

Edge of the Breach

Book 1 of the Rift Cycle



HALO SCOT

EDGE OF THE BREACH
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For the invisible ones

I

THE SUNRISE YEARS



1

Pain Made a Man

Julian Kyder, Age 9 ■■■ July 7, 7009

Her body is stone. Her eyes glass. She doesn't see me. Doesn't want me. Yet her blood runs through me, a river of pain.

I call her mother, but she calls me nothing. She hopes to forget me. Hopes I will disappear. Conceived in violence, I am a constant reminder of the crime that made me.

“Come,” she orders me. Like a dog. And I jog at her heels, obedient.

She won't use my name. It's a reminder I exist. The meaning behind it is empty, anyway. She refused to name me, so the hospital staff did. Julian Kyder — Julian after the doctor who delivered me and Kyder after the hospital. Forever marked by the circumstances of my birth.

She tried to abort, but I survived. She put me up for

adoption, but no one took me. She tried to release me into the system, but they were already at overcapacity. We're trapped. Stuck together as two halves of misery. The doctor told me I am a miracle. She told me I am a curse.

"This way."

She leads me along the edge of the Shelf toward the market. With each step, my feet crunch along the parched gravel. To our left, cliffs drop hundreds of meters into the Ruined Sea, a toxic cesspool that encircles the island. In the distance, Mount Erebus puffs ash into the blanched sky, a grandfather smoking the last bit of a cigar.

We mutilated our world, bombarded the planet for centuries with nuclear weapons until we ran out of missiles, until Earth flipped upside-down. The only habitable continent is Antarctica, now the North Pole, and even here, the war melted the desolate wasteland into a scorching desert. Humans near extinction, huddled near the top of the planet like exiles. But we deserve it.

A circular wound punctures the sky at its zenith, ever-present. It's the Rift — a dark, festering mass opened by the end of the war one thousand years ago. The hole in the sky is the size of my fist from here, unassuming from the ground, yet world-changing to civilization. It's a gateway to the other realms, though the gods are mostly silent, indifferent, rarely speaking and never interfering. They care as little about this place as I do.

Sweat trickles down my back. I pull my robe tight around myself, hoping to block out the sun. It's summer, so there's no respite from the heat. The days are endless. They bleed into each other like ink on a page, no distinction between the lines. Night won't come for another few months, and soon after it does, it won't leave till winter's done.

Some call it balance. Day and night. Light and dark. Sun and stars. Birth and death. People look for meaning when it's only chaos disguised as order.

"Halela, it's been too long." One of the men from church greets my mother with a warm smile.

"Reve." She shirks away but manages to dip her head in polite acknowledgment.

My mother has autism. Severe autism. Normal sensation is overwhelming. Pregnancy was torture. The doctors drugged her into a medically induced coma for the duration while I grew, a parasite in her belly. And when I was ready, they cut me out, lanced her uterus like an overgrown cyst. The first face I saw was a nurse. The next, the doctor. Then the midwife. My mother was fourth, high on anesthetic. She didn't touch me. Couldn't touch me. It was too much. She couldn't handle it. They put her back under.

I never blame her for her condition. I blame her for everything else. For her cruelty, for the things she *can* help. She could say she loves me or be there for me in her own way, but she isn't. She's never even made an effort.

"Rations are limited today, I'm afraid." Reve motions to the market where a sprawl of tents crouches under the relentless sun.

He's one of the nice ones. Keeps his distance, understands our situation, but goes out of his way to help. Most aren't like him. The Shelf is a refuge for the rural poor, for those who can't afford to live in Zawad, the last city of human civilization. Most of our neighbors are half-mad zealots preaching about nonsensical bullshit. We fit right in.

"Yes, yes," my mother says. She taps her fingers against her thigh, a nervous tic.

“And who do we have here?” Reve asks. He squats down to look me in the eye. “Little Kyder, how you’ve grown! You’ll be tall as the Four Towers when you’re done.”

He addresses me properly, by surname, even though I am but a child. First names are reserved for matters of love or intimacy. I have neither.

“Yes, sir,” I say.

He ruffles my dark hair. “But too skinny. Here, take my bread. Ra knows I do not need it.” He chuckles and pats his round stomach.

“I cannot accept, sir,” I say. “Thank you, though.”

Reve shoves the bread into my hands. “Take it, child. And get inside right after the market. A sandstorm’s forecasted for this afternoon.”

I blush at his kindness. “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Always a pleasure, Halela.” Reve bows and leaves us.

