

CHAPTER 1

A KALEIDOSCOPE OF VIOLET seared across Fletcher's vision. Then he was in an abyss, dark water flooding his mouth and nose.

Something rubbery knocked against his ankle as he kicked, fighting the inexorable drag down into the black emptiness. His lungs burned ice cold as he choked on the brackish liquid.

Consciousness faded, seeping from him with the warmth from his body. He was numb, weightless.

With each moment, flashes of memory darted across his air-starved brain. Sariel, crushed beneath the shattered masonry of the pyramid. Jeffrey's smirking face as he stepped over the paralyzed bodies of his friends, a blowpipe in his hands. The portal, spinning. His mother.

He hung in the void.

But thick fingers grasped his outstretched wrist and drew him up. He gagged as cool air hit his face, then felt the meaty thump of a fist on his back as he vomited up the liquid he had swallowed.

"That's it, get it all out," Othello murmured as Fletcher blinked the water away and saw the new world around them.

They were on a small, craggy island, shaped like an upturned bowl and coated in a thick layer of green algae.

He could see they were in the middle of a channel of inky water, with submerged, mangrove-like trees forming a thick barrier on either side. The sky above was a dim, sullen blue, like dusk in winter.

Cress, Sylva and his mother were also there, shivering wet and pressed up close to Lysander's side, while Tosk nestled in his master's lap. Ignatius was busy tongue-drying a bedraggled-looking Athena, and Solomon lay facedown, hugging the island for dear life, panting with the herculean effort it must have taken to haul himself and the paralyzed Griffin out of the water.

"It's moving," Sylva said, pointing at the contracting portal, ten feet from the island. It was half-submerged in the placid water. "That's why you were all the way over there when you came through from the chamber." As Fletcher watched, the shrinking portal seemed to get farther away, before disappearing with a faint pop.

"No," Othello said, nodding at the shifting trees beside them. "We're the ones that are moving."

It was true. They were slowly but surely edging down the dark river. It was almost as if the island was . . . floating.

Fletcher crawled to the edge of the rocks. In the murky water below, a reptilian head turned to the side, revealing a gold-flecked iris that blinked up at him.

"It's not an island," Fletcher whispered, watching as a webbed claw drifted beneath the surface. "We're on a Zaratan."

He backed away slowly, careful not to slip on the shell's surface. For that is what it was—a shell. The demon they rode could have been described as a giant amphibious turtle. He guessed this one was an adolescent, for the species could grow many times larger than the specimen they were perched on.

Looking at the sunken trees beside them, Fletcher considered their options. With no land in sight, they were stuck until they found something better.

Blue light flashed on the trees around them, and he turned to see

that the craggy form of Solomon was gone, infused using Othello's sodden summoning leather.

"Solomon would sink like a stone if our ride here decides to dive," Othello said, eyeing the black water with trepidation.

"Good idea," Fletcher replied, feeling a pang of fear for Lysander. The Griffin was still paralyzed from the darts Jeffrey had shot him with and would likely have drowned had the Zaratan not been passing by.

As for Ignatius, he had curled around Athena, using his natural heat to warm her, while she in turn settled her wings over him like a blanket. Fletcher let them stay. It would do the two demons good to bond. He needed them to be a team, now more than ever.

The group sat in silence, the only sound being the creaking of trees in the wind. With each gust, the placid surface of the water shivered like a living creature.

"The only question is, what do we do now?" Cress finally asked, squinting at the dim sky above.

"We wait," Sylva said, resting her head on Cress's shoulder. "Wait for dry land, or somewhere to hide. Let's just hope the Zaratan gets us out of here quickly."

"Why do we need to hide?" Othello asked.

"You think the orcs won't guess where we've gone?" Sylva said, gesturing around them. "They'll see the blood pattern on the floor and know we've escaped through a portal into their part of the ether. Of course the keys don't transport us to a precise location, so they won't know exactly where we are, but they'll know we're in the area."

"Maybe they'll let us go," Cress whispered, half to herself.

"We just walked into the heart of their holiest place and destroyed half an army that's taken them years to build," Sylva replied, shaking her head. "They won't let us get away that easily. The Wyvern riders will be hunting us in a matter of hours, entering the ether as soon as they're back from chasing the other teams. We're just lucky Fletcher buried so many of the nearest shamans' demons. They will be in disarray, for a while at least."

“She’s right,” Fletcher agreed. “We wait for land and the cover of the forest. We’re too exposed out here.”

He shuffled back and pressed himself against his mother. It felt strange, to touch her. He could hardly believe it was real. Was it truly her . . . after all this time?

All those years, searching the faces of the women he met, thinking of the heartless person who could have left him naked in the snow. And now, to know that she had loved him, and had been kept from him all this time.

As he lay his head on her shoulder, Fletcher realized she was shivering—her frame was so emaciated that it provided no protection from the cold, and the filthy rags she wore were soaked.

“Cress, where are the satchels?” Fletcher asked.

“Um . . . about that,” Cress murmured, twisting her hands in her lap. “We landed in the water. I needed my hands to stay afloat. I only managed to keep hold of two satchels and one of the petal bags. Yours and Jeffrey’s. Here.”

