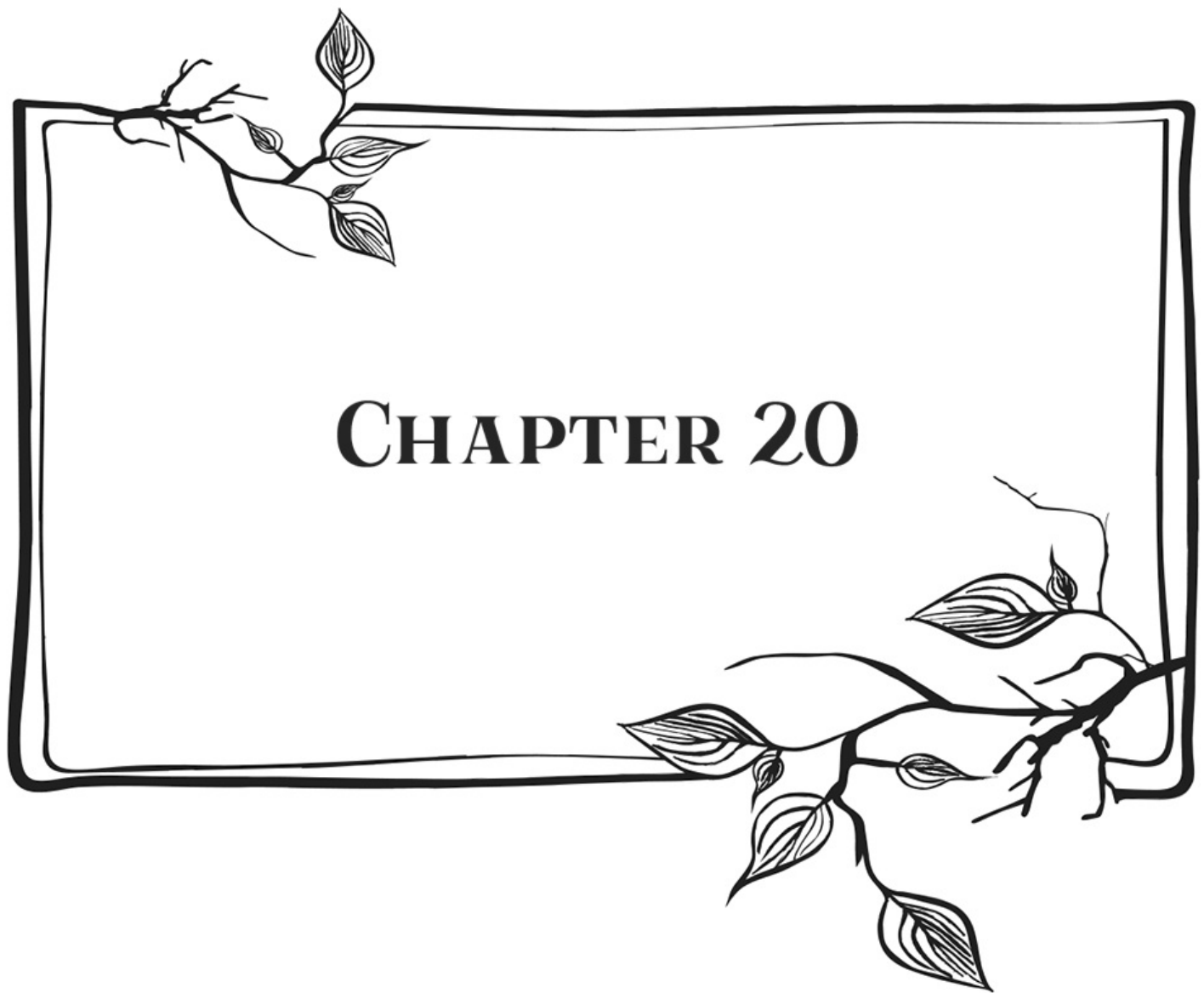
That was it for me. I left, and I made sure to slam the door behind me. I went back to join the others, and I told the squadron to fly off with any student who wanted to leave with them to go to Guildford, while it was decided that Alex, Tristan and I would be hovering around just to see what was coming next.

To my surprise, all the students chose to follow us, leaving the authorities behind. It confirmed to me that even the Masani students knew that the Famla was the most likely to win that battle.

I suddenly realised that not only had I forgotten to call Pam's mother and report on what had happened, but I still hadn't told the boys about the mission I had been given by the general council.

When I told Alex and Tristan about the anomaly and our belief that the school yew tree was the source of the anomaly and was a portal, they agreed with Pam and my assessment. They also said that they now understood why the Famla kept attacking the school.

We still didn't know why they wanted twenty-four people, but letting them get access to that tree was a no-no for us.



CHAPTER 20

William agreed to leave with the others, but only if I promised not to intervene and help the authorities. He was worried that I might get hurt. I had no intention of helping those who I called “ungrateful bags”, and I swore to join him and the others with plenty of gossip as soon as possible.

Watching Jay fly off with her squadron seemed to rattle the soldiers and the officers deeply, because we could see them arguing with their leadership, and I knew why. They had witnessed first-hand the full force of the Famla and knew that without us they would be decimated.

It seemed to me that the Famla was not willing to wait either, because as soon as they received the message from the chief constable informing them of their decision not to agree to their demands, they slaughtered the entire village, children included, and set it on fire.

Before long, they arrived at J.C. and started to break down the two gates to allow their followers to enter. It took them no more than five minutes. Then they barged in, holding torches. It was surreal. I could only surmise that they were using torches to intimidate their enemies, and as far as I was concerned, it worked – if I had been down there, I would have been terrified.

J.C.'s very own Ragnarök had started. All we could hear was screams and gunfire. I would have given anything to see the faces of the chief constable, the captain and especially the major at that moment, but they had retreated to the main building while their troops were firing at the Famla's followers.

Cowards, the whole lot of them. I knew it! I thought. In Yanar the leader was the first to head onto the battlefield, but clearly not here. When I saw them cowering in the main building, I thought to myself, *They are lucky. If I wasn't Odin's daughter, I would have gone down there and said I told you so!*

But things quickly escalated. The soldiers seemed to be no match for an angry mob, so I sent Alex to go to Guildford and get the other Yans. *We will definitely need them for this fight,* I thought.

As much as I was willing to let the major and the other bosses suffer, I liked the soldiers, and I knew that they were only obeying orders. I decided that I couldn't stand by and let the attack continue. It would be a slaughter.

I signalled Tristan and we attacked. He started blasting the Famla followers with blazes of fire while I was electrocuting them. It was working fine. It was obvious that the Famla had thought we had departed, because they started running away as soon as we attacked. They were surprised to find us in the school.

While they were running away, we noticed a change in the air. The air felt heavy, just like the first time we had dealt with the Firas. It was coming from the west, so we flew over in order to check what was happening, and we saw from afar that something was approaching.

We surmised that it must have been Firas, but they were too far away for us to be absolutely sure, and it looked like they were carrying something. We got closer and we noticed a few human forms. That was when we understood. They had made themselves into a flying carpet and had a group of people with them. Humans could not stand on Firas. The only possible explanation was that it was the Yahas, the Hendus' very own witches.

We barged into the main hall, where the police officers and soldiers had retreated and were having a meeting. Tristan was so surprised that he blurted out, "Why?"

They turned towards us, and Captain O'Connor walked to us and said, "Why what?"

Then Tristan said, "Why are you having a meeting? Clearly, you have been beaten. Why aren't you packing up and on your way out?"

He gave us a puzzled look, and I had had enough. I was not prepared to die for their stubbornness, so I hovered above them and told them exactly what was coming and why. I knew talking to Major McNamara was a waste of time. A soldier's duty was to die for their country, but the police had a duty to live in order to protect the public. I was pretty sure they would retreat with us.

I went straight to the chief constable, and as expected, the major cut me off and said that they should wait for Jay's squadron to return. I told Nicola Egrave that I had sent Alex to ask for help a while ago, and since they were flying, if they had not yet arrived, that probably meant that they couldn't come.

She told Major McNamara that she didn't want to gamble it, and gave him one last chance to save the lives of his men, because she was leaving with or without him. It worked. They got into their vehicles and made their way to the north gate, but not before making us promise to follow them. We agreed.

As soon as we saw their vehicles disappear, I turned to Tristan and said, "Remember the yew tree. Let's burn it down before they get here, a nice little goodbye gift for the Yahas."

