

Destined

Circle

Book One

M.A.I. Murray

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DEDICATION

For Lee Lee.

You've always been a part of
my stories (and you're a much
better storyteller than I).

Plus you've been my best friend
since middle school, so duh.

CONTENTS

Prologue.	It's not the end of the world	1
Chapter 1.	Take them a dish and make friends	8
Chapter 2.	I get major cool points for that	31
Chapter 3.	My parents don't quite get along	65
Chapter 4.	I am the Once Beautiful Lady	88
Chapter 5.	That's the last thing I want to hear	122
Chapter 6.	I'll eat whomever you want me to	145
Chapter 7.	Well, by my name, of course	181
Chapter 8.	Maybe the bed isn't a bed	209
Chapter 9.	We got saved by the Destined	237
Chapter 10.	You'll be safe, I promise	274
Chapter 11.	Forgive me, I'm old and senile	299
Chapter 12.	Everything comes at a price	327
Epilogue.	With an army of the dead	352

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PROLOGUE

It's not the end of the world

The Fourth Spinner knew the time was approaching when she would wither and fade like the three who had gone before her. Tarel could feel her strength beginning to wane, the weight of the years finally catching up with her bones. After nearly a millennium she supposed she should not be surprised. The spirit of Antiln grew restless within the Loom; she sensed her predecessors warring against the immortal power bound to its deceptively delicate frame. The silky threads became more unpredictable, the patterns blurred and vague, jumping from land to land and from time to time at the slightest provocation. It was not as easy as it once had been to control the visions that danced across the colorful fabric.

The day was coming when she would no longer control them at all.

She had been searching for her successor for half a century at least. At first Tarel thought to find her among her own people, or perhaps among another of the ancient lines. However, it was not long before she realized there was no trace of the calling anywhere in Aorea, and so she

turned her eyes instead to the children of Sier. The Loom quickly fixated on a certain young girl with wild eyes and wilder hair. Thinking perhaps that she was the one whom fate had chosen to become her replacement, the Spinner watched her grow. Sometimes Tarel would glimpse bits of the girl's life that had not yet come to pass, and other times she would look too far into the past and see the child's ancestors sharpening spears around a fire. Most often she watched her present. The Spinner found that she could speak to the girl through her dreams, although the girl never seemed to remember the Spinner's words once she woke.

After a while Tarel realized that the girl was not meant to share her specific fate, but rather to weave a different destiny of her own. Shortly thereafter the Loom finally gifted the Spinner with a vision of her true successor, and Tarel instantly recognized in the second maiden the same longing that had once called to her.

Tarel stood, turning her back on the woven magic for the first time in far too many years. She smoothed the wrinkles from her gown and stepped cautiously to the window of the small cottage. Sunlight spilled across her face and coaxed her dry lips into a smile. She could not remember the last time she had done that. "Micaeth," Tarel called, fingers pressed on the windowsill for support. "I have a favor to ask, dear friend."

The nietheran's long, white neck formed an elegant arch as he lifted his head from where he'd buried his nose in the flowers. His flared nostrils were coated in pollen, and his silvered mane spilled down his neck and over his shoulders. He dipped his crystal horn in a regal bow. Tarel had always envied the niethera their easy grace, although sometimes she wondered if Micaeth and his fascination with eating common flowers was a poor example of it. "Anything you wish, Lady Spinner," he replied, a twinkle in both his eyes and voice.

"I need you to deliver a message to Kupala, Vesna, and

DESTINED

that dreadful sister of hers. Tell them that the Destined Four will join us very soon, and that I need their help preparing the way. Actually, tell the Witchazel Wizard, too, please, although he likely already knows,” she said. The Spinner surveyed her domain slowly, taking in the sights and smells of the bountiful garden, the smooth golden walls, the cloudless sky. She had forgotten how beautiful her sanctuary was, ever overflowing in an eternal harvest. “And please remind them all to behave,” she added, noticing the mischievous glint in Micaeth’s purple gaze.

He nodded his acceptance of the task.

As she sat once more before the ancient Loom, she searched for her successor’s image in the fabric. The vision came quickly enough. Tarel found the girl standing at a kitchen sink, her deft hands cleaning dishes before passing them to her younger brother to dry. Her hair, pulled loosely back from her face in a golden braid, hung to just above her waist. The Spinner could not help but sigh as the knowledge came to her: her successor would have quite a tale to tell when she finally reached the sanctuary.

If she reached it in time, that is.

Tarel continued to watch the story of her successor unfold, spiraling across the Loom in a whirl of perpetual motion, the pattern of life woven in silken threads.

~

“That should be the last of the plates, at least,” Laria said, handing the chipped dish, ivory with a border of blue swirls, to her brother. Timothy took the plate carefully, wiping the surface with a ragged towel. “Have you finished packing up your clothes?” she continued.

“Almost,” Timothy replied, setting the dry plate on the top of the stack. He left his sister to her thoughts and walked down the adjacent hallway.

Laria looked around the kitchen, taking in the clean—if somewhat run down—surfaces. The wood veneer on the

cupboards was peeling in places; the hinges, rusted and prone to squeaking. Several of the square tiles that lined the wall above the sink were scratched, but Laria could remember when they were new. She and Timothy had helped their father, David, put up the tiles to surprise their stepmom several years ago. That was right after their most recent move and the closest to being happy that she could remember since her biological mother had died. Laria winced at the memory. She had been seven years old, riding in the back seat, and her mom had been driving. When she closed her eyes sometimes she could still hear the squealing tires and crunching metal as the truck smashed into the front of their sedan. The damage to the backseat had been minimal, so Laria ended up with just a broken arm and a mild concussion. Her mother had not been so fortunate; the light bled out of her long before the ambulance arrived.

The other driver fled the scene. Laria never knew if they found him.

After the accident, David spent years alone in his grief until Laria finally convinced him that her mom would want him to be happy. Before long he started dating again. He breezed through a few girlfriends, each worse than the last, until he met Eleanor. However, it wasn't until Eleanor had entered the picture in a more permanent role that Laria truly regretted her advice.

She wouldn't really miss the cracked kitchen tiles when they moved.

Or the rest of the house, for that matter.

Laria sighed wistfully and followed her brother down the hall. She hadn't taken more than a few steps when she heard the front door open suddenly and slam shut. She waited, listening to the dog barking excitedly in the back yard. "Dad?" she called. "Is that you?"

Heavy footsteps thudding through the living room were the only response she received. Laria heard the television flicker to life, and, sighing once more,

DESTINED

determined that rearranging the contents of her suitcase could wait. She walked slowly to the living room where her dad sat, his feet propped up on a stack of old newspapers and magazines. “Dad?” she asked again. “What do you want for dinner?”

He grunted. Then, as if finally realizing where he was and that his daughter was speaking, he turned to face her. “Dinner, you said?”

“I was thinking of making spaghetti, but Tim says he’s tired of noodles.”

“I’ll order pizza. Can you grab me a beer?”

“Sure,” Laria replied, heading back into the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator, wrinkling her delicate nose at the contents. She moved a half-drunk carton of overripe milk out of the way to reach a six pack, which was shoved behind several other expired items. Shutting the door, she turned to grab the telephone off the wall before walking back into the living room. “Here you go,” she said, handing her father both the can and the phone.

“Thanks,” he mumbled. He set the beer on the cardboard box that presently served as an end table, absently dialing numbers. “Hawaiian ok?”

“Sure,” she said, walking back to the kitchen.

Laria was digging through the nearly empty cupboards in a vain search for an errant tea bag when she heard her stepmother return. Eleanor’s high pitched voice never failed to grate her nerves. “Laria! Timothy!” she cried, tossing her purse in a corner. “Did you finish packing yet?”

Timothy poked his head out of his door just long enough to shout, “Almost!”

Giving up on the tea bag, Laria replied, “I’m just about there. We spent most of the afternoon cleaning up the dishes. The kitchen is ready to be packed now, at least.”

“I thought you were going to pack the kitchen this afternoon?” Eleanor queried, one of her thin eyebrows arched in annoyance. “The trailer is coming tomorrow.”

Laria knew what else was coming and swallowed the nervous lump building in her throat. She took a deep breath before explaining, “We ran out of boxes after packing the basement.”

“Why didn’t you get more?”

“Where would I get them from? I don’t exactly have a car.”

“You could have walked. The post office is barely a mile away.”

“El,” her father interjected, “it’s not the end of the world. I’ll go pick up some more boxes on my way to get the pizza.”

“Pizza? Since when do we have the money to order pizza? That’s why we’re moving again in the first place!” Eleanor exclaimed, throwing her arms in the air dramatically. She turned an accusing eye on Laria and said, “This was your idea. I know it was. You’re just trying to get out of your chores.”

“I’m not! I offered to make spaghetti but dad wanted...”

“Enough!” Eleanor thundered, her dark eyes narrowed. “You will quit making excuses for your laziness, and you will certainly quit talking back to me!”

“You’re not my mother,” Laria returned quietly.

Evidently it was the wrong response.

Eleanor flustered, her previously narrowed eyes swiftly widening in astonishment and disgust. Her lower right eyelid began to twitch, a sign Laria recognized as indicative of an imminent explosion. Eleanor opened her mouth to begin her rant, but Laria simply turned and walked through the kitchen to the back door.

A golden retriever met her at the threshold, his tail swishing enthusiastically from side to side. She bent down to place a kiss on his whitened muzzle. “I can’t believe we’re moving tomorrow,” she whispered to the old dog. “We’ve moved around so much already.” She paused to listen to the muffled argument between her father and

DESTINED

stepmother, hoping the neighbors would continue to feign apathy for one more night. Laria sat down on the back stoop. Scratching behind his ear, she asked, "What do you think, Sunny? Will the next place be any better than this one?" The dog merely looked up at her adoringly as he plopped himself on the ground at her feet. "That's what I thought," she replied.

Laria looked at the sky, the stars just beginning to pierce through the darkness. The moon was a slim crescent, and in the summer haze she could have sworn she saw a shooting star dart across the ether. She closed her eyes and whispered to the night, "I wish someone would come take me away from all this mess."

Sunny licked her hand and whined.

"But I suppose that's silly," she continued. "They don't make shining armor anymore, let alone knights worthy to wear it."

Disturbing her reverie, the back door opened, and her brother joined her on the stoop. "I think they're almost done in there," Timothy said.

"They'll never be done," Laria replied.

He frowned. "Maybe if you didn't antagonize her so much."

Laria placed her hands on her hips. "Don't you dare put this on me, Timothy Sumner! I doubt anyone ever blamed Cinderella for her evil stepmother being a jerk."

"Life isn't a fairy tale," Timothy said flatly. He left, slamming the door behind him.

Laria sat quietly for a moment on the back porch, scratching Sunny's head. "It should be," she whispered. She stood and went back inside the kitchen.

CHAPTER ONE

Take them a dish and make friends

Music crackled through the two amplifiers, the bass line weaving an eerie undercurrent to the screaming guitar as the driving pulse of the kick drum seemed to shake the building from its very foundation. The drummer, shirtless and sweating in the afternoon heat, suddenly changed the beat and descended into an improvised solo. His eyes were as much alight from the energy of the music as from his personal exertion, for his arms moved across the drum set so fast that it seemed impossible he possessed only two of them. Noticing the sudden change in rhythm, the guitarist ceased his strumming and chucked his pick across the room. “Dammit, Jimmy!” he said, lifting the strap of his guitar over his head. “What the hell?”

The thrum of the bass screeched to a halt shortly thereafter. Ignoring his friends’ silence, the drummer ended his improvisation in a flurry of beats and a cymbal crash, grinning sheepishly. “Sorry, Gren. I got bored with playing the same song five times in row.”

“Maybe it’s time for a break,” offered the bassist. She bent down to unplug her amp and set her pink, glitter-

DESTINED

coated guitar in a corner. Wild brunette curls shifted into her face as she knelt. She brushed the mass of spirals impatiently behind her shoulders, saying, “We have been practicing for almost three hours straight, after all.”

Gren set his own black guitar aside. Running a hand through his dark brown hair, made even darker by a slick coat of sweat, he admitted, “Maybe you’re right. I guess we have been hitting it a little hard lately. I just want to be ready for next week’s gig.”

Jimmy tossed his drumsticks and stood. “Me too, but I think Mari’s on to something with this whole break idea.”