Silence follows in his absence. My mother speaks only if necessary. It’s a wonder I learned language at all.

“Good morn!” an airsail vendor by the side of the path calls to us several minutes later. “On your way to the market? You’d go much faster in one of these.”

He pulls out what looks like a wooden surfboard from behind his booth and throws it onto the ground. The board quivers. The top unfolds until a translucent sail interwoven with gold webbing stretches two meters in the air. The board hovers several inches above the gravel path, sail shimmering like dragonfly wings in the sunlight. It’s a shred of high technology pirated from Zawad, out of place in this apocalyptic Hel.

My mother twitches, flustered. Her mouth opens and closes

like a marionette as she attempts conversation. “N-no money-y-y,” she stutters.

“I’ll make you a deal.” The vendor, oblivious to my mother’s deteriorating condition, continues in singsong. “Pay half upfront and the other half next year.”

“M-m-my...I-I-I-I...” Words sputter from my mother’s mouth like an engine failing to start.

I step in. “Thank you for your consideration, sir, but we will unfortunately need to decline your generous offer.”

The vendor’s eyebrows shoot up, noticing me. “How old are you, boy?”

“Nine, sir.”

“You don’t talk like a nine-year-old.”

“I don’t act like a nine-year-old, either,” I say, my temper rising. “Please allow us to pass, and we will be on our way.”

There’s something in my look that causes men triple my age to cower before me. My eyes are an unnatural shade, a shocking cyan that glows with inner fury. They’re my one gift from him, the him I never met, the him who abandoned me before my first cells joined. My mother never told me his name, but I don’t need his name to know his soul. I see him in my face, in the blue fire that burns in my gaze. I sense him lurking in my subconscious, a shadow of aggression that threatens to unleash if I echo the darkness.

The vendor senses it, too. He stumbles backward, mumbles something about a special next month, and waves us on.

My mother glances at me, wary. I scare her. She fears me to be like him. I fear to be like her, an animated skeleton seeking death. She’s all I have in this world. And I hate her, as I suspect she hates me, or at least hates what I symbolize. She’s never shown me love

or kindness or comfort, so in its absence, I substitute hatred and anger and loneliness. And she blames *me* for what I've become.

We reach the market at noon. People swarm the stalls like maggots in a corpse. My mother freezes, paralyzed. She should have let me come alone, but she doesn't trust me. Her diet is very particular, of her own doing, and she only trusts herself to acquire the ingredients.

We make slow progress. The heat rises to stifling levels. In the village school, they teach that Antarctica used to be as cold as the Lost Realm of Mogard, but today, I find that difficult to believe. Each breath sears my lungs. The putrid mix of sweat and body odor permeates the tents. Mirages rise from the earth like warbled ghosts. People rest in the shade, passed out from heat exhaustion.

My mother doesn't mind the heat. She focuses on one stall at a time. First vegetables. Only the green ones. Five of each, except for seven leaves of spinach. Then fruit. Only those with large seeds. Peaches, nectarines, papaya, and mango are okay. No apples. No watermelons. No grapes or bananas. Next, starch. We can only afford potatoes today. She buys seven, for the Seven Realms, and touches each four times, for the Four Towers of Ma'at.

"Kyder!" I recognize the voice. A peer from my class. One I tutor. Jereby. My stomach knots. I'm in no mood for pleasantries.

Frantic, my mother scurries away. "I can't," she mutters in excuse and leaves to finish the shopping. The conversations with Reve and the vendor sent her over her threshold. It takes little to overstimulate her. I'm the opposite. I can't get enough.

Jereby jogs over to me, flanked by a group of his friends. All beautiful. All popular. All easy targets.

"Good morn," I greet.

“So this is the boy you can’t stop talking about,” a tall girl, Anjeli, says. As she speaks, her hair fades from auburn to platinum, and the lashes around her sultry eyes widen. A shapeshifter, then. Focused on parlor tricks. Pitiful.

After the nuclear war ended, the fallout radiation mutated human DNA. Everyone born since is connected with Earth’s cycles and harbors a power linked with their season of birth — spring healers, summer mages, fall shapeshifters, and winter shields. Proximity to the North Pole heightens our powers. It’s part of the village school’s curriculum. They teach us best they can. If you’re good enough, you can join one of the four seasonal guilds of Ma’at. Most aren’t, though. The majority of the remaining population is marginal at best.

Many found purpose in the knowledge of realms and gods and guilds, especially after the war. It gave people hope, something to look forward to, something to dedicate their lives to, someone to pray to, a category to fit neatly inside. No longer did they have to search for meaning. They were told from birth who they were, what they should do, and where they should go. Simple. Uncomplicated. You are your birth. And I am mine, more than I’d like.

