

# CAMILLEON

## Beyond The Veil

A Novel by Shykia Bell

*SAMPLE CHAPTERS*



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*Sometimes taking hold of your dreams means having to let go of all that seems certain. Doing so occasionally brings the realization that between ambition and triumph lay nightmares.*

*The journey has been long and I couldn't have made it without the tireless support and dedication of my loving husband, Max. He has instilled in me the bravery to share my work with the world while being true to my soul.*

*Max, thanks for being my beacon and staying beside me through it all.*



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# Chapter 1

## Return of the Pariah

Only death could grant her clemency from the torment. At least that's what she figured as she was swept up by the exquisite ambiguity of fear and fury. It carried her with the centrifugal force of a dizzying carousel as she approached the crescendo of her despair. Her attempt to evade oppression only seemed to increase her weight against the cold floor. Constricted by the bondage of radiating pain and a hood of darkness, her body trembled as it pleaded for release only to be denied the mercy it craved.

Useless anger and desperation fogged her mind, fueling her terror-induced disorientation. As she gasped, the salty metallic scent of the thickening air invaded her nostrils, tingling the back of her throat. Despite keeping her eyes squeezed shut as though to preserve her sanity, she could feel it seeping out of her like sweat from her pores. Her anguished voice was all she had left and she used it to unleash an outcry of defiance.

“No! You can’t make me!”

Parting her lids cautiously, Camile let the soft glow of her computer monitor guide her to salvation. Her head still propped in her hand, she breathed deeply and basked in the presence of sweet consciousness. Constantly haunted by the recurring nightmare, sleep was often difficult to come by. In fact, it had recently become her newest enemy. Nonetheless,

she couldn't resist paying it a brief visit a few hours before her usual bedtime.

The fatigue stemming from her accumulating restless nights was taking its toll. Surprisingly, Akalina made no appearances in any of the nightmares Camile experienced during the few times she managed to sleep. Since the reintegration, Akalina only existed in the memories and distant echoes that resonated in her subconscious mind. Camile didn't like to think of the one who used her own distorted self-image against her, driving her to a suicide that further divided her already shredded soul. She hated the fact she and Akalina were now the same person.

No.

Not quite the same.

Akalina possessed a darkness that swallowed civility wherever she went. Such wickedness isn't easily forgotten, which is why Camile's been living in heavily guarded temporary quarters for nearly two months. She wasn't a prisoner, though at times she felt like one. Camile had been subjected to this period of near-total isolation for her protection and that of the citizens residing in her new environment.

They called it the Transcendent World, a concurrent dimension to the world in which she had spent the last eighteen of her twenty-four years. Based on the information Camile reviewed on her computer, Arvaina—which overlapped a large portion of the United States in the Coexistent World—was one of six continents in the Transcendent dimension. The others were Bauldana, Saulnan, Jypsone, Norcrine and Krohme. From what Camile had read of Arvaina, family life and camaraderie were highly valued. There were few formal holidays since every day in itself was a celebration of life. The Arvainans expressed their gratitude, not necessarily in the form of extravagant parties, but simple acts of appreciation.

There were, however, occasional gatherings to celebrate marital unions, life milestones and to honor the dead. She often wondered about the ceremony of the latter and if she would have received such an honor upon her death. Then she remembered she had already died under rather ominous circumstances. The icy grip of the dark memory sometimes ensnared her attention, but she was always able to hang onto a positive remnant of reality.

For instance, she was to soon travel with her parents to the main section of Caldaq, the compound where she would reside during her training. At present, she dwelled just a few miles away in a hidden branch of the facility, located beneath a large lake. Though she found silent comfort in her current quarters, she felt an ironic nostalgia for the busy city she could never quite fit into. Yet, she had found some sort of stability in the chaotic disorder that once swirled around her.



Prior to recent events, she had become fairly accustomed to the hectic monotony of her former New York residence. Even so, Camile knew that every civilization had its deep dark secrets and learned that Arvaina was no exception. The Arvainan council had ordered her execution just six years after she was born from a forbidden union between Kylie, her Coexistent mother and Zephyr, her Transcendent father—who she knew very little about during her upbringing. Now, in an almost sardonic turn of events, the council needed her help.

Sitting upright in her chair, Camile stretched deeper into her awareness. She knew that the torturous reverie awaited her return, but she planned to evade it by forsaking slumber for the umpteenth time in weeks. Still, she needed to do something to soothe her racing mind and ease the thumping bass, furiously pulsing in her chest. She decided a quick bath would do the trick. It had to be quick. She couldn't risk the chance of relaxation reopening the gateway to her subconscious.

After peeling away layers of cotton, denim and lace, she caught a glimpse of her caramel toned body in the large mirror across the bathroom. Her gaze lingered there despite the fact she often feared to regard her own reflection, afraid of whom or what might look back at her. Aside from her cool gray eyes, Camile could barely recognize herself at times. Her body had undergone changes since her fateful day of self-discovery. Among them were three parallel scars across her right oblique. She would sometimes trace her fingers over them as though to gauge their authenticity. Hers was an averagely feminine body with the typical problem areas most women have, or think they have. She wished her breasts were more proportional to her ample backside, but overall, she made peace with what she saw in the mirror, which hadn't always been the case. Realizing she was admiring her image a little too long, she retreated to the tub.

Camile deeply inhaled the powdery, lavender-infused scent of the warm water enveloping her like a foamy blanket. She soaked her sponge while considering what her parents had told her weeks earlier and figured they were right, she had been reborn and was getting reacquainted with herself. It led her to realize that her physical and spiritual separation from Akalina—her egocentric counterpart—had impeded her emotional stability, leading her to make faulty decisions. With time came clarification, something that had eluded her prior to the reintegration. Still, there was a lingering void that she hoped would eventually heal.

Nevertheless, she now understood why it was necessary to endure so many obstacles in order to facilitate the reintegration. She needed to find her strength, Akalina needed to find humbleness, and Zareah—her former ghost—needed to learn self-belief and determination. In doing so, their energies combined, leaving her with a second chance and the regret of having betrayed life by embracing death too soon.

\* \* \*

Camile's parents were an obvious representation of her dual citizenship and diverse ancestry. Kylie, her mother, was a nurturing and protective woman, perhaps overly so. She had sheltered her daughter to such a degree as a child that it fostered her naivety.

Kylie's contemplative hazel eyes were as warm as a summer sunrise partially eclipsed by buttery brown lids. Subtle under eye wrinkles and the off-centered streak of silver in her brunette hair were the only visible indicators of her age. Camile's father, Zephyr, wore his years slightly more generously in his creamy white skin. Even so, his angular face was well-defined and symmetrical and seemed to effortlessly cling to youth despite his mildly graying jet-black hair. Though Camile was just getting to know him, his eyes seemed familiar. They were the same eyes that had stared back at her from the mirror all her life.

As they toured Deltine City, Camile's parents explained that she would meet two of her soon-to-be instructors, Sir Drayden Sebastian and Tabitha Livingstone, later that afternoon. Tabitha, a shaman and spiritual healer, would act as Camile's counselor through the duration of her training. Sir Drayden, Tabitha's overseer, was tasked with appraising Camile's overall progress in all aspects of her instruction.

Camile was informed that her abilities were not dissimilar from those of the average Transcendent resident. Several civilizations within the Transcendent dimension viewed their abilities as a derivative of their spiritual creator. Many individuals were either empaths, telepaths, changelings, or possessed enhanced intuition or hypersensitive hearing. Only a small percentage of the population had multiple abilities. She had read about people with telekinesis in addition to a very select few with coercive powers.

What set Camile apart from the inhabitants of her new environment was the fact she possessed a vast combination of these powers—a very rare anomaly within the Transcendent World. She had the most experience with the latter and several people were tormented as a result. No matter how hard she tried to drive the memories from her mind she couldn't forget how she had somehow convinced several childhood bullies to maim themselves. Nor could she ignore the occasions when she inadvertently drove a woman to suicide and blinded several pedestrians, all with the power of her subconscious thoughts.

Since her reintegration, she found herself unable to use any of her special gifts. She wondered if it was due to her severe exhaustion, from

which she was recovering. Curious citizens pierced through her thoughts with sharp uneasy glances. Akalina's lasting effect on them became abundantly clear as Camile skimmed the mosaic of their anguished faces. Otherwise, they looked like ordinary people. Of course, she was now aware that like her, they were anything but. Nevertheless, their reaction reiterated what she already knew, adjusting to her new atmosphere wasn't going to be easy.

The intermittent dispersal of the bustling crowd revealed congratulatory posters honoring the reinstatements of Arvainan President Atlas Okara and Vice President Clayton Eisner McGrath. As Camile observed the various shops and businesses she was impressed with how some of the architecture in the Transcendent World seemed to be modeled after the Coexistent one, or vice-versa. Her overall impression of her new environment was that it was a hodgepodge of all things organic, agricultural and technological. However, the Caldaq mountain range eclipsing the city was said to be a metropolis in itself. Thanks to her avid studies, Camile remembered the names of its primary peaks; Daebrayk, Quaezar, Dusque and Aqueon, all of which surrounded the main summit, Coronis.

As she and her parents approached the shuttle bay, Camile wondered how the officials would receive her. She knew her parents worked for the government, though the exact nature of their work remained a mystery. Even so, Camile was aware they had no power to prevent the council from ordering her death in the past. For now, she could only hope that history would not repeat itself.

The trio eventually came to an air transport hub where Camile's parents had reserved a small private four-passenger aircraft. Upon arrival, a security officer approached Kylie, informing her of an urgent communiqué. Excusing herself, Kylie departed to take the call in private.

"Well, your mother's conversations are rarely brief, so I guess there'll be plenty of time for you to meet Charles." Zephyr smiled, displaying a charming combination of high cheekbones and deep dimples. Little did he know, his wife wasn't out of earshot.

"I heard that," Kylie replied dryly, glancing over her shoulder as she turned the corner.

En route to the hangar, Zephyr explained that Charles was one of his most trusted engineers and the chief builder of his vessel. There was a soothing, yet gallant quality to his baritone voice that Camile found fascinating. It was the type of voice that could effortlessly tell a story while holding the listener's attention. She bypassed half a dozen of the stately aircraft lining the shuttle bay. She marveled at the exquisite designs and craftsmanship as their metallic skin gleamed in the late morning sun streaming through the entrance. Her father halted upon seeing a man polishing one of the smaller shuttles. Camile admired its sleek circular

exterior and mirror-like finish. It almost reminded her of the slick silver buttons on the dark gray uniforms she'd seen some of the officers wearing.

"Not clean enough for you, Sven?" her father greeted the round-faced older man, donning dark shades pushed into his curly ashen hairline. He had the beginnings of a potbelly, which seemed misplaced among his lean and lanky limbs.

"I'm a perfectionist, sir. Besides, I like the feel of it against my hands," Sven replied in a burly voice before tossing the soiled buffing rag into an open toolbox on the ground. Straightening his neon green uniform, he approached, bringing with him a faint smell of sweat, metal and solvents.

"Don't stop on my account. Just don't polish a hole in the hull," Zephyr said jokingly.