“Let’s go see what my mom left in the fridge,” Gren replied. He picked his way carefully across the tangled cords and music sheets that littered the basement floor, the others following closely after him. They ascended the stairs that led from the cellar, which served as their musical haven, to the kitchen. Reaching the top of the stairs, Gren pulled open the door and held it. Once they were all through, he headed over to the refrigerator and surveyed the contents. He frowned, then said, “Well, apparently all we have left is root beer and what looks like some diet grape concoction. It may be carbonated. I dunno, it’s purple. Mari, what’ll it be?”

The bassist giggled before replying, “Root beer sounds fine.”

“Jimmy?”

“Any tea?”

“It’s like you weren’t even listening. No, no tea.”

“Lemonade?”

“Also a negative.”

Jimmy rolled his eyes and released a melodramatic sigh. “Root beer it is, then.”

“You drummers are always so picky,” Gren replied with a smirk. He tossed them each a can before closing the refrigerator door. Mari and Jimmy caught the cans easily as Gren joined them at the kitchen table.

“And you front men are such cocky mothers,” Jimmy

retorted.

Gren shook his head and changed the subject. "Should we practice more tomorrow? I still don't feel great about our line up."

Mari crinkled her brow slightly before replying, "I think we have a few days still to lock it in. It's only Tuesday. Besides, I need to get out of the house."

"You are out of your house, technically," Jimmy stated.

She shot him a sarcastic glare. "I meant houses in general," she said, waving a hand to indicate the building surrounding them. "It's the walls."

Gren looked thoughtful for a moment and suggested, "We could go hiking? The weather's supposed to cool down a little."

"Hiking's a good idea!" Mari agreed. "We could leave after lunch and hit up some of the trails off the parkway, maybe even see if any of them are good for running, too."

Jimmy drained the rest of his root beer. "I'd love to join you two, but I'm afraid I already have plans for tomorrow afternoon. If you move it to a morning trip, maybe I could make it."

"What on earth are you doing tomorrow afternoon that's so important?" Gren asked suspiciously. He picked up Jimmy's empty can and dropped it in the recycling bin.

"Believe it or not," he replied slowly, "I have a date."

Mari shrieked in delight, throwing her own empty can across the table at him. "Who's the lucky girl?" she asked.

"Susie."

"NO!"

Jimmy squinted at her in annoyance. "Yes," he replied. "In fact, I seem to be moving up on the social ladder now that our band is finally getting paid gigs."

"Well, I'm very happy for you. You'll have to tell us how it goes at Thursday's practice," Mari replied with a smile. She looked at Gren and continued, "Will Hal be joining us on the hike? I haven't seen him in a while outside of our morning runs."

DESTINED

"I'll call him later," Gren shrugged. "Y'all ready to play again?"

Mari and Jimmy nodded.

"Alright then, back to the basement!"

"Yes, sir!" Jimmy snapped, saluting.

Mari poked him in the shoulder. "You're such a dork. You know that, right?"

"Dork or not, I still have a date with Susie Johnson, which is more than I can say for either of you nerds," he replied, grinning.

"She's not really my type," Mari laughed. "I've never been a fan of the fake blondes."

They retreated into the basement, and shortly after they picked up their respective instruments, the music surged back to life.

~

By the time Mari headed homeward, the sky had just begun to darken. Since Jimmy lived in another neighborhood, Mari and Gren had helped him pack his drum set piece by piece into the back of his van before he peeled out of the driveway and down the road. Mari then returned to the basement to pack up her own equipment. She decided to leave the amp with Gren since his house provided the best acoustic atmosphere for practices; thus, she merely zipped her bass into its soft shell, slipped the case over her right shoulder, and headed back upstairs and out the front door. She waved goodbye to Gren after she crossed the threshold, thankful that she lived only a few houses down from one of her best friends.

Mari hummed quietly as she walked along the sidewalk. When she reached her front porch, she couldn't help but notice that the *For Sale* sign at the blue house across the street was missing and that a dilapidated sedan was parked there instead. Twisting the brass doorknob, she decided to ask her father about the new neighbors.

That house had been empty for years.

The acidic tang of heating tomatoes led her to the kitchen. She saw her father, Ilya, standing at the stove, stirring a large stock pot with a wooden spoon. He was tall, but not unusually so, with a thin build and lightly tanned skin. His unruly curls were the same mahogany-brown that he had passed on to his daughter, and likewise their eyes shared the same shade of mossy green. In fact, Mari often wondered if there was any trace of her mother in her at all since she looked so much like her father, from their high cheekbones to their pointed fae chins. Ilya turned around at the sound of her footsteps, inquiring, "Marechka! How was your playing today?" A plate of cabbage leaves, a bowl of cooked rice, another of ground sausage, and a dish of spices made a neat row on the counter next to him.

"It went well," she replied. "Is that *halupki* I smell?"

Ilya smiled, his green eyes twinkling with mischief. "It certainly is," he said. He motioned for her to take over the stirring as he began to chop peppers on the cutting board.

Mari stirred steadily, pulling the spoon through the thick red sauce in a clockwise circle. "You seem to be making an awful lot for just the two of us," she commented. "I'm assuming we're taking some to the new neighbors across the street?"

"Yes, yes," he said, nodding. "The father came to the guitar shop for an interview. Nice man, very nice. He said they have a daughter your age. When we finish, you should take them a dish and make friends."

"Sure thing," Mari said with another smile. She kept stirring slowly, watching the red begin to bubble and pop. "Any word from Baba Rojko?"

Ilya frowned. "Babushka sent another letter."

"Can I read it?"

"Perhaps later," he said. His frown deepened.

"Ok," Mari replied, somewhat confused. Her grandmother's weekly letters were hardly cause for

DESTINED

concern; half of the time they were relayed messages from their extended family, begging them to come back to Slovakia. The other half, they were just a collection of pleasantries and vague updates on family happenings. Sniffing the cooking tomatoes, she said, "I think we can add the rice and sausage now."

Her father poured the rice, sausage, peppers, and spices into the tomatoes as Mari continued to stir. Once everything was combined, they began stuffing the mixture inside the cabbage leaves. Mari winced a few times as drops of the hot stuffing scalded her skin. As they finished folding each cabbage leaf into a neat pocket, they laid them out one by one in a casserole. Her father garnished the rows of stuffed cabbage with dill and parsley and placed the dish in the oven. He hit the timer and disappeared into the living room. When he returned, he handed Mari a folded piece of paper. "Baba Rojko's letter," he explained.

"Did something happen? Is she ok?" Mari asked, starting to get worried.

"She is well enough. Just read," he said before retreating again into the living room. Mari heard him shuffling a newspaper as she sat down in the kitchen.

She skimmed over the first few lines, trying to make sense of her grandmother's tiny, neat script. Mari frequently marveled at how precise her grandmother's English was despite having never left her home country. Before Ilya and Mari had emigrated, the three of them spent hours together every evening pouring over textbooks and practicing their speech. At the time Mari could barely read her native tongue, let alone decipher the complex exercises in the English books, but her father and grandmother had been patient tutors. They had lived within a Romani camp, settled on the outskirts of a small city in the far eastern part of the state. After his wife died giving birth to Mari, Ilya was determined to provide better opportunities for his only daughter: specifically, one with access to modern medicine. Thus, he spent the first seven

years of Mari's life saving up enough money to get the two of them as far as America. Once they passed successfully through customs, he borrowed a map, closed his eyes, and randomly picked a city. That's how they ended up settling in Saffron County, a small town nestled in the mountains of southwest Virginia. Ten years later Mari hardly remembered her previous life. It was only the letters from her grandmother that reminded her periodically that the Romani camp still existed, and that somewhere in Eastern Europe, she really did have more family than just her dad.

Right. The letter. Mari shook herself out of her reminiscences and returned her focus to the piece of paper she clutched in her hands.

My darling Maraka,

You will not like what I am about to tell you, but you are old enough now to know the truth of your heritage and your destiny. Perhaps we should have told you years ago, but we agreed to keep the secret until you were an adult. The Rojko family is not a normal Romani family. We serve a specific purpose, one which you are fated to fulfill. You, little Maraka, are the Summoner, prophesied since the ancient times to help bring about a great change in the worlds. Either this change will result in the dawning of a golden era, or else it will bring about great destruction and chaos. The choice, my dear, will be yours.

Our family has known of this prophecy since a traveling magician entrusted us with the care of its fulfillment many centuries ago. He gave a series of items to our elders, who passed them down to each generation. Once you were born, we saw the mark upon your foot and knew you were the child touched by fate.

When you left, I made your father promise that he would take the sacred items with him, keeping them safe until you came of age. I had hoped that your destiny would not call you until you were older, but unfortunately the signs point to a change coming very soon. Ask your father to show

DESTINED

you the heirlooms. You will need them in order to follow your path. Do not be scared, my granddaughter. You will succeed.

*With deepest love,
Tanya Babushka*

Mari read the letter three times before it started to make sense, and even then she was still half-convinced that she must be reading it wrong. She read it a fourth time and started to read it a fifth before finally deciding that either this was the strangest attempt at a birthday prank (several months too early, at that), or else her grandmother had finally gone completely and utterly insane. She refolded the letter along the creases and stormed into the living room. “Dad?” she asked. “What the hell is this supposed to mean? Did Babushka finally lose it or is this some sort of joke?”

“It is nothing but a silly story the elders tell, trying to feel important,” Ilya said. His normally calm, even voice was practically a growl.

Mari blinked at him in disbelief. She opened her mouth to retort, but the timer went off, interrupting her already scattered thoughts. She tossed the letter at her father and stomped into the kitchen. She was in such a hurry to shut off the oven and take out the *halupki* that she forgot to put on an oven mitt, and so she cursed as she burnt her fingers on the hot glass. She nearly jumped out of her skin when her father placed a warm hand on her shoulder.

“I am sorry I had not warned you of this sooner,” he said. “They always said that the Time of Changing was your eighteenth birthday.”

“Well, September’s still two months away, and Baba Rojko’s letter seems to imply that this destiny bullshit is about to go into effect a lot sooner than that,” Mari fired, blowing on her reddened fingertips. She was not looking forward to the inevitable blisters. “Just great, my bass playing’s going to suck till these heal. And we have a gig

next week! Gren's going to be *so* pissed. They were actually going to pay us this time!"

"He will get over it," Ilya replied softly. "Come, let us eat before the *halupki* goes cold."

"Fat chance of that," she grumbled.

They set the table quickly, and Ilya spooned the steaming stuffed cabbage on each of their plates while Mari poured hot tea from the kettle. They ate in silence for several minutes until Mari finally asked, "So what's with these heirlooms?"

"You believe in her letter now?" Ilya inquired in response.

"No, I didn't say that," Mari said, rolling her eyes. "I'm just curious. Jewelry? Books?"

Ilya frowned and scratched his chin. "Not books, exactly," he said eventually, "and only a little jewelry. And something else. I will show you after dinner."

"Do you believe in the story or prophecy or whatever?"

"I do not know," he said, somewhat sadly. "I grew up hearing of little else, but when I met your mother, everything changed for me. I suddenly could see a life for me, for us, that was not stuck in a camp, persecuted and hated, called *vigan*. I wanted to leave. And then my poor, sweet Verochka was too good for this world, and she named you Maraka with her dying breath. My mother saw the crescent moon on your foot and said you were the Summoner. I didn't believe her at first, but what else was I to do? She is my mother. She made me promise."

"You mean that silly little birthmark on my foot? Seriously? That's what this is all about?" Mari tried to mask her mixed curiosity and disbelief by shoveling more stuffed cabbage into her mouth.

He shook his head slowly, saying, "It is more than that." Ilya rose from the table, his empty plate in his hand. "Come, we have both eaten more than enough. I will get the heirlooms out of the basement so you can see for yourself how silly the elders are. Then we will both laugh,

DESTINED

and you can take the rest of the *halupki* to our new neighbors. I am sure they are hungry.” He put his plate on the sink and walked away, disappearing into the basement.

Mari sighed, arranging the remaining stuffed cabbage on a large platter. She stretched tin foil across the top. To busy herself while her father gathered whatever mysterious heirlooms she would apparently inherit in order to fulfill an equally mysterious (and, she thought, unlikely) destiny, she cleared off the rest of the table and began to rinse the dishes in the sink.