"Will it close the anomaly?" he asked.

"I don't know, but I'll be damned if I don't do something to that tree. After all the Hendus have done to us, we have earned the Right of Fuchou," I said.

The Right of Fuchou was the right of vengeance. It was a right given to any Yan who had been hurt in some way to get revenge on their attacker. It was usually done by challenging the attacker to a duel, but since we did not have that option, we could only go after their tree.

He smiled and agreed, and we started laughing. It was going to be fabulous. We counted to three and lit the tree on fire. Then all of a sudden, we heard an unimaginable and horrendous sound. The tree started to move and vibrate, so much so that it started to look like a double image. The ground started to shake. It felt like the entire structure around the tree was about to collapse, so we flew away.

All of a sudden, we started seeing the flying carpet getting closer and closer. They were speeding. One of the Hendus in human form was actually flying. The flying-human dot moved to the front of the pack, and we realised that the person was wearing a black mask.

We immediately screamed, "The royal!"

It was so obvious that it was the royal; the outfit had a golden crest right at the front. It was a black suit that reminded me of the one Red Skull wears in *Captain America*. As it got closer, it became obvious that the royal was a woman.

I thought, *Well, clearly, we know who that is. Otherwise, why bother with a full head mask? It's not like we get The Real Royal of the Hendu Home World on Sky TV.*

When I repeated this to Tristan, he gave me a puzzled look, so I had to explain the joke to him. I told him that I was making a reference to *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. To me the equivalent would be *The Real Royal of the Hendu Home World*.

This time he got the joke and burst out laughing but agreed. And now we realised that we must have gotten her really angry, because we could still feel the ground shaking. The screams had diminished, but then it turned into a huge roar. It was so loud that we had to fly higher and close our ears.

The royal screamed when she saw the tree, and flew towards it. Not long after she had reached the tree, the carpet of people finally landed and ran towards her to try and stop her from trying to save the tree, but she pushed them away. The tree gave a last roar, then fell. It was dead. The royal took off her mask, raised her head up and screamed in pain.

She was crying and crying. She was hugging the tree and crying some more. She was devastated. She kept talking in a language we did not understand, and her followers were trying to touch her, but she

wouldn't let them.

We realised that we had done something seriously bad. We couldn't see the royal's face, but we could see her and feel her pain. Whatever we had killed meant a lot to her, and I had the feeling that there would be hell to pay.

Tristan took my hand and said, "I think we just made a big mistake. We need to clear out of here yesterday."

We gave the grieving royal a last look, hoping to see her face, but she did not turn around, so we left.

We flew so fast that we passed the authorities' convoy, and Tristan stopped me. He wasn't sure that we should leave them, but I was. We had given them more time than they had deserved.

As far as I was concerned, we were done with them. Our friends and fellow students were my priority, and I wanted to make sure that they had arrived safely in Guildford and were on their way to their homes, or at least at Guildford train station, waiting for their train.

When we were approaching Guildford, we could see from afar a lot of small fires all around the town. I couldn't understand what had happened, and wondered where my cousin was. Where was my sister? Where was William? Where were our friends? Where were all the students from J.C.? I turned to Tristan in shock. I was also terrified. Something really bad had happened, and I was too scared to speculate. I just said, "Tristan."

He held my hand and said, "It's going to be okay. They are fine. They are all fine."

I couldn't think straight, so I told him, "I'm too upset. Help me. I can't think. I can't think."

He gave me a hug and whispered in my ear, "You go and find your family. I've got the others. I've got it. Go."

Tears started running down my cheeks. I nodded. Then I flew off.

It was dark and hard to see. All I could see was fire everywhere, so I flew higher and conjured some rain to stop the fires. Then I came down. The city seemed deserted. There was no noise; bodies were lying on the street. I checked on a few of them, but they were all dead.

Most places were dark, but even the places that had a light on were deserted or had dead bodies within. The Borough of Guildford had about a hundred and forty-eight thousand inhabitants, and not a single one was left standing in the town. It was obvious that they were not all dead, but where had they all gone? Where was my sister and her friends?

Eventually, I met back with Tristan, and he told me that he couldn't find anyone either, and for the first time, we really felt alone.

We should have had our phones with us, but as usual we didn't. Yans didn't use social media – it was illegal in Yanar – and the Yans living in the Masani world tended to not walk around with their phones. The people of Yanar no longer used phones. We used a communication device on our wrist called KJ, but it wasn't available in the Masani world.

Tristan thought that maybe they had all gone to London for safety, Yans and Masanis alike, including the Guildford locals, and proposed that we follow them there. I agreed, and we had started making our way when I noticed a few familiar vehicles. It was the convoy that had been transporting the younger students, and those wounded, as well as the bodies, from J.C.

The vehicles were turned upside down. It was obvious that the convoy had been ambushed. The coach transporting the students was empty, but their luggage was splattered on the floor. The bodies from J.C. were missing, and I immediately thought of Delphine and Brown. Their bodies were gone as well.

Then I check the wounded, and they had all disappeared. If it wasn't for the massive amount of blood and the obvious sign of struggle, I would have thought that those vehicles had been empty to start with.

I gasped and looked at Tristan. I said, "What on earth happened here?" I was so distraught that I was almost yelling.

Tristan was frozen. He wasn't saying a word. Then he looked at me and said, "It was a trap. It was a game from the beginning, and we fell for it."

I didn't understand what he meant at first. Then it just clicked. He was right; it had been a trap. The Famla had never expected us to hand over to them twenty-four students.

They knew that the authorities would send the students away. They also knew that the government wouldn't negotiate with them, and they knew that the closest town was Guildford.

All they'd had to do was to wait for the convoy and attack it and take the students. The inhabitants of Thursley village had probably been killed a long time ago. I realised that Major McNamara was right and I was wrong. Negotiating with the Famla would have been a waste of time.

Tristan started yelling, "Let's get out of here, now. Let's go now."

So we flew away, and we were making our way to London, and that was when we saw it: the dome. London was under a dome. There was no other explanation for it but that the council had been pushed to do it.

I looked at Tristan and said, "How tired are you?"

He replied, "Very."

Then we knew that we needed to go and regroup somewhere and spend the night, so we flew to Birmingham and knocked at Hassan's uncle's house. When he opened the door, he wasn't surprised to see us. He just said, "About time," and moved away. Behind him were Amelia and the gang. I started crying and ran towards them. I knew they had a lot to tell, but so did we.

After hugging Amelia, Scarlett, Hogan, Alex, Pam and Hassan, I noticed that my William wasn't there. I frantically asked where he was, and they sent me upstairs. I ran into Hassan's bedroom, hoping that William was there, and found him lying on the bed.

He smiled and opened his arms, and I jumped on him. He screamed, and I realised that he was hurt. I pulled his top up and saw bruises all over his body. I looked at him with tears in my eyes. All I could do

was touch him gently and tell him how sorry I was.

He had had his ribs broken, but he assured me that he was okay and had seen a doctor. He took me back into his arms, and I lay next to him. I wanted to know what had happened, and he wanted to kiss me first. I happily caved. We started kissing, and William put his hand under my top and was touching me when Hassan barged in.

The look we gave him could have killed Godzilla himself. Forgetting that we owed him our accommodation, William screamed at him to get out, but Hassan ignored him. He turned to me and said, "We received news. Get downstairs now."

We looked at each other and then jumped from the bed. William struggled but refused to stay behind. I could see he was in pain, and asked him to lean on me, but he refused. As usual, his macho side was winning over common sense.

When we got to the living room, Amelia was in tears. I asked, "What's going on?"

Hogan was struggling to speak. He had been crying too and said, "Jay's team is almost entirely gone. They died in the battle of Guildford, and she is in intensive care. They are not sure if she is going to make it."

"She was taken back to Yanar by her flight lieutenant, Diallo."

I said, "Wait, wait, wait. I was in Guildford. If Yan bodies were there, I would have seen them."

Hassan told me to activate my KJ. At his uncle's home, they had the KJ's activation key. As soon as I did, I saw the message that had been left. Amelia and I had received a message from our parents, narrating what had happened to Jay. She had used the Mjölfnir attack, and by doing so, she had managed to take out the entire Hendu battalion situated at Guildford station.

The news made me feel sick. Jay was almost gone. She had chosen to risk her life to save someone else's. That was definitely the attitude I would have expected from her. I ran to the closest bathroom and vomited. Then I screamed in anger and pain. I should have been there. I should have been fighting next to her, but instead, I had been foolish enough to want to stay at J.C.

