

BOOK III OF THE YOUNG VAMPIRE CHRONICLES

CAPITAL CHAOS



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To Mom,
who instilled a love of books and reading.
Thank you for everything.

CHAPTER 1

“Detention on the first day of school?” Daea shouted as she walked into the Childaar home located under the National Gallery of Canada. She kicked off her shoes, which bounced off the wall with solid thuds.

Chuck, the team’s new leader, sat in the TV area, keeping an eye on the sports highlights. He looked at the clock. “Why are you here?”

The short, brown-haired, brown-eyed girl stormed into their spacious living area. “I decided that it wasn’t fair, so I didn’t have to stay.”

Ottawa’s A-team leader was a mousey looking boy with gold-flecked eyes and sandy hair. He shot a hard glance at the small girl.

Eli sat at the table in the main room next to Hudson, where their school books lay open. The short-haired, dark-eyed boy asked, “Does the teacher know?”

Daea walked to the kitchen and opened the fridge.

“Don’t touch that cake,” Hudson hollered. “It’s for dessert tonight.” He turned in his chair to address her. Even seated, the tall boy rose well above his study partner. His combed back, dark brown hair had a classic style. He wore his usual black T-shirt, black jeans, and black socks.

“It looks great,” Daea said, sticking her head into the fridge to smell it.

Chuck stood and moved into the kitchen to confront the girl. “Answer Eli’s question. Does the teacher know you are gone?”

“If she’s checked, then yes.”

“You snuck past her.”

Daea reached into the bag for another handful of chips. “Snuck? I don’t know if I would say that.”

“You left without permission?”

“I would say that.”

“You have to go back. We’ve just begun school, and you are already on thin ice,” the team leader stated. “She started class today by addressing you directly, saying that she had read your report card from last year’s teacher and that she wouldn’t put up with such antics.”

Daea shrugged and threw another handful of chips into her mouth.

The team leader snatched the bag out of the girl’s hand.

“Hey!” Daea protested.

“I’m serious. In case you haven’t noticed, things aren’t exactly going well in Ottawa these days. Jesi-Sera’s been kidnapped by Dracul, who is wreaking havoc on the city and country, and let’s not forget that he basically wiped out the previous A-team.”

“And the missions caused by the Suffering are more frequent, and each seems harder than the last,” Eli quipped.

“That too,” the Sight said, giving the Smart a look as if to say he did not need the help. “We are here to make the Kinedaar’s lives better, and that doesn’t seem to be your priority.”

Daea attempted to reclaim the bag of chips, but Chuck was quick to hold it out of her reach. The girl’s nose scrunched. “I know all that, but I don’t see why I have to go to school.”

“Because if you don’t, you could get expelled, and we need you here.”

“I don’t want to.”

“You don’t have a choice. Childaar must go to class.”

“I went.”

“You also need to pay attention and not horse around, like today with those sounds you were making when the teacher turned around.”

“It was funny.”

“Was it?”

“I thought so.”

“I thought it was disrespectful to the teacher and the students trying to learn.”

“Eli laughed.”

The Smart held up a finger to make a point. "I laughed the first time because I didn't expect it, but it wasn't funny."

"Hudson?" Daea asked, looking at the tall boy for support.

The Sovereign shook his head. "Sorry, Daea. I thought it was rude."

"You're all ganging up on me." The girl grabbed another bag of chips from the cupboard. "I'll be in the movie theater."

"No, you won't," Chuck barked. "You are going to go back to the class to apologize."

"No, I'm not," Daea replied as she started to walk away.

"Daea!" the Sight shouted. "We can't afford to have you get suspended or expelled. Do you want to get sent home?"

"Since I'd have to go to school there too, I guess not. Being a Childaar is alright."

"OK, then you will go back to the classroom and apologize to the teacher."

"Can I do that tomorrow?"

"No, she doesn't even know you are gone."

"What if I sneak back into detention? She will never know."

“You’ve already breached her trust. That deserves an apology.”

Daea looked at the two other boys for support.

Eli said, “Just do it.”

Hudson added, “And then we can start making dinner.”

“But, the cake is already made.” Daea opened the new bag of chips and ate a handful.

“We can’t just have cake for dinner,” Hudson said.

“Sure, we can.”

“Well, we aren’t going to. And you can’t have any cake unless you apologize to the teacher.”

“Seriously?”

Hudson tilted and lowered his head to show that was as good a deal as she was likely to get.

The small girl huffed. “I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“Can you just go?” Eli pleaded.

The Hardy stuck her tongue out at the three boys in the room, crossed her arms, and stomped across the floor to the entrance. “Don’t eat that cake without me,” she said as she slammed the door behind her.

The young girl walked through the halls below the nation’s art gallery. She found herself back in the full-sized

classroom. It looked much like any other, except this one did not have any online technology.

Their teacher frowned when Daea walked in. Before the girl could say anything, the woman chastised her for leaving and flaunting her authority. The teacher said that she had written an official reprimand to the school board. Daea raised her hands and asked her to reconsider but was told that the email had already been sent and that it wouldn't take many more to build a case that the young girl did not belong in such a great program and was wasting an opportunity many other kids would love to have.

The girl began to protest, but the teacher's face showed that maybe it was not the best time to press the argument. Daea mumbled a quick apology and asked if she could leave. The teacher said that she could, but that she had best reconsider her classroom efforts.

"I'm back," Daea said, announcing her return. "Let's eat."

"What did the teacher say?" Eli asked. He and Hudson stood in the kitchen, organizing ingredients.

"About what you would expect."

"That you need to behave?"

"Something like that."

"Are you going to?"

"I'm not sure I did anything wrong."

"Really?" the Smart and Sovereign said in unison.

"Really," the girl answered. "Now, let's eat that cake."

Hudson held up a hand. "Not until after supper."

"What's for supper?"

"Stir-fry," Eli said. "Hudson is showing me how to make one."

The girl's eyes lit up. "I hope you are making a candy stir-fry. We could put gobstoppers, blue whales, bananaramas, and cinnamon hearts on cotton candy. We could even sprinkle some pop rocks on top for texture."

"I'm going to veto that," Chuck said from the TV area, where he reclined on a sofa reading a report and watched the beginning of a baseball game.

"What?" Daea said, overemphasizing a hurt tone.

"I appreciate you making a suggestion, but that doesn't sound good."

The Sovereign said, "This one is going to be more conventional."

"Good," Chuck grunted.

Eli turned toward Daea and asked, "Do you want to help chop vegetables?"

"Count me out," the girl said. She rummaged through a drawer and found a bag of salted caramels. She leaned against a freezer and watched the boys.

Eli and Hudson shared the kitchen space as they prepared their ingredients, utensils, and cookware.

“Start with the vegetables,” the Sovereign instructed. “I’ll make the sauce, and then we’ll get cooking.”

While the Smart concentrated on slicing a handful of mushrooms, he looked toward Chuck and asked, “What can we expect at tonight’s meeting? Do we know anything about the new B-team?”

Chuck stood and walked into the dining area next to the kitchen and began setting the table. “I got the file. Two of them are coming from New York City, where they’ve been working with the Orakles.”

Eli said, “An Orakle is coming? Wow!”

“No,” Chuck clarified. “Abigail is close, but she doesn’t have Scry. She manifested two levels of Seeingness early, so they put her near the Orakles to get her accustomed to their ways, but she hasn’t developed that last level. She did get three levels in Hideness, though.”

Eli said, “Cloak. That must help get teams into places. If you had that, these government buildings wouldn’t be so tough.”

The Sight nodded in agreement.

“I bet she will have a lot of interesting information. I have some questions about Owen’s Tomes. I’ve been finding inconsistencies.”

“She might be able to help you with that.”

“Who else is there?” Daea asked before tossing a caramel into her mouth.

“Rosalicia is coming with Abigail. She’s a Hardy from Brazil.”

“Woohoo, go Hardies. Can she turn into a wolf?”

Chuck shook his head. “She doesn’t have any Formness.”

“What does she have?”

“Three Powness and two Tuffness.”

“Who are the other two?” Eli asked.

“We’ve also got a fifteen-year-old Quick named Ion from eastern Canada who has been working in Vancouver. Interestingly, she is an L3, and all her Gifts are in Psiness.”

“Blast,” Hudson said, impressed. “That’s so good on Stomps.”

“Who’s the last?” Eli asked.

“Arjun, a sixteen-year-old rookie who just had his Awakening. He’s from Toronto and has a level in Adoreness.

“Sixteen?” Daea said with a laugh. “He’s older than me, but I have more Gifts.”

“You have more Gifts than most Childaar,” Eli said.

“Especially since getting Impact and Indomitable.”

The small girl flexed her arms then kissed each bicep.

“That is on the older side of becoming Childaar,” the Sovereign added.

“We’ll take all the help we can get,” Chuck stated.

Hudson used a press to mince garlic into a measuring cup filled with soy sauce. “That seems like a pretty good team.”

“I think so too,” Chuck concurred.

“Where are we meeting them?” Eli asked as he finished the last of the chopping.

“Here,” Chuck said.

“Yes, but where? Which room? Which piece of art?”

“Does it matter?”

Eli said, “I think some are better than others.” He had finished with the mushrooms, and tears welled in his eyes as he chopped onion.

“You can choose,” the team leader said as he finished setting the table with cups and napkins.

“Alright.”

“Where do you have in mind?” Hudson asked as he added spices to the sauce.

“I don’t know. I’ll go take a look after we eat. Want to come?”

“Sure,” Hudson said. “There are lots of good options.”

Daea asked, “Are they staying at the Museum of Nature?”

Chuck nodded. He filled the glasses on the table with water from a lovely ceramic pitcher.

The small Hardy walked to the fridge and grabbed a can of cream soda, which she placed next to the water glass at her spot.

Hudson went into full-on chef mode as Eli handed him ingredients, which he tossed into the sizzling wok. A delicious aroma filled the room. The rice cooker tinged, and he pulled the bowl-shaped pan off the burner.

Chuck looked over at the boys cooking. "This is amazing. Thanks, you two."

"No problem, boss," the tall boy replied. "It's nice to be able to cook again. As a Rogue, I never stayed anywhere long enough to get set up with a good kitchen."

"Please don't call me boss."

"Come and get it," the Smart announced.

The Childaar lined up with bowl-like plates. Hudson scooped the rice first and then topped it with the stir-fry medley.

"This looks so good," Chuck said.

The Sovereign smiled as he filled the team leader's dish.

Daea stood with her plate, scrutinizing the food in the wok. "No candy at all in there?"

"Sorry, Daea," Hudson replied.

"I'll just wait for dessert."

"You have to have some dinner first if you are going to have dessert."

Daea rolled her eyes. "Why? It's not like we even need to eat."

"Tradition, routine," the tall boy answered.

"Are you sure?"

"I am."

"OK, but don't give me too much. Just enough so that I can have some cake."

He scooped small portions onto her plate. "If you eat that, you can have dessert."

"You sound like my parents."

"And mine," Eli echoed, sitting down at the dining table.

"And mine," Chuck repeated.

"Probably all parents everywhere," Eli said with a laugh.

After they had finished the main course, Daea quickly retrieved the cake. She placed it in the middle of the table with lavish ceremony.

Chuck rubbed his stomach. "I don't know if I have room."

"That's on you," Daea said, taking the long knife. She looked at Hudson. "May I?"

The Sovereign nodded and handed her small plates to dish the slices upon.

"Do you want one?" she asked Chuck, who sat back and shook his head.

“Eli?”

“Yes, please. Not too big.”

Daea sliced about an eighth of the cake and placed it on one of the plates.

“That’s too big,” the Smart said.

“What?”

“I’ll take it,” Hudson said, reaching over to take it.

Daea placed the knife on the cake to about half of what she had just cut. “How’s that?” she asked.

“Perfect,” Eli replied.

Daea handed the boy a plate before cutting a large slice for herself.

“I may want some later,” Chuck said.

“No promises,” Daea replied.

The Childaar enjoyed their dessert. After they finished, Eli said, “We don’t have much time before the B-team arrives. Let’s go pick a room.”

The team gathered at the door to their home. They put on their shoes and headed out into the hall, where they climbed the stairwell into the gallery.

“Where are we going?” Chuck asked.

A big smile crossed Eli’s face. He adjusted his suit jacket and said, “You’ll see.”

The Sight gave the Smart a sideways glance but didn’t say anything. “Did you pick a spot?”

“We sure did.”

Hudson smiled and added, “It’s the best place for a meeting.”

The gallery had just closed for the night, and a few staff finished their final duties. Hudson walked at the front of the group. He towered over everyone, and his eyes were watchful as his steps led them from the entrance up the long, inclined concourse. Tall concrete walls rose up beside them but didn’t quite meet the ceiling where moonlight filtered through rows of V-shaped skylights.

They walked into the glass-enclosed Great Hall. The enclosure gave them a spectacular view of the three massive parliamentary buildings in front of downtown, Major’s Hill Park, and the Ottawa River. The spiraling Library of Parliament, illuminated by cleverly placed lights, gave it a magical glow. The mammoth stone Peace Tower was unmistakable as it jutted up from the middle of the Center Block. It was easy to see the gigantic Canadian flag flying atop its peak even late into the night.

“Here we are,” Eli said, taking in the surroundings.

“We’re meeting them here?” Chuck asked. “I thought you were going to choose a piece from the collection.”

“That was the plan,” Eli said. “But we couldn’t decide which would be best. Then when we found ourselves here, we knew it was the spot. That view is hard to beat.”

“It’s pretty good,” the team leader said, looking out the rectangular windows. The wind gusted and tried to pull the leaves off their branches, but it was still early in September, and while some had begun to change colors, most of them held on. The scene was not perfect, as the Suffering, a dark, inky-black substance visible only to Childaar, swirled on the ground beyond the location’s perimeter. Only the protections of the gallery kept it from encroaching.

They did not have to wait long before they heard footsteps in the quiet space coming up the ramp.

“Here they come,” Hudson whispered under his breath.

“Everyone on your best behavior,” Chuck said to the team, but his gaze was on Daea.

Leading the new group, a solid girl, of about sixteen or seventeen, with muscular, bronze-colored skin, moved as though she was protecting those behind her. Rosalicia’s dark hair had been buzzed short, and while her brooding expression didn’t challenge the A-team, it didn’t look friendly, either. Her arms poked through a sleeveless black vest, which matched her tight black pants.

Daea unwrapped a lollipop, which she then used to point at the big girl then to Hudson and said, “You two have the same style.”

Chuck shushed the girl.

Behind the big Hardy, a slight, pasty-skinned girl, also in her late teens, stood wearing a beige trench coat with an elegant, red silk scarf wrapped around her neck. A short brown ponytail stuck out from under a brown fedora with a gray band around its brim. Abigail's stern gaze bore into the team ahead of her.

Two younger Childaar flanked the older girls. A bleached blonde, spiky-haired girl with a reddish-brown complexion and a punk-rock style sauntered into the room to the left. Ion examined the expansive glass hall with an interested gaze.

On the right, an attractive boy stood with his hands in his pockets and a good-humored grin on his face. Arjun's long black hair complemented his creamy brown skin and big dark eyes. He wore a white buttoned shirt and a pair of khakis. A few strands of hair fell across his face, which he reflexively wiped away.

The two teams approached each other and met in the middle of the great hall under the high, glass dome.

"Welcome to Ottawa," Chuck said. His gold-flecked eyes scanned each of the Childaar across from him.

The older girl in the trench coat stepped forward. In a high, sharp voice, she said, "Enchanté."

Chuck turned and waved his hand toward the A-team. "That's Hudson, Eli, and Daea."

Abigail said, "I am familiar with your team, as I am sure you are with ours, so we should not waste time with idle pleasantries lest our tempers grow short." She reached into her trench coat and pulled out a folder, which she passed to Chuck.

"What's this?"

"My notes on the happenings in the city and how we are going to resolve them."

Daea removed the lollipop from her mouth and pointed it at the slight girl. "This should be the other way around. Chuck's your boss. He's going to tell you what to do."

The leader of the B-team shot the small Hardy a hard stare. She used her Telepathy to communicate. *Be the solution, not the problem.*

"Get out of my head," the small Hardy shouted.

"Daea," Chuck snapped. He returned his attention back to Abigail. "You've read my reports?"

"I have."

"Is there anything you don't understand?"

"How this city has gotten so out of control."

Chuck squinted like a predator tracking prey. "Did you miss the part about Dracul?"

"I did not, but I'm not convinced."

"You think I'm lying?"

Abigail's gaze drilled into her fellow Sight. "I believe you think it is Dracul. It's just that he is more legend than reality. Encounters with Eldaar are rare, but when it happens, they tend to be much younger."

Daea's eyes opened wide as she blurted, "Then who kidnapped Jesi-Sera?"

Abigail gave the girl a dismissive glance and then Chuck a disapproving one. "Eldaar are wily creatures, masters of deception. This one is likely masquerading as the ancient one."

"It's Dracul," Chuck said in a low growl.

"It is," Eli said.

"I think so too," Hudson concurred.

Daea stood with the lollipop in her mouth, her hands on her hips, and an "I told you so" expression on her face.

"We will see about that, but I have been around long enough to see what is on the surface isn't always what lies beneath."

Daea said, "You better hope he doesn't kidnap you too."

"That would be preposterous since I am wise enough not to enter the domain or accept gifts from an Eldaar."

Eli said, "How do you know that? I've transcribed all of Owen's Tomes, and that was never mentioned."

Abigail nodded. "Yes, Tomes can be frustrating. You find something in one, and then the next one says the

opposite." She looked at the young boy, who smiled as she used Telepathy to communicate with him.

"Thanks," Eli said with a big smile. "I'd like that."

"What?" Daea exclaimed.

"We're going to have meetings to discuss this further."

"Not me. It's bad enough that I have to go to school."

"Who says you are invited?"

"Who says I want to be?"

"Hey!" Chuck yelled at the young kids.

The B-team uncomfortably watched the altercation. Abigail frowned and asked, "Is there anything else we need to know?"

The A-team team leader met her glance with a hard stare of his own. "Just keep your side of the city clean."

"You don't have to worry about us. In fact, how would you like to switch sides? We can take over the A-team duties, and you can go back to the B-team, as we are better prepared to deal with the bigger problems plaguing this town."

Daea pursed her lips and looked like she was about to explode as veins protruded on her forehead. Before she could say anything, Chuck placed a hand on her shoulder and said, "Let's keep things how they are for now."

Eli pointed out the window. "Looks like the Suffering is growing."

Hudson grimaced and looked toward the members of the new B-team. "Get used to that."

Chuck examined the inky-black aether that flowed around the gallery's perimeter. "It looks like it's pretty far in the south." He turned to Abigail and said, "Since you just arrived, how about we do this, and we'll begin normal duties tomorrow."

"What!" Daea exclaimed.

Chuck, whose hand was still on the small girl's shoulder, squeezed to quiet her.

Abigail's stern face softened as she looked out the window. She returned her gaze to the other team leader. "That is a kind offer and appreciated, but we'll do it. It will give us a chance to get to know our new home."

CHAPTER 2

"I still can't believe Abigail wanted us to switch sides. We're the A-team," Daea said from the backseat of Chuck's silver pickup truck.

"Drop it," the Sight said from the driver's seat. "You've been griping about that for days now. How many times do I have to tell you that it was just a suggestion? She thinks that because she and Rosalicia are more experienced, it might be better if they took over the main parts of the city."

"But we're the A-team, and you're the leader of the city."

"I don't see what makes me qualified for that."

"I think you're the best person for the job, boss," Hudson said from the front passenger's seat. "You know this city better than anyone."

Eli was sitting next to Daea in the back. "Besides, the most interesting part of the meeting was what she said about Tomes and lore. We're meeting next week to discuss it."

"What?" Daea exclaimed. "We have more important things to worry about. Abigail is attempting a coup."

"It's not a coup," Chuck said. "And, I told you to drop it, so please drop it." His serious tone indicated that it was

the end of the conversation. He looked over at Hudson next to him and added, "And, please don't call me boss."

The tall boy smiled. "You got it, boss." He pointed out the front of the window and said, "We're leaving the city?"

A flock of geese huddled in a field preparing for their migratory flight south.

"Looks like it," Eli answered. "Unless this Operation presents itself in the next few kilometers."

"Can't we use miles?" Daea complained. "Kilometers makes no sense."

"Actually," the three boys in the truck said in unison.

Chuck and Hudson quieted for Eli, who explained, "Kilometers makes more sense. There are ten millimeters in a centimeter, one hundred centimeters in a meter, and one thousand meters in a kilometer. It's all divisible by ten."

"I don't see how that's better," Daea said.

Chuck looked at the girl through the rearview mirror. "How many feet are there in a mile? Isn't it three thousand or something?"

"Five thousand, two hundred, and eighty," Hudson said, looking over at the driver. "Not even close."

Chuck shrugged. "That's a ridiculous number. What's a foot, even?"

"Twelve inches," Eli answered.

"Then what's an inch?" the Sight asked.

"One thirty-sixth of a yard."

“And what’s a yard?”

Nobody answered.

Daea was reaching around the bottom of her backpack for candies that had fallen out of their bag. “It doesn’t matter. There are three Americans on this team and only one Canadian, so we should use inches, yards, and miles.”

“I prefer the metric system,” Eli said. “It’s better.”

Hudson turned to look at the girl in the back of the cab. “I do too.”

Daea slammed herself back in her seat. “Well, I like the American way, so we should do it that way!”

The boys all laughed.

“I’m serious,” Daea protested.

“I believe you,” Hudson said, still turned in his seat. “But we don’t always get what we want. Especially if there are other people involved. It’s called compromise.”

“Not my specialty.”

“We know,” Eli and Chuck said in unison, prompting a chuckle from Hudson and a scowl from Daea.

The small girl’s nose scrunched. “I never get my way.”

This time the vehicle erupted in laughter. Even Daea smiled.

The silver truck turned down a paved road. It was still early in the evening, so a few rays of light crept over the horizon to illuminate the colorful forested area, but the tranquility of the scene was ruined by the ever-present

Suffering, which grew higher and more turbulent by the minute.

“The raceway,” Chuck said. “That’s what I thought but wasn’t sure.”

“What kind of raceway?” Hudson asked.

“Horse racing,” Eli answered. “I’ve never been, but they advertise in much of the tourism literature promoting Ottawa.”

“Think we will get to ride the horses?” Daea said, her tiff forgotten.

Hudson answered, “You never know.”

“If only one of us gets to, it should be me,” the Hardy added. “I’m the lightest, and jockeys are small.”

“I’m not that much bigger than you,” Eli said. “Why not me?”

Daea answered, “I have Tuffness, so I would be better suited to handle a fall.”

“I can talk to horses,” Chuck said. “Maybe I should do it.”

“I can...” Hudson trailed off.

“You’re too tall,” Daea said. “Your feet would touch the ground.”

“They wouldn’t.”

“We don’t even know if that’s the Op,” Chuck said. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“Maybe we should all go horseback riding sometime,” Eli suggested. “That could be a fun thing to do.”

“Yeah,” Daea agreed.

“I’ve never ridden a horse,” Hudson said. “I’d like to give it a try.”

“Neither have I,” Eli replied.

Daea said, “I got to once on a movie set. It was set in the old times before cars. It seemed kind of boring. I never saw the final version, but it was fun to be there while they made it.”

“A movie story we haven’t heard,” Eli said.

“I forgot about that one.”

A giant sign greeted the team as they pulled into a full parking lot. Fancy columns guided patrons toward the entrance. Bright spotlights shone from behind the building, where a crowd clamored in anticipation of the next event. The Suffering churned as waves of the dark ichor crashed toward the building.

“We had better hurry,” Chuck said. “I don’t think we have much time.”

His teammates followed him as he ran toward the automatic doors. The heat and humidity of the late summer evening struck them as they left the vehicle.

They were stopped at the entrance by a host, who asked them about their purpose for being there. Chuck

explained that they just wanted to see the horse races. They were told that while children were allowed, they had to stay out of the gambling areas. Daea said that they were Childaar and that they would go where they pleased. The team leader admonished her and told the man that they would go straight to the track.

A blast of air conditioning smacked the young vampires as they walked inside. Pictures of winning horses lined the corridor's wall, which they followed toward the back.

Chuck turned to Daea and said, "Your arguing didn't help at all. In fact, it cost us time that we need for this Operation."

"I didn't like his attitude."

"That's not the point," the team leader said. "What if that had popped the mission?"

Daea shrugged. "It didn't, and he didn't have to act that way."

"In what way?" Chuck asked. "He was doing his job. You have to be old enough to be in some areas. It makes sense."

As they walked through the hallway, near the restaurant, Eli pointed and said, "Whoa, look at those pinball machines."

A half dozen rectangular gaming machines lined the wall between the restaurant and the washroom. The boy

rushed over to inspect them. Happiness crossed his face as he ran his hands over the glass tops, but his expression changed to puzzled determination as he looked at their fronts.

“Come on, Eli. No time for that,” Chuck hollered as the rest of the team walked through the door to the outside.

The Smart rushed to catch up with his teammates, where they were once again smashed by the heat. “The same person has all the high scores on all the machines. They use ‘BLD’ as their initials.”

Daea patted the boy on his back. “I bet you want to beat them all.”

“Kind of,” the young boy agreed.

“Focus,” Chuck said. “We’re in the middle of a mission. We have to keep our eye on the ball.”

“We’ll come back and beat those scores,” Daea said.

The team walked outside into the track area, and Hudson inspected the location. “This place isn’t that big.”

The patrons' seats were confined to the bleachers built out from the backside of the raceway’s building. It was a full house, and the Kinedaar glistened in the cramped quarters on the hot evening. A high concrete fence surrounded the premises, while a smaller chain-link one separated the dirt-covered oval racetrack from stables and maintenance structures.

“But it is busy,” Eli said, pointing at the people sitting in the stands.

The crowd was antsy. Chuck asked a sunburnt woman wearing a visor and holding a rolled-up program when the next race would begin. She told him that there was only one more scheduled, and it was already twenty minutes late and added that she had to get home to let her dogs out, and the delay was keeping her away. Chuck suggested that she didn’t have to stay for the last race, and she could go home now to take care of them. The woman gave the boy a dirty look and yelled at no one in particular to get the race started. A few people within her vicinity agreed with the sentiment.

“The locals are getting restless,” Hudson said. “We had better hurry and see why the race isn’t starting.”

“Down there.” Daea pointed. “There’s a group of people by those stables.”

“And two security guards,” Eli said. “I doubt they will let us by.”

Chuck surveyed the area. “Stay here. I am going to investigate.” The Sight used his Unnoticeable and disappeared in front of their eyes.

Daea spotted a man with a tray of snacks. She raised her hand to get his attention.

“Let’s stand near the top so that we aren’t in anyone’s way,” Hudson said, taking the younger kids up a flight of

stairs to the top of the seating area. The vendor changed his course to meet them at their destination, and Daea bought a small brown, butter-stained bag of popcorn. She scooped a handful into her mouth and offered some to her friends, who shook their heads and surveyed the area.

Even though they were high up in the stands, the Suffering crept up and rolled around their legs.

Hudson kicked at the dark, swirling substance. "Yuck."

"I think we are going to get to ride horses," Daea said before finishing the bag of popcorn.

Chuck appeared next to the team.

"What did you find?" Hudson asked.

"Yeah, what did you find?" Daea repeated.

"The horses refuse to leave the stable. They won't come out to race. One of the employees whipped them to get them to come out, but they weren't his, nor should he have been abusing them like that. Now the Kinedaar are all fighting amongst themselves."

Eli pointed at the scene in the distance. "They sure look heated."

The foggy Suffering rose and swirled.

"Anything else?" Hudson asked.

Chuck nodded. "I snuck past them to talk to the horses, and they are spooked. They kept talking about dark individuals. They are scared of something."

“Individuals,” Eli repeated with emphasis on the final zed sounding syllable.

Hudson sighed. “Could it have been Dracul? If not, who else?”

“Maybe a Thraldaar,” Eli suggested. “We killed Ismerelda, but I suspect he has more than just her.”

“It’s hard to say,” Chuck said. “But this isn’t good.”

The intercom buzzed, and a voice announced that the last race was canceled due to unforeseen circumstances. The crowd groaned and fumed as they left the seating area. The Suffering grew like a rising tide before popping into a fine mist that fell to the ground.

“So much for that,” Daea said. “Things are going to get worse for the people of Ottawa.”

“It seems like these missions just get harder and harder,” Eli said. “We hardly had any time for this one.”

“They have. Our win rate has plummeted since Jesi-Sera disappeared,” Chuck said.

“Regardless of what Abigail thinks, Dracul must be involved,” Eli replied. “We’ve seen him subvert the country’s institutions and bully journalists. I think he has fingers in all this chaos.”

“We have to find him and kill him,” Daea said.

Eli turned and looked at the small girl. “I’m sure Childaar have been saying that for a long time, but yes, that would be a success.”

“For the whole world,” Hudson added.

The Sight sighed. “I’ll let Abigail know about this. We’ll have to build a case to convince her.”

“Another chance for her to boss us around,” Daea said.

Chuck gave the small girl a hard look. “She’s here to help, and she knows more than us.”

“It’s annoying. I don’t know why Rosalicia puts up with her. We Hardies usually have good judgment.”

Eli chortled. “You’re the only Hardy you’ve ever known. They obviously have history together.”

The girl’s nose scrunched. “I don’t like her telling us what to do.”

“All she did was make a suggestion.”

“Exactly. I didn’t like it.”

Hudson said, “You need to relax. We’re all on the same side.”

Chuck pointed at the exit. “Nothing more to do here. Let’s head home.”

“Do we have time for a game of pinball?” Eli asked as they entered the cool building and walked past the machines.

Chuck looked at his watch. “Why not?”

Eli popped four coins into the Addams Family themed machine and pushed the start button four times. “We’re all in,” he said as the familiar da-da-da-dum

followed by two finger snaps theme played. The machine's front showed Gomez and Morticia Addams in an embrace in front of their spooky mansion. Lurch, the family's butler, held the door to a 1930's luxury car in the bottom left. Up top, in one of the windows, Cousin Fester conducted a science experiment as a shot of electricity blasted across the front of the house toward the children, Wednesday and Pugsley, who stood on the ground holding a lightning rod.

They each took turns playing the silver ball, hitting the ramps, and engaging the bumpers. Upon completion, Eli won, Hudson came in second, Chuck third, and Daea last, but no one was close to beating the high score.

"I don't know if I like pinball," Daea said.

"Don't be sore," Eli replied. "You can't be so aggressive. You lost two balls to tilt. You can't move the machine."

"I would have lost regardless."

"I don't think so. You had shots." Eli looked at the screen, which flashed "BLD" as the high score. "Do we have time for another?"

Chuck shook his head. "We had better get home to do some work. We have a lot to do before class."

Daea groaned. "I like pinball more than class." She bent down to get her backpack. "Hey, look at this." She crawled underneath the machine to retrieve a book. She held it up for Eli to take before scrambling up off the floor.

The Smart inspected the old, masterly bound hardcover. It was a copy of *Frankenstein* that had been handwritten by someone with impeccable penmanship. Given the quality of craftsmanship and the time it would have taken to create, he was surprised to see the dogeared pages and highlighted and underlined text. He inspected the spine. "This could be an original. Who would do this?"

"I wonder if the Operation had something to do with that book?" Hudson suggested.

"Maybe we have to take it to someone for repair," Eli replied.

"Let's go," Chuck barked.

As they left, Eli brought the book to the doorman they talked with on their way in. He explained that they had found it under the pinball machine and wondered if they had a lost and found.

The man took it, thumbed through the pages, and gave it back, telling the boy he could keep it; otherwise, he'd throw it in the garbage. The Smart recoiled at the idea and said he'd find someone to restore it.

CHAPTER 3

“So far, so good. No mission,” Chuck said, walking into the Childaar home. “Let’s use our time well.”

“Investigate?” Hudson asked from the kitchen, where he was making cookies.

“That’s right,” the team leader answered.

Daea stood next to the Sovereign, trying to eat the raw dough, but the tall boy slapped her hand each time she made an attempt. “We’ve been investigating for a month and haven’t found anything.”

Eli placed a bookmark in the Tome he had received from Abigail and turned his attention to the team.

Chuck gestured uncertainty by throwing his hands in the air. “Maybe tonight is the night. I’m going to check the transportation hubs. Hudson, could you circle the city? I know it’s a long shot, but you could spot something.”

“Got it, boss,” the tall boy said.

“Eli, scour the dailies. News, police reports, and other paperwork.”

The Smart nodded.

“I’ll hit the street?” Daea asked.

“Yep. Where Hudson is going to be high overhead, you are going to be on the ground. Check the usual spots.”

“Comic book stores, boutiques, and cafes?”

Chuck nodded. "Exactly.

"Alright, the sun is down. The days are getting shorter, and we know that the city goes to sleep early, so let's use our time well."

"Go team!" Daea shouted as the three Childaar put on their shoes and prepared to leave.

Whiskers, a big, sturdy German Shepherd, awaited them outside the museum's exit. The air was warm and the Suffering lapped against the perimeter of the gallery.

The dog ran around, tail wagging, as it licked the young vampires and sought pets.

"Can I take Whiskers with me?" Daea asked.

The team leader nodded. "Sure, maybe he'll catch a scent. Just don't get into any fights with him, even against Crawlies."

The girl shrieked with excitement and gave the dog a big hug. "Daea and Whiskers, on the case."

"Any last questions?" Chuck asked. When neither Daea nor Hudson said anything, he clapped his hands. "We will reconvene here at midnight to share our findings."

"And sooner if a mission appears?" Hudson added.

"Yes, thank you. Keep your eyes on the Suffering," Chuck said before he disappeared.

Hudson gave Daea a playful salute before using his Upness to Jump high into the evening sky.

Daea walked toward downtown. She took the long way down Sussex, past rows of small, street-front restaurants, boutiques, and other small businesses. Whiskers walked obediently beside the girl. The Kinedaar on the street seemed somewhat apprehensive to walk by them, but once they got closer and saw the dog's wagging tail and bright, happy eyes, they smiled, stopped, and wanted to give a few pets and scratches of their own, which he was more than glad to accept.

The first store she stopped at was called The Gold Octopus. She opened the door, and she saw two young employees behind a counter. One wore a Star Wars shirt, the other a Star Trek. Whiskers pushed his way inside and pranced up to the counter, which the workers moved around to pet and play with him. They recognized the small girl and told her that they still had not seen Jesi-Sera. The young woman mentioned it was too bad because she missed seeing the rare comics the Scottish girl would bring to show them, not to mention that she was a great customer. Daea thanked them for the information and said she would take a look around.

The Gold Octopus had more than comic books. Daea saw board and card games, statues and figurines, along with shirts and novels. Daea returned to the front, where the employees had brought a bowl of water for the dog, who lapped up the water with his big pink tongue. Daea

thanked them again, said goodbye, and called for Whiskers to leave.

Back on the street, the Childaar and German Shepherd walked to Laurier Avenue and then cut into downtown on O'Connor Street. The buildings concentrated and grew taller.

As she walked toward the next comic shop, she decided to visit a restaurant named Capital Fun that had a wide selection of arcade games. The door opened into an open-concept space with tables in the middle and a series of video games and pinball machines against the walls. The smell of deep-fried food wafted through the area as staff came and went through two swinging doors that led into the kitchen. Loud rock music combined with sound effects from the games engulfed the room. A dirty-blonde, waifish, young woman in a long, deep red jacket played pinball. Daea noticed that the same person held all the high scores, with the initials "BLD."

A waiter yelled that dogs were not allowed in the restaurant. He pointed at Whiskers, who accepted scraps from patrons at one of the tables. Not realizing that the German Shepherd had followed her in, she apologized and called Whiskers to leave.

Back on the street, they walked to a shop called Beyond Infinity, which was only a block away from the restaurant. Along with comic racks, spinners, bags, boards,

and unsorted boxes, a stale funk greeted them when they entered. This store specialized in comic books and accessories. They didn't carry games like the previous store.

Daea walked up to a middle-aged woman, whom she had talked with many times, and asked if Jesi-Sera had been around. The woman attempted to give Whiskers a disapproving look, but the dog's deep hazel eyes were irresistible, and she smiled despite there being an animal in the store. In a curt tone, the proprietor answered that she still hadn't been in. In fact, the woman said her file had become too full. If it got to that point with most customers, they might cancel it, but because she had been their best customer by far over the past year, she would keep it going.

Daea asked what she meant by file and was told that customers could create an account for books to be automatically added. That way, they always got what they wanted. The small girl said that she was good friends with Jesi-Sera, and wondered if she could buy them.

The woman remarked that that would be unusual, but when she opened a filing cabinet and pulled out a folder labeled "JS" and then another four folders behind it, she assessed the sale versus the ethics of selling someone's stuff to another person. She clarified that the comics would indeed be for Jesi-Sera, and told her that it would cost a lot

of money. Daea said that they were and that it would not be a problem as she removed her backpack and pulled a wad of cash from one of the side pockets. The worker seemed surprised to see so much money from such a young kid but exchanged it for the horde of comic books.

Daea thanked the woman for her help and left the store with three large bags full of comics, along with the ones placed in her backpack.

Whiskers's big, bushy tail wagged as they walked down the street.

"Looks like we have some reading ahead of us."

The dog licked the girl's hand.

"Let's take this back to the museum and get a snack."

"What have you got there?" Eli asked, seeing Daea walking into the Childaar home. "You look like a pack mule."

"I bought Jesi-Sera's comics."

Eli stood up from the desk where he had piles of newspapers and reports stacked to give his friend a hand. He took one of the bags and brought it over to the workspace. "Find anything?"

"Not really. It would be a hassle walking around with these, so I brought them home. I'm going to head out again."

Eli pulled comic books out of a bag. "She sure orders a lot."

"How can she even read them all?"

"She did spend a lot of time reading." The Smart looked longingly at their previous team leader's beanbag chair near the play area.

"True. Let's see what we've got," the girl said, digging through the bags.

"Looks like a lot of superhero stuff. Oh, there's a crossover event."

"What's that?"

"When they combine a story arc across various characters. See here," the boy said, pointing at a cover. "Even though this is a Wonder Woman comic, Superman and Batman are also in it." He then grabbed a couple of others. "And these are Superman and Batman comics featuring Wonder Woman. These numbers at the top show you what order to read them in."

"Think there would be any clues if we read these? I could get us a snack, and we could get comfortable in the beanbag chairs like we used to."

Eli smiled. "I doubt it, and I don't think Chuck would be happy to see us reading comic books when he gets back."

"What are you doing reading comic books?" Daea growled in her best impression of the Sight. She walked to

the kitchen, opened the fridge, and removed a pie Hudson had baked earlier in the day. She took a spoon and ate straight from the tray. Between swallows, she said, "Guess what I saw?"

"What?"

"You know Capital Fun?"

"Of course. We've been there many times."

"All the high scores on the pinball machines are held by the same person."

"BLD?"

"Yep." The young girl stuffed more pie into her mouth.

"Wow, someone likes pinball."

"If you still want to beat their high score, we should go there. It is easier to get to than the race track."

"I can't wait," Eli said.

The door to the Childaar home opened. "Why are you here?" the A-team's leader growled, giving Daea a hard look.