Finally her father returned from the basement, lugging a large duffle bag behind him. He hauled the bag up and let it drop on the center of the kitchen table with a loud clank. Mari watched with a raised brow as he unpacked the contents. When he was finished, four bundles of different sizes were laid out, as well as a small velvet pouch and an old, brown folder. “Where’s the jewelry?” she asked.

He shot her an exasperated look. “Be patient, my daughter. The jewels are in here,” he said, pointing to the pouch. He tugged open the drawstring, and a glimmer of stones poured out in different shapes and colors, a green moon, a black sword, something in blue. They caught the light, twinkling and sparkling. “But these,” he said, indicating the larger bundles, “these are what concern me.”

“What’s in those?” Mari asked, her curiosity beginning to outweigh her doubt.

Ilya pulled back one of the wrappers, and a glint of silver caught the lamplight.

“A sword?” she squeaked. “What the hell am I supposed to do with that!?”

~

“Not again,” Tarel remarked as the Loom changed its scenery. Instead of the earthly kitchen with two children of Sier, the dancing fabric depicted a wooded location not so far removed from her own sanctuary. She watched silently

as the vision took form, and when she recognized the subject of the unfolding events, she sighed in resignation.

Brae raced through the misty forest, the bright flames of her hair catching on branches and bracken. Her strides were swift and steady; her breath, no louder than the summer wind whispering overhead. The ivory folds of her skirt swished with every step.

Still, she knew she could not outrun them forever.

She increased her pace, trying to put as much distance between herself and her cousins as possible. If by some miracle she could make it to Vesna's cottage before they caught up with her, she just might leave this forest alive.

When they chose to taunt her, their voices were too close for comfort. She quickened her stride further, her steady breathing no longer a quiet wind. "You cannot escape us, dear Brae," they snickered. "We will catch you as we caught your sisters, and then you, too, will be punished for your repeated crimes."

Unfriendly vines tangled her feet, sending her sprawling amongst the leaves. She tore her ankles from the grip of the vines, wincing as a thorn cut her foot. Because running for her life and freedom was not enough trouble, now she had to leave a trail of blood as she went. She limped along, determined not to go down without a fight.

Her cousins ensured that they had her completely surrounded before they finally struck. She was pleased to see the other leshii feared her so, considering how many they sent. Four or five of her cousins she could probably have shaken off, eventually, at least. A full seven? Unlikely. Brae turned her best smile on the eldest as she said, "Congratulations. You'll probably get that promotion you wanted for this."

The leader returned Brae's smile with a cold one of her own. "You and your sisters have caused enough trouble. Cousins, bind her limbs. She goes to trial at sunset."

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DESTINED

The lights were still on in most of the rooms in the blue house, Mari noticed with relief. Catching a glance at the clock before she left, she had been worried that the new neighbors had already gone to sleep. Surely they were tired after a long day of moving in, and after the strange conversation she had just had with her father, she did not relish the thought of explaining to grumpy neighbors why she was waking them up just to deliver some stuffed cabbage. They probably wouldn't even eat it anyway.

Mari took a deep breath before ringing the doorbell. She had to balance the platter in her left hand so that she could reach the button with her right. She stole a quick glimpse of her reflection in the mirror, deciding she did not look too disheveled. Hopefully they wouldn't think she was crazy. Smoothing a wayward curl behind her ear, she waited.

After what seemed like forever, finally the door opened. Mari was forced to take a step backward as the door swung forward. A tall young girl with slender, pale limbs stepped out onto the porch. She looked painfully familiar, as if her face came from a dream, but before Mari could open her mouth to speak a greeting, a rush of images assaulted her brain, swirling around her head in a dance of memories that passed too quickly for her to focus on any one thing. She reeled backward, the platter of *halupki* tumbling from her grip, and her world went dark.

When she came to, her head pounded. She blinked her eyes open, squinting despite the early summer twilight. "What happened?" she finally managed to ask. Her vision was blurred, still tinted dark at the edges, and she wasn't entirely sure where she was.

"You fainted on our front porch," said a pleasant, feminine voice. "Are you alright?"

"I think so," Mari replied. She blinked again, and this time it finally seemed to help clear her vision. "I'm sorry, that's never happened to me before." Looking around, she realized she had spilled the *halupki* everywhere as she fell.

So much for a welcoming dinner. “And I’m sorry about that too,” she said as she gestured toward the mess. “That was supposed to be a ‘hey, welcome to our neighborhood!’ gift from my family to yours. I’m Maraka Rojko, by the way, but everyone around here just calls me Mari. Well, except my dad. He prefers to use the Slavic nickname and calls me Marechka. Apparently you can take the man out of the old country, but you can’t take the old country out of the man. Anyway, we live in the house across the street.”

“Laria Sumner,” the girl replied. Mari studied her face curiously, wondering what about the girl could have possibly made her faint. She had delicate, fine-boned features, with perfectly clear skin just a shade off from ivory. Her wide eyes were a serene aqua, flecks of dark sapphire and slate gray creating an oceanic effect. Her long hair, presently loose and hanging in a mess over her shoulders, was a shade akin to what Rumpelstiltskin must have held in his bony fingers halfway between straw and gold.

Mari fought back a pang of jealousy. Part of her had always wanted to be slender and delicate and pale and blonde. A small part of her, perhaps, but it was there nonetheless. Instead, she had inherited an average height and athletic build, and apart from a half-hearted attempt at highlights a few years back, she had long ago accepted that she would not make a very good blonde. “Well, it’s very nice to meet you,” she said, forcing a smile despite the pain that still pounded behind her eyes.

“You too,” Laria replied with a warm grin. “Here, let me help you up.” Laria extended her hand, and as Mari gripped it, a strange tingling sensation began to spread over her skin. She saw no indication on Laria’s face that the other girl had felt anything out of the ordinary, so Mari chocked it up to frayed nerves after an extra-weird evening. When they were both standing, Laria said, “Wait here, and I’ll go get some towels.” She returned a few

DESTINED

moments later with a fresh roll of paper towels, and the girls began to clean up the ruined food. “Across the street, you said?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Mari replied. She leaned over to mop up the tomatoes and rice mixture that had leaked from one of the burst cabbage packets. “Your dad apparently dropped by my dad’s guitar shop today, so we thought we’d make extra dinner and share with you all. Again, really sorry about all this. It didn’t exactly go according to plan,” she explained with a shrug. “I’ve never fainted before in my life, so I don’t have a clue what came over me.”

“No need to apologize,” Laria said with a smile.

Mari found herself smiling back again. “So my dad was saying you’re around my age. What grade are you going into this fall?”

“Well, I just turned eighteen about a month ago. My brother and I are homeschooled, but I’d be the equivalent of a senior, I suppose,” she stated. “You see, we kinda move around a lot, so it’s just easier for my parents that way since they don’t have to keep taking us out of school after school.”

“Oh, cool! You’re a few months ahead of me then. I reach lottery-playing, cigarette-smoking eligibility this September. I’ll be a senior, too,” Mari replied, “except I’m not homeschooled, obviously. I go to Basil Brook. It’s sadly the only high school in all of Saffron County.” They finished wiping up the rest of the mess, at least to the extent that they could see in the ever deepening dusk.

Laria gathered up the used paper towels, handing the platter back to Mari. “Well, I guess I better throw these out. Wait just a minute, then we can keep talking!” She disappeared inside, but not before flashing Mari another infectious grin.

“Well, it’d be a lot easier to hate her if she weren’t so darn nice,” Mari mumbled to herself. Laria returned after a few minutes and they both sat down on the stoop. “So,”

Mari began again, "what all are you into? Hobbies and such? Any sports?"

"Um, quiet stuff, I guess," Laria replied. "I like to read, and occasionally I'll write a story or a poem or something, and then sometimes I make jewelry. Other than that, I mostly just study. I never really got into sports, unless you count the ballet lessons I took when I was a kid."

"Oh," Mari said. "Poetry is cool. I'm not much of a writer myself, but I do play in a band, so I can appreciate the lyrical thing. I don't do any of the actual writing though, that's all Gren. I just play bass guitar. Anyway, apart from that, I mostly just run and hike. I'm on the cross country team for Basil Brook, so hiking helps to stay in shape off season."

"Is Gren another friend of yours?" Laria asked.

"The best!" Mari replied brightly. "He and I go way back, all the way to when I first moved here with my dad. Gren lives just down the street. I'm sure you'll meet him soon enough."

"You mentioned hiking—are there many good trails around here? I used to go hiking a lot with my brother, but we kinda got out of the habit," Laria said softly. "Tim—that's my brother—he's not much of an outdoorsman anymore, but I still think a regular dose of fresh air is good for the soul."

"Very wise words," Mari agreed in mock solemnity. The two girls erupted in laughter. Once they had calmed somewhat, Mari asked, "So where'd you move from?"

Laria shrugged. "A small town in North Carolina that no one's ever heard of. It was maybe half an hour outside of Boone."

"And now you're stuck in a small town in Virginia that no one's ever heard of. I imagine you are terribly excited."

"Oh, yes," Laria replied with another giggle.

Mari stood up, saying, "Well, I should probably get back. I'm meeting Gren and Hal—that's another guy on the cross country team with us—to go for a run in the

DESTINED

morning, and then tomorrow afternoon we have a hiking trip planned. You should come along, if you don't have anything else going on yet. For the hiking, that is. You don't really look like you'd be into the long distance running part."

"Running? Oh no, but I would love to go on the hiking trip," Laria replied, turning towards the front door.

Mari grinned. "Excellent. We'll pick you up around one and be back in time for dinner." She walked back across the street, pausing once to wave goodnight.

Ilya was waiting for her in the kitchen, his reading glasses on his face and Baba Rojko's letter in his hands. "You brought back the platter already?" he asked. "They must have been a hungry family, eating so quick."

Mari blushed. "Actually, that's not quite how it went down. For some reason I passed out as soon as Laria—that's the new girl—opened the door, and so I spilled the *halupki* everywhere. We just chatted as we cleaned it up, is all."

"That is too bad," Ilya said with a slight frown. "We will have to bring them something tomorrow instead. Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, I'm fine now," she lied. Her head was still pounding so much that she was starting to wonder if the migraine would ever go away. "I think I'm just going to go straight to bed though. The boys and I are going for an early run tomorrow." She turned towards the stairs, but before she took more than two steps, she paused and added, "Oh, and Dad? Can we just forget about the prophecy and the weird swords and all that for a while? I can't deal with my grandmother being crazy just yet."

Ilya nodded, whispering, "Of course."

"Thanks."

~

Images flickered across her subconscious, an onslaught

of vivid color and ethereal voices. She dreamed a green forest, a pathway leading up into the mountains, a clearing dyed orange in the setting sun. She dreamed a circle of spotted mushrooms and a willow tree swaying in a fierce wind; she almost tasted the wind as she heard it, howling across her sleeping ears like an angry pipe. She dreamed an old woman and a ragged hut. She dreamed a wolf pack, racing through a dusky wood as some great, winged beast cast a shadow over the moon. She dreamed a journey, a deep, urgent necessity.

She dreamed of her past; she dreamed of her future.

She dreamed of music.

When Mari awoke in a cold sweat at midnight, she knew what she had to do. "I am not the Summoner," she whispered to the darkness of her bedroom. "I am just the guide."

She rolled over on her side and went back to sleep. While she slept, she dreamed.

~

After a quick run with his friends, Hal returned to an empty house. He ducked underneath the doorway and strode immediately to the kitchen, the quietness of his long stride belying his size. At over six and a half feet, he was easily taller than anyone else he had met, and while his build was not particularly bulky, he was solid muscle stretched around long, dense bone. Thus, it was with no great difficulty that Hal removed a large glass from the top shelf of the cupboard before filling it from the tap. He drank quickly so as to ignore the stale, tinny flavor of water that had sat too long in the pipes. Setting the empty glass upon the counter, he shook his sweat-slicked hair out of his eyes. The golden strands caught in the sunlight, and the released droplets of sweat sparkled in their newfound freedom.

Hal turned towards the refrigerator, hoping there were

DESTINED

enough eggs left for a decent meal, and instead got distracted by a yellow sticky note. Pulling the note off the door, he read the message to himself:

Howard,

Please remember to feed Lulu and vacuum the guest room before you go anywhere today. Aunt Phyllis and Uncle Rob are coming over for a little while. They'll be here around dinnertime.

Also if you could pick up some steaks, that'd be awesome.

