

Hidden

Circle

Book Two

M.A.I. Murray

Anden Jade

Published by Anden Jade
Charlottesville, VA

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission. Please do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

Copyright © 2020 Melissa A. Ivanco-Murray

All rights reserved.

ISBN-13: 978-0-9966044-3-7

DEDICATION

For Mama Murray.

I hope you're enjoying
the view from above.

We miss you.

CONTENTS

Prologue.	My family would not understand	1
Chapter 1.	Certainly took you long enough	6
Chapter 2.	That disreputable pair of sanguines	34
Chapter 3.	Some demon goddess of destruction	69
Chapter 4.	A group of awfully brave explorers	97
Chapter 5.	To break through a wall of cloud	129
Chapter 6.	You've lived a charmed life	155
Chapter 7.	No way you could have known	178
Chapter 8.	You still want to be there, too	204
Chapter 9.	With all the intensity of a star	227
Chapter 10.	See a monster that needs slaying	250
Chapter 11.	What do you have to wager	268
Chapter 12.	None of the stories the elders tell	298
Epilogue.	Ah, but the burden is great	329

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are too many people to list without whom this book never would have made it as far as publication, but I will try my best. To my wonderful husband Sean, thank you for the unbelievable amount of support you have provided me over the past few years as I devoted way too much time to writing (among many other creative pursuits). To Lauren and Britt, thank you for helping me refine all my ridiculous ideas into a coherent story (well, as coherent as anything coming out of my brain could be). To Mom, Dad, Teddy, and Jess, thank you so much for your invaluable feedback on the early drafts, helping me find all the plot holes, and, of course, for your years of friendship. Those who dislike the ending can blame Jess in particular. Lastly, a huge shout out to Rob Vega Jr. and Josh Lintz of True Sounds Audio, who turned my dream of hearing *Destined* as an audiobook into a reality; I do hope you'll help me bring *Hidden* to life as well.

All of you are amazing.

PROLOGUE

My family would not understand

It was the silence that woke her.

He always brought the silence with him when he came, as if it clung to his person like a spider to its web. He did not visit her every night, but as soon as the sun dipped below the horizon, she could tell the nights that he would. She had known long before she laid down to sleep that he would arrive with the midnight and enfold her in blessed silence.

She shoved the blankets back and braced herself on her elbows. Squinting, she could just make out a shifting shadow in the corner of the cramped room. She knew the answer already, yet like a ritual she asked, “Who’s there?” The shadow moved closer, bringing with it the scent of cloves, myrrh, and a sickly sweetness. It was the scent of flowers left too long in the vase, of lilies at the edge of a grave. She inhaled the familiar, bittersweet perfume. She exhaled, “It’s you.”

“Of course,” the shadow whispered. “I have returned to you as I promised I would.” He perched on the edge of her bed in a rustle of cloaks.

She sat up higher, fumbling towards him. "Returned from where?" she asked with the softest of sighs. "You never tell me where it is you go when you leave. I want to know. I have a right to know." She reached out an arm to him; her fingers fell just short of the distance.

"I never leave you, not truly. I just cannot risk being seen by anyone else," he whispered, taking her hand and stroking the callused skin of her palm. "Not yet, at least."

"Then where are you during the day?" she persisted.

"Where I have to be."

"And now?"

"Where I want to be."

She closed her eyes, mulling over his response and enjoying the sensation of his cooling touch. "Come closer," she pleaded. "You're still too far away."

He slid along the covers, the thick quilt giving way as he moved toward the head of the bed. He came to rest beside her, his back against the headboard. When he finally spoke again, his voice was the barest breath, mere inches from her ear: "Anything you wish, my love." His lips against her neck left a trail of winter shivers.

"I wish to see you in sunlight," she replied, the request nearly inaudible. "I wish to walk down the street holding your hand. I wish to know who you are."

Although she could not make out the details of his face through the gloom, she knew his brow wrinkled in frustration. The air thickened around her, constricting her throat, but just as quickly the pressure dissipated in time with his frustration. By the time he replied, his voice was as calm as ever. "All you need to know is that I remain yours. Here, I've brought you a gift." He deposited a scrap of knotted velvet in her hand. "Open it," he commanded.

"What is it?" Her jeweler's fingers, normally deft, hesitated and tripped in the dark. When she succeeded in untying the slick fabric, those same fingers recognized the object within at once. "A ring," she announced. "I bet it's beautiful. I can't wait to see it in the morning."

HIDDEN

“It holds but a fraction of your own beauty. Wear it always, and I will always be with you,” he explained. He plucked the ring from her palm and slid it into place along her middle finger. “If you are ever in danger, day or night, I will know, and I will come for you.”

At first she felt a spark like a needle prick where the ring rested against her knuckle. Peering down at her glimmering hand, she asked, “What is this stone? It’s so black I can see it even now. It feels odd.” She flexed her fingers. “Heavier than it should be.”

He brushed her hair over her shoulder and said, “It’s a special stone, one native to my birthplace.”

“Everyone will wonder where I acquired such a ring,” she commented softly. “Bits of wood and scraps of metal, even bone, those I work with. But this...”

“Tell them anything you like,” he whispered, planting another chilling kiss on her neck. “The truth, perhaps.”

She turned to face him. “The truth?” she scoffed. “That three years ago I found a wounded angel who stole away my heart? That he gives me jewels yet never shows me his true face?” She laughed hollowly and shook her head. “You know perfectly well why I can’t tell them the truth. My family would not understand.”

The glint of his grin flashed. “Then tell them nothing.”

“I will think of something, my angel.”

“I never said I was an angel.”

“You never said you were not,” she countered, a touch of humor brightening her voice. She placed her hands on either side of his face, stroking the sharp bones she had come to know so well by touch, if not by sight. Not since that first night had she seen her visitor clearly, and even then, the moon revealed only so much. “And I know what you really are, deep inside.”

In the morning, when the rays of sunlight broke through her window, she was unsurprised to find herself alone. She closed her eyes, memories swirling through her brain. That night in the forest, the arrow, the bones.

She nearly forgot to breathe.

As she opened her eyes again, she whispered, “No demon can love, not truly.”

The ring on her hand glittered, its polished gold framing a sphere hewn from the emptiness between stars.



The Fifth Spinner paced back and forth in the weaving room. In the corner the Loom lurked, its threads tangled in the frame. Half-spun threads waited on a wheel in another corner. “Something’s wrong,” Laria muttered as she picked up a book from the desk to the left of the Loom. She flipped it open and squinted at the tiny script, scrawled there by one of her predecessors in an ancient language she had only just begun learning to decipher. Many of the words remained a mystery to her, but she could recognize enough now, at least, to know that the pages contained no mention of the topic she sought.

