

THE
GUARDIAN'S
HEART

LOST SOULS BOOK ONE



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A HARSH AND BEAUTIFUL TRUTH

I have seen human suffering in all of its spawning variations and there are as many expressions as there are stars crowding the sky. Just as a star is born of dust and debris, suffering is born from the debris of your longing. It swirls in your mind, gains momentum from rage, collides with your fears and blazes to life. I've gazed upon many 'stars', so to speak, tiny pricks of light struggling to be seen through infinite black. They might all appear the same from a distance, but viewed closely, are as varied and unique as a fingerprint. Some rage white hot and blue; others simmer a slow, pale yellow; others a deep, lonely red, but all eventually collapse and burn out in the end. When your suffering is spent and dull dust and ash are all that remain, only then can you understand that you never really lost anything at all, but gained something infinitely brighter – compassion.

ONE

My father had once told me without prejudice or judgement, ‘Humans know so little of what they carry inside.’

His hazel eyes had glistened, warring between sadness and hope, and darting through memories of things that could never be unseen – no matter how much he might have wished it. The grand ceremony pronouncing me a Soul Guardian had just ended. His hand had rested on my shoulder. I could feel its reassuring warmth, even through my white, hooded robe. We’d stood beneath the cut crystal ceiling of Ophanim Dome as pearlescent light poured in from above. It bathed the milling crowd in a milky luminance as elated parents offered sage words and congratulations to their own sons and daughters. My father had beamed down at me, wrapped me in an all-

encompassing embrace and gazed upon me with such loving pride, I'd felt like Panacea's greatest treasure. But, I am not unique and I am not special. Like every other go-lite on the planet, I'd been in training for Soul Guardianship since birth. Vowing to honour the Guardians' Code before the Elders was a pledge that countless millions of us had made since the beginning of time. Whenever there were humans in pain, we would be there to support them. We didn't see it as a chore or a burden, it was just the way of our world. We did it gladly, because in truth, every earthbound Soul suffers... more than anyone ever sees or knows... and more than they want to admit. The reality is, suffering is an inescapable part of what it means to be human; a common thread that binds Souls together.

I rolled over to hug the spare pillow on my bed, feeling so grateful to have been born here. My city, Citrine, sprang from a purple valley, hedged by paper mountains in three directions. In the fourth, a gateway lay open to the silver sea. Scribbled around the city's edges, an emerald vein of river almost made the shape of a heart. Ornate tin rooftops capped the snug sprawl of houses, all tinged with an antique patina. For miles they stretched in blue and green, looking like a patchwork of floating fields. From them, copper weathervanes sprouted in a metal menagerie of leaping stags, gargantuan insects, and nature sprites.

There were thundering horses, coiling sea serpents, cunning foxes, suns, moons, spinning constellations and every other winged, finned and furred creature imaginable, only coming to life at the whim of the wind.

Down below, houses were artfully assembled from an eclectic array of weathered wood and sandstone, stained glass and iron lace. Some sat like jewelled boxes, others like up-side-down teacups, all jumbled together, lining the cobblestone streets in rows reminiscent of mismatched babushka dolls. In the centre of it all, Ophanim Dome gleamed; a luminous egg, nested amongst candy coloured emporiums and brindled stone buildings adorned with ancient scrollwork.

Everywhere, there was evidence of the artist's hand, from the street sculptures wearing mantles of moss, to the crystal mosaics set into walls, and ancient symbols pressed into sidewalks. Life sprang from every crevice. Between stout cottages and tall terraces, prolific greenery spilled from vertical garden walls, like the lush tresses of Mother Nature herself. A city dreamt up by sages and visionaries, born on the backs and belief of the people. Nurtured to life in farmers' fields and orchards. Sustained on potters' wheels, bootmakers' benches, and weavers' looms, and celebrated through the murals and music of artists. There was a flowing circle of respect that bonded all things.

It was as natural and instinctive as drawing breath. The city turned under the power of the sun, wind, and rain, and – the most potent of all energies – love.