*Love You,
Mom & Dad*

Hal put the note back and rolled his eyes. He was the only one who ever remembered to feed the cat in the first place, and yet he was still the only one she wouldn't let pet her. "Here kitty-kitty-kitty!" he called, marching towards the cabinet where they kept the cat food. "Come here, Kitty Lulu!" The gray shadow of a cat padded silently towards him, casting a wary eye over the scoop of kibble he held in his hand. Hal bent down to dump it into her bowl, muttering, "Perhaps Cthulu would have been a better name for you, ungrateful lynx."

Kitty Lulu, yellow eyes never leaving his, responded with an agitated swish of her tail.

"Ok, ok, I'll let you eat in peace," Hal said, moving towards the kitchen.

He no sooner made it back to the refrigerator than the phone rang. Mumbling over his own breakfast being delayed yet again, he picked up the phone without looking at the caller's name on the screen. "Smith's residence," he said. "May I ask who's calling?"

"Dude, you always sound so formal," came the

digitized reply.

“Dude, I literally just saw you like, five minutes ago. What did you forget?” Hal asked, ignoring Gren’s jibe.

“I forgot to ask what you’re doing this afternoon,” Gren said.

Hal sighed. “Apparently I am shopping for steaks and cleaning the guest bedroom.”

Hal could practically hear Gren’s sarcastic grin over the phone as he replied, “You can do all that this morning. We still have like, four hours until our hiking trip starts!”

“What hiking trip?” Hal asked, his curiosity peaked.

“The one I forgot to invite you on during the run, duh.”

Hal snorted a chuckle. “Where are we going?”

Gren’s voice crackled through the static.

Sighing, Hal answered, “Sorry man, didn’t catch that last bit. Damn mountains. What’d you say?”

This time the reply came in clearly. “I dunno where, exactly. Mari has some new place she wants to check out,” Gren repeated. “You know how she is.”

Hal considered the invitation. Usually Mari-initiated hiking adventures turned into much longer excursions than were originally intended, not least of all because they tended to end up well off the beaten path and lost in the woods. “I dunno, I have to be back in time for dinner. We have company.”

“Screw company!” Gren said. “I need backup!”

“You’re just afraid to be alone with her,” Hal retorted, pouring another glass of water as he sandwiched the phone precariously between his ear and his shoulder. He could practically hear Gren flinching on the other end.

“For good reason, you know,” his friend eventually mumbled. “I always end up saying something awkward when it’s just me and her.”

“Just ask her out already. This is getting ridiculous,” Hal said. “You guys have been friends almost as long as *we* have.”

DESTINED

“She’s dating that douche Brian still,” Gren said.

“Did you really call me to complain about Mari being your best friend instead of your girlfriend—again—or did you call to convince me to be a buffer—again—so you two don’t end up alone in the woods?” Hal asked, the second glass of water already drained. “Because I have been more than doing my part on that front,” he added.

“Possibly both,” Gren replied. “Also you won’t be third wheeling it because Mari invited some new girl along.”

Hal sighed. “Wonderful, a set up. I’m assuming I’m driving?”

“Yes, please,” Gren said. “My sister stole the car for the day.”

“Since when did Giselle get her license?” Hal asked skeptically.

Gren sighed. “Literally a week ago. It’s scary stuff. I feel old now.”

“That is scary. I’ll meet you over at Mari’s house in a few hours, then.”

“You’re the best, dude!” Gren said. “Gotta run, see ya later!”

“Yeah, I know. Peace,” Hal answered, hanging the phone back on the wall charger. So much for breakfast. He shook his head and strode towards the stairs. Hiking adventures with Gren and Mari were, at least, never dull. He flicked the light switch in the bathroom and studied his reflection in the mirror. Dark blue eyes stared back at him, and for a split second he thought his eyes appeared older than they had any right to be. He blinked, and his reflection returned to normal. Rubbing his hand over his hairless chin while simultaneously reaching for a towel, he muttered to himself, “Perhaps one of these days I’ll actually need a razor.”

~

“Someone’s at the door for you,” Timothy said, rhythmically tossing a yellow tennis ball up in the air and catching it. He tossed the ball a few more times to himself before chucking it through the doorway and directly at his sister’s head.

Laria ducked quickly out of the way, glaring at him. She sat cross legged on the floor, tangled up in a pile of flannel, with a half-filled notebook resting on her lap. Since their furniture had not yet arrived, she had spent the night tossing and turning in an old sleeping bag; thus, when the sun first started to trickle through her window, she was already mostly awake and decided to just get up and start writing. “What time is it?” she asked him, putting aside her pen.

“I dunno, the clocks aren’t hooked up yet,” he replied with a shrug.

“You’re no help at all.”

“Anyway, some chick’s at the door. She brought breakfast. Eleanor wouldn’t let me invite her in, so she’s just standing there with a bunch of pancakes,” Timothy explained. “They look pretty good. She even brought syrup.”

“It must be Mari,” Laria said. “Did she have a lot of crazy-curly hair?”

“Yeah, and she’s hot, too,” Timothy said with a lopsided grin.

Laria picked up the tennis ball and hurled it back at him. “Play nice,” she admonished, “and please tell Mari thank you, and I’ll be down in a minute.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he replied, closing the door behind him.

Laria dressed quickly, pulling on the clean pair of jeans she had packed in her backpack along with her toiletries and journal. She grabbed her toothbrush and headed to the bathroom. When she was relatively presentable, she rushed to the front door, where indeed Mari was waiting with a steaming plate of pancakes.

“No fainting this time, promise!” Mari giggled, holding

DESTINED

out the plate and a bottle of maple syrup. “I figured you guys hadn’t had a chance to go grocery shopping yet, and I thought breakfast might make up for my epic fail with dinner last night.”

“Wow, thank you!” Laria exclaimed, taking the proffered plate from her new friend. “It looks delicious!”

“Hopefully they’re edible,” Mari said, grinning.

Laria grinned back, saying, “I’d invite you in, but we don’t have our table set up, and the place is still a mess. Boxes and suitcases everywhere and no furniture to speak of. My stepmom would have a cow.”

“It’s ok, I have to get going anyway. I’ve gotta get some things together before the hiking trip. You still game to come with?”

“Of course!” Laria replied eagerly. “One, right?”

“Yep, one o’clock,” Mari said. She gave a quick wave and stepped agilely off the bricked porch and onto the sidewalk.

“Ok, I’ll see you then,” Laria called, closing the door and stepping back inside. She brought the pancakes to the kitchen, where her brother and stepmother waited. Timothy was sitting at a counter that divided the kitchen from the living room. Two semi-stable stools had been left with the house, along with a run-down shed in the back yard and a birdbath in the front. Her father had negotiated for the extras in addition to the already ridiculously low price, which the real estate agent was all too happy to oblige given that the house had been on the market for so long with no interested buyers. The previous owners had been irresponsible at best, leaving the house in a disarray that Laria found oddly comforting. Her stepmother, on the other hand, had an entirely different reaction.

Laria shivered at the memory as she set the pancake platter and syrup bottle on the counter.

“Well,” Eleanor said as Laria walked in, “I see you are already eliciting charity from the neighbors.”

“She’s just a new friend, that’s all. She’s trying to be

nice.”

“And she’s cute,” Timothy replied. “Think she’s single?”

Eleanor and Laria both scowled at him. Laria walked past her stepmother to get to the refrigerator, which had also (luckily, she thought) come with the house. “She’s way too old for you, Tim. And we don’t have any juice yet, do we?”

“David picked some up last night on his way home,” Eleanor replied. She seemed to be in a relatively good mood, all things considered. Laria wondered briefly how long it would last.

Timothy, meanwhile, was already stuffing fistfuls of pancake into his mouth. Mumbling around the mass between his teeth, he attempted to say, “Laria, you need to make friends more often!” However, only the vowels escaped his lips, and so his consonant-less statement made little sense to anyone but himself.

Naturally, Laria and Eleanor both replied, “What?”

Timothy finished chewing, swallowed, and repeated his previous statement.

Laria laughed softly. “Perhaps I do. Mari definitely seems nice.”

“And she’s a good cook!” Timothy added with enthusiasm, reaching for another pancake. “That’s it, I’m officially in love.”

Laria poured herself a glass of orange juice and sat next to her brother. Reaching for a pancake for herself, she asked her stepmother, “Where’s Dad?”

Eleanor rolled her eyes. “Out looking for work again.”

“Oh,” Laria replied. She took a sip of juice and nibbled thoughtfully. Timothy continued to shovel pancakes into his mouth as if it was the last food he was likely to see for a good long while. Laria shook her head at him. “Well,” she said, raising her juice glass in a toast, “here’s to new beginnings. Maybe this time we’ll get it right.”

Eleanor just glared.

CHAPTER TWO

I get major cool points for that

“Let’s see, what else to add,” Mari mumbled to herself as she scribbled a letter on a piece of notebook paper. Her father was at work already and wouldn’t be home until well after five, and she intended to be long gone by then. She hated not getting to say goodbye in person, but she couldn’t risk it. If he knew that everything was real, that she was about to—well, he’d try to stop her. Any self-respecting parent would. She hoped her letter would explain it better than she could in person anyway.

Finishing her signature with a flourish, she recapped the pen and stashed it in a drawer. She pinned the letter to the refrigerator with a magnet before heading back to the phone. She dialed Gren’s number from memory. The phone rang twice before he answered with a half-asleep, “Yeah?”

“Hey, Gren, it’s me. Are you seriously taking a nap already? Anyway, just wondered what all you were bringing on the hike.”

Gren paused for a moment, and Mari imagined that he was probably chewing his lip on the other end, or perhaps

running his free hand through his hair. He did that a lot. “Not sure,” he eventually said. “Snacks, I guess. Granola bars. Couple water bottles. Why?”

“Could you do me a favor and pack extra water and munchies? I don’t think I’ll have room for any, and I’d really rather not die,” she explained.

Gren laughed. “Sure, I’ll bring enough for the both of us. And then some. You okay? You seemed kinda out of it on the run this morning.”

“Yeah, everything’s fine. I was just tired, I guess. Any who, I gotta go now, so I’ll see you later,” she replied quickly. She hung up the phone before he could respond and dashed upstairs to her room. Reaching under the bed, she pulled out the soft case she used to transport her acoustic guitar before she had started playing bass. She smiled sentimentally at the thought, tracing the lines of the old case with her hand. Her father had taught her to play the guitar as soon as she was big enough to hold one, but once she reached high school, Gren talked her into starting a band with him. He had tried to talk Hal into learning the drums, but Hal claimed complete and utter lack of rhythm and so declined. Nevertheless, Gren did succeed in talking Mari into learning the bass—“It won’t be that different from guitar,” he had promised her—and so their band was born. She sighed, unzipping the black nylon. Her very first guitar was still inside, complete with the broken string she’d never gotten around to replacing and a snapped neck that had been wood-glued back together. She pulled the guitar out and set it gently on top of her bed.

“I’m going to miss you, old friend,” Mari whispered, caressing the wood. The varnish gleamed in the light seeping from her window, a stark contrast against the dark greens and blues of the quilt. She gave the guitar a pat and said, “You will always be my first love. But I have bigger things to do now, bigger than you and me, and certainly bigger than that silly punk band I left you for.” She turned her back on the broken guitar and faced the mirror that

DESTINED

hung over the bedroom door. Studying her reflection, she decided that she looked normal enough to not scare her friends while still being ready for an adventure in running shoes, a well-worn pair of blue jeans, and a white camisole. She reached for an elastic band and began to pull her unruly curls into a ponytail. When she had finished tugging the twisted strands into submission, she slid a few extra elastics over her wrist, just in case. She glanced briefly at her jewelry box before muttering, “What the hell, why not?” and removing a pair of copper hoop earrings. She slid them through her earlobes with a grin, grabbed the now empty guitar case, and headed back downstairs.

Luckily, Ilya had not hidden the duffle bag full of weapons from the old country after their talk the night before, and so Mari did not have to go searching for it. Hauling it out from underneath the kitchen table, she grumbled to herself about how stupid hunks of metal and leather and wood could possibly be so heavy. Finally, she managed to wrestle the bag into the open and began to carefully empty its contents, starting with the velvet pouch full of gems. She momentarily debated opening the pouch to look inside, but decided that could wait until she was—well, until later. She glanced at the clock. Only an hour remained before Gren and Hal showed up at her house, expecting to go on a normal afternoon hiking trip in the Appalachians.