Progeny of rape. Heir to violence. Drunk with power. Forged from fire. The sun-made child. Sometimes, I wish to be ordinary. It would be easier if I was normal. Easier, but far less fun.

Jereby’s ears redden. “I do *not* talk about him all the time.” He nudges Anjeli, and the motion sends her flying. He’s a mage, like me, a master of gravity. But he’s not that good. I am.

I’m a prodigy. I was born at noon on the summer solstice and am thus bestowed with the highest possible genetic gift. It’s wasted on me, though. I’m a poor nobody from the outskirts of

civilization. The most I'll amount to is a criminal. The least, a statistic in a gutter.

Anjeli brushes the dirt off her robe. "Clumsy oaf."

"Sorry, Anj, I didn't mean to—" Jereby starts.

"Don't worry about it." She smiles at him. Perfect white pearls for teeth. Cheater.

"Are you okay, Anjeli? Do you need me to heal anything?" a tiny, shriveled boy asks. Spring-borns are always so annoyingly helpful.

"No thanks, Shel. I'm good."

The last of their group, a large brute, looks at me and squints. "Hey, aren't you the kid who got suspended last month?"

"Leave him alone, Rylan," Jereby says.

Rylan doesn't. "Yeah, I recognize you. You lit the gym on fire, didn't you?"

"Yes," I reply evenly. I have no wish to discuss my reasons with this pea-brained thug.

"Why?"

"I got bored," I say. I'm always bored.

"Bored?" Rylan asks, the word foreign on his tongue. "How are you bored? Don't you take advanced physics or something? And ancient Latin?"

Jereby covers for me. "Kyder's wicked smart. He's top of the class. A genius."

Please don't, Jereby, I beg silently. Whenever people learn of my intelligence, I see the judgment in their eyes, the instant challenge of my brilliance. I want to be a fly on the wall. Unseen. Unnoticed. But then I'd have to stop lighting things on fire. That's not going to happen.

“Is that true? A genius?” Shel asks.

“By the arbitrary conditions set forth by an antiquated system of determination, yes,” I reply.

His face is vacant.

“My IQ is over 200,” I say.

And there’s the spark of comprehension.

“Holy Ra,” Shel gasps.

“Who cares? He’s still a creep,” Anjeli says.

I turn my blue glare on her, and she falls silent. I could kill her with the lift of a finger. Puny fall-born.

“Careful, Anj,” Jereby says. “He’s summer-born.”

She scoffs. “So are you.”

“But he’s *really* summer-born. Noon on the solstice.” Jereby shifts from foot to foot, nervous. He’s seen what I’m capable of. Once. An accident. But it served its purpose. He won’t cross me again. He also won’t have full use of his left arm again.

“I’m not afraid of playing with fire,” Anjeli says. “Show us, sun boy. Rylan’s a shield. He’ll protect us if anything gets out of hand.”

He can’t. Few can match me, and I’d bet the last of my mother’s dwindling bank account that Rylan is not one of them. Winter-borns are too eager to prove their incompetence. My mother is one of them.

“It’s not a good idea,” Jereby warns. He cradles his arm, remembering. He challenged me to a duel a year ago after I stole his sugar rations. Before he could move, I crushed his arm from the elbow down. It took five adult healers to set the bone, but even they couldn’t fix it entirely. I was suspended for a month. I didn’t care. It let me focus on my own projects.

“What’s the worst he could do?” Anjeli grins at me, flirtatious. It’s disgusting. Fake. Plastic. Hollow like her head.

“Would you like a synopsis or a summary?” I ask, grinning back. I have a knack for charm that’s served me well in my short life.

“Oh, details, please.”

My eyes narrow. “I could squeeze your chest until your lungs pop like balloons. I could shatter your skeleton and make you a bag of bone soup. I could throw you from here to the Ruined Sea and scatter your limbs throughout the Shelf. And since we’re in the fruit section, let’s make a few comparisons, shall we? I could burst your heart like a melon, peel your skin like an apple, and pluck off your fingers like grapes. Would you like me to continue?”

Anjeli’s skin is green. Literally. “No,” she rasps, swallowing hard. “Thank you.”

“For the love of Llyr.” Shel swears the name of his patron god.

“You’re not normal,” Rylan says, backing away. He looks at me the same way the vendor did. With fear.

“No,” I say, “I’m not.”