An equine snort at the window interrupted her silent studies. Laria held up one slender finger in the direction of the disturbance. Once she had finished scanning the page, she shut the book and raised her gaze to see Micaeth pressing his long, white nose through the shutters. His horn glistened as he rested his chin on the window sill.

“Guardian Hal has the rest of the books you requested,” he announced. Though his words were formal, his tone was anything but.

“Thanks, Mickey,” Laria replied, forcing a smile.

Micaeth snorted again. “I still don’t understand that name, but since you are the Spinner, you may call me what you will.”

Laria smiled, genuinely this time. “I’ll look at the books this evening,” she said as she turned back to confront her burden and her gift, the enchanted item that allowed her to peer into the past and present and future of the three worlds. The Loom. The timelines wove and unwove,

HIDDEN

revealing patterns spun along lines of prophetic probability that no other could decipher, that no other could control, but the reigning Spinner. The power within the Loom itself came from another, but the duty of interpretation fell to her. She could see anything she wished in the fabric.

Anything, that is, until now.

She grasped either side of the wooden frame, concentrating on the colored threads, and a trickle of magic coursed through them. The fabric unraveled and wove back together to form a neat pattern. Gradually the pattern evolved into a picture, and a distant city spread across the fabric, red and green lights blinking in the twilight as buildings climbed toward a mundane sky. "It works fine if I look literally anywhere else," she mumbled underneath her breath.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm still not sure," Laria replied with a frown. "Could you go get Gryndonmin? I think it's time I asked for more help with this than just books."

Micaeth quirked his head to the side, but then nodded. "You know," he tentatively suggested, "you still have friends outside these walls, too. Maybe they could see what you cannot."

"That's not a bad idea," she mused as she returned her attention to the Loom. The urban scene danced across the woven threads. Laria almost thought she could hear the horns of the cars singing in the streets. If she focused on the scene much longer, she knew she would hear them and a great deal more besides. She waved a hand in front of the Loom, and the scene faded.

The threads tangled.

CHAPTER ONE

Certainly took you long enough

Gren squinted at a blueprint as he trudged down a darkened corridor with Mari a few steps in front of him and Ruv a few steps behind. The rosy light of either a motion sensor or a camera—they were not quite sure which, although they were at least fairly certain they had successfully disabled the overall system as evident by the general darkness—blinked in the far corner. “According to the printout, it’s two more lefts, then three cells down on the right,” he reminded his friends. His boots made the softest of clicks along the tile floor, but despite his efforts to remain otherwise silent, every few steps his bow and quiver of arrows rattled under his trench coat.

Mari spun around fleetingly to respond, “Good.” As she neared the end of the hall, she dropped to the floor. She kept low and darted her head around the corner. Seeing no one, she hopped back on her feet and adjusted her own long coat to cover the bejeweled sword at her hip. “Ruv, still got those keys?”

He chuckled quietly, hazel eyes sparkling with mischief as he replied, “Of course! I only lifted them from the front

HIDDEN

desk five minutes ago. Even I cannot lose something so quick.” All the same, he checked his pocket and let out a silent sigh of relief when his fingers brushed metal. He spared a glance behind them to ensure no one followed.

So far, so good.

Suddenly Mari held up a hand to halt their progress, scooting closer to the wall and pressing herself as flat as possible. Her companions followed suit. “I think I heard something,” she mouthed. She glanced about them, scouring the darkness for a possible attack.

Gren’s shoulders drooped. “No,” he whispered with an embarrassed half-smile. “That was just me. I stumbled when I was putting away the map, and it echoed weird in here,” He shrugged, the leather of his coat and quiver rustling again. As if to emphasize his words, the folded blueprint stuck haphazardly out of one of his pockets.

Mari relaxed as she continued down the corridor. “I don’t know why I bother with you two,” she lamented. “If I were by myself, I’d already be—”

Her thoughts were unexpectedly dispersed by the telepathic intrusion of Laria, who asked, *Hey, you busy?*

Mari suppressed a squeal at the invasion of her brain, but since she had grown more accustomed to the fatestone link, it took only a few breaths to recover. She reached for the anchor that allowed such communication: a pendent of faceted jade, carved into the shape of a crescent moon, suspended perpetually from her throat. “Holy hell, girl!” she answered, mentally directing her words toward the Spinner’s sanctuary where Laria had resided for the past several years. At least, years had elapsed for Mari since she had seen her friend in person. She suspected only a handful of months had passed from Laria’s perspective. Time became a funny thing when you traveled between dimensions. “You know damn well I’m busy.”

Gren and Ruv, all too familiar with witnessing spontaneous, seemingly one-sided conversations (and, in Gren’s case, participating in his own), resigned themselves

to the inevitable break. Gren moved forward to keep watch around the other corner, while Ruv took a few paces back to better guard their rear. As he moved into position, Gren prayed that this time his own brain would remain clear of any thoughts that did not belong to him.

Mari rolled her eyes as she listened to Laria's telepathic response. *I can't watch everything you're doing every minute of every day, you know*, she was saying. *Besides, I don't particularly want to see what you and Gren get up to in your free time lately.*

"Well, we're in the middle of an operation," Mari replied with a vague wave of her hand, even though she knew Laria could not witness the action unless she happened to be actively watching her in the Loom. Since Laria seemed to possess limited knowledge of their present circumstances, Mari suspected the Spinner's attention must have been focused elsewhere as of late. "Sam got caught. Long story."

Ah yes, the thieving panther twins, Laria rejoined. *I thought you all were still in Scotland with that wicked smart geologist? The one whose circle you fell through?*

Mari allowed herself a soft smile as she repeated, "Like I said, long story. Short version: Sam's chilling in a jail cell, and Sarah's about to drive the getaway van."

And the geologist?

"She's tagging along for the ride."

When Mari, Gren, and Ruv first met Sarah and Sam near Kupala's waterfall while attempting to fulfill the task the goddess had set before Gren on their first trip to Aorea, they never dreamed they would spend the ensuing weeks cleaning up the various messes the twins left in their wake. They were suspicious of the siblings to be sure, considering their reluctance to answer direct questions with direct answers, but curiosity at meeting another set of shapeshifting humans outweighed that suspicion. That the twins were clearly so comfortable shifting between their human and panther forms intrigued them. More intriguing still, the existence of traveling circles was not exactly

HIDDEN

common knowledge on Earth, and their operation required magic limited to a select few in each generation, and especially few among humans. Gren possessed such magic; the twins did not.