They were going to be really, really pissed.

She shook her head and continued transferring the contents of the duffle bag to her old guitar case. The largest of the swords just barely fit, and she was grateful that at least every blade came with a sheath, or else the points would surely end up poking through the black nylon.

Eventually the time came for her to leave. Gren knocked on the front door; then, when she didn’t answer right away, he opened it and walked in to find Mari sitting on the couch in the living room, staring off into space.

“You ready?” he asked. Mari turned her head to look at him. He was wearing dark jeans, old running shoes and a red t-shirt that emphasized the lean muscles of his arms. She was surprised to find herself admiring him in that way. He had never struck her as particularly handsome before, but she found she liked the way his smile lit up his otherwise dark eyes.

“Yeah, I think so,” Mari answered, standing slowly. She hauled the now-full guitar case over her shoulder and headed for the front door.

“You’re bringing your old acoustic?” Gren asked. “Good idea! I should of thought of that. No wonder you wanted me to bring extra snacks. We can have a jam session at the top of the mountain!”

“Something like that,” Mari said. She followed Gren out to the driveway, where Hal had parked his black truck. “I’ll just toss this in the back and meet you guys in a minute. I gotta go get Laria,” Mari explained.

Gren nodded and opened the back of the truck bed. Mari stashed the guitar case inside, careful not to let the contents rustle and give away their true nature. Gren went around to hop in the passenger’s seat while Mari meandered slowly towards Laria’s front porch.

Laria had apparently been ready and waiting for her, because as soon as Mari placed a toe on the first brick step, Laria opened the door. She wore a pale lilac tank top over faded jeans and hiking boots with a lavender sweater tied around her waist. She smiled shyly, the afternoon sunlight transforming the loose wisps of hair escaping her ponytail into a halo. Tiny beaded drops of pale blue stone dangled from each earlobe. Mari grinned a greeting and gestured for her to follow. Slinging a violet tote bag over her shoulder, Laria trailed after her.

Gren and Hal were quiet when Mari opened the door to let Laria slip into the backseat. Mari scooted in next to her, sitting behind Gren as Laria slid over to sit on the driver’s side. Mari winked at her before shutting the door.

DESTINED

Hal turned the key in the ignition, shifted into reverse, and backed into the road. As they pulled onto the street, Mari decided to make her introductions. “Hal, Gren, this is Laria Sumner,” she said brightly. “Laria, that ridiculously tall fellow driving is Howard Smith, but he will ignore any attempts to call him anything but Hal.”

“Damn straight,” Hal agreed, waving into the rearview mirror without taking his eyes off the road before him.

“And that pretty boy riding shotgun is Gren Vandern. He’s the front man for the band I told you about,” Mari continued.

“I am *so* not a pretty boy!” Gren retorted hotly.

Laria smiled warmly and said, “It’s nice to meet you both.”

Hal froze at the sound of her voice, a soft whisper of recognition flickering across his ears as something primordial and forgotten stirred in his blood. With his eyes staring vacantly forward, lost in another world, the truck began to drift to the side of the road. Gren leaned over and grabbed the wheel, steering back into the lane. He smacked Hal upside the head and exclaimed, “Dude! What the hell!?”

Mari put a hand on Hal’s shoulder, her tan fingers in stark contrast with the golden-sand colored fabric of his shirt, and asked, “Are you alright, man?”

Hal, blinking into the mirror at Mari and avoiding eye contact with the girl sitting next to her, the girl whose voice alone had just sent him into a trance, mumbled, “Sorry, guys. I dunno what just came over me.” He shook his head before continuing, “Wow, that was weird. I’m ok now though, I promise.”

Gren relinquished his grip on the wheel and let Hal take over again. “It was like all of a sudden you just...weren’t here, or something.”

“I’m back now,” Hal stated. “Won’t happen again.”

“Hal,” Mari said, a touch of sarcasm now coloring her voice, “you better not kill us. I spent a lot of time talking

up this hiking trip to Laria, so if we don't even make it to the trail because you wreck the truck, I may have to put on my mean face."

Hal, rolling his eyes in the mirror, said, "Yes, ma'am! Can't have the mean face."

Mari sighed. Turning to Laria, she said, "I swear they're not normally like this. They're actually really great guys."

Laria giggled softly. "Well, if they're friends with you, I'm sure they can't be *all* bad."

Gren turned over his shoulder to ask, "So, Mari, where are we going this time?"

"Just keep heading towards the parkway. I can't remember exactly how far it was, but I'll know it when I see it."

"Well, that doesn't sound at all like a bad idea," Hal grumbled.

"It exists!" Mari cried defensively. "I drove past it the other day and thought it looked like a promising place to go for a hike."

Gren nodded. "You always did have an eye for spotting a good trail."

"Even if you tended to wander off it and get us all lost for hours trying to find you," Hal finished for him.

Mari drummed her fingertips on the armrest. "Hey! It's been at least like, two years since the last time I got us lost."

Laria cleared her throat and added, "In the words of a wise wizard, 'Not all who wander are lost.' Or something like that."

Cackling, Mari announced, "Well, you'll fit right in with these geeks!"

"Excuse me," Gren interjected, "but I am neither a pretty boy, nor am I a geek."

"Oh, please," Mari said. "You're probably the worst culprit among us. Why don't you list off your hobbies for our new friend so she can see what I mean? Or perhaps the list of languages you studied. By studied, I mean aced."

“I also happen to be the front man of an indie punk band, thank you very much,” Gren countered. “I get major cool points for that.”

Hal snorted. “Doesn’t cancel out the fact that you read books about dead mythologies in your free time.”

“Hey, Hal,” Gren replied, smirking, “why don’t you tell Laria about how much you love to go LARPing?”

“I do *not* LARP!” Hal bellowed, tearing his eyes away from the road to shoot a scathing glare at Gren.

“You totally went to that thing last year!” Gren fired back.

“It was a renaissance faire!” Hal explained, furious. “Plus my parents freaking forced me to go, it was one freaking time, and I was in the sixth freaking grade—*not* last year. All of which you know damn well! Mari, please back me up.”

Mari, however, had something else entirely on her mind. “Stop! Stop the truck!” she shouted over their argument. “We’re here!”

Hal blinked and started breaking. “Here? Seriously? We’re in the middle of nowhere.”

Gren, forgetting his previous teasing of Hal, was inclined to agree with him. “I don’t see any trail, Mari,” he said.

“It’s here, I swear! Just pull over.”

Hal and Gren exchanged a familiar look. “If you say so,” Hal said.

Hal slowed the truck to a stop and parked along the side of the road. The trees, stretching up the mountainside and into the cloudless sky, cast a shadow across the parkway. The afternoon was warm with just the barest hint of a breeze to ruffle the leaf-laden branches. Laria sighed blissfully as she sucked in the fresh mountain air. Popping open the bed of his truck, Hal waited for everyone to get out of the cab and grab their packs. Mari was the last one, reaching for her guitar case and remembering just how annoyingly heavy it was going to be. She tapped Gren on

the shoulder and asked, "Hey, you brought lots of extra water and snacks, right?"

Gren nodded. "Yeah, like you asked. Why?"

"Well, I think my case may get a little heavy with all the uphill bits and I couldn't fit any water inside it."

Gren raised his eyebrows in puzzlement. "Mari, it's a guitar. It weighs like, nothing. For goodness sake, it's mostly air."

"You would think so," Mari admitted, "but...it's not actually a guitar."

"What?" Gren asked.

Mari thought if his eyebrows got any further up his forehead, they'd get eaten by the rest of his artfully disheveled hair. "You'll see," she assured him with a grin and a wink.

"Yeah, ok, crazy," Gren said, his eyebrows returning to their normally brooding position.

"Everyone ready?" Mari asked, looking around the group. They nodded their affirmations, albeit Hal and Gren were somewhat more apprehensive about it than she would have liked. Mari ignored their dubious faces and instead headed off directly into the woods. The others exchanged glances once more before shrugging and following after her.

After several minutes of hiking steadily uphill as the boys griped and grumbled about the lack of trail, Mari finally stopped walking and told the others to look around them. They were, in fact, standing on a narrow path, which wound slowly further up the mountainside. "See?" Mari asked. "I told you there was a trail!" She started walking leisurely along the route, which was just barely wide enough for them to walk in pairs. Gren joined her up front as Hal and Laria followed behind them.

After a few more moments had past, Gren looked over at her and asked, "Why didn't we just start out at the trail entrance?"

"Because the trailhead is like, six miles back that way,"

DESTINED

Mari replied, pointing east. “We just took a shortcut, that’s all.”

Hal scratched his perfectly hairless chin. “How did you even know it was here then?”

“Like I said earlier, I saw it,” she answered vaguely.

“But...how?” Gren pressed, hopping over an exposed root.

Mari shrugged. “It’s a long story. Let’s just get to the top of the mountain and see what there is to be seen. I have a real good feeling about this one.”

Laria, having been distracted thoroughly by the forested surroundings and thus mostly ignoring their conversation, suddenly burst out, “Hey! You guys, come look at this!”

“What did you find?” Hal asked, curious.

“The coolest freaking mushroom ever,” Laria answered. “First off, it’s freaking huge. Second, it looks like one of those mushrooms in a fairy tale painting or something!” She was standing off the trail a few steps, peering down at what was indeed a giant, spotted mushroom in shades of pink and white. The capped monstrosity rose out of the ground to the height of her knees and was surrounded by smaller replicas of itself in that haphazard arrangement only nature’s chaos can produce.

Hal, wandering over to join her, said, “Wow, you’re right. Hey, Gren! Come check this thing out! It’s huge!”

“Bigger than your head?” Gren asked, finally looking behind him to see what all the fuss was about. He joined them off the side of the trail and stared down at the mushroom.

“Bigger than yours, actually,” Hal retorted.

“No shit,” Gren agreed. “I bet that thing’s poisonous as hell.”

“We’ll see more of those pretty soon,” Mari said.

Gren tore his eyes away from the unusual fungus and studied his friend’s blank face. “Cryptic, much?” he

inquired.

“It’s just a hunch,” Mari said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

“Speaking of hunching,” Hal added, “you’re really doubled over under that guitar of yours. Want to switch packs?”

“Nah, it’s cool,” Mari said. “I got it.”

Hal shook his head and unslung his bag. “No, I insist. Mine’s pretty light.”

Mari, hesitating, began to protest, but before she could get the words out of her mouth, Hal came up and removed the guitar case from her shoulders. As he did so, he exclaimed, “Holy shit, Rojko! What the hell do you have in here? Rocks!?”

“Well, it’s not a guitar, that’s for sure,” Mari said with a forced laugh. “You’ll see later. It’s a surprise,” she added quickly.

Hal shrugged, slipping the overweight case onto his broad shoulders. “If you say so. Dang, no wonder you were struggling. This thing is heavy even for me!”

“And you’re what, twice her size?” Gren added.

“Yeah, yeah. Less talking, more walking,” Mari ordered. But to Hal, she added, “And thanks, Hal. I really appreciate it.” He smiled a response, and with that, the group continued their trek up the trail with Mari and Gren once more leading the way.

They walked on for at least an hour, Laria and Hal talking softly to each other while Mari and Gren exchanged the occasional comment or knowing smirk. After seeing Hal help Laria scale a fallen tree that she could have quite easily stepped over without any such assistance, Gren turned to Mari and whispered, “Can you believe this guy? He’s clearly enamored.”

Mari nodded and quietly added, “Yeah, he’s been oddly chivalrous today.”

“I mean, the dude’s never had a girlfriend. I’ve never even seen him *flirt*,” Gren continued, rubbing his hand

through his bangs. “All the chicks at school—well, not you, obviously, but anyway—they all practically throw themselves at him, and it’s like he doesn’t even know they’re there. Now he’s being all googly-eyed over Laria.”

“Perhaps it’s love at first sight?” Mari whispered back.

“Ridiculous,” Gren snorted, a little too loudly to avoid attention. He caught Hal’s eye and shrugged. “That’s just a myth propagated by some industry or another.”

Mari grinned, taking the bait. “I thought that was supposed to be Valentine’s Day?”

Gren shrugged. “Same thing.”

Giggling, Mari conceded, “Sure, why not. On an unrelated note, this is quite the lovely trail, if I do say so myself.”