I don't know how long I stayed in the bathroom until William came to get me. He told me how sorry he was. He added that I needed to get up, because breaking us was exactly what the enemy wanted. He also added that my cousin wasn't dead yet and that he fully believed that she would pull through.

That was what I needed to hear, so I turned around and hugged him. He was my rock, and I knew at that moment that he was my everything. When I got to the living room, the others were waiting for me. Hogan and Hassan said that I should be proud of Jay, that she had destroyed the enemy, and her squadron's sacrifice meant that I would see them very soon in Valhalla.

He was right; their sacrifice did guarantee them a prominent place next to Odin, but it still hurt, and it wasn't much consolation. I knew most of them and loved them dearly. It did, however, give me the strength and determination to avenge their death.

But for that, I needed to know exactly what had happened when they had left us and made their way to Guildford. Jay's squadron had left with all the students.

I was told that when they got to Guildford, they had found the first convoy had been attacked and no students were left. The Hendus were picking up the bodies of J.C.'s dead students, which were meant to be returned to their families, while other Hendus were escorting the inhabitants of Guildford in chains and putting them into lorries like animals.

Jay had sent a group of Airborns to London with instructions to protect all the students and put them on trains back to their homes. They were ordered to stay with the Masani students until the last one had been safely put on a train, and come back to Guildford. The Yan students, however, were asked to prepare for a fight on the ground with the Famla. William and Scarlett refused to leave with the others but were forcibly removed by Jay's team.

When the students arrived in London, they found it under siege by the Firas, so the Airborns told the students that there were too few of them to fight the Firas. They opted for the best solution at that moment and flew the students to Birmingham. There were too many students to fly in one go, so they had to take them one by one and drop them at the train station.

Scarlett and William asked to be dropped at the Congo Tree offices, a charity based in Birmingham working to help citizens of RDC living in the UK. Hogan had told them that one of their prominent members was a Yan. They lied to him and told him that Jay had asked that they remain with him until Hassan and the other Yans joined them.

Hogan had indicated that they would meet them as soon as they could, but since London was under a dome, they decided to gamble and hoped that at least Hassan would be taking refuge at his uncle's home.

So when the Yan at Congo Tree was in front of them, they told him that they had been sent by Jaimie Bouba, and her instructions were for him to protect them. Then they left. The Yan in question then took them to the most prominent Yan in town, Jonathan Mulumba, Hassan's uncle.

We then turned to Hogan, Hassan and Pam, and asked them what had happened when the others left. They paused for a second, and then Pam said that they had been told by Jay to call for help, and Jay and her team had left. The problem was that all their KJs were offline, and as usual, none of the Yans carried mobile phones, so they had had to run into different buildings and try to use their landlines, but the lines had been cut.

The office was ransacked. The entire town looked like it had been looted. They were about to lose hope when they found a working mobile phone on the ground and called for help, but the embassy demanded that they leave the Guildford inhabitants to their fate and report to London immediately.

It looked like the Hendus had also called for help, because not long after William's group had left, a swarm of Yahas wearing black hooded capes with the royal family crest, like the Volturis in *Twilight*, arrived to give their Guildford team a hand.

A Yan squadron was made of one hundred fighters. Unfortunately, from what Pam was saying, even though the Fira squadron wasn't bigger, they still had at least three hundred Yahas on their side. On J.C.'s side, there were only thirteen Yans, not counting Jay's already diminished group, since she had sent a sizable portion of her team to escort the Masani students to safety. The fight was looking more and more like an impossible battle, and Jay knew it.

She made the decision to send some of her remaining squadron to escort the Yan students to London. At first the students refused, but she turned her request into an order, and they retreated like the Road Runner in front of Wile E. Coyote.

As soon as the Yahas realised that the J.C. Yans were doing a runner, they started running after them and showed how powerful they actually were. At first the Yahas started running after the students. Then they stopped. A group of them held hands and started chanting, "*Berlin bango.*"

They chanted over and over again. A wall of clay erected itself in front of Pam and the other Yans. Unfortunately for them, Pam being a Terrayan, she made it explode in on itself, allowing them to continue on their way. She then flew and hovered over them. She gave them a very big smile. By attempting to stop them, the Yahas had shown their hand.

Individually they couldn't match Yans. It clearly took at least ten of them to erect a wall, which told Pam and the others that individually they were not that hard to kill. Pam turned to Mabel and shouted, "*Wahdu mahol,*" which meant "Create a wall" in Yan.

They both raised their hands and erected a wall between them and the Yahas. Pam turned to the boys to give them the next step, but Eirnin Maclochlainn – a fellow Yan from JC – was faster than her, and he said, "Girls, you have helped enough. Time to leave and let us try to hold them back."

Pam disagreed and said, "Look, guys, it doesn't matter how strong you guys are. They outnumber you at least twenty to one. You are all dead before the fight even starts."

Then Hogan asked, "So what exactly do you expect us to do? Run away?"

Hassan turned to him and said, "Hoggy, in some cases, the only victory is to flee."

The other guys agreed with him, except the Irish boys, as usual. Irish Yans were known to be incapable of moving away from a fight.

Pam then had a brilliant idea. She offered to break the wall down, open the ground underneath the Yahas and close it back. Whatever was left of them would be easily defeated by the boys.

They agreed and prepared themselves. Pam came down, and with Mabel they both stood in front of the wall. She could hear the Yahas on the other side, chanting in a language they did not understand. "*Bango ya sauko.*"

The girls blew away their wall, which took out a few of the Yahas. The girls then plunged onto one knee, knocked the ground with their fists, and it opened right underneath the Yahas, prompting a large number of Yahas to fall in. They then closed the rift back, ensuring that the fallen had been buried forever.

The Yahas looked furious. They screamed with rage and ran towards them, determined to tear them apart. This was when the boys ran towards the Yahas, and the fight started. The Yahas were very good fighters, and it was a difficult battle. Mabel was trying her best, but Pam noticed that she was about to be overrun by her opponents, so she coated her in clay and sent her flying away from the fighting site.

Mabel's opponent turned towards Pam in rage, but Pam, being excellent at FIST, was overpowering them easily. Eventually, they realised that they couldn't win, and the remaining group of Yahas who could still stand ran away. Pam flew away to make sure that Mabel had landed safely, and they all left the area.

We then turned to Alex to find out what he had seen. When he arrived, it was a full-blown war. Most Firas had been killed by the squadron, but the Yahas were a challenge for them. The witches had cast a protective spell on themselves, so Yan powers were not affecting them.

Jay had no other option but to engage them in a physical fight, which should have been easy if it wasn't for the fact that the Yahas seriously outnumbered the Yans.

Jay realised that if they could fight them with melee combat, then they could kill them in one go as well. She conjured rain, and one of her Omni fighters blasted an electric ball on the wet ground while the squadron got off the ground quickly, which killed all the Yahas instantly.

Jay then realised that Alex had arrived, and she flew towards him. When she reached him, she said, "Go, tell the council everything you know about the Hendus. I'll be giving them a report as soon as I am done here."

He informed her that they could not be killed by bullets but, like zombies, chopping off their heads worked fine. She smiled at him, gave him a forward Sahnu, which was the Yan goodbye, told him that she loved him and sent him to rejoin his sister.

Alex had a funny feeling. His stomach became tight. He wanted to turn around, but he knew that Jay was not joking and would have him escorted if necessary. While he was leaving, he saw Jay's Omnis imprisoning another squadron of Yahas who had just arrived in the mud, and heard her preparing for the Mjölfnir attack.

He was about to ask her why when he saw a squadron of Firas approaching, as well as even more Yahas marching towards them. He couldn't understand how there could be so many Hendus in Surrey. He was wondering where they were coming from. He wanted to stay despite Jay's order, but he knew that he had to leave and find Pam because J.C. was in trouble, so he left.

As soon as I heard that, my heart sank. The Mjölfnir attack was a military move created by the Norse to crush their enemies in one blow with Thor's help. I didn't know how it was performed, but I had heard that the people executing it were guaranteed a trip straight to Valhalla.

Jay had known she might never see Alex again. That was why she gave him a forward Sahnu rather than a regular Sahnu. A Sahnu was the Yan greeting. The forward Sahnu involved crossing your arms

over your chest, having the back of your hands touch with those of the other person and then putting your forehead on their forehead. The regular Sahnú did not involve the foreheads touching.