So when Sarah and Sam's path disappeared as soon as they reached the Birch Forest circle, they took a chance and followed them. The trail led them through the rainforests of Southern Faerie and into a hidden cave, where they ended up rescuing the twins from the vengeance of Kutkah, a shapeshifting god of trickery and mischief who also happened to be Sarah and Sam's erstwhile employer. He had used the twins to acquire various treasures to add to his collection. Now, however, Kutkah was safely contained by his fellow lanti, and thus, unable to cause further mischief.

Yet here they were, just a few weeks later, cleaning up another mess the twins left behind. This time, they did not have Kutkah's orders as an excuse. The theft was entirely of their own volition.

Mari could practically feel Laria's arching eyebrow through her response. *Sounds about right for those two.*

"Get to the point, please," Mari admonished, fingers still firmly laced around her fatestone. "We are kinda on a time crunch."

Right, sorry, Laria replied. I need you to come back to Aorea, and you might want to bring the whole crowd with you. Twins included. Got a bit of a problem I'd like you to look into. I'll have someone meet you with the details at that tavern up in the Alpines that Ruw always talks about. What's the name again? I know he knows it, at least. The one whose owner has all those daughters.

Mari frowned, concentrating, then suggested, "The Tipsy Turtle?"

That's the one!

"Sure thing," she agreed. "Now if you don't mind, I've got a jail break to complete." Mari released her grip on the jade crescent, letting the connection between them fade once more to the back of her mind. The fatestone link

lingered only as a dull hum, imperceptible unless she actively thought about it. Mari ran her fingers through her hair, as messy as ever and, unbeknownst to her, every bit as tangled as the threads in Laria's Loom.

Observing that Mari's thoughts had returned to the present, Gren and Ruv collapsed their positions. "What'd she want?" Gren queried, adjusting the belt that strapped an ornate knife to his thigh. He then adjusted his coat again since the previous movement had caused his quiver to slip off his shoulder. "Damn arrows," he muttered with a grimace, shoving one of them back in place. "I really wish we could have just left these with the girls."

Mari flicked Gren halfheartedly across an ear while resuming her position as point of their miniature assault party. "Considering they had to move the van after we hopped out, you know that wasn't an option."

"I know, I know," Gren whined, his voice louder than discretion might deem wise. "Worked great for holding Kutkah's cave in place, not so great for an automobile. Emphasis on the *mobile* part. Stupid binding."

"Please, keep it down," Mari reproved. "We don't have time for any of your lame puns, let alone to argue the merits of enchanted weapons. We may have temporarily taken out the security system and knocked a guard or two unconscious, but we only have a few minutes left before the emergency generators kick in and someone realizes we're here." She gestured around the ostensibly empty halls to emphasize her point. "I'll tell you what Laria said later. She probably wants us to save the worlds or something. But first, we need to finish saving a sanguine," she finished with a flourish, grinning at her own alliteration and daring either of her companions to comment.

Gren just sighed, murmuring something about how he was supposed to be the poet, not Mari, but she chose not to acknowledge it. Ruv, if he heard, wisely kept silent.

The trio slunk through the corridors, naught but the faint glow of the emergency lights along the baseboards

and the blinking red of the motion sensors (or possibly cameras; they remained undecided on that front) to illuminate their careful steps. They could hear muffled voices echoing from around the next bend, signaling they had finally reached the primary cell block.

Stopping outside the third cell on the right, Gren rapped his knuckles across the bars. “Hey, brother, how you holding up in there?”

A shadow stirred in the far corner of the cell, accompanied by Sam’s velveteen voice. “It’s about bloody time. A fellow could rot in here. In fact, I think one of my neighbors already did.”

Ruv began fumbling with the lock while Mari said, “Sorry we left you so long. We had to get all the details ironed out first. Shift changes, security measures, when they’re down to minimal manning. You know how it is. Plus it’s not exactly like any of us have done this before.”

“Well,” Ruv cut in, “I have.”

Gren snorted. “Jails have changed a lot since, what, eighteen-something-or-other.”

“Just unlock the damn door before the guards come back, will you?” Sam growled, his inner panther bubbling beneath the surface as he approached the cell door.

Ruv, still searching for the correct key on the welded ring, asserted, “We’ve got a little time. The guards are, how you say, indisposed.”

Sam sighed. “There’s video surveillance, you ninnies.”

“Ha! I knew they were cameras!” Gren said with a triumphant smirk.

Mari rolled her eyes at the gloat but kept her attention fixed on their imprisoned friend. “The cameras are disabled for the time being as well,” she explained. “Also, we figured you might be wanting these. You’ll be at least somewhat less conspicuous.” She tossed him a gloomy bundle of clothing.

Suddenly forgiving the delay in his rescue, he praised, “You, my dear, are a saint.” Sam gleefully shed his

jumpsuit for his preferred black leather and mesh. He slid into the skin-tight clothing with more ease than anyone would have deemed possible had this been the first time they had witnessed him perform such a feat. Yet the life of a sanguine possesses its share of peculiarities, frequent nudity chiefly among them. “Ah, that’s much better,” he continued. “Though would it have killed you to bring some earrings, too?”

“Those are in the—” Mari started, but the wailing of an alarm and a flood of blinding light interrupted her as the security system sputtered back to life. Outcries in varying degrees of hostility from the rest of the prisoners further assailed their ears, and so instead of finishing her prior statement, Mari released a torrent of curses. “Ruv, can you speed things up? It’s safe to say our grace period is over,” she shouted over the cacophony. Instinctively her hand moved to the hilt of her sword, although she dreaded the thought of wielding it against another human, especially since that human would merely be doing his job.

And, of course, she knew full well that a sword, enchanted or not, would do her little good against a bullet.

Ruv jiggled another key in the padlock, eschewing comment while he squinted in the sudden brightness. Instead the reply came from Gren. “We should just count ourselves lucky this outdated place still uses real locks,” he drawled. The fingers that hovered over the sapphire cabochon in the pommel of his dagger, however, belied his easy tone in an echo of Mari’s unease.

“Success!” Ruv proclaimed at last. Mari and Gren hauled open the door while Ruv tossed the keyring around the corner from which they had arrived, safely out of the other prisoners’ reach lest they find themselves swarmed by less friendly offenders as well as the inevitable guards.