“That it is,” Gren replied. “Though in all seriousness, where are you taking us? This is a bit spontaneous, even for you.”

“It’s a surprise,” was all Mari said.

Gren paused before commenting, “Just like the not-guitar in your guitar case is a surprise. And how you found this trail is a surprise.”

“Precisely,” Mari said, keeping her eyes unnecessarily focused on her footing. “I am full of surprises today.”

“You’re crazy,” Gren observed.

Mari turned to look at him with a playful grin. “And y’all hang out with me willingly, so what does that say about you?”

Gren shrugged and the two kept walking along the trail, spiraling ever up the mountain.

Meanwhile Hal, more or less oblivious to his two friends’ conversation up ahead of him, was asking Laria, “So, how did you like living in North Carolina?”

“It was nice enough,” Laria replied, brushing the end of her long blonde ponytail, which had fallen in her face, back behind her shoulders. “We were only there for a few years, though.”

“Where’d you live before that?”

“Oh, everywhere,” she answered reluctantly. “We move around a lot.”

Hal tapped his nose lightly with one long finger while he pondered her response. Eventually, he guessed, “Military family?”

Laria giggled softly. “Um, no. Not quite. More like my dad is just a very—free—spirit, and can’t keep a job.” She looked down at her toes, slowly shuffling one foot in front of the other along the wooded trail.

Hal wasn’t quite sure how to respond to her statement, and so he kept his silence for a few more steps before commenting, “Well, at least you’ve gotten to see lots of places. I’ve never been out of the state.”

“Really?” Laria asked. “I guess you’re not missing much, though. Everywhere I’ve been is pretty much the same as everywhere else.”

“I suppose,” Hal agreed. He swatted a gnat out of his face. “So what kinda things do you do for fun, besides going on spontaneous hiking trips with total strangers?”

“You’re awfully inquisitive,” Laria returned.

Hal grinned sheepishly. “Sorry, I just can’t help it. You’re fascinating.”

Laria laughed gently, readjusting the shoulder strap of her purple tote bag. “I doubt that. Why don’t you tell me more about yourself? I feel like I’ve done all the talking.”

Hal thought for yet another moment before explaining, “Well, I’m adopted. That’s probably the most interesting thing there is about me. My parents found me on their doorstep one day when I was a baby. They took me to the police, but no one ever claimed me, so they just decided to keep me. Went through all the paperwork, and that was that.”

“Huh,” Laria remarked, “I didn’t know it ever actually happened like that in real life.”

“I don’t think it’s the normal method of adoption, no,” Hal concurred.

After what felt like several hours of hiking along the

DESTINED

gradually sloping trail, Mari finally indicated they should stop for a short break. Hal, more than happy to put down the heavy guitar case, sat cross-legged in the litter of leaves with his back against the trunk of a large oak. Gren plopped himself down with a sigh and unzipped his backpack, passing around a few bottles of water. Laria graciously accepted and took a long drink. "This really is a beautiful place to hike, Mari," she said as she screwed the cap back on the bottle.

"I'm glad you like it," Mari replied.

"How much further to the top, do you think?" Gren asked, draining the water bottle he kept for himself in one swig.

Mari shrugged. "Not far. A few more turns in the trail, I believe."

"If we are that close," Hal pondered aloud, "then why didn't we just stop at the top?"

"I figured if we break now, we can enjoy the view better without being too tired," Mari explained, perhaps a little too quickly, because she found Gren looking at her with his eyes narrowed and his normally generous mouth pulled tight. Luckily, he decided to keep his thoughts to himself.

Hal and Laria did not seem to notice anything out of the ordinary about her explanation, however, and so after a few more minutes of resting and regrouping, Mari stood and continued along the trail towards the top of the mountain. The others followed without comment.

Mari's assessment of the time left along the path proved correct. After a few more winding turns, the narrow trail opened up into a small, circular clearing. Towering over the trees, they could see a stone formation that provided an outlook any semi-enthusiastic hiker would be excited to attain. As they stepped into the clearing, the slight breeze they had felt back on the road transformed into a sudden rush of air, heavy with the summer scents of berry and leaf. The clearing was ringed

by ash trees, and in the very center was a tall, swaying willow, which was in turn ringed by the same oversized, spotted mushrooms.

“What a lovely clearing!” Laria cried, stepping out into the late afternoon sun and spinning in a slow circle. She closed her eyes and threw her arms out in a blissful dance, swaying in the wind like the willow tree at the clearing’s heart.

Gren, leaving the shade of the trees and shuddering despite the heat, asked, “Whoa, anyone else feel that? It’s like tingles all up and down my spine, and I swear I hear music.”

Hal lingered in the shadow, unwilling to step into the fading light where Laria still laughed and twirled in a slow, spiraling dance, and where Gren stood shaking. “Mari—” Hal started, looking at his friend with a somewhat disturbed expression contorting the angles of his face.

“Relax,” she ordered, cutting him off. “What you feel is magic: deep, old magic. I brought us here for a reason.”

Laria stopped her dance and turned wide, crystal blue eyes at her new friends. Gren shivered again and stepped back into the shadows with Hal. “Mari, what the hell is going on?” he asked. “Seriously, what the hell?”

Mari ignored them and stepped into the clearing, moving slowly toward the willow tree. Laria, blinking dazedly, followed her. When she was about halfway between the edge of the ash trees and the ring of mushrooms, she stopped. She turned back to look at Hal and Gren and in a voice that was hardly her own, she commanded, “Hal, hold tight to that guitar case. We’re going to need what’s in it on the other side. Gren, very soon you will have a song pop into your head. When it does, I want you to sing it. Don’t think about it, just sing.”

She turned back to face the willow tree and pointed. Laria, standing at her side, gasped and clutched her hands over her mouth. “Oh my god,” she whispered. Gren and Hal, as transfixed by the sight as Laria, started walking

slowly forward to join the girls.

“Right on time,” Mari stated softly as the wind picked up in an even stronger torrent, scattering pine needles and willow twigs and ash leaves all around them in a swirl of green and brown. And as the wind rose, all lingering doubt was cast aside, for striding boldly towards the willow tree from the opposite side of the clearing, a vision of pearl and snow in the summer heat, mane and tail billowing in the rushing wind, was a unicorn. The being bowed low to the youths, staring and muted, and then disappeared as he stepped gingerly, one silver hoof at a time, through the ring of mushrooms.

The wind died; the magic remained.

Into the ensuing silence Hal observed, “Is it just me, or is the sun starting to set about three hours too early? Because I swear we were not hiking for that long.”

Gren combed his fingers through his dark hair, whispering, “Only you would even think about something like that with a, with a—”

“Unicorn,” Laria finished for him. “It was a unicorn! He was so pretty, but now he’s gone. Mari, where did he go?”

The wind began to pick back up as Mari resumed her march towards the center of the clearing. Without so much as a second thought, the others followed her, joining her in a circle outside of the mushrooms. Mari shouted to them over the ever-rising wind, saying, “Everyone, listen to me! Something very strange is about to happen, and I need you all to trust me that it’s for the best of reasons. We have a once in a lifetime opportunity ahead of us. We’re going to follow that unicorn. Join hands with me in the center, inside the mushrooms, around the willow tree.” As she finished her speech, she took another step forward and let out a sigh of relief as she saw her friends silently obeying. “Gren,” she said, “start singing.”

He turned her a panicked look. “I don’t think I can!”

“Don’t think,” she ordered. “Just sing!”

M.A.I. MURRAY

The wind continued to scatter forest litter all around them, whipping their hair in their faces. Gren cleared his throat and closed his eyes, letting the lyrics that stirred inside his brain pour out of his lips in a deep, resonating hymn.

*Through the mists of time and space,
where rivers speak and birches sway,
into the flaming forest land,
bring us all, hand in hand.*

A blue mist began to creep around them as Gren spun his song, weaving around their ankles and softening the edges of their sight. Only the sound of Gren's voice, a honeyed baritone, rang clear above the howling wind.

*Bring us all, our journey begun;
bring us whole, each and everyone
into that mystic land of old,
where all dreams and stories unfold.*

Gren sucked in a deep breath to finish the song with one final verse, letting the music rise up from his feet and out through his lungs. He felt the power of the song bubbling within him, boiling his blood and emptying his thoughts. His head was hollow; he was merely a vessel for the music, an instrument. The four clasped hands, circling themselves around the small willow's trunk. Even Hal could feel the energy, pulsating with the beat of life.

*Through the mists of space and time,
the shifting fabric, dark and light,
into the flaming forest land,
bring us all, hand in hand.*

Just as the last word escaped from Gren's lips, the sun slipped below the ridged horizon. Screaming wind

DESTINED

monopolized their senses, tugging violently at their hair, their clothes. A cascade of emerald vines and ruby petals swirled around the four, pressing on them ever heavier as they were pulled into the ground and became one with life and legend indiscriminately. And then, just when they felt that they were about to be crushed into the soil on which they had formerly stood, their feet left the Earth and they were hurled into an unknown sky.

~

Temporarily torn away from her successor's present, Tarel watched as a distant past shifted across the fabric of the Loom, a past as ancient as the Loom itself. Thousands of years had turned since the events replaying before her had originally transpired, and although she knew this particular history well, she was powerless to control the repeated images. Instead she watched, helpless, as a trio of siblings cut a shadowed path through a forest near the Baltic Sea, back when humanity was relatively young.

Green sunlight filtered through the dark forest canopy. The three travelers knew they neared a shore, for they could smell the brine on the wind, but the forest had them turned about and walking in circles. They wore thick, brown robes of a coarsely woven fabric, with hoods draped over their heads. Two of them wore curved knives at their hips, and the third clutched a gnarled staff in her bony, pale hand. By the time they eventually reached what they hoped would be a town, they were disappointed to discover merely another uncivilized gathering of pathetic huts, no more advanced than the last group they had stumbled across in the dark wood.

When they left it was another smoking ruin.

"These simple creatures begin to bore me," one of the travelers said. He was tall and muscular, but his sickly-pale skin and flat, black eyes hinted at the rot within. "We should return to our own realm. At least there we speak

the language.”

The second traveler sniffed derisively. “There is nothing in this dull place for us to learn,” he agreed. He was slightly shorter than the first, but of equal build and with the same sickly pallor.

“Brothers,” whispered the third traveler, “the light here—this air—is so much purer!” She threw wide her pallid arms and twirled round in a circle, laughing coldly in the dim, green light. Stopping her dance as suddenly as she started, she announced, “I would rather stay.”

“The light you adore hurts my eyes,” the second traveler remarked.

The sorceress laughed again, then brought a finger to her lips in a gesture of silence. Dropping her gnarled staff, she hunched to the ground, motioning her brothers to join her. They hastily obeyed. “I feel something...different,” she whispered, her black eyes narrowing. “Something out of place. There is one here who is an outsider, one from another plane.”

“Did one of our own follow us?” the first traveler asked.

“No, it’s not like us,” the sorceress hissed. “Something older.” She sniffed the air, clutching her staff again to her heart. She stood, one languid, furtive movement. “The outsider is not far; let us find it. Perhaps there will be the answers we seek.”

“Yes, let’s,” agreed her brothers.

The sorceress bolted through the forest, following the otherworldly trail of power as a wolf follows blood. Her brothers raced after her, their curved blades hacking at the low-lying branches that tangled their path. The scent of salt and brine grew stronger as they pursued the outsider, and when suddenly they reached the edge of the forest, they skidded to a stop. A stony cliff stood before them, the raging sea stretching beyond to the horizon. On the edge of the precipice lingered a woman unlike any they had yet seen, neither among the peoples of their home world nor

DESTINED

among the primitive forest tribes in the land they presently wandered. The woman was tall and robust, a quiet strength emanating from the core of her being. She was neither particularly dark nor particularly pale, but somewhere in the shades of brown between. Her thick, black hair was braided into a single plait down her back, and she wore a simple yet elegant dress in a shade that blended with the sapphire sky against which she stood.

The sorceress in the shadows whispered excitedly, “Brothers, can you feel her power? She is filled with magic, overflowing with it! I have never felt power such as this before.”

“Then we should take her power for our own to rule all of Daem,” the first traveler said.

His sister grinned, replying, “Yes, but not yet. If we follow her further, perhaps she will lead us to others of her kind, and then we can have all of their magic as well. Enough magic to change our hideous world into something grander, something of *our* choosing.”