She pushed Fletcher’s sodden bag over. At the loss of their precious petals, a pulse of fear spread across Fletcher’s chest—they were their only source of immunity from the ether’s atmosphere’s natural poison—but he pushed that worry aside for the moment. Instead, he opened the satchel and was relieved to find the tight leather casing had kept most of the water out. Rummaging at the very bottom, he dug out the jacket Berdon had given him for his birthday and wrapped it tightly around his mother’s shoulders, pulling the hood over her head. She rubbed her cheek against the soft down of the rabbit fur.

For the first time, he met his mother’s eyes. The swamp water had washed most of the dirt from her face, and Fletcher marveled at the striking resemblance to her twin, Josephine, the woman he had seen by Zacharias Forsyth’s side at his trial. However, she was by no means identical, not in her current state. Her eyes were sunken, staring blankly past him. He brushed a stray hair from her cheek, which was so gaunt that it bordered on skeletal. Who knew what she had suffered in the seventeen years of her captivity?

“Alice, can you hear me?” Fletcher said. He tried to meet her gaze, but there was no light behind her stare. “Mother?”

“Mother?” Othello repeated gently. “Fletcher . . . are you okay? This is Lady Cavendish.”

“No,” Fletcher replied, helping the woman get her skinny arms into the jacket. “Lady Cavendish died in her fall; the prisoner was never her. This woman had been there for far longer . . . my whole life. She recognized Athena, and called for her baby, and I remember her face from my dream. This is my mother. The orcs took her when I was a child.”

Othello creased his brow, then understanding dawned upon him. But, even as he opened his mouth to speak, his eyes flicked to the murky waters behind them.

“Get back!” Othello yelled, diving across the shell. Fletcher was tackled to the ground, and he heard the hollow snap of jaws above his head. Fetid, fish-laden breath washed over him, then the creature was gone, slipping back into the dark pools around them with barely a sound.

Fletcher caught a glimpse of a reptilian head, and for a panicked moment he thought the Wyverns had caught up with them. But then he saw the humped, log-like shapes in the water around them, and his lessons at Vocans flashed unbidden to his mind.

Sobeks. Great bipedal crocodile-like creatures that used their claws and jaws to tear apart their opponents, if their large tails didn’t batter them to death first. Hunched over at five feet tall, the Sobek was a level-nine demon.

And now they were surrounded by dozens of them.

CHAPTER 2

FLETCHER SCRAMBLED BACK, dragging his mother with him. They pressed against Lysander's side with the others, but they were still no more than a few feet from the water—and the humped shapes lurking beneath the surface.

“Where did they come from?” Cress gasped, drawing her seax from its scabbard.

“They must have sensed the Zaratan,” Sylva said. “Sobeks prey on juveniles like ours.”

The shell shook beneath them, and Fletcher saw that they had stopped their slow passage down the waterway. There was a splash as the nearest Sobek thrashed its tail with excitement. They had their prey cornered.

“Our ride's going to dive,” Othello warned, struggling onto his knees. “Has Lysander recovered? He'll drown!”

Another tremor rocked them, but they didn't sink. Instead the Zaratan held its ground, even as the Sobeks began to circle, their ridged, leathery backs barely breaking the surface.

“Why isn't it diving?” Fletcher murmured. He peered into the water, and the golden eyes of the Zaratan stared back at him.

“It’s . . . protecting us,” he whispered. “It knows we’d die in the water.”

“Well, it’ll just die with us if we don’t do something,” Sylva snarled, tugging her bow from her shoulders. She reached over her shoulder for an arrow, but her quiver was empty, its contents lost to the swamp.

A Sobek lunged at the Zaratan. The turtle demon jerked, dipping his shell to one side, and Lysander slid down the surface. He struggled weakly to climb back up, but as he clawed at the gentle incline, the nearest Sobeks saw their chance. The water foamed white as two separated from the pack, their thick tails lashing back and forth as they homed in on the powerless Griffin. The others hung back: They were more patient than their siblings.

“No!” Fletcher yelled, drawing his khopesh and leaping over Lysander’s inert body. Sylva followed, her curved falx held high as the two monsters sped toward them. Yellow-green eyes flashed, then the first leaped from the water. It crouched low on its two legs and scraped its claws along the shell, leaving furrows in the algae coating. The long snout opened, revealing a cavernous yellow mouth filled with jagged teeth.

It lashed out, so fast that Fletcher barely had time to parry it, meeting the five sickle-shaped claws in the curve of his khopesh. The power in the Sobek’s arms was immense, and Fletcher could barely keep the needle points from hooking into his face. He heaved his sword with both hands, in desperation.

The demon’s second arm swung up, and only a frantic swipe from Sylva’s falx deflected the blow. Even as she did so, the other Sobek sprang from the water, and she had to turn and meet it.

Teeth snapped over Fletcher’s blade, forcing him to lean back, teetering on the slippery surface of the shell. Then the Sobek broke away and spun low. Its heavy tail whipped around, knocking Fletcher’s feet from under him. His head cracked against the shell beneath, and his vision bruised. The khopesh fell from his nerveless fingers.