I thanked the One Source that Panacea was free of the bonds of suffering that plagued Earth. That world was a million light years away, and yet, each night Soul Guardians all over Panacea invited the surreal and abstruse into the intimate space of their dreams to uphold the oaths they had made. Six months had passed since the ceremony and I was beginning to understand what I'd glimpsed in my father's eyes that day, because now, every night, I saw it for myself. Their myriad minds with their pain, insecurity and disillusionment had become my night-time companions. They seeped into my dreams, crying out for assistance or long forgotten answers or just an end to it all: so many lost Souls.

Outside, an owl sent its call into the night, slicing the silence in two. The full moon hung from the belly of a black cloud like a ripe, golden fruit, dangling from an unreachable bough. I knew it was late because the scent of midnight jewels wafted through my window. The minute, white flowers only opened for a few short hours in the dead of night, their waxy petals reflecting the moonlight, making them gleam like gemstones. I should have been asleep hours ago. I closed my heavy eyelids and prepared myself for what

I knew was coming next, or at least, I tried to. Almost immediately they were there, gathering in my mind's eye, wisps of broken voices and hazy cracked images. It was as though they'd been waiting for me. I vowed to get through it like I had every other night: sorely tested, but unscathed. In time, I reassured myself, it would get easier.

The images raced through my mind, blooming and blurring in horror and confusion. I sent a silent prayer to the One Source to give me the strength to do my duty. The answering warmth was immediate, sedating. It flowed around me and through me, allowing the fragmented pictures to sift through my subconscious like soft powder. I felt light, weightless, a single feather set adrift in the endless expanse of the universe, knowing that I would float in my sleep to whichever Soul on Earth needed me the most.

An endless queue of struggling people cycled through my mind's eye – a small boy cowered in a corner with trembling hands, trying to shield his head from a bloody fist. A man listened to a doctor's diagnosis. He heard only two of those solemn words – four months. A woman was wailing and rocking in the dirt. She was clutching something in a torn, dirty rag. It was her dead baby. A lank figure lying motionless in a drab room. His eyes were closed and..I waited and watched.. and that was it. There were no tears, no signs of conflict. I couldn't see an obvious

reason why this Soul would need my help. The carousel of struggling Souls had ground to a halt. There was just him, suspended in an eerie quiet that both puzzled and intrigued me. As I peered closer and focussed in to study his face, his eyes flew open and I froze. I could see it now – he looked like he was drowning from the inside out. His tortured, pale green eyes blocked out all the rest and demanded my recognition.

His gaze was a numbing physical weight and a shocking pain twisted through my heart. I let out a frightened yelp and recoiled. The sheer intensity of it stole my breath away and catapulted me backwards, far away from him. I gasped, clutching at my chest. Then I could have sworn I was floating on a wave, an invisible wave that had started to pull me toward him again and I didn't know how to make it stop. Instead of slipping effortlessly through the silken blackness to the person in need, I felt like I was caught in a riptide being sucked out to sea. Icy pins pricked at my skin and my body began rattling with cold. A weight was pressing around me as though I was immersed in water, yet my hair and clothes felt dry. *What in the name of the Universe was going on?* This was not how I was normally called.

My eyes searched all around me but saw only soft, black ether and straight ahead, the dimly lit window into a lost Soul's life. I did the only thing I could do and focussed

my attention there. I was no longer sliding smoothly through space, my body was rocking and tossing on an increasing, invisible swell. I tried to steady my nerves and make calm sense of what was happening; I came up blank. I could smell the salt and taste the brine. The cold sting of it whipped at my face. Persistent waves rose and fell, tossing me like a cork on their torrid surface. I could feel it but I couldn't *see* any of it, I could only see black. I drew in a shaky breath. All I could do was trust that I was protected and that no harm would come to me. It was easier said than done.

