

NEBULA ANDRA:
SYNCHRONICITY ABYSS

CHAPTER 1 EXCERPT

BOOK BY NIKI BOND

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CHAPTER 1
LOOKING FOR YOU IN THE SKY

I'm sorry, Anya. Please don't look for me.

Even now, his last words echoed repeatedly in her head. He'd been there her whole life, but now, no matter how hard she tried to reach him, he wouldn't reply.

Though they were friends, she didn't know him through class or around town. In fact, she'd never met him in person. For as long as she could remember, he'd been a voice in her head—a voice that'd grown up with her and helped her in times of need. Yet, somehow, she knew nothing about him except the name she'd given him: Raymond.

Well, that and a nagging suspicion that his disappearance held untold tales of danger.

She ran her fingers over the white petals of a snowdrop in a vase of flowers, watching its hue glimmer with the cold air despite the day's fading light. With a pluck away from its family, Anya combined it with a few others and offered it to a customer as she pushed her thoughts aside. "I hope it brings you luck, Alaina," she said, handing the flower over.

"Mm... Thank you again, Anya," the woman said. She paid a few large chondrules before returning to her daily business with a wave.

"Hey, Anya," a familiar voice spoke up. It was Simon, her employer at the small flower shop in Egeria. Though he had a balding head, he kept a grin on his middle-aged face around customers, only allowing it to relax when they'd all left. She turned her teal eyes to him as he continued, "Do you want your break today?"

Anya shook her head, her light blue ponytail swishing back and forth. "Thank you, but no. It's my last day, so I might as well keep working."

"You've been working pretty hard the last few months," he pointed out, taking a break from his daily paperwork. "What are you going to do once you leave here? You're not out of school, are you?"

"Not yet, but... There's just something I have to do," she answered as she moved the vase to the windowsill. She stared out at the snowy streets to watch people walking about. Despite the cold weather, sailors still worked on loading up their ships and couples held hands as they made their way towards dinner. Not one stopped to pay notice to the flower shop, or even to rest on a bench as they pulled their jackets tight around them. None of them knew or cared what happened outside of their own small world...

"That doesn't answer my question."

Anya turned to him, forcing a smile across her pale face. Her worries vanished before the one person around who treated her like a normal girl—almost as if they'd never existed. "I'm going on a journey."

"Traveling? Are you saving up for a boat trip, then?"

"No... There's no way I could afford something like that. I'll just have to walk."

"What's so important that you have to leave?"

Simon wouldn't understand—she knew that. He could live in the same place, content his whole life, as long as his friends and family stayed nearby. Humble, blissful... but for her, that life of simple ignorance had become a hole that threatened to devour her.

"I have to find someone," she said. "A precious friend of mine..."

"A friend? Is it that Edwin guy you've mentioned before?"

A true grin met her lips this time as she recalled her childhood friend. A few months younger than Anya, Edwin always stayed studious in his training to become a mage. She stifled a laugh as she remembered him running to greet her one day in the forest, exhausted after getting lost. Two years ago, though, his parents had sent him to a prestigious academy to improve his education, and she hadn't seen him since. However, he never failed to send letters once a month and packages bearing gifts for important

holidays. “No. He’s studying in Eunomia... I’ll probably stop by and visit him, though; Eunomia’s not that far.”

“Not that far? Are you crazy? If I were you, I’d just send him a postcard.”

Before she could argue, the bell above the door rung as another customer entered. She found a young, well-dressed man standing there. From his hurried gait and the smell of rich cologne, Anya guessed that he needed to impress a girl. “Welcome,” she spoke up, walking over to greet him. “What can I get for you today?”

“I’m looking for a bouquet,” he said, his tone curt.

“Any flower preference?”

In response, he stared at her like she’d grown another head. “I don’t know—aren’t you the florist?”

Of course he didn’t know. They never knew. “What’s the occasion?”

“I have an important date coming up.”

Just as she’d thought... With a skip back, she twirled around and said, “All right, I’ll set something up for you. Just give me a moment... Do you want a vase or no?”

“No.”

Pulling out a flutter of tissue paper to wrap the flowers in, the young woman waltzed around the store to prepare the request. She parted the silence with a melody just barely allowed to leave her lips, her fingers adding flowers to her dance as she passed. Pink crocuses for the prelude of spring, Venus’ looking-glass dashing the array with purple for the beauty that emerges from shards of love, white orchids for a pure and polished beauty... With a note of azaleas for passion, she coupled them up until she’d formed an arrangement. She then rolled them up in paper, and, after adding a ribbon to finish the symphony, presented the bouquet to the customer. “How’s this?”

“That’s fine...” He allowed his words to draw out as he spoke now, calming.

With a sly grin, she informed him, “That’ll be thirty chondrules.”

He produced the money before thanking her and leaving with the bouquet. She waved, though a smirk lingered on her face.

“That song...” Simon said as the door closed, studying the girl with his lips tight. “I’ve heard you sing others like that before—do you major in Cancer?”

“Yes,” she admitted. Cancer, the nebula of sound—with it, people could control sound waves and channel magic through songs. As one who majored in Cancer, Anya had the ability to use it as naturally as she could walk. “I just use them to calm down the rude customers a little,” she explained.

“Is your minor Taurus?” Taurus was the nebula of earth. Considering Anya supplied many of the fresh flowers for the store, she found his guess logical enough.

“No,” Anya answered, not offering to divulge too much information. Instead, she busied herself with the flowers as she returned to her thoughts. She quietly sang another song, though this time a different song. Soothing, soft, yet heroic... Perhaps Raymond would hear it and finally talk to her again...