The yellow jaws of the Sobek flashed down, but even as its hot breath

wafted over him, a ball of flame blasted the demon into the water, leaving the scent of scorched flesh in Fletcher's nostrils.

Ignatius had come to the rescue.

In his concussed haze, Fletcher scrambled to his knees and saw Othello, Cress and Sylva advance together, hacking and parrying the remaining Sobek. Seeing its partner defeated, it dove back in with an angry bellow, leaving the trio panting by the water's edge.

"We can't fight them all," Fletcher gasped, snatching back his khopesh as Ignatius scampered onto his shoulder. Athena remained with his mother, keeping the confused woman from leaving the relative safety of the center of the shell.

The burned Sobek seemed none the worse from Ignatius's attack, but it slipped away into the network of trees opposite them. Its retreat did not deter the others—already they were circling closer, perhaps encouraged by the pitiful resistance from the stranded team. It would not be long now.

"Fire won't work, not in the water anyway," Othello wheezed. "Kinetic blasts won't do it either."

"Lightning," Cress said, and suddenly Tosk was on her shoulder, his furry tail crackling with electric sparks.

"No," Fletcher shouted, holding up his hand. "The spell would fan out in the water and hit the Zaratan too. We'll sink."

"We can cross that bridge when we come to it," Cress replied. "It's the only spell that'll work."

"Don't waste your mana," Sylva said, gesturing at the circling Sobeks. "It won't be powerful enough to kill them all."

Lysander groaned behind them, fighting the vestiges of the paralytic poison. A level-ten Griffin battling beside them might help even the odds, but Lysander was barely able to crawl up the gentle incline of the shell.

Another Sobek broke from the pack, gliding closer to test their defenses. There was a spray of water as a webbed foot erupted from the river, sending the reptile tumbling in the air. It splashed back down in a

deluge, floundering, half-stunned among its brethren. The Zaratan was fighting back.

“Think,” Fletcher muttered to himself. He ran through the spells he knew. Shield spells were useless against demons; the demonic energy tore through them like rice paper. There were spells to numb pain, open and close locks, pull moisture from the air. Spells that amplified and deadened sound, spells that allowed the caster to detect nearby movement. All useless.

But then, as he stared out at the marshes around him, he remembered another swamp, back in the orc jungles. And Malik, testing Jeffrey’s ice spell on its inky pools, turning the black water into solid ice. Sobeks would freeze just the same.

He etched in the air, trying to remember the pattern that Jeffrey had shown them. It was a complex glyph, in the shape of a snowflake.

“Wait . . . ,” Othello said, his eyes widening. “That might just work.”

The pattern sizzled, but Fletcher’s year of training in Pelt’s dungeons came to the fore, his mind easily maintaining the pulses of mana both to and through his finger. As if galvanized by the symbol’s blue light, a pack broke off from the circling Sobeks. Three of them, powering through the water in a V-shaped formation.

A bead of sweat trickled down Fletcher’s brow. His finger darted back and forth, its pad burning and freezing as the last line was formed in the air. The Sobeks were so close, he could see their slitted pupils focused on him with malevolent intent. A bolt from Cress’s crossbow whipped past his shoulder, but it missed, disappearing into the dark water with barely a ripple.

“Fletcher, hurry!” Sylva cried, and he felt the Zaratan shudder beneath them.

Then, as the first Sobek hurled itself out of the river, a long streak of white gusted from Fletcher’s fingers, blasting ice crystals into the water. He could feel the mana draining from him, but he redoubled his efforts, sending pulse after pulse at the approaching demons until the air was

filled with a blizzard of snowflakes. It was only when half of his mana had been expended that he stopped, collapsing to his knees and panting with exertion.

Slowly, the flakes settled on the water, revealing the full extent of Fletcher's efforts.

The Sobek hung motionless in a jagged lump of crystal, its jaws half-open, claws outstretched for Fletcher's throat. Only its tail and back legs remained uncovered, hanging limply from the back of the floating iceberg. The other two demons could be seen half-submerged in the water, their bodies frozen solid, while a sheet of ice crackled and snapped around them on the swamp's surface.

"Bloody hell," Cress murmured. "That worked like a charm."

"Is the Zaratan okay?" Fletcher asked, worried at how close he had blasted the ice spell.

As if in answer, the shell beneath them shuddered as the Zaratan began to swim. Fletcher kept the ice symbol fixed in the air, but already the remaining Sobeks were breaking away at the sight of their stricken companions, one by one at first, but soon in twos and threes as the Zaratan neared the edge of the circling pack.

Soon they were alone once again in the swamps, the silence disturbed only by the gentle rattle of tree branches as a chill wind wafted over them. They had survived.

For now.

CHAPTER 3

THE ZARATAN SWAM ON as the sky began to darken, pausing only to chew on the occasional patch of river weed that floated by. It swam with new purpose, and they ate up the distance quickly, even if their surroundings looked much the same. Every minute that ticked by was a blessing, for it meant they were going farther and farther away from the orcish part of the ether, where the orc shamans and the Wyverns they rode would undoubtedly have already begun their pursuit.