I could almost hear the waves now, roaring and squalling. They climbed higher and higher, reaching out for heaven and then shattering down in a thunderous mess, spewing salt and spray. It took all of my will and faith to remain calm as I heard a guttural roar building in the distance. It rumbled closer, like a wild animal rapidly closing on its cornered prey. The immense wall of water lunged, and its jaws came down around my helpless form. It drove me under with furious force and the roar was immediately extinguished. I tumbled repeatedly through the echo of the roar from above, not knowing which way was up or down, wafting through the thick, fluid sounds of submersion.

I desperately tried to right myself, looking for the dull window of light to guide me. Fear was sounding an alarm in my mind and telling me to kick to the surface. Yet,

as my body stopped tumbling and I reconnected with the intensity of those eyes, there was nothing I could do but surrender to them. I stared into their bottomless depths like I was looking into a watery grave. They were beautiful... mesmerising. Their hypnotic pull drew me closer like a silent song and I sailed on like a ghost bound to its past.

A spellbinding peace washed over me. I drifted in serenity and wonder. My limbs floated in slow motion through the softness, then without warning, the green deep sucked me down fast like it was swallowing a bullet, obliterating the warm cradle of euphoria that had enveloped me a moment ago. The speed made a blur of me. My insides felt like they'd been left behind and I could barely see a thing through the rush of water. I had never been drawn to a human this way before or with such urgent force. I shot along the slipstream towards my target and after what seemed mere seconds, stuttered to a halting stop inside the dim, dusty room. I was suspended there in a watery prison, arms and legs flailing, dizzy from the intensity of speed and relieved to be in one piece.

Although I was right in front of him now, he couldn't see me, but I'd often encountered human Souls that could sense my presence even if they didn't have the proof of seeing me with their own eyes. They knew us as a soft voice in their heads, like the whisper of a butterfly's wings,

urging them to hold on a little longer. Or a flush of lightness that liberates their wounded hearts, allowing them to soar above it all. Or a silent breath that cocoons them in stillness, collapsing time and bringing peace, if only for a little while.

He smarted back tears as they welled up like tidal waves to envelop the two soft, green worlds residing in his perfect face. The salty water spilled down his cheeks and as suddenly as it had started, the tears stopped and the undertow released me. My prison burst like a water balloon, my arms swung down like someone had cut the strings and my legs dropped towards the floor. I was left gasping for breath, even though I was never underwater at all. I instinctively filled my lungs with air and loudly exhaled my relief, then returned my attention to the boy. I listened intently trying to hear the source of his wordless pain. There was only silence, as though a great wall had quickly been erected to hold back the tide with practiced precision and careful purpose.

I waited patiently, just as I had been taught, for his questions. He had only to ask for my help and I would give it freely. The silence was never a good sign. I'd come to recognise it as the quiet resignation that often spelled defeat. I could feel the burden on his shoulders, the effort and struggle of this dense world weighing him down. I looked to the light inside his Soul. It was burning very low, a

melancholy glow where a blinding radiance should have been. I was here to ensure it didn't go out. My wish was to see every human blazing so brilliantly, that they could no longer deny or fail to see how magnificent they truly were.

Everything was very still. He was very still. The room bore no air of turmoil, just that quiet resignation. It was small, modestly furnished, with pale mint walls and dusty polished boards that had lost their lustre long ago. His tall frame was splayed on a threadbare couch with one foot carelessly thrown onto the wooden coffee table. It was a litter of magazines; the subscription kind from Greenpeace, WSPA and the like. From the far wall, a television flickered mutely. No doubt the journalist on the screen was relaying Earth's latest atrocities. I watched and waited in silence for him to reveal something to me.

An exasperated sigh escaped his lips as he flopped restlessly on the couch. I watched a whirlpool of thoughts spiral in his mind. I glimpsed a horror house of memories from his childhood; the mounting bills he couldn't pay; an empty bed where his lover had once lay, her face, her laugh, her beautiful smile. They pierced like knives – every single one. Just ask and I can help you. Nothing coherent came back, just fragmented memories that wound through his mind like snakes. Hissing and twisting around each other, strangling, biting. His eyes were closed and I wondered if he

was about to fall asleep. If he did, it would make this easier for me; I could lend him guidance through his dreams.