“Thank the various gods,” Sam exhaled as he strode into the hallway. “Let’s get the bleeding hell out of here!”

The four raced away from the cellblock, this time turning down the opposite corridor from which they

HIDDEN

arrived. They sprinted past the auxiliary cells, past the stale kitchens, past a break room reeking of burnt coffee. They did not slow their pace until they reached the emergency exit at the back of the building. Considering the alarms still blared around them and probably at least a few guards—no doubt waking from their enforced slumber with angry headaches—bore witness to their hasty escape, they did not think twice about exploiting the emergency door.

Mari, the first to reach the exit, hurled a shoulder into the metal to no avail. Gren and Ruv joined her for a second rush while Sam kept an eye on the open hallway behind them. At last the hinges gave way. An empty back alley and a wind thick with smog and the threat of rain rewarded their efforts.

When they poured into the dim morning, boots squelching in the muddy street, a petite young woman in a blue raincoat stepped out from behind a rusted dumpster. Strawberry-blonde hair bound in a tight braid framed her heart-shaped face, and rectangular glasses failed to conceal the dusting of freckles sprinkled across her delicate nose. Nor could the lenses conceal the enormous eyes that made her appear perpetually astonished. Her mouth, too small for the rest of her face, broke into a smile.

Mari, Gren, and Ruv were initially surprised that their newest acquaintance, Wendy, had wanted to participate in this particular venture. Like the twins, they met her quite by accident. Unlike the twins, Wendy had never attempted to pick their pockets. Her insistence on joining them had proven invaluable. Indeed, no part of the rescue would have been successful without her generosity.

Shortly after they unbound the twins from Kutkah's service, Mari, Gren, and Ruv returned to Earth. At Sarah and Sam's request, Gren sang them through the traveling circle to Scotland. Since only three circles remained active on Earth and they had only ever used the one in Virginia before, Mari and Gren couldn't be sure where, precisely, the Scotland circle would be located. They only suspected

that it would be there based on their prior research of unexplained disappearances. The twins, having never navigated the circles unassisted and having always been rendered blind during the process, could not say for sure where the Scottish circle was either, only that it was there. Kutkah never felt it necessary to share the information, preferring to keep his employees as ignorant as possible.

So when Gren's song deposited them on a highland hilltop where Wendy had been observing the autumn equinox with a solitary picnic, they were as surprised as she. A scientist by trade, Wendy adopted the notion of magic with astonishing immediacy. Magic had confronted her clear as the glass of one of her slides, she argued. She would be a fool to deny it. Instead, she chose to accompany her impromptu wards in hopes of uncovering the science underlying the enchantments.

Mari gave the diminutive woman a quick hug. "Where'd you guys park the van?"

Wendy pulled up the hood of her raincoat and pronounced, "Found a spot just two blocks away." Without further delay she dashed down the alley and onto the sidewalk that skirted the main street as the others followed, their own hoods pulled up to conceal their identities from the closed circuit street cameras. Not that it mattered much if the cameras did capture their faces; they no longer possessed identities to identify in the first place.

On Earth Mari, Gren, and Ruv had long been presumed dead.

As planned, the early hour worked in their favor. Although the tiny jail technically resided within the city limits, they encountered few pedestrians. They hurried from the alleyway to the corner of the next block, where Sarah waited in a dingy but otherwise unremarkable van.

Just as they rounded the corner, the back doors burst open, allowing them to leap straight inside. Sarah embraced her twin for only a second before scrambling into the driver's seat. Mari counted heads one last time as

Gren dragged the back doors shut. With the final headcount complete, Mari nodded to Wendy, who had hopped into the front seat next to Sarah and was watching for just such a signal, and braced herself against the chilly metal. The engine sputtered as Sarah shifted into drive.

“Certainly took you long enough,” Sarah remarked, shooting a look of concern over her shoulder before turning her focus to avoiding potholes and changing gears. The traffic was still light as they traversed the side streets, but they knew it would get much worse when they neared the city center no matter what time of day they had chosen to execute the operation. “So what was the hold up in there? I was starting to fear you’d botched the whole thing and I’d have to put together an entirely new crew.”

“So we’re your crew now, huh?” Gren remarked.

“You know what I meant,” Sarah snapped. “And my question stands.”

Sam, huddled behind the driver’s seat with his knees to his chest, nodded in agreement. “Funny,” he recalled, “I asked the same question.”

Everyone turned their eyes expectantly to Mari, who was busy rearranging the drape of her coat to cover her sword so that an unsuspecting Londoner would not glimpse a world they were not mentally prepared to encounter. When she finished her adjustments and saw her friends’ anxious faces, she explicated, “Once we get out of here, we’ve got another mission. Laria needs us to go back to Aorea for something.”

Gren, crouched opposite her, narrowed his eyes. “Surely she knows we were headed that way anyway, right? We’ve got to figure out Wendy’s totem. Besides, with Ilya gone...” He choked back the rest of his intended statement at a flash of warning in Mari’s eyes. The recent loss of her father remained taboo. When she turned her gaze out the window at the gray buildings and grayer skies, Gren felt it safe to proceed. “There isn’t much to keep us here anymore.”

“Yeah, but she wants us in the Alpines instead of the Birch Forest,” Mari clarified, her voice strained but steady. If a wrist happened to dart across her eyes and come back moist, no one acknowledged it. She took a deep breath, and when she continued, she had her emotions firmly under control. “Or Faerie. Or anywhere else, for that matter. She said she’ll have someone meet us at the Topsy Turtle to tell us more.”

Ruv, polishing the iron tips of his wooden fighting staff and ergo making no effort to hide it from any curious onlookers whose gaze might stray into the back of the van, lit up at the mention of his favorite tavern. He flashed Mari his crooked grin, and her returning grin betrayed that she was all too happy for a change of topic. “Excellent!” Ruv professed. “It’s been ages since I’ve flirted with one of Therese’s girls. I do hope Therese himself doesn’t remember me, though.”

The three women in the van released a collective sigh of annoyance. “You never change,” Mari chided.

“Well, we can’t *all* have you,” Ruv intimated.

Gren’s attention snapped from worrying about how Mari was coping with their recently discovered loss to the thinly-veiled challenge in Ruv’s lopsided smirk. However, before he could retort, Sam cut in, “Sister dear, how much further to the station?”

“Hard to say now that we’ve hit the morning rush. If this damnable traffic gets much worse, we may be better off just stashing the van in another alley and walking the rest of the way,” she replied. Wendy, nose buried in the GPS app on her phone, quietly directed Sarah to take a left at the next intersection. The back tires skidded on the wet pavement as the vehicle whipped around the bend, bumping against the curb and narrowly avoiding a collision with a lucky signpost.