Though I want to be. No thoughts rushing through my mind all hours of the day and night. No violent fantasies about how best to kill my adversaries. No questions as to my lack of empathy or guilt or remorse. It would be so much simpler. Maybe therein lies happiness. In ignorance.

“As I said, leave him alone,” Jereby says, embarrassed. He keeps rubbing his arm.

“We’re just playing, Kyder,” Shel says.

“I am not playing,” I say.

“Why do you hang out with this freak?” Anjeli asks Jereby.

Her skin has lost its green luster, but she is still pale.

Because he feels my power and is drawn to it like a moth to the flame. If he can't be the fire, he wants to feel its heat.

Jereby shrugs. "He's not always like this."

Yes, I am. I just don't always show it. So I turn it off.

I flash them a stunning smile, concealing the monster within. I can hide from adults, but children have a way of revealing the truth in a person.

"I apologize," I say. "I've been running lines to audition for the new play. I think I've taken to the role of Ra too well. Please forgive me." I lie easy as breathing. Always have.

The others relax a bit, though they're still anxious around me.

"Yeah, Ra's a crazy son of a bitch," Rylan says.

"Don't speak of his god in vain," Shel says. "Show some respect." He eyes me like a loose cannon.

"It's fine," I say. "So did you hear about the sandstorm?" I switch to weather, the universal topic for shallow conversation.

"It's going to be insane!" Rylan exclaims. "Bibby got a bunch of the guys together to watch from the top of Erebus."

"Is that safe?" Jereby asks.

"Who cares? They're saying the wall of sand could be five kilometers high!"

Anjeli rolls her eyes. "Boys."

"Weren't you the one who bungee jumped Blood Falls a few weeks back?" Shel asks, cocking an eyebrow.

"Touché," she says, and they all chuckle. I forget to exhibit normal behavior and join their laughter a few seconds late.

"Time to go." My mother appears behind me, baskets of

groceries in hand. She stares at the ground, avoiding eye contact.

Before anyone can notice her condition, I interject. “It was a pleasure visiting with all of you. I will see you in school on Monday.” I plaster on a smile and bow.

As I walk away, I hear Rylan whisper, “He talks like a bloody robot.”

I *am* a bloody robot, you imbecile. I wish I was a real boy. I wish I fit in, like you, something you take for granted.

Once we leave the market, my body compensates for the bravado. Composure leaves me, and I succumb to my nature. My eyes twitch — twice the left, then the right, two times to match, then twice again the left — a rhythm to my insanity. My teeth clench together, my jaw locked like a vise. Pain throbs in my neck from the strained muscles, and I hum without realizing it — short, low grunts in the back of my throat, echoes of my inner torment. The doctors diagnosed me with depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder thus far, though I’m sure there are many other demons stuffed inside of me.

My mother ignores me when I have these spells. It’s the one decency she shows me. The one crucible that binds us. We are enemies to ourselves. And what we have, even the healers can’t fix.

I try to calm my mind. I recite the powers of two. 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, 1024. It’s not enough. I try seven. 7, 49, 343, 2401. Still not enough. Prime numbers? 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, 37, 41, 43, 47, 53, 59, 61, 67, 71, 73, 79, 83, 89, 97, 101. It’s not working.

I switch to language. The seasons in French. *Le printemps, l’été, l’automne, l’hiver*. German. *Frühling, Sommer, Herbst, Winter*. Gaelic. *An t-earrach, an samhradh, am forghar, an geamhradh*.

The Gaelic works. I repeat the seasons and move to months, days of the week, and colors. We're halfway back before I harness control of myself. My eyes calm, my jaw loosens, and my breathing steadies. I fear the day normalcy fails to return.

We pass the vendor's booth, but he's gone. Dozens of airsails stand unprotected behind the counter. I hop over the desk and snatch one. My mother glances toward me but says nothing. I throw it on the ground, and the sail unfurls. If they catch me, they'll throw me in prison. But I'm clever. I'm sure I could escape. I can bribe anyone with the proper leverage.

"You first," I say. My mother steps onto the board and grabs the mast. I step behind her and kick off. We skim above the ground, soaring over the edge of the Shelf on the way back to the village. We make it in a quarter of the time.

Our home is underground. The earth insulates against the heat. I descend the staircase, park the airsail by the door, and help load groceries into the freezer.

"You sh-shouldn't..." my mother starts. She taps her fingers against her thigh. "You shouldn't have d-d-done that." She points to the airsail.

A rage flares only she can summon. "*You're judging me?*"

She doesn't respond. Can't respond. Guilt was all she could manage. Unfortunate for her, I don't feel regret, but I do feel anger.