As they waited for the swamps to end, cold became their greatest enemy; the damp air sucking the heat from their bodies to leave them shivering against the faint warmth of Lysander's downy sides. Fletcher left Ignatius draped around his mother's shoulders, while Athena curled up in her lap. Alice twisted her fingers absently through Athena's fur, a distant smile playing across her lips as the Gryphowl purred and chirruped.

A dull lethargy began to take hold of them as time passed by—and Fletcher could barely muster the energy to move at all. He wondered if it was the aftereffects of Jeffrey's darts . . . or the ether's poison slowly taking hold.

As night fell, they produced a small wyrdlight and ate the last of their supplies from the mission—salted pork from Briss's kitchen and bruised

bananas harvested from the jungle. It was simple fare, but Alice wolfed down the pork with feral jerks of her head, as if she had not tasted meat in years. Fletcher gave her his own portion, and he didn't know whether to laugh or cry as she sat back with a mindless groan, clutching her distended belly. Moments later she was almost asleep, her head resting on Fletcher's shoulder.

Fletcher's vision of his mother, for the brief time he had known her as Alice Raleigh, had been of a gentle, beautiful woman, full of love for her only child. Now he found himself the caretaker of a lost soul with a broken mind and no memory of even herself, let alone her son. Yet, as he gently wiped the oily stains from the corners of Alice's mouth, he found his heart breaking for her. How could he hold his disappointment against her, after all she had endured? He loved her just the same.

They used the last light of dusk—if you could call it that in this alien world—to check their supplies. They even had some spare dry clothing, which they changed into surreptitiously, using Lysander's body as a makeshift wall between boys and girls.

To Fletcher's surprise, they discovered that they had kept all of their weapons, though most of their gunpowder had become soaked in the water. Sylva's arrows had all been lost, but Fletcher had some to share, and Cress had seven remaining crossbow bolts too. Yet, in this environment, they all knew that it was their demons that would be their most useful tools, and Fletcher felt a pang of pity for Sylva. She had no demon or mana anymore.

As they sheathed their weapons and settled for the night, Fletcher turned his mind to the petals. There were roughly one hundred in the sack Cress had managed to save, though in the dark it was hard to count. And even as he counted under his breath, Fletcher could sense their effects waning, the strange lethargy they were feeling building with every minute. Soon each breath became labored, until it felt like he had just climbed Vocans's west staircase. He had not expected the effects to wear off so quickly, and suddenly their small sack seemed a pitiful number.

Seeing the others dozing, Fletcher realized it was too dangerous to sleep—he might never wake up if the effects wore off in the night.

“I need another petal,” he panted.

“I didn’t want to be the first to say it,” Cress sighed, cracking open her eyes and plucking one from the sack.

Sylva and Othello followed suit, and even Alice allowed Fletcher to place it in her mouth without complaint, swallowing it down when Fletcher gently rubbed her throat.

“What was that, five hours?” Fletcher asked, instantly feeling strength returning to his body.

“More or less,” Othello agreed. “That’s almost five petals a day, each. At least in our world’s time—I know the cycles of night and day vary in the ether.”

“Do they? I should have paid more attention in class,” Cress grumbled.

“Don’t worry, we learned this in second year,” Othello continued. “The ether’s days are around ten hours in winter and forty hours in the summer, but our years and seasons are the same length. That’s how we’re able to predict the migrations that pass through Hominum’s part of the ether. It’s winter now so . . . we should probably get some shut-eye; it’ll be light in five hours or so.”

Fletcher listened intently. He was a year behind Othello, and with his focus on the tournament, had forgotten much of what he had learned in his demonology and etherwork lessons.

“You’re missing the big picture,” Sylva snapped, her voice cutting through the darkness and making Fletcher jump. “We’ll go through five petals every five hours. How long before we run out and are slowly poisoned to death? There can’t be more than a hundred petals in that bag. That’s one hundred hours each. Ten day-night cycles in the ether.”

Fletcher’s mind raced. That came to a little over four days in real time. Four days until they lost the use of their bodies and eventually . . . died.

“Well, surely there will be some of those flowers around here,” Fletcher suggested, but already his heart was sinking.

“Do you see any?” Sylva asked, motioning at the submerged bushes around them. “I’m sure the flowers exist in the orcish part of the ether somewhere; it’s the only way they would have so many of them. But not here. These swamplands must be on the very edge of their territory—it’s probably the only reason the orcs haven’t found us yet.”

“Well, does it really matter?” Cress muttered.

“What the hell do you mean? Of course it bloody does,” Sylva retorted. Fletcher frowned. It wasn’t like Sylva to curse.

“Guys, take it easy,” Othello said nervously.

“No, I want to know,” Sylva growled, shaking off Othello’s hand as he tried to calm her. “I want to know why she thinks the only thing that’s keeping us from keeling over, foaming at the mouth and spasming and twitching to our deaths doesn’t *matter*.”

“It doesn’t matter because we’re all going to die here anyway!” Cress shouted. And then, to Fletcher’s astonishment, she burst into tears.