"Actually, I was just finishing up, sir," Sven replied as he closed his toolbox and loaded it onto the hover vehicle beside the vessel. The hefty thud was an audible manifestation of its generous weight.

Zephyr introduced his daughter, who accepted Sven's exceedingly firm handshake. Inwardly cringing at the abrasive sensation of his skin, Camile wondered if he thought everything was made of the rigid metal of his trade.

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am." He bowed slightly, momentarily revealing a thinning patch of hair.

"Where's Charles?" Camile's father furrowed his straight thick brows.

"Oh, you just missed him," Sven grunted mid-sentence as he limped into the hover vehicle. Sliding his shades over his eyes and smoothing his disheveled hair, he added: "He's having one of his busy days, but he sends his regards."

"I see. Well, did he work his usual magic?"

"Yep. She streams like lightning across the sky, but that's the last time I ride with that new pilot of yours. The kid's a maniac!"

"Reminds me of someone I know." Zephyr laughed, clapping the mechanic's shoulder. "I'll speak to him."

With a wave, Sven rode deeper into the shuttle bay, disappearing behind one of the larger aircraft.

"Let me introduce you to the crown jewels of our fleet." Camile's father gestured to the rows of shuttles before them as he neared the craft Sven had been polishing.

"Only citizens with special clearance can travel via these ultra high-speed aircraft," he continued as his daughter joined him, watching him inspect the exterior. "Recent events have prompted us to revisit our earlier technology. Regrettably, there have been incidents that have caused a series of plane crashes in the Coexistent World. There are rarely actual collisions between our vehicles and theirs, but sometimes the force generated from our aircraft is so strong it literally knocks them out of the sky."

He mentioned that spontaneous rifts and sudden changes in dimensional borders, otherwise known as *veils* also contributed to such accidents.

“This is my *other* baby,” he said playfully, briefly smoothing his hand along the hull. “It’s a remarkable piece of machinery. Not quite like my old one, though.”

“The one you wrecked?” Camile asked, remembering the story her mother had told her years ago about her father getting into a crash in the Sonoran Desert. Until recently, she didn’t realize it was a collision of the aerial variety.

“It wasn’t out of carelessness, mind you,” her father raised his brow. “I accidentally crossed into Coexistent airspace through a spontaneous rift while chasing rebels who had stolen one of our vehicles. By the time I realized what had happened it was already too late. I sustained heavy damage from the stolen ship and I was unable to chase them back into the rift before it closed. Instead, I hit the ground. I knew the crash would arouse the interest of the American government, so I did the best I could to destroy what was left of my ship to preserve the secrecy of our technology. To this day, what became of the rebels and our stolen vessel remains a mystery.” His voice and gaze grew distant, as though still pondering what went wrong.

Camile had already learned the rest of the story from her mother. In spite of her father’s numerous injuries, he was able to travel to the hospital, nearly thirty miles from the crash site. Kylie, who worked at the facility, had nursed him back to health.

“I was fortunate, really,” Zephyr admitted. “I wandered aimlessly until I arrived at the hospital. You’d be surprised at how many people ignored me along the way. They probably figured I was some poor drunk staggering home from a barroom brawl. It was my first visit to the Coexistent World. Up until that point I had only heard stories about it—how cold the people can be at times. I was disappointed to find out how accurate our historians were. Then I met your mother. Such a caring woman, not to mention incredibly beautiful.” His smile dazzled in his pale eyes. “At the time, I took a big risk by courting her. Romantic relationships between Coexistent and Transcendent humans had been forbidden ever since the announcement of the prophecy.”

Before Camile could ask about the reason for such a restriction, they were joined by her mother. Apparently eager to regain the time lost from their schedule, her parents promptly commenced boarding. Upon entering, she noticed a young man, seated at the controls. He looked no older than seventeen. Zephyr introduced him as Wyatt, their pilot.

“Hey,” he greeted casually.

Returning the salutation, she strapped herself into a seat beside her mother as Zephyr took the co-pilot chair. Camile watched curiously as the men operated the controls. The illuminated keys bore Arvainan symbols, similar to those that had appeared on her medallion months earlier.

The panoramic view screen displayed the vessel's air-piercing speed, which contradicted the relative stillness within it. Flashes of tattered leathery wings and strange heads with beaks and horn-like protrusions randomly crossed their path at brief intervals. Fearing a crash was inevitable, Camile gasped, hoping the strangely gigantic birds flying around the ship would disperse. Being the only person to react in response to the sight, she figured it was a normal occurrence. Then it dawned on her. The strange avian beasts had long preceded any bird she had seen.

*Pterodactyls?* She wondered.

The hand of gravity forced Camile deeper into her seat as Wyatt maneuvered a sharp turn, presumably to steer clear of the flock before them. Her heart leapt into her throat as the shaking ship fell into a steep decline just after the peak of the turn. Her body suddenly felt too light as it pressed upward into her harness. Seeing panic etched on her parents' faces and that of the pilot, she knew something had gone terribly wrong. The skewed horizon confirmed this. It disappeared as the rocky terrain rose like a swelling ocean, prompting her to grip her armrests and brace for impact.

# Chapter 2

## Intrusion

“Wyatt, pull up!” Zephyr instructed, his face scrunched with concern.

The pilot's eyes grew wide as he feverishly worked the controls. Despite his efforts the shuttle maintained its collision course with the ground. Camile's father acted fast, operating a second set of controls while barking out commands which the pilot immediately followed.

“Almost there, sir!” Wyatt grunted, struggling to bring the ship out of the nosedive.

Camile felt herself lurch forward as they reduced speed. Her safety harness tightened around her body, providing her with a sense of both security and entrapment as it pressed her against her seat. The pressure gradually eased as the horizon returned to its rightful position. Without further incident, the craft slowly descended until its bottom kissed the ground, landing safely.

“Wyatt, give me one good reason why I shouldn't have your license revoked immediately,” Camile's father calmly demanded after expelling a deep breath.

“Uh...We're still alive?” Wyatt cringed as though fearful of being punched.

Shaking his head, Zephyr cracked a faint smile. “Next time, try not to get fancy with the steering. I'm already aware of your ability. There's no need to show off.”

After a profuse apology, Wyatt helped Camile and her parents disembark from the ship. Camile froze as she was struck with a vision of a hauntingly beautiful dwelling carved into the gigantic mountain. The perimeter was skirted by lush woods and the unmistakable scent of fresh pine needles filled the crisp air. She blinked a few times after gazing at the peak, obscured by misty clouds, but the dream-like image before her remained unchanged, confirming its reality. As they grew closer to the compound's main entrance, she admired its exterior, which resembled polished soapstone. Camile was impressed to know that this was an extension of the place where she'd been holed up for weeks. During that time she had only seen one of the main gathering halls, the view of the countryside from the mountaintop and most of all, her temporary quarters.

She and her parents were less than twenty feet from the entrance when the ground began vibrating slightly beneath her feet. It was an unbroken disruption that led Camile to wonder if it was a sign of an approaching earthquake. As the pattern of sensation changed, she realized the subtle tremors weren't continuous, but were broken by strengthening syncopated thumps from which the vibration rippled. It was the type of rhythm only a powerful animal could beat into the earth. As she turned to her parents something caught her attention. From the corner of her eye she saw something white pouring out from one of the mountain's hidden crevices at ground level. Her peripheral vision was still adjusting, but she could tell it was just a few dozen feet from where she was standing. Now hearing the pulse of the quaking ground—or perhaps her heart—Camile's mounting curiosity pulled her full attention towards the rapidly approaching whiteness. Through the deafening roar, she could barely hear her parents shouting for her to back away.

It was too late.

Camile found herself engulfed in a heavy avalanche. The cottony softness against her front seemed to mock the rough impact her back made with the ground. Gasping, she received puffs of fur filtered air, all the while still blinded and oppressed by the heavy whiteness. Then came the sensation of wet sandpaper across the entire right side of her face.

“What's happening?” was her muffled cry.

Just as quickly as it had happened, she felt the weight being lifted from her body. Gazing upward, she saw two crystal blue orbs embedded into a large mass of fur. Carefully rising to her feet, she took in the image of the most beautiful tiger she'd ever seen. Its gleaming white fur had faint gray stripes, barely noticeable upon first glance. Mildly disgusted with the cooling saliva on her face, she wiped it away with her sleeve. Ensuring their daughter was uninjured, Camile's parents apologized and went on to explain that the tiger, Excelsior, had been her childhood companion.



“You might not remember it now since you were only four at the time, but you’re the reason he’s still alive today,” her mother said before explaining that years ago, during a safari, Camile had spotted Excelsior—then, just a cub—who had gotten separated from his mother. He had been on the brink of death at the time of his discovery.

“After nursing him back to health, we tried to release him into the wild,” Zephyr added, his fair cheeks dimpled faintly as he smiled, “but he grew attached to the girl who saved his life. The poor guy was devastated when you left. There wasn’t any time for you to say goodbye to him.”

“But Akalina was still here, wasn’t she? It’s not like he could tell the difference. He probably didn’t even notice I was gone.” Camile cautiously eyed the tiger.

“Don’t be so sure about that. How do you think you got that scar on your side?” Zephyr briefly dropped his gaze. Tightening his lips, he met her eyes anew. “You said, yourself, that you didn’t have it until you reintegrated with Akalina. You see, Excelsior was forced to attack her one day.”

“Why?” Camile gingerly backed away from the tiger while unconsciously touching her right oblique.

“Years ago, she tried to do something unspeakable, something that would have jeopardized your future and the future of both worlds.”

The dwelling’s heavy door cracked open, making way for an older man approaching them with sure steps. His walk exuded the kind of authoritative pride and confidence that demanded attention, making him seem taller than his apparent six-foot stature. There was something strangely familiar about him. Camile wondered if it was the knowing sparkle in his icy-blue eyes or the silver, feathery hair that he wore in a semi-spiked style, adding a touch of youth to his timeworn face.

“Kylie, it’s always a pleasure!” His thin pink lips curled into an easy smile, emphasizing a prominent, nearly aquiline nose. As he embraced Camile’s mother his glowing fair skin, moderately weathered with the seasons of his past, contrasted against her brown cheek.

Moving to Camile’s father, the man clapped his shoulder.

“Zephyr, you’ve been a stranger for far too long,” he said. “I hope you have a good excuse for missing your last few appointments.”

“Sir Drayden, I—” Zephyr awkwardly attempted to explain.

*This is Sir Drayden?* Camile thought. She had half-expected him to have an exotic accent of sorts, but was surprised to detect a highly articulate vocal inflection reminiscent of an American English professor.

“Nah. You don’t have to enlighten me, but Tabitha will *definitely* want an explanation.” The knight chortled faintly as he approached Camile, who felt herself shrinking in eyes that seemed capable of prying into the mind and revealing one’s innermost thoughts. She couldn’t help but wonder if he could read the apprehension that lingered in the back of her mind at that

very instant. There seemed to be something ominous upholding his casually dapper appearance, clad in dark denim, a mocha jacket and a blue-gray sweater that enhanced his shimmering orbs. After a brief moment of silence, he offered his hand. Upon taking it, Camile was flooded with a chilling weakness that induced a momentary desire to break away. Yet, she maintained her composure until the feeling passed.