As much as I was saddened by Jay's condition, I couldn't help but feel immense pride. My cousin was so amazing that she had defied the council's orders to stand down, so she could shield as many people as she could, and she had almost died trying to stop the Hendus from hurting more people than they had planned.

William suddenly said, "By the way, anyone know what is happening in the country? I am quite worried about my family."

"I am too," said the others.

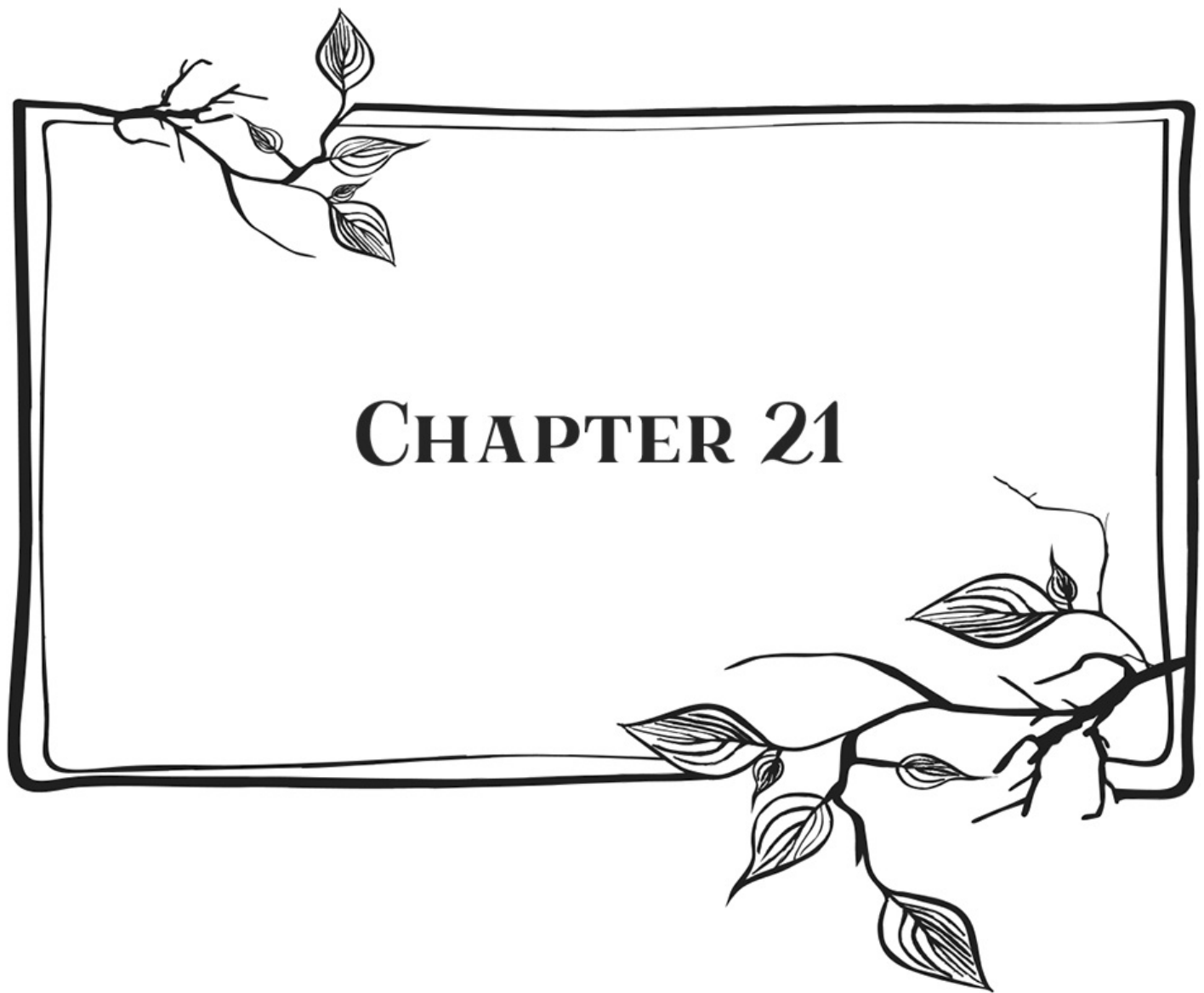
"Wait. No one has tried to watch TV or check online?" I asked.

They answered no. Apparently, they were too scared to do so in case the news was not good. The only message left by the council for us was an immediate return home.

In the Masani world, however, we found out from the news that the Hendus were winning every battle, and the portals were being opened by the Famla, allowing more Hendus to cross over to our world.

London was no longer under a dome. The news explained that the dome had been placed by the Yans in order to give the British authorities time to relocate the members of parliament and the royal family to a safe location.

Uncle Jonathan had confirmed that the UK was at war and that public transport was no longer safe for anyone, so we were asked to escort our friends home. I wanted to see William safe-ly home, so I took him while Hogan, accompanied by Tristan, took Scarlett back to Hereford.



CHAPTER 21

When we got to Cardiff, it was very hard to say goodbye. William begged me to stay with him for a few days, and I agreed. He made sure that my stay was very romantic. He took me out to dinner. Then we walked around the bay, and we went back to his house. His parents were in Bridgend, helping his nan move in with them, but his sister was there, and I got to know her.

His room was so boyish, covered with action figures and video games. He clearly didn't expect to bring anyone to spend the night in his house and see his room.

The next morning, it felt so strange waking up in his house. I had slept with his sister because William, being a Christian, was saving himself for marriage, but we did kiss a lot, and being able to touch him was amazing.

In Yanar the only people who followed strict rules of morality and lived by it were people who wanted to join the Orders, a special branch of the Yan military. None of us J.C. Yans essentially wanted to join the Orders except for Pam, but realising that even masanis could follow a strict way of life and be happy following it was making me reconsider my decision to join as well.

Waking up in my first love's house made me feel different, more grown-up. I really wanted to see if I also looked different, so I ran to the bathroom and stared at myself in the mirror, but I looked the same. I was a little disappointed.

William came up behind me, put his arms around my waist, put his chin on my shoulder and said, "What is it?" while staring at me through the mirror. I think he was worried that I regretted staying with him rather than heading for Yanar, but he was wrong.

I turned to him and said, "I look the same," and I made a funny face, so I had to explain to him how I was feeling.

He said, "Oh, honey."

He turned me towards him and started kissing me, which made me laugh. I explained to him that I thought that after him making me feel so special and feminine by being so romantic, I thought I would look different. I always read that love made women look even more beautiful, but I looked the same, and I was heartbroken.

He told me that I was the most stunning girl he had never seen and that if I needed to feel girly, then it was now his job to give me that feeling.

I was hoping that we would shower together, but it did not happen. However, he took me to his room after we had both showered, so we could have breakfast on his bed. I loved it.

While we were eating, I loved the fact that we kissed every five minutes and were glued to each other. I never thought that spending an entire day having fun and eating without leaving a bedroom would be so great, but it was. I couldn't help but dream of the day the war would be over and we would be doing this in my own bedroom in Yanara. It would be amazing.

But the honeymoon did not last. After two days in Cardiff, I was called to report to Yanar pronto by Aibreann MacConraoi, whose mother was the captain general of the Yan Marine Corps. I expected to find her at our embassy, but a knock at the door proved me wrong. She had come herself to pick me up.

The Yan Marine Corps was made of Aquas and Omnis only. No other Yans were allowed to be part of it, because no other Yan was capable of fighting underwater.

Aibreann, who everybody called Breann, informed me that the war my father and brothers were fighting had been won. I screamed with joy and jumped to hugged her, but she wasn't smiling back at me. I turned around, asked William to excuse me and came out of the house.

I asked her again what was wrong, and she repeated that the war had been won. Our enemy had capitulated and had signed an unconditional surrender on the promised land. This was when it hit me: the promised land was ours, which meant that the Yans would be leaving Earth for good.

Hundreds of years ago, after the Yans had settled in Yanar, the Norse priestesses received a visit from Odin, who told them of a promised land in the sky, a planet he had created just for our nation, and when the time was right, we would find that planet and be able to finally live happily ever after and away from the Masanis, who had persecuted us and chased us away from our homes.

Since that day, exploring the stars in search of that land had been the general council's top priority, and we had finally found it decades ago. The general council had started to move our equipment and infrastructure to the new world. They had also sent teams of engineers and builders to build us a brand-new home on that new planet we had named Geallta Yanar.