The girl pointed at the bags and books. "I bought Jesi-Sera's comics and brought them back."

Chuck looked at the desk and gave a curt nod. "This actually works out. Let's go. I have an idea."

"Stickball?" the girl asked.

"No."

Eli said, "If you are playing that game with the beavers, I'd like to come and play or cheer you on. It sounds like you don't have any fans."

Chuck said, "We have no time for stickball. I need bait."

"For what?"

"I was talking to a raccoon who said she saw a tiger, but she didn't get a good look because she hid in a burrow."

Eli's eyes widened. "Dracul's pet?"

"That's what I was thinking."

"That would mean Dracul is in town."

"Which could lead us to Jesi-Sera," Daea said.

The Sight nodded.

"And what do you need me to do?" the Hardy asked.

I need you to sit and wait while I watch from afar. You are the toughest, so I don't think you are in danger; I bet you could beat it in a fight."

"I can do that."

"Can I help?" Eli asked.

Chuck shook his head and added, "Thanks, but I'd like to use a single Childaar as a lure. I worry that if it sees too many of us, it may not come out. I hope it can't sense me. And, Whiskers might catch its scent."

"Where are you going to go?" Eli asked.

"We'll go to Parliament."

“No lack of Suffering there.”

“I’m going to need snacks for this.” The Hardy got her backpack and headed to the kitchen.

“You should bring some of these comics, too.” Eli held up a few of the books on the table. “If you are just going to be hanging around waiting.”

“Good idea,” the girl said. “Could you choose some for me, please?”

“Sure,” the boy said, rummaging through the comics. “The crossover event looks fun.”

Chuck clapped his hands. “Hurry up.”

Having refilled her backpack with snacks, Daea walked to Eli and stuffed the books he had selected into the bag's main pouch.

“Be careful with those,” Eli warned. “Jesi-Sera won’t be happy if you damage them. They are collector items, after all.”

“I’ll happily take that scolding,” Daea said as she walked to the door, where Chuck waited.

The two Childaar walked through the halls to the stairway, which led up and out into the early night. The temperature had dropped from earlier in the day. She pulled the hood of her purple jacket over her head. “It’s cooling off. It’s kind of nice after that hot, sticky summer.”

“Winter is on its way,” Chuck said as he led the pair through Major’s Hill Park, situated between the Rideau Canal and American embassy, toward the looming Parliament buildings. The park trees still had some leaves, but most of the red, yellow, and purple foliage rested on the ground. They took the path behind the Château Laurier hotel. They found themselves on Wellington Avenue across from the National War Memorial, a tall monument honoring soldiers who fought for Canada, and the old rail station, which had been used for various purposes over the years.

“We seem to end up here a lot,” Daea said.

Chuck nodded. “It is the busiest part of the city, and Parliament gets more than a fair share of Suffering.” Chuck kicked at the black, inky oozy substance swirling around the ground. His foot passed effortlessly through the effervescent vapors.

“What was it like here when you first arrived?”

“It was busy, as I’ve heard most capital cities are, but nothing like what we have been experiencing. Owen was a strict leader on missions, but once the work was done, he allowed us to do whatever we wanted.”

“What did you do?”

“I spent a lot of time making friends with animals.”

“The beavers.”

“Yes, and deer, owls, chipmunks...”

“Chipmunks?”

Chuck laughed as they walked through a gate into the grounds of the Canadian Parliament. “Those friendships didn’t go far — mostly pleasantries. They just aren’t that smart. Incredibly food motivated, as are most animals, I suppose, but chipmunks, squirrels, and shrews especially so.”

Daea tossed a coin into the Centennial Flame, a low fountain in which emblems for each province and territory surrounded a fiery center. “What’s your favorite?”

At that moment, they spotted Whiskers bounding toward them across the lawn.

“Dogs, of course,” Chuck said, crouching and letting the happy dog plow into him.

Daea joined in and scratched the German Shepherd’s hind, while Chuck gave him scratches under his chin.

They were all alone on the chilly night between the three main Parliamentary Blocks — the gigantic, gothic, old stone buildings that embody the Canadian government. In front of them stood the imposing Center Block, with its soaring Peace Tower. To their sides, the East and West Blocks surrounded them. They all had the same green copper roofs.

“Why is the Suffering always so strong here?” Daea asked.

“You should ask Eli or Hudson. They would love that.”

“I didn’t expect Hudson to take to his studies so much. He has his nose in a book as often as Eli.”

“Maybe more,” Chuck added. “I am happy for him.”

“Why? School.” She made a gagging sound.

“His Childaar experience has been pretty sad. He now has a home, fits in, and is making the best of it.”

“But he could watch movies and play with me in the gym. Or watch sports with you.”

“Haven’t you noticed he does all that too?”

The girl considered the idea. “Yeah, he’ll do whatever we suggest. And he is a master baker. His baking is the best I’ve ever had.”

Chuck smiled. “He is also a master chef. I don’t know if I’ve ever eaten this well.”

“I’m glad he is with us, but I wish Jesi-Sera was with us too.”

Before they could dwell on their missing team leader, Chuck said, “Come on, let’s walk behind.”

A gust of wind picked up a pile of leaves, creating a dreamy effect as they combined with the whirling Suffering. The pair walked to the Center Block's right, past a statue, through the parking lot reserved for members of parliament and senators. The corner greeted them with a

magnificent view of the National Art Gallery on the other side of the Rideau Canal and Major's Hill Park.

"Will you be able to see that thing?" Daea asked.

"I hope my Seeingness can penetrate its defenses."

They rounded the back of the building, where they saw the Museum of Civilization, located in Gatineau, Quebec, clear across the Ottawa river.

Following the driveway surrounding the historic stone building, they found themselves at the magnificent cone-shaped Library of Parliament. Not finding anything, they kept walking and arrived back at the front, next to the West Block building.

"Now what?" Daea asked.

"I don't know," Chuck answered. "Let's place you somewhere obvious."

"Where?"

Chuck looked across the yard. "How about under there?" He pointed to the colossal stone clock and bell tower that jutted out from the front of the Center Block. They looked up from the grand entrance and looming arches near the bottom, toward the shaft decorated with gargoyles and grotesques, to an observation deck that sits right below the massive clock faces on each of the tower's four sides, and finally to the steeped copper roof upon which an enormous Canadian flag flapped in the night.

“Remember the time we ran out of there after solving that Op with the fireworks?”

“I do,” Chuck said. “That entrance will keep the wind away. And it’s not so cold. Will you be OK?”

“Of course,” Daea said with a hint of hurt. “When am I not?”

“I suppose,” Chuck replied. “I will be over there,” he said, pointing at the Centennial Flame. The plumes of flames flickered in the windy night.

Daea pointed at the police cars behind it. “There are cops here. Do you think they will let me stay up there for long?”

“I don’t see why not,” Chuck said. “People are allowed to walk around here. I guess if anyone asks what you are doing, tell them you are waiting for me.”

“That’s not even a lie.”

“It’s not,” Chuck said.

“Alright, see you in a bit. I’ll do my best to be good bait.” The girl held her hands under her chin to frame it in a cutesy pose.

“Thanks.”

The Hardy walked over to the entrance to the Canadian government’s main building. She removed a bag of trail mix from her backpack that was far more M&Ms and caramels than nuts or seeds. The small girl took out Jesi-Sera’s comics, sat down on the ground, and rested

against the entrance wall. She opened the first issue of the crossover event and began to read. It wasn't for one of the regular characters but rather for the event as a whole. Her attention was rapt as she became engrossed in the story and was well into the series's sixth comic when she heard Chuck yelling.

The Sight jumped up and down next to the Centennial Flame, trying to get her attention. Daea threw her stuff into her backpack and slung it across her shoulders. The bag's unclosed top flapped as she ran.

The team leader had run out onto Wellington Avenue. Daea looked both ways upon exiting the tall iron gate but didn't see her partner. She veered left to look down O'Connor Street and saw the Sight sprinting further into downtown. Not waiting for the light to turn green, she ran across the street. Traffic was light, but one car, still quite a ways away from the girl, honked as she crossed.

Given his longer legs, Chuck was faster than Daea, but the girl was able to make up some distance as the boy stopped at corners to reassess the situation. They traversed through the tall downtown buildings and were near Laurier Avenue and Kent Street when Daea finally caught up.

Both Childaar panted as their sprint had strained their endurance.

“Did you see it?” Daea asked, her voice stabilizing as she caught her breath.

“I did,” Chuck answered, taking his hand off his knees and standing up straight. “It paced back and forth, keeping close to the ground. It looked like a cougar stalking prey.”

“Did it see you?”

“It spotted me when I got close. I was within striking distance.”

“What happened?”

“It ran.” Chuck pointed and added, “It took a wide berth around me through the Parliamentary grounds, and bolted out of the front and across the street. That thing is fast.”

“Where do you think it went?”

Chuck shrugged. “I don’t know. I lost sight of it.”

Whiskers ran from around the corner and barked.

“He lost its scent.”

“We’re at a dead-end,” Daea said, walking around the corner of the street. “Let’s keep looking. Maybe we can find a clue.”

The pair did not find anything as they searched the area.

“Was your Seeingness able to see through its Hideness?”

Chuck nodded. "Yeah, it was hard at first. I just saw a weird shimmer, but when I looked closer, I was able to get a better look at that catlike monster."

"Does that mean Dracul is in town?"

"I'd say it's likely."

"I must have been pretty good bait. Like a chocolate-covered almond."

Chuck laughed. "You must be pretty sweet. You eat enough candy."

"Thank you," Daea said. "That's nice of you to say."

CHAPTER 4

Eli walked into the Childaar home, where Daea was already seated in a beanbag chair, with her hand in a bag of penny candies. In her lap was a comic book from the crossover series she had gotten from Jesi-Sera's comic file.

The Smart motioned to hide the things, but before Daea could understand his meaning, Chuck burst into the room. "That was absolutely unacceptable!"

"What?" The girl held her hands open, indicating ignorance.

"You know what! Not only was what you did rude, but it was embarrassing for me and everyone else on the team. You know the teacher has the authority to expel you, and if you get expelled, you can't be on a team until you get reinstated." He left the other alternative hanging in the air.

"The teacher was picking on me. She doesn't like me," Daea protested.

"Nonsense! She was doing her job."

"Then why was she asking me every question?"

Eli held up his hand and said, "Because you weren't paying attention. She knew you had a comic book in your lap, then when she took that away, you..."

Chuck cut the Smart off with a hard look.

Hudson walked into the room and gave Daea a disappointed glance.

“Saying the teacher doesn’t like you is the oldest excuse in the book,” the team leader barked. “She just wants you to learn. It’s her job. She had every right to kick you out.”

“I don’t care,” Daea said, throwing a jellybean into her mouth.

“You’re on tunnels,” the Sight said.

“It’s not my turn,” the girl said in a smug tone.

“They’re all your turns now.”

“Whatever. I like doing tunnels. Sometimes we get a good fight.” She rummaged through the bag until she found a green apple gummy ring and popped it into her mouth.

“And I’m canceling your food orders. I’ll inform the museum staff that they are no longer to accept your requisitions.”

“So?”

“And I’m terminating your cards so you can’t buy anything anywhere else.”

Surprise and anger flashed across the small girl’s face. “That’s not fair,” she screamed.

“The way you treated the teacher today wasn’t fair to her or to us.”

The comic dropped off the girl's lap as she stood and stormed toward her room.

"I hope you are going there to get your things for the tunnels."

She didn't respond but instead entered her room and slammed the door.

Eli said, "It was supposed to be you and Hudson on tunnels today."

Before Chuck could answer, the Sovereign said, "I got it, boss."

Chuck gave the tall boy a thankful nod as he walked to the TV area.

"That came to a head, didn't it?" Eli said.

"Don't make things worse," the Sovereign replied as he walked toward the girl's room and knocked on the door. "Daea, come on. Let's go."

"I'm not going," the girl yelled through the door.

"Come on. Your situation won't get any better if you don't."

"I don't care."

"You should. It's our job to make the world a better place."

"What if I don't want to?"

"You should want to, but nobody is forcing you to be here. You could always take an early Sleeping and go home."

“Maybe I’ll go Rogue.”

Hudson winced but said nothing.

Daea felt the hurt through the silence and opened the door to look up at her friend. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

The Sovereign gave his head a short shake to snap out of a memory. “It’s fine. It was my Childaar life, but please don’t consider that as an option. It’s sad and lonely.”

Daea gave her friend an apologetic shrug.

“Come on. Let’s get on those tunnels.” The tall boy placed his hand on the girl’s shoulder and led her toward their home’s exit. They put on their shoes and made their way to the tunnel’s entrance.

The smell of dirt and mildew greeted Daea and Hudson as they entered the network of tunnels that connected the city’s central area. Some were passages for politicians and bureaucrats to travel between the government buildings. Other parts were for crews to maintain and repair the city’s underground infrastructure. A few were unused and unknown, their purposes forgotten by the passage of time. The Suffering drifted along the floor of the halls and pathways.

“Where to?” Hudson said. “It’s been pretty busy down here lately.”

“I don’t know why we have to do it. We’re busy enough as it is. The tunnels should be the B-team’s job.”

“He is trying to take some pressure off the new team.”

“By making us do all the work?”

“We’re not doing all the work.”

“We’re doing more than anyone else.”

“That’s true, but we know Ottawa better than them. Don’t forget leadership was thrust upon Chuck. I don’t think he likes it or wants it, but he is doing what he thinks is best.”

“Like picking on me.”

The Sovereign gave the girl a long, sideways glance. “You’re not being much of a help.”

“Well, maybe he shouldn’t take away my candy!”

“Maybe you could try a little harder in class, around the home, and on missions.”

“I help plenty on missions.”

The tall boy nodded. “That’s true—at least on Stomps.”

“I just don’t have the skills for Operations.”

“But you don’t have to make them harder than they have to be.”

Daea didn’t say anything but instead pointed at a ten-legged creature that looked like a cross between a spider and a cockroach hiding below some pipes and valves.

“Crawlie!” She ran at the little monster. She tried to kick it,

but the thing scooted back to evade her attack. The Hardy sighed, crouched onto her hands and knees, extended claws out of each of the digits on her right hand, and swiped the creature, which shriveled into a black, inky substance which rejoined the wafts of Suffering already present.

Hudson caught up to the girl. "I'm the opposite of you. My skills aren't so great for Stomps, but I try my best to be helpful."

"You're great on Stomps. Our cannonballs are amazing."

"That's more because of you."

A couple of ambitious Crawlies, like the one Daea had already destroyed, attempted to attack the Childaar, but the Hardy swatted them to the ground and crushed them under her heel, where they, too, oozed back into inky gusts.

"Do you think if I try a little harder, I'll get to order and buy candy again?"

"I'm sure of it, but that shouldn't be your motivation."

"What else could it be?"

"Making the world a better place."

"Oh yeah, that too."

Hudson chuckled and gave his friend a pat on her back.

Eli looked up from the desk where he was studying and waved at the pair upon their arrival. "How did it go?"

"No problem," Daea said, walking to the kitchen. "So many Crawlies."

Hudson said, "Yeah, but Daea handled them with ease."

"You were good company," the girl said, washing her hands in the sink.

"You didn't go back to the market, did you?"

"No, west side of downtown." The girl opened a freezer to grab a popsicle only to find it empty. She darted to the cupboards, which were also empty, then proceeded to check everywhere in the kitchen. It was devoid of snacks. Shock crossed her face as she stammered, "Did he..."

Eli nodded. "Yep, all the snacks are gone."

"He didn't."

"He did."

Daea ran to her backpack by the door. She opened it. Relief crossed her face as she pulled out a bag of miniature Tootsie Rolls, unwrapped one, and threw it in her mouth. She proceeded to devour half the bag.

"He didn't go through your stuff," Eli continued. "So, you had better ration anything you have in your bag and room. He's serious. He said it's the only way you would learn."

“Where is he?” Hudson asked.

A voice rose from the TV area, where the Sight was lying on a couch. They saw his hand rise in the air from behind the sofa’s back. “I’m here.” The television was turned on but muted as sports highlights played.

“Sorry, boss. Didn’t see you.”

Chuck sat up and rubbed his eyes. “I must have fallen asleep.”

Daea advanced toward the team leader, but Hudson grabbed her by the back of her T-shirt and coughed twice as if to say she should reconsider her decision.

The small girl pulled up, looked at the tall boy, then stomped toward her room, each step louder than the last.

The Sight stood. “I’m going to check the Suffering. Don’t get too comfortable.”

The girl stuck her tongue out at the team leader as he left. Instead of going into her room, she walked back to the boys. “Can you guys help me out? I could use some cash.”

Eli shook his head. “Sorry, I don’t want to disobey Chuck.”

Hudson said, “Same. This is between you and the boss.”

The girl’s face scrunched, but before she could retort, the Sight returned and said, “Suit up. It’s a Stomp.”

“Good,” Daea replied. “I need to hit something.”

“Really, we’re in the Market, and I can’t get a Beaver Tail?”

Chuck ignored the girl as the team walked through the entertainment district full of restaurants, shops, and people.

The Hardy turned to her other teammates. “Could one of you buy me one, please? I need fuel if we have a Stomp. You want me at full strength, right?”

Eli and Hudson pretended not to hear her.

“Come on, guys.”

Hudson looked down at his friend and mouthed, “Sorry.”

Eli changed the subject. “Odd to have a Stomp in the Byward Market. This is usually an Operation, given the area’s population density.”

They spotted a diverse group of Kinedaar waiting in front of a long, three-story stone building. The Suffering swelled and washed around the people’s feet. Hudson asked a man what was happening and was told that they were waiting for a haunted walk.

“Oh,” Eli said. “This could be scary.”

“What is it?” Daea asked.

The Smart answered, “It’s a tour around town to visit haunted locations.”

“Will there be ghosts?” she asked.

Chuck said, "We had a similar Stomp back when I was new to the city. We fought Appies, which are like ghosts. It was a brutal fight."

"What happened?" Hudson asked.

"If they hit you or you touch them, you'll get nightmares both while awake and while sleeping. We had to take sick days and couldn't go to school."

"That's an upside," Daea said.

Chuck shook his head. "You wouldn't say that if you had experienced it."

"I'm not worried."

"Take this seriously," the team leader said. "We can't get knocked out for any amount of time. There is too much work to do."

A young man and young woman stepped out from a door in the building. They were dressed in Victorian-era garb. The man wore an outdated coat and top hat, while the woman wore a long, flowing red gown. They introduced themselves and laid out the itinerary. They said they would start with a haunted high school, go to the old jail, and finally end at the most haunted place of all, the Laurier House.

The guides handed out pamphlets to everyone. The Childaar were asked if they had registered for the tour, and when Chuck said they hadn't but were interested, he was told that there was still room for more and that they just

had to pay the cost of the tickets. Daea's face scrunched when she saw the Sight pull cash from his wallet. The man walked to the front of the group and asked everyone to follow him, while the woman moved to the rear.

They walked across Elgin Street, where they passed City Hall and arrived at a prominent stone building next to the Rideau Canal. The beauty of the emerging fall colors contrasted with the foggy Suffering that swirled across the ground. The center of the structure looked like a castle's square keep with a flat top from which the rest of the building's four floors extended with pointed roofs. Ornate arched and square windows covered the building's fronts. A narrow lawn separated it from the nearby street.

"Is this place a museum too?" Daea asked. "It kind of looks like the nature museum."

"It's a high school," Eli told the girl.

The young woman leading the tour agreed with the boy and told everyone that Lisgar Collegiate was one of the country's premier high schools. They had advanced programs in many subjects. Daea made a gagging sound, but Eli's elbow stopped it. The guide continued and pointed to the building's flat top and explained that its attic was located on the uppermost floor. It was said that in the early 1940s, on the coldest day of the year, a chunk of ice broke off an overhang and killed a young girl who happened to be the school's best and most promising

student. Since then, students, teachers, and staff reported seeing the girl's thin outline looking down on them from the attic's window. This only happened on the coldest day of the year, so they likely wouldn't see her ghost on that night.

The guide's oratory skills shone as the people on tour blanched and stirred while they looked up at the building's peak. The Suffering rose and washed around their knees.

"Do you think we can find that girl here?" Eli asked.

Chuck inspected the Suffering. "I don't think so."

"I hope it's just a made-up story," Hudson said. "That was pretty sad."

"It was," Eli agreed.

One of the patrons wondered if they could go inside the school to see the attic but was told they did not have permission to enter the premises. Still, not to worry, they would be able to enter the next location.

The group was led north. They crossed the Rideau Canal, next to the downtown mall, and found themselves on Nicolas Street between the Byward Market and Ottawa University campus. A high gray stone wall surrounded a four-story building made of similar gray rock. The tour guides explained that it was built as a jail in 1862 and decommissioned in 1972 when it was converted into a hostel for travelers looking for a unique Ottawa experience.

Daea asked where the ghosts were and was told that the jail was infamous for its inhumane living conditions and gallows. Many people had been hanged there, such as Patrick J. Whelan, who assassinated D'Arcy McGee, one of the Fathers of Canadian Confederation. She was told that forensics was unreliable back in the old days, and many innocent people had been unjustly convicted. The hostel's ghosts were executed or died while imprisoned for crimes they did not commit.

The Suffering grew and surged.

"This place is creepy. Why would anyone want to stay here?" Eli said as they were led inside the small lobby. Guests checked in, checked out, and came and went as if it were any other hotel.

"Any idea on the Stomp?" Hudson asked their team leader.

Chuck inspected the Suffering. "I don't think it's here either."

One of the hotel employees took the group into the building, where they saw the jail cells converted into sleeping chambers. The bigger ones had bunk beds for groups of people, while the smaller rooms were furnished closer to a standard hotel room with two double beds. Daea told the tour guides that the jail didn't have the ghosts they sought and that it was time to hurry along. She

received a strange look and was told that they were finished, and it was time to move to the next location.

Everyone was led further into the Sandy Hill neighborhood. They walked on Laurier Avenue for a few blocks until they arrived at a grand mansion. The brick building with copper roofs stood at the corner of the street. Tower wings and bays gave the building an asymmetrical shape. A long veranda greeted visitors as they walked up the manicured lawn toward the entrance. A sign in front introduced it as “Laurier House.” The young man leading the tour told everyone the house originally belonged to Canada’s seventh Prime Minister, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, whose wife willed it to the tenth Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King.

The tour group shuffled into the musty-smelling estate. The staff awaited them dressed in attire from the early twentieth century. As they pushed into the main entrance, they saw that the furniture, carpet, paint, and various artifacts recreated an earlier historical period.

“This place is a museum,” Daea said. “I thought the Prime Minister lived here.”

“It is a museum,” Eli answered. “The Prime Minister’s home is 24 Sussex Drive. You know that. We’ve passed it many times.”

“Oh yeah.”

Once everyone was inside, the tour guides stepped back to let the museum staff take over. A middle-aged woman explained to the group that the Laurier House had a paranormal history. She said that people from all around the world come there to try and contact the dead. This connection existed because Prime Minister Mackenzie King was interested in the occult and attempted to commune with spirits through seances.

The Suffering roiled and frothed.

Hudson gave Chuck a questioning look.

The team leader pointed further into the house and nodded his head. "The Stomp is presenting itself."

The house guides indicated for the group to follow them up a staircase, where they would see the former Prime Ministers' study. The Childaar took it as their opportunity to slip away. They found themselves in the kitchen, which had a door leading down into a dark stairwell.

"This way," Chuck said, leading the team toward the stairs. He searched for a light switch but couldn't find one. "Eli, Fire."

"Someone's coming," Hudson whispered.

Before Eli could get into the corridor to illuminate it, one of the house staff walked in and asked what they were doing. Eli waved a hand toward the man and used

Command to ask him to leave. The man's eyes glazed, and he agreed to the order as he turned and walked away.

"Nice," Daea said, moving toward the stairwell.

"Hold up," Hudson said. He had found a candle in a drawer. "Let's use this. There's going to be a fight, and we will need you to shoot."

The Sight pressed a finger on one of the wicks, and the long candle came to life.

"Thank you," the tall boy said.

"Everyone ready?" Chuck asked.

"Let's go." Daea crept down the dark stairs, and they found themselves in a large, low-ceilinged root cellar.

The rest of the team stepped onto the dirt ground as the Suffering encroached well above their knees.

"Look there." Daea pointed. While the light from the candle provided them with ample illumination, it created eerie shadows.

"Where?" Eli asked, craning his neck in the direction the girl pointed.

"There," Daea repeated. "It's hard to see. You can see through them."

Chuck peered into the Suffering. "Those are Appies. This isn't good."

Eli asked, "What's the plan?"

"Don't let them hit you," Chuck replied.

Translucent characters with indistinguishable features floated from the corners toward them. They were mostly outlines, and their facial features were nothing more than smooth bumps on round faces. Delicate strands flowed from where their hair would have been. Faint groans and a pungent odor emanated from the creatures.

Daea extended her claws. "I'll just have to take them down before they hit me."

Chuck grabbed her shoulder before she could move forward to engage. "They are immune to physical damage. You don't want to come into contact with them."

"What about fire?" Eli asked, growing two fireballs in the palms of his hands.

"I'm not sure. It would be best if we had a Charm's Gift of Fear."

"Like Jesi-Sera."

Before they could lament the loss of their previous team leader, the figures began to approach the team. Eli shot his balls of Fire at two of the semitransparent monsters, but the fiery balls sailed straight through them and seemed to do little damage.

Daea moved into her kung fu tiger pose and monitored the situation.

The ghosts glided toward the Childaar. The closest one swiped at the team with a slow, dreamlike motion that was not close enough to hit any of them.

Eli moved into his Wing Chun kung fu pose, shoulders square with his hips. He held his hands forward, and a stream of Fire materialized. He shaped it such that it blocked access to the Childaar.

“How are we going to fight them, though?” Daea asked.

The Suffering grew, and one of the ghostly creatures found a way around the flaming barrier.

Daea engaged the monster with a front kick that passed through the semitransparent creature closest to her. She screamed in pain.

Hudson grabbed her by the waist and pulled her away from the fight. With a candle still in hand, he placed her on the ground out of the monster’s reach.

Eli manipulated his Fire to cover the open side.

Daea rested on her hands and knees, and between tears, she panted in a panicked attempt to catch her breath. Hudson kneeled beside her and rubbed her back.

“I hate to say it,” Chuck said, “but I’m calling this mission. I’m not sure we can beat it.”

“Fall back,” Hudson ordered as he picked up the small girl and moved toward the stairs.

Eli’s walls dimmed as he and the team leader moved to join their teammates. “Do you want me to keep these going?”

“Keep it up until we leave,” Chuck said.

Daea sat on a step. Her eyes welled with tears, and she took deep, heavy breaths.

The Sight crouched beside Daea. "Are you OK?"

The Suffering grew above their heads.

The girl took one last breath, then through a pained grimace, said, "I'll be fine. I want to win this fight."

"No, we're done here. Can you walk?"

The girl stood. "I don't want to lose."

The Sight led the team back into the kitchen. "We aren't prepared for this fight. It's not worth the risk."

"Chuck's right," Hudson said. "It's better to fight another day than get incapacitated by these things."

Another of the house's staff members walked into the kitchen. Eli dropped his Fire and closed the door. She spotted the Childaar and asked what they were doing. Chuck told the woman that their friend wasn't feeling well and that they had to leave. Concern crossed the woman's face when she saw the small girl's tear streaks. She asked if she could help. Chuck said they just needed to get some fresh air.

The Suffering erupted like little geysers spread across the kitchen floor. The inky, ephemeral substance returned to its usual ankle-deep cover once it finished pouring back down to the ground. It was higher than it would have been had they beaten the mission.

The Childaar groaned and followed the woman to the mansion's entrance. She wished the kids well and returned back into the house.

The team walked in silence back to their home.

CHAPTER 5

The whole team had finished school for the day and now sat in their living area, reviewing the day's news and reports. Chuck sat upright in a comfortable chair in the TV area, Daea sat in a beanbag chair, and Eli and Hudson sat together at the large table in the dining area.

Eli passed a stack of papers to Hudson. "Tell me what you think of this."

The Sovereign scanned the papers, but it didn't take long until he was fully engrossed in the documents. "This judge seems suspicious."

Daea and Chuck looked toward the boys.

"Did you find something?" the team leader asked.

Hudson held up a newspaper that had a section on Supreme Court rulings. "It says here that this judge has voted against the majority of the other justices on ninety percent of the rulings that come their way in the last year. Then she writes dissenting opinions using uncivil and rude language to refer to the other judges on the bench."

The tall boy had caught everyone's attention, and they came over to view the documents.

Eli nodded. "That's what I was thinking. Not so much that there are dissenting opinions, the judges are, of course, going to have differing ideas. It's the frequency where she

is the only one and the language she uses. Apparently, she is just as rude in French as she is in English.”

“Nice find, Eli,” Chuck said, patting the boy on his back. “Could you go ask the museum staff to find all the information they can on this judge, along with the full court proceedings.”

“Sure thing,” Eli answered, running to the door.

“What do you think it means?” Hudson asked.

Chuck scanned the papers. “It could be nothing, but it looks to me like evidence of the Contaminated.”

Daea’s eyes widened. “Could a Supreme Court judge be corrupted by the Suffering?”

“I don’t see why not,” Chuck replied. “Especially considering what’s happened in this city over the past year.”

“That’s a scary thought,” Hudson said. “She could do a lot of harm.”

“It could be disastrous for the citizens of the country.”

Eli returned and announced, “They said they can have it done by tomorrow, but it’s a lot of information, and if we want them to be thorough, it will take more time.”

Chuck gave the boy an approving nod. “That’s fine. It looks like we know what we’re doing tonight.”

The museum staff began delivering parts of the research request sooner than expected. The team spent the

few remaining hours before nightfall reading court proceedings and decisions.

“This is so boring,” Daea complained.

The rest of the teammates nodded in agreement.

Chuck looked at the clock. “Sundown, I’ll go check for missions. Get ready and meet outside in ten minutes.”

Daea went to her room to grab a sweater. She was the last to leave their home and join the team outside.

“Good news,” Chuck said.

“You’re giving me back candy privileges?” Daea asked.

The Sight ignored the girl.

“No mission,” Eli announced, pointing across the street as dark, lazy waves of Suffering lapped toward the gallery, where they broke and fizzled into nothing.

“I’d take a mission for some candy,” the girl grumbled.

“That’s selfish,” Eli said. “You shouldn’t wish any Suffering upon the world.”

The girl shrugged. “I guess if I really had to decide, I wouldn’t.”

“Let’s go,” Chuck said, pressing the button on a key fob to unlock the silver truck parked next to Hudson’s classic, blue, muscle car. The team jumped into their usual spots: Chuck in the driver’s seat, Hudson on the passenger side, and the younger Childaar in the back.

“Can we get some music?” Daea said, reaching through the seats to access the radio.

The Sight swatted her hand away as he started the vehicle. “How many times do I have to tell you not to do that? If you have any requests, let me know.”

“Top one hundred,” the girl replied quickly.

Chuck sighed. “You know there is older music that is good too.”

“But I like to hear the new stuff. And the top one hundred is recorded in Hollywood, which isn’t too far from my home.”

“We know,” the other Childaar in the car said at the same time.

Chuck acquiesced and changed the radio station to play the most popular songs of the day. The number one song in the world had just started. It sounded great on the custom sound system he had installed.

“Turn it up,” the Daea said as she danced in her seat.

“It’s loud enough,” Chuck said, leaving the volume at a reasonable level.

It took little time for the team to drive down Sussex Drive to Wellington Avenue, where they drove past the massive American Embassy, magnificent Château Laurier hotel, Parliament, and other large government buildings to the classic-styled Supreme Court of Canada.

Two majestic pavilions projected out from the smooth, square granite façade, all covered by a steep, copper roof. The building projected authority and dignity. The parking lot was half full. Most of the cars were basic sedans, but a red supercar stood out from the rest.

“What do you think?” Hudson asked no one in particular as the team exited the truck.

Chuck eyed the building. “It looks kind of busy.”

Eli said, “We need to find a way inside.”

“I think I could think better if I had some candy,” Daea said under her breath.

Hudson said, “Want me in the sky to watch from above?”

Chuck gave the Sovereign a permissive head nod.

“That would be helpful.”

“You got it, boss,” Hudson said before crouching and leaping into the air. A handful of tourists and locals milled about the area. One child, no older than five, saw the Gift in use. His eyes widened and jaw dropped. He pointed in the air and told his mom that the boy was flying, but the parent shushed him while taking pictures of the commanding building.

Chuck gave his head a slight shake. “We all need to be more aware of displaying our Gifts in front of Kinedaar.”

The trio walked toward the courthouse and up a set of wide stairs next to a pair of statues.

“Institia,” Daea said, pointing up at the statue of a looming cloaked figure. “I wonder if that’s her name.”

“That’s Latin for justice,” Eli said.

“What about that one?” Daea said, pointing at the other. “Veritas.”

“You should know that.”

“Why? I don’t know Latin.”

“Think of your French lessons. Vérité.”

“School’s done. I don’t want to think.”

“Come on,” Chuck said. “You know this one.”

“Vérité,” the girl said to herself. “Truth?”

“Yes!” Eli exclaimed. “Good job. Justice and truth are essential to a functioning judiciary.”

Chuck smiled at the girl. “Glad to see you learning.”

“I’d be better if I had a soda.”

The team leader ignored the girl’s complaint as they reached the top of the stairs.

Daea pulled on one of the front doors, but they were locked. “Should I pick it?”

Chuck looked at the RCMP vehicles parked in the lot. “No, I’ll take a look. Wait here.” The Sight checked to make sure nobody was watching, then disappeared from view.

“Good thing he has Hideness,” Eli said. “It must be hard for teams that don’t have somebody with it on their team.”

“I wonder what it’s like being invisible,” Daea said.

“Abigail has Cloak,” Eli said. “Next time we meet, we should ask if she would let us experience that.”

Daea’s face scrunched at the mention of the B-team’s leader. She reached into a pocket for candy, and a look of disappointment crossed her face when she remembered her predicament. “Now what?”

“I guess we wait.”

“I know a close convenience store. We could be there and back before Chuck returns.”

“Nope.”

The pair walked around the grassy, Suffering-covered yard. Daea sighed and moped while Eli scoured the area for anything out of the ordinary.

Chuck reappeared in front of the kids. “There are more people inside than I would expect at this hour. I’ll come back later. Let’s wait for Hudson to see if he finds anything.” The Sight pointed at some park benches.

Daea shuffled to the indicated spot and plopped down.

Eli asked, “Want to spar?”

The girl looked up, and her expression brightened. She jumped off the bench and proceeded to perform handstands, backflips, and front flips. She then moved into her kung fu pose.

“Snake?” Eli said.

“Yeah, I’m trying out some new things. Are you ready?”

Eli nodded. “Sure.” He stood and moved in front of the girl. He assumed the Wing Chun pose with his feet equal distance apart and parallel with his shoulders. He placed his fists near his waist and gave the girl a menacing look.

“No Fire,” Daea said.

“No claws,” the boy responded before he stepped in and threw a series of centerline punches.

Daea smirked and attempted to weave between the attacks, but Eli took advantage of her overconfidence and landed two solid strikes.

The girl crouched low, held her hands out so that her middle and index fingers looked like fangs, and sprang. She threw a left jab, which Eli blocked by using his arm to push hers to the outside. The Hardy used the feint to spin and deliver a leg sweep, which the boy jumped. Off-balance but still low to the ground, Daea darted forward with a flurry of blows, but Eli blocked each one by hitting her arms, forcing the thrusts wide.

“Looks like you need more practice,” the boy said, smiling.

“I’ll get it,” Daea responded.

Chuck, disinterested in the fight, struck up a conversation with a pigeon that had perched on the back of

the bench. They whistled and cooed at each other. Then his eyes grew wide. "Check it out." He pointed at a stocky old woman with hair as gray as her skin leaving the building and walking toward the small red sports car parked in the courthouse's front lot. "That's her."

"Don't you think she's a little old for that car?" Daea said.

"Don't be ageist," Chuck said, "but I am curious how she afforded such a luxury. Judges are well paid, but I don't think well enough to buy something in that range." He squinted and added, "She's definitely Contaminated." He started jogging to his truck.

The judge was already at the intersection, turning onto Wellington by the time the team got into their vehicle. Chuck put the truck in gear and headed toward the sports car, where the elderly woman squealed the tires as she made the right-hand turn. They saw her speed down the road. The engines of the supercar roared in the distance.

"If she keeps that up," Chuck said, "there's no way we will be able to catch her."

Eli, who sat in the middle between the driver and Daea, craned his neck to look at the sky. "If Hudson is up there, he could follow her."

Daea rolled down her window and stuck her head out, looking at the sky for signs of the Sovereign. "Hudson! Hudson!" she yelled into the evening sky. People standing

on the sidewalks gave her dirty looks as she disrupted the quiet street.

As the truck reached the end of Wellington, where the road forked to a bridge leading to Gatineau or the John A. McDonald parkway on the Ottawa side, Hudson dropped into the back of the truck. Eli climbed over the seat, where he opened the rear window. "Did you see that red sports car?" the Smart asked.

"I did."

"That's her car," Eli said.

"We need to know where she's going," Chuck yelled.

"Stay on the Parkway," the Sovereign said. "I'll follow her and come back." The truck dipped as the tall boy crouched and leaped back into the air.

Chuck kept the truck on the Ottawa side of the river. The scenic road lined with trees and shrubs highlighted the city's natural beauty. They passed the flat and somber National War Museum and continued along the route. A loud thump sounded in the back of the truck, and it dipped upon Hudson's return.

"Get onto Island Park Drive," the tall boy said. "She's at a house near the back corner of the neighborhood."

They saw the red car outside a small, unkempt house on the corner of the intersection. The house was the definition of tucked away and looked like it belonged to a witch out of a fairy tale. As they pulled up, the judge was

returning to her car. She carried a large box wrapped in brown packing paper and gave the truck's inhabitants a dirty look when she saw Hudson riding in the back.

"Busted," Chuck said.

They drove past the woman and her car and rounded the corner, at which point Hudson stuck his head in the rear window and said, "There's a grocery store down on Scott. I'll meet you there when I find out what she's up to."

Chuck gave the Sovereign an approving nod. The truck's bed dipped once again as Hudson used Jump to rise high into the night. Daea looked up and saw him circling in the sky like a hawk on thermals.

They arrived at the grocery store. Daea's habits had her ready to purchase snacks until she remembered that she didn't have any money. She looked longingly at her teammates. Chuck returned her gaze with a hard stare, and Eli shrugged and pointed at the team leader with his eyes. The girl slumped back into the truck, rested her arm on the windowsill and chin on her fist, and sighed heavily every few seconds.

"Stop pouting," Chuck said.

"Easy for you to say," she replied. "Imagine if you weren't allowed to watch sports."

"It's not the same thing," Chuck began.

"Yes, it is."

“How about some music,” Eli suggested in an attempt to change the conversation.

Chuck turned on the radio. The station was still tuned to the Top 100 pop station, but Daea did not react to the upbeat tune. She just sat and stared at the store. The Sight stepped out of the vehicle, stretched, and scanned the sky. Eli joined him.

Hudson returned about thirty minutes later. Daea climbed out of the truck with a sullen expression to meet her friend.