“Camile,” he said softly. “You’ve grown into a lovely young woman.” He released her hand, but held her gaze with his electric eyes. An inquisitive expression crossed his features. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

Camile shook her head, briefly avoiding eye contact.

“You look a little familiar, but no, I don’t.”

“Well, I can’t blame you. It’s been awhile since our last meeting,” Sir Drayden replied, briefly smiling at Kylie.

“Camile, you probably remember him as Travis D’Arby, the lawyer I brought to your school to deal with that whole mess about Barry’s disappearance,” Kylie explained, brushing away a lock of wavy hair a soft breeze had blown into her face.

Barry.

Camile didn’t think she’d ever hear his name come up again. He had been the merciless bully who tormented her during her high school years more than nine years ago. In her unwitting retaliation she had somehow made him wander off, but luckily he returned safely. Camile remembered the challenge she faced in convincing her suspicious teacher, Ms. Hawkins, that she had no knowledge of his whereabouts. Evading her bitter reminiscence, Camile’s mind gave way to clarity.

“That’s it,” she acknowledged. Flooded with familiarity, Sir Drayden no longer seemed a distant stranger to her. However, the realization did little to ease her discomfort. This became evident when Excelsior’s large head pushed against her, nearly knocking her down in his overzealous display of affection. Camile yelped in horror, feeling embarrassed by what she thought was a slight overreaction.

“Excelsior,” Sir Drayden said sternly, gesturing to the den from which the tiger emerged. The massive feline promptly backed down, though releasing a low growl to voice his displeasure. Reluctantly, Excelsior followed the unspoken command after staring at Camile, as though ensuring her continued presence.

“My apologies for Excelsior. He’s been awaiting your return for quite some time and seems to have escaped his handlers.” Sir Drayden frowned slightly. As though on cue, a man rushed to meet the tiger and lead him the rest of the way, but not before apologizing to the knight.

Sir Drayden chortled almost smugly as he watched the handler lead Excelsior away.

“Come, you must be hungry.”

\* \* \*

The orange afternoon sun kissed the treetops on the hillside. Their budding leaves held the promise of spring. As Camile toured Caldaq's perimeter with her parents and Sir Drayden she understood why the complex was prime real estate. It overlooked the bustling Deltine metropolis in the distance to the East and the peaceful countryside in the West. Having just finished a hearty early supper less than an hour earlier, Camile felt the weight of her meal slowing her steps. Since her parents seemed engaged in deep discussion with the knight, she lingered behind to watch a flock of swans take flight from the still lake. The water droplets rained down from their wings like golden glitter.

Inhaling the crisp air, she turned her attention to the pink and violet sky. The first stars of the evening were already beginning to emerge, as were a few fireflies studding the grass with their faint glow. Soon, neither would have to compete with the broad glow of daylight and Camile looked forward to witnessing how the luminous insects would mimic the celestial ceiling. Alas, her moment of serenity was suddenly interrupted by thunderous disorder.

Promptly training her gaze over her shoulder she saw approximately a dozen men charging in her direction. She stood slack jawed for a second before going into flight mode, eventually catching up with her parents. She protested when they shielded her with their bodies. Her father drew a device from his holster, pointed it to the advancing group and fired, emitting a pulsing flash of light. It had no effect.

"We need to get out of here," Camile said urgently, concerned for her parents' safety.

"We're not going anywhere. This is our home. I'll be damned if I let these punks drive me from it," Kylie remarked, her tawny hazel eyes ablaze with fierce determination as she and her husband drew retractable batons from their utility belts.

Less than a minute after those fighting words were spoken, Camile's father was caught in a clash with three of the intruders. Their strategy, though well-timed, was poorly executed, which worked to Zephyr's advantage. He quickly immobilized one, then the other before locking in a violent tussle with the third. Camile looked around for something, anything, that she could use to help her father fend off the tower of muscle holding him in a bear hug, but noticed she had problems of her own.

One of the assailants accosted her, nearly seizing her arm, but she promptly struck him square in the face with an open palm. It left him visibly stunned, but otherwise undeterred. His bearded sneer indicated that

her action possibly made matters worse for herself. Before Camile could consider her next move, she saw two slender brown hands clap both sides of the brute's head from behind. Clutching his ears, he fell to the ground in a fit of pain, revealing Camile's savior.

“Wow, Mom! That was—”

“No time to celebrate, baby. We're not clear yet.”

Following her mother's eyes Camile noticed her father had apparently overpowered the large intruder and was now working on another. Meanwhile, Sir Drayden stepped in and with a single wave of his hand he took down five attackers as their reinforcements approached from the distance. They met the same fate immediately upon their arrival.

*My God! What is this guy?*

A high-pitched sound cut into her thoughts, a sound she hadn't heard in months—the ringing of a cell phone. Puzzled, she looked around, realizing no one else seemed to hear it. A woman appeared just as Sir Drayden extended his palm to deflect another intruder. She was as translucent as an apparition. Oblivious to the chaos erupting around her, the woman continued about her business, looking both ways as though crossing a street. Unable to reverse his attack, Sir Drayden struck the woman with an invisible current of devastation. She doubled over, clutching her chest as she suffered an apparent asthma or heart attack. Her face contorted in sheer agony as she fell to the ground and faded away. The diminishing sound of the woman's labored breathing was accompanied by the faint wail of what sounded like a horn. Seeing that Camile's parents had the upper hand with the intruders, Sir Drayden vanished into thin air.

*What th—?*

Camile knew there was no time to stoke her bewilderment by pondering questions she couldn't answer. Returning her attention to her parents, Camile observed her mother unleashing a fury of blows, taking down two additional opponents. Camile was filled with pride as she witnessed her mother's strength yet again. That feeling was replaced with terror as one of the attackers unsheathed a blade, preparing to stab Kylie in the back as she fought with his cohort. Caution be damned, Camile darted in their direction, nearly stumbling over the fallen before colliding with the man in an air expelling crush. Despite the softness of the lush grass, the impact ached her knee and elbow. As they struggled for control of the weapon the man somehow managed to gain the upper hand, bringing the broadside of the cold blade to her throat. Camile's biceps burned with fiery determination as she continued pushing against his knife-wielding hand.

“Just come with us and no one gets hurt,” he said, straining against her. His voice was surprisingly benign, but his rancid halitosis threatened to expel her dinner.

A side-eye glance, revealed no less than fifty armor-clad guards swarming in from all directions like ants.

*Finally*, she thought.

“There’s no way you’re getting out of here, with or without me,” she said defiantly.

As her adversary’s expression shifted from cool determination to fiery disappointment she got a better understanding of his underlying desperation. Like a hurricane it spiraled in his eyes with the resentment of failure. Shoving Camile aside he rose to his feet, quickly throwing the knife at Kylie. Crying out to her mother, Camile watched helplessly as the blade traveled toward its target. Kylie turned in time to see the intended instrument of her death slicing through the air toward her chest. Her coppery eyes widened with surprise as she crossed her arms in front of her body.

A lump gathered in Camile’s throat as she realized she was about to witness her mother’s demise. Instead, she witnessed a miracle. The knife halted, hanging in mid-air before reversing course to hit the thrower in the chest, saving Camile the trouble of killing him as she so desired. He landed beside her in a heap and with a single gasp he was gone. In the end there was only a sliver of pink along the horizon, silhouetting the field, littered with the dead and injured bodies of the opposition. A visibly perplexed Zephyr gave orders to make arrangements for the deceased and to treat and detain the wounded for questioning.

“...and get a team to figure out how the hell so many of them breached security. If I find out anyone on my team dropped the ball, there will be consequences.” He concluded his commands as the torches lining the compound activated with a series of whooshes.

Satisfied that her parents were unharmed, Camile asked her mother about the strange appearance of the woman who had been injured in the melee.

“Don’t worry. Sir Drayden will handle it,” Kylie answered, her eyes sparkling in the light of the orange flames.

“How did you do the thing with the knife?”

“That wasn’t me. Must’ve been your father.” Kylie smiled, casting a brief adoring glance at her busy husband.

“Oh, right. For a minute there I almost forgot you’re not a Transcendent.” Camile acknowledged.

“Neat trick though, huh?” Kylie winked. “In time, I’m sure you’ll learn how to do it too. So far you’ve done just about everything else.”

\* \* \*

Camile cradled her steamy mug of chamomile tea in her hands, still sore with the memory of the clash. Though the scent of the beverage held the promise of physical comfort, her mind was still wired. She had been out of seclusion for less than a day and people were already on the attack. Try as she might to sip cautiously, the hot liquid bit her lip, prompting her to recoil.

*Even the drinks are out to get me.*

Her impatient frown softened into a smirk, acknowledging the silliness of the thought. Setting down her mug, Camile admired the view of Deltine from the window-side table. The city lights appeared somewhat frozen against the misty blue-violet backdrop. The rustic design of the tavern, in which she sat in a private room with her parents, was far departed from the urban region in the distance.

“You should be touring your new quarters right now, but we need to discuss what happened out there.” Her mother broke the silence. Camile turned to see her breaking off a small bunch of grapes from the crystal platter at the center of the table. Beside the fruit were small pastries and nuts. Whereas Camile passed on the refreshments, her father helped himself to a healthy serving.

Camile's parents theorized that the offenders were members of the rebel group that opposed the Transcendent Council's aid of the Coexistent World. They also explained that a rift suddenly appeared between both realms, which is how the female stranger momentarily crossed over.

“When a person travels through a rift they are usually temporarily cloaked in a cocoon of their previous world's energy, rendering them seemingly invisible,” Zephyr said between bites.

Camile also learned that the duration of such cocoons varies from split seconds to hours—or longer. Due to the fluctuations in some cocoons, the traveler may also appear ghostly transparent or fully visible. While she pondered this, Sir Drayden joined them and confirmed what she already knew.

“I couldn't save her. There was nothing left. She already disconnected,” he explained as casually as reading a grocery list.

*Disconnected? We're talking about a life, not electronics.*

Camile frowned, watching as the knight grabbed a handful of filberts from the crystal platter, effortlessly tossing them into his mouth one-by-one.

“That woman's dead because of you,” Camile crossed her arms, only then noticing the moderate tear in the side seam of her shirt. It was well coordinated with her now dirty jeans. She returned her arms to her side to conceal the damage. “How can you be so nonchalant?”

She instantly regretted her question once he paused, gripping her with his steely gaze.

Slowly rounding the table, Sir Drayden chewed the remainder of his snack as he eyed her intently. Once beside her, he pulled out a chair. Straddling it, he crossed both his arms atop the back, not once breaking eye contact. His cheek swelled slightly as he appeared to clear the remnants of the filberts with his tongue.

“Life and death are two faces on the coin of existence. Sooner or later, everyone pays their fare,” he said through the faintest enigmatic smile. “What happened today was unfortunate, but not unusual. Moping about it is counter-productive and won’t bring her back. The fact is, everything aligned perfectly for that woman to make her exit.”

“You’re saying she was *meant* to die?” Camile grimaced. “How did you come to that conclusion? What made my case so diff—?”

“Camile, don’t.” Kylie interrupted, shaking her head.

“You’ve got it all twisted backwards, young lady.” Sir Drayden frowned. “Death is supposed to choose us, not the other way around.”