His breathing was metered through clenched teeth. The muscles were held taut in his neck and stubble shadowed his jawline making it look sharply angular. I traced the line to the centre of his chin and up to the curve of his lower lip. It's pale, softness seemed out of place. His complexion reflected a lifetime in the sun: rich and olive. Those hypnotic green eyes were now shuttered behind relaxed eyelids and a mess of sandy, tousled hair hung limply over one deep line that was carved vertically between his eyebrows. As I mapped every angle and curve, something was gnawing deep in my solar plexus. Everything about him seemed vaguely familiar to me, but at the same time unknowable, like trying to cling to wisps of a fading dream at daybreak.

As I waited silently, I sorted through dim recollections of the hundreds of human Souls I had encountered in my work so far, trying to place him. There were so many people, so many stories. I don't know how long I'd been staring at his face when the afternoon sun leaked between the shady trees outside and poured through the grotty window. The dirt clinging to the glass created patterns of light that danced across his features and glinted off the hidden tawny streaks in his hair. He inhaled deeply

and surrendered a sigh. His voice was a monotone whisper addressed to the peeling paint on the ceiling. "I don't want to be here anymore. I don't belong." He was decided, resigned. There wasn't any hint of self-pity in his words. He could just as well have been ordering a cup of coffee –black, no sugar. I'd heard similar declarations from many human Souls before, but they always sprang from deep wells of pain and were spoken in times of utter despair. His just sounded like the simple truth and I found myself being drawn even closer to him.

Usually, human emotions were felt as a tugging at the fringes of your heart. We felt compassion for the human condition, not the emotions themselves. For some reason, I was struggling to keep my balance. I took in a deep, cleansing breath to steady my focus and regain my composure. This entire encounter had rattled me. I wondered if it was normal to be affected this way sometimes? Perhaps the plight of some Souls required more energy than others to remain impartial. Granted, I had only been appointed as a Soul Guardian six months ago but I'd been in training for this since birth. The Elders certainly wouldn't have appointed me if I wasn't ready. I reminded myself to breathe and recited the Guardians' Code of Conduct in my head. I was up to rule seven – a Guardian sees only the inherent love in all Souls and helps them to

remember, recognise and bring forth that love – when he spoke again.

“Why do I have to be here? What’s the point? This is a shitty world. I don’t understand it and no-one understands me.”

My reply came with absolute certainty. “You’re here because you chose it.” My voice was clear and even. He would hear me as neither male or female, no distinguishing features, just a voice; smooth and calm in his mind.

“Ha! Why would anyone choose this?” he bellowed, rising from the couch. “People are cruel, selfish and crazy! I feel like an alien... I feel alone.” His voice cracked on the last word and faded to a whisper.

My reply was immediate. “How will you ever recognise true joy unless you’ve first experienced true sorrow? Light cannot exist without shadow.”

Focussing my intent on his immediate surroundings, I willed warm energy to flow around him. The air glittered with a thousand tiny sparks that gravitated to his side and then swirled and encircled him from head to toe. The tiny points of light vibrated a pure angelic note. They hung in the air momentarily and dispersed into a fine gold mist that seeped into his skin and brought life to the air he breathed. His features softened as the despair drained from his body and the light returned to his eyes. He stood in

the centre of the silent room and I watched his chest rise and fall with a bit more ease.

A rustling sound caught his attention at the open window. A beautiful bird with rainbow feathers had alighted on the sill. It looked almost the same as a sapient bird from home. They were clever little things. They knew how to weave the sturdiest of nests to weather any storm and protect from any enemy. They tended the nest over the course of their lifetime, repairing as needed and making it stronger. If it had been built wisely enough and treated with care, it would still be hatching eggs for generations to come.

Now, this clever little bird, whose name I did not know, was boldly perched, staring at the boy as though it wanted to be invited in. . .had even expected it. The boy was frozen in place, not wanting to frighten off his visitor. They merely looked at one another for a minute, maybe two, but neither one moved. Eventually, an accepting smile twitched at the boy's lips and he faded from view as my window into his world closed and the veil came down.