“What did you find?” the team leader asked.

“It was weird. She drove to an abandoned warehouse, where she waited for quite a while. Eventually, a long black hearse pulled up next to her sports car, and she handed over that box.”

“Who was in the car?” Eli asked.

“I couldn’t see. They were side by side, and everything happened through the windows.”

“What then?” Chuck pressed.

“I stayed with her and followed her back to her home.”

Chuck nodded. “Is it her house?”

“I think so.”

“Great job,” the Sight said with an approving nod.

“Take the kids home.”

“We’re all kids,” Eli said.

Chuck ignored the boy. "I'm going to go investigate the Supreme Court and then her house. I'll come back as soon as I am done." He drove away, leaving the rest of the team stranded in the grocery store parking lot.

"Bus?" Eli said.

"We could taxi," Hudson proposed.

The boys looked at Daea to see if she had a suggestion. The girl shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Nothing matters."

Hudson said, "Want me to fly you?"

"Nah."

Eli rubbed the girl's back. "Come on, Daea, it's not that bad."

"Whatever." She sighed and started walking east toward the National Art Gallery.

"I can't handle this," Hudson said. "We should get her something."

Daea perked up and looked at the boys with big, hopeful eyes.

Eli shook his head and said, "Sorry, Daea, but I can't be a part of that."

"I'm doing it. Come with me, we'll find you something. Not much, but something."

Eli started walking out of the lot. "I don't know anything about this."

"Really!" Daea exclaimed. "You'll get me some candy?"

“Some,” Hudson explained. “You can have three things, so long as it’s reasonable.”

“It’s going to be so hard to decide,” the girl said as they walked into the store. She settled on a candy bar, a box of sour chews, and a two-liter bottle of Dr. Pepper.

The tall boy pointed at the bottle and said, “Maybe a bit smaller.” The girl didn’t hesitate to switch it out for a can and rushed to the counter to pay for the snacks before her friend could change his mind. She started eating before leaving the store, and it didn’t take long for her to finish everything in the parking lot. She flopped down on a piece of grass next to the sidewalk with a satisfied, comatose look. “Thanks, Hudson. I needed that.”

CHAPTER 6

Daea and Hudson soared high above Canada's capital as sunrise neared. The small girl piggybacked on the tall boy as they glided around the city, which looked like a miniature model town. It was as though they could pick up any of the large, historical buildings and place them somewhere else. They wore heavy jackets, pants, and boots. The late autumn weather had grown cold, and it was even colder at their elevated altitude. The pair circled, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

"Check that out," Hudson said, pointing at an alleyway on the west side of downtown.

"What?"

"It looks like a confrontation. Next to the hotel."

"You must have better eyes than me," Daea said. "I don't see anything."

"Hold on," Hudson warned as he straightened his body and torpedoed them toward the tall structure.

The wind was too loud for Daea to be heard, so she gave a thumbs-up to show that she saw what he was talking about. Two ruffians harassed what looked like businesspeople with luggage, who presumably were headed to the airport for an early flight.

The Sovereign pulled his body upright to use the air resistance as a brake. Still moving fast, he landed both feet on the ground, where he and his passenger came to a skidding halt.

“Childaar,” a young man hissed in a hard to place accent. His open mouth revealed incisors that were slightly longer and sharper than the average Kinedaar’s. His long hair was like a black cat’s, which contrasted against his sickly, jaundiced complexion. Dark circles lined his eyes, and a patch goatee was under his mouth. He wore a light leather jacket adorned with straps, buckles, and zippers. A black T-shirt with a brand name logo poked through his open coat. Faded bootcut, black jeans draped over a pair of combat boots. A heavy steel-link chain hugged his neck, while each of his fingers and thumbs sported their own steel ring. When the claws emerged from his hands, they were different than Daea’s short and sharp claws. His were longer, thicker, and starting to curl.

His companion, a young woman, stood next to him. She paid the businesspeople no mind as they took the distraction as an opportunity to flee.

“Hey, I know you!” Daea said, pointing at her. “You were playing pinball at Capital Fun.”

“I wouldn’t say you know me,” the woman replied with a diabolical smirk. Her French-accented voice was as smooth and as velvety as her jacket. The waifish woman

was about as pale as a person could be. Her long yellow hair was styled high on the top, while the sides were pulled back and fell past her shoulders. Her eyes had dark circles under them, which were enhanced by blood-red eye shadow and lipstick. She wore a royal-red velvet jacket laced with black trim. Its black lapels looked sharp on her willowy body. Her leather pants tapered into black platform boots, which climbed to just below her knees. The thick soles of the black boots made her appear taller than she was. The footwear had extra-big buckles to fit the thick red laces that cinched all the way to the top.

A dark and dirty fire enveloped the vampire's fists as she held them out from her body. At the same time, three menacing figures emerged from the alley's shadows — two men and a woman dressed in similar gothic punk attire.

Daea's nose scrunched when she saw the crew. "Those aren't real."

Hudson said, "You're right. They're an illusion."

The Hardy shook her head, and when her vision refocused, the brutes were no longer there.

"Clever Childaar," the pale woman said, her voice a soft purr.

"Who are you?" Daea demanded.

The young woman said, "You don't need to know that. You're not going to be much longer for this world."

The man's eyes narrowed. "Zavanna, are you sure?"

“Zavanna,” Daea scoffed.

The flames around her fists surged as the woman looked flustered and annoyed at having been interrupted. She glowered at her partner.

“Come on. Like it matters. You’re Zavanna, and I’m Axe.”

Daea laughed again. “Axe? Did your parents choose that?”

The woman’s evil smile revealed a pair of short fangs. “They literally fell onto us. This is an opportunity.”

“But we’re not supposed to —”

Zavanna’s eyes raged as she turned to her partner and yelled, “Shut up!”

Hudson checked their surroundings. “Daea, be careful.”

“Of what? These two?” She punched an open hand. “Let’s teach them a lesson.”

“You should listen to your friend, little girl,” the young woman hissed. “Not that it would do you much good.”

The tall boy moved up toward his friend and whispered, “We need to go.”

“I’m going to savor this,” Zavanna said, moving in to meet the Childaar.

“If you enjoy getting your face smashed in, sure,” Daea said, stepping forward to meet her.

Hudson pulled on the back of her jacket. "Let's go."

"Too late, kiddies," Zavanna said with a cold laugh.

"The little one is so dumb. I love it."

"Hey, I'm not dumb."

"You don't seem smart."

In a mocking voice, Daea added, "I bet you are so smart that you are actually a Smart."

Zavanna held up her fiery hands. "Ahh, that's right. I forgot about the Childaar vocabulary."

A realization crossed Hudson's face. "You're Sparklaar."

The woman shot Hudson a sharp look while the man had a slight look of panic on his face.

"It might not be too late," Hudson said. "Take your Sleepining, and free yourselves from the evil path you follow."

"I'll show you evil," the woman said as she held out her hands to project a fiery plasma storm at the tall boy.

Hudson anticipated the attack and used his Jump to evade it by launching himself into the air.

"Get the girl!" Zavanna shouted at her companion.

Daea and Axe engaged, each of them pulling back to punch the other. They were both sent in the air upon impact.

"Oww," Daea complained from where she'd landed. "That hurt."

The young man rubbed his chest but was quick to stand and move toward the girl.

Daea kickflipped into her kung fu stance, but before she could find her balance, fiery red plasma smashed into her, forcing her back to the ground of the concrete alley, where a hammer punch from Axe bounced her off of the pavement.

Hudson swooped in and crashed into the young man with both feet. Axe swatted the Sovereign to the side, picked him up by the collar, and delivered a swinging uppercut that sent him sailing high into the sky, where he crashed into one of the high-rises further down the block. The window he struck cracked, and his body went limp as he fell.

Daea held up her arms to block more incoming Fire while rolling side to side, dodging the pile-driver punches raining down. She looked around, eyes wild, trying to find an escape route, but the burning Fire combined with the heavy blows kept her from finding a way out.

Battered and burned, the Hardy saw Hudson drop out of the sky, landing both feet on Axe's upper body, forcing him away. He stumbled onto the ground and crouched so that Daea could get onto his back. Using all her energy, the girl crawled onto her friend, who launched the pair upward.

Zavanna shot one last blast at the pair as they ascended into the night. It struck Hudson's leg, causing him to lose control of the Glide. The Childaar momentarily spiraled out of control, but he was able to recover and guide them toward an empty sidewalk.

"We need to find Chuck," Hudson said, somewhat panicked.

"What was that? What's a Sparklaar?"

"Hold on." The Sovereign crouched to allow the girl to readjust her position on his back before taking them back into the air.

"What's a Sparklaar?" Daea yelled over the soaring winds.

The pair had hit the apex of their ascent and torpedoed toward the massive glass-and-stone structure that was their home. The wind drowned out any attempt Daea made to speak. It was a hard landing, as the pair came to a sliding halt. The Sovereign did not wait but instead ran straight for their entrance on the gallery's backside. Daea ran behind him. They scrambled down the stairs and burst into their place.

Eli and Chuck looked surprised at their entrance, and the Sight asked, "What is it?"

“Sparklaar!” Hudson answered. “We ran into two Sparklaar just now. We fought.” The tall boy wiped his face, where scratches and bruises lingered.

Eli’s eyes widened. “I just learned about them in my last lesson with Abigail.”

“What’s a Sparklaar?” Daea said.

Chuck looked at Hudson and shrugged.

Hudson motioned for Eli to respond.

“Talk of them isn’t encouraged,” the Smart said.

“When a Childaar skips his or her Sleepining, they don’t immediately become pure evil Eldaar. There’s a transition period of a few years, where they can still expose themselves to the sun without getting destroyed. If they wait too long, they will have lasting health effects.

“Why haven’t I heard of this?” Chuck asked.

“Why are they called Sparklaar?” Daea asked. “Do they sparkle?”

“Kind of,” Hudson said. “Just like Thraldaar have the wispy black streaks, and full-on Eldaar have a black mien to their aura, Sparklaar’s auras sparkle. You would have seen it if you knew what to look for.”

Eli raised his hands toward the ceiling. “So, not only is Jesi-Sera kidnapped, Dracul destroying the city, and a Supreme Court judge contaminated, but now we have a new kind of monster in town?”

Chuck looked at the boy. "I'm sure all these things are related. I need to talk to Abigail about this."

"Want us to come with you?" Eli asked.

The team leader considered the idea. "Yeah, I think this will be something that we all need to hear."

"Everyone on your best behavior," Chuck said, looking at his team. "We don't need to be squabbling."

The team stood at the base of the Rideau Canal lock that separated the Canada Agricultural and Food Museum, with its beautiful arboretum and assortment of gardens, from the Carleton University campus.

"There they are." Hudson pointed across the massive wooden doors that opened and closed so that boats could move through the system of water levels. A walkway over the doors allowed pedestrians to cross the canal. The two teams faced off, each on their respective side.

Abigail, wearing her trench coat, fedora, and red scarf, called across the waterway. "Care to join us over here?" Her high voice pierced through the cold night.

"Why don't you come over here?" Daea yelled in an insolent tone.

"Daea!" Chuck said, reprimanding the girl. He then waved and said, "On our way."

The team walked across the wooden barricade.

Arjun waited at the end with a broad smile and held up his hand for high fives. Ion stood a few paces from the rest of her team, plucking the strings of a small ukulele. Rosalicia stood behind her team's leader with her muscular arms crossed and a brooding expression.

"Hi, Arjun," Daea said, clapping the handsome boy's hand.

Eli also gave the boy a high five. "Ça va?"

"Ça va bien," the Charm replied. "Je sais Francais maintenant."

Hudson smiled and nudged Daea forward so that he could cross. "Hi, Arjun."

Abigail gave the Charm an approving nod. "Thanks for working to make it better."

"I like everyone," Arjun said, wiping his hair away from his face.

"Agreed," Chuck said, slapping the boy's hand and joining his teammates on the south side of the Rideau Canal. He turned his attention to Abigail. "You got my message about the Sparklaar?"

The older Sight frowned and said, "I did. We will keep our eyes open for pinball machines in our territory."

Eli said, "Pinball seems to be Zavanna's obsession."

"So," Abigail said, "this city is in a lot of trouble."

"Yeah, like we told you," Daea said.

Hudson placed his hand on the girl's shoulder, and she quieted.

Abigail gave the girl a stern look, then caught Arjun's smiling face in the corner of her eye and relaxed. "That's fair. When I read the initial reports, I didn't think it could be as bad as you claimed."

Eli raised his hand. "Do you think we can get any more support? Maybe another team?"

Abigail shook her head. "I doubt it. We are spread thin enough as it is."

Eli's expression deflated.

Chuck said, "But we have two full teams. The game's not over. With hard work and grit, we can overcome this struggle."

Abigail pointed approvingly at her fellow Sight. "That's right. This an opportunity for us to do some real good."

"Yeah!" Arjun hollered, causing everyone to stand a little taller.

"Yeah!" Daea echoed the Charm.

"Which leads us to our next issue," Abigail stated. "There have been a lot of missions, and our win to loss ratio has been abysmal."

Ion played a dark melody on the ukulele. Rosalicia's brooding intensified.

"I know," Chuck said.

“That’s because we’re doing more than you,” Daea stated.

“Daea,” Chuck growled.

“What? It’s true.”

“We’re the experienced team,” he said under his voice.

“We know the city.”

“The girl has a point,” Abigail said.

“It’s fine,” Chuck replied.

“It’s obviously not. We’ve been here for a couple of months now. I think we should redistrict the territories.”

Chuck grimaced.

Hudson placed his arm on his leader’s shoulder. “You should consider it, boss. It could be for the best.”

“I know.” The sandy-haired boy sighed.

“What are the traditional borders?” Abigail asked.

Eli answered, “The A-team was downtown and the surrounding areas, while the B-team was pretty much everywhere else and the tunnels.”

“Let’s go back to that.”

“Alright.” Chuck gave Abigail a faint smile. “Thanks.”

“If we’re going to save this city,” the B-team’s leader said, “We must all do our part.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“Look at that,” Eli said, pointing at the ground, where the Suffering roused. “Mission.”

“Missions,” Abigail corrected. “One for each of us. It looks like we have a Stomp at a golf course, and yours is a...” She trailed off. “Downtown? Something is lost?”

Chuck inspected the swirling, inky-black substance. “Looks like it is happening at the Confederation Building.”

While everyone was focused on the Suffering, Daea sidled up to Arjun and asked, “Hey, do you have any money I could borrow?”

CHAPTER 7

Eli walked into the Childaar home with three Tomes in hand and a gray fedora on his head.

“What have you got there?” Daea asked. She sat in a beanbag chair with a report on one leg and one of Jesi-Sera’s comic books on the other.

“I just had my weekly meeting with Abigail.”

“Lucky you.”

“I know. She’s impressive.”

“I was being sarcastic. Did she buy you that hat?”

“No, I bought it myself. I like the way they look.”

“You just like Abigail.”

“I don’t know why you have a problem with her. Sure, she’s serious, but in a good way. She thinks the Sparklaar may be in town to curry favor with an Eldaar.”

“And how does she know that?”

She doesn’t know for sure because information about Eldaar, Sparklaar, and Thraldaar don’t keep well in Tomes.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m going to take them down.”

“No, we don’t want to do that. There’s still hope while they’re Sparklaar.”

Daea mulled over the idea. “I don’t know. If they want to be evil Eldaar, I think they get what they deserve.”

“Please think about what you’re saying.” The Sight looked around the home. “Where are Chuck and Hudson?”

“On patrol.”

Eli nodded. “Also, attacking an Eldaar, Thraldaar, or Sparklaar puts you at a disadvantage, but it’s the other way around if they come at you.”

Daea’s eyes snapped up from the comic book. “What do you mean?”

“It’s related to the idea that a vampire must be invited into a place before they can enter.”

“That’s true?”

“I guess so.”

“That explains how Axe and Zavanna gave us such a beating.”

“Right, and why we were so powerless against Dracul.”

“But we didn’t attack him.”

“We went to him both times. At the Office of the Prime Minister and then again in the House of Commons.”

Daea touched her temples with her index fingers. “It’s weird remembering that since Hudson fixed our memories.”

“I know. That was over a year ago, last Halloween.”

“At least we got to go out last year. I’m still not impressed that Chuck decided we needed to work this year.”

“Well, things are pretty bad.”

“But it was Halloween.”

“And, it’s not looking good for Thanksgiving or Christmas.”

The girl’s nose scrunched. “We need to fix this place before the holidays. I want to go home.” She took a moment to collect her thoughts and then said, “So, we need to get them to come at us?”

“Like I said, it’s an advantage. It doesn’t guarantee victory. Dracul is going to be a lot more powerful than Sparklaar regardless of who’s attacking. Abigail also thinks that Eldaar try to avoid Childaar because we have protections that often make dealing with us not worth the hassle.”

“So, what do we need to do?”

Eli shrugged. “Abigail says that she’s never seen anything like what’s happening here. We are in uncharted territory.”

“Abigail says, Abigail says,” Daea mocked. “If you like her so much, you should marry her.”

“Grow up,” Eli said as he laid the Tomes on the desk.

“You grow up.”

The Smart ignored the girl’s taunt and walked back to the home’s exit.

“Where are you going?”

“Getting away from you.”

“Don’t be like that.”

“Don’t be rude.”

“I wasn’t.”

Eli gave the girl a hard look.

Daea followed the boy to the door. “OK, I’m sorry. I know you are learning lots from her. I won’t bug you about it anymore.”

The Smart looked at the girl and rolled his eyes.

“I’ll try not to.”

Eli tied his shoes.

“Can I come? I want to get out of the house.”

The boy sighed. “Fine. I want to find a pinball machine and beat its high score. I think that could be a way to track down these Sparklaar.”

“If Zavanna finds out that her score was beaten, she’ll have to go there.”

“Exactly.”

“Where are you going? Capital Fun?”

“Yep.”

“Can I come? I was planning on going there too.”

“Alright,” the boy said. “Just don’t bug me.”

“Of course not.”

Winter threatened on the mid-November night. The cold air forced the kids to button up their wool jackets and put their hands in the pockets. The clouds were low in the

sky, and the Suffering had subsided into its usual wispy veil across the ground. They cut through Majors Hill Park, where most of the leaves had dropped from the trees. They walked next to the castle-like Château Laurier and across the canal locks, into downtown.

“Did you know pinball was invented in the 1800s?” Eli asked.

“What? That long ago? Electricity hadn’t even been invented.”

The Smart sighed. “Electricity wasn’t invented, but rather discovered. And, technically, you don’t need electricity for a pinball machine.”

“How good could that be?”

“By today’s standards, not very. But I bet it was pretty fun back then.”

“I wonder what it was like being a Childaar in those days.”

“Hard to say. Unfortunately, our histories don’t keep well.”

“They probably didn’t have to go to school.”

Eli laughed. “Also, did you know that pinball was illegal in the 1940s?”

“Illegal?”

“It was considered gambling.”

“How so?”

Eli shrugged. "I'm not sure, but it remained illegal until 1976."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Of course, video games have overtaken pinball in popularity, but back before computers got as good as they have, I can see why it was so well-liked. There is a straightforwardness to the game that is enthralling."

The pair arrived at a building with a large sign above its front door that read Capital Fun.

Ringling, horns, and other sounds greeted them as they entered. The tables were empty, and only a few patrons played games. A lone employee, who was mopping the floor, looked up and greeted Daea by name. She set the mop against the wall and walked behind the counter. The Hardy returned the greeting and added that she would like a bag of chips and a soda and to put it on her tab.

Eli looked at the girl. "You're running a tab?"

"Yeah, I help out with things around the place, like moving things and stuff. They repay me with snacks, but I'm planning on paying them for everything once I regain my money privileges. Don't tell Chuck."

The Smart grimaced. "I wish I didn't know that."

"Come on. Let's play." Daea grabbed her snacks and walked toward the rows of games.

While the arcade had mostly video games, there was a wall with about a dozen well-maintained pinball machines.

“What do you think?” Eli asked, looking at their options. “BLD” held the high score on each one.

The girl plopped her bag of chips atop the glass cover of a Justice League themed machine. Wonder Woman, Batman, and Superman took up most of the picture on the front, but Flash, Martian Manhunter, Green Lantern, and Aquaman were featured in the background. In addition to the two main flippers protecting the drain, two were in alignment about halfway up the playfield. “I’d say we have to play this one.”

“It looks fun.” Eli examined the rules printed on the bottom left of the glass cover. “It says here that we have to find a villain and then assemble a team to defeat them.”

“Who are the villains?”

“Brainiac, H.I.V.E. Queen, Doomsday, Solomon Grundy, and Lex Luther.”

“We can take them.”

Eli laughed and dropped loonies, the Canadian one-dollar coin, into the game. He pressed the start button twice and waved a hand at Daea to indicate that she should play first.

The Hardy pulled the plunger all the way back and launched the silver ball high into the bumpers. “What do I do?”

Eli pointed at five different targets. “See how those each have one of the villains. You need to choose who you

want to fight, and they each have different ways to defeat them.”

“I want to fight them all.”

“You have to do them one at a time.”

“I’ll start with Doomsday.”

The red-eyed, white-haired, spiked behemoth’s image covered a section on the right-hand side.

“You have to clear those dropdowns,” Eli said, pointing at five red-and-black blocks.

The ball fell onto the right flipper, Daea did nothing, and it bounced over to the left one. She made a shot, which missed its intended targets. The ball dropped back onto the left flipper, which she used to send the ball up the middle through a spinner and into a group of circular bumpers. The machine clanged with excitement as the ball knocked around. It eventually dropped out to the top, clipped a post, and was sent straight down the middle into the gutter.

Lex Luther’s deep cackle sounded from the speakers.

“Unlucky,” Eli said. “You had the right idea.”

Daea huffed and moved out of the way for her friend to play his turn.

“Game on,” Eli said, pulling back the plunger to release the silver ball. He watched as it bounced around the top of the playfield and dropped into the chute that dropped it onto the left flipper. The Smart shot the ball

toward the Doomsday image and dropped three of the five blockers. The ball dropped back toward the right flipper, and he passed it over to the left and cleared the last two remaining blocks. The machine roared as Doomsday's section of the playfield exploded in flashing lights.

"You got him," Daea said, giving her friend a pat on the back.

"I opened him. Now I have to assemble a team of three to beat him."

"Who are you going to get?"

Eli shrugged. "Might as well go with Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman." His attempt to unlock the Man of Steel failed. The shot took a hard angle that bounced off the edge of a post and dropped into the gutter.

"Nice try." Daea pushed her friend aside to take over the machine. She released her second ball high into the top bumpers, but when it finally found its way out, it took an unlucky trajectory and beelined for the gutter. "That's not fair. I didn't even get one shot."

Eli pointed at the front of the machine where the words "Try Again" flashed. "You get another chance."

The girl huffed. "I should hope so."

On her next attempt, she unlocked Doomsday and made the three ramp shots to add Wonder Woman to her team, but when she tried for the Batman spinners, she lost control and lost the ball.

“I think you’re getting the hang of it.”

“I wish this was for real,” the girl replied. “If I could really fight him, it wouldn’t be a contest.”

“You think you could beat Doomsday, one of DC’s strongest villains, in a fight?”

“Of course.”

Eli squared himself off to the machine. “You know he killed Superman?”

Daea scoffed. “Superman can’t be beaten.”

“Actually, in the Death of Superman series, Doomsday kills him.”

“That doesn’t seem right.”

“It’s true. I bet if you looked through Jesi-Sera’s comics, you could find those copies.”

“But how? Superman’s indestructible.”

“That’s all I know. I never read it.” Eli’s eyes were laser-focused on the game action. “DC took it as an opportunity to reboot the franchise. They came back with four Supermans.”

“Four?”

“Yep. Steel, Superboy, Cyborg Superman, and Eradicator.” He had unlocked the trio of heroes and attempted to defeat the villain, but the ball nicked a saucer, which sent it off course and into the gutter.

“I don’t know if I like that.”

“From what I understand, it was divisive in the community.”

“But Superman shouldn’t die.”

Eli shrugged and moved to the side.

Daea took her place in front of the machine and launched the ball. “How did he come back?”

“I think they just rebooted the series. You know, comic book rules.”

“I’m going to have to read those for myself.”

Eli said, “Pass them along to me when you’re done.”

The Hardy struggled to make her shots and was unable to assemble the heroes before losing her ball.

“Ugh, how did I miss that? You win without even having to play your last ball.”

“I don’t care about beating you,” Eli responded. “I want to beat the high score, but I’m not even close.”

“You can do it,” Daea said as she opened a bag of chips.

Eli took a deep breath, stood square to the machine, and began his final play. The two Childaar did not talk as the boy vanquished Doomsday and Lex Luthor.

“Multiball” flashed across the screen as the Solomon Grundy fight began. The Smart found a rhythm as he flung the three balls up the left side ramp.

“This is making me dizzy,” Daea said as she watched her friend accumulate bonus points on top of bonus points.

The machine's sound effects blasted with each shot. Unfortunately, two of the balls got caught in the chute coming down to the flipper and dropped together. The boy tried to pass one across to the other side, but it dribbled high and down into the gutter, while the second missed its ramp shot. Eli had lost his stride and lost the two other balls. The machine rumbled with excitement as it tallied his final score, which netted him a free play.

Daea smiled. "You've got a great name for a high score. Three letters: E. L. I."

The machine returned to its normal state, and when it showed the top three scores, they were still held by "BLD."

"What?" Daea exclaimed. "Those scores are way higher than yours."

"I know."

"It would take you hours of perfect shots to beat them."

"Yep. And we won't be able to play pairs. I'll need all the time I can get."

"Zavanna is good at pinball."

"She is," Eli agreed. "But I am going to be better."

"You think you can?"

"Of course."

Daea stopped at the counter for a few bags of candy before leaving. The pair waved and thanked the staff.

"That was fun," Daea said.

Eli's eyes narrowed with determination. "I like pinball."

CHAPTER 8

The teacher asked Daea if she really thought that trigonometry had no real-world applications. The girl sat at her desk, focused on her clasped hands. She was pressed on how people could travel to space or build high-rises without it. Eli added making pinball machines to the list but was shushed for his efforts. Chuck and Hudson watched the showdown. The Hardy looked at the clock, knowing her best strategy would be to run it out. Neither the teacher nor the student budged for the few moments until the bell rang.

The girl stood, grabbed her books, and said, “Bye,” in a defiant tone. The rest of her teammates met up with her in their home shortly after. She walked to the kitchen, but opening the fridge and not seeing any snacks, closed it harder than she had to—not quite a slam. “Come on, Chuck. When am I going to get anything?”

“Considering how you behaved in class today, not for a while yet.”

“I’m not planning on going to space,” the girl said. She considered her words for a moment and then added, “Actually, maybe I will. I’ll just get others to do the math. Eli can do it for me.”

The Smart was unpacking his bookbag from a brown satchel he had purchased at the mall one evening with Daea. "If I'm doing the work, I'm going to space."

"But I'd be a better astronaut," the girl said.

Eli laughed. "How do you figure that?"

"I'm better under pressure, so when there is a problem, like an alien on a deserted spaceship, I can fight it and save the day."

"I don't think you know what astronauts do."

"I've seen enough movies to get an idea. My mom worked on many of them."

"Most of them are engineers and scientists, and if you keep shirking your schoolwork, there is no way you will ever be going."

"Well, we'll see how well your math and science help you when you're up there and get attacked by aliens. You'll wish I was there to help."

Eli opened a thick textbook and began working on his homework. "I guess we'll see."

Daea, returning to her original problem, asked, "Does anyone have a bag of chips?" When no one replied, she added, "Or a chocolate bar, lollipop, toffee, fudge, anything?"

While Eli completed his studies, Chuck flipped through reports, and Hudson read the local newspapers.

"Don't ignore me," Daea said, whining.

Only the ticking of the clock in the kitchen could be heard.

“Pleeease,” Daea begged.

Chuck looked up from the stack of papers in his lap. He had turned on the TV to watch a hockey game about to begin. “Help Hudson go over the dailies and reports, and I’ll give you a box of chocolates.”

“What kind?”

“It’ll be a surprise.”

“But an actual box of chocolates?”

Chuck nodded.

“Deal.”

The late afternoon passed with the team hard at work. Daea, Eli, and Hudson worked through newspapers, police reports, judicial memorandums, traffic reports, and any other public information they could find. Chuck sat next to them, recording their findings.

The team leader set down his pen and shook his wrist. “I’m getting tired of writing these all by hand.”

“What do the Orakles even do with all this?” Eli asked. “Just imagine how much correspondence they get from around the world.”

Chuck sighed. “That would be a tough job. I never realized how much work Jesi-Sera and Owen did behind the scenes.”

The team quieted at the mention of their previous team leader and friend.

Chuck looked at the clock. "We're about done here for the day."

Daea stood, placed her hands behind her back, and gave the Sight a big smile.

"Why are you being weird?" the team leader said, giving the girl a strange look.

"We had a deal," Daea said.

Chuck looked confused.

"The chocolate," Eli said.

Chuck rolled his eyes. "Oh, right. A deal's a deal." The Sight walked to his room and returned with a black rectangular box with the words Pot of Gold written across the top. He tossed it to the wide-eyed girl, who caught it and immediately ripped off the cellophane wrapper.

She removed the top, where a piece of paper explained the kinds of chocolates found in the individual spots. Without consulting the information, she grabbed five and threw them in her mouth. She looked up and saw her teammates' horrified expressions. She looked down at the box of chocolates and held it out to her friends. They each put their hands up and declined the offer.

"I'm going to check the Suffering," Chuck said.

Daea swallowed and said, "Do you think I can get my money privileges back?"

“We’ll see. You need to be more helpful like now, and less like you were in class today.”

“We’ll see means no,” the girl said. “But, thanks for this.” She plopped down in a beanbag chair and stuffed four more chocolates into her mouth.

“Be careful,” Eli said. “That’s not an unlimited supply.”

With a mouthful of chocolate and nougat, the girl tried to answer, but it was incomprehensible.

Eli recoiled. “I didn’t understand anything.”

Daea swallowed and tried again. “I said, I’ll take the remaining ones slower.”

Chuck opened the door to leave their home. “Be right back.”

“No mission, no mission,” Daea said, holding up her hands to show her crossed fingers. She picked up another chocolate, looked at it lovingly, and pushed it in her mouth.

“You may have a problem,” Eli said with a laugh.

“Imagine if you couldn’t play games,” Daea said. “How would that make you feel?”

Eli shrugged. “I’d manage.”

“Would you?”

“Doesn’t matter. I do well in school and take care of all my duties.”

“Good for you,” Daea said, throwing another chocolate high in the air, then catching it in her mouth.

The Smart ignored the girl as he moved to the games area. He surveyed the assortment, many of which he had ordered. “We haven’t had much time to play anything lately.”

“Yeah, I miss beating you at Go,” Daea said, joining him to look at the shelves.

“We’re about even.”

The small girl had finished the first layer of chocolates by the time the team leader returned. “We’ve got a Stomp.”

Daea sighed. “At least it’s not an Operation.”

“Do you know where?” Eli asked.

“Not yet,” the Sight replied. “I don’t think it’s too far.”

“Are we walking?” Hudson asked, heading toward the door.

Chuck shook his head. “Let’s take the truck.”

The team wore light winter jackets to face the chilly night. They were well into November, and a soft layer of snow mixed with the turbulent Suffering to cover the ground. Hudson sat in the front of the cab while the younger Childaar scooted into the back.

The team leader looked at the inky, misty dark force that whirled across the terrain. “I think we need to head east. It’s a little further than I first thought.”

Eli said, "I see east, too. But if you don't know where we're going, how could we?"

Chuck said, "Plenty of teams around the world don't have a member with Perception, and they have to make do the hard way. I suggest you work on developing that skill."

Hudson nodded in agreement.

"I'm glad we have you, Chuck," Daea said, reaching up to give the Sight a pat on the back.

"I'm glad I can help, but you need to practice your tracking skills in case I'm not around or you get moved to a different city."

"Not me," Daea said. "I'm going to stay here forever." She paused and considered her statement. "Or, L.A. It would be nice to work from home."

"I wonder how that would work," Eli said. "I can't imagine Childaar live with their parents even if they are in their home city. Our parents would think it strange how we can't be in the sun and go out every night. I know my parents wouldn't allow that."

Daea said, "I'm sure I could explain it to mine."

Eli chuckled. "I bet you could."

Chuck drove the truck through the Byward Market, and they got onto St. Patrick Street and passed the Chinese embassy. "It looks like Rockcliffe Park or New Edenborough."

“A Stomp in Rockcliffe?” Eli noted. “Those are usually Operations.”

“I wonder how Eva is doing,” Daea said.

“I’m sure she’s alright,” Eli answered. “She and her family are probably living happily since we helped them with their troubles.”

Chuck pointed ahead of them. “I know where it is. A grocery store in New Edenborough. The one on Hemlock, just after the Vanier Parkway.”

“Pretty much where this street changes names,” Eli said.

“I’m still not used to that,” Hudson added. “It’s strange how you can be on one road with one name, and then next thing you know, that road has a different name.”

“One of Ottawa’s peculiarities,” Chuck said with a shrug.

The truck passed over a small bridge covering the Rideau River. They went through a wide intersection at the Vanier Parkway, where a large illuminated sign showed them into the grocery store.

Restaurants, coffee shops, and apartment blocks lined the main street to the cozy Beachwood community. Houses ran parallel to the shops and stores on the surrounding streets, and a large parking lot welcomed people into the midsized grocery store.

The sliding glass doors opened automatically as a stream of customers and workers rushed out of the building screaming in a panic. They all ran to their cars to get away from whatever was happening inside.

“I wonder what spooked them?” Eli asked.

“Let’s find out,” Daea answered, punching a fist into her hand. She looked at Chuck. “Are we ready?”

“Game on,” the Sight replied.

“Stay behind me,” Daea announced. The door slid open as she approached the encounter. Eli stood close behind the Hardy, while Hudson and Chuck remained a few paces back from him. The building felt hotter than it should have. The Suffering washed across the floor like dirty water that had spilled from a mop bucket.

They were greeted by a turnstile that led into the produce section of the store. Shelves along the walls and display tables held fruits and vegetables. A half-unpacked pallet of prepackaged salads and juices sat in the middle of the entrance as the worker hadn’t finished stocking the display before being driven away.

“I think we’ll find what we need in the candy aisle,” Daea said.

“Let’s go aisle by aisle,” Chuck said. “I don’t want to miss anything or get ambushed.”

Eli added, “It’s a mission, not a snack run.”

“Why not both?”

“Pay attention,” Chuck ordered. “I’ll move ahead and come back if I find anything.” The Sight disappeared in front of their eyes. It did not take long before he reappeared. “We’ve got Crittars.”

“What’s a Crittar?” Daea asked.

“Ankle biters,” Hudson answered.

“What?”

“They are a category of monsters that are small, quick, and have sharp teeth,” Chuck said. “These ones look like mop heads.”

“There’s one,” Eli yelled, pointing at a display of crackers stacked on two wooden pallets in the center of the aisle.

Everyone saw a flash of movement as what looked like the head of a mop scurried across the floor. Instead of cloth, it was made of sinewy strands of beige muscle. It shimmied like a crab under the Suffering-covered display.

“I got it,” Daea yelled. She ran and then slid toward where she had seen the creature. She extended her claws and reached for the Crittar and was quick to pull her hand back. “Ouch, it bit me,” she cried.

“Get back here,” Chuck shouted. “We need to stick together.”

The Hardy peered under the wooden pallet.

“Daea!” Chuck yelled.

The Hardy's teammates saw the surprise on her face as she turned and ran back toward them. The Suffering oozed from under the wood foundation along with a cluster of Crittars that were faster than the girl. They latched onto her shoes and crawled up her legs. She cried in pain as she hopped in the air while using her claws to swipe at the monsters. Her teammates rushed to meet her and helped shake them off, after which they kicked and stomped the flat creatures, which lost their corporeal form and returned to the Suffering.

More Crittars emerged from the display. Eli turned his body square toward them and unloaded a series of fireballs that destroyed the monsters and exploded the hundreds of cracker boxes. Crumbs and Suffering floated to the ground after the blast. A few more slinked out from under the shelves and counters. Hudson and Chuck got in on the action by stomping down on the tiny creatures. Eli shot another fireball while Daea observed her teammates clear all the monsters in sight.

"Easy peasy," Daea said, dusting her hands.

The Suffering continued to churn.

"Don't get cocky," Chuck replied. His voice was serious. "We never know what a Stomp has in store."

More of the Crittars flooded out from nooks and crannies.

"See," Eli said. "You jinxed us."

“Did not,” the girl replied. “Besides, I got this.” Daea kicked a few monsters. It didn’t take much to destroy them, but she didn’t see the ones behind her slither onto the back of her legs. She howled in pain as she shook her foot.

Hudson and Chuck were unable to help her smack them off this time, as they fended off their own. Eli jumped ahead of the group and rolled bowling-ball-sized fireballs down the aisle. The explosions returned large swaths of the creatures back to the Suffering.

More creatures appeared. So many that they stacked on top of each other. They were quick, plentiful, and persistent.

Eli kept bowling his fireballs, but he could only get one section while the Crittars pressed the attack from all angles and fronts. The other Childaar kept stomping on the monsters, but there were too many, and they encroached on the tight circle of young vampires.

“Get up higher so that they can’t bite us,” Chuck yelled, jumping onto the rubbery tread of a till counter.

Eli followed the team leader, stood with shoulders square, and shot little fireballs in all directions. The monsters came out from under the till; the rack for impulse purchases like gum, chocolate bars, and batteries; and the extended store shelves that separated the aisles. They slid effortlessly along the ground, under the Suffering, like mops without handles.

The checkout counter became crowded as Daea and Hudson joined their teammates atop it. The tactical retreat didn't help them as much as they had hoped. The Crittars slithered up the sides. The team was once again surrounded by the sharp-toothed, sinewy mop monsters. They screamed in pain as tiny teeth pierced their skin through their clothes.

Hudson grabbed Chuck by the waist and used his Jump to bring the team leader up into the ceiling's rafters. He yelled down, "I'm going to drop and bring you both up here. Be ready." The tall boy gauged the distance and fell back down onto the conveyer belt.

Eli, unable to shoot fire as he fought off the creatures, was able to get onto the Sovereign's back while Daea wrapped her arms around the boy's neck on the front. It was an awkward Jump, but the Sovereign was able to bring the pair up toward the Sight. The team leader grabbed Daea's arm and helped her find her footing on the wide steel beam. Some of the Crittars remained attached to the Childaar, like leeches on skin. After the young vampires had shaken them all off, they looked around and saw the fiends crawling up the walls and support pillars at the same pace as they moved on the ground.

"Where should I focus my fire?" Eli asked no one in particular.

"Everywhere," Daea said.

"This isn't looking good," Hudson added.

A grim-faced Chuck surveyed the surroundings.

"Sometimes, we just don't have the right equipment for the game."

"We showed up to a basketball game with a football?"

Daea said.

"Something like that," the Sight replied. "Eli is the only effective Childaar in this situation."

"I bet Jesi-Sera's Fear would have worked well on these things," Eli said.

"Yep," Chuck agreed. "I'm calling it. This has the potential to end poorly."