“Never thought I’d miss Hal’s driving,” Gren quipped.

“If you think either of you bloody Americans can do better, then one of you take the wheel. You don’t even

drive on the right side of the road,” Sarah hissed through her teeth as she shifted lanes in preparation for another quick turn.

Gren grinned. “Actually, we do drive on the *right* side.”

“You know what in the hells I meant!”

“Look, I get it, everyone’s adrenaline is running high and everything is a bit tense, but we need to keep it together until we are safely on that train,” Mari directed. She peeked out the back window at the retreating roadway and caught sight of blinking blue lights. Pursuit was still several cars back, but it was approaching fast, weaving in between the traffic in a delayed mirror of Sarah’s driving. “Crap. I guess word’s out. We’ve already acquired a tail.”

Gren, Ruv, and Sam whipped their heads around to share Mari’s view. “Bollocks!” Sam exclaimed. “How close are we now?”

Wendy, her nose still buried in her phone’s digital map, answered, “Within sprinting distance.”

Sarah’s eyes flashed to the rearview mirror. She just managed to maneuver the van into the outer lane before careening down the next empty alley. The police car, unable to make the turn in time, sped past. The van had barely skidded to a halt before the occupants exploded from its doors. Mercifully, the alley emptied into another side street, and so the six friends bolted toward it without so much as a backward glance.

While she ran Wendy switched the settings on her app from vehicle to pedestrian, skimmed the recommended route, then tossed her phone in the next trash bin without missing a step. “The station’s only about five more blocks. We should make it in no time.”

Foot traffic picked up substantially as they neared the entrance to the metro, allowing them to catch their breath as they melted into the morning crowd. They kept their hoods up and weapons covered to the best of their ability, though Ruv’s staff garnered a few quizzical looks, as they zigzagged through clumps of people on their way to work.

The faceless throng absorbed them, each person caught in his or her own haste. They became nothing more than anonymous members of the horde, six more strangers in a sea of trench coats. At last, they could relax. The police would find the abandoned van, and by the time they pulled the footage from the closed circuit cameras and figured out where they went, they would be safe in another world.

Well, not exactly safe, perhaps, but they certainly would be inaccessible.

Once they entered the station, Sarah and Sam took the lead, navigating the congested metro with practiced ease. Since they knew their ultimate destination would require them to return to Scotland well before the jailbreak occurred, they had purchased the necessary tickets ahead of time. The black-clad siblings searched the blinking monitors for the right track.

“Let’s never do that again,” Gren asserted as they boarded their train several minutes later.

Mari squeezed his shoulder. “We won’t.”

Gren raised a thick, dark eyebrow at her. “You can’t know that for sure—unless you’re dreaming again?”

She pursed her lips. “No, not yet.”

They spread out once aboard. Mari determined that they would be less conspicuous in pairs, so she and Gren chose a spot toward the center of the car while Ruv and Sam staked out the back. Sarah and Wendy remained up front. Originally Sarah had argued with her reasoning, not wanting to be separated from her brother as soon as they reunited. Mari countered that, given the circumstances as well as the twins’ particular history, Sarah and Sam would be the most conspicuous pair among them. Mari’s subsequent recommendation that the twins should consider highlighting their naturally blue-black hair with less memorable colors than neon magenta and turquoise, however, fell on deaf ears.

Finally, the tracks rumbled, and the train took off, carrying them away from the dismal city.

Mari gazed out the window at the passing countryside. After several minutes, she said to Gren, “Laria sounded really, well, perturbed, I guess, is what I’d call it.”

“Yeah?”

She combed her fingers through one of her many mahogany tangles, vainly attempting to put her hair back in some semblance of order after the dash through jail corridors and windy streets. She gave up and transferred her attention to a hangnail. “We obviously didn’t have time for her to go into any details,” she clarified, “but she sounded almost panicked, and she was clearly trying to hide it from me. She was way too casual. So whatever problem she wants us to look into, I got the sense it’s bigger than she’s letting on.”

“Eh, Laria could just be being Laria, though,” he disputed. “You have to admit she tends to be excitable. I mean, there was that whole thing with the dragon.”

Mari snorted and poked Gren in the ribs, and he flinched. “To be fair, we were all a little dramatic during that particular event.”

“Ok, yeah, but she is still only eighteen, though,” he reminded her. “Time hasn’t really passed for her and Hal.”

“Even so,” she said, drawing out her words, “this wasn’t her usual tone.” She paused to chew on her lip before adding with a grin, “Plus she’s had a lot of weight on her shoulders since she became the Spinner. She’s probably more mature than us at this point. She’s certainly more mature than you.”

Gren returned her mocking grin, but his soon gave way to a frown. He removed his coat with the utmost care while simultaneously slipping out of the bow and quiver, then folded the whole bundle across his lap. The rehearsed move allowed the coat to continue concealing the weapons. He stretched, yawned, and asked, “Did you pay attention to any of the news yesterday? Shit is seriously about to go haywire. It almost makes me glad we don’t really have a steady home here anymore.”

"I've been trying my best to avoid the news," she replied, unbuckling her sword belt and shedding her own coat in much the same manner as Gren.

"It's definitely not the world we grew up in," he murmured. He glanced out the window, the movement causing a few strands of dark hair to shine copper in the fluorescent lights. When he turned back to Mari, she was staring blankly out the window past him. "Whenever you're ready to talk about it, you know I'm here."

"I know," she mumbled. "It's just...I should have been there for him. We should have waited another year before we went back."

Gren laced his fingers through hers. "He was the one who urged us to leave. He must—he must have known he was sick, and he didn't want us to see him that way." When Mari made no indication of responding, he added in a whisper, "I'll miss Ilya, too, you know. He was like a second dad to me."

"I know."

"Ruv is also upset about it."

"Can we talk about something else now, please?"

Gren gave her fingers a quick squeeze. "We could talk about the news you haven't been watching."

She rolled her eyes. "Let's try and get some rest. There's nothing we can do about the path Earth is on anyway," Mari contended. "Who would listen to us? We're nobody. Besides, I have the feeling this mission of Laria's will be a long one, so I don't know how many years will have passed by the time we come back to Earth again."

Mari's pale jade eyes met Gren's fathomless brown ones as he chuckled hollowly. "It can't be worse than playing a love song to a love goddess who would much rather be smiting you," he said.