It was a planet the size of Mercury, with no animals, but besides that, it was an exact replica of Earth in weather and ecosystem. Unfortunately, an alien race had started to appear a few years after their arrival and had laid claim to Geallta. The Yan government refused to hand over the planet, so the aliens had killed everybody that was on Geallta Yanar at the time, not knowing that there were more of us elsewhere.

The council sent our entire space force after them, reinforced by the Orders, and that move had started the war between the Yans and the aliens. Now that the war was won, there was nothing stopping us from leaving, especially since it seemed like the council wanted to leave the Masanis to their own fate and stay out of the Hendu–Masani war.

Now I understood why the council had been recalling all Yans home; we were leaving Earth for good. We were being taken to the promised land.

I told Breann that I needed to say goodbye to William, and she gave me a few minutes alone with him. I told him that I had to leave, but I promised to be in contact soon. He kept telling me how much he loved me, and he begged me to be careful and to come back to him in one piece.

Breann had had enough. She yelled, "Enough already. Let's go."

I turned to her in disbelief. The MacConraoi and the Kirkpatrick women were the most romantic women of the Ten, and she was getting annoyed because I had trouble leaving my boyfriend. I said, "What's your problem?"

"You are not the only one who will have to leave a loved one behind, Di," she said.

Of course, I thought. She was stationed in Dublin. She probably had fallen for one of the locals, and now she was being forced to leave her beloved behind.

I turned around, kissed William for the last time and flew out with her. I didn't know if I would ever see him again, but I could only hope for the best.

I thought Breann would take me straight to Yanara, but she told me that she wanted to pick up all of us, and by *all of us*, she meant Pam, Alex, Amelia, Tristan, Hogan and Hassan.

When we arrived in Birmingham, I was surprised to find Scarlett with them. I looked at all of them with disbelief and said, "Guys, I thought Scarlett was going home. I saw her leave with Hoggie and Tristan." I was almost screaming, and pointing at Scarlett and Hogan.

Tristan said, "It's a long story, but how did you guys get here?"

Breann and I looked at each other, and Breann said, "The old-fashioned way, by flying. By the way, don't you want to know what I am doing here?"

Pam and Amelia came towards us, took our hands and made us sit on the sofa. They said, "That has been going on for an hour."

To start with, they told us that all channels were showing the same thing. It was an older man, probably in his seventies, sitting on the set of what I was told was the BBC newsroom.

The message was simple: "You are now under the ruling of the Hendu royal family. The Famla is now the authority under which you will be living. A curfew has been imposed, and anyone found outside after 7 p.m. will be shot immediately. Your leaders have abandoned you and fled, and the ones that didn't have time to run have all been arrested and will be executed tomorrow at noon on The Elms at Smithfield in London. Their execution will be broadcast live for all to see. For those who wish to show their support for the Famla, you are all kindly invited to come and watch them meet their maker. All irrelevant civil servants have been relieved of duty. All communications have been suspended, and you will all receive further instructions later."

I turned to them and said "What was that?" while pointing at the TV.

Then one name came to my mind: William. I had left him in Cardiff, thinking that he would be safe. I had to return and save him.

As I was getting up to leave, Tristan stopped me and said, "If you are thinking of going to rescue Will, don't. He is just a teenager. He will be safe in his house. We have other people to rescue."

"Like who?" I asked angrily.

And he said, "How about the people who will be executed tomorrow in London?"

I realised that he was right. I turned to Breann, and she said, "No, no, no. I was sent to retrieve you guys, and that is it. We are leaving, and we are doing it right now. This order is coming straight from the council."

Alex and the others started to realise that something else was going on. He asked me, "What exactly is Breann doing here?"

I let Breann tell them herself why she had come. As soon as they heard that we had won the war, they started screaming and jumping with joy, so I did to them what Breann had done to me.

I said, "Guys, the enemy surrendered unconditionally. Geallta is ours."

And then it sank in.

Hogan said, "Hold on. Are you saying that we are really leaving?"

"Oh, no. It's worse. Technically, we have left already. The council has recalled all Yans home, remember. The big migration has begun. We won't join the Masanis in their fight against the Hendus." I knew that telling them that would be a shock, but they needed to know the situation we were in.

Breann said, "Guys, I was sent to take all of you home, so let's go. I have taken too long already."

Hogan turned towards Scarlett, who didn't understand what was happening, and he explained in detail our quest for the promised land and the fact that the Yans were now leaving Earth.

"Are you really going to leave me?" she said in a trembling voice.

He took her cheeks in his hands and put his forehead on her forehead and said, “Never. I am not leaving. I will never leave you. They can leave without me. I am not going to Geallta.”

“Neither am I,” I said, and I was happy to see that all the others had also decided to defy the council as well.

Breann had had enough and she said, “Very well, then. I’m going home, and I’ll make sure to inform the council of your decision. Good luck, guys. See you on Geallta if you survive the Masani war.”

We all gave her the forward Sahnu and watched her leave.

I turned to them and said, “All right, time to call home. Activate your KJs, and let’s talk to our parents. But first, would someone explain why Scarlett is not at home?”

So they made me sit down and narrated what had happened when they had arrived in Hereford.

Hogan explained that when he had taken Scarlett home with Tristan’s help, as soon as they got off the train, he realised that something was wrong.

All the exits from the station were blocked by a group of people dressed all in black with black masks and holding automatic weapons. He could feel fear in the air. People didn’t know what was going on, and everybody was asking each other if anyone knew who the people in black were.

Hogan had recognised the Famla insignia on the men-in-black uniforms. When I asked what the Famla insignia was, he said that he remembered seeing a similar insignia on the capes worn by the Yahas in Guildford. He said that it was the same insignia that ornamented the capes, except that the insignia was not golden, like in Guildford, but red.

The letter “F” had been sitting on top of the insignia on their jackets, so it wasn’t hard for him to make the leap and conclude that it was *F* for *Famla*. He had turned to Tristan and asked him to fly Scarlett out of the station and return to Bir-mingham with her.

Scarlett refused. She didn’t want to leave him, and she also wanted to check on her parents. Tristan refused as well. He told Hogan that the moment he flew off, the Famla would immediately guess that he was a Yan, and he would be killed on the spot.

Hogan turned to Tristan and told him, “I can’t fight my way out and protect her at the same time. I love her. She is my everything. Please save her. Just grab her and go.”

Tristan kept shaking his head. He said, “If I fly off, they will kill you. I will never forgive myself if anything happens to you. You are my brother and I love you. Let’s try and pass as regular people. I bet they are not even looking for us.”

Scarlett agreed. She categorically refused to leave, so they followed the crowd. The men in black were scanning each face with a device that looked like a portable scanner. It was pretty clear that they were looking for someone.

They managed to pass without being stopped and took the bus to Scarlett’s house, but no one was home. The house had been ransacked, and there were obvious signs of a struggle.

As soon as Scarlett started crying, Hogan had seen enough. He told Tristan to fly Scarlett to Birmingham, and he waited for Tristan to come back and pick him up.

They had no idea what had happened to Scarlett's parents, but now that they had heard the message on TV, it wasn't difficult to guess. Clearly, Scarlett's parents had been arrested, because her mother was a member of parliament.

While Hogan was busy consoling the scared and frantic Scarlett, I asked the others where uncle Jonathan was, and they said that he had been called to London. Now we also knew why; he was being told to return to Yanar.

We had no choice but to call our parents, and the message they gave us was clear, to come home immediately and discuss the situation face-to-face.

I was hesitant to leave. I was worried about William, but with both his parents being preachers, I was pretty certain that his family would be safe for a while.

Hogan, however, had a bigger problem. He couldn't leave Scarlett alone, so we decided to take her with us. The Croise family being Olympians, I was fairly confident that they would accept Scarlett quite easily, even if she was a Masani, but their son's refusal to follow them to the new-found planet would be harder to take.

Unlike other Yans, Olympians were very much attached to their offspring. Where a Norse would easily understand a child's need to prove themselves to Odin, Olympians were not fans of letting their children risk their lives, not even for the sake of Zeus himself.

We got on the lift available at Uncle Jonathan's house and were transported to Yanar City. From there I had to take another lift to Yanara with Amelia, leaving the others to face their parents.

Both my parents were home, as well as my brothers. By the look of the house, it was clear that they were ready to go. Everything was packed, even my things. They were just waiting for us to arrive.