“If I understand correctly, the council pretty much chose it for me when I was just a child,” Camile’s voice cracked slightly as though her throat was trying to suppress the statement.

“It was a consideration that was avoided, unlike your suicide. You have no idea what we went through to bring you back. If you think we made a mistake, let me know right now and I’ll reverse your fate myself.”

Camile’s parents attempted to protest, but fell silent as he raised his hand, keeping his aquatic gaze locked on their daughter.

“Did you just threaten me?” Camile frowned.

The knight’s eyes momentarily shifted upward and sideways before reengaging their target.

“I’m merely presenting the alternative. Well, what’ll it be?” he asked in a hushed whisper.

Camile hoped he was bluffing, but his hardened expression made her doubt that possibility. She didn’t know enough about the knight to dare test him, so she shook her head in response.

“Good,” Sir Drayden cracked a wry smile. “Not many people get a second shot at life. Next time, think twice before you take it for granted.”

The end of the ominous discussion left Camile wondering what level of protection her parents could offer her. It appeared they were under the weight of the government’s influence and she hoped it wouldn’t spell certain doom for them all.

# Chapter 3

## Fractured

Camile always dreaded medical examinations, but knew she couldn't avoid her first checkup since her return to the Transcendent World. Actually, it was her first medical in the dimension as a conscious adult since the reintegration. She was impressed to learn that most Transcendent medicine functioned on a cellular—and in some cases—a molecular level, which provided remarkable specificity in terms of treatment. Even more impressive was the Transcendent's capability to project three dimensional computer images of internal organs—ideal for mapping out the schematics for complex surgical procedures. While walking to her appointment, Camile peeked through the glass window of one of the rooms and saw a surgeon holding the image of a patient's heart in his hands. She found the sight somewhat poetic.

The medical table upon which Camile sat was more comfortable than it appeared. It, like the rest of the furniture in the infirmary, had been designed with sleek, rounded edges—presumably to make the facility look more inviting. Camile surmised it was the same reason for the use of warm beige and cream colors to offset the stark white lights and metallic accents. It made the gleaming silver medical equipment appear less threatening. Nevertheless, she felt anxious as she awaited the results of her physical.

She distracted herself by analyzing the Transcendent anatomical model by the entrance. Shortly before the doctor had excused herself she



informed Camile that although Transcendents and Coexistents looked similar in terms of outward appearance, there were marked physiological differences due to their differing environments and evolutionary paths. On average, the Transcendents had a higher bone density, larger lung capacity as well as a pair of small reserve kidneys. Camile had read about this and more, but nothing compared to seeing a representation of it in full scale.

Yet, she knew firsthand that at least some of the Transcendents' physiological advantages sometimes worked against them. She found her high visual and aural sensitivity challenging and nearly maddening at times. Then again, she also considered the possibility that hers was an anomalous reaction due to her mixed background.

"You are very fortunate, Camile," said the mousy doctor upon her return, her large nose pointing downward as she read the results. "The preliminary tests indicate you are still a very healthy hybrid."

"As opposed to what?" Camile furrowed her brow.

The doctor raised her dark saucer-like eyes, resuming eye-contact.

"There have been quite a few Transcendent/Coexistent hybrids that were born after you," she explained. "Many of those who survived developed physical and/or mental defects over time, usually by their mid to late teens."

"Like?"

"Paraplegia, deafness, blindness... Sometimes the conditions are treatable, but our success rate varies."

"Sorry I asked." Camile frowned.

"Don't worry about it. As I said, you appear to be quite healthy. Even those who were born with the challenges I mentioned are able to live their lives to the fullest of their ability." The doctor paused a moment, regarding her patient with mild concern. "We both know the preliminary results of your physical, but I'd like to hear, from you, how you're feeling."

"Still a little dazed by all that's been happening lately. Other than that, I'm fine." Camile cracked a faint smile that quickly sank with the weight of truth.

She had been experiencing occasional migraines and was concerned that it was the result of a bio-neurotransmitter she had been fitted with many years ago. She learned this through her parents, who like many Arvainan residents, also held the technology. She was still vague about the purpose of such devices or how they functioned, yet her parents had promised to reveal that information, as well as the nature of their work with the council, during an upcoming expedition. Even so, she raised her concern to the doctor, who insisted that her headaches were not a result of the device.

"It may be due to the residual effects of your abrupt change in climate," the doctor suggested while typing something on her handheld. "I've

prescribed a mild pain reliever. Try it for a few days. If it's insufficient, we'll look into other alternatives.”

After filling her prescription Camile was directed to the foyer, where she was said to have a visitor. Upon entering the area she saw no one except the guards who had escorted her to the infirmary.

“I see you pulled yourself together,” a cultured voice rang from behind. Her heart flooded with a warmth that could only be triggered by an old acquaintance. Upon turning, she saw a plump cherubic-like woman dressed in green. The copper coils framing her round face blazed in the morning sunlight filtering through the window. Camile recognized the woman as her mother's best friend. Back in the Coexistent World, she had been entrusted with the secret of Camile's true identity and had sworn to protect it, even from Camile herself. She no longer had any hard feelings about the deception since she knew her mother's friend had risked her life in the process.

“Nancy!” Camile eagerly approached, her arms outstretched for a hug.

The redhead flinched, hesitating before joining the embrace. Noticing this, Camile suspected she was still traumatized by the fact Akalina had once attacked her.

“It's good to see you again, Camile.” Nancy kissed her cheek. “I'm sorry I couldn't warn you about what was happening. By the time I realized who Akalina really was—”

“Don't worry about it. What's done is done. I'm just glad you're okay.” Camile ended the hug, letting her hands linger on the short redhead's shoulders for a few moments. “How are you?”

“Oh, I'm just fine. I was in pretty bad shape for awhile, but I have a way of bouncing back. How 'bout you?”

“I'm alive. That's as good a start as any.” Camile forced a chuckle. “The people here would probably disagree, though. Their resentment is as strong as the sky is blue. I'm tempted to ask them what I—” Camile caught herself. “Akalina did, but I'm not sure I really wanna know.”

“You'll find out eventually, ready or not. You of all people should know that even the deepest secrets can't stay hidden forever.” Nancy winked an emerald eye.

They turned their attention to the foyer's main entrance upon hearing the sharp sound of hard-soled shoes striking the polished floor tiles. Moments later, the knight emerged in black and gray. He greeted both women before focusing on Nancy.

“Nice to see you up and about again,” he said.

“Thanks to you, Sir Drayden.” Nancy grinned, bowing her head slightly.

Camile didn't feel as at ease. She wanted to sink into the floor to avert the path of his gaze, but found herself submerged in his eyes. His presence

was beginning to induce a nauseating discomfort she could neither shake nor comprehend.

“I’ll be escorting you to the amphitheater. Your parents are waiting for you there,” he announced.

“If it’s no trouble, I can take her there, sir,” Nancy suggested before regarding Camile with a glance of apparent concern.

Nodding his approval, Sir Drayden made his exit, much to Camile’s relief.

“Are you alright?” Nancy asked softly. “I swear you just lost your color.”

“I’m okay. He just makes me a little uncomfortable, that’s all.”

“A *little* uncomfortable?” The redhead arched her brow. “Camile, you looked like you were about to pass out.”

“Okay, the man gives me the creeps and then some,” she admitted. “I get the feeling something’s not right about him.”

“Really?” A perplexed expression crossed Nancy’s face. “Sir Drayden may seem a little standoffish, but he really is a great man. After all, he’s part of the team designated to help you through this whole thing. I see no reason for you to be afraid of him.”

“I wish I could feel the same way, but my gut tells me different.” Camile exhaled, lamenting her pending increase in contact with the mysterious knight.

\* \* \*

The sound of Camile’s footsteps deadened as she walked onto the finely patterned carpet. Her parents awaited her at the base of the multiple curved rows of seats, where a large portion of the floor dipped into a circular indentation. Camile inquired about the seemingly faulty construction, to which her father cracked a somber smile as the lights dimmed. The concave section of the floor appeared more vibrant in contrast to the rest of the carpeting, as though a spotlight was shining upon it. Zephyr seemed to hesitate as he regarded Kylie, who took his hand and nodded encouragingly.

“Reveal window,” he spoke into the air.

The colors in the concave segment instantly vanished, but the rest of the flooring remained unchanged. Awestricken, Camile gingerly approached the deactivated portion which revealed a dimly lit, barren room below. It was hauntingly familiar as was the single piece of furniture, a type of platform or table, contained within. She could almost hear the distant echoing cries of her memories, pleading to tell their chilling tales.

Her mother’s hand touched her shoulder.

“That's—”

“The lab,” Camile whispered, her voice as faint as a ghost from the past.

It was still relatively dark as they descended. The little light that entered the room was reflected by the convex mirror in the ceiling, casting an eerie glow upon the table beneath it. Upon closer inspection, Camile likened it to an altar as she slowly rounded it. Each step she took brought her closer to breaching the sealed memory of the evening which had forever changed the course of her life.

By the time she came full circle, stopping in front of her parents, she felt the lingering sense of familiarity getting stronger. Her cheeks tingled with the chill of a sudden breeze that had no identifiable source. The subtle scent of her mother's sweet perfume was now competing with crisp pine. Camile raised her gaze to behold her parents, but her eyes were suddenly wrapped in a pallid sheet of disorientation. At first she said nothing, figuring the flash would dissolve. Then alarm set in as she realized her vision wasn't returning. Squeezing her lids shut, she stumbled into her mother's arms.

Young Camile didn't care much for being carried, but had little choice in the matter. She was just a six-year-old girl and her legs were too short to endure the lengthy journey ahead. Though she knew she should've felt safe in her mother's arms, she was terrified. As they bypassed the final checkpoint, at which Kylie gained the mercy of an empathetic guard, Caldaq's alarms blared into the night. Little Camile's sobs worsened as she remembered the events that triggered them, events that followed her discovery of what the council had in store for her the next day. It seemed a miracle that they were able to avoid the harsh sweeping lights of the helicopters circling above the field.

Upon reaching the edge of the *Forsaken Square*—a massive stretch of dense forest nearly a kilometer away—a panting Kylie took cover behind a large tree and set her daughter down. Little Camile caught a tiny splinter in her palm as she peered anxiously around the trunk to regard the mountainous compound. Still, she kept her eyes fixed, knowing that somewhere in the midst of the emergency lights illuminating Caldaq was her father, who insisted that Kylie flee with their daughter and await his arrival at the rendezvous point. His urgent parting words: “If I'm not there in twenty minutes, leave without me. You know what to do. Follow the direction of the dead log and swim as deep as you can.”

Camile had been keeping a close eye on her mother's watch and knew their time was almost up. Each agonizing minute she wondered what would happen to him. He was the orchestrator of the grand diversion that unfolded just minutes earlier. When it started to go wrong, he resorted to brawn, punching out at least one guard in the process.

"I don't want to leave Daddy," she cried, figuring that he'd be killed for his actions.

"Me either, sweetheart." Kylie tenderly cupped her cheek. "I hope it won't come to that."

Despite the calm words, young Camile could feel her mother's fear breaking through her poised façade. It accompanied the apparent doubt lurking behind her wide hazel eyes.