"Oh please, that turned out just fine."

"Says the girl who did *not* have her guitar smashed on a rock," Gren remarked with a quirked eyebrow. "Although I guess we all did have to run from her wrath."

HIDDEN

“At least we made some new friends out of the experience,” Mari rejoined.

“Only if you define the term ‘friend’ rather loosely.”

“Wendy definitely counts,” she asserted. “The twins, in any case, are never boring.” Then she cracked her neck and settled down to sleep, resting her head against the warmth of Gren’s shoulder. Though, try as they might, sleep would not come for either of them.



The surface of the water rippled and wavered as an image fought its way through the murky depths of a gargantuan basin carved from banded black stone. The necromancer gripped either side of the bowl’s rim, drawing the image to the surface through sheer force of will. At last the otherwise mundane water began to boil with the magic coursing through it.

When the surface of the water stilled once more, his desired image formed. Yet, though pleased with his apparent success, the necromancer did not loosen his grip on the scrying bowl. Instead, he concentrated even more deeply. He concentrated until the water showed him every fleck of amber in the liquid marigold of his quarry’s eyes, every ebony freckle marring her perfect complexion. He concentrated until he could taste her name on the very wind that had first blown her into his life. He concentrated until reality frayed at the edges and space blurred and bent around him, the water became like a living scene, and the accompanying sounds echoed throughout the chamber.

The necromancer watched, mute, as two evrae maidens, with skin the golden-brown of fresh acorns and hair like black moss, walked hand in hand down a wooded pathway. Both girls were uncommonly tall for their people, although the younger of the two was far from done growing. As much as they shared in appearance—from their bare toes and matching leaf-green dresses up to their

prominent cheekbones and the points of their elfin ears—they differed in mannerism. The younger tugged enthusiastically on her sister's hand, practically dragging her along the path as the elder shuffled forward at a sleepwalker's pace. Afternoon light filtered through the tree tops, catching a glint of midnight stone on the elder girl's fingers.

"Come on, Necria!" The younger's words echoed around the necromancer in real time as the water upon which the maidens' images were transposed wavered. He winced against the sharp whine of the young girl's voice and frowned. "We're going to miss it!" she urged, tugging yet harder on her sister's limp hand. "They're only here for one more night and you promised."

"Did I?" Necria asked in a whisper. She glanced down at her third finger where the heavy ring pressed.

Her sister released Necria's hand along with a dramatic sigh. "Ugh, it's like you aren't even here anymore! Last year you promised you'd take me to the festival when they came back and I was old enough and now I am and mother said I could go as long as you stayed with me!"

Shaking her head to clear her clouded thoughts, Necria mused, "Is it the solstice already? Naya, I'm sorry. I remember now."

"Finally!" her sister said as she retook Necria's hand and continued marching along the shaded pathway, black hair streaming behind her. "It's the last day before they leave and they won't be back for a whole year and you promised and now you are walking so very slow and if we miss the dancing I'll never talk to you again!"

Necria smiled fondly at her sister's enthusiasm, and the two girls kept walking, fingers entwined, as the trees began to thin and the wooded pathway opened into a meadow filled with brilliant, silken tents, bonfires, and the steady pounding of drums. But once the maidens approached the outskirts of the festival, the watery image flickered twice before fading entirely.

HIDDEN

“Servorg!” the necromancer thundered, turning his back on the disappointing basin. His summons echoed around him from the walls of the hollow chamber. He cursed as he released his stony grip from the scrying bowl’s rim. Whatever magic lay dormant in the water, it had been completely drained.

A heavy door scraped open at the far end of the room, and a small, misshapen creature with peeling flesh and empty red eyes materialized at the threshold. “Yes, master?” the goblin croaked.

The necromancer reached into the folds of his cloak and withdrew a handful of ashes. He breathed into his hand, and the ashes ignited in a puff of acrid smoke before evaporating. All that remained was a pile of obsidian shards. “Take these,” he commanded. “Have them made into a necklace.” He deposited the shards in his minion’s waiting hand as he mused, “The ring can’t seem to anchor the images well enough. I need more.”

“Of course, master,” Servorg said as he shuffled away, his right foot dragging from an injury that would not heal.

The dead could be reanimated, but they could never be made whole.



By the time they debarked the train in Glasgow, the morning had nearly ended, and there had been no more signs of pursuit beyond a halfhearted announcement, echoing over the train’s intercom, to be wary of escaped prisoners. Sam stoically ignored it. From Glasgow they took a bus to the village nearest Wendy’s inherited estate. The bus jolted and jounced for several hours along the winding, uneven roads, bearing them deeper north, and they used the time to catch up on the sleep they had neglected over the past few weeks of preparation.

When the bus at last sputtered to a stop, the six companions dismounted into the Autumn mist. Gren

checked the time on his watch and declared, “We’ve got about three hours still until sunset.”

“I vote we head to the pub for a quick drink,” Ruv offered. “After all, it’s going to be a while before haggis is on the menu again, and I’ve grown rather fond of it. Reminds me of a similar dish from my youth.”

Sam and Sarah exchanged mirrored looks of disgust. “Why does the circle have to be in Scotland?” Sarah whined.

“London is much nicer,” Sam agreed, tightening the collar of his leather coat.

“We didn’t plant the circles,” Mari reminded them, cramming her sword into the trunk of Wendy’s car between Gren’s bow, Ruv’s stave, and the twins’ ample collection of knives. “We just use them. And since it takes about an hour to hike up to the circle from the manor, we should probably head straight to the estate, grab our shit, change, and head back out.”

Ruv’s face fell, but he nodded his assent along with the rest. Thus, without further debate, the group began the last, shortest, and most cramped stretch of their escape. Wendy drove with Gren in the passenger’s seat and Mari squeezed between them. In the backseat Ruv and Sarah flanked Sam, who did his best to keep out of sight in case his mugshot had already been plastered throughout the United Kingdom.

“Does it hurt?” Wendy probed after several minutes of silence.

“Does what hurt?” Mari asked.

“Going through the circle,” she continued. “What does it feel like?”

Mari furrowed her brow. “It’s different for everyone, I think. I mostly experience a lot of pressure, like I’m being squeezed at the bottom of the ocean, and then all of a sudden the pressure lifts and I’m floating, and then I’m just...somewhere else.” She gazed out the windshield at the gray road stretching before them, bordered by the

sporadic gray trunks of windswept trees beneath an even grayer sky. “The first time, I felt a little nauseous, too, and I passed out, but it’s gotten easier each time since.”