"We must be able to do something," Daea said.

"What?" Chuck asked.

"I don't know. Something."

"I'm not going to risk us getting overrun." He looked at the Sovereign and asked, "Can you get us out of here?"

The building's floors and walls were covered in Crittars that slithered onto the roof toward the Childaar.

"You got it, boss." Hudson shimmied his way next to Daea. "Can you be the pointy end of the spear as we crash through that big front window?"

"That's what I do," Daea said, disappointment clear on her face as she climbed onto the Sovereign's back.

The pair glided off the ceiling, torpedoing toward the window. The Hardy had her arms outstretched and claws

extended. The glass shattered as they exploded through the large pane. The adjacent sheets of glass cracked and fell out of their frames as well. Given the low glide, Hudson couldn't land upright, and the two Childaar tumbled across the ground.

Daea kickflipped onto her feet and looked back into the store, where the little monsters converged on Eli and Chuck.

"Hurry!" Daea screamed.

Hudson stood and ran at the broken window and jumped up toward the ceiling rafters, where the two boys awaited. A short conversation ensued, at which point Chuck climbed onto Hudson's back, and Eli wrapped himself around the front of the tall Sovereign. They stepped off the beam and glided clumsily off the fixture toward the broken front window.

Eli hadn't gotten a good hold, and the boys wobbled through the air. The Smart lost his grip and slid off the tall boy, who tried to catch him but ended up flipping over onto his back. The three Childaar dropped onto the floor of the store into a pile of Crittars. Eli yelped as his foot slipped and his leg twisted.

The Crittars converged on the boys. Hudson helped the Smart to his feet, and the trio attempted to fend off the monsters, but for each one they destroyed, two seemed to take its place. They crawled up and onto the boys, who

swatted and punched at them, but there were too many, and they were unable to fend off the attacks.

Daea ran back toward the store and jumped through the broken window. She crouched low, and as fast as she could move, waded through the monsters, cutting a swath toward her friends. The destroyed Crittars disappeared back into the Suffering, but the space filled with more creatures. She reached the boys and turned around to continue her low moving attack. "Stay behind me," she yelled as she began cutting a path out of the store.

Hudson and Chuck each had an arm around Eli, who limped on one foot. The Childaar's clothing had been ripped to shreds, and they had red welt and puncture marks on their exposed skin, but they were able to make progress toward the big, broken window.

Upon exiting, the team moved away from the window. The Suffering grew into a swell and then released, taking all the little mopypy creatures with it. The Suffering returned to its normal state, but a little deeper and heavier than it had been.

The team dropped to the ground, where they lay in pain.

"Sorry, guys," Chuck said. "I could have made a better plan."

"It's not your fault, boss," Hudson said. "These missions are backbreaking."

“He’s right,” Eli added, sitting up to examine his leg. The team leader shrugged and moved to the young boy. “How are you? That was a hard fall.”

The Smart lifted it off the ground and stretched. “I’ll be OK.”

The Sight then noticed the Suffering and groaned.

“What is it?” Eli asked.

“The B-team. They had a Stomp tonight, too. It failed.”

“It’s going to be another rough day for the people of Ottawa,” Hudson noted.

“That it is,” Chuck said. “That it is.”

CHAPTER 9

Daea and Eli rushed into the arcade. The Smart had his winter jacket off and a loonie in hand as they hurried toward the Justice League pinball machine. He pressed start and released the ball.

“I’ve got a good feeling about this one,” Daea said.

“I’m glad you do,” Eli replied. “I’ve been playing this for two weeks now and still haven’t beaten the high score.”

“You got close yesterday.”

“That’s true. At least the shorter days give us more time to play.”

“I didn’t expect the score to be so high that you need to use this much time. What is the shortest day of the year?”

Eli had already selected Lex Luther as his villain and was well on his way to assembling a team to beat him.

“You know this.”

“I do?”

“The winter solstice.”

“Oh yeah.” The girl’s nose scrunched. “When’s that?”

“The first day of winter. December twenty-first.”

“Right. Not long before New Year’s Eve — my birthday!”

Eli laughed. With his team assembled, he started the sequence to engage multiball.

Daea patted the glass cover. "I'm going to get a snack."

The boy did not answer but instead focused on his game as she walked to the counter where the young man who worked the arcade's afternoon shift sat. He played on his phone, but when he saw Daea, he smiled and started bringing a wide assortment of treats from the trays behind him onto the counter. She told him that he knew her well as she swiped a chocolate bar, unwrapped it, and ate it in three bites. Picking up the rest of the junk food, she thanked him and walked back toward the machines.

Setting her haul on a small table near the wall, Daea removed her winter clothes and approached a dancing game. It had two sides for two players, each with a massive screen and nine square floor sensors. She dropped a toonie into the coin slot and moved to the onscreen instructions.

It started with simple rhythms, but it wasn't long before she was moving at a quick tempo and adding extra flair with her arm movements. Eli's bonus scoring on his pinball machine, combined with the music and beats from her game, created a cacophony of noise throughout the restaurant arcade. As the levels progressed, the small girl became a blur of motion as she danced to the songs. Wiping her forehead with the sleeve of her shirt, she walked back to her friend.

"I'm going to check out the comic shop before it closes."

Eli's gaze did not move from the playfield. "Sounds good. I wonder what will be in her file this time."

"I'll find out. Want anything else?"

"You could ask if they have the Death of Superman comics since we couldn't find them in Jesi-Sera's collection."

"Good idea." Daea grabbed her winter gear and backpack. She zipped up her coat, told the staff member that she would be back, and headed out into the night. It felt colder than when they had arrived, but she wasn't sure if the temperature had dropped or the exercise from the game had just made her warm in comparison. Maybe it was both. She put on her toque and mitts and walked further into downtown. The Suffering rolled across the top of the snow-covered ground.

Sporadic traffic moved through the streets as people made their way home for the night. The sidewalks, however, remained empty on the cold and windy night. Daea crossed the street and spotted the neon sign to Beyond Infinity, where two individuals leaving the comic store caught her attention. Unaffected by the frigid night, a waifish woman with blonde hair and a red velvet coat and her jaundiced, goateed partner in a long black duster scanned the area before scurrying down the road.

Daea tiptoed up the sidewalk to hide behind the corner of a building. She was far enough away that she could see

them, but if they looked behind, she could skirt behind the wall. The Sparklaar seemed oblivious to her presence and continued down the street. The Hardy trailed the vampires for another two blocks, where they entered a menswear store. The girl moved closer to see what was happening. She hid behind a car on the opposite side of the street. The shop's large windows provided her an excellent view of the altercation.

Zavanna and Axe loomed over the proprietor, an elderly man in a sharp suit, who pleaded with them. Unfazed by the pleas, the sickly-looking young man raised a fist while the thin young woman glared at the shopkeeper. The man opened the till, removed all the bills, and handed the money over. Axe grabbed the cash and hurled what could only be understood as curses, threats, and invective at the man as he and his partner left.

Daea ducked behind the car as the Sparklaar exited. She peered around the corner but could not see the vampires she pursued. She stood up, which brought her gaze above the vehicle's hood and scanned the street but to no avail. She ran toward the clothing shop and saw big boot prints in the newly fallen snow, which she followed to the end of the block.

Taking a look around the corner, she saw her targets fling open the door to a pizza franchise and storm into the establishment. Creeping down the street, taking her time to

pause behind each car or truck as she moved forward, she again found herself in a position to see the store's happenings.

A scene like the previous encounter unfolded. This time, however, the woman working behind the counter put up more resistance. Zavanna yelled at her, grabbed her by the back of the neck, and smashed her face into the counter. The worker's face was bloody and busted when she pulled herself up, after which she opened the till and gave away the cash.

Daea's nose scrunched as she dashed across the street, flung the door open, extended her claws, and assumed her kung fu Tiger pose. The scent of baking dough filled the room.

"You again," the tall, waifish Sparklaar hissed. Her smooth, French-accented voice glided across the room.

"Give that money back and get out of here!" Daea commanded.

She looked at her partner and laughed, who half-heartedly joined in.

Zavanna said, "What do you think? Should we eat her? She came to us."

Axe replied, "I don't know."

"What? Do you think it will make your girlfriend sad?"

"Leave her out of this!" Spittle flew from Axe's mouth.

“I’m kidding; she’s not worth it. We don’t need a repeat of what happened last time.”

Daea moved forward, careful to not let herself get flanked. “What are you talking about?”

Zavanna waved a dismissive hand toward her partner. “Just get her out of the way.”

Axe moved toward Daea, who raised her arms to block the incoming backhand, which struck her like a cement truck. The Hardy flew across the room, where she crashed into the wall, cracking a series of framed posters showing the monthly specials. The small girl was quick to recover, but by the time she stood, the Sparklaar were gone.

She rushed out the door, looking both ways for signs of the assailants. She saw them enter the hearse they used for transportation. The long black car pulled onto the street and drove away.

Daea returned to the store, where she found the sobbing employee and the cook, a plain-looking man, who had rushed out upon hearing the commotion. Daea told him to bring her a first aid kit as she checked the woman’s injuries. A dark bruise began to form on her cheek, and her teeth had cut her mouth. The man was quick to return with a large box imprinted with a white cross on a green background. The girl opened it and used its contents to help clean the cuts. Daea assured the woman that nothing was broken and that she would be alright. She told the

workers to call the police and file a report. She explained that since the police were Kinedaar, they would be unable to bring justice to the Sparklaar who had assaulted and robbed them.

Complete confusion spelled across the faces of the two workers as they listened. The young vampire assured them that even though the police could not do anything, she and her team would get them. Again, the Kinedaar stood, stunned, not understanding anything that they were being told.

The Hardy checked the woman's injuries one last time before leaving the store with a wave and a reminder to call the police. The last thing she saw before heading out into the cold night was the cook picking up the store's phone.

The small girl walked back down the street the way she had come. Two police cruisers were pulling away from the comic store as she neared. The woman working at the store was just about to turn the deadbolt to lock the store as Daea pulled on the door.

The owner explained that they were closed for the night, but then she recognized Daea. A look of exasperation flashed across her face before she began to berate the Childaar. The Hardy asked what she was talking about and was told that her friend, the blonde Scottish girl, had arrived and yelled at her for selling her comic books. The owner had tried to explain that her friend had

purchased them and was holding onto them for her. It did not matter as Jesi-Sera scolded the shopkeeper for her unprofessional actions and vowed to never buy anything from them again.

Shocked, Daea asked if the owner was sure that it was Jesi-Sera and when it happened. The woman was certain because there could be no way she could forget their best customer. Taking a moment to think back, she said the incident had occurred three nights prior.

When Daea sought more details, the woman ignored the questions and blamed her for bringing such hassle into her life. She then described the Sparklaar, who had been frequenting the store, also asking about Jesi-Sera's whereabouts, which wasn't the worst part, as they shoplifted something expensive each time they entered the premises. She said that times were hard enough without losing valuable inventory to thieves.

The girl asked if she told them anything about Jesi-Sera, to which the woman replied that she had shared everything she knew. Daea said that she should have kept that information to herself, but the woman said she'd felt threatened. The store owner looked defeated as Daea pressed her for more details, but she didn't have anything more to add.

As the conversation ended, Daea assured the woman that she would return and buy enough to make up for the

shoplifting and lost sales once she got her money privileges back. Which reminded the Hardy to inquire about the Death of Superman series and was told they were in stock. Daea said that she would be back for them and more. The woman seemed confused by the promise and said that she just wanted to be left alone from any of these troubles. She locked the door without any more words and flipped the sign in the window to "Closed."

The small girl ran back to the arcade, where she found Eli still playing.

He smiled when he saw her. "I think I've got it this time. It's my last ball, but I'm in good shape."

"Jesi-Sera is in town."

"What?" the boy exclaimed. He stood shocked as the ball dropped into the gutter. His game ended, but he paid it no attention as he turned to face his friend. "What did you find?"

The screen flashed, asking for initials as he had the second-highest score. The boy ignored the prompt as he pushed his friend for details.

After Daea told him everything she knew, Eli said, "We need to head home and tell the guys."

"Alright, let's go." Daea quickly grabbed a box of candy, a bag of chips, and a soda before leaving.

CHAPTER 10

“Another Operation,” Daea complained from the back seat of Chuck’s truck. “Why can’t we just get a Stomp?”

“No missions would be better,” Eli said. “If Jesi-Sera’s back in town, we need to focus all our time on finding her.”

Chuck said, “Our priority needs to be on the Suffering. If we don’t control it, everything else gets harder. We’ll have time afterward to do our investigations, which includes finding Jesi-Sera.”

The snow had been falling all day, so he put the vehicle into four-wheel drive and had no problems traversing the slippery streets, where slush and Suffering parted before the silver vehicle. It did not take long before they arrived in front of a fifteen-story glass building on Kent Street.

“If it’s her,” Hudson said. “We know that Zavanna can create illusions. She could have been impersonating your teammate.”

“How would they know what she looked like?” Daea asked.

The Sovereign replied, “I think we can assume that there is a connection between the Sparklaar, Dracul, and Jesi-Sera.”

“It’s her,” Daea said, scrunching her nose.

“I’m just saying that it’s a possibility. I hope we find your friend.”

“Let’s focus on this Op,” Chuck barked. “We can speculate afterward.”

“We need a win,” Eli said. “This losing streak has been tough.”

“Agreed,” Hudson said.

“I know it’s been rough,” Chuck told his team. “But we just have to keep doing our best. Let’s give it one hundred percent.”

“Then, we’ll go out for waffle cones?” Daea asked.

Chuck closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Sure, if we solve this Operation, we’ll go for waffle cones. We’ll have to get back to work after that, though. We have lots to do.”

“We always have lots to do. I sometimes wonder what it’s like living in a normal city,” Eli said, looking up at the tall glassy building. Its windows seemed near black on the dark, snowy night.

“Enough grumbling,” Chuck growled. “It’s not helpful.”

“Any idea what we can expect in here?” Eli asked.

“The Suffering looks like little whirlpools.”

The team leader shrugged. “This is a government building, so I’d guess something to do with that.” A wide

overhang covered the building's entrance, where a sign listed the occupants.

"They have a gym," Daea said, pointing at the twenty-four-hour fitness center located on the ground floor.

"Maybe we just have to do a workout or something."

"You never know with Ops," Eli said.

"Guess what time it is?" Hudson asked.

Daea smiled up at the tall boy. "What?"

"Time to figure out how to get into another government building."

The other Childaar groaned.

"We should just get a set of keys from City Hall at this point," Chuck stated.

"If only," Eli said. "The city is not in charge of the federal buildings, and I don't think there's any way the bureaucracy would let us get those."

"I know," the team leader replied. "But it does get tiring to have to go through this every time.

"We always figure it out," the tall Sovereign said.

"Well," Chuck said, looking at Hudson, "you want to go up and take a look? We'll check out this gym and see if we can get in that way."

"You got it, boss."

Chuck gave the Sovereign a hard look. "We've talked about this."

“I know, boss.” Hudson gave the team leader a lazy salute and leaped into the air.

“Ready, boss?” Daea asked.

“Not you too.”

The girl laughed as the three Childaar walked around the building to the gym’s entrance. A young, black-haired woman looked surprised at three kids walking into the gym so late. She asked if she could help them. Daea told her that they would like to inspect the gym. The woman asked why, and Daea told her because they wanted to. Eli stepped forward and apologized for his friend’s rudeness, shooting a hard look at the girl. The Smart said that they were curious about the gym and wanted to check it out. They had a gym at their school but wondered how it might be different. Like a compare and contrast essay, Daea added. The two boys gave the girl a funny look.

The young woman shrugged and said that since it wasn’t busy, they could. She asked them to remove their footwear. The fitness club split into two areas, with cardiovascular equipment on one side and free weights on the other. The employee was shocked when Daea lifted heavy plates that had been left on the floor and placed them back on the rack.

Chuck asked about the clientele, enquiring whether many people come from the offices in the building. The woman said that yes, before work, at lunch, and after work

were their busiest times. The Sight then asked if there was a direct entrance to the building. There wasn't—those people had to walk around to get in. Chuck sought clarification and asked if there were any other ways in or out and was told that all the emergency exits led to the street. The team's interest in the fitness center waned with that piece of information.

Eli told her that they'd seen everything that they needed to, and they made their way toward the exit. They put on their boots, thanked the worker, and left. Hudson was waiting for them outside.

"This place is a lot bigger than it looks," the Sovereign said. "I found a door on the roof, but it's alarmed. I'd say it's a last resort."

"There is no way in from the gym," Chuck said.

Eli pointing to a wide door. "There is underground parking. Think we can expect a car to leave soon?"

The Suffering swirled and rose.

Before the team could get to the garage entrance, Daea exclaimed, "Hey, people are coming out of the front door."

"What?" Chuck asked, moving closer to the road, where he saw a forlorn-looking couple walking away from the building. At the same time, he saw an elderly woman with a walker hobbling toward it. He rushed to help her and was thanked for his help. The rest of the team was quick to join them.

Eli pulled on the door, which swung open. "It looks like it was open the entire time."

Hudson chuckled. "I guess we should have checked that."

The elderly lady told the Childaar that she did not want to be late for court.

"Court?" Eli said. "That doesn't make any sense. It's too late."

"Let's find out," Daea said.

A makeshift sign had been erected in the lobby which read, "Night Court of Canada/Cour de Nuit du Canada. Eleventh Floor/Onzième Étage."

"That sure seems strange," Hudson said. "Is that a thing in Canada that I just never knew about? You have night courts?"

"It's the first that I ever heard of it," Chuck said as the team and their companion rode up the elevator. A chime dinged to indicate that they had arrived. The door opened into a long hallway lined with people who held papers and documents in their hands.

The team walked past the queue and made their way into the packed courtroom. It was large, with a sitting area in the rear and a little wooden barricade with a gate to allow lawyers and their clients through to their desks. The front had a raised dais for the judge with a witness box next to it and a jury box off to the side. People sat in the

seats awaiting their turn, court clerks recorded activity, and a weary-looking woman sat at the prosecutor's desk. Next to the empty jury box, a diminutive and sad looking bailiff held a clipboard from which she read names.

Hudson found the team a place to stand against the wall, and once they had settled and got a better look at the judge, they all gasped in unison.

Sitting in the judge's chair, a gargantuan man loomed over the proceedings. "Judge Payne" was written on the nameplate in front of the massive magistrate. His bald head reflected his bone-white skin. As though hearing the Childaar's reaction, his piercing brown eyes rested on each for just long enough to make them uncomfortable. He took a deep breath, grinned, and turned his attention to the bailiff.

"Next," the big man commanded. His voice boomed throughout the room, and the bailiff replied that it was a traffic violation. She called a name, and a middle-aged, scrawny man stood, shuffled through the gate, and took a spot at the defendant's table. The prosecutor opened a file and read the charges. He had a series of outstanding tickets: speeding, distracted driving, and red-light camera violations. Judge Payne surveyed the file that the bailiff had given him. He hemmed and hawed while reading the information. He looked at the man and said, "This is a lot of missed fines." He leaned forward and bore his eyes into

the defendant. "But you look like a good sort. I think you deserve a second chance."

"More like a twentieth chance," Hudson whispered under his breath.

With a devilish smirk, Judge Payne asked, "Do you promise to be a better driver from now on?" The man said he did. "Pinky promise?" The man said he would. "Come on, then." He motioned the man forward and held out his smallest finger.

Confused, the defendant walked up to the bench and cinched pinkies with him. "All charges dismissed. Off with you."

The tired prosecutor sighed and tossed the file on top of a pile of spilled-over folders.

"That's not fair," Daea blurted.

A hushed silence fell over the room as everyone turned their attention toward the small girl.

"Silence!" Fury raged in the judge's eyes as he stared at the Hardy, who held his gaze with equal determination. "I will have you removed."

The Suffering rushed and swirled.

Daea pointed at the guy hurrying out of the room before the decision could be changed. "The evidence against that guy was overwhelming. How could you let him off like that?"

The Suffering grew higher.

Hate seethed through each of the judge's words. "It's my court, and I will do what I want."

Daea was about to retort, but Eli put his hand on her arm. "You're not helping. The Suffering grows when you speak. We have to find a different way."

Chuck leaned forward and whispered, "He's a Thraldaar. I wasn't sure at first, but I see it clearly in his aura now."

"Like Ismerlda?" Eli asked. "Dracul's minion, who we fought at the hospital?"

"Yeah."

"But she was crazy. She didn't seem capable of conversation, let alone law."

Hudson's voice quivered as he remembered his meeting of minds with the Thraldaar who had destroyed his previous team. "She was very old."

"I guess they can all be different," Eli said.

The loud voice again reverberated throughout the room. "What part of silence don't you understand?"

The four Childaar snapped up, compelled by the fury and authority in his voice.

The anger on the Thraldaar's face turned into a wide, toothy grin, which revealed a discolored, crooked, and sharp set of teeth with extraordinarily long incisors.

"Unless, of course, you think you could do a better job

presenting these cases. I'm sure Miss. Trembley would like a break."

A fleeting glimpse of hope crossed the tired prosecutor's face.

"You got it, bucko," Daea said, standing.

The Suffering calmed.

"I guess this is what we have to do," Chuck said, rising, and the team brought themselves to the short barricade and let themselves through the opening. The prosecutor handed Daea a file, grabbed her briefcase, and hurried away.

"I guess we're the lawyers now," Eli said, opening the folder.

"What's next?" the Thraldaar judge asked the bailiff, who read a name from her list. A rough and tough-looking man stood up at the back of the room, and the people around him leaned away when they saw his pet. A muzzled dog with short gray hair, a square head, and muscles on muscles walked next to the man. The owner held onto a thick steel chain attached to a wide spiked collar.

Eli closed the file and told his teammates, "This dog has a history of biting people, and the last incident was a week ago."

“There are no bad dogs,” Chuck said, looking at the grizzled man leading his dog to the front. “Just bad dog owners.”

“I’ve got a good feeling about this one,” the judge said.

Chuck stood with confidence. “We propose that the dog be removed from that owner’s custody.”

The bailiff wagged her finger at the Sight and told him to address the judge by “Your Honor” and wait for his turn to speak.

“Bring the dog to me,” Judge Payne told the man, who brought the big canine to the bench at the front of the room. “Up, up,” the judge said playfully, and the animal hopped onto his lap, after which he removed the muzzle. “I don’t think he needs this.”

The owner started to warn the judge, but the latter’s hateful stare silenced him. “Who’s a good dog? Who’s a good dog?” the judge said, nuzzling his face in close. He was greeted with plenty of wet, slobbery kisses from a shoe-sized tongue. His voice took on a cutesy tone. “You’re a good dog. You’re a good dog.”

“Your Honor,” Chuck pressed. “This animal is a danger to the community. This owner can’t be trusted after these attacks. It must be removed from his custody.”

The judge’s hateful gaze darted toward the sandy-haired boy. “Did I say you could talk?”

“Your Honor...”

“Did I?”

“No, but...”

“But what?”

“But, it should be removed from this owner.”

“Oh? OK.” He turned his face back toward the animal and gave it a few kisses on its lips. “Sorry, but we’ll take the prosecution’s advice on this one. The dog is to be put down.” He banged his gavel on the desk. “Take it away,” he ordered the bailiff, who came around and grabbed the animal by its collar and dragged it out of the courtroom. The dog’s owner protested and tried to follow but was forbidden from entering the back room where the animal had been taken. Judge Payne shot Chuck an evil grin. The Suffering rose to around the thighs of the people sitting in the room awaiting their cases.

“What!” Chuck yelled. “That’s not what I said. I’ll take the dog.”

“Too late,” the judge hissed. “Next case.”

“Wait!”

The Suffering swelled.

“I will have you removed, too, if you don’t drop it.” The judge banged the gavel, this time harder. “I said next case!”

The bailiff had returned to her spot, and she handed the judge another file and read another name.

“This is a shoplifting case,” Eli told his teammates.

The elderly woman the Childaar had helped into the building made her way to the lawyer's desk opposite the Childaar.

"A thief," the judge said, eyeing the woman. "Naughty, naughty. What do you have to say for yourself?"

The woman cleared her throat and spoke in a soft, hoarse voice. She explained that she could be forgetful and had unintentionally left the store without paying. Security followed her and alerted the police, who'd charged her with shoplifting. She said that she apologized and had the money to pay them there.

Judge Payne asked, "You tried to bribe them?"

Aghast, she said no, she meant to pay for the groceries.

"Too bad for you. That may have worked."

Eli said, "The woman said that she just wants to pay what she owes and get this all behind her."

The Thraldaar judge pressed a finger to his lips and considered the woman. "I'm not sure you've learned your lesson."

"What!" Daea shouted. "She forgot. She didn't intend to steal."

"I think she needs some time to consider her life choices. Six months in jail." The gavel banged on the desk so hard it echoed around the room. "Take her away!"

The Suffering grew higher as the bailiff lead the woman away through the back door.

“Hey!” Daea started to walk toward the judge’s bench. The Suffering’s waves turned into swells.

Hudson grabbed the back of her coat and pulled her back, and the Suffering eased. “We can’t engage so directly. Something is twisted. We need to find some way to make things right.”

The room to the courtroom swung open, and Zavanna and Axe sauntered in. They walked straight to the front, where they handed a stack of papers to the bailiff, who gave half to the judge and half to the Childaar. Zavanna sneered when she saw the young vampires. The judge indicated that they should wait for him by the door to his chambers. The Sparklaar leaned against the wall and shot aggressive glances at any who dared make eye contact.

“Oh, just what I’ve been waiting for.” He rubbed his hands together. “This is the good stuff.”

Eli scanned the documents.

“What are they?” Hudson asked.

“They are property transfers,” the Smart answered. “Specifically, from government holdings to private equity. And, they are all being sold for one dollar.”

“If everyone could just be patient while I sign these,” the Thraldaar ordered the room. He picked up a pen, opened a folder, and signed his name. “One building, two

buildings, three buildings. Hahaha.” The Suffering grew with each signature.

“Look at the names of these buyers.” Hudson pointed at the lines on the paper to show who was purchasing the real estate. “‘Loveblood Inc.’ and ‘A Little Long in the Tooth Ltd.’”

“He’s buying them for himself,” Eli said.

“Dracul, more likely,” Chuck clarified.

Hudson’s eyes widened. “They’ve completely corrupted the system.”

“We have to stop him,” Daea said. “What’s that word they always say in the movies when they want to talk to the judge?”

“Sidebar,” Eli answered.

“Ten buildings, eleven buildings, twelve buildings. Hahaha.”

Daea waved her hands in the air. “Sidebar, sidebar.”

Judge Payne took a moment to stop and look at the girl. The Suffering rose and bubbled. “I’m in a good mood. Let’s hear what you have to say.” He motioned the Childaar forward.

The team approached the bench, and the judge seemed even higher from their low vantage point. Up close, his skin looked leathery and cracked. “What do you want?”

“This is wrong,” Eli said. “You shouldn’t be able to do this.”

“But I am,” the Thraldaar sneered.

“And we’re going to stop you.” Daea’s claws exploded from her hands. The Suffering jumped.

“Oh, you’re going to come at me? Please do.”

“Put those away,” Eli whispered. “We can’t attack him here.”

The girl’s claws returned back into her hands.

“Clever boy.”

“We’re going to stop you,” Chuck said, glaring at the Thraldaar.

“Not this time, sport.” Judge Payne opened the last few remaining folders, signed the documents, and gave them to the bailiff to give to the clerks. “I thought you were going to have something interesting to say, but you didn’t.” He slammed the gavel one last time. “Court is adjourned.”

The Suffering popped, and the mission failed. The people awaiting their cases groaned when they realized that theirs would not be heard.

“Let’s get him,” Daea said, watching the judge stand. “We’ll take him out here.”

Chuck assessed the situation and looked at Eli, who shook his head. “I don’t know if this is the best time to strike.”

“Of course it is,” Daea protested. “They are causing harm.”

“Us against a Thraldaar and two Sparklaar?” Hudson considered the situation.

“And we came to him,” Eli added.

“We have more information to work with,” the team leader said with a concerned expression. “Don’t worry. We’ll get them on our terms.”

The small Hardy’s nose scrunched.

“That’s unfortunate,” Judge Payne said, realizing there would not be a fight. He turned and walked toward the door to his chambers and motioned for the Sparklaar to go in. Before entering, he waved to the Childaar. “Toodle-oo.”

CHAPTER 11

“It’s my birthday. It’s my birthday. I’m eleven. I’m eleven.” Daea sang as she danced around the room.

“And a New Year’s Eve party,” Hudson said. “We’re due for a night of fun.”

“We’ve earned it,” Eli added.

“Assuming there is no mission,” Chuck added. “Yes, let’s try to enjoy ourselves. You’ve all been working hard. I know it was a lot to ask of you to work through the holidays, but you did, and I appreciate it.”

Daea pointed at the Sight. “Don’t jinx it. There won’t be any missions for us or the B-team.”

“It’s a festive occasion,” Hudson said. “We should be alright, especially since Abigail agreed to meet us for bowling later.”

“I didn’t expect that, either,” Eli agreed. “But she said we are due for a team meetup, and this is as good of a night as we are likely to find.”

The small Hardy’s nose scrunched. “She had better not make this about work.”

Eli sighed. “You have to relax. She’s a good person and a great teacher.”

“She’s the one who doesn’t like me,” Daea retorted. “You should hear the things she says to me in my head.”

Hudson laughed. "The last time we met, you told her that she would be the worst Orakle ever and that if she ever manifested Scry and became one, you would immediately take an early Sleeping rather than be subject to her orders."

"She was being bossy."

"She was doing her job."

"Telling me what to do?"

"She was only sharing information. Then when we left, you told her t—"

"OK, OK," Daea said, cutting the Sovereign off. "I take your point."

"Have you finalized what we are doing before we meet them?" Eli asked.

"I have it all planned," the girl replied, pulling a crumpled piece of paper out of a pocket in her jeans.

Hudson hovered over the small Hardy and laughed. "There's no way we are doing all that."

"We can try."

Hudson nodded. "We certainly can."

"Let's start by going to the candy store in the mall. We will bring our skates and then go for a skate on the canal. We will definitely need hot chocolate and Beaver Tails after that. Then we can come home and watch a movie and play a board game. After that, we will meet the B-team for bowling and the New Year's countdown. That will make

us hungry, so we can go for an early breakfast at a diner. We will finish the night by making crafts. And since we don't have school until next week, we should play some basketball and then have a dance party."

Hudson whistled in disbelief. "Should we give her the birthday present before we leave?"

Daea clapped her hands. "Yes! What did you get me?"

"It's a surprise," Eli answered, looking at the team leader for approval.

Chuck looked at the clock. "Sure." He straightened the suspenders on his snow pants but refrained from donning his heavy parka.

Eli ran to his room and returned with a huge gift-wrapped box. Dozens of balloons, each of which read, "Happy Birthday," had been attached. It was nearly as tall and wide as the girl.

Daea squealed with excitement as the Smart placed it on the floor in the main room. "What is it? What is it?"

"Open it up and see," Hudson said with a slight smirk.

Daea lifted the box up and down a few times. "It's heavy." She ravaged the paper to reveal a plain brown box. Her eyes grew wide as she opened the flaps. "Is this fudge?"

"Custom made," Eli said. "We asked the makers at the fudge shop—"

"The one in the market? That's my favorite."

“We know,” Eli continued. “We asked them to make a custom cube of fudge. It has layers of every kind they make. They said that it is the biggest order they ever had.”

“I love it! Who wants some?” She extended a claw on her index finger and carved out a piece of the chocolatey treat. She gave it a light poke, picked it up, and offered it to her teammates.

Chuck, with a warm gleam in his gold-flecked eyes, said, “It’s all yours, Daea. Happy birthday.”

“Are you sure? There’s a lot. More than enough to share.”

“We want you to have it all,” Eli said.

Daea took a big bite of the chunk, placed it down on top of the box, then proceeded to give each of her friends a big hug. “Thank you.”

Hudson said, “You’ll be on that for a while.”

“It won’t take me long.”

“That wasn’t a challenge,” the tall boy replied.

“Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome,” Chuck said. “I’m going to go check on the Suffering. Be right back.” The Sight walked over to the exit of their home, slipped on his big winter boots, and threw on his jacket before leaving.

“Please, no mission,” Daea begged to no one in particular.

“Did you have a mission on your birthday last year?” Hudson asked.

“There wasn’t,” Eli answered.

“That was an alright party,” Daea said. “Everyone tried, but the missing A-team was a downer.”

Eli said, “We went to Trampoline Town. We stayed there almost the entire night.”

“That was fun. Maybe we should go there after bowling,” Daea mused.

Eli laughed and said, “I think we’ve got enough going on.”

Chuck returned with a smile on his face. “Good news, Daea. No missions.”

The girl cheered.

“Yet,” Chuck added. “But it’s looking good.”

“Get your skates, everybody.”

“It’s cold out,” Chuck said. “Dress appropriately.”

Daea crouched and swung her arms back and forth. “I’m going to be skating so fast, the cold won’t matter.”

Chuck turned to leave. “Suit yourself.”

The girl walked to the door, where she took a heavy parka off its post. It was navy blue, came down past her legs, and had a furry collar. She picked up her skates and stood near the door.

Eli and Hudson were slow to put on their winter gear.

“Let’s go. We have things to do.” When the boys’ hustle didn’t match her expectations, she huffed and added, “I’ll meet you outside.”

A big, furry German Shepherd met her upon her exit from the museum. “Whiskers!” she said, kneeling to give the dog a hug. He licked her face and wagged his tail. “Do you want to come skating with us?”

Chuck said, “Of course he wants to. Whiskers likes the ice.” The big dog ran around the pair, nuzzling them for pets and love.

Eli and Hudson exited the gallery.

“It’s freezing,” the Sovereign said, giving his body a squeeze. “Are you sure you want to go skating?”

Daea started walking. “You’ll warm up once we’re on the ice.”

By the time the Childaar had finished buying candy at the mall and skating on the canal, they only had time for a quick game of Settlers of Catan upon returning home.

Chuck was pleased with himself for winning the game by getting both the longest road and the largest army. He looked at the clock and said, “We had better get to the bowling alley.” The team leader was in a good mood as he led the team outside and unlocked the truck’s doors.

Hudson offered the birthday girl the front seat, which she declined because the tall boy would have difficulty

fitting into the back. She asked if she could choose the music and was granted permission. She asked for the top one hundred station. They listened to pop hits as they drove southward toward Nepean, where they found themselves at a long building whose parking lot was full of vehicles.

Abigail, Rosalicia, Ion, and Arjun waited at the counter. They all wished the small Hardy a happy birthday upon spotting the girl. The B-team leader wore her usual tweed suit and fedora. The big Hardy wore a heavy black sweater with black jeans. The Quick's hair was spiked, but she was not wearing her punk rock outfit, rather settling for a concert T-shirt from an obscure band and ripped and bleached blue jeans. Arjun's smile radiated. He wore a pair of khakis and a white dress shirt with his stylish wool winter coat slung across his arm. He wiped away a lock of hair that had dropped over his eyes.

Daea thanked everyone and gave each a hug. When she got to Abigail, she said, "I'm sorry I was rude to you last time we met. I know you are a good Childaar, and I hope you get to be an Orakle."

The Sight seemed surprised by the apology but was quick to compose herself. "Thank you. How magnanimous. Apology accepted." She then turned toward Chuck and said, "Shall we do a little housekeeping before proceeding with the festivities?"

The sandy-haired boy said, "Sure. Any leads on that Thraldaar judge?"

The other Sight shook her head. "No, it seems as though the night court has been postponed. I know headquarters is looking into the legalities of those property transfers. It will be a while before we hear anything more about that."

Chuck looked disheartened and added, "How about Jesi-Sera or the Sparklaar? We've been looking, but every lead takes us to a dead end."

"Likewise," Abigail replied. "I suspect that it might have something to do with the holiday season. The Suffering has ebbed. I wonder if they are lying low waiting for next year."

Chuck nodded. "Good point. Any suggestions? The new year is less than an hour away."

"We need to get the missions under control. The added Suffering makes everything else worse."

Chuck said, "Agreed. I feel like we are better with Stomps, but I can't remember the last Operation we beat."

"We have the opposite problem," Abigail said.

Daea exchanged her boots for a pair of bowling shoes. "We should make one team for fighting and another for solving mysteries."

Everyone stopped talking and looked at the girl.

“What would that look like?” Hudson wondered aloud.

Eli answered, “Daea, Rosalicia, Ion, and me on one team. You, Abigail, Hudson, and Arjun on another.”

“I won’t be on a different team than Abigail,” the big Hardy said, and her serious tone, deep voice, and Portuguese accent all added to her gravitas. “I swore an oath.”

“I wasn’t serious,” Daea said. “I was just talking. I don’t want to split up the teams. Are we even allowed to do that?”

Chuck nodded. “I am responsible for the team makeup, so yes...”

“I will not leave Abigail’s side,” Rosalicia repeated. This time her voice rose, and her face turned red.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, we heard you the first time,” Daea said. “We’re not changing teams.”

Eli raised his hand. “The next best fighting team would be Daea, me, Ion, and Arjun.”

“That would make the Stomp team pretty young,” Hudson said with a look of concern.

“Would that make Arjun the team leader?” Eli asked. “He’s the oldest.”

Hudson looked at Ion, who held her hands up to decline any suggestions that she would do it.

Chuck turned to the handsome Charm, who didn't seem concerned by the conversation. "Do you have your driver's license?"

"Yeah, I got it a few months ago. Just after my sixteenth birthday. But it's only a learner's."

"We can get that upgraded," Chuck said.

Eli laughed. "A Childaar for a few months and already a team lead."

"No," Daea repeated. "Let's keep the teams the way they are. We can all just work a little harder."

Chuck said, "We have to do what's best for the city, and this might be for the best."

"I wish I hadn't said anything," the small Hardy said, sticking her tongue out at the older Childaar.

Chuck looked at Abigail. "What do you think?"

"It might be our best chance. With you and Hudson, we could put the screws to Dracul and those judges."

Eli said, "And we could focus on Jesi-Sera and the Sparklaar," which prompted an approving nod from his mentor.

"We can't change teams because we won't know where to go," Daea said.

"We've talked about this," Chuck replied. "Like every other team without a Childaar with levels in Seeingness, you follow it."

"But, I like how you just take us to them."

Chuck shook his head. "Convenience isn't a good reason not to consider this idea."

"What about..."

Hudson walked up to the girl and put his hand on her shoulder. "I think they are right. This is best for the city."

"But we won't get to do any more cannonballs? That's our move."

"I know, but you will figure out new strategies. That's one of the things about being on teams. We find ways to work together."

"I don't like it."

"I know. I'll miss you and Eli. You helped me so much and will always be an important part of my life."

Daea leaned into the tall boy and gave him a big hug. Tears streamed down her cheeks. "I'll miss you too." She let go of the tall Sovereign and ran at the sandy-haired, mousey looking Sight. She leaped into his arms. "What if I promise to always be good?"

Chuck looked away and released an emotional laugh. "Don't go making promises you can't keep."

"I can promise to try. I'll even do all my homework."

The Sight let go of the girl and bent to look her in the eyes. "I know we get attached to our teams and friends, but this is a reality of Childaar life. This won't be the last time you have to say goodbye to friends."