TWO

I woke up with a sharp gasp and sprang upright in my bed. I sat and blinked a few times, trying to clear my head, then slumped back down, confused by what had happened and wondering if I'd succeeded in helping him. I tried to swing my legs over the side only to wind up face down on the floor with my legs securely tangled in the sheets. I must have been really thrashing around last night. *Ah, that's right... 'drowning'.* I flopped there for a second, laughing, then reached down to untangle my cottony shackles. I dragged my weary body upright and plodded to the bathroom. I felt weighted down somehow and a little off-balance. Maybe I was getting sick.

The pale creature staring back at me in the star shaped mirror only confirmed my suspicion. My hair was just as tangled as my sheets had been so I took to it with the brush and spun it up into a loose knot on the top of my head. I splashed cold water on my face, pausing to feel the clear rivers trickle off the end of my nose and chin and snuggled my damp face into the towel's soft loops. It smelt like sunshine from hanging on the clothesline a day too long.

“Good morning, Lilly! Sleep well?” Sky chirped, as I was drawn to the kitchen by delicious wafts of freshly brewed coffee.

“I think so,” I yawned. Sky's early morning cheer was as reliable as the sunrise. Having moved from cold, snowy Endua just four short years ago, Sky had discovered that a day can actually mean more than five hours of sunlight. Consequently, she never took a single ray for granted and made sure she was awake to catch every one. She was an incredibly cheery morning person – something I had adapted to over time.

“You look a bit...wrung out,” she observed.

“Well, we can't all be morning people, can we?” I raised an eyebrow and slumped into the chair.

Her returning smile widened as she swept across the kitchen and spun back setting a plate of fresh fruit on the table. She slipped into the chair opposite me. "Eat up," she encouraged.

"But I want coffee... and chocolate...is there any chocolate cake left?" I whined like a two-year-old.

"No, there isn't," she released an exasperated sigh. "Because you ate it all. *This*, however, is fresh from Bertie's farm this morning." She gave the plate a determined shove towards me.

Sky was forever fussing about my diet. I saw nothing wrong with eating cake upon waking. What were muffins, if not little cakes masquerading as breakfast? They had eggs and butter and milk – perfectly respectable.

"You've been out already?" I shouldn't have been surprised. "What time is it?" I asked, feeling a bit disoriented.

"Lilly, it's 10am," she raised an eyebrow. "I looked in on you before I left for class at seven, but you were out like a light. Should I have woken you?"

"Oh." I'd not realised how late I'd slept. The green-eyed boy's beautiful face flashed into my mind. "No, no, I'm glad you didn't wake me," I reassured her. "You're right though, I do feel a bit zapped of energy. I think I'll just go to afternoon class today."

She placed her elbow on the table and propped her gamine face on her hand. Sky was tall and lissome with skin like a china doll and huge eyes of glassy blue, dripping with impossibly long lashes. Her dead straight, black hair framed her face in a sharp pixie cut and was so glossy it threw rainbows in the sun. "Rough night?" she asked surveying my dishevelled state.

"It was actually," I rubbed at my tired eyes, "new and... unusual." It was the only way I could describe nearly being drowned by a human Soul.

"Well," she shrugged, "we're still very new little Guardians in training. I'm sure it becomes easier... eventually. Maybe you should go up to the crystal pools and soak for a while," she waved at me with her free hand while nibbling on a wedge of lyla melon with the other. She somehow made it look graceful. Sky made *everything* look graceful. She had a feline way about her. There was such a precise elegance to her every move that I wondered if she hadn't been a tiger in a previous life... or a perhaps a well-loved tabby. Then, of course, there was her obvious resemblance to a cat basking in the sun whenever she was worshipping the rays. Although she was always kind and bright spirited and what others referred to as 'such a lovely person', she could muster some sass when she had to. Sky was nobody's fool. She was intelligent and watchful and

quite capable of conjuring a regal, prowling air when it served. She was turning it on me now, as she tapped a fingernail on the table, waiting for my response.