Amelia and I followed our parents to my mother's office. My mother sat at her table, but my father refused to sit and preferred to stand next to her. I thought, *Oh, boy, he is not happy.*

I explained that as happy as I was that Geallta Yanar was officially ours, I couldn't join them at the moment because I was in love. I had met someone who meant more to me than anything, and I had made friends who had become family to me.

I told them that the place of a true daughter of Odin was to fight to protect what she held dear in her heart, and what I was holding dear at that very moment was waiting for me in the UK. By staying on Earth, I was not only honouring my heritage but also everything they had taught me. I added that by leaving William and the others to their fate, I would become no better than a person with no honour and no courage.

I knew that I was being a tad dramatic, but it was necessary, and it worked, because they allowed me to stay but decided that Amelia was too young to stay. Plus, since she would be the only one able to

replace my mother as the head of the council and duchess if anything did happen to me, she needed to stay with them, where she could be safe.

My parents decided that all the Yans choosing to remain in the UK should be housed in Draycott Place to maximise our chances of survival. We would also retain the city of Yanara, if we ever needed a safe place in case the Masani war did not go our way.

The rest of Yanar was to be destroyed to avoid it falling into enemy hands, and they would leave a spacecraft in orbit for us, if we needed to join them or, in my case, bring William and his family for a more formal introduction.

I was ecstatic to stay, but I was sad to see my family go. It broke my heart, but I had no choice. Earth needed me. I couldn't leave.

I let the others know that I was going to meet them in London, and my mother promised to make all the arrangements to ensure that the Yanara protection grid was up and running before her departure.

I gave them a Sahnu and transported back to London. I was the first to arrive, followed by Tristan, Alex and Pam. I expected that. Tristan, Alex, Pam and I, we were children of Odin, so it was obvious that it wouldn't be too hard to convince our parents that staying was the best thing.

Hours went by, and there was still no news of Hogan, Scarlett and Hassan. Hassan being a Makua, which meant that he was a follower of Makua Hine, I had no idea how his parents would react to his desire to stay.

For the Makuas, being in sync with Mother Nature and having to go to a new planet would allow them, in their faith, to get closer to the universe. I was worried that they would want him to experience it with them, but I was wrong.

He arrived with a big smile, and he looked different, more confident. After I screamed with joy and jumped on him when he arrived, I looked straight in his eyes and said, "Go on, just tell us. What happened?"

He let go of me, walked into the middle of the study room, where we had gathered, and made his hand glow. We screamed with joy. His parents didn't want him to stay without being able to protect himself, so his sister had gracefully transferred her power to him.

I was very touched. Fimi Mulumba was the kindest girl I had ever met, and she loved her brother dearly. I could only imagine her fear at the thought of maybe never seeing him again, so she wanted to make sure that he would not go down without a fight.

We didn't have much time in front of us, so I needed to teach him how to use that power as soon as possible. I took him to the FIST room and told the others to work on a plan to stop the next-day executions while I showed Hassan how to use his power.

An hour after Hassan and I had left the study room, Hogan finally arrived with Scarlett. From what he told us, it had been a very difficult negotiation. His parents were adamant that he should go with them, but they were willing to let Scarlett follow them.

Later on, after Scarlett had begged them to let her save her parents, they had agreed to let them return to the UK, but not without Hogan getting a power from his cousin. She had transferred it to him on the condition that he rejoined the entire family as soon as Scarlett's parents were saved.

"So, what are you going to do?" I asked.

He looked at Scarlett, who he was holding, then looked back at me and said, "I'm not rejoining them. This is my new home. *Our* new home," he said, staring back at Scarlett.

"Yes, *our* new home," she said back to him.

I rolled my eyes and mumbled, "Mm-hmm."

Hogan turned towards me and said, "They are free to visit me if they miss me so much."

I knew his cousin was a Streak, which meant that she could generate energy like Fimi's, so I told him to join me and Hassan.

When Hassan, Hogan and I were done with the training, we found Pam, Alex, Tristan and Scarlett quite excited. The news had just been broadcast that the prisoners would be escorted from Belmarsh prison to Smithfield.

I thought, *Excellent. Now we know exactly where they are.*

Pam's plan was easy: get to Belmarsh, free the officials, bring them to Draycott Place, and transport them to Yanara, the only safe place left on Earth.

I thought it was brilliant, but we couldn't leave Scarlett alone. So we decided that I would take her to William's house, but first I needed to check that it was safe in Cardiff.

When I was about to take off, Scarlett stopped me and said, "Wait. Won't the men in black detect you if you fly?"

"They don't possess that kind of technology. As long as they don't see me take off, I should be safe," I answered.

Hogan hugged her and said, "Don't worry, babe. She'll be fine." And he kissed her.

I took off, and as soon as I arrived, I could tell that Cardiff was no longer safe. There were patrols of men in black everywhere, and not a single person outside besides them.

I flew to William's window and was so happy to see that he was in his room. I knocked at the window, and when he opened, I jumped into his arms.

"Oh my God, I was so worried about you. I tried to call you, but all communications have been cut," he said. He hugged me really tight and kissed me over and over.

I felt so bad. I should have come to see him earlier. Although I could protect myself, William clearly would always be worried about me getting hurt. I made him sit on his bed and told him everything about the promised land, the Yans' mass migration, our decision to stay and the plan to break into Belmarsh.

I told him that I had come to see if Scarlett could stay with him, and he said yes. He informed me that his parents were home and that she would be safe. He also said that everybody was a bit shaken after the

announcement on TV and that the Welsh Assembly members had all been arrested by the Famla and taken to London.

I realised that there was a good chance that the same could have happened to Scarlett's parents, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Now there was a glimmer of hope that Scarlett could be reunited with her family.

William decided that the best thing would be for him to accompany me to London so he could assess how safe I was at Draycott Place. He would then bring Scarlett to his parents and return to London with me to help us fight the Famla.

I was not happy. William was a Masani. The chances of him being hurt had just gone from zero to a million in a second. On top of that, he hadn't even asked me if I needed help, and that was not resonating well with me.

He wrote a letter to his parents and left it on his study desk. I asked him why he was leaving a letter, and he said, "Just in case Scarlett refuses to come to Cardiff, I don't want to have to come back and explain why I had to leave."

I realised that William was always going to be William. He was not doubting my ability to win a battle, he was just being the strong and protective guy that he had always been. I had fallen in love with an alpha, and I should have expected his authoritarian side to show up from time to time.

I didn't want him to come and put his life in danger, but I preferred him to be with me, where I would be able to protect him, rather than far away with me constantly worried.

I agreed with his decisions, and we flew back to Draycott Place. As soon as I told them that the Famla had taken over Cardiff as well, Scarlett decided that she was better off staying in London with us. I also told them about the Welsh Assembly members, and it brought Scarlett hope that maybe she would be able to see her parents soon.

Pam had decided that we would leave Scarlett and William in the house, then go and free as many officials as we could and come straight back. William refused. He wanted to be useful, so we taught them how to activate the lift.

First, we took him and Scarlett to Yanara. Then we identified a gathering point and told them to start moving the escapees to Yanara as soon as the first escapee had reached Draycott Place, just in case we arrived under fire from the men in black.

Because of the high level of danger we would face on our mission, Pam advised that we use our powers at all times. She was staring straight at me when she was saying that. She knew that I wouldn't want to do it.

The rules of combat in Yanar were very clear, and breaking them was unthinkable. It was a sure way to guarantee never to be chosen by Odin to join him on Ragnarök, and I for one wanted to join my god's army in the afterlife.

The most important rule of combat was that when faced with an opponent who did not possess supernatural powers, you were forbidden to use yours, in order for the fight to be fair and honourable.

I repeated the rule to my fellow Yans, and Tristan agreed with me, but Hogan and Alex said that being outnumbered, as far as they were concerned, gave them the right to use their powers against the men in black.

We wanted all the luck to be on our side, so we decided to give offerings to our gods in order for our journey to be bless-ed. William and Scarlett offered to pray to their god as well. Although we had doubts that their god could be of any help, we humoured them by letting them give it a go.

Pam, Alex, Tristan and I, being Norse, went to give offerings to Loki at the Norse temple on the top floor. We chose Loki because he was the god of mischief, and his approach to battle would be the best course of action for this particular situation.

Hassan, although not an Olympian, accompanied Hogan to give offerings to Ares and Athena in Draycott Place's Olympian temple.

Time was flying, and Pam wanted us to leave at midnight, so as soon as the clock hit twelve a.m., off we went.

It was very strange to see London so empty. There wasn't even a fly in sight, except for the men-in-black patrols.