“Different for me,” Ruv said with a shrug. “I hardly feel anything, maybe just a slight tingle. Of course, I don’t remember my first time going through a circle. I didn’t know that’s where I was, you see, only that me and my pack needed a place to sleep for the night, and one spot in the Siberian forest was as good as any other. So we went to sleep, and when we woke up, well, we seemed to have moved.”

Mari craned her neck to look at him. “I still wonder how that’s possible, you know? I mean, it requires a lot of magic to operate the circles, and you can’t do it without a Wanderer. You definitely didn’t have a Wanderer in your pack to accidentally sing in his sleep.”

Ruv cracked a crooked smile. “I don’t think we’ll ever know. I was asleep on Earth, then I was awake in Aorea.” His smile gave way to another shrug. “Maybe someone came along and opened the portal for us. It certainly turned out in our favor, at least. For the good of the pack.”

“Doesn’t sound so bad,” Wendy supposed. “Gren, what’s it like for you? I imagine it must be very powerful since you’re the one who can actually open them.”

He kept his gaze directed out the window while he ran his hand over his face. “Powerful is one word for it,” he eventually said. “The song fills me completely, overwhelms my brain until I can think of nothing else but letting the words and the melody flow out of me. As soon as I step into a circle, I start to hear the song calling me. It doesn’t even have to be near dusk or dawn. I still hear the music, all the different melodies intertwined, overlapping in endless potential.” With his description complete, he leaned back, thick lashes concealing the chocolate of his eyes as his voice faded to silence.

“Your poet is showing,” Sarah commented in an ambiguous tone of either derision or grudging respect; no

one but Sam could be certain which, and no one desired to ask for clarification.

“How do you know which song is the right one?” Wendy pressed.

After a while, Gren answered, “It’s hard to explain. I kinda just know.” He shared a glance with Mari before adding, “If I focus on where I want to go, I can pick out one melody that’s stronger than the rest, and then I start singing it, and the circle takes it from there.”

“So it doesn’t hurt,” Wendy whispered. “That’s good.”

Mari reached over and gently clasped the driver’s arm. “Don’t worry, it’s really not that bad. All you have to do is hold on. You excited to find out your totem?”

Wendy blurted, “I’m not sure I’m ready to think about that part just yet. Let’s get there first, and then we’ll see how much faith I can muster in Ruv’s assertion I’m a shifter. Sanguine. Whatever the hell you call it.”

Ruv feigned offense at her expressed doubt of his abilities to sniff out those who possess sufficient totem blood to shift between human and animal form, but then his lips broke into yet another lopsided smirk. “I have never been wrong,” he bragged.

The rest of the drive passed by without conversation, the only sound the punctuation of the raindrops on the roof and the occasional splash of the tires rolling through a puddle. By the time Wendy pulled the car into the driveway of the estate she inherited from her uncle, the fog and rain had mostly cleared. The six friends hastened out of the overcrowded vehicle and onto the front porch. Wendy unlocked the front door then motioned for the others to enter.

“Are you sure you want to come with us?” Mari asked, lingering on the porch. “I thought we could just make a short trip, but I don’t think that’s the case anymore. I don’t know how long it’ll be before we can get you back.”

Wendy did not immediately respond. Instead she gazed out at the rolling expanse of her late uncle’s estate, its

HIDDEN

emerald grass and hedgerows, once trimmed to perfection, fallen into shaggy disarray. She wondered how long it would remain untenanted after she left, considering she was the last MacEunrig heir. She decided it did not particularly matter. Wendy closed her eyes and sniffed the wind, then nodded. “I’ve already taken so much time off my dissertation. What’s a wee bit more?”

Mari smiled, but it was a sad smile, full of fresh memories of friends and family lost over the decades in what had, for her, been only a few years. “You’ve still got time to change your mind.”



Laria sat before the spinning wheel, translucent filaments flowing across her slender fingers like unfinished spider silk, winding around the spindle in a gossamer blur as the wheel spun on and on. The turn of the wheel, its monotony, its steady whirr, drew her into a meditative state that allowed her thoughts to float about her as if they were visible entities. A litany of problems, solutions, more problems, the unknown, all spiraled through the air around her head in an echo of the filaments she spun into thread, her thoughts a tangled reflection of the uncooperative Loom. She contemplated the vastness of the task she was about to lay before her friends, and she hoped that whatever they found within the shadow blocking her sight was something small. Something concrete. A glitch, nothing more.

But hoping and knowing are two separate things, and Laria knew better.

A rap at the door snatched her consciousness back from reverie. She slowed the wheel to a stop and gathered the newly finished threads. Hal entered in response to her silence. “How goes the spinning?” he asked.

Laria coiled the last bit around the spindle, saying, “This latest batch is ready. Maybe new threads will help.”

“Awesome,” he decreed, but the trace of a line between his brows contradicted the conviction of his tone. “Did you have any luck earlier?”

Nibbling her bottom lip, Laria replied, “Same as before. The whole western coastline is shrouded.” She turned her gaze to the window to observe the niethera milling about the fields and gardens. She kept her eyes on the window as she continued, “If anything, my blind spot may be growing. This morning it looked like the hidden area might be slightly larger than yesterday.”

“Well, you’ve sent Micaeth—”

“He sent himself, to be honest,” Laria interrupted him. “I could have communicated everything directly to Mari and Gren myself.”

“I know, but—”

“But I suppose I have been rather busy lately, between the Loom and the spinning and entertaining Nemini every time she gets ‘lost’ and lands her mortar and pestle in the middle of the garden. Plus, Micaeth was, well, bored,” she finally finished. She glanced back at Hal, a formidable presence with his piercing cobalt eyes and golden curls that nearly brushed the ceiling.

“But now *I’m* bored!” he complained. To emphasize his state of agitation, his fingers twitched over the hilt of the onyx-studded sword he bore at all times regardless of the security provided by the sanctuary’s unbreakable walls. “None of the other niethera will spar with me!”

Laria rose from her stool, a faint smile playing across her lips. “Nothing’s keeping you here, you know.” She stretched her hands to Hal, and he took them in his own. The twitching fingers stilled. “You could have gone with them as well,” she added. “I know you’ve been itching for another adventure. Mari could use another friendly face right now anyway.”

He drew her closer, crushing her in a fierce embrace before she could so much as utter a protest. “She has Gren and Ruv. They’ll take care of her. And as much fun as I’m

HIDDEN

sure another adventure would be, it's not an option. You stay, I stay," he breathed into her hair.