"Don't patronize me," I growl, my cool cracking like ice. "If you provided enough, I wouldn't have to steal."

"Demon child," she spits at me. "Child. Child. Child. Child." She repeats the word over and over in echolalia, a symptom of her disease.

The chant lights the short fuse of my temper. I pick up a

peach and throw it at her. It catches her in the chin, and she staggers, clumsy, until she hits the wall. She turns toward the packed earth and bangs her head against the dirt, over and over. Each repetition is the same as the last, a dance of madness between her and the world that disclaims us both.

I desert the groceries and grab her arm, yank her back to sanity. "I'm sorry." It's a lie, but it's what I'm supposed to say.

She pushes me away and crosses to the opposite end of the room, leans over a table for support. "I see...I see...I see who you are...are. You're no bet-t-t-ter...no better...no better than him. Spawn of dark-k-ness...of darkness. I'd k-k-k-kill you myself if I wasn't a...wasn't a...wasn't a c-c-coward."

She straightens and faces me. Her fingers tap furiously against her thigh as her eyes meet mine. She looks away after a second, overwhelmed by sensation.

"I'd like to see you try," I whisper. She's a shield. A powerful one. Though she isn't as powerful as I will become.

Fear flickers in her gaze. I am her nightmare incarnate. But when she wakes, I'm still here.

"G-get out-t-t...out...out...of m-m-my house...my house...my house...my house...my house," she says, staring at the floor.

"Gladly," I say. I pick up the airsail and head toward the door.

"Bastard. Bastard. Bastard. Bastard," she murmurs behind me.

Fire floods me. Wild. Uncontrollable. I shoot out my hand and unleash a gravity wave. My mother raises a shield at the last second, a bubble of energy conjured from the heart of the universe. She protects herself, but our home crumples into a mound of dirt.

Shafts of sunlight shine through the tattered roof. The walls slide in avalanches onto the floor. Furniture becomes kindling. The groceries explode. Their sticky juices cover the wreckage.

I almost killed her. And I feel nothing.

Fury mobilizes her. She takes two steps toward me and slaps me across the face hard enough to spark stars. The only time she touches me is in violence. Her hatred for me is the one force strong enough to override her condition.

“Remember your birth,” she hisses at me like a snake. Her voice is the steadiest it’s been in years.

“You never let me forget,” I say. I mean the rape that conceived me, but she means my power.

I am a cataclysm. If I was born in Zawad, I could be Komanguard, Arch of the Sun Guild at Ma’at. But I wasn’t born in Zawad. I was born on the Shelf to a crippled mother and an absent father. I doubt I’ll live long enough to see the Four Towers.

“Take off your shirt,” she orders.

I freeze. “No.” I won’t let her do it again.

“Take. Off. Your. Shirt.” With each word, she closes the distance between us. “Shirt. Shirt. Shirt. Shirt.”

The word is like the pounding of a war drum.

I step backward, flatten myself against the door, clutch the airsail like a lifeboat. “If you whip me again, I won’t control myself.”

My back burns with phantom pain. She had a healer tend me afterward, so there are no scars, no evidence of her abuse. But my body remembers. It’s not the punishment that bothers me. It’s the shame.

“You won’t control yourself,” she says, noticing my word choice. *Won’t*, not *can’t*. The power inside me is a behemoth,

bucking to break free. If I don't stand in its way, it will possess me. I would let it possess me if it would save me from her.

“Go, then.” She dismisses me with a wave of both hands she repeats four times. “Don't return until morning. Morning. Morning. Morning.”

I unfold the airsail and kick off into the sandstorm.

2

Love Made a Woman

Sira Rune, Age 11 ■■■ August 23, 7014

My room is on the top floor of the hospital. My bed is near the window, overlooking Zawad below, the last city in a world literally turned upside-down.

The city surrounds a lake in Souhait Valley like a necklace of civilization. The round buildings are white marble. Veins of silver run like webs through the milky stone. Domed roofs balance on airy colonnades and arched doorways. Mythical statues peer from every level, and intricate carvings ornament the porticoed walkways between residences. Canals stream from the lake into the city, and waterfalls pour from the balconies back into the lake, filtered and recycled for reuse.

The harsh, summer sunlight glints the skyline, silhouetted against the mountains beyond. The land slopes up and away from

the city as dunes yield to bedrock, a feature common in all of Antarctica's Dry Valleys. The terrain is smooth at the base and jagged near the top where the crags break off in landslips. Sandstone decorates the mountainsides in stripes of slate, hazel, and violet bands. The view would be stunning if it didn't signify humanity's exodus.