"I don't like it."

“It is for the best.” He wiped tears from the girl’s eyes. “And I know I don’t say it enough, but you’re a good kid, Daea. You can be a bit much at times, but you are, without a doubt, a valuable member of the team. You are tough as nails and never give up.”

“Can we visit?”

“I’m sure we will see each other, but as you know, it’s best to keep our teams separate; otherwise, we get more suffering, and that’s the whole reason for this change.”

“Stickball?”

“We’ll play stickball.”

“Promise?”

“Promise,” Chuck said with a smile.

Chuck walked over to Arjun. “You are going to be the leader of the new B-team. Are you OK with that?”

Abigail said, “Ion is experienced. She should be able to answer any questions you have.”

“I’m just glad I’m not the team leader,” the punky girl said. “But, yes, I can help.”

Arjun shrugged. “We go to the Stomps and fight the monsters. That seems pretty straightforward.”

Chuck gave the Charm a solemn look. “That’s the short of it, but the part that requires experience is knowing how to approach the fight.”

“I can help with that,” Eli said. “I like strategy and tactics.”

The Sight gave Eli an approving nod. He turned back to the Charm and added, "The most important and hardest thing to do is call a mission to get everyone out if it isn't going well. No one wants to give up, but sometimes that is the best plan because it means you get to fight another day. Total party wipes are to be avoided at all costs."

"Don't worry," Daea said to her new team leader. "You won't have to call any of our Stomps because I'll be winning them all."

"See what I mean," Chuck said. "You have to be firm. They're not all winnable."

"Got it," Arjun said. His expression turned more solemn than anyone had ever seen.

Hudson looked down at the youthful group. His eyes lingered on Daea. "Be careful. We can't afford to lose you."

Daea's nose scrunched. "Don't worry about us. We'll be smashing monsters."

"Alright," Chuck said. "It's settled. We are splitting into a fighting team and an investigating team."

"Fight team rules!" Daea yelled.

"So, Daea and I have to move back to the Museum of Nature," Eli stated.

"I suppose so," Hudson replied.

A spark lit in Daea's eyes. "Hey, Arjun, do you care if I buy candy?"

"What?"

“You know, with our money privileges. Do you care if I buy candy?”

Chuck rolled his eyes.

“Why would I care?” the Charm asked. “Buy as much candy as you want.”

Eli, Chuck, and Hudson all burst out with laughter.

“He doesn’t know what he’s saying,” Hudson said.

Daea clapped her hands and said, “Everyone heard him. No takesy-backsies.”

The handsome boy looked confused.

“Let’s bowl,” Daea said. “The new B-team against the new A-team. We’re going to win.”

CHAPTER 12

Daea held the door to the Childaar home below the Canadian Museum of Nature while its maintenance staff carried in a train of fridges and freezers. Most of them were returned to where they'd been when she and Eli had lived there before, but she'd requested additional appliances, and they had to make room to install them. The expert staff arranged everything to fit even if it was not the most elegant of room setups. She thanked them as they exited the underground household.

"We're back in business," the girl shouted, planting a kiss on one of the fridges. "Tomorrow, you will all be full of delicious snacks."

Her teammates sat in the living area, watching the scene unfold. Eli did not look at all surprised compared to Ion and Arjun.

"Are they all necessary?" the Charm asked.

Daea gave the boy a strange look as she opened a Fudgesicle. "Yes. I have a plan for everything. Don't worry, we'll be a well-stocked household."

"You sure like junk food," the spikey-haired Quick said.

"Yeah!" Daea agreed, taking a bite of the ice cream treat.

Eli said, "Sometimes when you think you're used to her obsession with candy, you realize you really weren't. It's something to behold."

"I love candy," Daea said between chews.

Ion shrugged, picked up her guitar, and strummed the strings. "We all have our thing."

Daea pointed at the guitar and said, "Candy is my instrument."

Arjun busted out in laughter. "That's one way to look at it."

"I will make you the best sundaes you've ever had," Daea promised.

Eli looked at the clock on the wall. "I guess we should check the Suffering."

"One, two, three—not it," Daea said.

"Not it," Ion said.

"Not it," Eli said.

Arjun grinned. "I guess I'm it. I don't know if this should be the best way to handle chores, though."

His teammates all nodded, and Eli said, "How about we rotate? I'll do it tomorrow."

Ion said, "I've got the day after that."

Daea had finished her Fudgesicle and retrieved another from a freezer. She looked up to see her teammates looking at her. "What?"

"You'll check on the Suffering after Ion?" Eli asked.

“Yeah, sure.” She unwrapped the treat and took a big bite off its end.

The new team leader of the B-team walked to the door. “Did anyone see the forecast?”

“Still cold,” Eli said.

The Charm wiped his long hair from out of his face before pulling on his tuque. He slid into a pair of boots and threw on a stylish wool jacket before leaving their home. It didn’t take long for him to return and say, “We have a Stomp. I think.”

Daea started on her third Fudgsicle. “Where is it?”

He shrugged. “I have no idea. Don’t forget I haven’t been doing this as long as you all have.”

“We haven’t been doing this long, either,” Eli said. “And we always had Chuck to take us where we needed to go.”

“Well, let’s get going,” Ion said as she placed her guitar down and walked to the door.

The Childaar exited through their door at the back of the stone, four-story museum. Small carvings of flora and fauna decorated the building amidst the long, rectangular windows. Its short corner towers and low ramparts loomed high above the Childaar. Not as big as the National Gallery of Canada, they only had to walk around the building to

get to the parking lot. Arjun pulled a set of keys from his heavy jacket, and a shiny new purple rally car beeped.

“That’s your car?” Daea asked. “Nice ride.”

“Wow!” His eyes were as wide as saucers, and his mouth dropped open. “Abigail asked me what I’d like to drive, and here it is.”

“I like it,” the Hardy said. “Do you mind if Eli and I borrow it for drift racing?”

“I’m not sure if you should be racing,” the Charm said.

“We’ve driven before. We won the race.”

“That was the third thing you ever told me. The first was about how your family works in the movie industry. The second was asking me if I had any candy. And, the race was the third.”

The little girl’s nose scrunched. “I’m just saying that we know how to drive. If you would like to relax and enjoy a ride, we can take over.”

“I don’t know how relaxing that would be,” Arjun said. “I think the person steering the wheel should also be the person pushing the pedals.”

“Besides,” Eli added, “I don’t want to be on the floor.”

“It’s an open offer,” the Hardy stated as they arrived at the vehicle. “Shotgun!”

“Here we go again,” Eli remarked.

Ion and Eli pushed the seats forward and crawled into the back.

Arjun started the car, which was quieter than Chuck's rumbling truck.

Daea moved to press the power button on the stereo. Ion was quick to intercede. She passed a compact disc through the seats and said, "I like to be in charge of the music. I have playlists for everything."

"No problem," Arjun said, sliding the disc into the console.

"Hey," Daea exclaimed.

The team leader looked over at the girl and said, "We accommodated your freezers..."

The small girl considered the statement. "OK, but I hope there is some top one hundred."

Ion said, "I'll take that into account. It's not easy collecting music without the Internet, but the museum and gallery staffs are helpful."

"Do you have music for playing games?" Eli asked.

"Yes, but it depends on the game."

"Board games," Eli said.

Ion nodded. "I saw your collection. "That will be a lot of playlists."

"What about video games?" Daea asked.

"Or card games," Arjun added.

Ion said, "Video games come with their own soundtracks, so I'm happy to appreciate the in-game

music. Card games can use playlists, though. What are you thinking, Crazy Eights?"

"Uno is better than Crazy Eights," Eli said. "But, there are better games."

"What do you recommend?" Arjun asked.

"Do you mean with a deck of playing cards?"

"Sure."

"Bridge is a good challenge."

"Boring," Daea groaned. "He tried to teach us that once with Chuck and Jesi-Sera. I do not recommend it."

"I'm not sure you gave it a chance," Eli responded.

"It took forever to explain, and then you got angry at me for playing the wrong way."

"I didn't get angry. I was just trying to explain why your plays weren't following the proper conventions."

"You went to a convention to play?" Arjun asked with endearing sincerity.

"No," Eli said with a hint of frustration in his voice. "They are rules you follow to make sure that you and your partner understand what's going on. They have their own names like Fourth Suit Forcing and Jacoby NT."

"See what I mean," Daea said. "I'll take Go Fish any day."

"That's only a good game for young children," Eli said.

"Tell us something that we may like," Arjun asked.

"I'll show you some when we get home."

Daea dug a bag of gummy bears out of her backpack. "Eli actually knows a lot of good games. I think you will like game night."

"I can't wait," Arjun said as he pulled the rally car out of the parking lot. The smooth ride rolled over the mounds and clumps of snow with ease.

Ion said, "Do any of you play music? That's something we could do."

"She's good," Arjun said. "You should hear her."

"Thank you," The Quick said with a modest smile.

"You never play games?" Eli asked.

"Or watch movies?" Daea added.

Ion shrugged. "I do, but nothing beats playing music."

"We could make a band," Daea suggested.

"Maybe... Do you play anything?"

"You can teach me."

"Want me to teach you guitar?"

"How about drums?"

"I could show you the basics."

Daea turned to Eli. "What would you like?"

The Smart said, "I took guitar lessons for about a year back in Los Angeles."

Ion smiled. "I'm lead, but want to play bass?"

The Smart nodded.

She looked at Arjun and asked, "How about you?"

The handsome boy smiled. "I've been told I'm a good singer."

Ion's smile was bigger than any of them had ever seen. "We have the beginnings of a rock band."

"Let's do it." The Charm's enthusiasm infected them all, and everyone cheered.

"What about a band name? We need a name." Daea smooched five gummy bears into one before throwing them in her mouth.

Ion laughed. "We've never even played together."

Daea said, "But it's the most important part."

Ion shook her head. "No, it's not."

"But it is important."

"Is it?"

"Well, it's fun."

Ion nodded. "Yes, people love coming up with band names."

"So, what's ours going to be?" Eli asked.

Daea raised her hand. "Candy Forever, but we could spell it with the number four."

The others wavered on her suggestion.

"Marshmallow Dreams? No, Marshmallow Forever."

"Maybe they don't have to be so food-centric," Eli suggested.

"You make one then."

The boy thought for a moment. "I don't know."

Arjun said, "How about Ten Times Hot?"

"That's pretty good," Ion said.

Daea's nose scrunched.

"Or, No Rest for the Childaar?" Arjun gauged his teammates' reactions.

"Not bad," the punky girl said. "But we should avoid talk of our supernatural lives."

"A Box of Tiger Chocolates?" Daea suggested.

"That sounds more like a song. We could write that."

Eli's eyes brightened. "Thunder Hands." His suggestion did not generate enthusiasm. He followed up with, "Ottawa City Breakdown?"

"I like the idea," the Quick said, "but names of cities in band names can be tricky."

"Capital Chaos," Daea said. She reached into the cellophane bag and tossed a handful of the gummy bears into her mouth with a self-satisfied look.

The other teammates considered her suggestion.

"It seems perfect," Arjun said.

Ion nodded. "I like it, too."

Eli smiled. "It's no Thunder Hands, but it fits."

"Where are we going?" Daea asked.

Arjun pointed out the car's window. "Who wants to follow the Suffering? I'm driving and can't give it my full attention."

“We can all help, but how about the person sitting in the front makes the decisions,” Ion suggested.

Arjun smiled and said, “That makes sense. They have the best view. You’re up, Daea.”

“I’ll try.”

“You can do it,” the Charm said. “You’re a natural.”

“I am,” the girl said, smiling at the driver. Using the armrest to pull herself up to see the ground, she said, “I don’t know. Chuck always took us where we needed to go.”

“Well, it’s your call now. Be quick. There is a car behind us who will get impatient if we stay stopped at this sign much longer.”

“Uhm.”

“Left, right, or straight?”

“Straight,” Daea stammered. “But only to get moving.”

“That’s OK. This is good practice.”

The Hardy said, “This will be easier when Eli gets Seeingness.”

“If,” Eli corrected.

“That’s true,” Daea agreed. “But I like to think you are going all the way. I bet you get Scry someday and become an Orakle.”

“Would you like to be an Orakle?” Ion asked, looking over at the boy.

Flustered, Eli answered, "I don't even have a level of Seeingness. I think we're getting a little ahead of ourselves here."

"But would you?" Arjun pressed.

"I don't know. I don't even know what they do. Even Abigail doesn't know all the details."

"Eli just said Abigail doesn't know something. Wow," Daea remarked.

"Hey, guys," Ion said with a hint of warning in her voice. "Nobody likes a gossip."

"I didn't mean anything negative," Eli said. "She's been so helpful. It's just when our conversations turned toward the higher levels of Childaar society, she doesn't have much to share. She said there were many things that they wouldn't tell her."

Ion nodded. "Yeah, she is the most impressive Childaar I've gotten to work with. She's a superstar on Operations."

Arjun smiled. "Abigail really helped me understand Childaar life. She answered all my questions, even if sometimes the answers took longer than I expected."

The snow and Suffering that they drove through was evenly layered across the streets, front yards, and parking lots they passed.

They drove under the Queensway on Bank Street and were well into the Glebe when Eli said, "Same. She's

helped me understand more about this world in which we live. We're so constrained to our teams that it's hard to find much beyond the local Tomes. And, even then, it seems like there are different theories on the makeup of our world. Jesi-Sera didn't tell me any of this."

"To be fair," Ion said, "not every Childaar cares much about the lore. It may not have been a pressing concern for her." The punky Quick looked at the Hardy and asked, "Daea, what do you like about Abigail?"

The Hardy shrugged. "I don't know. I barely know her."

"You know her well enough to make a joke at her expense."

"It was more at Eli's expense." The small girl crossed her arms and plopped herself hard against the back of her seat. She looked over and saw Arjun's big wide eyes and pleasant, expectant demeanor. The car was quiet as everyone awaited an answer. "I guess she has a pretty cool style. That trench coat and hat make her look an old-timey private eye."

"Like a gumshoe," Eli said. "Yeah, I like it too."

"Gum?" Daea asked, reaching for her backpack. "I have some somewhere. What kind would you like?"

"Not, gum," Eli corrected. "Gumshoe. It's the nickname for a detective, you know the ones like in those old black-and-white movies."

“I prefer color movies.”

“But, you know what I am talking about.”

Daea considered the thought and said, “Yeah, I know what you are talking about.”

They had arrived at the Lansdowne entertainment district. The stadium could be seen sticking out behind the local businesses, but the area was quiet, as no event was scheduled.

“That’s where we first met Hudson.” Eli pointed at the park behind the stadium and businesses. “Feels like a long time ago.”

“I wonder what he and Chuck are up to tonight,” Daea said.

Ion looked at the ground. “I only see one mission.”

“That means they are patrolling and investigating,” Eli said. “Maybe they’ll stop the judges tonight.”

Daea’s voice spiked as she pointed and said, “Turn here. I think I see some motion in the Suffering. It’s going that way.”

They had crossed the Rideau Canal, where evening skaters went up and down the longest skating rink in the world. Daea told Arjun to take a few quick turns that led them to a flat, square white brick building with red trim running across the top of the roof. The parking lot was full, but Arjun was able to find a spot on the street. Small letters attached near the entrance read, “Brewer Arena.”

“What is this place?” Daea said as the team got out of the car and approached the building.

“It’s a curling rink,” Eli answered.

“What’s curling?”

“It’s a sport,” Eli answered. “You throw stones down a sheet of ice and try to get them closest to the center of the rings.”

“Stones? Is it like marbles?” the small girl asked.

“No, they’re flat on the bottom, and you don’t actually throw them. You slide them.”

“Maybe we can play monsters,” Arjun said.

Eli shook his head. “It’s a Stomp, so I doubt they are looking for a night of leisure and fun.”

Ion held the door open for the team to enter the building. “You never know in this city.”

The Suffering rose high up the Childaar’s legs as Kinedaar milled about the entrance, oblivious to the evil substance. The cool rink felt warm compared to the outside freeze. Many waited in line for the canteen while others talked amongst themselves. Nobody looked happy—it was as though everyone had lost their matches.

“Be right back.” Daea made a beeline for the little food counter.

Eli grabbed her by the back of her coat. “We don’t have time for that. This Stomp is on the verge of popping, and that lineup will take half an hour to get through.”

"I'll just go to the front and tell them that I have an emergency."

"No time," Arjun reiterated.

"But—" the small girl began to say.

"Vote," Eli called. "All in favor of no time, raise your hand."

When Daea saw all her teammates raise their hands, she reluctantly raised hers as well. "OK, but after the mission, I get whatever I want."

"Like always," Eli stated.

"Yes, like always."

"Where are the monsters?" Ion asked, looking around.

"Good question," Eli said. "Let's walk around and see if there is somewhere with fewer people."

Bleacher-style seats lined two walls of the rink with three long sheets of ice between them. The sheets had rings painted at both ends. A white dot started in the middle, a red ring surrounded it, a white ring surrounded that, and on the outside, a big blue ring surrounded them all.

One of the matches had a team preparing their shots, while another was in progress, as two players used brooms to clean the ice in front of the rock as it slid toward the middle circle at the other end. The other match had just finished with an unsatisfactory result. The two teams

refused to shake hands but instead just glared at each other.

“I’m not sure if we are going to get to play,” Arjun said. “This place is busy.” He drew out the two syllables of the last word for emphasis.

The team walked to the end of the bleachers, where family and friends watched the contests with interest. Given the distances between the players, they had to shout to communicate. Words like “hurry,” “hard,” and “sweep” reverberated around the arena. They circled the play area without finding any monsters.

Ion said, “I don’t think the Stomp is going to be in here. We have to search for any side rooms or a basement.”

“And we should hurry,” Eli said. “The Suffering is growing.”

“How that one?” Ion said as she pointed at a lone, unmarked door toward which the Suffering seemed to flow. They waded through the crowd and Suffering to get to it.

Daea turned the handle on the door, but it would not open. “It’s locked.”

Arjun looked around. “Now what?”

“Cover me,” Daea said, dropping her backpack to the floor and grabbing her lockpicks. She unrolled the pouch just enough to get two tools before passing it to Arjun.

“Turn around,” she whispered. “We don’t need to look suspicious.”

The three other Childaar turned to cover the girl. If anything, they made the scene look even more suspicious. Arjun whistled while he pretended to watch the room. Lucky for them, Daea had it unlocked in a few seconds.

“That wasn’t even a challenge,” the small girl said, opening the door to reveal an empty storeroom.

Eli pointed at the turbulent Suffering raging inside the area. “I’m pretty sure we found the Stomp.”

Everyone followed Daea’s lead as she crept into the vast room with a cement floor and unfinished walls. Specks of moonlight sparkled through a series of tiny windows near the ceiling.

“This is bigger than I was expecting,” Ion said.

The team gasped as their eyes adjusted to the dim light. They saw what they were up against on the far side of the space—a horde of pig-sized beetles with strands of hair that floated around their bodies as though they were underwater. They chattered and moaned as they shuffled toward the young vampires.

“It’s on!” Daea yelled, moving forward to face the group.

Arjun moved to stand behind the girl, while Eli and Ion flanked him on his left and right.

Eli shot hard balls of Fire at the creatures, leaving scorch marks on the hairy carapaces. Ion's Blast manifested from the space between her eyes, and blue plasma tore holes in the group of beetles.

The creatures encroached on the team, but Daea held the line for her friends with pushes and blocks.

"Great job, Daea. You're so strong," Arjun yelled. "You guys are all so great." His encouragement and Adoreness gave the Hardy a boost as she kept the monsters at bay while enhancing the Smart and Quick's ranged attacks. One of the giant beetles snuck around Daea and came face-to-face with the Charm.

The handsome boy steadied himself and delivered a few clumsy punches. His strikes hit their target but didn't do enough damage to destroy it.

Daea reached back to claw the monster in front of the Charm. She dispatched the horrific insect with ease so that he could focus on supporting his teammates.

"My hero," Arjun said, patting the girl's back.

The horde continued to push into the small Hardy, which forced her to step back into the team leader. Eli moved up and pulled the boy back from the fray. With fine precision, Ion's Blast tore through the monsters, which disintegrated into a fine black mist that rejoined the greater Suffering swirling around them.

The oversized beetles moaned and groaned as they continued to push forward, scratching and scraping the girl at the front.

Eli grabbed Arjun, and they shifted toward the exit. Ion used three quick blasts to give Daea room to free herself from the enemies surrounding her.

“Thanks for the assist,” the Hardy said as she escaped the shambling horde.

“That’s why we’re a team,” Ion said, turning to join the boys near the door.

Eli had prepared a massive orange-and-yellow fireball. From his Wing Chun pose, he pushed the ball of flame forward with both hands. The fiery projectile sailed through the air and exploded upon contact. Bits of beetle and Suffering struck the low ceiling. When the dust settled, the horde was noticeably thinner.

“Yeah!” Arjun cheered.

Ion targeted and annihilated two more creatures.

“Get them!” Daea yelled, charging back into the room.

“Get them!” Arjun repeated, quick on the girl’s heels.

While the ranks of large beetles had been thinned, they clumped back together and made one final advance. Daea stood prepared to defend against the assault.

Arjun moved with caution toward a monster, where one on one, he was able to block its attacks and deliver some punches. One landed under the beetle’s chin, which

popped its head off and fell to the ground. The head and body dissolved into the inky black Suffering. “Did you see that? I got one.”

“Great job,” Daea said as she dropped another with a side kick.

Ion finished the fight by using her Blast to destroy the last few monsters. The Suffering deflated as they beat the Stomp.

Daea raised her arms into the air. “Capital Chaos!”

CHAPTER 13

The team sat around the dining room table, working on homework. Eli, Ion, and Arjun's spaces were tidy, while Daea's was surrounded by empty soda cans and candy wrappers.

The team leader wiped a strand of hair away from his face and said, "We should have supper then work on reports before we head out. We don't have a lot of time considering sundown is so early."

Eli walked to the kitchen and opened the fridge. He pulled out some takeaway containers that had been stacked amongst Daea's junk food. "Anyone want me to heat them up some of this Thai we had the other night?"

Ion shook her head. "I'm just going to have the pizza from yesterday."

The Charm stood and met the Smart in the kitchen. He inspected the cardboard containers. "I'll have some, please."

"Daea?" Eli inquired.

"I'm good," the girl said, cracking open another can of pop and opening a bag of corn chips.

"Of course you are."

"I was worried about changing teams, but I think we're going to be alright."

“That’s because you got your money and supply privileges back,” Eli said with a laugh.

“And Chuck’s not yelling at me.”

The Smart tilted his head to the side as if pondering the statement. “I wonder if that’s just a matter of time.”

“Hey!” the girl shouted. “I’ve been good.”

Eli placed his hands defensively in front of his body. “Sorry. You’ve definitely been trying harder.”

“I think you’re doing a great job,” Arjun added.

“Thank you,” the girl said with a huff.

“My parents would never let me eat like this back in Toronto,” the Charm said. “They would want me out of this school if they knew.”

“It’s a perk.” The small girl took a long gulp of soda.

“I don’t know,” the Charm replied. “My family makes pretty good food.”

“Hudson was a master chef,” Eli said.

“His baking is incredible, but the meals were kind of boring,” Daea stated.

“I disagree.” Eli tossed the leftovers into a frying pan. “I used to think eating out all the time would be great, but I kind of miss making our own.”

Arjun placed a hand on the Smart’s shoulder. “How about when things quiet down, we do that.”

“Deal.” Eli turned on the stove and began frying the leftovers.

Ion joined the boys in the kitchen, where she opened a crumpled pizza box Eli had placed on the counter. Before taking a bite, she said, "Quiet down? This city is out of control."

"I don't know any different," Arjun said.

Eli nodded. "Same. This all we've ever known."

Daea finished her can of soda, grabbed the corn chips, and met her team in the kitchen. "What was it like where you came from?"

"Vancouver?" Ion replied. "It's a great city with mountains and ocean."

"Like Los Angeles?"

"Yeah, I suppose there are similarities."

"Except, no movies are made in Vancouver."

"Actually, they do have a film industry."

"Really?"

"Yeah, it's not as big as L.A.'s, but it's one of North America's bigger film locations."

"Toronto, too," Arjun added.

The Quick looked at the handsome boy. "I've heard that." She turned her attention back to the small girl. "Life was pretty good. We had maybe one mission per week, lots of free time, and were able to visit our families quite often."

"No Eldaar?" Daea asked, finishing off the bag of chips by holding it up to her mouth and draining the crumbs.

“I had heard of them, but they were more legend than anything.”

The handsome boy sighed. “This Childaar thing is a lot of responsibility.”

Daea punched her open palm. She took a deep breath and said, “But where else would you rather be? If we were regular Kinedaar children, do you think anyone would listen to us or take us seriously? I want to defeat those Sparklaar, destroy Dracul, and find Jesi-Sera, and the best place for me to get that done is right here.”

Arjun gave the girl an approving nod.

“And, you’re lucky to know your Dynasty early,” Daea told the boy. “Since you have a level of Adoreness, you know you are a Charm. I had to wait months with only Toughness before I manifested a level in Formness to learn I’m a Hardy.”

“I want to help, but miss my brother, sister, and parents. I’d like you to meet them.”

“That would be nice,” Eli said.

The handsome boy looked determined. “So, we have to fix this city to make that happen.”

“Then we’ll take a trip to Toronto,” Daea stated.

“I think you would like it. There’s a lot to do.”

“Where would you take us first?”

“Canada’s Wonderland.”

“What’s that?”

“An amusement park.”

“Say no more.” She gave the boy two thumbs-up. “I love carnivals. They have snacks that are hard to get in other places. I hope they have deep-fried Oreos.”

The Charm smiled. “I look forward to it, but we have to focus on here first.”

The team stood eating in the kitchen. When they finished, Ion said, “It’s time to get to work.”

Daea found a bag of saltwater toffee and joined the team in the TV area. Rather than watch the television, Ion turned on some music. It was a modern instrumental album. It sounded like an orchestra that had been supplemented with a side of electronica. They gathered the assignments, reports, and newspapers.

“It’s all the same,” Eli said.

Daea, holding a chewy candy in her teeth and stretching it out with her hand, said, “Bad. It looks like it was a tough day.”

Ion looked at the team. “You know, if we can get it finished in time, we could have a band practice.”

The Childaar looked over at the space near the play area they had created for the instruments. Daea had close to twenty drums and cymbals set up on her kit, Eli’s bass guitar had flames painted along its front, Ion had her collection of guitars waiting on their guitar stands, and a slim aluminum stand held Arjun’s microphone. The Quick

had placed amplifiers and receivers such that they would not interfere with each other.

“Let’s get loud.” Daea jumped to her feet.

“Work first,” Arjun said, looking at the girl.

Eli handed her a stack of newspapers. “Here, read these.”

Ion moved next to Arjun. “I can help with the correspondence. I’ll browse the data that came in from the Orakles. I know it’s global in its scope, but you never know, there could be a clue.” She stood and grabbed a pile of papers from the table. “You can write back to them.”

“Sounds good,” the B-team’s leader said. “Ion, do you mind if we watch the news while doing this? We’ve got all the local episodes, and then if we have time, we can change it to cable news.

The punky girl turned off the music. “No problem.”

The team got comfortable. Arjun used the remote control to turn on a news episode that had been recorded earlier in the morning. A man and woman anchored the desk with jubilant enthusiasm. They introduced the presenters from weather, sports, and lifestyle. The first fifteen minutes was a lot of fluff, but then they got to the news segment, where the man and woman’s tone became more somber, and they told of the happenings in the country.

Corruption leaked from every possible department, which the government denied even in the face of facts to the contrary. News from the Supreme Court was also disheartening, as some of the justices were collaborating with the Prime Minister to circumvent the constitution.

Ion said, "I hope the A-team are doing alright."

Eli switched newspapers. "I'm sure better than we are doing with the Sparklaar."

"I'm looking forward to destroying them," Daea said.

Ion shook her head. "That's not the plan."

"What? Why not?"

Eli answered, "We've talked about this. So long as they are Sparklaar, they have the opportunity for a Sleeping. They can still return to the Kinedaar world. It's only when they become full-on Eldaar that we have to destroy them."

"What if they don't want to?"

"We're not going to kill them," Ion said. "We have to trap them, or capture them somehow, or convince them."

"But if we can't, we take them out the old-fashioned way."

"Absolutely not. We'll keep trying. Hopefully, they come to their senses and expose themselves."

"They'll become Eldaar and inflict pain and suffering on the world like Dracul," the small girl countered.

Ion shrugged. "We won't kill anyone while they have a chance."

“I’m not sure if I’m going to go along with that.”

“You will!” Ion yelled. Her outburst shocked everyone in the room, including, it seemed, Ion.

Arjun looked at his watch. “I know I am new to all this, but that seems like the right idea.”

The Quick regained her composure and said, “Let’s focus on the things we can do.”

“Like beat their pinball scores at the arcade,” Eli said.

“Yes,” Arjun replied. “You said you’re close?”

Daea answered, “He has the second and third places on the JLA machine. Maybe tonight’s the night.”

“I’ve got a good feeling,” the Smart said, pantomiming the act of pressing flippers.

“I tried,” Daea said, “but I can’t get the shots like Eli.”

“That’s alright,” Arjun said. “There are other things for you to do.”

“Yeah, I need to find Jesi-Sera.”

“We need to find out if that was Jesi-Sera,” Ion replied.

“It was,” Daea said. “But why would she get so angry at the store owner? She could just ask us for the books we bought.”

“That’s why I think it was the Sparklaar. They must have been trying to glean something from that woman.”

The small girl’s nose scrunched. “It’s her.”

The work took until sundown, when the Charm looked at his watch and said, "It's my turn to check the Suffering. Be right back."

"And if there's no mission, band practice?" Daea asked.

Before leaving, the team leader turned and said, "We still have work to do, but sure, let's have a quick jam."

Daea ran to Ion and held up her hand for a high five.

The Quick laughed and clapped the girl's hand. "We can't have a Stomp every night, can we?"

Arjun returned moments later. "We have a Stomp. Suit up. It's a cold one."

The Childaar put on their winter gear before leaving their home. Each of the coats was a solid color. Daea's was purple, Eli's gray, Arjun's green, and Ion's blue. Only the streetlights illuminated the area, as low, dark clouds prevented the moonlight from penetrating. The Suffering swirled around the Museum of Nature, where the wispy, evil waves churned and smashed against anything in the vicinity.

Eli sat in the passenger's seat, but the whole team had a hard time figuring out where to go. After hours of searching, they arrived at a large cinema complex on the city's south side.

“A Stomp at a movie theater?” Daea said. “I hope we don’t disturb the shows.”

“Who knows,” Eli said as the team headed toward the cinema. “It could be in a basement or in that field behind the building.”

The theater was on its final showings, so the entrance and lobby were quiet. A few young staff members performed their end-of-night duties. One of them spotted the kids walking in, apologized, and told them that no more movies were showing that night, and they were almost closed.

Eli asked if they could still buy a ticket, but the young Kinedaar said that they would only be able to see the last half of the last movie. Daea declared that she had already seen it and that the end was the best part. The worker seemed hesitant. Eli waved at hand and used his Command. The Kinedaar relented and sold them the tickets, pointing them in the direction of the theaters. The small girl gave the employee a curt thank you, took the tickets, and stormed toward the concession booth.

“Come on, Daea,” Eli yelled. “We don’t have time for that.”

Having purchased a box of Whoppers, she jogged toward her teammates, and with a mouth full of malted chocolate balls, said, “There is always time for candy.”

A young Kinedaar woman, wearing the same uniform as the young man who'd sold them their tickets, met them at the entrance to the theaters. She ripped their tickets and handed back the stubs. She pointed them down the hall and told them that theirs was the last on the left.

The team was about two-thirds of the way down the hall when Eli pointed at a door. "The Suffering is leading us here." He took a quick glance down the hall, where the young Kinedaar who had taken their tickets was distracted by her phone.

Arjun opened the door and said, "Quick, let's go."

The team rushed inside, where a musky odor permeated the dark and empty room. It got even darker once the door closed.

"I can't see anything," Daea stated.

"This should help," Eli said, sending a slow rising, balloon-like ball of fire into the air.

A walkway set the first five rows apart from the main area. Everyone gasped. At the bottom of the stairs, under the screen, stood a massive creature with the body of a man and the head of a bull.

"Minotaur," Eli said.

"Look at the size of him," Arjun said, half in disbelief.

"The bigger they are, the harder they fall," Daea proclaimed.

The creature's bull-like face was harder and rougher than that of a farm animal. Thick, dense horns that curled at the end protruded from the top of its head. One of the tips had been broken off. Its bright yellow eyes glowed in the dark room, and tufts of smoke billowed out of its flattened nose with each breath. A set of long sharp teeth protruded from its bottom lip, above a strong jaw. Broad shoulders led to massive biceps and forearms from which rock-like fists extended. A short loincloth skirted around the creature's waist. A light coat of fur covered the beast's muscular torso.

It threw its head back and roared. The roar coincided with a barrage of sound from the next theater over, which seemed to be in the middle of an exciting action scene.

"Get it!" Daea yelled, running down the stairs.

Arjun was quick behind her, while Eli ran across the room so that he and Ion could flank it with ranged attacks.

The monster identified Daea as the primary threat. It kicked a group of chairs that flew toward the Hardy, which bounced off the small, resilient girl. It swiped at more chairs as it cut a swath toward the young vampire, who anticipated the incoming punch, which she evaded by jumping to the side. Her confidence soared when she heard Arjun cheer the dodge.

The room lit up as the Smart and Quick launched their attacks. Eli's fireballs looked like little baseballs flying out

of his fists. Ion braced her footing and pushed her hands down against her body as she launched a blue stream of energy from between her eyes.

The beast roared again as the blasts scorched its matted hide. It kicked more seats out of its way as it stomped up the middle of the cinema toward the back, where it could engage with Eli or Ion.

Seeing the monster going after her squishy friends, Daea hopped across the tops of any seats that remained, leaped into the air, and grabbed hold of the monster's broad, muscular shoulders. Feeling her presence, the Minotaur reached back, grabbed the girl in its massive grip, and threw her across the room. She hit the middle of the screen before sliding down.

Arjun placed a well-formed kick to the monster's knee, but it was ineffective, as the beast grabbed and launched him across the room, where he too hit and slid down the screen.

"This thing is tough," the Charm said, accepting a hand from his teammate to stand up.

"Is it ever. Did you see those blasts Eli and Ion dropped on it?"

"I did. Amazing that it is still standing after that."

"It doesn't even look that hurt," Daea said. "Let's go hurt it."

"Alright!"

The massive half-man, half-bull monster stretched its arms out above its head and flexed. Every muscle on its body bulged. It looked upward and once again released a roar that filled the room.

“Shoot now!” Daea yelled as she led Arjun behind the creature.

Eli and Ion, again in sync, shot the monster with their ranged attacks

Daea took the opportunity to close with the enemy.

Arjun stayed a few paces behind her, looking for a chance to strike. “Great job, Daea. I think we can get it now,” he said, peering around the beast to flash his other teammates a thumbs-up.

The Hardy lunged and dug deep into the monster’s hide with her claws. A deep gash opened across its stomach, and Suffering oozed out and dropped to the floor.

The monster bellowed into the girl’s face before punching down with a massive fist. She sidestepped the blow, but the beast was quicker than she had expected. Its other fist clobbered her squarely on the side of her head and shoulders. She didn’t have time to recover, as she was picked up and slammed into the ground and broken seats.

“Let her go!” Arjun yelled, rushing the monster. The Charm jumped and grabbed hold of the beast’s arm that held his teammate. The boy’s rescue attempt didn’t go as planned. The Minotaur grabbed him with its other hand

and bashed the Childaar together, again and again. It then smashed them into the floor. Arjun's lifeless eyes indicated that he had been knocked out. Daea groaned and crawled toward her friend, who she dragged away from the fracas.

The Minotaur howled and took two long steps to tower over the fallen young vampires. It raised a foot and stomped down on the pair. Daea rolled on top of the knocked-out boy to take the brunt of the attack. The creature's leg swung back and kicked. They flew across the cinema into the side wall, where they fell and landed on top of some seats. The creature raised its arms as if to defy anyone to challenge it.

"Finish him," Eli yelled and began throwing centerline punches from which hard balls of fire exploded and struck the large target's torso. Ion's eyes narrowed, and a stream of blue plasma-like substance shot forth from her forehead.

Where Eli's shots peppered the monster across its body, Ion's concentrated on its chest. The beast attempted to move toward the source of its pain, but the incoming Fire and Blast kept it off balance. It managed a few steps, but each one was slower than the last. The immense brute began to fall apart, as chunks of it blackened, turned into ooze, and dripped onto the floor until nothing remained. The Suffering eased to its normal state.

Eli slumped over and rested his hands on his knees. Ion took a deep breath, walked over to the Smart, placed a hand on his back, and took a moment to catch her breath.

Daea picked up Arjun and set him in a broken chair. The young boy's eyes fluttered and opened.

"Did we win?" the Charm asked.

"We did," Daea said, sitting down beside him and holding his hand.

Eli and Ion made their way down the destroyed theater's stairs.

"Great job, everyone," Arjun said as he rubbed the back of his head. "It feels like we made a difference."

"And now we celebrate," Daea said. "I feel like pie à la mode. That's French for with ice cream."

CHAPTER 14

“Amazing, we don’t have a Stomp tonight,” Daea said, returning from the cold January evening.

“How many days in a row has it been?” Ion wondered aloud.

Eli answered, “We’ve had six days in a row, and the A-team has had as many Operations in that time.”

“We won five out of six, so I’d say that’s a win,” Arjun said.

“We should have won them all,” Daea replied.

Eli nodded. “Yeah, I think we could have beaten those Polters and Geists, but compared to our win percentage before we switched teams, we’re doing a lot better.”

Arjun stood and nibbled on some pretzels. “We’re trying our best, and that’s what counts.”

“So long as we don’t get a mission showing up tonight, we can get some good work done,” Ion added.

“What’s the plan?” Daea asked, holding a bag of pretzels.

“We need to keep investigating,” Ion said.

“And pinball,” Eli added.

Arjun nodded. “That still seems like the best chance to find the Sparklaar.”

Daea said, “And we need to find Jesi-Sera.”

“Assuming that the Sparklaar aren’t impersonating her,” Ion said.

Arjun made a balancing motion with his hands.

“Whatever the case, it doesn’t change the work.”

The small girl’s nose scrunched. “It’s her, and I’m going to find her.”

Ion smiled at the young Hardy. “I hope you’re right and that we can rescue your friend.”

Daea nodded. “I know you are making sure that we don’t get caught off guard.”

The Charm checked his watch. “Let’s get an early start on the night. I’ll pair with Eli, and Daea and Ion can work together.”

“Meet back here at Midnight unless a Stomp manifests?” Eli asked.

“Yes, let’s do that. We’ll share information and go from there.”

It was the end of January and the coldest night of the new year thus far.

“Get ready,” Arjun called. “We’ve got a Stomp. Let’s hope it’s inside.”

The team exited their home, bundled in the warmest winter gear, and raced to Arjun’s rally car. It took a while for Eli to read the Suffering and navigate the driver toward a wooded encampment on the outskirts of Gatineau.