Pam had downloaded a map of London and studied the way to Belmarsh. When we arrived at the prison, it was very quiet. We expected to see prison guards, or at least men in black, but there was no one.

We broke the door down, and when we went in, we saw bodies all over. Clearly, the Famla had gone in and killed all the prisoners to make space for the new detainees. It was a terrifying sight, but we had to press on.

We went our separate ways in order to free them more quickly. It did not take long for me to start hearing doors opening. We were very lucky that the Famla was so confident that no one would be able to escape, or be brave enough to rescue the prisoners, that they had left no guards for us to fight.

After freeing a sizable number of very frightened MPs and, to my surprise, a good number of military officers, I finally arrived at the last cell in my block and opened it. I gasped and said, "Major? Captain?" I couldn't believe it was them. It really was Major Paul McNamara and Captain Gerard O'Connor.

They looked as shocked as I was, and the major said in a mocking voice, "O'Connor, look. It's the PJ Masks. We are saved."

I was too happy to see him to be mad at him for that sarcastic tone of voice, so I entered the cell and hugged them. I was so glad to see them alive.

The major took my cheeks in his hands and said in a concerned tone of voice, "What the hell are you doing here, princess?"

"Rescuing you, of course," I said in a very excited voice.

“Well, let’s go, then. I for one have never been so happy to see anyone in my life,” said the captain. He then put his hand on my shoulder and said, “Thank you, child, for coming.”

They helped us free the rest of the prisoners, and we all gathered at the prison’s main gate. When I saw how many there were, I got worried. There were at least two hundred officials, military personnel and so on. We couldn’t fly all of them over, but we needed to get to Draycott Place, so the major took charge. He asked us to take him to the military base in order to get some weapons and lorries to carry everyone to Draycott Place.

The ride to the army base was easy, but not the drive back to Belmarsh. We were spotted by the men in black, and Pam, Alex, Tristan and I had to blow up their cars, which, unfortunately, made a lot of noise. I realised that Pam was right; there were just too many of them, and the only way we could protect the detainees would be by using our powers.

By the time we had arrived at the prison and loaded all the vehicles with the escapees, we knew that the ride home would be a fight, and it was. Hordes of cars were now coming towards us, and as soon as we started blowing up their cars, they pulled bazookas out of their windows and started shooting at us.

I saw the major stop the convoy and run towards me, screaming, “No! Diana! Diana!”

I knew that the sight of us being fired at must have been frightening for him, but I needed him to continue on his way and leave us to our fate.

I turned towards Pam and said, “Keep hitting at them. I’ll be back.”

She saw the major running towards us and nodded. She understood that I had to go to him.

I flew towards him to stop him in his tracks, and he looked furiously at me. He said, “What the hell are you thinking, putting yourself in danger like that? I forbid you to continue. Call your little friends over and get in the car with me immediately.”

He was scared. I could not only see it, but I felt it as well, so I knew that as long as he was in a panicked state, he wouldn’t hear me at all. He was too tall for me to grab his face, so I levitated to his level, grabbed him by his cheeks and whispered to him, “You have to go. You know that you have to go. If you stay, we all die, but if you go, the other PJ Masks and I will have a slim chance to make it out of here. Please, Major, go. Go now.”

The PJ Masks reference brought a little smile to his face, but he was still hesitating when the captain, who was also nearby, said to him, “She is right, sir. We have to go, or we are all dead.”

He reluctantly got back in his lorry, and they continued on their way while Pam, Alex and Tristan were dodging the missiles. It was clear that the message had been passed everywhere that Yans were in London, and they had come prepared for us.

The major was leading the convoy, and our fight with the men in black allowed the convoy to continue, escorted by Hogan and Hassan, who were still not used to flying but could at least blast balls of energy and immobilise the men in black’s cars.

After we had taken care of the other cars that had come after us, we arrived at Draycott Place, where we found that William and Scarlett had started to transport the officials to Yanara as planned.

We had not been followed all the way to Draycott Place, but we were certain that by now the Famla knew that the people who had escaped from the prison were in Chelsea. I was pretty sure that they would be knocking at every door in the area, so I activated the shield. That way, they could knock all they wanted, and they wouldn't be able to penetrate our house.

I realised that I had forgotten to ask if Scarlett's parents were among the rescued, but Hogan reassured me that they were and, at that very moment, were with their daughter in Yanara.

After we had sent the last official through the lift, we followed them to Yanara. We took them to the closest hotel and told them to choose a bedroom for each while we spoke to the manager of the hotel.

Although the mass migration had started, not everyone was gone yet, and after Pam and I explained to the manager that the new clients were Masanis, he sent his staff to show them how to operate the machines in their bedrooms, as well as showing them how to order food.

I asked the major if he and the captain would accompany Pam and me to see my mother, while Hogan took Scarlett and her parents to his winter home. William chose to go sightseeing with Alex and Hassan.

When I got home, I found my mother in her office. She was surprised to see me. She was even more surprised to see the major and the captain with Pam and me, and was gobsmacked when I told her of our new refugees in town.

The major and the captain asked to speak to her privately. I gave them an evil look and was about to refuse when, to my surprise, she agreed and sent Pam and me to my room.

Pam reluctantly followed me to my room while my mother was talking to the major.

I found out later that after we had gone, my mother turned her attention to the two men. She looked at the major and said, "So, you are the famous Major McNamara. My daughter called you a jerk. And you must be Captain O'Connor. She didn't say much about you. I'm guessing she was too busy hating the major for taking leadership away from her during the battle of J.C.."

She then pointed to the chairs on the opposite side of the table and said, "Please, take a seat and tell me what you are doing in my fair city."

The two officers looked at each other, and the major started. "Mrs Korsning —"

But my mother cut him off in his tracks by saying, "Your Grace. I am the ruler of this duchy, and you will address me by my proper title, regardless of your relationship with my daughter."

"Forgive me, Your Grace. We are not versed in Yanar protocol," said Major McNamara. Angering the duchess was the last thing he wanted.

"You are forgiven. Now tell me why you are here," she said in a calmer voice.

"We are here for help. We are being overrun by an alien race who have placed their human allies in all governmental positions, arrested every official they could find, and are trying to take over the world."

The major's voice was starting to tremble, and he took a deep breath before continuing. "From what we could observe since arriving here, you have the technology to drive them off our planet, not to mention that the Yans possess superpowers. Defeating the invaders would be very easy for you."

My mother looked at him intensely and said, "I am guessing that Diana has already told you that we are leaving this planet. Our forces are already on their way to our new world, and so is my husband. I can't help you."

The major couldn't believe what he was hearing. When I had told him that the Yans would not join the fight, he had shrugged his shoulders, but getting a confirmation from the duchess herself was crushing his last hope. He leaned forward and said, "The British royal family and the UK's highest officials are hiding in a bunker on the border of England and Scotland. We have to retrieve them before they are found by the Famla, and take them to safety. I am begging you to recall your forces and join us in the fight to defeat the Hendus and their shadow group, the Famla."

She sat down, stared at him for a while, then said, "Okay, I'll make you a deal. My heir is staying behind. Apparently, Diana is in love with some boy and refuses to abandon him. She also refuses to leave Earth to the mercy of the Hendus and the Famla. I might be the duchess, but I am also a mother, and my child's safety comes first. If you agree to become the guardian of not only Diana but the Wu twins, the Croise heir, Tristan and David, then I might reconsider destroying the duchy and leaving it as a refuge for your leaders," she concluded.

The major and the captain breathed a sigh of relief. At least they now had not only a safe place to hide the prominent members of their society but also a place to regroup and organise a decent plan to retake their country.

He was also glad to have been given guardianship of the children. He had realised very early on that he was dealing with spoiled brats, and now that he had the authority to order them to stand down, he would be able to protect them from harm more effectively.

The duchess gave the major access not only to our technology but also our weapons and assured him and the captain that all of us children knew how they worked, and we would be able to teach them how to utilise them.

The bad news for him came when she informed him that access to Yanar territories would have to be approved by Pam and me. If we girls found anyone unworthy of entering our territories, no matter how important that person was, then that person would be refused access. Additionally, if anyone misbehaved or acted dishonourably while in Yanar, then the person would be immediately removed and sent back to their country, regardless of the threat that might be on their lives.

To ensure that our laws would be followed to the letter, my mother decided to leave our police force in place to regulate the flow of newcomers until the end of the Hendu–Masani war.