Her reply was muffled. "So you've said, but—"

"You stay, I stay," he repeated.

"You sure?" she asked as she pried her cheek away from his warmth. "You barely know me, even now."

"I know your spirit, your heart. I'll learn the rest of you as time goes on," he replied with a warm smile. The line between his brows had faded. "Besides, we have a thousand years to do just that."

"You're going to get sick of me long before that time is up," Laria warned. "I'm not nearly as interesting as you think I am."

"I could never get sick of you."

Laria chuckled and shoved him away. "Quit being so dramatically sweet and go make yourself useful. Chop some wood or something."

"For what? We don't have a fireplace."

"Then build one!"

Hal grinned. "See? You already know me so well."



At the crest of the hilltop overlooking Wendy's estate, their backs burdened with camping gear, weapons, and extra clothes, the six friends waited just beyond the perimeter of stone monoliths for the sun to finish its daily descent. Everyone had traded the jeans and coats that allowed them to blend into the city crowd for clothing more appropriate for long days of hiking through one forest or another in unknown weather without the luxury of a washing machine.

Everyone except the twins, of course.

Sam and Sarah had stubbornly maintained their coordinated aesthetic, and so they still sported leather and mesh in a midnight monochrome, broken only by the occasional pop of neon. Their plethora of knives remained

stowed in assorted locations, some of which the rest preferred not to know. Sarah had even gone so far as to pack a bottle of black nail polish and a tube of blood-red lipstick, arguing that it was her pack to fill with what supplies she saw fit, and if Mari would mind her own damn business, then everything would be just peachy.

Abandoning the gauze dress shredded by her previous journey to Aorea, Mari opted for sturdier layers for her third trip. She wore a tan suede vest laced over a green tunic, leather leggings in a dark chestnut wash (Sarah had actually helped her find those, but then lamented when Mari chose brown instead of the superior black), and waterproofed suede boots. Since it was no longer necessary to conceal her ostentatious weaponry, she now strapped her sword belt around the outside of a wool coat so the blade would remain visible as well as accessible; the accompanying knife buckled around her thigh, however, remained hidden under her tunic.

Gren, largely at Mari's incessant urging, had finally exchanged his loose jeans and t-shirt for a pair of slate gray cargo pants, hefty hiking boots, and a knitted sweater that matched the sapphire star suspended from his throat. Like Mari, he had moved his weapons to the outside of his coat for easy access, the quiver and bow slung across his torso and another knife strapped to his thigh.

Ruv, after raiding Wendy's uncle's closet, sported a buttoned shirt in the same shade of gray as the present sky along with a tweed vest, jacket, and thick linen pants he kept tucked into his boots. Wendy herself, unable to find any clothes of such resilient materials in her own size, had opted for muted athletic wear and running shoes. The children's section had been a bust.

They eyed the stones, glittering in the fading sunlight, with interest and expectation. No matter how simple the construction of the traveling circles appeared to be from the outside, the power inside was palpable. The gargantuan slabs of gray stone formed the outermost perimeter of a

series of concentric circles. Within the stones hid a ring of fae mushrooms, all white and pink and spotted; then an inner circle of soft, spongy moss; and finally, at the heart of the traveling circle itself, an ancient rowan tree, twisted branches ever reaching toward the sky. Even from outside the stone boundary, they could feel the magic pulsate.

Voice pitched to a reverent whisper, Gren asked Mari, “So you’re absolutely sure she wants us in the Alpines?”

Mari, whose sense of the magic was present but muted in comparison, voiced her response at her normal volume: “Laria was quite clear about that, yeah.”

Ruv tugged at the day-old scruff on his chin, saying, “There should be a cabin near there that the pack uses sometimes. We can bed down for the night in comfort. I know they would not mind if we use it.” After a pause, he added, “That is, if the boys are not there themselves. It would be a tight fit for us plus another twelve men, but I am sure they would welcome the reunion.”

“Potentially sleeping on top a wolf pack still beats sleeping on the ground,” Gren offered.

Ruv opened his mouth to offer an additional suggestion, but before he could utter so much as a syllable, Sarah cleared her throat. “I hate to interrupt all the chatter,” she said, although her facial expression betrayed the fact that she really did not hate interrupting much at all, “but we are wanted persons, you know. We may want to get going while the going is to be got.”

Mari rolled her eyes and began a retort, but it was Gren who, adopting the pedantic tone he always acquired when explaining such things, replied, “We still need a few more minutes. I have to finish the song right at sunset. The rules for Earth-to-Aorea travel are picky, as I’m sure you remember, and we’re a little too far past the equinox for me to just rely on that to thin the veils.”

“All the same, may as well get ready,” Sarah quipped.

“A pack should only have one alpha,” Ruv observed, looking pointedly at Mari.

“It’s ok, Sarah’s right,” she interposed. “It’s time.”

Gren inhaled deeply and closed his eyes, bracing against the onslaught of magic and music he knew would rip through his brain as soon as he stepped across the stone perimeter. He was the last to enter. The others followed Mari, meeting at the center and forming a circle of their own around the battered rowan tree. Mari and Ruv stood to either side of Gren, while Wendy and the twins completed the ring. Lacing his fingers through Mari’s and gripping tight, he breathed, “Now.”

The wind, sensing the magic about to take place, began to rise. Wendy shuddered, her fingers trembling in Mari’s. “I’m st-starting to get nervous, now that it’s really happening,” she stammered.

“This is your last chance to back out,” Mari said softly.

Wendy shook her head in response. “I’m going.”

Then Gren began to sing, and the solid world fell away.

*Through the mists of space and time,
The changing fabric of violet light,
Into the snow, into wind and ice,
Among the everlasting pines.*

Gren’s song continued as the cold wind kept rising, surrounding them in a cascade of brittle leaves and dry autumn moss. The circle engulfed them in a blur of cold and sound, symphonic synchronicity and shifting space-time. They felt the pressure of the worlds compressing them, and yet all the while, Gren’s voice rang true.

*Bring us where our journey begins.
Bear us through the howling winds,
Into the snow, beyond winter’s eyes;
Bring us to the everlasting pines.*

As he began the third and final stanza, the raging wind vanished. The only sound the humans could perceive was

HIDDEN

Gren's melodic baritone. The sun finally dipped below the skyline, surrounding them in utter darkness.

*Through the mists of time and space,
Through dark nights and darker days,
Into the snow, into wind and ice;
Bring us to the everlasting pines.*

On Gren's final note, the silence shattered, and the ensuing darkness plucked them from the earth.