“Here,” Eli called. “It looks like this is the spot.”

Arjun stopped and turned off the vehicle.

Daea said, “Too bad we can’t stay in here until we see it manifest.”

“Best not,” the team leader replied. “Let’s explore.”

“I know,” the Hardy replied. “But it’s so cold.” Before putting on her gloves that had holes on their ends where her claws had cut through, Daea popped two cinnamon jawbreakers into her mouth. The girl’s cheeks puffed out with the round candies stuck inside them. Her speech was garbled as she said, “This will keep my mouth warm.”

The team exited the car and scrutinized the forest next to the road.

“Who wants some heat?” Eli said, holding up his bare hands, each of which manifested a glowing ball of fire.

“You don’t have to ask me twice,” Ion said, scooting next to the boy.

“Thanks, Eli,” Arjun said, stepping near him. “That helps.”

“My pleasure,” the Smart said, holding his arms wider to project the heat.

“Same plan?” Daea asked.

Arjun gave a thumbs-up from under his mittens. “Yep. Daea, you stay at the front. Focus on defense, don’t worry about attacking. Eli and Ion will be behind you, and they’ll

do the damage. I'll stay between you all and encourage you to do your thing."

Eli said, "And we're happy to have your buffs."

"I'm glad you feel that because sometimes I don't think I do enough."

"Don't worry about it," Daea said. "I love your help."

"You'll manifest more Gifts," Ion said.

"I hope so. Becoming Childaar late might limit my potential."

Hard, icy snow cracked under the Childaar's boots as they tromped into the woods. Low clouds blocked the moonlight while Eli's Fire created spooky shadows.

"I saw something," Ion said, pointing deeper into the thicket.

The rest of the team looked in her direction, and they saw a group of shaggy humanoids with heads and torsos far larger than their lower bodies. The monsters were quick for their size and rushed through the snow to attack the young vampires. Eli destroyed one with a shot of Fire that exploded from a centerline punch. At the same time, Ion finished another with a blue plasma beam that shot from her forehead. The other beasts got close enough to engage the Childaar, where Daea held them up with a series of blocks and feints.

"We've got this," Arjun called from behind the team.

"I only saw these five."

Eli redirected his fireballs to melt one of the remaining monsters. Ion used her Blast to destroy another, returning it to the dark, swirling Suffering. With only one monster left in front of her, Daea extended her claws and, with expert Tiger-style kung fu swipes, finished the last.

The Suffering settled and returned to its normal vapor state as it lay across the snow.

“Done and done,” Arjun said, clapping his hands.

The band took their positions in the practice area. Arjun stood at the front with the microphone stand, Eli and Ion flanked the handsome singer with their guitars, while Daea sat in the drum kit behind her bandmates.

“On three,” Ion said. “One, two, three.”

Daea began with a steady four-beat on the bass drum. Eli was quick to join her as he locked on to her drumming to provide accompanying chords. Ion watched the pair with a careful eye. Once satisfied, she joined in with an electric riff that worked outside the confines of Daea and Eli’s rhythm. Arjun turned to look at his teammates and gave them an approving nod as he danced in place.

Ion pressed her hand across the strings of her guitar and motioned for everyone to stop. The room went silent.

“Did you hear that, Eli?” the Quick asked.

With an ashamed expression, the Smart said, “Yes, I missed the transition.”

Ion smiled. "Don't feel bad; that's why we practice. Just remember that the bass guitar is the most important part of the band."

"I think the drums are the most important," Daea said, taking the break to open and down a can of orange soda.

Ion shook her head. "The bass guitar is responsible for the feel of the song. If guitar, vocals, or even drums make a mistake, we can recover, but everyone knows something is wrong when the bass guitar is off. It's the band's glue."

"I'll do better," the Smart said.

"It's all good," the bandleader said. "Are you having fun?"

Eli's frown turned into a thin smile. "Yeah."

"That's what matters." She readjusted her guitar. "On three. One, two, three."

Daea started the music again with a simple beat. Eli joined her and kept steady once Ion began to play her wild riffs. The Quick gave the bass guitarist an encouraging smile as he completed the transitions without flaw. Arjun shook a pair of maracas and danced to the music. The Childaar took turns to show their skills. Daea pounded on the drums and cymbals, and a few times, Ion motioned for her to bring it down. Eli concentrated and brought all the instruments together with smooth grooves.

Ion focused on her bandmates by providing instruction through her guitar. As they were not playing

actual songs, the handsome team leader joined the music with vocal harmonies. His voice was a smooth tenor that created an exciting musical experience, even with the random sounds.

“I think we are ready to start playing songs,” Ion said.

“What kind?” Eli asked.

“We can mix it up. Start thinking of songs you would like to play.

“And you said we could write our own too,” Daea said.

“We can.”

“Marshmallows Forever!”

Daea and Arjun stood behind a trash dumpster watching the entrances of a series of late-night bistros and pubs. Even the Suffering looked cold as its movements had lost much of their turbulence and seemed to crystalize atop the icy ground. They watched as people and vehicles came and went on the busy weekend night.

Rubbing her hands and holding her body, Daea said, “Eli should be on this job.”

“That would be nice,” Arjun said, adjusting the scarf around his face. “But, it’s his pinball night.”

“It’s so cold.”

“I know.”

They watched an old rusted beater of a car pull up next to one of the establishments. Disregarding the no parking signs, a haggard couple exited the vehicle and entered the bistro. The woman had a devilish expression, and the man looked sick and weary. They entered the leftmost restaurant and then exited after about five minutes. They proceeded to enter each of the establishments for about the same amount of time.

Daea said, "That couple is acting a lot like the Sparklaar did when I caught them extorting those businesses."

Arjun looked at the girl and then back toward the old couple returning to their beat-up jalopy. "Could this be them? Do you think they are disguising themselves and their car?"

Daea concentrated on the vehicle as it pulled away. The rusty old car transformed into a long black hearse. "It's them. Do you see that?"

"I do now. Let's go!"

Unfortunately, by the time the Childaar had gotten to the rally car, they had lost the trail. They drove up and down the streets for the rest of the night, searching for the Sparklaar without success.

The February winter hadn't been kinder than the previous month. Icy snow flurries fell from the low clouds

in the sky while the Suffering bubbled around the museum's outskirts. Depending on one's perspective, it was either very late or very early.

"This cold is fierce," Arjun said.

The rest of the team followed him out of the Childaar door to the museum.

Daea examined the ground across the street and asked, "Does anyone see anything?"

"Just the Stomp," Ion answered. "Somewhere in the middle of the city?"

"That's what I see," Eli added. "Maybe downtown or somewhere nearby."

"Let's see where it takes us." Arjun pressed the button on the keychain to unlock his car.

"Not shotgun," Daea called.

"You don't like being responsible for following the Suffering?" Eli chided.

"Not after I got it so wrong last week. We lost that Stomp because we were so late." The girl unslung her backpack and crawled into the backseat.

"You were too distracted with trying to eat candy and follow the Suffering," Arjun said.

Daea unzipped a side pocket where she had stored a spool of licorice shoelaces. She stuck one end in her mouth and pulled the string into her mouth one bite at a time.

“I’ll sit in the front,” Ion said, pulling the seat forward for Eli to crawl into the back. She swapped CDs in the car’s console to play a classic album from the New Wave era.

The icy snow crunched under the vehicle’s tires as Arjun pulled out of the parking lot.

Ion looked at the dark substance rolling around the ground. “I’d say it’s in the Glebe, not downtown. I see a southward flow in the Suffering.”

Eli sat up and looked out the window. “That seems right.”

They turned left onto Bank Street and took the car underneath the Queensway into downtown’s southern neighborhood.

When they got to First Avenue, Ion said, “Turn left here.”

“It’s got to be around here,” the team leader said as the car traveled straight toward the Rideau Canal.

“Maybe we’ll be fighting on the ice,” Daea said. “We should have brought our skates.”

Arjun stopped the car before they reached the Queen Elizabeth Driveway. The team jumped out of the car and followed the Suffering toward the frozen waterway.

“At least there won’t be anyone around at this hour,” Eli said.

“Or in this cold,” Arjun added. “You would have to be crazy to skate in this weather.”

Eli held his palms open as they reached the pathway to provide warmth for the team. "I've seen people here skating in the deep freezes."

Daea moved closer to the Smart for warmth. "I like skating in the cold because it makes the hot chocolate taste better afterward."

The rest of the teammates laughed as they reached a guardrail. Climbing over it and down the embankment, the team found themselves on the snow-covered, frozen canal. The snow atop the ice sweated from Eli's fireball that was keeping everyone warm.

"Be careful," Ion said. "We don't want to fall through."

"There they are," Arjun said, pointing up.

A horde of Gergeyles flew toward them from the sky. These monsters were not made of stone, but rather bone and sinew covered in ice. Their pinched faces expressed a wicked glee as they used their altitude for a tactical advantage. In tandem, the monsters unleashed a flurry of ice pellets, which rained down toward the Childaar.

The attack failed as Eli quickly created a wall of fire in front of the team that melted the flying creatures' icy bullets. Ion proceeded to Blast them out of the sky, where they unraveled into inky black Suffering and floated to the ground.

"No fair," Daea complained. "I didn't get to fight any."

The team sat in a late-night diner. Next to the window, Eli watched the Suffering for a sign of its intentions. As March approached, winter had not let up, and mounds of snow still covered the city streets and sidewalks.

“Keep your eyes open for anything suspicious,” Arjun said. “We know the Sparklaar have ways of concealing their actions.”

Ion looked out the window. “I wonder if they use the same illusions or change them up every night.”

“Abigail thinks that they are trying to avoid us because we make their lives harder. She’s not sure exactly how, but something about us gives them problems.”

“Or, they know we’ll put them down.” Daea extended then retracted her claws.

Eli smiled. “I’m not sure how much they fear us. We seem to be more of a nuisance. We somehow make their lives worse.”

“They better hope that they don’t run into me,” the girl stated in a matter-of-fact tone.

“The longer we do this, the more I am beginning to think Zavanna conjured Jesi-Sera at the comic shop.”

Daea groaned.

“If it was Jesi-Sera, what could we do to lure her?” Arjun asked.

The team went silent as they considered the challenge.

“We know she likes comic books,” the Charm said.

“She loves comic books,” Daea said through a mouthful of ice cream.

“I love comics, too.”

Eli said, “No, she really loves comic books. Really really.”

“We can use that,” Ion said. “But she hasn’t been back to any of the stores, right?”

Daea finished the second of three milkshakes she had ordered. “No, she hasn’t been seen since that night at Beyond Infinity.”

“Toronto has a comic convention every year,” Arjun stated. “Does Ottawa? Maybe there’s one coming up that we could use.”

Eli shook his head. “We do, but it’s not until summer.”

“We could make our own,” Daea suggested, her words again jumbled by the ice cream in her mouth.

Arjun smiled at the girl. “That’s a good idea.”

“That’s a big undertaking,” Ion said.

“It wouldn’t have to be the biggest,” Eli stated. “We could make it local.”

Daea swallowed and added, “I’m sure she would come to that.”

“Where would we start?” the new team leader asked.

“I don’t think it would be that hard,” Eli said. “We do have the museum’s resources available to us. We would

need to find a location, incorporate the community, do some marketing.”

“And guests,” Daea exclaimed. “I bet I could use my movie connections to get someone to come.”

“This could work,” Arjun said as he wiped hair away from his face. “Sounds like we have the makings of a comic convention.”

“We have a Stomp,” Ion yelled, opening the door to the arcade, where Daea watched Eli playing pinball.

“Let’s go,” Daea said, picking up her winter gear and backpack that had been dropped on the floor underneath the machines.

Eli forgot about the game, grabbed his jacket, mittens, and fedora, and was quick on the girl’s heels. They put on their coats and rushed into the freezing night, where Arjun was parked in front of the restaurant arcade. They jumped into the warm car, after which the team leader pulled them out into traffic. The night was not so late that the Kinedaar were yet in bed, and traffic was a steady stream in all directions.

“This makes it three nights in a row,” Daea said. “Eli’s never going to beat that high score if he can’t get time to play.”

“I’m getting so close,” the Smart added.

“Missions are our priority,” Ion said. “If we don’t beat these, it makes everything harder.”

“I know,” Eli replied. “It’s just I had a real good groove happening.”

“He did,” Daea said, rummaging through the main compartment of her backpack and pulling out a bottle of cola, which she opened and drained.

“You’ll get it,” Arjun said.

“I know. I just didn’t think it would be this hard.”

Daea held out a bag of jelly beans. “Anyone want one?” Each of the Childaar helped themselves to the candies.

“Do we know where we are going?” Eli asked as Arjun got the vehicle onto the Queensway.

“Ion thinks it’s at a hospital in the west.”

“Queensway Carleton Hospital?” Eli asked.

“I think so,” Ion said. “I see that direction in the Suffering, along with viral shapes.”

The Smart looked out the window to inspect the vile substance that flowed along the ground. “I see what you are talking about.”

It took about twenty minutes before the Childaar drove into the hospital parking lot. The team stepped out into the frigid night and inspected the grounds.

“I think it’s inside,” Eli said.

“That’s good. I know your Fire helps keeps us warm,” Daea said, “but it’s still cold out here.”

Eli grimaced. “We’re well into March, but where’s spring?”

The team entered the emergency room doors and snuck past the arrivals desk and into a stairwell that led down into a basement storage area. Large, amorphous, gelatinous monsters slithered along the ground. Daea took a few slams from thick appendages that shot out from the Oozes’ bodies, but she skillfully handled the attacks.

Eli and Ion continued to use their Fire and Blast, respectively, to destroy the monsters, which created a big splash of Suffering that receded onto the floor.

“Great job, team,” Arjun said with a smile.

“This is much better than Operations,” Daea said. “Even if I don’t have much to do.”

“That’s the goal,” the Charm said. “We’ve specialized.” He turned to Eli and asked, “Want me to drop you off at the arcade? You could try again.”

Eli shook his head. “I wouldn’t have time to beat that score.”

Daea grabbed a Pocky out of the open box sitting on the corner of her desk and nibbled on the chocolate-covered biscuit stick. She turned the page of her textbook and examined the diagram in the middle of the page. The

teacher had found that it helped keep the girl's attention by disregarding the rules about food and drink in the classroom. Her three teammates all sat at their desks for the self-study part of the day.

Eli sat in front of her, and she tapped him on the shoulder to show him her notes.

"What is it?" the boy asked, turning around.

"The things we will need to build for the convention. Stages, booths, and risers."

"That's nice, but aren't the crews going to do it?"

"I think I could do a better job."

"It's a lot of work."

"Maybe I'll just make the prototypes, and they can follow that."

"Did you get a key for the workshop?"

"Yeah, Chuck sent one over. He said it's no problem. I'll see if Arjun will drop me off later."

"I don't think he'll mind."

"Mind what?" the Charm said from a few desks down.

"Can you drop me off at Chuck's friend's workshop tonight?"

"Of course. Whenever you want so long as there isn't a Stomp." The team leader looked at Eli and asked, "Have you found a place for the convention yet?"

Eli shrugged. "I have some meetings to check out a few possible venues."

“Wherever you choose, I’m sure it will be great.”

The teacher looked up at the students as if to say that the allocated time was not for talking. The Childaar took the hint and returned to their work.

Daea and Ion climbed into the tunnels.

“Are you ready?” Daea asked in an excited tone.

“Sure,” the punky girl replied.

“I hope we find something good to fight. Lately, it’s been only Crawlies. I haven’t had a good fight down here in a while.”

The Quick shrugged. “That’s fine by me.”

“But it’s more fun fighting.”

“I don’t like the risk. I know we could handle about anything down here, but it’s good to be careful.”

“I like that it gives me a chance to practice some new moves.” The small girl crouched and placed both hands on the ground. Bringing a leg back, she kicked out behind her.

“That would be good when you’re surrounded.”

Daea, still crouched, kicked back and forth a few times. “It will be hard for big monsters to hit me when I’m this low.”

The pair made their way through the tunnels on the west side of downtown.

Daea spotted a Crawlie that looked like an oversized millipede with pink eyes strewn across its body. She

crouched and leaped on the tiny monster. It flew into the air as she was about to land atop it, and it dangled helplessly for a few moments before getting slammed into the concrete wall and dispersed back into the Suffering.

“Sorry,” Ion said with a smile.

Daea’s nose scrunched. “Not fair. You and Eli always get them before me.”

Ion raised her hands.

“Even Arjun gets more kills than I do. He asked me if he could fight them for practice, so all I do is coach him.”

“That’s a big help.”

“I know, but I’d like to do some fighting too.”

The Childaar walked down the maintenance tunnel, and they found themselves in a room amongst a series of tubes. The Suffering surged across the floor. The room was filled with litter from what looked like a party.

“Strange. Why would anyone want to hang out down here?”

“Who knows with Kinedaar?”

Ion spotted a millipede, picked it up with her Telekinesis, and floated it toward her teammate. “Here you go.”

Daea scoffed and swiped it out of the air, and it wafted back down to the floor to join the rest of the Suffering.

“Like that even counts.”

Eli waved his hands in front of a large circular building. They stood downtown, on the west side of the Rideau Canal, next to a tall, luxurious hotel, where cars stopped, and well-dressed Kinedaar gave their keys to valets, who parked the vehicles

“This place looks like a spaceship,” Daea said.

Eli’s shrug was barely noticeable under his heavy parka. He led the team inside. They walked into a foyer, where two young Kinedaar men at a host station met them. They looked at the Childaar with skepticism and asked to see their invitations. The Smart explained that they were not there for the event but rather had a meeting to talk to someone about renting the place.

Before the hosts could say anything, an elegant woman swept in and told the guys that she had it from there. She introduced herself as the convention center’s manager and said that the museum staff had given her some details. If she was surprised to be dealing with kids, she did not show it.

Eli explained that they needed a venue for a comic convention and thought that this place could work. The woman nodded and said that her organization could host many kinds of events, and she was sure that theirs would be no different. She took them for a tour. It had three levels, each with an open rotunda and side rooms. The

black-tie soiree was in high gear by the time they returned back to the entrance.

“What do you think?” Eli asked the team.

“It seems perfect to me,” Arjun said. “So much space and an experienced staff to help manage the event.”

“I agree. It’s a good location.”

Daea rejoined the team after inspecting the dessert table with a paper plate full of dainties and treats. She swallowed what was in her mouth before saying, “Their desserts are pretty good. Not as good as Hudson’s, but it will do.”

CHAPTER 15

“I think we have everything in place,” Arjun said. He and the rest of the B-team stood around their dining room table, upon which stacks of papers, maps, and blueprints lay.

Between mouthfuls of chips, Daea said, “We did it.”

Eli clapped. “We did in weeks what should take months, if not a year.”

“Our event planner from the convention center helped a lot,” Arjun said.

“A lot of people helped a lot,” Eli said in agreement.

“Yeah, the website, social media, badges and swag, sponsorships, setup.”

Daea said, “I’m going to make the final check tonight so that we are ready for next week’s big day.”

Eli gave the girl a pensive look. “You’re sure you can explain this all to the construction crew?”

“Of course. It’s mostly tables and a little bit of scaffolding for the stages.”

“And electrical, don’t forget about that.”

“Everything is on the list,” she said, pulling a crumpled paper out of her pocket.

The Smart looked at Ion. “Are you excited to be on the radio?”

Arjun asked, "Have you ever done that before?"

Ion stretched. "I've had some music played on the air but never did an interview. This should be fun."

"It'll be practice for when you're a famous rock star," Daea said, holding out the bag of chips, which everyone declined.

"Thanks," Ion said. "That's the dream."

"You're so good, I don't see how it won't come true," Arjun added.

"You make us sound good," Daea said. "Even I'm impressed with our practice. Don't forget to mention Kirsteen Okorie and Callirrhoe Hanssen. My mom had to pull some strings to get them to come."

"I won't," Ion said with a reassuring smile. "I know how important it is to you."

Arjun added, "I'm surprised how many movie and TV stars, authors, and online personalities we were able to secure on such short notice."

Eli stood and clapped his hands. "It's nice to see the community so supportive of our local event. Things are looking up."

Ion grabbed her guitar and slipped it into its case. "Now, so long as we don't have a mission tonight, everything should be perfect." She walked toward the home's exit. "I'll go check."

The Charm looked at Eli. "Everything's good with the curation?"

"It's all done," Eli said. "I've got everything ready. I'm glad we went with the Wonder Woman theme for the special display."

Daea finished the bag of chips. "All those Wonder Woman comics will get Jesi-Sera's attention."

"They're not all Wonder Woman comics, though," Eli said. "For example, we have All-star Comics number eight, of course."

"Why is that?" Arjun asked, wiping a strand of hair away from his eyes.

"It's Wonder Woman's first appearance. Interestingly, she isn't on the cover, but it is an important part of comic book history."

"What else?" Daea asked.

Eli started counting books off on his fingers. "Sensation Comics #1, her first cover. Obviously, Wonder Woman #1. All the number ones from reboots. So many amazing pieces."

Ion returned. "Nothing yet. Let's get to work."

Daea left Eli at the arcade to take a look around the neighborhood. The evening had warmed, spring neared, and walking up and down the streets was pleasant in comparison to the brutal winter they had experienced.

Even the Suffering seemed to be awakening as its robust waves spun across the ground.

Upon turning the corner on Kent Street, she spotted Whiskers running toward her. He was impatient and spun in circles. She bent down to try to understand what the dog was trying to communicate. He walked a few paces from the girl, barked, and then turned as though expecting her to follow.

“What is it, boy?”

Whiskers bolted down the street. Daea could not keep up with the athletic dog, but he stopped at each corner, giving her some time to catch up before darting across the next street. The German shepherd led the girl a few blocks away, then he stopped her in front of a local coffee shop.

The store, known for roasting their own beans, was fronted by large, clean windows. As the hour was getting late, few patrons sat inside. Daea saw a table of university students studying at a table, a couple who looked like they were on a date, and an older man sitting by himself at the window watching the world go by. In the back corner, with her back to the window, sat a figure with a full head of long, blonde hair. Jesi-Sera had her head down, reading a comic book that lay on the table.

Daea hurried into the store toward her previous team leader, ignoring the barista, who told her that dogs weren't allowed.

“Jesi-Sera,” the girl screamed with elation.

The Charm turned in her seat, a look of sadness and fear on her face. “Daea. What are ye doing here?”

“Looking for you. Why didn’t you come to us?”

“How did ye find me?”

“Whiskers caught your scent.”

A wave of understanding crossed the Charm’s face.

“Ye shouldn’t be here.”

“Why not? Let’s go back to the museum. Everyone is going to be so happy.”

“I can’t go.”

“What’s going on?”

“It’s complicated.”

“I don’t see how. I found you. You’re rescued.”

“Ye don’t understand.”

“Then tell me.”

The Charm stood up and started to pack her comic books into a designer satchel. “I have to go.”

Daea took a long, hard look at her previous team leader. Her aura had faint, glittery traces. “Are you a Sparklaar?”

The Scottish girl did not say anything.

Daea’s nose scrunched. “You are!”

“It’s not what ye think.”

“That you are going to become an evil Eldaar?”

“It’s not like that.”

“Oh, no?”

“Childaar are told that Sparklaar are evil, but for a few years, it’s kind of like having the fun of being Childaar without the responsibility.”

“How did this happen?”

“When I went to Montreal to investigate the missing team, I made a friend. He said he had some information for me. I think he was infatuated and was telling me that he knew more than he did. I asked him to look into it.”

“Is that how Axe met Zavanna?”

“How do ye know about them?”

“They’re here.”

“Ye have to stay clear of them. Especially Zavanna. Ye could get hurt.”

“Too late for that now, and they’re the ones who are going to get hurt.”

“I’m serious.”

“I am too. They are working for Dracul, you know.”

The blonde girl nodded. “Aye, Zavanna is. Axe doesn’t know about that; she has his mind completely dominated. She told him that he would need to get something in exchange for information. I had told Axe about the Artifax, so we made a deal to trade the sword for info.”

“What happened?”

“We planned to meet at Parliament, in the House of Commons. When I arrived, I was led to Dracul’s

subterranean home. I had a bad feeling but descended anyway.”

“It was a trap.”

“It was. Dracul, with Zavanna’s aid, captured me.”

“That’s the last time we saw you.”

“Did ye rescue the A-team?”

“Yeah, but none of them are in the city anymore. A new team replaced them. Where were Axe and Zavanna when we encountered Dracul?”

“Axe was still in Montreal, and Zavanna was flying the helicopter.”

“Where did you go?”

“Back to Montreal. I was still young enough that Dracul couldn’t hurt me too badly. He wiped my mind and entrusted me to Zavanna and Axe for a proper Sparklaar education.”

“What happened?”

“It didn’t take long before I started noticing Zavanna’s manipulative ways. She’s almost an Eldaar if she isn’t already. She’s ambitious and is looking to Dracul to be her mentor.”

“Scary.”

“Yes, and I’m worried about Axe. I need to rescue him.”

“So that you can both take your Sleepining?”

Jesi-Sera didn't say anything. "I think we've got a couple years yet to explore and enjoy ourselves."

"And become Eldaar."

"We'll expose ourselves before that. There are Sparklaar communities that encourage safe practices. It can be done."

Daea crossed her arms across her body. "I don't like it. You should expose yourself now. We'll save Axe."

The tall girl moved to leave. "We are done here. Don't try to contact me again. We now exist in different worlds."

The small Hardy stood in front of the tall girl as she stood to leave. "I can't let you go."

Jesi-Sera knelt to look the girl straight in the eye. A warm aura, with a hint of sparkles, surrounded the vampire. "This is where we say goodbye." She paused for a moment. "Unless."

"Unless what?"

"Ye could bring me my comic books that were in my room."

We are using them for the convention, but if you come now, I'll give them to you."

"Ye are planning that convention? I should have realized as much."

"Yeah, we thought we could lure you."

The beautiful young woman's smile lit up the room. "Well, you found me and can just bring them. I don't

expect them all, but the Wonder Woman stuff would be nice.”

“We’re using those for the special exhibit.”

“Bring them to me!” A dark, silver, sparkling glow surrounded the young woman.

“You’re scaring me.”

“Well, if ye are not going to help, we’re done.”

Daea stood stunned by the force of her friend’s will.

Before leaving the shop, Jesi-Sera added, “And, let’s keep this conversation to ourselves.”

A warm sensation of friendship enveloped the girl as she watched Jesi-Sera give her a wink and leave the shop.

Daea ran back to the arcade. Eli had just finished writing his initials for the high score on the Justice League themed pinball machine. Through a big grin, he said, “I did it! I got the high score.” His expression turned serious when he saw her grim face. “What happened?”

“I found her. I found Jesi-Sera.”

The Smart’s eyes widened. “What? That’s great. Where is she? How did you find her?”

“She wants me to keep our conversation between the two of us.”

“Say everything,” Eli pressed.

“Whiskers caught her scent and led me to a nearby coffee shop, where I found her reading her books.”

“Why didn’t she come to find us?” Eli asked. A pang of sadness resonated in his voice.

“She’s Sparklaar,” Daea answered.

The boy’s face soured. “No.”

“That’s why she can’t come to the museum.”

Eli nodded. “The protective force around it won’t let her in.”

“She’s still in danger. She got caught up with Zavanna and Axe in Montreal and is now caught up in Dracul’s plot.”

“We need to get home to tell the others.”

The duo rushed onto the street, where they hailed a taxi. Daea pushed the driver to go faster, but he said that he had to follow the law. When she wouldn’t relent, he snapped and said that if they weren’t such young children, he would kick them out then and there. Eli apologized on behalf of his friend. Given the close proximity of the museum to downtown, it didn’t take long to arrive.

Chuck stood at the dining room table with Ion and Arjun, looking at a folio of papers. The three Childaar looked despondent.

“I found Jesi-Sera,” Daea exclaimed, kicking off her boots and running into the home.

Chuck’s face brightened. “What?”

“She’s a Sparklaar,” Eli added.

Daea recounted her encounter at the coffee shop.

With every detail, the Sight's expression became more dejected.

When there was nothing more to say, Eli grabbed the papers on the table and asked, "What's this?" His expression darkened. "You're not serious?"

Chuck sighed. "Sorry, it's true. Judge Payne has canceled all your permits for the convention."

Daea slammed the table with a fist. "What!"

Eli said, "We put a lot of work into this."

"I know," the Sight said, resting his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Abigail is trying to get this reversed, but the system is so corrupted."

Ion held her acoustic guitar close to her chest and quietly stared at the table.

"We'll figure something out," Arjun said, trying to lift his team's spirit.

Eli looked at Chuck. "How's it going with the A-team?"

The sandy-haired Sight sighed. "Not to diminish your losses here, but we're doing even worse with Dracul. Every clue we find or inroad we make gets stymied. He has his claws in this city worse than we ever realized. It feels like every step forward is followed by ten steps back."

"Isn't Abigail informing the Orakles about this? Why aren't they sending more help?"

“She is, but it’s a lot like when we were telling them. They don’t understand how bad it is, and Childaar resources are already spread thin.”

“But this is Dracul,” the Smart pressed.

“I know that, and you know that, but...” Chuck looked at his watch. “I have to get going, but I wanted to pass along this information. I’ll let you know if Abigail and the others have anything to help with Jesi-Sera, but I think you were on the right track. You’ll find a way to salvage it.”

Daea paced around the table. “We will.”

The A-team’s leader attempted a smile. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” Eli said. “You too.”

The Sight left the Museum of Nature’s Childaar home. He stuck his head back in a minute later. “Not to kick you while you’re down, but there’s a Stomp brewing. Looks like it’s at the C.D Howe Building. I’d say you have a couple of hours before it manifests, but keep an eye on it.”

Ion strummed a sad chord on her guitar as the Sight took his leave.

“Great! Just great!” Daea stormed into the kitchen, where she flung cupboards open in search of a snack. She finally settled on a bag of candied marshmallows that she ripped open and started stuffing into her mouth.

Eli sat down at the desk and began poring over the pages. “I can’t believe this.”

Arjun sat beside him. “Think they missed anything?”

“I am going to find out.”

CHAPTER 16

The team sat around their table. Heads and spirits low, they searched for something to say. The only sounds in the room were a ticking clock and a crinkling chip bag.

“What are we going to do now?” Daea asked through a mouthful of chips.

“I’m not sure,” Eli replied.

“We’ve put so much work into this.”

Ion plucked sad notes on her acoustic guitar. “It’s unbelievable how they’ve corrupted the city.”

Arjun attempted a smile but was not exactly successful. “We’ll figure out something.”

Eli stood and stretched. “I’ll ask the museum staff if they can help us find information on these decisions.”

The team leader looked at the calendar on the wall. “It’s Daea and me on tunnels.”

“Let’s go.” the small girl said, grabbing her backpack and walking to the door.

“Which way?” Arjun asked Daea with a sweeping bow into the underground corridor.

“Eli and I were the last to do tunnels, and we went under the market, so maybe this time we should sweep downtown?”

“Works for me,” the Charm said as they began walking north.

Daea led them through the tunnel system, and they didn’t encounter any monsters on their journey.

“Pretty quiet, so far,” Arjun said.

The team leader had spoken too soon, as they heard a rustling from down the passageway.

Daea smiled and extended her claws. “Alright!”

Arjun stayed behind the girl as the pair crept forward.

The Hardy looked around the corner, looked back at her teammate, and rolled her eyes. “You can do this.”

“What is it?”

“Just a few Crawlies. Use your low kicks like we practiced.” She held her hand up and received a high five for her efforts.

The Charm dashed around the corner. Holding his fists protectively in front of his body, he delivered a flurry of low kicks, each which destroyed one of the slow worms with long antennae across their bodies.

“There’s more,” Daea said, pointing at another group of vermin entering the room.

Arjun finished the small creatures and turned to the girl and wiped a strand of hair away from his face. “That was fun.”

“Yep, beating monsters is the best. Nice work.”

“I know you could have done it faster, so thanks for letting me try.”

“I don’t think I would have been that much faster. Eli and Ion, though, can clear tunnels in no time.”

“They just nuke them.”

“Yep. We have to get in close.”

“We all have our strengths.”

“You should get Fear,” Daea said. “Jesi-Sera cleaned up with that Gift.”

Arjun shrugged. “That would be nice, but I’d take anything. I know I help on fights, but I’d like to do more than just be the cheerleader.”

“You should get some pom-poms.”

“Think that would help?”

Daea laughed. “It might be worth a try.”

They didn’t find anything more than groups of Crawlies as they spent a few hours sweeping the tunnels.

Arjun looked at his watch and said, “We’re getting close to sundown. Let’s head back.”

Upon their return, Daea and Arjun walked into a room quite unlike the one they had left. Bundles of paper filled the living area, and loose papers were thrown into broken and lidless boxes scattered everywhere.

Eli stood in the middle of the mess. His eyes were wild when he saw his teammates walk in.

Arjun stepped into their home and navigated through the muddle. "What happened?"

"The court complied with the museum's request for information, but they gave us more than what we asked for and delivered it unsorted. If there's anything useful, it's going to be impossible to find."

"How much is this?" the Charm asked. He picked up a stack of papers from a box and flipped through them.

"Tens of thousands of papers," Eli guessed. "I don't know, what do a hundred thousand papers look like?"

Daea stood in the kitchen, holding a bag of candy-covered chocolate mini eggs. She waved at Ion, who entered with another box of documents. "This is the last one," the punky girl said, placing the box on the ground.

Arjun whistled. "Think there is anything useful in here?"

"Only one way to find out," the Quick replied.

"This isn't going to be fun," Eli added.

"What?" Daea asked.

"We have to read them."

"All of them? Eli, you can't be serious."

"We don't have to read for understanding," the Sight explained. "It will be more like scanning for anything that looks important."

"It will take forever," Daea said, her eyes wide. "We already had school today."

Arjun laughed then turned to Ion and Eli. "Is there a plan?"

Eli pointed at the documents. "I thought we could make an assembly line of sorts."

"Can't we get the museum staff to do this?" Daea asked.

The Smart shook his head. "They wouldn't know what to do."

Arjun nodded in agreement. "So, how will the assembly line work?"

"You three will do a quick scan to see if there is anything that looks interesting. If there is, pass it along to me, and I'll give it a closer look."

The team leader moved a strand of hair away from his eyes. "Let's get to work."

"I'm going to need some refreshments for this," Daea said as she walked to the kitchen, where she grabbed a two-liter bottle of root beer from the fridge.

"No glasses?" Arjun asked as the girl sat down at the desk.

Daea looked surprised. "Sorry, I should have asked if anyone else wants some. This one's for me."

Her teammates laughed.

Arjun stood. "I'll get it." He returned to the table with another bottle and glasses for the others.

“Here we go,” Eli said, placing boxes on the table for each of his teammates. He then sat across from them and waited.

Arjun grabbed a stack of papers to inspect. Daea and Ion followed the Charm’s lead. They quickly scanned each document and then dropped it into an empty box for recycling or passed it over to Eli, who’d shake his head and drop it into a plastic bin next to him.

After sunset, Ion walked upstairs and returned. “No mission.”

“That’s too bad,” Daea said. “I’m going cross-eyed.”

“Aren’t we all,” Eli said. “But I’m glad we have time to work on this.”

The team continued to scan and discard documents all night. A half-hour before they were expected in class, Eli waved a paper. “I think I found something.”

His teammates looked at him and waited for an explanation.

The Smart finished reading the document. “We might be able to use the Peace Tower. They allow community displays, but we would only get it for a day. Judge Payne must have missed this possibility.”

“It’s not the whole weekend like we had planned for the convention,” Arjun said. “But, it could work.”

Eli continued reading. “There is one thing, though.”

Arjun looked serious. “What?”

“We need to get five thousand signatures.”

“How are we going to do that on such short notice?”

“Ask people on the street?” Daea suggested.

Eli shook his head. “It’s too many people.”

“We could throw a concert,” Ion suggested.

Arjun nodded. “But where?”

“How about the National Arts Center? It’s a big venue,” Eli said. “I can check with the museum staff about booking it.”

Ion’s brow furrowed. “The Peace Tower is the bigger problem. It has windows and sunlight. We couldn’t get Jesi-Sera to walk into it.”

Daea paused from licking the icing off a cinnamon bun. “I could build blinds that would spring open for the sun when she’s inside.”

Arjun pointed at the girl. “You could build that?”

“Of course.”

“What about the door? Wouldn’t she just leave?” Eli asked.

Daea used her finger to trace some sketches on the table. “I could also make something to block the door when the blinds open. That’d be easy so long as it doesn’t need to open again.”

Arjun nodded. “We could get a maintenance crew at Parliament to open it afterward.”

“And how would we know she is in there or when to release it?”

“Closed-circuit TV?” Ion suggested. “We used some in Vancouver for a series of Operations. Because they don’t connect to the Internet, it’s fine.”

“This is coming along,” Arjun said. “We just have to decide what to show. We have too much for that small space.”

“We’ll put her comics in it. Her Wonder Woman and especially that All-Star Comics #8 and the Sensation Comics features. She’ll want to get them back.”

“You think that she would steal them?” Daea said. “She’s not a thief.”

“Can you steal your own stuff?” Eli asked.

“Good point.”

“Be wary,” Ion added. “She is a Sparklaar, after all.”

“You don’t know her,” Daea said. “She’s a good person.”

“You say that because you knew her as a Childaar, but things change. Why is she embracing Sparklaar life? She should know better.”

Daea stuck her tongue out at the Quick.

Eli said, “Whatever her reason, we have to try something, and this seems like a good opportunity.” He sighed. “Too bad it’ll be so much smaller than what we had planned. I think the community was getting excited.”

Arjun shrugged. "It'll be a unique experience to see them in the Peace Tower."

"I'll have the museum staff start the cancellation and refunds process." The Smart stood and picked up his schoolbag as he prepared for class.

Finishing the last bite of a cinnamon bun, Daea picked up a pencil and started to sketch. She designed the broad strokes to trap the Scottish Sparklaar in the observation deck of the Peace Tower. She snapped out of her work when she heard Eli announce that they had to get going or they would be late.

The Smart looked over the girl's shoulder to see what she was working on. "That's good. It looks like a professional designer or architect made that."

"Thanks." She laughed, then added, "I'm even using trigonometry."

The B-team had only a few nights to prepare for their inaugural performance. Aside from a Stomp in Orleans, where they fought a group of floating eyeballs, the team spent their time rehearsing and patrolling the streets, taking it as an opportunity to place posters for the show.

The National Arts Center was only a few blocks from Parliament, next to the Rideau Canal, near the convention center they had booked before the permits had been

revoked. The Suffering simmered around the area but stopped short at the building's perimeter.

A large glass enclosure welcomed people into the brown, concrete and granite, asymmetrical structure comprising of rectangular, hexagonal, and triangle-shaped wings. Posters hung high on the walls to promote upcoming events.

Arjun drove the team into the underground parking lot. They passed a group of people already lined up for the show. "That's promising."

"We have Ion to thank for that," Eli said. "After she went back on the radio and played some of her new music, tickets sold out within the hour."

The punky girl accepted the compliment with a smile. She looked the most like a rocker with her spiked vest and ripped jeans.

A concierge met them in the parking lot and took them to a green room with a full spread of mini-sandwiches, fruits and vegetables, candies, and baked desserts.