“One hundred hours, two hundred hours. Who cares,” she sobbed, hiding her face in her hands. “There’s no way back.”

Sylva froze, her angry retort dying on her lips.

“Hey,” Sylva said, shuffling closer to her. “I just . . . with Sariel dead and now the petals . . . I was lashing out. I’m sorry.”

She wrapped her arms around Cress and buried her head in the dwarf’s shoulder.

Despite their circumstances, Fletcher and Othello smiled at each other. After all of Sylva’s suspicion and distrust, she and Cress could finally let their defenses down and see each other for who they truly were.

Fletcher let them hug it out a few beats longer but knew he could not leave it at that. They needed a plan, or even just a sliver of hope. He cleared his throat.

“It’s not a hundred hours until we die,” he said, lacing his voice with confidence he did not feel. Sylva pulled away from Cress, and he saw her face was also damp with tears.

“What do you mean?” she said.

“We just have to find some more petals,” Fletcher continued. “That’s

all. Think about it—the flowers must exist in both Hominum’s and the orcs’ part of the ether, so it’s got to be a common plant. I bet Jeffrey’s journal has all the information we need on what they look like and where they grow.”

“Okay,” Cress said, her voice barely above a whisper. “So we search for them. But . . . what about getting home?”

“We aren’t able to create a portal back to our world from here, not without some sort of new keys,” Othello said quickly. “Or another part of the ether for that matter; it’s been tried before.”

“Great,” Sylva said despondently.

“But . . . we can go back through a portal that someone in *our* world has already created.”

“So what are you suggesting?” Cress muttered. “That we somehow turn this Zaratan around, make our way back to where we started, avoid the Wyverns and shamans, find a portal they’ve just opened, jump through, fight our way out of wherever we end up and then hightail it through the jungle to the Hominum border with half of orcdom in pursuit. No thanks.”

“You’re right,” Fletcher said, holding up his hands in surrender. “We’re definitely not doing that. We’re going to get as far from the orcish part of the ether as possible.”

“Then what?” Othello asked. He and Cress looked confused, but Fletcher could see the beginnings of a smile playing across Sylva’s face. He took a deep breath.

“We’re going to get out of these swamps and traverse the ether—until we find Hominum’s part of it.”

CHAPTER 4

FLETCHER WOKE. He heard a soft thud and rocked to the side. Another followed, and he rolled against Lysander's belly.

"Wuh—" he managed, cracking open his eyes.

There were trees around him. Real trees, with dangling branches like willows shading him from the pale skies. Cress's face swam into view, a bright grin plastered across her face.

"Sheldon's walking," she said, tugging at his jacket.

Fletcher sat up, wincing as his back twinged with pain. It had not been a comfortable sleep, and far less than he would have liked.

His first thought was of Alice. She was awake and chewing on a petal, sitting near the Zaratan's tail, staring vacantly at the trees above.

There was a flake of yellow resting on her upper lip. Fletcher wiped it away gently and tugged the jacket close about her shoulders, taking care not to disturb the still-sleeping Ignatius. Athena was alert but had not moved from Alice's lap. He could sense a great melancholy from the Gryphowl and knew that she loved Alice as much as his father had. He rubbed her head and left the two together.

"Sheldon?" he asked, Cress's words catching up with him.

"Our Zaratan—we decided to name him," Sylva said, holding out a

petal for Fletcher to eat. “Eat up, it’s been five hours, or at least, that’s what Cress’s pocket watch says.”

As he munched on the tart garnish, he saw Sylva was busy counting the petals in the sack, stacking them carefully between her thighs.

“How do you know it’s a him?” Othello said, still sprawled across the front half of the shell, his eyes closed.

“I checked,” Cress said, her cheeks flushing red.

Fletcher chuckled and crawled to the front of the Zaratan. Sheldon turned to look back at him, blinking his golden eyes ponderously. He was a handsome creature, with a smooth yellow beak and a long, agile neck. His pace, though deliberate, was faster than it seemed, the long strides eating up the ground beneath his splayed, claw-tipped feet.

For a moment Fletcher considered whether the demon might be worth harnessing. But it was a level-fifteen demon—far too high for Sylva.

“Ninety petals,” Sylva announced, interrupting his thoughts. “Just as I thought. Ninety hours left.”

Fletcher’s eyes flicked to the ground around them, searching for even a hint of yellow. Yet it was all a mess of greens and browns, with nary a demon or blossom in sight.

“We should stay with Sheldon,” Fletcher suggested, looking ahead to where the ground was still swampy but already beginning to dry out, with the occasional patch of coarse grass making an appearance. Beyond, the trees became taller, though the area was obscured by the deepening shadow of the canopy.

“I agree, he’s faster than we would be on foot,” Sylva said. “Plus he’s not completely defenseless—his claws and beak look sharp enough.”

“We can stay on the move while we’re sleeping too, if one of us keeps watch,” Cress agreed, scrambling over to join Fletcher.

She reached out to pet Sheldon, and Fletcher grinned when the Zaratan rumbled with pleasure as she scratched the root of his neck. The gentle giant would be a formidable ally in the coming days.