The major tried to convince the duchess to place an adult on the throne, but she refused. She explained that Yanar had very strict laws, and one of the laws was that only the Yan with the strongest

powers could rule, and with their departure, that Yan would be me.

She also informed him that about a million and a half Yans had decided to stay on Earth, so she strongly advised him to seek them out for help.

He replied, “With all due respect, Your Grace, if a million and a half Yans have been left on Earth, why did they allow the planet to be overrun by the Famla?”

My mother smiled and asked, “Has China been overrun as well?”

The major was confused. He turned towards the captain, but the captain had no answer, so the major turned back to my mother and said, “I am not sure, but I can’t see why they wouldn’t have been. Their firepower is not superior to the rest of the world’s.”

My mother was still smiling and said, “I like you, Major. You are courageous, and you are willing to fight and die for your freedom. Those are qualities that Odin expects in all of us. I will do you a favour and reveal to you that two of China’s top generals are also Yans. Now tell me, what are the chances that two Yan generals would let the country they live in fall under anyone’s rule?”

He couldn’t believe it. He asked, “Are the Chinese aware of who they are?”

“They were made aware of their generals’ true identities soon after the invasion began,” she said. “So this is what I can do for you. All the Yans left on Earth have been asked to go dark, including the generals. Two of China’s best designers, who happen to be Yans, are now the point of contact for all Yans left on Earth. Get their KJ signals from the girls, and ask the designers to connect you to either General Ying Yue Lorelei Liu or General Feng Tyr Li. If you are lucky, they might agree to join your fight.”

She then stood up and pressed a button that rang in our room. She then brought us forward and told us of her decision. I was furious. I was old enough to be my own boss. I didn’t need a guardian, especially a caveman like the major, but I knew that antagonising my mother would be a serious mistake. I had a temper, and I had inherited that quality from her.

But the good news was that Pam and I had been made the new regents of Yanar, and that made me happier than anything. I would be able to allow or veto any decision regarding my country and who would be allowed in.

The meeting was over. My mother informed us that she would be leaving soon and made a point to tell us that they were expecting us to join them in Geallta Yanar for every religious holiday and family celebration.

Pam and I looked at each other, and we agreed that it was a fair deal. I wanted her to meet William, but she said that she was too busy, so we left with our new guardian.

The first thing the major did was to demand that we show him how Yanar’s shield worked. I was a little surprised. I expected him to want to do some sightseeing, but I understood when we were made aware of the royal family and the prime minister being in a bunker near the Scottish border.

I thought, *Ouch. If the Famla ever find out about that, it will not end well.*

The major was desperate to get them out of there as soon as possible and wanted to have with him as many weapons as possible.

The major chose Yanara's army base to set up residency for all the military officers and soldiers that had come with us, and all the volunteers that had decided to join the fight.

Not surprisingly, very few of the volunteers were career politicians. That particular group chose to be sent to Yanar City, because the weather was better, and they could spend their days at the beach while waiting for their families to join them.

I was heartbroken when William joined the military volunteers. Yes, he looked very handsome in his brand-new uniform, but he was spending most of his time learning how to fight with Yan weapons rather than spend that time with me.

I was surprised when the major asked to speak to either Jenny Ji or Luo Zheng. First I thought, *Bro, you can't afford their clothes*, but then he disclosed that he needed their help to get in contact with General Lorelei and General Tyr, so we hurried with the introductions.

The two generals were China's youngest and most esteemed generals. When General Lorelei arrived looking super-hot, I thought the major's eyes were going to fall out. Her long black hair was in a bun, and she was wearing China's official military attire. She was quite impressive and a little bit scary.

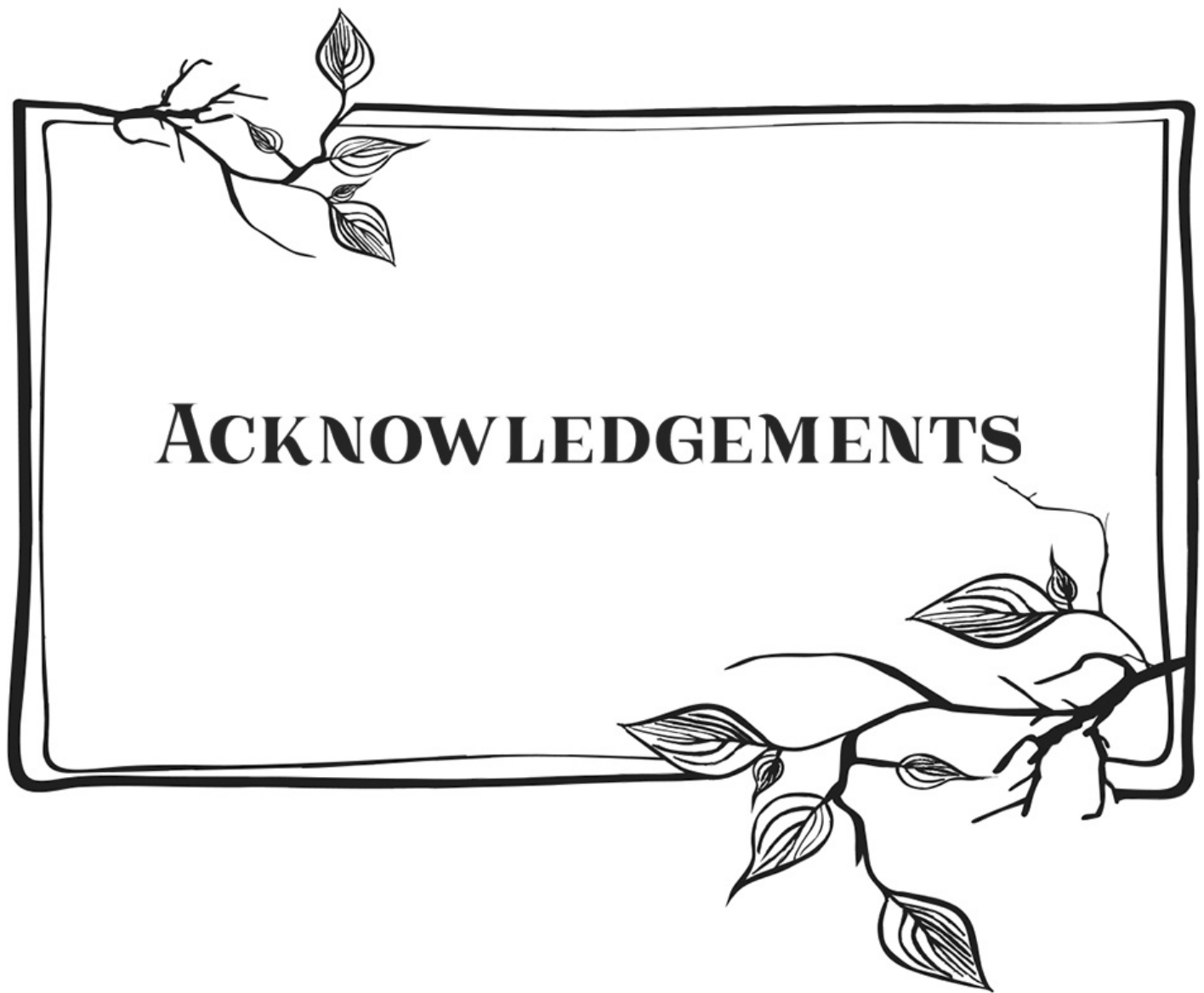
General Tyr arrived later. He too was wearing his official attire. Clearly, the major hadn't expected both of them to be in their thirties. As soon as the pleasantries were over, Pam and I disappeared. The two generals were very old friends of our parents, and we did not want them to decide that they would be better suited to being our guardians rather than the major. The truth was that as strict as the major was, the generals were even worse.

It took the generals two weeks to show the major's army the basics of Yan technology, and by the time they were done, all except for the police force had left, including my mother.

The refugees had helped themselves to accommodations left empty by the previous occupants with our blessings, and as I had predicted, the major booted Pam and me out of any meeting relating to their plans to retake the planet.

He promised to include us in any discussion related to Yanar, but that was no consolation to my wounded pride. I was thinking that he was lucky I was too honourable to blast him away. He was also lucky that my mother had ordered Pam and me to show him respect and obey him, since he was our guardian.

And while the boys, Pam and I were watching Paul on his way to finalise the plans to save the royal family, Hassan turned towards us and said, "Just like Flo Rida said, it's going down for real." And we all burst out laughing.



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