"Look at all this stuff," Daea said, marveling at the snacks. She wore a black T-shirt and blue jeans.

Arjun looked around the comfortable room. He, too, had settled for a jeans and T-shirt aesthetic, but in contrast to Daea, his top was white. "This is nice." He looked at his watch and added, "We have about an hour until showtime.

We did the soundcheck and everything yesterday, so relax.”

Daea kept her drumsticks in her belt so that she could use both hands to devour the banquet.

Eli looked nervous with his fedora askew on his head. He wore a black suit but had substituted his usual dress shirt for a T-shirt, and rather than dress shoes, he wore a pair of blue sneakers.

The concierge arrived and said that the auditorium was full. They were pretty sure that people had snuck in because people were standing at the back and sitting on the stairs.

“It’s showtime,” Ion said. “Gather up.”

The team huddled and put their hands into the center.

“On three,” the Quick said. “One, two...”

Everyone shouted “three” in unison and brought their hands up.

“Break a leg,” Daea yelled as they moved to the side of the enormous stage. “That’s what the actors on the movie sets always say.”

“It works here, too,” Ion said with a wink.

Everything was dark, and the audience sat in hushed anticipation. Ion picked up her guitar and walked toward the center of the stage. She began with a haunting but exciting melody that caused each person in the crowd to jump from their seats and cheer with excitement.

While Ion had the audience's attention, the rest of the band took their places. Daea climbed onto the raised drum set, Eli grabbed his bass guitar and stood stage right, while Arjun strutted to the microphone that stood in the front center of the stage. The Quick kept playing but moved to the left to give their vocalist room to perform.

A series of strobe lights flashed and outlined the members of the band. Ion's opening solo led into a long-drawn note; as soon as it sounded like it was about to finish, the rest of the band kicked in.

Daea twirled her drumsticks and proceeded to crash down on the skins and symbols. Eli bobbed his head and plucked his bass guitar's strings in time with the Hardy's drums. Arjun pulled the microphone off the stand, bent back, and wailed. The crowd went wild as they danced and jumped in their seats. Even the Kinedaar on the highest levels of the third balcony felt as though they were in the front row.

The band started with the original music that Ion had written and taught the Childaar. Even though they were not a known band, the music was so good that the enraptured audience did not care if they had never heard it before. The songs ranged between power-pop to hard rock.

Daea broke sticks smashing on the symbols, but each time it happened, she grabbed another from a full sheath that had been placed by her legs.

The band then changed tacks and played a series of cover songs, both new and classic, driving the crowd into a happy frenzy.

The technical team exceeded the band's expectations and provided perfect acoustics accompanied by magnificent stage lighting. The spotlight was always on the right members, the strobe lights boosted crescendos, and an array of colored lights and effects enhanced each song. Without the Suffering, the smoke machine was able to create a wholesome and wavy effect across the floor of the stage.

Arjun commanded attention as he sashayed, belting out lyrics, much to the crowd's delight. The lead vocalist faced competition for the crowd's favor, as each time Ion took control of a song, they reveled in her prodigious talents. The Quick made sounds on the guitar that only the best guitarists in the world could play. She brought the crowd to a quiet hush only to explode and bring them up in a tide of excitement.

The band returned to their original music and played a haunting ballad that started slow but ended with a hard-rocking conclusion. However, before they reached the song's climax, the crowd grew silent as horror and fear washed across their faces.

The Quick turned her back to the audience and mouthed, "What?" to her teammates. Everyone on the stage had noticed the change in the audience's demeanor.

Arjun held his microphone away from his body and said, "I think I just manifested a new Gift."

"Fear," Eli said.

"Turn it off," Ion called. "You're freaking them out."

The Charm's smile was huge as he turned and faced the audience. Turning off his Fear and channeling his Awe, he started the slow build to the song's end. Ion was quick to join him with incredible guitar speed. Daea kept the beat steady, but it grew louder and louder. Even though the band had been told that pyrotechnics were prohibited, Eli took an opportunity to shoot streams of fire into the air. The crowd had no idea how the effect was created, but they loved it.

The Childaar finished the concert with a few upbeat, catchy singalongs. The crowd was quick to learn the lyrics and participate. When the songs finished, the onlookers would not stop cheering. Arjun waved his hands down so that he could speak to the audience. When they quieted, he thanked everyone for coming. He told the crowd that the reason for the show was to collect signatures so that they could display an exhibit in the Peace Tower. He said that they would find petitions on tables when they left and that it would be appreciated if they could sign them before

leaving. The band bowed and waved to the crowd as they walked off the stage.

The audience cheered to say that they would comply with the request. The cheering turned into a demand for an encore.

“We have to play a few more songs,” Ion said as the sweaty band caught their breath on the side of the stage.

“You got a new Gift!” Eli said, wrapping an arm around the Charm’s shoulders.

“I know,” the handsome boy said. “What a time to get that one, though.”

The crowd got louder, and the team members were unable to speak to one another.

Arjun grinned and pointed back to the stage.

The applause was deafening as Capital Chaos walked out, grabbed their instruments, and resumed their positions. They played three more songs: two covers and then “Marshmallows 4ever,” which became an immediate fan favorite. Arjun gave each other member plenty of time for a solo before closing the show by thanking the crowd one last time.

The band returned to the green room, where Daea finished the snacks on the table. It did not take the concierge much time to join them, tell them that that was one of the most incredible shows she had ever seen, and

tell the team that everyone was signing their petition on the way out.

CHAPTER 17

“I’ll drop you off,” Arjun said, “but we can’t spend all our resources staking out the arcade. Ion and I have errands to run.”

Eli nodded in agreement. He pointed at Daea. “We’ll do it.”

The team walked through the parking lot to Arjun’s purple rally car. They looked similar in their sporty, waterproof coats, jeans, and hiking boots. Eli, the only one wearing headgear, pulled his fedora forward so that the brim sat just above his eye level.

The day had been sunny, and a cool spring breeze flowed through the early night. Garbage unveiled itself from under the melted piles of snow. The Suffering, while turbulent, showed no signs of a mission. The team leader unlocked the doors to the car, and everyone jumped in.

Ion, who had taken the front passenger seat, turned around with a firm look. “You just have to promise not to engage them if you find them. We need to be together if we are going to confront those Sparklaar.”

“A Sparklaar and Eldaar,” Eli said.

“That’s even worse,” the punky Quick replied.

Arjun looked at the kids from the rearview mirror. “Ion’s right. Promise you won’t engage them and that you will run away if they find you.”

Eli said, “Of course. It would be too dangerous.”

Daea did not say anything, seemingly preoccupied with the ingredients on the bag of Jolly Ranchers she held.

“Daea?” Arjun pressed.

“What?”

“You won’t fight Axe and Zavanna if you see them.”

“What if they find us?”

“I just said that. You’ll run.”

The girl’s nose scrunched.

“You will come and get us. We’ll do it together.”

The small girl yielded. “I know. They whooped Hudson and me. But we will be able to take them as a team.”

Arjun smiled. “Thank you.” He drove down Metcalfe Street, where he was able to navigate into the downtown core. “Here you are.”

The younger Childaar were able to get out of the car without the older ones needing to move the seat forward.

“Good luck and be safe,” the team leader called out to them before closing his door and driving away.

Daea and Eli rushed into an alley across the street from Capital Fun. The Suffering splashed and churned across the road and sidewalks.

“Think she’s in there?” Daea asked, removing her backpack to retrieve a thermos of hot chocolate.

“We should take a look to know what we’re working with.”

Daea took a sip from the insulated container and placed it back into the pack’s side pocket. “Let’s go.”

The Childaar crossed the street and snuck up to the door.

Eli said, “You keep watch; I’ll take a look.”

“You got it,” the Hardy said, moving down the sidewalk, where she found cover behind a mailbox.

The Smart had no sooner gone in before he turned and ran out. “She’s here. She’s in there playing the Justice League machine.”

“We should get her!” Daea said, her claws shooting out of her fingers.

Eli gave the girl a hard look.

“What? We said that we wouldn’t engage *them*, but she’s alone.”

“I’m pretty sure they meant any kind of engagement.”

“I don’t know.”

The boy pointed across the street. “I do. Let’s go back and keep watch.”

Once back in the alley, the Childaar used discarded crates and empty cardboard boxes to create a blind from

which they could see the restaurant arcade and would give them cover upon Zavanna's exit.

Daea rubbed her hands together. "We got her now."

Eli chuckled and said, "She must have been pretty surprised to see that her high score had been beaten."

"Should I take another look to see how she's doing?"

"No."

"I could just go in for a snack."

"I'm sure you have enough in your backpack."

The girl unslung her pack to retrieve a bag of black licorice. "I do, but I like to support the business."

Eli kept his eyes on the door. Kinedaar came and left, but as the night grew late, the streets began to clear.

"She's been in there for quite a while."

"Yeah, it takes time to get scores that high."

"I don't think she will be able to beat your score."

The night was at its darkest when a long vehicle that looked like a combination between a car and truck pulled up in front of the establishment.

"That's an El Camino," Eli said. "I remember seeing those around L.A. They're funny."

The girl squinted and took a good look at the vehicle, which transformed into a long, black hearse.

Zavanna walked out shortly afterward with a self-satisfied grin on her face. She dropped a phone into her jacket pocket as she climbed into the passenger side.

“Oh, no. They’re driving away,” Eli said.

“This is why we should have a car,” Daea replied.

The car did not speed away but rather skulked down the street.

Eli started running. “Let’s go.”

The pair got lucky with a couple of red lights that slowed the unhurried vehicle as it stalked the night streets. They followed it down O’Connor, where it pulled into the Château Laurier hotel driveway. The Sparklaar exited the car, at which point Zavanna threw the keys to a valet, who caught them with a fearful look. They did not enter the hotel but rather walked east toward the Byward Market.

“They’re staying at the hotel?” Eli asked.

“Seems like it. We should investigate,” Daea said.

“We should go back and get the others.”

“But we know they are not here right now.”

“That’s true. It could be an opportunity.”

“It is,” the small girl said, stuffing two strings of licorice into her face. “And we’re not engaging them.”

“This may be our best chance.”

“Let’s do it.”

A young woman held the door open for them and said hello, giving the kids a strange look, given their presence at the hotel so early in the day. The lobby was as spectacular as its stunning exterior. A sofa and host of chairs sat atop

an ornate, square carpet in the middle of the room atop the polished marble floor. Wooden doorways surrounded the central area, where guests could access the front desk, restaurant, or gift shops. A large chandelier hung from the high ceiling that served both the main lobby and its corresponding balcony.

Staff had begun preparations for the upcoming day. Amidst a massive groundswell of Suffering, a few Kinedaar ate in the restaurant, checked out, and asked the bell staff for directions.

“We have to figure out how to get downstairs to find where they keep themselves,” Eli said, leading them inside.

“How do you know they are downstairs?” Daea asked. “Why wouldn’t they want a fancy room at the top?”

Eli looked over at the girl in disbelief. “Think about it.”

“About what?” the girl asked.

“Why do you think our room is underground, and Dracul’s, and almost certainly the Sparklaar’s?”

“The sun,” Daea answered.

“Exactly,” Eli said. “The problem is that we don’t know how to get to their lair from here.”

The girl said, “We’ll figure it out,” and gave her friend a pat on the back.

Eli approached the woman working at the door and asked her if there were any rooms in the basement. The Kinedaar scoffed and said that nobody would want to stay

down there. Eli stated that he and his friend would like to see it regardless, and she said that it wasn't possible. Besides, there wasn't much to see—just some meeting rooms, housekeeping's laundry facility, a staff room, and storage. The woman was cordial, so when she saw Eli's disappointed look, she offered to give them a tour of the rooms upstairs, which were much more interesting.

The Smart used his Command to say that they would much rather see the basement, at which point the woman agreed to the idea. She took them to the elevator, where she pressed a button to take them down. The elevator opened into a hall with a series of small boardroom-sized spaces.

The duo spread out to inspect the floor.

"Seems all clear down here," Eli said.

The bell person asked what they were looking for, and Daea told her that they sought vampires somewhere between Childaar and Eldaar. The woman looked confused, but Eli grabbed her attention and asked if they could see behind the scenes: the places where the public was not allowed. Again, the woman looked hesitant, but once again acquiesced after Eli used his Command.

"Kind of like an Operation," Daea said.

Eli nodded. "Yes, it's been a while since we've done one of those."

The woman opened a door with a sign on it that read, "Employees Only/Employés Seulement." She told them not

to touch anything. Daea told her to get on with it. Where the front of the hotel was sophisticated and refined, the back was less polished. The walls looked as if it had been many decades since they were painted, the concrete floor was scuffed over years of use, and tables, chairs, and glassware were stacked in corners and along the wall.

“Where could they be?” Eli asked. “This place isn’t that big, and all the space is accounted for.”

Daea asked the woman if there was anything below the floor they were on. She told the girl only the maintenance and boiler rooms.

Eli asked if they could see those. The woman started to protest, and the Smart gave her a hard look but did not need to use his Gift, for the woman relented. She took them to an unmarked door for which she had the key. The door opened into a dark stairwell. She flipped the light switch, but nothing happened. She flicked it a few more times to no avail. The Smart thanked the staff member for her time and said that they had it from there. She protested, but Eli used Command, which she was unable to resist.

“Let’s go,” Daea said. “Get us some light.”

“Please?”

“Please,” Daea said, drawing the word out.

Eli held up his palm from which a small, fiery orb grew. Daea stood in the front, with Eli behind her. The girl

cast a long shadow from the light source as they made their way down the stairs.

The Suffering grew wilder as it cascaded down the steps. The only sound they heard was the grinding and whirring of the machinery that powered the grand hotel. Pipes, valves, and flanges greeted the team at the bottom, but there was no sign of the Sparklaar. Daea pointed to an exit on the far side of the room, and they made their way toward the opening, where they saw an empty room with two cots and a lot of garbage.

“What a mess,” Daea said, stepping into the room and kicking through the trash. “They could, at the least, put the garbage in the garbage.”

Eli examined the room. “This is gross. What slob.”

“How are we going to find anything in here?”

“At least we don’t have a lot to search.”

Daea opened a night table and removed more debris, which she dropped onto the floor.

Eli dug around under the cots. “Look at this,” he said, holding up a journal.

“What’s that?” Daea asked, walking over to the boy.

“It looks like a diary,” Eli said. “But it’s written in gibberish. This makes no sense. It’s a code.”

“Can you crack it?” Daea asked.

Eli examined the script. “Unlikely without a cipher.”

“What’s a cipher?”

"I think these characters correspond with a cipher that would line up with the actual letter or number."

"Like a decoder ring," Daea said.

"Exactly," Eli replied. "We have to find that."

"A secret decoder ring?"

"More than likely, it's a book. They make great ciphers. Are there any books here?"

Daea picked through the garbage on the floor. "I don't see any, but who knows, given this mess." She then looked at Eli. "What about that copy of *Frankenstein* we found under the pinball machine at the race track?" Daea asked.

Eli's head snapped up. "Yeah, that would explain that."

"What?"

"Zavanna played pinball at the racetrack. She forgot it, and it would have been gone by the time they returned."

"Do you still have it?"

"No, I gave it to the museum staff for restoration. They were not happy to see its condition. It's one of the rarest books they had seen in a long time. It may even have been written by Mary Shelley herself."

"And they wouldn't be able to come into our home to get it because of the museum protections."

"Exactly."

The pair backtracked up the stairs. The employee corridors were empty, and they made their way back to the elevator near the meeting rooms.

Eli flipped through the journal. "There is a lot of information here. I wonder what it says."

"Maybe it's a list of her favorite pinball games."

"I don't see how the whole thing could be about pinball. And, why would she write that in code?"

Daea took a wrapped toffee from her pocket, squeezed it so that the treat popped into her mouth, and said, "I suppose not." She paused for a moment and added, "I should make a list of my favorite candies in code."

"That would be longer than this."

The elevator arrived, and they rode back to the lobby. The woman who had guided them down to the basement stood at the door. They thanked her for her help as they left. She looked puzzled but said that it was her pleasure and that they should come again soon.

Daea and Eli rushed into the Childaar home, where they found the other teammates getting ready for the day.

"We found something," Eli said, holding up the journal.

"What's that?" Ion asked.

The Smart explained their night. Arjun's and Ion's eyes grew larger with every detail.

“You cracked the case,” Ion said.

Eli nodded. “I’ll go see if the cipher is still here. They said they were planning on transferring it to the Museum of History. Hopefully, that hasn’t happened yet.” He handed the journal to Ion, who flipped through the jumbled letters.

Daea went to the kitchen, where she opened a box full of artisan donuts and helped herself to a Boston Creme.

“This could be a gold mine,” Arjun said, taking the book from the Quick and scanning the pages.

Eli returned, holding the damaged book victoriously over his head. “They still had it!”

The team met at their dining room table and placed the journal and cipher atop it.

A hush came over the room but was broken by the sound of Daea using the slushie machine she’d had the museum staff install. She grabbed the donuts box and joined her teammates at the table, where they translated the letters.

“That’s an ‘A,’” Eli said, pointing at a glyph with four horizontal lines with a diagonal that cut through them left to right. He then pointed at a similar symbol. The only difference was that the diagonal line cut across right to left. “That’s a ‘Y.’”

Daea opened the box and offered its contents to her friends, but only Arjun helped himself to an old-fashioned glazed donut.

With filling from a Boston cream dripping down the side of her mouth, Daea asked, "What have we got?"

Eli shushed the Hardy. "We're still working on it."

The team worked swiftly as they lined symbols to page numbers and their corresponding letters. As the process progressed, Eli said, "I'm not sure this is in English. None of these words fit together."

Ion said, "I'm not sure this is any language. It looks like a lot of nonsense to me."

"We can figure it out," the team leader said, resting his elbows on the table to inspect the writing that they had translated thus far. "Let's finish it and see what we get."

It took the team about another ten minutes to complete the first page. The paper on which they had written letters looked as confusing as the original.

"It's reversed," Ion exclaimed.

Eli pumped his fist. "Yes, and it's bottom to top."

"Can you read it out loud?" Arjun asked.

"It will be easier to use a mirror," the Smart answered.

"Bathrooms have mirrors," Daea said. "We can read it there."

The team stood and rushed to the washroom.

Eli held the paper up to the mirror, and they all leaned in.

“Wow,” Ion said.

“Is this what I think it is?” Eli asked no one in particular.

Arjun gave a low whistle.

“What is it?” Daea asked.

“A direct link to Dracul,” Eli answered.

CHAPTER 18

“Where are they?” Daea complained. “We’ve been here all night. How do we know they haven’t hatched their plan yet?”

“We have to be patient,” Ion said, leaning against Arjun’s rally car. “The intelligence we received from that journal has been invaluable. Abigail thinks that the Sparklaar have been ordered to create a distraction, so here we are.”

“But how do we know they haven’t left already?”

The Quick’s eyes were fixed on the front doors of the magnificent Château Laurier. “We don’t, but we got here at sunset, so unless they left before we arrived, they should still be inside. That’s why we have the boys watching the other doors and their car, you’re watching the front, and I’m patrolling the area.”

They could see Eli standing in his suit and hat at the corner of Sussex, where he had a good view down the long side of the hotel.

The Hardy held out a bag of peppermints to Ion, who refused with a polite hand gesture. Daea perked up when she saw the old, dirty couple walk out of the hotel. “There they are,” she said, and the Sparklaar transformed from

their illusioned selves into a waifish young woman and sickly young man.

Ion used her Telekinesis to pick up a pebble near Eli and toss it at the Smart. He waved at the car and disappeared behind the corner of the hotel.

The boys emerged as they sprinted toward the car to meet the girls, who crouched behind it to not be seen by the Sparklaar.

“Where are they?” Eli asked, taking cover.

Ion took a quick peek. “It looks like they are walking downtown.”

“They don’t have much time,” Arjun said, looking at his watch.

Daea said, “This might take away from school, but it’s OK; I finished my report in class.”

Arjun grimaced. “Let’s stop them from whatever they plan to do so that we can get home before the sun comes up.”

The team moved toward O’Connor Street, where they crossed the road.

“Keep back,” Ion ordered. “We have to be careful not to be noticed.”

Staying a block away, the Childaar followed the Sparklaar to one of the entrances to the Parliament light rail transit station on Queen Street.

“The trains aren’t running yet,” Eli said.

The team moved toward the LRT stop. They were careful to peek ahead at corners. Still, they did not see any signs of the Sparklaar until they found themselves at glass doors that had been smashed to allow unauthorized entry.

“Follow me and be quiet,” Ion said, stepping through the broken door.

“This is where Chuck is helpful,” Daea whispered. “He could scout ahead with Hideness and let us know what to expect.”

Ion shushed the girl. The transportation hub was spacious to accommodate all the people who commuted in and out of the downtown core. A foul odor complemented the eddies of Suffering that swirled around the entryway. Humming lights created an eerie effect, given the station was usually busy with people coming and going.

Daea pulled on Ion’s shirt and whispered, “I should be in the front.”

The Quick nodded and snuck in behind the girl. Arjun followed her, while Eli walked backward to make sure that no one and nothing could get the drop on them from behind. The sets of escalators bringing passengers to their trains had not been turned on. The team had to get through narrow turnstiles with plastic barriers that opened when a pass or ticket was scanned by the machines. Each team member jumped the plastic stands and walked to the

escalators. They crouched to use the sides and handrails for cover.

Daea stopped and held up a hand. Her teammates halted, and she turned and pointed to her ear. Voices echoed from down the platform.

Ion whispered, "I can hear talking, but I can't make out any details."

"Same," Eli said. "Let's get closer to see if we can hear what they are saying."

"Is it them?" Arjun asked.

Eli shrugged. "Who else could it be?"

"Go, go," Ion instructed Daea, who crept down to the bottom of the escalator, where she led the team to a corner from which to peek.

"It seems that it is only us down here," Arjun said. "We should be the stronger group, so let's get as close as we can and then rush them."

A stationary train came to life as the lights inside the cabins turned on, and its engine whirred. It was white with red trim. Two engines, each comprised of four subsections connected by accordion hinges, had been fastened to accommodate more people. Big, rectangular windows lined the cars' sides, while the front window gave conductors a full view of anything in front. Its doors closed as the vehicle began to move.

“We have to get on there,” Daea said, rising to her feet to sprint toward a closing door. She was too slow, and the train picked up speed as it began to leave the terminal. They watched in stunned silence as the train started to pass them by.

“Everyone, jump on,” Arjun ordered as the last car approached.

Daea, Eli, and Ion all leaped onto the reverse facing engine’s window and scrambled onto the machine’s flat roof. Arjun missed his jump, and even though Daea reached out to grab him, she could not clasp his wrist, and the small Charm landed between the tracks. He stood and began running after them but could not catch up.

“I’ll find you,” was the last thing his teammates heard him say before the train exited the station.

“Do we go back for him?” Eli asked.

Ion said, “No. We don’t know what they are up to, but we know it’s not good. Let’s get to the front of this thing and turn it off.”

The train exited the underground tunnel as the city began to awaken. The Suffering’s boiling had increased into a wild churn.

The light rail train continued to accelerate. The next stop on the route was at the downtown mall. Early morning workers completed the last duties in preparation for opening. The train blew through the shopping center’s

underground platform, prompting looks of bewilderment from the personnel.

Axe crawled out from a window and then helped Zavanna onto the top.

“Who’s driving this thing?” Eli asked.

“Nobody’s driving this train,” Daea answered.

The Sparklaar walked toward the middle on one of the cars, while the Childaar moved forward on their side. Zavanna crouched behind Axe, while Daea preceded Ion and Eli.

The evil young woman shot her hands forward, and a blast of Fire exploded from them. The flame was thick with soot and burned char. Ion threw a Shield in front of Daea, who held up a hand to protect herself from the attack. The force of Zavanna’s Dark Gift pushed the Childaar back.

Eli was quick with a burst of his own once Zavanna’s had finished. Axe grimaced as he punched the balls of Fire out of the way.

“He’s tough,” Eli said, yelling to be heard over the whooshing wind around them.

“Let’s close in,” Daea yelled, hopping over the soft accordion material that joined the cars. Her team was quick behind her but had to stop as another blast of Zavanna’s Dark Fire propelled toward them as a red-and-black torrent of flame. Ion and Daea were able to absorb the attack, but it came at the cost of forward progress.

Again, once the Dark Gift subsided, Eli popped up, stood square, and threw the hardest punches he could, releasing solid balls of Fire. Axe punched the balls to the side but winced in pain with each strike.

All the vampires had to duck when a tunnel appeared from around a bend. They lay prone on top of the train, only a few hand widths separating them from the concrete above.

“Let’s rush them as soon as we get out of this thing,” Daea called to her teammates.

Eli and Ion nodded in understanding.

The Sparklaar stood first coming out of the tunnel and braced themselves for combat once they saw the Childaar running toward them. The young vampires jumped the space between the two vehicles to meet their foes.

Axe took the opportunity to move and engage with Daea. His punches were slow and heavy. The Hardy attempted to block the blows but was thrown back into her teammates. Eli was sent flailing backward, where he lost his balance and fell between the two attached train cars. Ion was quick enough to reach down to grab him by the collar. His fedora was knocked off and tumbled onto the ground as they sped away.

Daea recovered from the fall and looked back at the Sparklaar. Zavanna had moved in behind her partner. With a diabolical grin that provided a clear view of how long her

fangs had become, the young woman shot a stream of black-and-red flame at the small girl.

The Hardy raised her arms to cover her face to defend herself from the fiery attack. Her clothes were singed and tattered from the assault. She unleashed her claws and entered into her kung fu tiger pose. She screamed as she swiped at Axe, whose attempted blocks left him with gashes along his hands and arms.

Ion pulled Eli up from between the cars and assessed the situation. A look of horror crossed her face as the vehicle whizzed by another station without stopping. The people on the platform awaiting the first ride of the day looked scared and confused as the train sped by. The Quick yelled something, but the sound of the rushing air was too loud for her to be heard. She pointed ahead, where another train rounded the bend on a collision course with theirs.

Zavanna looked back and looked devilishly satisfied when she saw the oncoming engine. She unleashed another Fire attack at Daea, but Ion provided a Shield for her teammate. Before the Childaar could counterattack, the waifish, evil woman grabbed her partner and jumped off the speeding vehicle.

Ion yelled, "Follow them. I'll stop this crash."

Daea grabbed Eli and jumped. She landed on her back to protect the Smart, and the duo skidded through a ditch across rocks and hard ground. She stood and helped her

friend up. Looking around for Zavanna and Axe, she saw Ion near the front of the train.

The Quick swiped her hand across her body, and the line across the track switched so that the two vehicles missed colliding.

“She did it!” Eli exclaimed as they saw the trains pass each other on separate tracks.

“Now, let’s finish this fight.”

The Childaar and Sparklaar, both injured and hurt from fight and fall, hobbled along a pathway. Rays of light started to appear on the horizon. The Suffering swirled around their legs as they limped and staggered. Traffic picked up as people began their morning commutes.

Axe, beaten and bloodied, looked back at his pursuers.

“It’s over,” the Hardy yelled.

Zavanna turned to look at Daea. In her smooth, French accent, she screamed, “Get lost!” Her eyes momentarily turned red. Seeing that her Dark Gifts did not affect the small girl, she made eye contact with her partner. “Fight her.”

Axe’s eyes became glossy as he turned to face the pursuers.

Daea moved into her kung fu tiger pose as the two vampires reached melee range. The young man raised his hands protectively, watching the small girl from between

his forearms. Daea crouched low and waited for an opportunity to engage.

Zavanna searched for a way to remove herself from the encounter, but Eli closed in on her.

“Give up!” Eli shouted his Command.

Axe hesitated, but his partner was not affected. “Cute that you thought that would work.” She looked at her partner and yelled, “What are you waiting for? Kill them!”

The young man regained his focus and moved to engage his opponent.

“Bring it on,” Daea said through gritted teeth. “I’ve been waiting for this.”

As they reached striking distance, Axe threw a few jabs at Daea, who leaned back to avoid the strikes. The next set of punches got inside her defenses and pushed her back.

Eli and Zavanna squared off and blasted Fire toward each other, which met in the middle and exploded out the sides. The burning streams moved back and forth, but neither seemed like they could get an edge.

Daea began to wear down the young man, whose attacks and blocks slowed. Their bodies pressed together as strikes became grapples. The girl said, “You know you don’t have to do this? Zavanna’s an Eldaar, and she’s just using you.”

“You don’t know anything,” the Sparklaar spat.

“That’s what Jesi-Sera told me.”

Axe hesitated, and Daea took the pause to swing onto his back and place him in a headlock. Her feet dangled off the ground as she applied the chokehold.

Zavanna’s Fire pushed close to Eli, who looked like he was having a hard time matching his opponent’s force.

Axe clawed at Daea’s arms to try and break the hold. In a hoarse whisper, he said, “When were you talking to Jesi-Sera?”

The Hardy, whose head was next to the Sparklaar’s ear, said, “Not long ago. She’s in town. She wants to free you from Zavanna’s spell. You know she’s working with Dracul, right?”

“You lie,” Axe said as he continued his attempts to break free.

“I’m not lying. She’s controlling your mind. Think about it. You know it’s true.”

The Sparklaar’s grip weakened.

“What about Jesi-Sera? Can I see her?”

“Nope. We are going to expose her to the sun as well.”

“But we have plans.”

“Considered them canceled. But you can go out as a good guy.”

“What are you talking about?”

The battle of fires between Eli and Zavanna reached its crescendo. The young woman had gained the advantage as

her dark Fire had reached her opponent. An explosion cracked throughout the coming dawn. The Smart was sent flying, and he landed on an open patch of hard, dead grass. The evil woman stood, licked her lips, and turned her dark gaze on Daea and Axe.

Daea relaxed her arms but did not break the grip. "Help me take her down, and you can complete your vampire existence with an act of good."

Giving up, Axe dropped to the ground. Daea's feet touched the earth, but she didn't relinquish the hold. "I don't know if I can fight her," he said without much energy.

"What are you doing?" Zavanna yelled at her partner. "Don't just sit there. Fight!"

"Resist," the small girl whispered into his ear.

Zavanna yelled, "What are you waiting for!"

"Help me," Daea pleaded. "Do it for Jesi-Sera. Do it for yourself."

The young man stood to face Zavanna. "I can't be with you anymore."

"Submit," the waifish woman hissed.

"Are you working for Dracul?"

Without hesitation, Zavanna responded, "Of course not."

"Are you an Eldaar?"

"No."

“Then why isn’t your aura sparkling? All I see are dark lines.”

“You are being manipulated by the Childaar.”

Axe screamed into the air with fury. He glared at the woman across from him. “You are the one lying. I see it now.”

The woman shrugged. “You can die with the Childaar, then.” She reached back and then pushed forward, and a dark, fiery stream shot toward the two vampires. Together, they were able to resist the attack but were unable to advance.

“I can’t take much more,” Axe said through a grimace.

“Me neither,” Daea agreed.

The weight of the attack lessened. Daea turned and saw Ion holding out her hands to create a protective Shield.

“Now,” Axe shouted. He and Daea used the reprieve to run around the fiery stream to confront the young Eldaar.

Daea pounced and raked Zavanna’s face, who was unable to fight back, as her partner tackled her at the waist. The three vampires rolled around in the dirt. Daea and Axe tried to restrain the woman, but she was wily and evaded their grasps.

Ion finished the fight with a targeted blue beam from the center of her head that struck the red-coated Eldaar square in the chest. It stunned her just long enough for

Daea to deliver an uppercut punch that rendered the young Eldaar unconscious.

“Thank you,” Daea said with a breath of relief.

“You’re welcome,” the Quick replied. “We need to take care of these two before the sun comes up, which isn’t long.” She looked around. “Where’s Eli?”

Daea ran to her friend, who lay lifelessly where he had fallen. She wiped the blood from his face and begged, “Eli, you there? Wake up.”

The Smart’s eyes fluttered. He gasped and tried to say something, but it was incomprehensible.

“Thank goodness,” the girl said as she enveloped him in a hug.

The boy propped himself up to a seated position. “Where are they?”

“Over there,” the girl said, pointing at the unconscious Eldaar and seated Sparklaar.

Eli’s face blanched. “Why is he just sitting there?”

“He helped us beat Zavanna.”

“Really?”

“He was able to resist her hold over him. He’s going to take his Sleepining.”

Eli pulled himself off the ground and walked toward their defeated rivals. “We had better hurry.”

“Hey!” Arjun called out as he spotted his friends. He climbed over a fence and joined the team. “Is everyone alright?”

Ion smiled upon seeing the Charm. “We are now.” She pointed. “We have to deal with them, though. And we’re running out of time.”

“Stake through the heart?” Daea suggested.

Axe shook his head. “I’ll stay with her as the sun comes up. Maybe it’s not too late, and she too can have a Sleepining.”

“How long will it take for them to become Kinedaar?” Daea asked.

Ion said, “I had a teammate in Vancouver who got stuck outside after a mission for not even two minutes, and she lost two levels of her Gifts.” She snapped her fingers and said, “She went from an L3 to L1 like that.”

Daea carried Zavanna’s limp body to where Axe sat against a big rock. She propped the waifish woman next to the young man. “Thanks for the help, and good luck in your Kinedaar life.”

Axe smiled. “Thank you. I see now that I was in more danger than I realized.”

“You’re welcome,” the Hardy said as she pulled a sucker from her pocket, unwrapped it, and stuck it in the vampire’s mouth.

The Suffering whirled around the brightening sky.

“We need to move,” Ion said. “I don’t think we have time to get home.”

Eli looked around and said, “I don’t see anywhere to go. Unless we want to break into those people’s homes over there.”

Ion said, “I’m not even sure we have time to do that.” She pointed at a maintenance cover on the ground. “I think this is our best option.”

“The sewer?” Arjun asked with incredulity.

Ion used her Telekinesis to raise the heavy, round plate from its lodging.

“Everybody in.”

“Does this connect to the tunnels?” the Charm asked.

“Not out here,” Eli answered. “This is not going to be a pleasant day.”

“No, it’s not,” Ion said, joining him in going down the ladder into the smelly, confined space. Once everyone was in, the Quick brought the cover down on top. Everything went dark.

Eli created a small ball of fire, revealing the sludge in which they stood. He turned to Daea and asked, “Is this still better than school?”

After taking a breath, she said, “I’d prefer school.”

CHAPTER 19

The team entered their home dirty, smelly, and weary.

"Those passengers on the bus were sure glad when we got off," Eli said with a laugh.

Arjun wiped a strand of hair away from his face. "I think they clapped louder than the audience at the concert."

"I need a snack," Daea said. "We ate everything last night." The girl contemplated her options in the kitchen.

"*You* ate everything," Eli replied. "We tried but couldn't get it past our mouths."

"Make it quick," Arjun said. "There's a mission brewing, and we need to be ready."

Ion leafed through a stack of papers, news, and reports that had been waiting for them outside their door.

"Anything?" Arjun asked.

The Quick nodded and held up a page. "First responders were called to the area, where an unexplained train accident had occurred. They rescued a boy who had been found wandering around. They said he was weak and ill and taken to the hospital for monitoring but is expected to make a full recovery. Apparently, his real name is Steve."

"Nothing about Zavanna?" Eli asked.

Ion tilted her head. "It says they found a pile of clothes, including a red velvet coat, but don't know if it means anything."

Eli winced. "Which means she burned in the sun."

"She knew the risks," Daea said. "One less Eldaar is a good thing."

The Charm removed his socks and hiked up his pants as he walked to his room. "Get clean. We need to be ready."

Daea grabbed a couple cans of soda from the fridge. "Shower pops."

All clean, the team gathered in the living room. Ion had turned on some background music, Daea finished a sleeve of cookies, Arjun sat cross-legged on the couch reading a report, and Eli had just returned from outside.

The Smart said, "The Suffering is wild. There's an Operation and a Stomp, and they're acting similarly. I think we should head out."

Arjun stood. "Yeah, let's go."

Daea frowned. "Let's finish this fast so that I can finalize the preparations for tomorrow's display."

"Do you have much more to do?"

"Just finishing touches," the girl answered. "We tested the mechanism, and everything works."

Eli said, "We are ready if she comes in the morning or in the evening. The surveillance room we're set up in has no windows, so we'll be safe from the sun."

"We set up a big screen TV and have lots of movies to watch and snacks to eat while we wait."

Arjun smiled at the girl. "You worked hard on this. You took the lead and got it done. Great job."

The girl shrugged. "I just want to help."

The team left their home and walked up the stairs. Dark clouds converged in the night sky.

"Wow," Ion exclaimed. "I've never seen the Suffering like that."

Eli nodded. "See what I mean?"

"Let's figure this out," Arjun said as he unlocked the vehicle with a press of a button.

The team got in the car and drove out of the parking lot. Ion sat in the front with her guitar, but all members monitored the Suffering. They began by patrolling downtown, which was busy with Kinedaar, but they couldn't find any clues to the Stomp at hand.

Eli suggested that they get onto the Queensway. They drove west all the way to the Palladium Arena, but not finding anything, Arjun navigated through a cloverleaf intersection to head back into the city. The cars on the

highway slowed, and they ended up in bumper-to-bumper traffic. A trickle of rain started to fall.

“What’s going on?” Daea asked as she unwrapped a candy.

“Rush hour?” Eli suggested.

Ion stopped her playlist and turned on the radio, and the DJ announced an accident on the city’s thoroughfare.

“That explains it,” Arjun said. “Usually, I find Ottawa’s traffic easy compared to Toronto, but when the Queensway goes down, I’m not sure.”

“Vancouver could be pretty bad, too,” Ion stated. “Especially if we had to go to Surrey or one of the adjacent cities.”

“We have to get off,” Daea said. “We can’t be stuck here.”

Eli pointed ahead. “There’s an offramp coming up. We could get onto Woodroffe Avenue to check out the southern side of the city.”

Arjun wove their car across the lanes to take the marked exit and sighed once they had regained some speed. “Ugh. Nothing worse than being stuck in traffic.”

“Try having your candy and snack privileges revoked,” Daea said, chewing on a wad of bubble gum.”

Ion looked at the ground. “I have no idea where this is going. It looked like it could have been Barrhaven or Manotick, but now I don’t know.”

The team watched the turbulent, dark force on the ground as they drove further from the city's downtown core. The rain had picked up and pelted against the car's windshield.

When they reached Fallowfield Road, the team leader said, "I don't think it's over here."

Ion nodded in agreement.

Eli said, "Take a left, and we can traverse over to the east side. It has to be in that direction."

Arjun took the boy's suggestion. Fallowfield Road came to a dead end, so they turned left and got onto West Hunt Club Road, which took them across to the other side of the city.

Traffic picked up as most people had made their way home for the evening. The Suffering was more chaotic than ever.

"It's definitely over here," Eli said. "At least, I'm pretty sure."

The Childaar eventually arrived at Highway 417, which they followed back into the city. Rather than rejoin the Queensway at the split, they continued straight onto Aviation Parkway next to the Ottawa River.

"Left," Eli said. "We're getting close."

Ion played an up-tempo melody on her guitar.

They got onto Sussex Drive, where waves of Suffering lapped over the road's embankment. High granite walls

reached up into the Rockcliffe Park neighborhood on their left, while the river presented itself to their right.