“Hmm, I think I will,” I told her. The thought of floating in the healing waters of the mountain pools brought an immediate smile to my face. “Then I have class this afternoon and a three-hour shift at the ‘healaxis’ tonight, so I won’t be home until late.” I wondered if Healer Cray would have me treating patients today.

“Wow, big day. Do you need me to do the rest of the shopping then?”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll go after I’ve been to the pools.”

“All right, I’m off to meditate, so I’ll see you later.”

“Okay, see you.”

She rose fluidly from her seat and paused. “And Lilly, I’ve hidden the chocolate cookies in a different place, so don’t bother trying to find them.”

She swept through the glass doors that led to the circular garden we had lovingly planted and tended together. This beautiful and cosy home had been ours since the commencement of our first ‘magistrument’ year, which was similar to university on Earth. While I toiled away with the study of potions, herbs and energy medicine, Sky was studying elemental magic. She possessed a natural gift for manipulating the elements of fire, water, earth, air and

ether. I smiled as I watched her sashay along the uneven stepping stones that meandered their way through tufts of fragrant and medicinal herbs. Fire Leaf for muscular aches and pains; Healer's Hand for accelerated healing of broken bones, soft tissue tears and open wounds; Hichter Balm, Silver Cress, Verlanis Flower and Petchin Root were the most common administrations for viral infections; Orin for clearing the vision, both physically and intuitively. I wished our garden was bigger. I could only grow a minute selection of the thousands of flowers, roots, barks and leaves that formed the basis of the herbal healing arts. As it was, Sky had to fight me for space to plant the rainbow of flowers she was unable to grow in dreary Endua.

The outer border of the garden was a tangle of magnolias, wisteria and creeping vines of night blooming jasmine. A tall, natural fence of thick bamboo encircled it, affording complete privacy. Sky had positioned herself in the centre of the soft, circular lawn that formed the heart of the garden. Her lithe body was arranged cross-legged on the meditation cushion I'd bought for her last birthday. It was an ornate patchwork of bright, bold colours embroidered with lustrous thread. Each square depicted teachings and symbols of go-lite philosophies and our way of life.

I was so privileged to be born on Panacea, to live in a world where all life is respected as precious and equal to

our own. We took only what we needed from the land, wasting nothing and polluting little. Destructive human inventions like plastic and nuclear weapons were foreign and unnecessary to us. Our homes and vehicles were powered by the sun, the wind and the rain. We considered ourselves honoured guests in this world, loath to place unrealistic demands on our host.

I wondered if the human Souls on Earth would ever realise that if they continue to bleed their host dry, she will forcefully remove them for good? I sighed and finished my brunch in silence, trying not to think of this or any other challenges the humans on Earth were there to learn through and overcome. I popped a lush, purple berry into my mouth and it exploded between my teeth dripping thick, perfumed syrup onto my tongue. It was so delicious it made me laugh! It was like a happiness bomb! How could one tiny berry hold so much joy? I imagined launching a berry bomb assault on Earth – a worldwide air raid where countless billions of berries were dropped in a hail of purple as people ran around, dancing and laughing, covered in exploded, purple berry goo. I sighed. If only it were that simple.

I pulled my little solar powered car onto the shoulder of the road at the track's entrance and cut the engine. It was so quiet I could almost hear my heartbeat. I gathered my

backpack and towel from the back seat and headed for a break in the wall of trees where some of the gnarled trunks had parted into a misshapen doorway.

As I crossed the dense threshold, the warm, white light of day surrendered to cool, abundant green. I paused, breathing in the verdant air, absorbing the vibrancy of it and becoming a part of the silence. I began winding my way along the heavy clay path. It was littered with moist decay and the wonderful smell of rich earth released beneath my feet. Leafy arms and lace-like ferns strayed across the path at every angle. Cool fronds delicately brushed my legs, as I stepped quietly and carefully, not wanting to disturb this perfect stillness.