The powerful woman turned, emerald eyes piercing the shadows of the forest where the travelers hid and watched. “You do not belong here,” she called. “You should go back whence you came.”

“You do not belong here either,” the sorceress whispered into the twilight.

The woman turned back to face the waves, outstretched her hand, and drew a circle in the sky. Abruptly there was a shimmer of purple light where she had traced the air, and she threw herself from the precipice and into the portal. The purple flashed once more and was gone.

“After you, sweet sister,” the second traveler said.

The sorceress stepped out from the forest. She approached the edge cautiously, peering over the precipice to the crashing waves below. The sea swallowed the dim starlight from the moonless sky, black as the cold eyes of the three travelers. The sorceress stretched her staff over

the water, drawing her own circle in the air. The portal that opened shimmered a darker purple than the original, but it opened all the same. "Dimeldor, Derrien. You enter first; I will hold it open and then follow."

"Are you sure your portal will follow hers?"

"Go!" she hissed.

They did.

When both of her brothers had disappeared through the shimmering indigo, the sorceress spared one last glance behind her to the twilight forest, the moonless sky, then threw herself into the portal. She could not quite fathom the origin of the feeling, but still she knew in her bones and her gut that the next world would be even better. She felt the magic prickle across her skin as a slight wave of nausea gripped her belly, and then in a flash, all sensation was gone.

She drifted in oblivion for a time, until slowly sensation returned to her, oozing down her limbs as she opened her eyes. The light was harsh and had a silvery glow to it, but her eyes adjusted quickly. Her brothers crouched nearby, rubbing their foreheads. The force of their travels had pushed their hoods back, revealing the straw-yellow tangles of their hair and the sharp, angular bones of their sallow faces.

"Why is she not here?" the sorceress murmured. She scanned her surroundings carefully. They were in another forest, but the smallest trees of this forest were twice as round as the largest in the last, and the lowest lying branches towered far over their heads. She could place no name to any of the foliage she looked upon, but she could sense the potential for power all the same. "I did exactly as she did," she continued. "We should have ended up in the same place only moments behind her."

"Perhaps you have made an error," Dimeldor supposed, standing slowly and fingering the hilt of his curved knife.

The sorceress turned a scathing glance his way. "I did

DESTINED

not err," she hissed.

"Then perhaps this place is more unpredictable than we thought," Derrien offered.

"No matter," the sorceress dismissed. "I sense a gathering nearby, a large group of sentient creatures, some of whom have magic although most are simple. Those few, though—they are strong, but none quite as strong as the one we followed from the land we left."

Dimeldor bent to extend a hand to his sister. "Then let us seek these ones out. Perhaps our journey will not have been in vain after all."

~

Through the hazy darkness, a light began to glow softly. The light brightened, illuminating a small room. The walls were built of a smooth, white stone, and there was a round window leaking sunlight onto the polished wooden floor. In the center of the room, bathed in the golden light, was a young woman with slender limbs and angular features. She wore a simple linen dress in pale blue, and her hair fell in thick, chocolate-brown waves, half-concealing ears that ended in subtle points. Her skin was golden brown, and her eyes were dark amber. She sat serenely on a silver chair. In front of her stood an ancient, yellowed loom. It looked both fragile and indestructible, as if it had weathered untold strain and its delicate design had become even stronger than it was before. The woman was weaving, a pattern of blurred blues and greens. She hummed quietly under her breath. Suddenly, as if she felt she was being watched, she stopped humming and looked to the window. "I am the Fourth," she said softly, but with authority. "Bring the Fifth to me. Bring me the one called Laria." The light disappeared. "Antiln cannot be allowed to escape," the darkness whispered.

The dream ended.

Mari opened her eyes. She was lying on her back,

sprawled uncomfortably across a mossy rock. A sore spot above her left elbow promised a nasty bruise. She wondered initially where she was, but slowly, gradually, a memory spun itself into her cerebral cortex and an awareness of the recent past returned. She tried to sit up, and in doing so, realized there was a body collapsed across her abdomen that pinned her where she was. She took note of the hair, slick and straight and deep, dark brown. Gren. She wrenched an arm free and rolled him off of her. She could breathe again.

A stifled squeal alerted Mari to the presence of another girl. Woops. She had pushed Gren off of herself, perhaps, but onto Laria, which meant that Hal had to be nearby, too. Mari willed her muscles to movement. She found that she had more strength than she had first assumed, or perhaps it was just that her strength had seeped back into her body from wherever it had fled; either way, she managed a sitting position easily enough and then focused her attention on waking the others.

“Laria? Gren? Hal?” Small noises from each at the sounds of their names revealed that they were, at least, conscious. Mari exhaled her relief in a sigh. “I don’t suppose any of you would care to doubt me now?”

Hal was the next one to recover, joining Mari in reclining against the stones. Laria soon followed, struggling with the body of the still-groggy Gren. After a moment or two, they were all sentient enough to attempt standing. Laria swooned a little at first, dazed by the sudden blood pressure change, but collective support allowed her to stay upright.

“Mari,” Gren started, searching for what he meant to say. “I did it. But where are we, exactly?”

Hal folded his powerful arms across his chest and waited for her answer. Laria lifted her left leg absentmindedly in a stretch and held it by the ankle.

Mari allowed a small smile to play across her face as she answered. “We are in another world, one parallel to Earth.

DESTINED

It's our destiny to be here, and to go on, well, an adventure. A sort of mission. Look around you—the magic here is palpable, almost a gravity, and it leaked into our world and pulled us through—this is our new home.” She closed her eyes and breathed deep, letting the otherworldly fragrances fill her nose.

The others began to examine the world into which they had been thrown. They were in a forest, not unlike the one they left, but denser, noticeably older, and peppered with the same gigantic pink mushrooms that had marked the circle through which they had stepped. They also noticed that, although there were many species of trees present, the overwhelming majority seemed to possess the peeling bark that makes birch trees so easily identifiable. It was at the early end of evening, as if they had taken the time with them from one realm into the other. The sky was invisible through the leafy ceiling, but some element in their blood sang of the stirrings of moonrise. Mari turned a sparkling green gaze toward the others, who were as yet too awed by their surroundings to feel any sadness at leaving the lives they understood far behind them.

Further knowledge of their whereabouts wound through her thoughts as she started to walk deeper into the woods, the others following after her. “The longer we're here, the more I remember,” she disclosed to the dazzling expanse of fern, tree, and vine in shades of dusky sage. “Whenever I was here before, I was always asleep. It's nice to be awake this time.”

Gren, walking at her side and clumsily knocking branches out of his line of travel, flashed her an inquisitive look. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“It's complicated,” she said with a shrug. “Come on, we've got a little ways to go before the light fades completely, and we need to get to the traveler's haven. Once we're settled in, I will explain what I can. For now all I will tell you is that I have these dreams, visions I guess, that show me things, like how to get here and where to go

next.” *Bring me the Fifth*. She replayed the recent dream of the young woman and the loom in her mind, but said nothing to her friends. *Antiln cannot be allowed to escape*. She wondered what she meant. Who, or what, was Antiln? She continued her trek through the darkening forest, her friends close at her heels as the gentle wind whispered a lullaby over their heads.

The sounds of gently flowing water touched their ears long before they actually saw the stream. Hal, spotting a promising shelter in a grove near the creek bank, motioned to Laria and alerted Mari and Gren, who had been walking in front of him. “We should sleep there,” he said, pointing, “for the night. It’s warm enough out that we won’t need to worry about a fire, there’s easy access to the river, and those trees should offer at least some protection in case there’s anything dangerous up and about around here.”

Mari recognized the place as their first destination. “Good eyes. I think that might be the right spot, but we need to check once we get there.”

They picked their way carefully through the dense thicket until they were safely in the grove. Ancient oaks formed the secluded area, their leafy crowns casting a shadow over the center. A bed of soft ferns and leaves covered the floor of the grove, and various ivies, which they hoped were not of the poisonous persuasion, climbed the oaken trunks. The four teenagers felt the magic and security of the grove swell up in their veins; Hal gasped, Gren blinked dark lashes against the intensity, and Laria stared with softly parted lips. Mari ignored their reactions, instead kneeling beside a small and twisting tree not far from the entrance of the grove. She ran a palm slowly over the gnarled trunk until she detected a symbol etched into the bark. The marking was invisible in the dim twilight. Shattering the spellbound silence, Mari asked, “Gren, are you still pretending you don’t smoke?”

“What? That’s ridiculous, I totally don’t—”

Gren’s argument ceased when Mari reached uninvited

DESTINED

into his back pocket and retrieved a cheap, plastic lighter. Hal punched Gren lightly in the shoulder, saying, “You know that’s bad for you, right?”

Gren flinched. “Shut up.”

“It’ll ruin your singing voice,” Mari added. She flicked the lighter open, holding the tiny flame up to where she could feel the symbol carved into the bark. “There!” she exclaimed, pointing it out to the boys. They leaned closer to study the curving lines, which formed the vague outline of a spiraling letter, not unlike an ornate alpha. “This is certainly the place. We’ll be safe here for the night.” She flicked the lighter closed and slipped it back into Gren’s pocket.

They all sat down in a rustle of leaves in the center of the sheltered grove. Mari pulled Hal’s pack from off her shoulders and handed it back to him. He nodded his thanks and removed a water bottle and some crackers from a side pocket. Laria gathered her tote bag onto her lap and pulled out a granola bar, a sandwich, and a reusable water bottle covered in an abstract, swirling print of blue and purple flowers. Gren unzipped the top of his black backpack and dug inside for his own snacks, withdrawing two sandwiches and a couple of apples. He tossed an apple to each of his friends and handed one of the sandwiches to Mari. As she took it, Gren asked, “So, this guitar case of yours that doesn’t have a guitar inside it. We get to open that yet?”

Mari nodded. “We may as well, once we’ve eaten.” She took a bite of her sandwich, chewed, and swallowed before adding, “I’m ninety-nine percent sure we’ll be safe here for the night, but we may need what’s inside sooner rather than later. One never can be certain.”

They ate their dinner quickly, choking down dry mouthfuls of granola in between bites of the tart apples and warm sandwiches, all washed down with flat water. After their dinner was over, Mari left to refill their water bottles from the nearby stream. When she returned she

asked them how much food they all had left. Gren dug deeper into his bag and pulled out a box of crackers, half a loaf of bread wrapped in aluminum foil, and a block of hard, orange cheese. Hal rummaged through the contents of his own backpack and revealed a few fruit cups and a handful of energy bars. Laria, emptying her tote bag onto the mossy ground, had only a pocket reference of poisonous plants, a sketchbook, a daily planner, and a few pens.

“Sorry,” she said. “Looks like I won’t be really feeding us.”

Mari furrowed her brow at first, but before long she was smiling. “That’s ok, we just need to get through tomorrow, and then we should be fine, food wise, at least.”

“So, time to check inside that guitar case, huh?” Gren asked, stuffing his share of the food back into his bag. “Also, I am now regretting the decision to not bring a sleeping bag.”

“I have a few blankets squirreled away, among other things,” Mari said. “Hal, if you wouldn’t mind opening my case? Thanks.”

Hal carefully unzipped the nylon case, the contents clinking slightly as he repositioned himself to get a better grip. Hal flipped back the cover to display a soft pile of fleece blankets, which he withdrew one at a time and tossed to each of his friends, starting with Laria. As the last cloth was removed, revealing the myriad weapons hidden underneath, he couldn’t help but exclaim, “The hell kind of hiking trip did you drag us on?”

“We’re in another world, in case you forgot. That’s kind of a big deal. Plus we have that whole mission thing I briefly mentioned. Trust me, these swords are the least of the weirdness we’re likely to encounter, and we will definitely need them,” Mari stated, her voice tight.

“Yeah, about that,” Hal interjected. “Would you perhaps mind elaborating on what, exactly, we are

supposed to do here?”

Laria began to nervously twirl a lock of hair around her finger. “Yes, please. I mean, I’m having a grand old time on this hiking adventure—it’s not every day you get to follow a unicorn into a mushroom circle and end up somewhere else entirely—but my parents are probably pretty worried about me. I told them I’d be back by dinner.”