"It won't," a masculine voice grunted.

Zephyr emerged from the ground before them, yet the grass and soil remained undisturbed. The reunited trio indulged in hugs and kisses before venturing deeper into the *Forsaken Square*. Kylie held her daughter securely as they traveled in silence. Eventually, little Camile grew tired and drifted off to sleep on her mother's shoulder to the tune of her parents' footsteps crunching the fallen autumn leaves. A sharp gasp interrupted her slumber a short while later. Upon opening her eyes, Camile saw two dozen or so guards closing in on them beneath the forest canopy, through which the helicopters poured their cold bluish lights. The officers closed in like shadows in the misty night. The sound of her mother's unsteady breathing fed Camile's terror, which escalated when Sir Drayden emerged from the thick barricade of sentinels.

"I know this isn't easy for you, Kylie, but you must give her to me." Sir Drayden outstretched his hands, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Trust me. It'll be better this way."

"Mommy, no!" Camile cried, clutching her mother's arm as tightly as her little fingers would allow.

Following her mother's gaze, Camile noticed her father's intense expression. She'd already seen it once that evening, just before he had attacked the guard. Everyone remained as still and quiet as chess pieces, but the silver-haired knight was about to take the pawn.

"Please, at least allow me a moment to say goodbye to my little girl," Kylie said tremulously, taking a step back.

Camile objected to the surrender, but was hushed by her mother, who slowly searched her pocket. The reason became obvious once Kylie raised her cupped left hand to stroke her daughter's curls. The child felt a firm round object barely brush her cheek. It was cool to the touch.

"It'll be fine, baby," Kylie whispered. "Just close your eyes."

As soon as the frightened child obliged, there was a loud explosion, punctuated by the officers' shouts. An intense flash permeated her sealed lids, revealing the fine veins within them. Then came the jolt. Holding on tight, young Camile's body bobbed around as her mother sprinted into the night. Once the light faded, she cautiously peered over her mother's shoulder. Amidst the lingering smoke was her father, fighting several disoriented guards. The knight was nowhere to be seen, but a group of

officers fanned out in pursuit of Camile and her mother, now headed toward a ravine. They were almost in the clear since the rift was located in the water, a dead log ironically pointing to their salvation. All that was left to do was clear another few meters and jump in.

Heavy boots beat the earth behind them like a stampede of wild horses. The sound indicated that Kylie's luxury of a head start was rapidly waning. Camile saw them pouring in from between the dense trees, closing them in from behind, their weapons drawn. Upon feeling her mother halt with a sharp gasp, Camile turned her attention forward and saw Sir Drayden appearing out of thin air, just inches in front of them.

"That was a very foolish move." He frowned, his facial crevices sharpened by the above lighting.

A panting Kylie shuffled backward as the squad surrounded them. The lead officer commanded his team to lower their arms as he raised a baton-like device. He apologized prior to activating it, directing a vivid pulsating light at Kylie's face. The descent was quick and hard as the mother, still cradling her child, met the ground.

Young Camile felt one of the officers grab hold of her waist, pulling her away from Kylie, who fought like hell to resist, but failed to maintain her painfully tight grip on her daughter's arm. The other guards parted, allowing Sir Drayden to pass through. As he approached, his leather duster flowed behind him, rustling the dead leaves in an almost taunting manner. Knowing she would soon face her own mortality, little Camile kicked and screamed, but was no match for the burly officer who passed her to the knight. Once in his clutches, little Camile grew exhausted. Her desire and ability to fight was gone. Kylie grasped at the hem of Sir Drayden's coat and pled desperately for her daughter's return.

"I'm sorry, Kylie," he said softly, turning on his heel to walk away.

Through heavy lids, young Camile saw the broken expression on her mother's face as she remained kneeling on the ground.

"I request the option of core segregation," she cried, her voice saturated with desperation.

Sir Drayden halted his steps.

"Excuse me?" He regarded her anew, his face etched with perplexity. The surrounding officers looked equally baffled.

Kylie's voice grew weaker as she tremulously repeated her request.

"Are you aware of the risk?" Sir Drayden asked.

"It can't be much worse than what the council has already proposed," Kylie bitterly gazed up into his eyes.

"Don't be so sure about that," was Zephyr's ominous response as the guards escorted him before the elder.

He regarded his wife with a shocked expression and said nothing else for several moments. Camile could no longer keep her eyes open or her

head from falling onto Sir Drayden's shoulder. Yet, her ears stubbornly clung to her fading consciousness.

"By requesting core segregation you may have just condemned our daughter to a fate far worse than death." She heard her father say, his voice sorrowfully heavy.

Falling deeper, Camile found herself traversing the barriers of time in ways only recollection could permit. Everything around her was white and unbearably bright and it took a few moments to realize she was lying face-up on a table in a stark room. Her eyes now fixed on the circular convex mirror in the ceiling, she saw the image of her tiny frame dressed in a simple white gown. It was only when she attempted to sit upright that she noticed her wrists and ankles were restrained. Wondering where her parents were, she called out for them only to be greeted with silence.

Upon inspecting the rest of her surroundings she saw Sir Drayden near the top of her head and two men—one on each side of her. Like her, they were all clad in white. They stood in silence, their eyes closed as though in prayer. Fear grew into full-blown terror as she writhed in an attempt to break free of the restraints, all the while screaming for the men to let her go. They appeared unfazed as they continued their quiet ceremony.

Young Camile's terror eventually gave way to intense, searing rage. Sir Drayden's eyes opened and went colorless as he stretched his hand over little Camile, letting it hover above her heaving midsection. A warm sensation radiated from the pit of her stomach to her chest. It increased steadily until it felt as though a volcano was erupting inside her. The intensity matched her resistance until she grew still and exhausted, sobbing helpless tears through rampant breathing.

Her mind grew dizzy as she wondered what the men were attempting to do. Looking up into the mirror, she saw something glowing from inside her chest like a spiraling vortex when Sir Drayden moved his hand away. Suddenly her entire body was raided by fiery agony. The light intensified until it violently ripped itself free, pulling a horrific shriek along with it. The object resembled ball lightning as it floated through the air. Young Camile lost consciousness as the burning pain slowly began to subside.

As her eyes popped open, Camile saw her reflection in the above mirror. Seeing her adult form confirmed that the vision was over. Yet, an acidic heat lingered in the pit of her stomach. Realizing she was lying on the very slab on which she had endured the core segregation, she scrambled to her feet. Her parents expressed concern, inquiring about her well-being. Though floored, Camile insisted that she was fine and informed them of her recollection. She then requested that they explain what happened after the painful extraction.

“All procedures are recorded and evaluated,” her father explained as they returned to the amphitheater. “I think seeing it for yourself would give you more insight than your mother and I can provide with words alone.”

\* \* \*

Sir Drayden cautiously watched the entity hover over young Camile's small, unconscious body. He ordered his assistants not to look at it as it may take it as a challenge. However, one of the men couldn't resist his curiosity. A second after he eyed the strange glowing object, it shot across the room, striking him in the chest before it exploded. The force of the blast slammed the men against the wall, knocking one of them out cold. The other managed to feebly mention that Camile's body was rapidly draining of energy. Sir Drayden already seemed to realize the alarming fact and outstretched his hand over the child in an apparent act to replenish her strength.

In spite of the destructive explosion, the violent entity seemed to gain power and suddenly soared towards Camile with apparent aggression. Sir Drayden stepped in its path, outstretching his other hand to prevent its attack. An electrical current streamed out of the entity, passing through his body to Camile and back. It sputtered as it floated to a corner and descended to the ground. As its radiance continued to dim, the object grew in size, morphing into the form of a young girl—an exact physical replica of little Camile. The unclothed copy lay on the ground, shivering in a fetal position. Sir Drayden, who regarded the doppelganger with an expression of grim confusion, removed his cloak and placed it over her body, scooping her into his arms as though she were a newborn baby.

As the view screen retracted into the high ceiling and the lights brightened the theater, Camile's parents allowed her a few moments to digest what she had seen. The silence was followed by an explanation that they had been suspended from their duties as a result of their noncompliance. During that time, they were placed under strict surveillance while the council considered Kylie's request for their daughter's core segregation in lieu of execution.

“I was surprised the council let us take you to Arizona during our final day together,” Kylie explained. “You loved it there, so we figured it would be the best place for us to spend our last day as a family. We considered going into exile once we got there, but as I mentioned, the council kept a very close eye on us after our escape attempt.”

Though she had been very young at the time, it was a day that was firmly embedded into Camile's memory. She could almost smell the faint



aroma of chlorine from the public pool where her father once tried to teach her to swim.

“There was no guarantee the procedure would work or if you'd even survive, only that you'd never be the same.” Zephyr's voice seemed as heavy as his eyes. “Neither would we.”

“Looking back, I sure wish I did more research on the procedure before I requested it,” a glassy-eyed Kylie explained, pausing to bite her lower lip. “But I just couldn't sit there and do nothing while my only child was about to be put to death. I was desperate.”

“I understand, Mom.” Camile placed her hand on her mother's shoulder. “What I don't get is why the council wanted me dead to begin with.”

“The decision to execute you was also made in desperation,” Zephyr explained. “There were a series of prophecies that were made pertaining to an imbalance in the *Invisible War* and the endangerment of the *Age of Ascension*.”

The *Age of Ascension* was defined as an era when the Coexistents would discover their true potential while placing higher importance in healing their civilization versus clinging to material excess and an imbalance of prosperity. In doing so, they would abandon superficial conflict and behavior while striving toward global unification. The *Invisible War* was said to be the struggle that precedes choice, a recurring burden which has been present since the dawn of human conflict. Every decision made, whether moral or immoral, contributes toward either the success or failure of the arrival of the *Age of Ascension*.

“The prophecies foretold a string of catastrophic incidents to be initiated by a person who would at worst prevent the *Age of Ascension*, or at least tragically alter the course of its progression,” Zephyr continued. “There were terrible accidents, injuries, diseases, agricultural devastation and social unrest, all happening within our society, just as predicted. Eventually, all signs pointed to you.”

“In each one of those tragic occurrences you were the only common link,” Kylie added. “The council tried every possible solution from counseling, therapy, isolation...but nothing worked.”

“Not only did the incidents continue, they worsened.” Zephyr's brows raised as his lips sank into a frown. “It was feared that you would taint, if not completely prevent, the *Age of Ascension*. It was that fear that led the council to opt for the most drastic solution. To this day, the council's decision remains one that shames us as a people. Still, it serves as a lesson that as long as there is fear, doubt and shakable faith, there is always a chance for us to relapse to the old ways our ancestors fought to escape.”

# Chapter 4

## Out of Line

Camile lost count of how many times she'd read the same section of text. She sometimes struggled to comprehend certain aspects of Transcendent education, but was told she'd reach her full potential in a matter of time. Still, focus was difficult to come by as she sat in the airy café located on the thirtieth level of Coronis Peak. Actually, the view beyond the picturesque windows played a part in her inability to concentrate on her Arvainan lexicon, as did the hushed conversations and meager clanking of dishes around her as the other patrons enjoyed their breakfasts.