A squawk cut through the air, followed by a cry from Sylva. Fletcher turned to see Lysander had finally recovered—but he was advancing on

Tosk with his hackles raised, stalking him like a lion would a gazelle. His eyes were different somehow, the pupils dilated and empty of the intelligence that had shone there before.

“Lysander, what are you doing?” Fletcher shouted. He knew Lysander hadn’t eaten since being paralyzed, but this was more than hunger.

“His bond with Lovett was broken when the portal closed,” Sylva said, horrified. “He’s becoming wild again.”

Lysander took another step closer to the terrified Raiju, whose blue fur was standing on end. Tosk’s squirrel-like tail arched, crackling with lightning. In response, the Griffin opened his beak wide and unleashed a roar, the timbre rising until it ended in a screech.

“We need to do something,” Othello shouted, half-obscured by the prowling Griffin. “He’s going to kill him!”

Fletcher’s mind raced. Lysander’s summoning scroll was stuffed down the side of his pack. The only problem was, the pack was underneath the Griffin’s belly.

“I’m not letting him hurt Tosk,” Cress said, and suddenly her cross-bow was armed, the tip centered on Lysander’s head.

“Fletcher, any ideas?” Sylva yelled.

Sylva. Without Sariel, she might be capable of harnessing a level-ten demon like Lysander. Two years ago, she had a summoning level of seven.

“Get ready,” he said, lowering himself into a crouch.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sylva hissed. But there was no time to explain.

“Athena, now!” Fletcher shouted, sprinting up the incline of the Zatan’s shell. He skidded beneath Lysander’s belly and thrust his hand into the side pocket of his satchel. The world above brightened as Lysander leaped for Tosk, only to find his prey snatched away by the swooping Gryphowl.

“Read it!” Fletcher bellowed, hurling the scroll into Sylva’s bewildered hands.

“What . . . ,” Sylva began, but then, “*Lo ro di mai si lo.*”

Lysander screeched and spun, his talons scraping on the surface of the shell. His eyes bored into Fletcher's with a deep, animal hunger. It was all Fletcher could do not to scramble away.

Ignatius was circling the pair, woken from Alice's neck by Sylva's scream. He waited for an opportunity to strike, but Fletcher ordered him to hold off. They needed time; an attack from Ignatius would just force a confrontation too soon.

As if Sheldon could sense the commotion, the shell shuddered beneath them. The tremors gave the Griffin pause, and he widened his stance, spreading himself like a bear crossing a frozen lake. Already white threads were beginning to appear between him and Sylva, twisting together to form a cord of glowing light.

"Hurry up . . .," Fletcher whispered under his breath, willing Sylva's chanting on as it swirled around them.

Lysander took a faltering step, his fierce beak hanging open to reveal a pink maw within. He was struggling, his bond with Sylva growing with every word that she spoke. Fletcher remained still, knowing that any sudden movement might set the Griffin off.

Another step, and now Fletcher could feel the panting Griffin's hot breaths, moist from the demon's gullet. Fletcher closed his eyes.

The cold, hard beak grazed his cheek, and then he felt the soft ruffle of feathers as the demon nuzzled him, burying his great head against Fletcher's chest. Sylva's chanting had stopped. . . . Lysander was back.

Fletcher wrapped his arms around the Griffin's neck, but seconds later they were empty. He opened his eyes and saw the Griffin was dissolving in a haze of white light, with Sylva holding a summoning leather beneath him.

As the last of the luminescence flowed into her, she sat back with her fists clenched, shuddering with the euphoria of infusing a new demon for the first time. Finally she lay down, a gentle smile playing across her lips.

Fletcher collapsed onto the shell beside her, and then Ignatius knocked

him onto his back, chirping with relief. It was strange, but the demon seemed heavier somehow. He gave Fletcher a remonstrative nip on the ear for scaring him and promptly enveloped Fletcher's neck.

"Right, someone has to tell me what the hell just happened," Cress growled.

Fletcher turned to see her stomping across the shell toward them, Tosk's round, black eyes peering out from where he had hidden within her jacket.

"It happens when demons lose their masters," Othello explained, rubbing the back of his neck. "I should have remembered; we learned about it in second year. Demons only become truly sentient when they are captured and harnessed by a summoner; before that they're no more intelligent than any other animal. Without the bond, they return to that state until they bond with a new master and remember who they were. We're lucky that Lysander was paralyzed for so long—it usually happens very quickly."

"It's true," Fletcher said, his mind flashing back to Athena's memory of the night he was left outside Pelt's gates. How she had felt the wild call of the ether, tugging at her very essence.

"Well, you could have bloody warned us," Cress grumbled.

Fletcher stood and tried to extricate himself from Ignatius's embrace, but the demon refused to budge. He sighed and scooted down the shell's incline to Alice, who was sitting cross-legged, staring vacantly ahead. She had not moved, not even when Lysander had roared. It was only the occasional stroke of her hand across Athena's back that gave him any hope that she might one day recover.