Bellbirds rang through the trees; the high clarity of their song diminished by distance and lost in the ceaseless growth of a thousand years. The very air was iridescent. It felt like the forest had taken a long, deep breath eons ago and held it, knowing that one breath would sustain it forever. Yet underneath that perfect stillness was life: the occasional flutter of small wings; the hypnotic weaving of a spider in its silver web; the silent march of ants up an ancient trunk; a bush rat scurrying for shelter.

Looking up, the towering canopy was striving for the heavens, the trees' majestic heads appearing to bow in reverence of each others' undeniable beauty. I moved slowly

down the aisle of the grand, green cathedral. Soft, spears of light pierced the thinning growth and seeped into the forest floor, casting patterns like stained glass windows. As I reached the path's end and emerged from the sanctuary, the smell of peat and moss that had hung thickly in the air gave way to wild mint on a sunlit breeze. I blinked into the white light of the midday sun, trying to readjust my eyes.

My feet found the smooth, warm river stones that sloped gently to a peaceful shore. They clacked happily together as I teetered to the pool's edge and peered into the still water. The Crystal Pools were usually quiet at this time of day. I had timed my visit well. In the town below, friends and family would be gathering to share company and a hearty midday meal, followed by a leisurely afternoon rest and meditation. For now, I had this glorious sanctuary all to myself. A mere twenty minutes in these magical waters and I'd feel full of life, completely loved and at peace.

I slowly stretched a solitary toe toward the liquid mirror. As it dipped below the surface, languid ripples loped to the opposite shore, caressing the moss covered stones like they were welcoming old friends. Piled behind them was a tumble of shiny black boulders that formed a waterfall in rainy season, their surfaces polished to a high sheen from the swift and constant flow of water. The rocky creek bed wove its way through the rainforest for miles. Tranquil

pools like this one could be found all along its path. This was as far as I wanted to go today, though. I wasn't feeling particularly energetic. I smiled at the thought of humans and their artificial swimming pools and shrugged. It didn't make sense to me. I tossed my clothes aside and dove in.

The cool water felt dense as I plunged deep; a comforting pressure enveloping my entire body. A curious penny turtle eyed me and paddled on by as my hands touched on the stoney bottom and I pushed myself back up, bursting through the surface. I breathed in the wild mint and the joy of the moment. I sighed at the pure bliss of it all and floated on my back; effortlessly buoyant, gazing at the slow moving sky – plump, white clouds tinged with ultramarine edges against endless blue. I lay still as the healing waters cradled and soothed me. Each soft ripple against my skin was a mother's touch. I could feel the haze lifting from my mind and my usually sharp focus returning. I felt myself again; re-energised and peaceful.

“Hey there.” A rich, silky voice came from above me somewhere. A voice that had been there for as long as I could remember. I whirled to see Christian standing barefoot on a boulder high above with his arms folded, grinning cheekily.

“Chris, you scared me half to death,” I laughed, splashing water at him. “Have you no respect?” I scolded. “This is a place of *private* healing.”

“Ah, and I suppose throwing the sacred water at other people is perfectly respectful conduct?” He arched a dark eyebrow over the twinkle in his eye that always spelt mischief. “And as for privacy,” he said smoothly, “why would you need that when I already know you better than you know yourself?” All teasing left his face and he just stood there smiling his handsome smile.

“Doesn’t matter. I was done anyway.” I rolled my eyes but couldn’t help returning some of the warmth that Chris so freely radiated. He was my closest friend. We’d grown up together, joined at the hip, wreaking havoc wherever we went. He loved telling Sky of our adventures, even the ones that made my cheeks flame. It didn’t matter that I knew just as many embarrassing stories about Christian Palladen because nothing ever seemed to embarrass him. He’d always been so confident and sure of himself. Annoyingly so at times.