Bedridden, I spend most of my time counting starboats. There are seven million people in Zawad and at least as many starboats. The hovering vessels ship residents across the city in multi-level traffic patterns. There are ferries for the public, yachts for the wealthy, brigs for retro types, gondolas for romantic types, and kayaks for racers — all airborne. I sometimes blur my eyes and imagine they are lost species of birds from the golden days of Earth.

A stab of pain interrupts my daydreaming. My stomach cramps, and I collapse forward, grabbing my waist.

"Shh, shh, *mon cœur*." My mother wakes beside me and gently strokes my bald head. "What hurts?"

"Everything, *Maman*," I say. My chest, my head, my very bones. I sweat with fever, my body frail and slick and clammy. No matter what I eat, no matter how much I sleep, I remain emaciated, weak, tired. I used to be strong. Graceful, even. Now, I catch colds every other week. Bruises mottle my dark skin. Blood leaks from my nose, and I shove a wad of gauze into my nostrils to ebb the flow.

I was diagnosed with leukemia a year ago. I'm stage four. It's terminal. My twin brother, Syh, lays beside me with the same fate, but he is somehow able to rest. My father curls around his bony frame, asleep from exhaustion. My parents are both spring-born doctors who work at the hospital. They can't save us, and it torments them. Our curse is too strong.

Maman gazes at me with agonizing helplessness. Tears glisten in her eyes, the eyes we share, a rich sapphire like the night sky in winter.

“Rune, I would give all the *étoiles dans le ciel* to save you,” she says. “I would tear down the sun and shatter *la lune* if it would make you whole again. But I am human, flawed, limited. *Pardonne-moi.*”

When she is upset, she peppers her speech with French, the language of our ancestors, the language lost like the rest of our culture.

“It is not your fault, *Maman,*” I say.

Though it *is* a cruel irony. Give two healers the two children they cannot save. And give those twins immense power they can never use. We are winter-born, birthed at midnight on the solstice, shields of untold potential who will remain mysteries. We will never join the Star Guild, never set foot in the Four Towers of Ma’at. The hospital is the last place we will see. My mind lingers on the macabre. I need a distraction.

“Tell me a story,” I say.

“It’s late, *mon cœur,*” *Maman* says. “I’ll read to you in the morning.”

“Please, *Maman.*”

“Sira, you need your rest.” She uses my given name when she’s serious.

“I try, but the sun will not let me,” I say.

“You are so full of life,” she says with a wistful, futile strand of hope. “So *plein de vie.* But you must sleep.”

“A story will help me sleep.”

“*Une nuit blanche* will not help your insomnia,” she says. “*Je*

dis ça, je dis rien.”

“Just one story,” I plead. “*Je promets.*” It will ease both my pain and her worries.

Maman sighs. “*Si je dois.* Which one would you like?”

I think for a moment. “The Four Sisters.”

“*Encore?* You must have it memorized by now.”

“*Oui, mais* it’s a comfort. The words are like a lullaby.”

“A violent *berceuse*,” she says. “And that’s not a story. That’s history. Don’t you want something lighter, like a fairy tale or fantasy?”

I don’t want to escape to fantasy. I want to escape to possibility. A different life, one grounded in truth, based in reality, where I could live to see adulthood.

“*Non merci, Maman.*”

“*Très bien, l’élú.* The Four Sisters it is.”

She opens the history book to the page earmarked from use and reads.

—

In the beginning, there was the sun. And from the sun, came a god.

Lord Ra was the first, the only. From Digard, he ruled the Seven Realms with a righteous, if not merciful, fist. After eons of solitude, loneliness drove him to the brink of madness. He split his heart and bore four daughters from the chambers — Nyx, Llyr, Raze, and Ramiel. Llyr married Baal, a giant from Fegard, Realm of Power, whom Ra blessed with divinity. And thus, the pantheon was complete.

All was well for a time. Ra ruled the summer sun, Nyx ruled the winter stars, Llyr ruled the spring sea, and Baal ruled the fall

storms — patron gods of each season.

Raze and Ramiel found it difficult to fit in. The sisters tried their hand at many different pursuits, but there were no seasons nor gifts left to claim. They were outcast, ostracized when their powers were not as focused as the other gods.