Deciding a break from reading was in order she allowed her eyes to drift to the city skyline just beyond the dense woods, now exploding with the lively colors of a Monet painting. The clean, neutral lines of the café seemed to serve as a frame for the visual masterpiece beyond it. A cool gentle breeze caressed Camile's face and was promptly followed by a kiss from the sun. For a short while she forgot about the guards around the perimeter and the other diners regarding her with curious glances.

"Not slacking off, are you?" a soft voice stole her attention. Camile turned around, but didn't need to do so in order to know it was her mother. Sure enough, she saw both her parents approaching, dozens of eyes trailing behind them. There didn't seem to be a color her mother didn't look good in, but the peach camisole and matching sweater duster really enhanced the golden undertones of her deep skin. Her hazel eyes glowed like amber as

her face entered the sunlight. After briefly discussing her progress, they made an announcement.

“Your father's being honored next week.” Kylie smiled as she slid into a seat opposite her daughter. “It's not every day someone—”

“Gets older?” Zephyr quipped smoothly as he sat beside her. “I'm grateful for the honor, but I admit I'm not accustomed to such fuss.”

Camile noticed her mother's smile grow faint upon hearing his words. Seeing this, Zephyr took her hand and stroked it gently.

Eyeing his daughter, he added, “But you'll still need to pick out something pretty for the festivity.”

Kylie instantly volunteered to help her daughter find an outfit. Camile had almost forgotten how enthusiastic her mother was about shopping. It was an interest she shared, depending on her mood. Though she was excited about trying out the Arvainan fashions, Camile also felt apprehensive about the upcoming gathering. She hadn't encountered many of the citizens and the few of which she had made it clear she made them uncomfortable. Camile considered voicing her concerns, but changed her mind when she saw an officer approaching.

“The trespassers aren't who you think they are, but you were close, sir,” the officer informed Camile's father. “They're not rebels. They're untagged Coexistents who travelled here illegally.”

“How did they get here?” Zephyr furrowed his brow.

“None of them seem to remember, sir. Our best guess is that they were smuggled into this dimension by the rebels under false pretenses. We're still trying to determine the cause of their memory loss.”

Zephyr ordered the officer to put a trace on inter-dimensional transfer records for the previous three months.

“Untagged Coexistents?” Camile inquired as the officer exited.

“It's not uncommon for the rebels to carry out suicide missions,” her father explained. “In all cases, the rebels are either killed during their assignments or suffer extensive mental damage, making it impossible to extract any information. Now, it appears they're recruiting untagged Coexistents to do their bidding. Hopefully, we'll have better luck getting information from them in the coming days.”

Camile's mother explained the rise of a disturbing trend among the rebels—trafficking untagged Coexistents, usually from populous cities like New York, Shanghai and Moscow among many others.

“Why do you need to tag them to begin with?” Camile wondered.

“For their own safety, and because we've been doing some recruiting of our own,” Zephyr answered. “You'll find out more as you complete your training. Right now, there's something I think you should see.”

\* \* \*

There wasn't an empty seat in the meeting hall and the faces of hundreds reflected the tension in the room. All was silent except for the strong voice of a visibly displeased woman. Her dark eyes smoldered like hot coals in contrast to her cool demeanor.

"For years we've been slaves to their cause," she declared, her red lips twisting in apparent revulsion. "Am I the only one who can see the incredible disservice we're doing ourselves? We bend over backwards to help these...these insidious, hypocritical people; all the while knowing that if they had the chance to discover our world they'd rip it from under our feet." She clenched her fist. "We've all seen the historical archives. Coexistent humans are synonymous with gluttony and turmoil. Have we forgotten that we're helping people who are addicted to torment, pain and disaster? Yet they cry and complain when they receive the evil they glorify—just one example of their contradictory behavior. They're opportunistic and with each passing day that we help them they squander our efforts! We have to put an end to this once and for all!"

The room filled with scattered mumbled acquiescence until Kylie signaled for silence.

"Are you suggesting we save one world by defiling the freedoms of another?" Her smooth voice was authoritative, yet calm. "What if the situation was reversed?"

"Theoretical questions solve nothing. We need to deal with the harsh reality." The disgruntled woman frowned. "The only way to do that is to control them before it's too late. What do we reserve for ourselves; several more lifetimes of waiting quietly, hoping they get their shit together? I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm tired of dealing with the backdraft of their emotional diarrhea."

"We all share your concerns. However, I'm disappointed that you would generalize your opinion of the entire Coexistent race." Kylie's hazel orbs appeared to darken as she grimaced. "By helping them we also help ourselves. Yes, they have much to improve on, but at least they're trying, and in that, there's hope."

"Well, a Coexistent *would* say that." The woman snorted disgustedly. Upon doing so, she was promptly removed from her seat by security. "You can take me away, but that won't change my opinion. Unbelievable! After all our society has done for them, we're the ones who are destitute of choice," she shouted over her shoulder as two officers escorted her from the room. Her diminishing voice echoed from the corridor before growing silent.

“Maybe she’s right. Maybe we’re going about it the wrong way,” a middle-aged gentleman said calmly once the disruption died down. “We’ve been going through the same pattern for centuries and it obviously isn’t working. The lives of my ancestors have been wasted in this hopeless mission. Nearly all of them died violent deaths in the process. We need to communicate with the Coexistents in the only language they seem to understand—domination. In each instance where we presented the option of peace versus continued mayhem, they always choose mayhem. Maybe it’s time for *their* luxury of choice to come to an end since they keep making the wrong ones.”

“Part of evolving is accepting and adapting to change,” Kylie lectured. “Those who fail to do so are left behind in the dust of yesterday. The fact is, the Coexistents are evolving and will be capable of standing on their own if only we just support them a little longer. Let’s not forget, the Transcendent World has had to go through its own period of trial and error to get to where it is today. Patience is a virtue, but I know it sure as hell isn’t easy. As much as we would all love to wake up tomorrow without the burden of worrying about the collapse of either world, the fact is it’s not likely to happen. Positive change is among the most powerful forces in the universe, but it doesn’t happen overnight. But when it does happen, it’ll certainly be worth the wait.”

Impressed by her mother’s poignant speech Camile’s eyes remained on the blank screen moments after the playback ended. Turning her attention to her parents, she noticed their solemn expressions.

“A short while after that meeting we noticed citizens going missing,” Zephyr explained. “Turns out, they were forming a council of their own, now known as *the rebels*. They view Coexistents as a hindrance to our own progression. In some ways, it’s understandable—the closer we seem to get to leading the Coexistents to a time of peaceful cohabitation with one another, they relapse to their destructive behavior. But, I haven’t lost hope. We’re getting closer with each attempt. Despite their setbacks, Coexistents have made remarkable progress. They’ve broken many barriers that at one time seemed impenetrable. Sadly, the rebels don’t see it that way. They’re so blinded by their own rage and twisted agendas, they fail to realize what they’ve become.”

\* \* \*

The days seemed to pass at breakneck speed and before Camile knew it, she was getting ready for the big celebration. She was grateful that her mother was able to walk her through the details of what women

traditionally wore at such functions. The Arvainans prided themselves in their ability to maintain dignity in the art of seduction by preserving its main element—mystery. This was reflected in their overall sense of style. Comfortable in their skin, the Arvainans weren't afraid to show it on occasion, though in tasteful glimpses that enticed the imagination to play. Camile had tried on about a dozen dresses, eventually opting for a relatively modest look for her first formal social gathering.

Checking her appearance a final time before leaving her quarters, Camile smoothed the flouncy asymmetrical hem on her white, toga-style dress. She accessorized it with a floral prismatic crystal and ivory choker that matched her earrings. For the evening, her medallion—which she was told to wear at all times—was fashioned into a bracelet. She regarded it for a moment, taking in the tranquil vision of the deep blue stone that seemed to encapsulate a galaxy beneath water. It was this trinket that led her to the world she was now exploring.

*No guts, no glory*, she thought, adjusting a stray lock of her dark shoulder-skimming waves before entering the enormous banquet hall. Its gilded ivory walls were filled with all the life and jubilation of a carnival. As Camile stepped onto the burgundy carpet she estimated that there were nearly a thousand guests in attendance, enjoying food, drink and conversation amid lively music. She nearly froze at the entrance, wishing her parents had gone into more detail about exactly how many people would be present. Then again, she knew they probably realized she would've refused attendance if they had.

A hush followed her into the room. For a moment, it seemed as though someone hit a pause button on the crowd's merriment. Attempting to distract herself from the stifling crush of attention, Camile busied herself with analyzing the elaborate fashions of the guests. Many of them were wearing medallions similar to her own, though in varying shades. Some were fashioned into leather cuffs, wristlets and bracelets. Others were suspended from necklaces. Most of the sharply dressed men wore theirs in a style similar to pocket watches clipped to their waistbands.

As though on cue, the stark silence was broken by the music of a peculiar band, which included jubilant twins, conjoined at the abdomen, playing a double guitar that had apparently been customized for them. The music roused the crowd to resume their celebration as Camile's mother approached. She was a vision in flowing blue taffeta and silver with her hair smoothed into an elegant updo. Shortly after receiving her mother's warm welcome, Camile inquired about their condition.

"Transcendent technology is advanced, but still has its limitations. In their case," Kylie regarded the musicians with her tawny eyes, "surgical options were much too risky. But as you can see, they've made the most of their situation."

The statement conjured thoughts of Camile's separation from Akalina, thoughts that were broken by several sharp, cracking sounds that echoed throughout the hall. Turning around, Camile noticed a small group of acrobatic men entering the room, lashing whips and twirling staffs in a combative display. Their impeccable almond, cinnamon and chocolate toned bodies were clothed in chest-baring vests and white loose pants, secured with black sashes and matching ankle bands. They moved with easy agility to the thumping beat of drums. Their electrifying performance sparked with danger; one false move would surely result in a devastating injury. Their battle demonstration was poetry in motion set to the entrancing rhythm of their weaponry.

Once the enthralling act concluded, Camile found it slightly easier to breathe, only then realizing that she had been holding her breath for much of the performance. After bowing to Zephyr, the men parted allowing a short, portly pink-skinned man to approach Camile's father.

"I hope you enjoyed the performance, sir." He smiled proudly, gesturing to the men behind him. "These are some of Bauldana's finest champions."

"Yes. They're quite impressive," Zephyr praised, turning his gaze to the glistening performers. "Well done, gentlemen. You've done your country proud."

"And you, sir, have done your parents proud," Ezekiel proclaimed. "They raised a very good man."

Zephyr's smile faded. "They certainly did their best."

"Oh, don't be modest, mister!" Ezekiel's smile broadened. "You had a hand in the efforts that liberated our people from the Dark Days of Bloodlust."

"It was a team effort." Dimples deepening, Zephyr's lips turned upward as he clamped the man's shoulder, guiding him to the refreshment station. "Anyway, wouldn't you rather indulge in a few delicacies rather than talk shop? There'll be plenty of time for that later."

The beverage table was flowing with drinks distributed by cordial attendants. Camile stood in line to receive a serving of wine for the pending toast. Just as the attendant extended the glass to her, Sir Drayden intercepted. He was sharply dressed in a high-collared, white button-down shirt and black suit, giving him a prestigious aristocratic appearance.

"Please, allow me." Taking the glass from the server, he passed it to Camile.