“Hey!” Eli pointed. “That’s Chuck’s truck.” The silver vehicle sat on the side of the street near the Prime Minister’s residence.

Arjun parked behind it. “That explains the confusing Suffering. It looks like we have our missions at the same place.”

They stepped out of the car into the dark and rainy night. Eli pointed at the Suffering that rolled across the street toward a fancy entrance opposite the Prime Minister’s home. Two tall stone columns with lampposts atop them flanked a black iron gate in the middle, which led a spiked iron fence that pushed out to surround the Hall’s grounds. Two booths for guards to stand in stood on each side of the columns. A house-sized guardhouse sat just inside the gate.

The team leader asked, “What’s this?”

“Rideau Hall,” Eli answered. “It’s where the Governor-General lives and works.”

“Canada’s head of state,” Daea said with a self-satisfied nod.”

“That’s right,” Eli replied. “You remembered.”

Ion pointed at the guardhouse. “I doubt we’ll be able to go through the front.”

Arjun wiped his wet hair away from his face. "Yes, let's keep moving. We don't want to draw unwanted attention. Follow me."

The team walked down the winding road. Small buds had begun to grow on the tall trees. Ion stepped off the road next to the high, black spiked fence.

"Don't touch anything," Eli said. "There are motion sensors." He pointed at a line of wires running across the barrier.

"Can you help us with this?" Arjun asked Ion.

"Sure." The Quick used Telekinesis to float into the air. She reached for a branch and pulled herself into a wet tree.

"Who's first?" she asked.

Daea threw her arms up in the air. "Me, me, me."

"Shhh," Eli admonished. "You're too loud."

"I want to go first," the small girl whispered loudly.

"Here we go," Ion said, pointing at Daea. The punky girl's face strained, but it didn't take long before Daea was levitating through the air toward the Quick, who pulled her toward the branch when she got into reaching distance.

Daea adjusted her position to make room for the other two Childaar, whom Ion brought up alongside them.

The team scurried down the tree onto the dark floor of the grove. The wet ground depressed under their feet as they crept through the wooded area until they finally saw a

clearing open up ahead of them. They stopped at the edge to inspect the surroundings.

The outline of a large, two-story structure loomed ahead.

“I’ve been here before,” Eli said. “That’s the main building. It has almost two hundred rooms.”

“That’s a lot of rooms,” Arjun said. “We should make that our home.”

“We can’t,” Eli said. “It doesn’t get the protections we have at the museums and galleries.”

Daea was the first to move. She led the team toward the path that circled the massive house. Eli was behind her, then Arjun and Ion covered the rear. The back of Rideau Hall opened into a lawn that was an impeccably manicured small field.

“What have we got?” Daea asked, surveying the area for signs of monsters.

Arjun looked around. “I don’t see anything. Where is the A-team?”

A massive dark cloud passed overhead, lightning shot across the sky, thunder blasted as a torrential deluge began. The already wet team became soaked to their core.

Eli said, “When it rains, it pours.”

A loud, high-pitched screech rang from on high. At first, it could not be seen amidst the dark sky and pouring rain. Darting toward the Childaar like a missile, an azure

reptilian creature with wings, each as wide and long as a bus, descended toward the team of young vampires. It screeched again and opened its wide maw, from which a stream of electricity spewed.

“Dracoli!” Eli screamed.

Daea grabbed Arjun and pulled him close, and raised an arm to protect them from the cackling blast. Ion pushed her hands forward and created a protective Shield in front of the young Hardy. The surge curved around the Shield. Some of the attack permeated the barrier, but Daea absorbed the rest of the blow.

Candy, bags of chips, and soda bottles spewed across the ground as Daea’s backpack did not survive the assault. The Dracoli soared above the group, and then with a few strong beats of its wings returned into the low clouds.

The team stood stunned until Arjun screamed, “Gather up.”

They heard another scream as the colossal creature reappeared. This time it swooped at them from the south. Mighty, leathery blue wings beat in the rainy night. A lightning bolt tore through the sky, illuminating the Dracoli’s yellow, hateful eyes, flaring nostrils, razor-sharp teeth, and front fangs as long as a child’s body. Electrical currents swirled in the back of its throat. The mythical creature threw back its head, and the powerful neck snapped forward, releasing another stream of lightning.

Her teammates crouched behind Daea, who again turned her body and raised an arm. Ion used her Shield to provide more protections. The electrical blast burned a line in the ground that cut straight toward the team. The Suffering bubbled happily as the mythical lizard pressed its attack. They felt the air from the wings' heavy flaps push down on them as the monster flew overhead.

Eli was quick to stand and launch an attack of his own. His balls of fire left tiny scorch marks on the monster's backside.

"Is this thing just going to make flyby attacks?" Ion asked.

Eli said, "If so, maybe we can trap it in a pattern."

The team's leader looked at Daea. "Can you take those attacks with Ion's Shield?"

"All night long," the small Hardy said through gritted teeth.

Arjun looked apprehensive. "OK, let's try that with the next attack, and we will see how it goes."

Daea pulled the boy closer. "Stay as close as you can."

"Should I try my new Fear?"

Ion shrugged. "I doubt it will work, given this thing's size."

"Yeah, Fear works better on smaller monsters, at least from what I've seen," Eli added

"I'll do what I can."

“You are doing exactly what you need to do,” Ion added.

Daea said, “Yes, I feel stronger and tougher.”

The Charm’s smile brought comfort to his teammates. “This team’s the best. Let’s take down a Dracoli.”

Everyone stood a little taller and cheered in unison.

“Get ready,” Ion ordered. “Eli shoots as it comes in, we hide behind Daea and the Shield as it makes its attack, then Eli and I will shoot it as it flies away.”

“There it is!” Arjun yelled, pointing up to the sky.

“We’ve got this,” Arjun yelled.

The Dracoli reappeared in the sky and beelined toward the team. Eli shot another series of small, hard fireballs while Ion prepared a Shield. The Smart hit his target, blasting into the colossal monster’s chest. Even with its armor, the creature screeched. Its mouth opened, and they saw the electrical bursts crackle in the back of its throat.

“Down!” Daea yelled as her team dove behind her. The Hardy turned her body halfway so that she could cover her teammates but, at the same time, keep an eye on their assailant. She grimaced as the stream of electricity hit, burning away the sleeve of her T-shirt and causing the skin on her arm to redden and blister.

The Dracoli swooped past the team and began its ascent up into the sky.

“Shoot! Shoot!” Arjun yelled as he stood and helped the other Childaar to their feet.

Eli and Ion didn’t need to be told. They launched their attacks at the back of the Dracoli. Eli’s fireballs were small and tight, while Ion’s Blast was a steady stream of blue plasma that hit its target.

Arjun pressed his hands forward, closed his eyes, and concentrated. His attempt to use Fear on the Dracoli seemed to have no effect as the monster flew out of range. He turned to the team and said, “I wanted to try.” He then spotted Daea and rushed to her side. “Are you alright?” Arjun asked, inspecting the girl’s arm.

“I’m great,” Daea said.

“Now’s not the time for boasting,” the Charm declared. “Be honest. How many of those attacks can you take?”

The girl’s nose scrunched but seeing the worry on her friends’ faces, she gave them a reassuring nod. “As many as we need.”

“Eyes up,” Eli said. “The sooner we spot it, the more damage we can do before it arrives.”

“This seems like it’s working,” Ion said.

Daea pointed. “There it is.”

Above the large hall, what had been a tiny speck grew as the Dracoli locked onto the Childaar’s position and prepared to attack.

“Let’s go, team!” Arjun shouted.

Having practiced the shot, Eli’s next volley anticipated his target’s movements, and they landed square and hard. The monster launched its breath weapon against the Childaar, but they did not take much damage thanks to Daea and Ion. Instead of flying overhead, however, the creature spread its wings to slow down. A loud whooshing of beating wings preceded its landing, as the team stood face-to-face with the Dracoli.

Towering over the group, the monster shrieked. Fear began to overcome the Childaar as they stood so close to the colossal beast.

“Be strong!” Daea yelled. “We got this.”

“Yeah!” Arjun yelled in support. He wiped his wet hair away from his face.

The Dracoli stood on its hind legs and bellowed into the rainy night. It fell forward toward the ground, raised one of its massive arms, and swung at the Childaar. Daea attempted to block the attack, and even though she took the brunt of it, the entire team was struck by the clawed hand and sent airborne. When they landed, they slid and scattered. Daea dug into the wet lawn, so she stopped shorter than the rest of her teammates.

Eli, Arjun, and Ion all got back onto their feet. The Dracoli pivoted to face the team’s direction and roared. Daea ran toward her teammates to regroup.

“I guess it didn’t like our plan,” Eli yelled.

Ion shouted, “And we couldn’t deflect that last attack. We need a new strategy.”

The Dracoli, as big as a house, stepped toward the team, sending up splashes of water and dirt as each massive clawed foot made craters in the soft, muddy earth.

“Brace for impact,” the Quick yelled.

Before it reached the Childaar, the Dracoli opened its mouth, and they saw the roiling generator at the back of its throat. It took a quick breath inward and released a blast of electricity that headed straight at the team. Daea stepped forward to meet the attack. She crossed her forearms, which, along with Ion’s concentrated Shield and Arjun’s Awe, created a concave barrier that caused the breath weapon to bend around Daea and the rest of the team.

The monster charged into the young vampires and headbutted the Childaar, who were sent flying back. The Dracoli, head low to the ground, scanned for a target. Its gaze stopped on Ion. With only a couple of steps, the gargantuan beast reached the Quick and grabbed her in its long, sharp teeth. She screamed as her attempt to protect herself with Shield failed. The monster crunched down on the punky girl, shook its head back and forth, and then spit her out, sending her unconscious body to the ground.

Arjun ran to the Quick, and he gave her body a gentle shake. She stirred, but her eyes remained closed.

Eli joined the Charm. “We need to get her off the battlefield.” The Smart pulled Ion a few paces and placed her under a small copse of trees, which provided some shelter from the downpour. “She should be fine here, but I don’t know how we are going to beat that thing.”

Daea met the team by the bush with a determined expression. “With claws.”

The Dracoli turned to stare at the Childaar near the foliage, its head weaving atop its powerful neck. Steam vapor preceded another deafening roar.

The Hardy stood and took a few steps forward. For a few moments, the Childaar and Dracoli locked eyes in a staring contest. The gigantic beast reacted first by letting loose a tremendous roar as it charged toward the girl. Daea extended her claws and sprinted toward her foe.

The ground rumbled with each of the monster’s footsteps; its gaze narrowed on the small girl. Daea jumped before the two collided. She angled her leap to skim across the creature’s neck, at which point she gripped the armored hide with her claws. Expecting a collision, which turned into neck pain, the Dracoli tried to stop. Still, given the wet grass, its attempt turned into an uncontrolled slide.

Seeing that the Dracoli was more concerned with Daea climbing up the side of its neck and not with the other Childaar, Eli stepped in front of Arjun and their fallen comrade. He moved into his Wing Chun pose and shot Fire

from a series of centerline punches that hit the broadside of the monster's body.

Penetrating the armored hide with her claws, Daea climbed up the Dracoli's neckline. It swung its head from side to side, but the girl's grip was too secure and too deep to be dislodged. She reached the top of its collar and sat astride the creature's neck wedged between the armored plates that ran from the top of its head down to the bottom of its tail.

Eli began to grow a ball of fire between his hands. Standing parallel to their foe, his arms forward, he made the ball bigger and bigger. His control of the Fire grew tenuous. He brought his shoulders back and punched forward with both fists. Preoccupied with the Childaar atop it, the Dracoli didn't see the incoming projectile. The attack exploded upon contact, dislodging a chunk of the armored hide to reveal dark, veiny muscles as black, icky. Suffering streamed from the monster's wounds.

Under assault from multiple locations, the massive creature began to beat its wings. Daea, with her legs entwined around one of the ridges on the Dracoli's spine and her left claws embedded in the creature's hide, slashed down with her right hand. Another screech erupted from the monster. She got under its armor and ripped off the plates, which transmuted into Suffering as they fell and joined the dark substance that covered the ground.

“Get off!” Eli yelled as he launched another one of the slow, intense fireballs. Another chunk of hide exploded off the monster’s hind.

Daea could not hear her friend over the storm and the wails of the Dracoli, but even if she could, she was not about to disembark. She continued to dig and slash atop the creature.

With a few mighty flaps, the Dracoli took to the air. Arjun stood stunned, unsure of what to do.

The Hardy and the monster rose into the night sky, well above the Rideau Hall grounds. The girl could not make out many details, given the heavy clouds blocking the moonlight and the hard rain that poured from them. The Dracoli spun its body side to side in an attempt to dislodge the unwanted passenger. Still, she held tight and would not be shaken. The creature soared even higher. They went into a cloud. Daea’s wet hair plastered across her determined face.

A tranquil serenity overcame the dueling pair as they emerged above the clouds. The moon shone bright, and everything around them was quiet. The peacefulness did not last long, as the Dracoli pointed its head downward and nosedived toward the Earth. Daea’s hair flew back as they sped toward the ground. The Dracoli’s body spiraled as it performed a series of barrel rolls, but the girl held on.

The dark planet headed toward them, and when they got close, she was able to make out the city and then the Rideau Hall grounds. She saw a growing speck of red and orange, even if she could not make out Eli creating it. She saw the ball of fire leave his hands and grow as it approached her and the monster she rode. The Dracoli saw it too and attempted to dodge the attack, but could not get out of the way and was struck on its underside. It was the most substantial ball of Fire Eli had ever created, and it sent the mythical beast into a flat spin.

The Hardy kept her head down as the creature spun out of control and crashed into the ground. Daea and the Dracoli tumbled across the Rideau Hall lawn. The girl stopped herself short while the monster came close to smashing into the front of the building.

Eli and Arjun ran toward their fallen teammate. Daea was slow to rise as she pushed herself up off the ground.

“Are you OK?” Arjun asked.

“Of course,” she responded.

“Are you crazy?” Eli yelled. The worry in his voice was evident.

“What?” Daea replied.

“You went flying into the sky on a Dracoli.”

“Hudson and I flew in the sky all the time.”

“You weren’t on Hudson! You could have fallen off up there, and I’m sure it wouldn’t swoop in to save you like Hudson would.”

“But I didn’t, and we still have to beat it.”

Arjun pointed at the other side of the lawn, where the Dracoli got back on its feet. It loomed high in front of the main entrance to Rideau Hall — a three-story, stone façade, with the country’s shield etched near the top. The large, ornate fountain that welcomed both tourists and dignitaries into the hall became nothing more than rubble as the creature regained its footing.

It turned its scorched and torn body to face them. Then like a bull, it pawed at the ground a few times before charging.

“Stay behind me,” Daea yelled. “Eli, shoot it. Arjun, do your thing.”

“Uhhh, keep up the good work,” the Charm said, giving the team two thumbs-up and wiped his hair away from his face.

“That’s good,” Daea said, taking in the boy’s buffs.

“I’m glad you feel good. I can’t say the same.” The handsome boy’s eyes widened as he watched the incoming monster.

Eli had grown two massive fireballs in each of his hands. He punched forward with both hands to release the projectiles. They were not fast, but the Dracoli was not far

away. The monster lowered its body and took the Fire on the top of its skull. One of the creature's pointy ears burned off along with a substantial chunk of its head. A few paces later, it had caught up to the team's position, where Arjun and Eli stood behind Daea, who braced for impact.

The collision sent the Childaar flying. They tumbled across the ground, where they were stopped by another row of bushes, not far from where Ion lay.

"What's it going to take to beat this thing," Daea said to no one in particular as the Childaar picked themselves up off the ground.

"Watch out!" Arjun yelled.

The Dracoli's tail whipped at the young vampires, who scrambled in separate directions. The creature focused its attention on the team leader and began to chase him.

Arjun tried to evade the Dracoli with a last-ditch dodge, but he slipped at the same time that the Dracoli brought a foot up to stomp on the boy, which drove him into the muddy ground. The Charm's eyes rolled into the back of his head as the monster barreled over him. It used its momentum to flap its wings and take back to the sky.

"This isn't good," Eli said, looking at their fallen leader. "I don't know if we can beat this thing." The Smart ran and dragged the Charm's body under a bush before rejoining his partner.

"It's just us now," Daea said.

“And me,” a deep, brooding voice called. Rosalicia walked out of Rideau Hall carrying the limp bodies of her teammates. Hudson rested on her left shoulder, Abigail and Chuck on her other.

“Rosalicia!” Daea cheered.

“Where are Ion and Arjun?” The big Hardy asked, searching the grounds.

“Over there.” Eli pointed at the Childaar bodies.

“They’ve been knocked out.”

“What are we fighting?” She dropped her teammates onto the ground underneath a wide shrub.

“A Dracoli,” Eli answered.

“Where is it?”

“It took off in the sky.” The small girl pointed upward. “There it is.”

“You two,” Eli said, grabbing the two Hardies. “In the front. Protect me while I get my flame on.”

“We got you,” Daea hollered.

The boy hid behind the girls and took the opportunity to create two of his giant, slow fireballs. The outline of the Dracoli grew as it soared toward them. Eli launched the Fire and then crouched behind his protectors. The monster spotted and dodged the Smart’s attack. No longer a silhouette in the night sky, the blue beast became apparent, especially its open mouth, which had electrical currents brewing at the back.

“Here it comes!” Daea yelled.

The Dracoli exhaled a torrent of lightning. Daea turned a shoulder toward the breath attack and buried her face in the crook of her elbow. Rosalicia held her arms crossed in front of her face. The stream of electricity arced around the trio, scorching more lawn. The gale force of wind from the Dracoli’s beating wings pushed down on the team as it landed in front of the Childaar. The monster finished its wail, raised its clawed foot, and brought it down on the young vampires, who scrambled out of the way.

Eli prepared and launched another pair of his large, slow balls of fire. The Dracoli did not have room to maneuver or dodge, and the attacks exploded against the side of the monster’s ravaged body. More dark tendons and inky-black Suffering poured from the exposed wounds.

“It’s hurt,” Rosalicia yelled. “Keep that fire coming, Eli!”

The Smart kept a steady stream of Fire on the Dracoli. The creature slumped to the ground, rolled onto its side, and turned into a misty, black vapor. With both missions completed, the Suffering returned to a state lower than any of them had ever seen in the nation’s capital.

The three Childaar surveyed the wreckage and their fallen friends.

“We did it,” Daea said, pulling the Smart and older Hardy into a squeeze.

Hey, who’s that?” Daea said, pointing at a lithe figure limping out the hall’s main door.

CHAPTER 20

Eli squinted through the pouring rain and darkness. "That's Dracul! He looks rough." He turned to Rosalicia and asked, "What happened in there?"

"We beat the Operation, destroyed Judge Payne, and thwarted Dracul's plans," the big Hardy answered. She took a deep breath and added, "But at great cost."

The legendary Eldaar transformed into a bat and disappeared into the night sky.

"I'll clean up here. You go save your friend," the Hardy said, her expression grim.

"Will you be able to protect yourself if he returns?" Eli asked.

"He's lucky to have survived. He won't come back."

The Smart looked at the sky. "We'll be lucky to make it to Parliament before daybreak."

"Go."

"OK, we'll catch up this evening," Daea said. She held her hand up for a high-five but only received a brooding glare and face full of rain for her efforts.

Eli fumbled through Arjun's pockets and found a set of keys.

The duo ran back to the path that led to the front entrance. Sirens rang through the night sky.

“Quick, hide,” Eli said, pulling his friend into the tree line running down the lane. They crouched behind a shrub and watched the speeding police cars zip by.

The pair moved out of their hiding spot and ran next to the road in case they had to hide again.

Daea asked, “Do you think they are going to get in trouble?”

“Doubtful,” Eli said. “Our protections have ways to keep us safe when dealing with the Kinedaar world. Rosalicia is a veteran.”

When they arrived at the vehicles, Eli asked, “Remember how to do this?”

“Of course! Let’s go.”

Eli opened the rally car and slid under near the pedals. Daea quickly hopped into the driver’s seat and dropped her legs over the boy’s shoulders. The sound of pouring rain quieted when the door closed.

The Smart shifted. “It’s cramped in here. I’m not sure if this car is smaller or I’ve grown.”

“I think you’re taller than you were. I’m not sure I am. I’ll need something to sit on.”

“What have we got?”

“The only thing I see is Ion’s guitar.”

“Yikes.”

“It will do.” The girl grabbed the instrument from the passenger seat and wedged it sideways underneath her.

The instrument's neck rested at an awkward angle against the console, and a crack sounded through the car as the long piece of wood broke.

"I heard that."

"I hope this isn't one of her favorites."

"I'm sure she will understand."

Daea pressed the button to start the car. "Ready."

"Let's go."

It took a few moments of Daea pressing her legs down on the Smart's shoulders and body before they found their rhythm. "Just like old times," the girl said, peeling a donut on the dark pavement and speeding down the rain-soaked street.

"That's true. This is near the end of the course we raced that time to help Ava and her family."

Daea pressed hard on the boy's arm, and they picked up speed as they passed the elegant French embassy. Soft lighting illuminated the square building's interior. They were well above the speed limit as they crossed the bridge onto the tiny Green Island, where the modern John G. Diefenbaker building resided.

"It's easier without the snow," Daea said. "Think we could drift?"

"We're not in a race," Eli said. "I see no reason to tempt fate. The last thing we need is a wipeout. Especially in this rain."

“We could do it.”

“It’s not worth the risk.”

The car crossed the Rideau River as they were sandwiched between the stone headquarters for the Department of Natural Resources on their right and the Sphinx-inspired Department of Foreign Affairs to their left. The road curved as they crossed above the McDonald-Cartier Bridge, which many Gatineau residents were using to make their way into the city for a day of work.

“How’s traffic?” Eli asked.

“Pretty quiet. Haven’t had to pass anyone yet.”

“Don’t be reckless.”

“When have I ever been reckless?”

Eli left the statement alone.

To their right, Daea had a clear look at the river. The rain had let up, and only a fine layer of Suffering covered the water as it flowed to the east. A flock of Canadian geese flew overhead as they returned home from their southern migration.

“We’re at the Royal Mint. And the hospital where we destroyed that Thraldaar.”

“Ismerelda,” Eli said.

“Yeah, she was crazy.”

“More so than Judge Payne.”

“Did you hear they got him?”

“Yes, that’s what Rosalicia said. I can’t wait to hear the details of how they foiled Dracul’s plans. The city should be a lot easier to care for now.”

“It will be even better after we rescue Jesi-Sera.”

Eli said. “I wonder what it will be like.”

“Lots of time for games, music, and fun.” Daea squealed. The girl gripped the steering wheel as she eased the car to the right as they passed the National Art Gallery with its massive spider statue out front. She honked the horn a couple of times.

“What was that for?” Eli asked.

“Just saying hi to Maman.”

“Focus.”

“That doesn’t mean we can’t have fun. I love that spider.”

They moved into a roundabout, circled a statue memorializing the country’s Peacekeepers, and came out between the massive battleship-like American Embassy and Major’s Hill Park.

“Can you believe that the Sparklaar were living in the Château?” Daea said as the grand hotel loomed ahead.

“We’ve gotten to know this place quite well,” Eli said with a sigh.

“Is there anywhere we haven’t had a mission?” Daea asked.

“There are still lots of places in the city that we haven’t been to yet.”

They reached the end of Sussex Drive at the landmark hotel, where they turned right onto Wellington Avenue. Traffic grew heavier as they moved toward downtown. The Suffering increased as they approached Parliament, but it was still lower than they were used to. They passed over the locks that connected the Rideau Canal to the Ottawa River.

The sun was on the verge of cresting the horizon.

Daea asked, “Where should I park? We don’t have a lot of time.”

“Anywhere you can.”

“Should I go through the gate and up the lawn?”

“No! The police would take issue with that.”

“I’m going to just stop in front. Arjun’s car is going to get towed, but whatever.”

The pair stopped the car on the street and jumped out of the driver’s side door. The rain had stopped, but puddles remained. The sun fought to break through the clouds. A lone morning jogger looked surprised to see the two kids climbing out. They paid him no mind, running through the gate into the Parliamentary grounds. They ran as fast as possible between the three massive, stone buildings, as rays of light poked from behind the East Block. The tall Peace Tower loomed overhead. The

windows to the observation deck were dark because of the blinds they had erected for the event.

“Do you have your pass?” Eli asked, reaching into his jacket pocket to retrieve a lanyard that held a plastic identification tag.

“It was in my backpack.”

“I saw it get scorched.”

“Yep, it got obliterated. Think they will let me in?”

“We’ll find out soon enough.” Rather than enter the main doors under the Peace Tower, he led them to the staff and visitors' side entrance. Since the tattered and dirty Childaar did not have bags to be searched, they moved straight to the front of the line, where the Parliamentary Protective Service staff told them that tours did not start until later in the day.

Eli explained that they were there for the Peace Tower’s comic display, at which point they were asked for their credentials. The Smart showed them his pass, and they waved him through, but before entering, he explained that his friend had forgotten hers. He used his Command on the Kinedaar to let her in without it. The Gift did not work, as they stated that everyone needed to have proper identification to be inside Parliament. The sun breached the clouds, pushing the shadows out of the doorway.

Daea asked if there was anything she could do and was told that they should have her information on the

computer and could print her a new one. She implored them to hurry as their situation was time-sensitive. They replied that it would take as long as it took. The sun was close to touching the Hardy.

A woman smiled and said that she'd found Daea's information. She pressed a few buttons, and the printer next to her came to life. The woman attached the identification card to a lanyard. She handed it to the girl, who snatched it out of her hands and rushed underneath the metal detector, where they found themselves in a vast, windowless hall.

"This is it. We're in," Eli said. He smiled and took a deep breath.

"Let's go," Daea yelled as she ran down the hall toward the room that they had set up to observe the Peace Tower's observation deck.

Eli followed her and said, "It's a good thing this place doesn't have windows, or we would be a goner for sure."

A man's deep voice commanded them to halt. The Childaar stopped in their tracks. They turned to see a burly security guard. His clothes were all black, and his bulletproof vest had the letters PPC-SPP written in bold letters across the front. He demanded to know what the kids were doing.

Eli told the man that they were there to work on the comic display. He gave the beaten and dirty kids a

skeptical look. They held out their IDs for him to inspect. He told them not to run in the halls but that they were free to go. He also said that someone was already up there working on it. The Smart asked for clarification and learned that a tall Scottish girl had already arrived to work on the display.

Excitement surged across their faces. The Childaar were not far from the tiny room they had been allocated in addition to the Peace Tower. They entered and quickly closed the door behind them.

“She’s here,” Eli said. “Did you hear that? She’s here.”

“Let’s see for ourselves,” Daea said, running to a table upon which sat their surveillance system. She turned on the monitor, and it took a few moments, but the outline of their old team leader materialized.

“It’s her,” Eli said.

Jesi-Sera stood in the darkened display room. She inspected the comic books and placed the ones she wanted to keep inside her designer satchel.

Eli pointed at the lever to release the mechanism she had designed to open the observation deck to the sun.

“Ready?”

“Let’s save our friend,” the small girl said, walking up to the switch.

“When you’re ready.”

Daea pulled down on the handle, but nothing happened. She pushed it up and down, but again to no avail. The blinds did not lift, nor did the barrier drop, as they had planned.

Eli scrutinized the monitor. He took a few moments and then said, "She's wedged something into that release mechanism." He pointed at an open box on the side of the screen.

"She found it?" Daea asked. "I knew I needed more time for the finishing touches."

Eli seemed to deflate as he watched Jesi-Sera going about her business. "What are we going to do now?"

Daea looked at her friend then back to the monitor. "I got this."

CHAPTER 21

“Daea, no!” Eli cried.

“I have to save her,” the small Hardy said.

“We’ll find another way.”

She shook her head. “We don’t know if we’ll get another opportunity.”

“I’ll go.”

“No. I have a better chance of success.” She took her friend’s hands in her own. “Besides, you have so many great things ahead of you.”

Tears welled in the Smart’s eyes as he gripped his friend’s hands.

Daea gave a squeeze, let go, and turned toward the hallway. With one last look over her shoulder, she said, “You’re going to be great, Eli.”

Tears streamed down the young boy’s face as he watched her round the corner to the Peace Tower’s narrow stairwell.

Taking the steps three at a time, Daea raced up the tall tower. When she arrived at the landing, she peeked around the corner into the darkened observation deck. Stands and shelves with Wonder Woman comics from all eras had been set in front of the covered windows. Signs asking that photographs not be taken interspersed each section. Jesi-

Sera's satchel, full of comics, perched on one of the window ledges.

The young woman's head snapped up, and anger and fury crossed her face when Daea entered the room. "What are ye doing?" Jesi-Sera asked. Her anger turned into surprise and then disbelief when she saw the small girl dart toward the release mechanism. With astonishing alacrity, the Charm sped to place herself between Daea and the device. A glowing aura surrounded her body. "Calm down. Let's talk about this."

Daea frowned. Her steps slowed and became unsure.

"Ye don't want to do this," the Charm explained. "I just need these books, and then I will wrap up a few remaining errands, then I will leave the city. I promise."

Daea stopped in front of her old team leader. She looked up at the young, Scottish woman. "Really?"

"Of course. I understand the risks I am taking, but I have my reasons."

"Axe took his Sleepining."

"What?"

"We caught him and Zavanna. They were exposed to the sun, and she didn't make it."

"What about Axe?"

"His name is Steve, and he's going to be alright. So, you don't need to stay a Sparklaar to save him."

"I have other things I need to do too."

“That’s not a good idea.”

Jesi-Sera crouched and placed her hands on the small Hardy’s shoulders. “Everything is going to be alright.” Her charming aura swirled around her beautiful blonde locks. Daea looked closer and saw that faint sparkles lightly speckled the previously pure glow.

Daea took a deep breath. “No!” She pushed the Charm, who was caught off guard and sent off-balance. The Hardy leaped at the device she had created and pulled a hairpin that Jesi-Sera had used to block the release mechanism. A wall of reinforced, corrugated metal smashed down in front of the doorway as the window blinds shot up. The Parliament buildings, downtown, the river, and Gatineau could all be seen as the sun’s bright rays hit the pair. They felt the warm embrace of the sun for the first time since their Awakenings.

“You fool!” Jesi-Sera screamed at the girl. “You’ve doomed us.”

“I’ve saved you,” Daea shouted back.

Using her Speedness, Jesi-Sera dashed to the heavy door, reached down, and tried to lift it. “Help me with this. There’s still time.”

“No,” Daea said, watching her friend struggle with the barrier.

The sparkles in Jesi-Sera’s aura flared and grew darker. She turned and gave the girl a hard look. Daea raised her

hands, stepping back in fear. The young woman moved into her Aikido pose and cornered the girl in the small space.

“I don’t want to fight,” Daea said.

Jesi-Sera threw a solid front punch at the Hardy, who moved into her tiger pose and dodged the strike. Jesi-Sera’s defensive choice in martial arts was not enough to land any significant blows, as the girl blocked and dodged the attacks.

Tears of rage rolled down the Charm’s face as she lost the energy to fight and slumped onto the ground. She rolled into a fetal position and began to weep. What started as tiny sobs ended with full-on wails.

Daea sat on the ground and rubbed her friend’s back. “It’s going to be OK.”

Jesi-Sera caught her breath long enough to say, “I know.”

The two sat for a good while in the sun’s morning rays. The young Scottish woman pulled herself up to sit against the wall. “That’s it, then?”

Daea nodded. “That’s it. How do you feel?”

“Better.” She looked out at the morning sky. The clouds had lightened and parted to reveal blue segments. “Can you feel your Gifts leaving?”

The small girl held up her hand and willed her claws, but nothing happened. “Looks like they’re gone.”

“Are you OK with that?”

“Sure. I’m just glad you are going to be alright.” Daea squeezed her friend’s hand.

“I will be.”

“I know.”

A commotion sounded from the other side of the door.

“They’re coming to let us out. We planned for that.”

Jesi-Sera stood. “I guess I should put these back.” She walked to her satchel and began to place the books back on the shelves.

“I’ll help,” Daea said as the two worked on the display. She looked at the copy of Wonder Woman #1 and then held it out. “You should keep this as a souvenir.”

The tall Scottish girl took and caressed the comic book. “That would be nice, but others should have the opportunity to see it. I don’t like the idea of using my Childaar privileges to enrich myself.” She placed the book on its prominent display in the middle of the observation deck. They got everything back into place by the time the building’s maintenance workers had lifted the door.

“Ready?” Daea asked, holding her hand out.

“Aye.”

Hand in hand, they left the sun-filled observation deck. Walking down the stairs, they turned to leave the giant stone doors of the Parliament’s Center Block, where

they made their way toward the ground's exit at the Centennial Flame.

"What are you going to do now?" Daea asked.

"I guess I'll go home to Scotland."

"What then?"

"Start uni, I suppose."

"That's a good idea."

Jesi-Sera gave her friend a curious look.

"I think I will try a little harder at school." Then in her best Scottish accent, Daea added, "Maybe I will go to uni one day too."

The older girl placed the back of her hand against the small girl's forehead. "Do ye have a fever?"

"It was silly of me to hate school so much."

"Are you going to stop eating candy too?"

The small girl's nose scrunched as she looked up at her friend. "Let's not get crazy."

They walked down the long pathway toward the street. When they arrived, Jesi-Sera took a knee and looked Daea straight in the eye. "Thank ye for everything. Ye are a good friend."

Daea gave Jesi-Sera a big hug. "You're welcome."

"I'm going that way." Jesi-Sera pointed.

"And I'm going that way," Daea replied, pointing in the opposite direction.

Standing, the tall girl took in their surroundings. "I guess this is where we part ways."

"Goodbye," Daea said with a wave.

"Goodbye."

The girl watched her friend walk down the street until she was no longer in sight. Daea turned, squinted as the sun hit her in the face, and walked into the light.

THE END



LEXICON

- Adoreness*** Gift. Level 1: Awe. Level 2: Fear. Level 3: Love. Only Charms have access to this Gift.
- Animalness*** Gift. Level 1: Whisperer. Level 2: Summon. Level 3: Possess. Only Sights have access to this Gift.
- Artifax*** Rare objects with special powers. Childaar policy requires that if found, they must be recovered and placed in museums for safekeeping.
- Awakening*** The time when a Kinedaar child becomes a young vampire. Newly Awakened Childaar develop physical and mental capacities that reach the upper limits of human achievement. Over time they develop Gifts. They also gain the ability to see and track the Suffering.
- Charm*** One of the six Childaar Dynasties. Charms have access to the Adoreness, Speedness, and Tuffness Gifts.
- Childaar*** A young vampire.
- Dynasty*** Each Childaar belongs to one of six Dynasties: Charm, Hardy, Quick, Sight, Sovereign, and Smart. A Childaar's Dynasty determines their Gifts.

Eldaar Vampires who were once Childaar but skipped their Sleepining. Eldaar receive Dark Gifts and are evil. They must drink the blood of Kinedaar for sustenance.

Ennui Kinedaar who were once young vampires but underwent the Sleepining. They tend to have a love for nature.

Formness Gift. Level 1: Claws. Level 2: Dirt Sleep. Level 3: Transform (bat, mist, wolf). Only Hardies have access to this Gift.

Gifts Young vampire powers: Adoreness, Animalness, Formness, Hideness, Mindness, Powness, Psiness, Seeingness, Speedness, Tuffness, Upness, and Wizardness. Each Gift has 3 levels. The longer a Childaar has a Gift, the stronger it becomes. For example, a Sovereign who develops Jump at ten years old will jump further than if he or she had developed it at sixteen.

Hardy One of the six Childaar Dynasties. Hardies have access to the Formness, Powness, and Tuffness Gifts.

Hideness Gift. Level 1: Unnoticeable. Level 2: Stranger. Level 3: Cloak. Quicks and Sights have access to this Gift.

- Kinedaar*** Normal humans. Adult Kinedaar rationalize away and forget supernatural activities. Child Kinedaar may see and remember such activities. The younger they are, the clearer their memories.
- Mindness*** Gift. Level 1: Suggest. Level 2: Command. Level 3: Memory. Smarts and Sovereigns have access to this Gift.
- Missions*** An encounter in which young vampires attempt to ease a buildup of Suffering. There are two kinds of missions: Stomps and Operations.
- Operation*** A mission in which a situation must be resolved in order to ease the Suffering. Young vampires must be careful to not draw unwanted attention during an Operation.
- Orakles*** A group of young vampires with Scry who organize Childaar around the world by assigning them to teams and placing them in cities.
- Powness*** Gift. All Childaar have access to basic Powness, which gives them Brawn. Level 1: Might. Level 2: Impact. Level 3: Onslaught. Hardies and Sovereigns have access to this Gift.
- Psiness*** Gift. Level 1: Shield. Level 2: Telekinesis. Level 3: Blast. Only Quicks have access to this Gift.

- Quick** One of the six Childaar Dynasties. Sights have access to the Hideness, Psiness, and Speedness Gifts.
- Rogue** Young vampires who forsake the social structure set up by the Orakles. If found, Childaar are expected to bring them back into the fold or force them into an early Sleepining.
- Seeingness** Gift. All Childaar have access to basic Seeingness, which gives them Spot. Level 1: Perception. Level 2: Telepathy. Level 3: Scry. Sights and Smarts have access to this Gift.
- Sight** One of the six Childaar Dynasties. Sights have access to the Animalness, Hideness, and Seeingness Gifts.
- Sleepining** The process of changing from Childaar to Ennui through prolonged exposure to the sun. Childaar must have their Sleepining before their eighteenth birthday or risk becoming Eldaar.
- Smart** One of the six Childaar Dynasties. Smarts have access to the Mindness, Seeingness, and Wizardness Gifts.
- Sovereign** One of the six Childaar Dynasties. Sovereigns have access to the Mindness, Powness, and Upness Gifts.

Sparklaar A vampiric stage between Childaar and Eldaar. Should they wait too long before exposing themselves to the sun, their Kinedaar lives will suffer from ill-health.

Speedness Gift. All Childaar have access to basic Speedness, which gives them Dash. Level 1: Rapid. Level 2: Swift. Level 3: Bolt. Quicks and Charms have access to this Gift.

Stomps A mission in which young vampires fight monsters to ease the Suffering. The general rule is that the rarer a monster, the more dangerous it is.

The Suffering An omnipresent force that manifests as a gray and black, wispy, swirling mist or fog. Only Childaar can see the Suffering. Locations such as museums, galleries, libraries, and schools are mostly safe from it. Furthermore, the friends and family of Childaar also have protections.

Thraldaar A vampire that is created by an Eldaar. While not as powerful as their sires, they too have Dark Gifts and derangements.

Tomes Handwritten books of the finest materials used to store vampire lore. They fade and become forgotten over time.

Tuffness

Gift. All Childaar have access to basic Tuffness, which gives them Sturdy. Level 1: Durable. Level 2: Stalwart. Level 3: Indomitable. Hardies and Charms have access to this Gift.

Upness

Gift. Level 1: Jump. Level 2: Glide. Level 3: Fly. Only Sovereigns have access to this Gift.

Wizardness

Gift. Level 1: Fire. Level 2: Illusion. Level 3: Time. Only Smarts have access to this Gift.