Ramiel became dissatisfied with the hierarchy on Digard. She convinced Raze that, in order to belong, they must create a new realm, one where they ruled without Ra's oversight. Their subjects would pledge loyalty, after which the sisters would care for them completely. Free will would be sacrificed for protection. And if war dawned at the realm's gates, their people would fight without hesitation. Sanctuary in exchange for an army.

However, the creation of new realms is forbidden. It disrupts the balance of seven and causes splintering between the walls of the realms. Once Ra heard of the sisters' plan, he destroyed the nascent realm, stripped Raze and Ramiel of their immortality, and banished his two daughters to Mogard.

Since their exile, Raze and Ramiel lead the Lost Realm as joint rulers. For eleven years, they've brewed in bitterness and cynicism, plotting to reclaim their immortality. On Digard, the four gods continue to rule as more and more demigods flood the realm. And on Higard, Realm of Humans, we learned the truth.

One thousand years ago, after the nuclear war scarred the sky, a Rift opened between the Seven Realms and bestowed humanity with its final evolution, with its seasonal powers. Higard was unaware of the truth of existence until this atrocity. Digard introduced themselves to humanity and founded Ma'at.

The Four Towers is based on the principles of order, balance, unity, and the cycle of all things under the motto, "All is one

is all." When one rises, all rise. When one falls, all fall. The training academy is the last hope for a people plagued by tragedy. But when man becomes myth, morality is dismissed.

—

Maman closes the book. "Rather dark for a bedtime story."

"So it's real?" I ask, mind muddy with fatigue. "The gods? The realms? All of it?"

"*Oui, mon cœur,*" *Maman* says. "Now, sleep."

"What are the Seven Realms?"

"Sira, *tu as promis.*"

"I know about Higard, obviously, and the story mentions Digard, Mogard, and Fegard, but what are the three others?"

"You must rest, or you will not..." She stops herself. She was going to say, "...or you will not get better." Even if I rest, I will not get better.

"Please, *Maman,*" I say softly. Curiosity is all that keeps me sane.

She wipes the pity from her expression. "Progard, Realm of Prophecy. Egard, Realm of Balance. And Sagard, Realm of Creation."

"Has anyone ever seen them?" I ask.

"Sira—" my mother warns.

"Just answer this one more question, then I will sleep."

"I suspect the Arches have."

"The Arches?" I ask.

"The leaders of the four guilds."

"What happened to Raze and Ramiel?"

"*Qui vivra verra. Bonne nuit, mon cœur.*" *Maman* turns off the lamp before I can ask any more questions.

—

When I wake, Syh does not. My twin passed in the night. I felt him go, felt him ease into everlasting peace without me. I am broken. No, I am missing. A part of me is gone. Maybe all of me is gone. I will never be whole again. Never feel right again. Never feel anything again. I am numb, a sculpture of ice.

They lay me beside him. His body is still warm. His eyes still clear.

“Sira, *je suis là*,” my mother says. “I am here.”

Her voice is the wisp of soul that fled with him. She sits next to me and places a hand on my back. Her face is wet with tears, but she sits straight, the strength for my father beside her.

Papa is a wreck. He cradles his dead son’s hand, face ravaged with anguish. “*Il est parti. Il est parti*,” he repeats over and over. *He is gone. He is gone.*

I can’t believe it, either. Can’t believe it’s over. I’ll never see Syh again. Never hear his voice. Never see his smile. What road do I travel down where he is not by my side?

“Time of death, 1:22 AM,” a nurse logs in Syh’s death certificate.

A fresh wave of grief drowns me. *Time of death*. It’s real. It happened. This isn’t a dream. I can’t wake from this nightmare. Sobs wrack my withered body as agony fights for escape. Let me out. Let me free. Let me go with him. Don’t prolong my suffering in this Nyx-forsaken place.

“I am sorry, Miss, but we must move the body,” the coroner says to me.

The body. They refer to him as an object, not as a human being who lived and loved and laughed. I don’t move. I can’t do this

alone. I need you, Syh. Don't leave me.

"Would you like to say goodbye?" the coroner asks.

No. This isn't goodbye. It can't be.

"*Dors bien, mon frère.*" I kiss Syh on the brow and squeeze his hand one last time. His body is already stiffening, turning to stone. "Till next time."

They move me from his bed and wheel him from the room. Devastation wrenches my heart from my soul. The emptiness is stifling. I can't breathe. Sorrow clogs my throat. I cough, hack up heartache, flail at the nurses who restrain me, beg the coroner to take me with him. *Maman* wraps her arms around me, rocks me like a babe. She holds me together, but barely.

"We failed him," *Papa* sobs. "We failed our boy."