"Thanks." Camile forced a smile as she reluctantly accepted.

"Don't mention it," Sir Drayden replied, gesturing that she take a seat beside her parents. It was a welcome invitation since she was wearing heels for the first time in months and was finding it increasingly challenging to remain steady. A hush swept over the room as the elder took to the head of the room and called for attention.

“Thank you for joining us for this brief celebration of a milestone reached by one of our brothers,” Sir Drayden began. “I’m usually a man of few words, so I’ll honor that tradition by keeping my sentiments short. When I first met Zephyr, he was a rambunctious, energetic young man in dire need of discipline and direction. But I always had a hunch that beneath his rugged exterior lie a dedicated, driven individual who would accomplish great things.” Raising his glass, he turned to Camile’s father. Smiling confidently, he said, “Zephyr, thanks for proving I’m always right.”

The room momentarily filled with scattered amused laughter as everyone raised their glasses. Sir Drayden punctuated the merriment, declaring, “The measure of a successful life is not how long you live, but how well you live. Live well!”

The sentiment was cheered by the guests to the xylophonic tune of clanking glasses.

Camile overheard some of the attendees commenting on the rich flavor of the libations. However, when she took a sip, she tasted something akin to diluted fruit juice. Confused, she locked eyes with Sir Drayden, who regarded her with a subtle wink and a faint smile as he raised his glass to his lips.

\* \* \*

The following morning Camile was scheduled to meet with the knight. He was lying across the dark leather daybed in front of his office window, engrossed in a book as she entered. The sunlight poured through the window casting a halo-like glow upon his hair.

“Catching up on some reading?” Camile asked, attempting to break the ice.

“Translating, actually,” Sir Drayden met her gaze, twirling a silver pen in his fingers.

“Where are the originals?”

The elder’s eyes crinkled as he cracked a wry smile. Tapping his temple with his pen, he replied, “They’re all up here.”

The furnishings in Sir Drayden’s office were luxurious and seemed like the kind of setup a high-powered executive would enjoy. To the far right of the generous floor-to-ceiling windows was a separate sitting area facing the fireplace.

“We could sit there if you like,” he offered. The power and clarity of his voice raided her ears and traveled through her like a mild electric current. Uncomfortable with the enormity of his presence, Camile declined, stating she was content with standing.



"I doubt you'll get any taller, if that's your goal." He chortled, shifting himself into a sitting position. "But since you prefer to stand..." Rising to his feet, he expelled a breath before walking to a window, motioning her to follow.

A glint of light reflected off the silver buckle of the belt encircling his trim waistline, giving life to an otherwise stark black sweater and matching slacks. His eyes seemed to be made of mirror as they appeared to reflect the colors of the sky they were now beholding. The dazzling view of the city and its rooftop gardens did little to quell the imposing discomfort that stemmed from his standing beside her.

His ensuing inquiries were surprisingly casual as he expressed curiosity in her broad interests and hobbies which included history, sketching, reading, poetry and cooking. Camile was equally impressed by his breadth of knowledge in each subject. According to what she had heard about the elder, he was the type who was all-business. She was mildly puzzled by the fact he mainly seemed interested in small talk and wondered if it was some sort of psychological assessment or if he was routinely sizing-up his newest trainee. The latter seemed more likely as the conversation continued.

"What's your impression of this world so far?" he asked, clasping his hands behind his back. "I'd imagine your head must be spinning, given what you've learned in recent months."

"It's something." Camile folded her arms. "Certainly not anything I thought I'd ever see."

"Young lady, you ain't seen nothin' yet." Sir Drayden chortled. "What about your life in the Coexistent World? Do you have any regrets about having to leave?"

"I don't know," Camile said. "Should I?"

"I believe it is I who asked the question first." He raised an eyebrow. "Well?"

"No, sir. Not so far."

"*Not so far.* Hmm. I see," Sir Drayden said almost to himself as though making a mental note of her answer. "How would you describe your upbringing?"

"It wasn't easy growing up without my father, but my mother did the best she could as a single parent."

"Do you hold any resentment?"

"I just said, she—"

"I'm not referring to your mother alone."

"In that case, I guess I'll have to say that even though I'm still working through a few things, I know the situation wasn't my parents' fault. I remember what happened the night of their escape attempt, the night they tried to save me. I also recall how their efforts were tragically interrupted." Camile looked deliberately into the elder's eyes. Her gaze wavered briefly

before revisiting his blue orbs. “I was just a little girl. Were you really gonna let the council kill me?”

This time it was Sir Drayden who briefly broke eye contact before giving his response.

“If it's any consolation, the process would've been quite gentle, unlike the core segregation you endured.”

*I'll take that as a yes.*

Camile caught a chill upon realizing she was standing beside the man who, at one time, planned to deliver her to the executioner. She looked forward to her exit, but a question held her back upon dismissal. Sir Drayden had already resumed his previous position on the daybed and continued reviewing his notes. Realizing Camile hadn't left, he paused.

“Something wrong?” he inquired.

“I was just wondering...Did you switch my drink at the party last night?”

“Yes, I did.” The knight peered at her over the top of his book. “Maybe you forgot, but you're restricted from consuming alcoholic beverages. We can't risk having your mind steered by the influence of such substances.”

“Oh, I see,” Camile replied softly. She had, indeed, forgotten that her parents had informed her about the restriction just days after her arrival at Caldaq. “I thought there might've been an exception since it was my father's birthday and all.”

“There are no exceptions unless otherwise specified,” Sir Drayden said matter-of-factly, returning his eyes to his literature.

“How did you switch it so fast?”

“Easy. You weren't paying attention.” The elder peeled his eyes away from his notes to regard her anew. His facial expression hardened a little and seemed to reflect mild impatience. “Will that be all?”

It was clear that he was forcing the conversation to a close. Having no desire to overstay her welcome, Camile didn't resist its end.

The tension lifted as she entered the corridor and saw her father. Curious about his reaction to the subject of his parents the prior evening, Camile decided to question him about it. Her intuition was cautioning her that bad news surrounded the topic in question. Still, she wanted to ask for herself.

“I noticed you didn't seem too happy when that guy mentioned your parents last night. Are they no longer with us?” she asked.

Zephyr's lips tightened as he appeared to consider his response. Finally, he said, “This isn't a good time to talk about this, Camile. I—”

“You have to tell her sometime. You're only delaying the inevitable,” the knight interrupted from his doorway.

“Sir Drayden, I understand your concern, but with all due respect, this is a family matter.” Zephyr frowned. “I'll tell her when the time is right.”

“Alright. If you won’t tell her, I will.” Expelling a breath, Sir Drayden turned to Camile. “Your grandparents are dead.”

*Seriously? You just blurt it out point blank like that?*

“That was *way* out of line.” Zephyr pointed a finger at the elder. The irritation in his voice was evident, yet tame.

“She’s bound to find out sooner or later. We’ll all be better off if we tell her what she wants to know now and get it out of the way. In case you haven’t noticed, she has an uncanny way of figuring things out. Furthermore, we can’t afford any distractions on her part, so it’s best to clear the air now rather than later.” Sir Drayden paused a moment before frowning slightly. “Zephyr, do you need a visit to the EDC? You seem to be losing control of your anger.”

Camile could feel the stifling shift in the atmosphere as well. Her father was clearly furious with this man and it seemed to be rubbing off on her. She agreed that Sir Drayden had crossed a major line. He didn’t just avoid beating around the bush. He destroyed it.

“No, sir. I’m fine, but I would like to discuss this with you later,” Zephyr said firmly. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to continue my conversation with my daughter... *Alone.*”

The knight appeared to scrutinize him for a tense moment. Seemingly satisfied, he turned his attention to Camile.

“I’m sorry I had to initiate this conversation,” Sir Drayden said. “Your grandparents were decent people. It’s a shame you never got to know them.” His eyes shifted between father and daughter before returning to his office.

Awkward silence filled the air for several moments after the knight’s departure.

“I’m sorry, Dad. That was messed up, the way he—”

“I know, sweetheart. I’ll handle it in my own time.” Zephyr regarded her with a tight-lipped smile. His somber eyes indicated that he was working to maintain his control. He appeared to be succeeding and Camile hoped it was a hereditary ability. She also hoped she wouldn’t tip his emotional balance by inquiring about her grandparents’ deaths.

“Hmm.” Zephyr chuckled faintly. “I see the ways of the Coexistent World have gotten to you—so focused on death. Wouldn’t you rather know how they lived?”

# Chapter 5

## Faces of the Past

Later that evening, Camile was deep in thought. She hoped the relics of the past would help enrich her relationship with her father. For years she sought to know him, but now that he was finally in her life, she was disappointed by the lingering distance between them. Yet, she understood that it would take longer than a few months to repair an eighteen-year breach in communication. It was a fracture in their relationship she was unsure any amount of time could mend, but she was willing to do her best, especially since her parents were the only family she had. This weighed on Camile's mind as she traveled with the security escorts guiding her to her quarters. A shrill whistle jostled her from her thoughts. As it grew louder she realized it was coming from within the corridor walls. There was an unmistakable Doppler effect as the sound faded rapidly into the distance. Camile noticed marked annoyance etched on the guards' faces.

“Joy-sliders.” The tall one palmed his face.

“When will these kids learn that the hatches are for emergencies only?” The short one exhaled.

The sound returned, this time punctuated by squealing laughter.

“Think you can catch this one, Cole?” The short guard smirked.

His partner nodded, walking closer to the wall and thrusting out his palm, but stopped short of hitting the surface. The laughter ceased and was replaced by a thin *uh-oh*. Camile stifled a chuckle as the guard opened a

hidden hatch in the stone wall. A young girl peered out, regarding her captors with wide eyes.

“How many?” Cole asked simply as he helped her down. The girl held up three fingers, gesturing that her accomplices had gone ahead of her.

“I’ll take her to find the others before reporting this to their parents. You can escort Ms. Leon back to her quarters.” Cole ordered, before leading the sullen girl away.

Camile and the officer took no more than ten steps before hearing yet another sound within the walls. The decidedly male voice was equally jubilant as the young girl’s had been moments earlier.

*Woo-hoo! Down the hatch, baby,* the passenger exclaimed.

The guard quickly ran to the wall and performed the same maneuver his partner had done earlier. A teenage boy emerged from the opening and quickly darted past Camile with the officer hot on his trail. Camile soon found herself completely separated from both guards. In her attempt to locate the shorter officer, she submerged deeper into the winding corridors of Coronis Peak. Though the pathways were brightly lit and busy with foot traffic, Camile was intimidated by the unfamiliarity of it all. Had she been in another place and time she would’ve asked for directions, but nearly everyone around was regarding her with suspicion. They all vanished behind her as she rounded a corner and the sounds of the daily commute faded with them. Traveling further, she heard her father’s tension-laced voice emanating from an adjacent corridor.

“Sir Drayden, how could you? It should’ve been up to me to decide when and how I told my daughter about my parents.”

“He’s right, Sir Drayden,” Kylie added. “What you did was very unfair.”

“I don’t expect you to understand my reasons for doing what I did today. The sooner you put the past behind you, the sooner we can all help Camile to commit herself to the important work that lies ahead of her,” the knight explained.