Fletcher had lost his birth father, Edmund. But he would not lose his mother again. Not now, when they spent so little time together. There had to be a way.

He gazed out at the wasteland, searching for some semblance of hope. But there was no food, no flowers, just mud and drab plants.

"Don't worry, Ali—Mum," Fletcher murmured, the word sitting strangely in his mouth. "We'll get you home. I promise."

CHAPTER 5

THE LIGHT OF THE SKY changed quickly in the ether, going from golden morning sun to clear gray sky in the space of an hour. The area around them remained desolate, the only sign of life coming from a lone Kappa: a scrawny, green-skinned humanoid that slipped into a pool of murky water as soon as they neared. Fletcher had just enough time to identify it, and see the strange, bowl-like indent on the top of its head, where it stored water when it traveled on land.

In a way, he was glad at the lack of demons nearby—for it made the occasional need to relieve themselves safer. Cress had taken on the role of minder for his mother, guiding her ahead of Sheldon to the bushes at regular intervals, after Tosk had scouted them for safety first. She told Fletcher that she had cared for her grandmother in the same way, when she had become too old to look after herself. He was immensely grateful; he knew he could not bring himself to take that on just yet.

As the hours went by, Fletcher felt oddly drowsy, as if his body could not recognize the rhythms of this new world. He supposed they had spent more time in the ether than any human, elf or dwarf ever had.

He was not the only one who was feeling the effects—Cress and Othello were snoozing, propping themselves up against each other in the

center of the shell. Sylva sat below the Zaratan's neck, her back to him. Her head was tilted forward, as if she was staring at her lap.

Curious, Fletcher settled down beside her.

"What are you reading?" Fletcher asked, seeing an open book resting on her calves. It was not unlike James Baker's, with sketches of small, insectile demons in the margins.

"That traitor Jeffrey's journal," Sylva spat, and Fletcher could almost feel the anger radiating from her like a furnace.

"Sorry," he said, not wanting to intrude.

He began to get up, but Sylva caught his expression and grasped his wrist.

"No, I'm sorry," she whispered, her face softening. "For blaming you . . . when Sariel died. If you hadn't acted, none of us would be alive right now."

She lowered her head and looked into his eyes. There was sincerity there and . . . something else.

For a moment Fletcher's mind flashed to the moment he had buried Sariel beneath the rubble of the pyramid, along with the enemy demons that were bearing down on them. He'd had no choice . . . had he?

"There's nothing to apologize for," Fletcher said, feeling a pang of guilt, despite her words. "I don't know what I would have done if I had lost Ignatius."

He paused, searching for a subject to get her mind off Sariel. Sadly, his first thought was not much cheerier.

"Still, I can't help but think that all I've done is delay the inevitable," he said. "We're no closer to finding those yellow flowers than yesterday."

Fletcher half expected Sylva to grow more despondent, but to his surprise she broke into a grin.

"That's where you're wrong," she said, flipping forward a few pages and running her finger over the yellow paper. "Look."

There was a sketch of a flower there, with a delicate stem and large petals that curved around one another in the shape of a conch shell. Below

it, Fletcher could read out a short passage, written in Jeffrey's surprisingly neat handwriting.

Experiment 786—The Three Sister Flowers

Captain Jacoby's search of the ether bore fruit—or should I say, plants—today. A trio of flowering plants, each appearing near identical but for the coloring of their petals—red, blue and yellow. Clearly, they are related to one another somehow.

From what Jacoby tells us, the red flowers (genus: Medusa) tend to grow near the similarly colored sands of the deadlands—perhaps a camouflage mechanism of sorts.

The blue flowers (genus: Stheno) grow near salt water, which is a shame, as other than the occasional small brackish marsh, the nearest salt water is a sea, some distance from Hominum's part of the ether. I imagine he may have used a charging stone to keep the portal open long enough for his Chamrosh to travel there and back. Impressive.

Finally, the yellow flowers (genus: Euryale). Apparently they only grow near lava. The batch he brought us was found in the crater of a nearby volcano. It is a good thing those are common near our part of the ether.

Though our dissection of the plants yielded poor results, Captain Lovett has volunteered to consume them in order to determine if they have any medicinal properties. The chances of poisoning are far higher than any positive results, but I say we roll the dice. After all, what else is she good for?

Fletcher clenched his fists as he read the final sentence. How had he judged Jeffrey so poorly? He had pitied the sickly servant boy, had even seen some of himself in him. But appearances could be deceiving. Jeffrey had been as heartless as the Forsyths were.

“Don’t you see?” Sylva asked, interrupting his thoughts. “The flower we’re looking for grows near lava.”

She was beaming from ear to ear, but Fletcher wasn’t hopeful.

“I mean, have you seen any volcanoes?” he asked, gesturing at the lifeless bayou surrounding them. “I know there are some near Hominum’s part of the ether, but we’re probably miles away from there and might not even be heading in the right direction.”

“Well, send Athena out to have a look!” she said, exasperated. “We need a plan, Fletcher. Look around you. Do you really think sitting back and hoping for the best is the right thing to do? I know you’ve just found your mother, but you’re still our leader. So, lead.”