One of the nurses approaches and lays a hand on *Maman's* shoulder. "Our grief counselors are at your disposal should you require their services. Syh will be kept in the mortuary until the funeral. There is no need for an autopsy or post-mortem examination. Are there any special customs or rituals you would like to see performed?"

It's all happening too fast. My life spirals out of control. I'm not ready for this.

"There will be no *funèbre*," *Maman* says. "Donate his body to science. Except for his heart. Burn his *cœur*, and scatter the ashes in the Ruined Sea. Lady Llyr will watch over him."

"No, *Maman*," I say, weeping, "let him rest in peace. Don't tear him apart like he's some kind of experiment."

"He *is* at peace, Rune," *Maman* says. "And he's no longer here, but his body could help others."

"Leave him alone!" I shriek, thrashing on the bed. "Don't

touch him!" *Papa* restrains me and holds me against his chest.

"Sira, *s'il vous plaît*, we must let him go," *Maman* says.

"No!" I scream. "*Laisse-le tranquille! Laisse-le tranquille!*"

Leave him alone, you *animaux!*"

"I am sorry, *mon cœur*."

There's a pinch in my neck, and the world goes black.

—

I sleep till late afternoon. Each time I try to wake, grief overwhelms me, and I fall again into the abyss. I welcome the darkness. It's my only escape. I want to end my suffering and leave this place with him. We came into this world together. It's only right that we leave together, too.

Maman enters my room and throws open the curtains. Sunlight blinds me, and I cover my eyes. It's disrespectful. There should be no light where he is not.

"*Comment vas-tu?*" she asks, sitting on my bedside.

"I want to die, *Maman*," I say.

"L'lyr forbid, *mon cœur*," she says. Concern etches her elegant features into a mask of worry. "Do not say such things."

"But I do," I say, bitter. "There's no reason for me to stay."

She gazes at me fiercely. "Yes, there is. You must live for two now. His soul is yours. His journey mirrors your own. *Qui n'avance pas, recule.*"

"Am I not allowed to grieve?" I shouldn't speak to her like this. She's only trying to help. But she's not a twin. She doesn't understand. "I can't let him go."

"I'm not asking you to. I'm asking you to — *comment dis-tu?* — take him with you."

"I share his fate, *Maman*. I am not long for this world."

“I will not lose another child,” she says. Tears stream down her cheeks.

“You do not have a choice,” I snap.

“Actually,” a nurse interjects as she enters the room, “that’s what I was coming to talk to you about.” She looks between us. “Unless this is not a good time.”

No, it is not a good time, you insensitive fool.

“Please, *entrez*,” Maman says, always gracious, always kind, even in the face of tragedy. I do not deserve her.

The nurse hesitates in the doorway and then crosses the room to stand in front of my bed. “This is somewhat of a miracle. Even the doctors don’t fully understand.”

“What is it?” I ask.

Her face breaks into a smile, unable to contain her joy any longer. “Your tests are clear. You’re going home, Rune. You’re healed.”

Healed. The word echoes in my mind like a pinball, silencing all other thoughts. *Healed.* I am anything but healed.

Maman gasps and claps her hands in pleasure. “This is marvelous news! Are you sure?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Her discharge papers are already filled out.”

This can’t be happening. We were supposed to survive together. We were supposed to leave and live and grow old together. But instead, his death is a sacrifice for my life, a life I no longer want.

“The gods have shown mercy,” the nurse says.

“Mercy?” I ask, revolted. “My brother is dead, and you speak of mercy.”

The nurse pales. “I am sorry, Miss, I only meant—”

“It is fine,” *Maman* interrupts. She shoots me a warning

glance. “We are very grateful. Thank you, *Madame*.”

“Of course, Ma’am. Let me know if there is anything else you require. Your release is scheduled for tomorrow morning.” The nurse bows and leaves us.

“Do not let this break you,” *Maman* says. “You must remain strong, Sira.”

“You did not love him as I did,” I say. “If you did, you would not say such things.”

“I made him, *mon cœur*,” she says gently. “My love is tall as the skies, my grief deep as the Ruined Sea. Neither Nyx nor Llyr holds the power to quell my suffering. But I will pray to Ra for strength and to Baal for a sail large enough to weather this storm.”

A sob escapes my throat. Anger fades to sorrow. “*Maman*,” I weep. “I am sorry. I shouldn’t have said—”

“Shh, shh,” she says. “There is nothing to forgive.”

I collapse, and she catches me, cradles me while I shatter.

“You will be okay,” she whispers in my ear. “We will be okay.”