“And I don’t expect *you* to understand the importance of a parent’s bond with their children since you don’t have any,” Zephyr retorted.

“Honey, I know you’re upset, but that’s a little harsh.” Kylie said gingerly.

“His anger’s justified,” Sir Drayden acknowledged before cautioning, “However, his emotional control is wavering for the second time today. Do you need to visit the EDC, Zephyr?”

“That won’t be necessary, sir.” Camile’s father exhaled, his voice notably lower.

“Good. If there’s nothing else you wish to discuss, I’ll be on my way. Oh, one last thing, it might be a good idea to show your daughter the archives,” Sir Drayden suggested. “Hopefully, that will be enough to sate her desire to know more about her grandparents. It may also help—”

Camile nearly leapt out of her skin when a hand fell heavily on her shoulder, pulling her attention away from the discussion. Whipping around, she saw the relieved expression of the short guard.

"I've been looking all over for you." He expelled a deep breath.

"Likewise." Camile chortled, sharing in his relief.

"For future reference, just stay put and I'll find you," he advised, moping his glistening brow. "This is a very big place. It's not a good idea to go wandering off the way you did."

\* \* \*

Though windowless, Caldaq's central library in Coronis Peak was flooded with warm light, enhancing its mahogany and wine colored ambiance. The walls were seemingly constructed by the countless volumes of books, stowed within towering recessed shelves.

*A bookworm's dream come true, or an illiterate's nightmare,* Camile thought while observing librarians on rolling ladders, retrieving and replacing editions. Detecting the stale scent of archaic parchment in the mildly dusty air, she wondered if Arvaina's most treasured secrets were hidden in the facility.

As Camile and her mother ventured further into the chamber she caught the eyes of a few dozen scholars, who quickly returned their attention to their studies. Even with the small army of guards lining the room, she could still sense their fear. It permeated the air like the stench of toxic waste. They entered one of the archive rooms where her father was awaiting her arrival. It was dim and spartan, except for a corner table inset with a glowing computer screen that reflected in the buttons of his slate gray uniform.

"I guess I'll leave you to your father-daughter chat." Kylie turned to exit.

"You're not staying?" Camile furrowed her brow.

"I've seen these archives dozens of times, but they always make me a little emotional. Your father's parents were the closest thing I had to parents of my own." Kylie sighed. "I know it's been years, but I still miss them. I guess I still have a bit of work to do in letting go. Transcendents make it look deceptively easy." Shaking her head slightly, Camile's mother gently touched her daughter's shoulder before leaving the room.

"Fair warning, I went through a few awkward phases in my youth. Try not to laugh too hard." Zephyr quipped once Camile joined his side.

"We clearly have more in common than our eyes," she said, regarding his gray gaze.

Her father smiled deeply before swiping through the images with a fluid motion of his fingers. Each photo was sequentially projected into life-sized three-dimensional visuals at the room's center.

Awestruck, Camile gawked at her father's childhood images. He was the spitting image of his own father who shared the same striking pale eyes and dark hair. However, the man in the picture was noticeably wiry.

"So, this is grandpa." Camile exhaled, approaching the projection.

Her father nodded, staring at the image for a moment. "His name was Zephyr Leon I, but everyone called him by his middle name, Lysander."

"You look a lot alike, only you're not as skinny." Camile met her father's eyes. "No offense."

"None taken." Zephyr chortled as he joined his daughter's side. "My father was more the spiritual and intellectual type, but don't let his appearance fool you. He was more than capable of kicking some serious ass in his day." He beamed. "I guess you could say it was he, in part, who influenced my decision to work in law enforcement."

"And so you followed in his footsteps."

"Not exactly. Crime prevention is my main interest. My father worked in the judgment and penalty sector."

"Sounds like he was a no nonsense kinda guy," Camile remarked.

"That pretty much sums him up." Her father nodded with quirked brows. "His job was burdensome to say the least, but he always did his best to do what he felt was right."

Camile's eyes fell upon the image of a young petite woman with large dark eyes and pouty lips, curled into a proud smile. Her light-colored glossy locks were perfectly coifed like a 40s-era starlet, framing her face as she knelt behind a young Zephyr, his arms braced in her hands.

"That's my mother, Camelia. Your name was inspired by hers. She always wanted me and my dad to go into medicine with her. Actually, this is a video of me learning to walk," Zephyr explained before prompting the film to play.

Camelia cheered little Zephyr on as he took one wobbly step after the next. After a misstep, the child stumbled into his father's arms.

"That was a close one, little man," Lysander said through jubilant amusement as his son cooed and giggled.

"Nice catch, honey. Looks like we've got a real sprinter on our hands," Camelia said to her husband in a silky full-bodied voice, fit for book or film narration.

The footage continued for several moments, during which Zephyr's parents showered him with praise. This was followed by pictorial chronicles of her father's life. Camile felt as though she were watching him grow before her very eyes. She couldn't help but feel a little bitter about the fact he had missed out on her life. There was something tauntingly backwards

about it. At nearly the exact moment the resentment began to chill her mind it was melted away by the warmth she felt when watching the next set of images in which a very pregnant Kylie, was present. Joyful tears stung Camile's eyes as she regarded images of her parents together with her as a newborn.

There were a wide assortment of family photos, including her parent's wedding. The simple floral backdrop complimented what she imagined was a modest, romantic ceremony. Her parents and paternal grandparents stood side by side. Surrounding them were guests including Sir Drayden, a striking raven-haired woman, Nancy and several other people, whom her father described as staff, council members and other government officials. Camile was about to inquire about the dark haired woman when she recognized someone in the wedding party, someone she hadn't seen in nearly a decade.

"*Ms. Hawkins?*" she asked almost to herself, narrowing her eyes. Ms. Hawkins had been Camile's distrustful high school teacher. In the photo, the woman's diminutive height was all but eclipsed by Sir Drayden, who towered behind her. The crown of her head, spiked with short jet-black hair, barely aligned with his shoulder.

"Excuse me?" Camile's father inquired, prompting her to indicate the youthful looking dark-skinned woman in the photo. "Oh, Jezebel. She was one of your mother's bridesmaids. As I recall she was more than a little miffed that Nancy was picked for matron of honor. I'll never understand these things and I value my sanity way too much to keep trying." He chuckled softly before his expression grew serious. "Jezebel ended up being selected for a more important role. She was assigned as one of your guardians in the Coexistent World. Unfortunately, she failed to meet the council's expectations."

Camile recalled the skeptical manner in which her former high school teacher had addressed her on numerous occasions. She never would have guessed her to be an ally of any sort, particularly since her mother suspected Jezebel was looking for reasons to incriminate her.

"It's strange to hear her first name after all this time." Camile shook her head. "Is she here in the Transcendent World?"

"Yes, but she no longer works for the council."

The slight deviation of Zephyr's eyes alluded Camile to the fact someone was behind her. She followed his line of sight to see Sir Drayden silently approaching. At first she wondered if he had managed to slip into the room with the stealth of a shadow, then she suspected he'd been present all along. The latter seemed more likely since no additional light had breached the room since her mother's departure. Even so, Camile had casually scanned the four walls and corners upon entry and her father was the only man present at the time, or so she thought.



Sir Drayden stopped just a few feet in front of father and daughter. His age seemed more evident in the sparse lighting, which emphasized his under eye bags and the crepey skin around his neck. There appeared to be a sense of understanding between the men, who remained locked in a silent stare. Finally, Zephyr nodded, his expression solemn.

“I suppose you can say your piece since we've somewhat touched on the subject.”

Based on her father's statement, Camile knew the knight had somehow asked him a question by way of thought.

Facing Camile, Sir Drayden began, “I understand you're not only curious about the life of your grandparents, but also how they died.” He paused briefly to regard Zephyr. “I regret to inform you that I am responsible for their deaths.”

Camile quickly toggled her attention between the knight and her father, as though gauging his response. Zephyr pursed his lips, briefly lowering his gaze as Sir Drayden continued.

“I sent them on a mission designed to throw the enemy off our trail. It inevitably cost them their lives. For the sake of national security there's no official record of the assignment or the nature surrounding their passing. However, they believed in the importance of their task so deeply, they bravely chose to sacrifice themselves in order to succeed,” Sir Drayden explained, a hint of pride softened his sharp voice. “By helping the Coexistents win the *Invisible War* we'll prove that your grandparents didn't die in vain.” He paused a moment, filling the room with deafening silence.

Zephyr's jaw tightened as he regarded Sir Drayden with glassy eyes. Camile couldn't imagine how difficult it was for him to stand face-to-face with the man who was at least partially responsible for his parents' deaths. She knew it must've been a constant reminder that he would never see them again. The thought alone was heartbreaking enough, but then she learned that their end wasn't quick nor easy.

“Since there's nothing further for me to say on the matter, I'll leave you to finish your meeting in private,” Sir Drayden said. “Unless, of course, you have any questions.”

The tension in Camile's throat obstructed a verbal response. She shook her head, prompting him to exit. The knight's departure alleviated the tension in the room, but the painful consequence of his decision remained in her father's eyes.

“After my parents died, my brothers, sisters and I drifted apart,” Zephyr broke the silence.

“I have aunts and uncles?” Camile cracked a smile, her interest piquing further. She found some comfort in learning her family was larger than three people.

“Quite a few.” He nodded somberly. “Three aunts, eight uncles.”

Camile's mouth fell agape. "From *one* marriage?"

Zephyr nodded anew, chuckling at her stunned reaction. "It wasn't easy being the youngest of twelve children. We rarely keep in touch, anymore. Sadly, it's just not the same as it used to be. It could be worse, though. I guess occasional contact is better than none at all."

*So much for a family reunion.*

"What happened? Sibling rivalry?"

"Something like that. We had many disagreements. The biggest was over our parents' final arrangements." Expelling a deep breath, Zephyr loosened the cuffs of his jacket. "They were upset about my inheritance. Can't say that I blame them. They thought it was unfair for one person to inherit everything. But, considering the history of things, I think I earned it."

"Are they in here?" Camile gestured to the archive.

Zephyr nodded his head, his nostrils slightly flared. "But if you don't mind, I'd like to show those to you another time."

Having no desire to pick the scab that family drama had left behind, Camile was content with surveying the rest of the preset photos in the archive. In them, everyone seemed overjoyed as though nothing could go wrong. For a little more than an instant Camile found herself wanting to forget everything that had transpired so that she could experience those precious, seemingly carefree moments in the images displayed before her. Sadly, she knew that was an impossibility. Those moments, along with her childhood, were long gone and could never be reclaimed.



Dear Friend,

Thanks for joining the journey thus far! I hope you enjoyed reading these sample chapters as much as I've enjoyed writing CAMILEON: *Beyond The Veil*. As the subsequent chapters of this novel unfolds, Camile will discover just how complex, amazing and daunting the Transcendent World can be. She, and I, would be honored if you decided to witness the adventure as it blooms in all of its intensity, wonder and mystery.

Whether or not you're ready to leap further *Beyond The Veil* at this time, you're more than welcome to share your thoughts about what you've read so far. I'd love to hear from you!

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CAMILEON: *Beyond The Veil* is currently available for Kindle and will soon be available in print.

Warmest regards,

*Shykia Bell*