Once there had been a splinter lodged in my finger. The four-year-old me had defiantly refused to tell my parents or have it removed, even though Christian said it would get worse if I didn’t. Days passed and of course, he was right, it festered. It swelled to the point where I couldn’t

bear to touch it and I had no choice but to ask Chris to pull it out. He snuck into his mother's drawer, while she and my mother sipped tea, retrieved a pair of tweezers and operated. I remember being so scared but Chris held my hand so lightly, all the while murmuring reassurances in his velvet cadence, that I barely felt a thing. The pressure where the wood had been lodged was instantly relieved. "You made it stop hurting!" I'd declared incredulously, blinking into his big, grey eyes as though he'd exacted a minor miracle. Instead of being smug or saying 'I told you so', he'd just smiled and thoughtfully gazed at his handy work before placing a whisper of a kiss on my wounded fingertip, and... I had let him. Even back then, I knew without question, that Christian would never let anything harm me.

"Pass me my towel?" I smiled as I waded back to the smooth basalt shore. He sprang lightly down the dry falls and draped the towel around my dripping shoulders. It had been heated by the warm rocks and I shivered as the toasty pile hugged my skin. "So you came to check up on me because I missed class this morning?" I surmised with a grin.

"Am I that predictable?" he arched a brow. "What a terrible bore I must be. I'll have to work on my charm before you tire of me completely."

“Ha! I think you have an infinite well of charm. Ask Petra Honeywell if you don’t believe me. You seemed to have her swooning on the campus lawn yesterday.”

“Who, me?” He blinked his thick lashes with indubitable surprise. As per usual, he was completely unaware of the devastating effect he had on the opposite sex.

“You know, Christian, you’re such a master of sarcasm that one day someone is actually going to believe you’re the pompous ass you play so convincingly.”

“Never!” he immediately snapped back into ‘ass’ mode. “My stunning displays of *ass-ery* and efficacious wit are purely reserved for you,” he winked.

“Oh, I am so blessed.”

“Anyway, you did miss a great lecture. Master Green was discussing the steady decline of community spirit throughout human history and how it’s led to feelings of separation on Earth.”

I recalled the green-eyed boy’s emotional words, *‘People are selfish and cruel. I feel alone.’* A wave of compassion washed over me for his struggle and I stared, unspeaking, into the glassy pool. The next thing I heard was my name.

“Lilly, are you okay?” Chris touched my shoulder.

“I’m fine,” I answered, my eyes snapping up to meet his. “Just had a heavy night, that’s all.”

He studied my face. A dark lock of hair fell into his eyes and he raked it back with long fingers. "Anything I can help with?" he asked carefully. His frame was shielding me from staring directly into the sun as I squinted up into his face. It formed a halo that glowed about him and he looked like a pinup boy for 'Angel Weekly', if there was such a thing. I stifled a laugh – it was so very fitting.

"No, I'm okay," I smiled and chased thoughts of the mysterious boy out of my head. "I think the pools have done their job. Is Master Green doing the same lecture again this afternoon?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Yes, at four. If you're thinking of going I might tag along again. Then maybe we could grab some dinner afterward?"

"Sure, sounds great," I nodded.

"Okay, I'll meet you at quarter to outside the great hall."

"All right. Enjoy your privacy," I laughed as he pecked me on the cheek and turned to dive gracefully into the still water.

I wandered back through the forest at a quicker pace trying to relieve my thoughts of the green-eyed boy. Maybe I should have soaked in the pool a bit longer. His words cycled through my mind, each sentiment a cog in a larger machine. The machine groaned through each cog's

revolution, as though straining from work that would never be done. Why was I thinking about any of this? He was one of millions of Souls in need of direction and support. One of hundreds I'd listened to and been with in times of distress. I couldn't recall ever being bombarded with thoughts about any of them. It simply wasn't the go-lite way. We lived in the present, not the past. I'd probably never see him again anyway. An image flashed into my mind of his set jaw and soft lips. I could see him mouthing the words he'd spoken to me. My chest hurt. I involuntarily shook my head to dislodge the memory from my mind and suddenly found myself standing at my car. I had walked for fifteen minutes, yet I couldn't remember a single step.

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