“Ok, so let’s all take a deep breath, and I’ll explain what I can,” Mari said. “I don’t know everything, not yet, but I knew enough to get us this far, and more comes back to me with every moment I’m here. I’ve had these dreams my whole life, only I never knew what they meant and I could barely remember them once I woke up, that is, until I met you, Laria. Then all of a sudden, it was like something just clicked on in my brain and all my dreams came rushing back into me at once. Now I remember everything.”

Laria frowned, a slight crease forming between her delicate brows. “Is that why you passed out on my porch?”

Nodding, Mari replied, “I think so. Even then, nothing really became clear until last night while I slept. That’s when I saw the path to the clearing: in my dream. It’s still a little jumbled, but things are slowly getting easier for me to sort out.”

Motioning towards the guitar case full of sharp shiny things, Hal asked, “So where did you get all of those, then? Raid a medieval armory in your sleep, too?”

Mari suppressed a snorting laugh. “Hardly! I got them from my father. The camp we came from back in Slovakia—oh, yeah, Laria, by the way, I’m not technically an American, well, not originally, but more on that later—anyway, so our family passed them down from generation to generation along with a legend and a pocket full of jewels. The elders knew about me, about us, long before any of us were even born. They got some of the story wrong over the years, like they thought it was only supposed to be just me and not the four of us, but anyway,

apparently when I was born they saw the moon-shaped birthmark on my foot and so named me the Summoner. I'm not the Summoner though—Laria, *you* are. Right, so, when my dad and I left the family and moved to America, apparently my grandmother made my dad promise to take all of the legend-related things with him. So all these years my dad kept these swords and such locked up in the basement and just never told me about them until my Baba Rojko sent me a letter yesterday. I asked him what on earth Babushka was rambling about, he brought up a bag full of weapons, I went to meet Laria and spilled stuffed cabbage all over her steps, and that was that. I'm sorry, I feel very much like I'm making precisely zero sense. There's just so much going on in my head right now that it's still difficult to make everything coherent."

"Maybe we can help with that," Laria suggested. "We ask you basic questions, and you give us as basic of answers as you can manage, and maybe then we'll all understand."

Mari nodded.

"So," Laria continued, "I'm the Summoner. What does that even mean?"

"It's like, a title. You are the reason we are here. You triggered the dream-memories in me, and your arrival coincided with my grandmother's letter. We each have a sort of title attached to us that's related to our role or whatever in this mission-thing we're on."

Hal and Gren leaned forward and blurted out, "So what am I?" Upon doing so, Gren promptly continued with a rushed "Jinx!" which Hal just as promptly chose to ignore.

"Hal, you are the Guardian, and Gren, you are the Wanderer. Your voice and your song brought us here. If Laria is the reason, you are the method. Which makes me, well, the Dreamer," Mari explained, taking another swig of water. "I dream the way, and then guide all of us to the journey's end."

DESTINED

“So the mission is a journey, then?” Hal asked, frowning. “And if I’m the Guardian, what the hell do I guard?”

“The Summoner,” Mari said, looking at her hands. She lifted her head and returned Hal’s surprised stare. “The Guardian guards the Summoner. As for the mission, we have to head north—no, wait, yeah, north—along the river, and then we’ll be looking for more unicorns. But first there’s something we have to do with another big tree in the middle of a meadow. I’ll know it when I see it. That’s all I have for now. The rest is a blur, I just know that it’s really important we find the unicorns.”

Gren asked the next question. “How long are we stuck here?”

“I don’t know, exactly. There’s some sort of time constraint or what-have-you on the whole journey. Gimme a minute and maybe I can figure it out.” She closed her eyes and calmed her breathing, focusing on taking one deep breath at a time as she rubbed slow circles on her temples. Finally the answer came to her, and when she spoke she kept her eyes closed: “One week. We have roughly one week to find the unicorns, or else...oh gods.”

“What? What is it?” Hal and Gren asked simultaneously.

“Or else what? Do we die?” Laria asked, fidgeting.

“Worse,” Mari whispered, finally opening her eyes. She kept her gaze straight ahead, unwilling to make eye contact with any of her friends.

“What is worse than dying?” Gren asked quietly.

Mari took another deep breath before continuing. “How about complete chaos? An evil so ancient and so powerful and so totally insane, unleashed, that the total annihilation of every sentient being on both worlds—here and Earth—would become just a matter of time?”

She finally understood the Fourth Spinner’s warning.

“How do we even fight something like that?” Hal asked.

“If we finish our journey in time, we won’t have to,” Mari answered.

Gren forced a grin, saying, “So this journey of ours. Kind of a big deal.”

“It would seem so, yes,” Mari replied with a nod. “Hal, we are definitely going to need those swords. And I can see who gets what now.”

“Ok,” Hal answered. He reached for the larger of the two swords first, which took up the most space, extending from the base of the case all the way to the very tip of the neck.

“Hal,” she said, “that long sword you’re holding with the black stones on its hilt is for you. So is the matching dagger. You’ll find all the daggers in the zipped pouch where I used to carry my cords and spare picks.” Hal unzipped the pocket she was talking about and removed five daggers. The long sword and corresponding dagger were both sheathed in thick leather, dyed midnight black, with brass studs and an inlay of black stones in the pattern of a miniature sword. The hilt of the sword and dagger matched the pattern on each sheath, the metal of the blade transitioning seamlessly into the leather-wrapped metal of the handle. The long sword had two simple hand guards extending from the main hilt, each with a black stone set in the tip. The main hilt had a large cabochon of the same stone at the bottom of the pommel. He set the sword to the side and unsheathed the dagger, the silvery blade glinting in the fading twilight.

“Ok, so I was a little hesitant about the whole weapons idea at first,” Hal admitted, “but these are freaking sweet.”

“You’re not kidding,” Gren agreed, nodding appreciatively.

“I mean, if I were to sit down one day and design a sword for myself, this is exactly what I’d pick. Like seriously. This shit rocks,” Hal rambled, continuing to admire the gilded hilts of his sword and dagger. “I really want to hack something up now. Really want to. Alright,

DESTINED

I'm done being a dork. Who's next?"

Mari smiled. "The pair of daggers with the pale blue stones are for our newest friend."

Hal retrieved the described daggers and handed them gently to Laria. She nodded her thanks and began tracing a delicate finger along the silvery designs spiraling across the two sheaths and the belt to which they were each fastened. The leather of the belt and sheaths was left its natural tan color, simply softened and then set with icy blue gemstones in the shape of teardrops, like someone had captured a droplet of rain mid-fall and froze it for all time. She kept the daggers sheathed, but clipped the belt around her waist. It fit perfectly and comfortably around her narrow hips. "These are beautiful," she finally whispered, unclipping the belt and continuing to appreciate the handiwork. "And they're mine?"

Nodding, Mari pointed to the next item in the guitar case. "Gren, you get the bow and arrows, along with the dagger that has the dark blue stones in it." Hal handed the set to his friend, grinning mischievously.

"A bow!? Seriously?" Gren exclaimed. "I haven't touched a bow since that mistake hunting with my dad!"

Hal, the reason for his mischievous grin finally coming to light, said, "Dude, you were scared of bunnies for the longest time after that!"

"Shut up!" Gren shouted.

Laria giggled. "Bunnies?"

Gren turned a fierce glance at her. "Don't judge me. You don't know what it was like. They came out of nowhere."

Hal burst into uncontrollable laughter, his head thrown back and one hand grabbing his side while his other hand flailed desperately in an attempt to maintain his balance. Mari, chuckling at the memory of Gren's rabbit-induced trauma in spite of her desire to convey the solemnity of the occasion, decided to let the laughter die down of its own accord before saying, "Regardless of what may or may not

have happened concerning a certain hunting trip and a certain bunny, I'm sure using a bow will come back to you. If I remember correctly, you were quite the skilled archer before that little incident. I'm sure you will be again."

Gren reluctantly took the bow and arrow set from Hal, and, despite his reluctance, could not help but respect the craftsmanship. The bow was not particularly large, so he figured it was designed for closer ranges, and the grip—wrapped in deep blue leather—felt comfortable in his hand. The quiver was pieced together from rich, walnut-brown leather trimmed in silver and decorated with dark blue stones. Nestled into the quiver were a dozen arrows, expertly fashioned from smooth dowels of hardwood and fletched with sapphire-blue feathers. He drew a single arrow from the bunch, admiring the sharp point of the metal arrowhead and pricking his finger on the tip. A drop of red beaded on his skin. He returned the arrow to the quiver and set both the bow and arrows aside. Sucking on his fingertip, he turned the dagger around in his other hand. The dagger was attached to a strip of leather that was too small for his waist, and so he assumed it was meant to be worn at his thigh. He clipped it together around his jeans, and was pleasantly surprised that it fit. He hoped it wouldn't chafe.

"I see that you're over your tantrum about the bow and arrows already," Mari observed.

Gren flashed her his best, most innocent smile. "What tantrum?"

"I thought as much," Mari laughed. "So that leaves one short sword and another dagger, I believe. Those are for me," she added with a grin.

"Yes," Hal said, handing her the last of the weapons. "Although there's some other stuff in here still, a little bag and what looks like a folder."

Mari carefully took the sword and dagger from Hal before responding, "We'll look at those in the morning, I guess. I don't think we'll be able to see much more

tonight.” She briefly examined what little she could make out of the intricately decorated sword and dagger in the ever-increasing darkness. Luckily, she had time to more fully examine them each when she was still in her father’s house, and so she knew that the hard bump she felt along the sheath was a crescent moon-shaped gemstone in shades of leafy green, and that the leather of the sheath and belt was dyed a reddish brown. She remembered the way the gilded hilt, wrapped in matching brown leather and with a green stone set in the pommel and at each end of the hand guard, fit perfectly in her grip. The dagger, much smaller and yet no less beautiful in its design, had its own belt that fit perfectly around her thigh. She set the weapons gently to her right.

“Fair point. It is getting rather dark,” Hal agreed. He zipped the guitar case closed and moved it behind him. “For the record, I still think this is some sort of shared hallucination. Gren, are you sure we didn’t eat any magic mushrooms? Or maybe breathe in some magic mushroom spores? Those things were awfully huge, after all.”

“If only,” Gren shrugged. “No, we seem to really be in another world.”

“I just hope my little brother is doing ok without me,” Laria whispered.

Mari frowned slightly. “I’m sure he’ll be fine,” she said. “Our families will deal with our absence, but we can’t afford to worry about them right now. Our journey is too important. If we let ourselves be distracted by what might be happening back on Earth, we’ll fail our mission here. In order to protect our families, all of our friends, everyone back home, unfortunately, that means we have to forget about them.” Mari paused her speech to let out a sad sigh. “At least for the time being,” she concluded.

“Not to be a dick or anything,” Hal replied, “but all we have is your word. Mari, we’ve been friends since you first moved into the neighborhood, but you can understand why I think this is all just a little bit crazy, right? Cool

swords aside.”

Gren nodded reluctantly, adding, “I hate to say it, but Hal’s right. We don’t have any proof that this destiny thing exists, magical otherworld or not. We can’t see your dreams.”

Mari opened her mouth to begin a defensive retort, but Laria beat her to it, saying, “Well, she’s been right so far. She found a trail where none was visible from the road, she led us to a clearing where we saw a freaking unicorn—a fact which everyone seems so quick to forget—she knew that Gren would sing something that would bring us to another freaking world, and now, whether we believe in some crazy destiny or not, we’re here. Mari is the only one of us who has at least a clue of what is going on, so we may as well follow her lead. Mari, I’m in. Whatever you want us to do or wherever you lead us from here, I’m with you.” With that, Laria drew her legs up and hugged them to her chest, resting her chin on her knees.

“Thank you for that,” Mari breathed.

Hal sniffed. “Well, I know when I’ve been beaten. Bedtime, everyone?”

“Sure, I’m exhausted,” Laria and Gren said at almost, but not quite, the same time.

“Thanks, guys,” Mari repeated. “I know it all seems ridiculous now—believe me, it’s even crazier when you’ve got the inside view—but it will make more sense in the morning.” She shifted her weight and leaned down to curl up in the soft ferns, clutching her sword and dagger tightly as she drew a blanket over her shoulders. “I hope,” she whispered. The others followed suit, lying down among the ferns.

Once everyone was settled and quiet, Laria raised her eyes to the intertwined branches of the grove, knit so tightly that they practically formed a ceiling. She wondered what sort of stars slept overhead and what sort of dreams Mari would have next.