Fletcher knew she spoke sense, but the thought of sending Athena to scout filled him with dread. He was scared of what he might see. An empty skyline, void of the telltale columns of volcanic smoke? A sea of green, with no end in sight? He didn’t want to know the answer. Not yet.

He looked at Alice, and the gentle stroking of her hand across Athena’s back. His mother looked almost content. Why not stay on the shell, wait it out and let fate decide? He was tired of making decisions, rolling the dice. They were safe here.

As if she could sense his doubt, Sylva laid her hand on his, her palm cool and smooth to the touch. He lifted his head and met her gaze.

“You’ve got us this far,” she whispered. “Lysander’s too big . . . you’re the only one who can do this.” Her eyes were filled with hope, and he felt disgusted with himself, at his fear, his doubt.

“I don’t want to risk it,” he said, hating himself with every word. “She might be seen. We should wait, at least until we’re farther away . . . we still have time. I don’t want to make any hasty decisions.”

Sylva lowered her gaze and pulled away from him, stashing the book inside her jacket.

“Doing nothing is as much a choice as doing something, Fletcher,” she said. “It might be the greatest risk of all.”

She stood up, swaying slightly as the shell tilted with each of Sheldon’s ponderous steps.

“Think it over,” she said, walking away from him.

To Fletcher’s surprise, she went to sit beside his mother. As he watched, she tugged an ivory-colored object from the coil of her braided hair, letting her tresses fall loose around her shoulders in a wave of white gold.

It was a comb made from carved deer bone, and Sylva lifted it and gently pulled it through Alice’s hair. Fletcher’s heart leaped as a smile played across his mother’s lips, and she closed her eyes and tilted her head back, enjoying the sensation.

Sylva did not seem to notice, instead teasing Alice’s hair with long, careful strokes until it hung straight down his mother’s back, free of the muck that had coated it, the dirty yellow soon a burnished flaxen sheet, peppered with white at the roots. Pocketing the comb, Sylva lifted her hands, and soon her nimble fingers were dancing back and forth, twisting and braiding it.

“There,” Sylva said, tugging Alice’s hair one final time. It had been braided to fall in a thick plait down his mother’s back, and Fletcher smiled. Gone was the wild woman, leaving a frail, elegant beauty in her place.

“Thank you,” Fletcher breathed, hurrying over to them. “She needed it. And the braid, it’s beautiful.”

“Just something my mother taught me,” Sylva said, shrugging shyly. Fletcher smiled again.

“I wish I’d had time to meet her after the council meeting,” Fletcher said.

Sylva looked down at her hands.

“She died when I was very young,” she said.

Fletcher kicked himself. Of course. How had he never asked about her mother?

He suddenly realized that he knew far less about Sylva than any other of his friends. Ever since they met, she had never spoken about her home and rarely mentioned her family. But when she had, it had always been about her father.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I should have known.”

“No . . . I never talk about her,” Sylva said, her voice taut with pain.

Fletcher said nothing. He didn’t want to press her. The silence stretched on, until Sylva finally spoke again.

“Maybe I should,” she said, her voice barely more than a breath. “You would have liked her. She was brave, and loyal. But she trusted too much. She was poisoned and . . . we couldn’t save her.”

She turned her head away and wiped a tear from her eye.

“I . . . that’s awful, Sylva,” Fletcher said. It was all beginning to make sense. How hard it was for her to trust, to care about others. Her constant suspicion of his motives. It all came down to this.

“Why would someone do such a thing?” Fletcher whispered.

“It was my sister,” Sylva said, and her face turned hard once more. “She was older. Wanted to be chieftain, and knew that she was next in line. When they found hemlock in her room, we knew it was her. But we couldn’t prove it, so she was banished from our lands. I haven’t seen her in eight years.”

Fletcher shook his head, horrified. Somehow, he had imagined elves to be above such evils.

“So . . . why aren’t you chieftain then?” Fletcher asked, hoping to change the subject.

“I wasn’t old enough, and am not even now. My father took her position. Our society passes chieftainship through the mother to the eldest daughter, or if there are none, the eldest son.”

So that was why most of the Elven Chieftains had been female. It was a stark contrast to Hominum’s society.

“Anyway, enough of that,” Sylva said, getting to her knees. “I’m glad you have a chance to know your own mother. She’s a sweetheart.”

Sylva leaned forward and kissed the top of Alice’s head. And then something amazing happened. Alice lifted her hand and pressed it against Sylva’s cheek.

“Mum?” Fletcher asked, his pulse quickening. “Can you hear me?”

He leaned forward and peered into her eyes. For the briefest of moments, his mother met his gaze. Then her hand dropped to her lap and she gazed vacantly out at the thickening groves around them.

Hope flooded Fletcher.

Perhaps his mother could be saved. She needed normality, comfort and care. And he knew they wouldn't find that out here, in this sullen wasteland. Sylva was right; he needed to act.

"Athena," Fletcher said, pulling the Gryphowl from his mother's lap. She gave him a disgruntled yowl, but reluctantly unfurled her wings and looked at him expectantly.

"How would you like to do some scouting?"