However, the end of the tune only brought disappointment; she had failed.

He must be a Gemini major, she thought. Gemini was the nebula of the mind; Anya minored in it, which allowed her to use telepathy and telekinesis without learning formal spells. The fact that he held a better control over the nebulae meant one of two things: either he’d become an exceptionally powerful mage or he majored in it. Even after seventeen years, she had no idea what nebulae he used. *Well, I guess it hasn’t been that long. How old was I when we first started talking?* she pondered. *I was old enough to speak, but I didn’t know how to use my nebulae back then...* A small smile formed on her face as she recollected their first meeting. She closed her eyes, replaying the scene in her head.

Only a child at the time, she had been crying alone in her room, holding a bruised arm. She spent much of her time alone back then, yearning for a friend, or at least someone to talk to... someone that wouldn’t call her cursed.

“*Is someone crying?*” a young boy’s voice asked.

“Who’s there...?” little Anya said aloud, looking around. As hard as she looked, she saw no one in sight, though the shadows of her room seemed foreboding enough to hide monsters. “Are you hiding...?”

“*This is... telepathy...*”

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“Terey...?”

“Telepathy... We’re talking with our minds... I think...”

Try as hard as she might, she couldn’t understand. Was he even real?

“Why were you crying?”

Still, the voice in her head kept talking... He sounded about her age, though she didn’t recognize him... Even so, maybe, just this once, she could talk to someone who would listen and understand... “Mommy was scary again today...”

“Scary?”

“Yeah... People say she’s in...insane...”

“In...insane...? What’s that...?”

“I’m not sure... b-but she gets scary...”

“What’s scary...?”

“Mommy is, ‘cause she yells and throws things and...and it hurts...” She hugged her knees as she stared down at her plain covers. She’d already given up on her attempt to find him. Perhaps she’d lost the will to look at the reminder of her fears. “I don’t like it...”

“Ah... Then, people here are scary, too,” the voice spoke. *“But you’re not...”*

Anya blinked, her head lifting as hope lit up somewhere deep inside of her. Wiping her eyes, she replied, “Neither are you...” She had found someone who understood, who might have something in common with her. She didn’t know where he’d come from, but it didn’t matter anymore. “I’m Anya... What’s your name?”

“My name...?”

“Yeah! What’s your name?”

“...I...I don’t have a name...”

“You don’t have a name...?” The young girl thought for only a few seconds before declaring, “Then I’ll give you one!”

“Eh? But...”

“Everyone has names. And you’re my friend, so I wanna give you a name!”

“Friend...?”

“Yep! Let’s see...” She hummed thoughtfully, her childish mind trying to come up with a simple name. Staring out at the bright sky, she finally decided. “Okay, I’ve got it!” she called out, jumping out of bed. Full of energy, she pointed at a shadow by her dresser, pretending he’d hidden in it. “Your name’s Raymond!”

“Ray...mond... My name’s... Raymond...”

“Yep! It’s nice to meet you, Raymond!”

“M-mm...”

They’d spent hours talking that day, about subjects Anya couldn’t begin to remember, until Raymond had to leave. She vaguely recalled begging him to stay; she had no other friends, and she feared never having such company again... Even after succeeding in that battle, though, she ended up falling asleep on him. Still, the next night, his voice had returned like a sweet, familiar tune.

She’d continued to speak to him almost every day since. He always showed up when she grew angry or sad, and his gentle tone calmed her with ease every time. Usually they spoke at night, after they’d finished their daily duties. Many times, she stayed up late just to talk to him a little while longer, wishing the next day would never come.

“Say, Ray,” she once said during their nightly talks. By then, she’d learned how to control her inherent powers in Gemini. She sat on her worn out bed with a single beaten pillow propped up against the wall to lean on. As she talked to him, she stared out her window at the empty darkness that held streets during the daylight and listened to crickets chirping in a wild song. *“What’s your name?”*

“You know my name,” he answered. *“You gave it to me.”*

“I mean your real name... When we were kids, you said you didn’t have one, but... that’s not the case, is it? What do people call you in person?”

He gave a long pause, and Anya almost thought he’d left. However, the light tug of his Gemini

loitered in her mind, assuring her of his presence. She'd grown so accustomed to his Gemini by then—almost like a glow that mirrored her own nebula. Finally, he answered, *“My name is Raymond. I have no other name.”*

“You're lying...”

He never replied to her statement. Instead, he changed the subject, asking about her grandparents. She'd let it drop, but as time passed, his true identity continued to nag at her... All the gaps in his life began to pile up as she discovered that she knew less and less about the one friend who'd always been there for her. More still, she yearned to meet him in person, to finally see his face... Yet every time she tried to bring up his personal life, he either lied or avoided it.

She refused to give up, though. Just the past winter, on Ruarc's Day, she had tried again.

“Did you get anything good today?” he asked, knowing that the holiday celebrated the hero for which it was named. Again, she spoke to him in her room that night; he'd kept himself closed off during the day.

“Mm... Edwin sent me a book on flowers. It has some wonderful information in it; I already have some ideas for what to plant next,” she told him. *“What about you? Did you get anything this year?”*

“No.” She expected that answer; he gave the same reply every year. He once said that he lived with Gentilians—perhaps in that area, where few celebrated it, though she knew he'd moved since then. *“It's all right, though,”* he assured her. *“I'm always happy just hearing about what you received. It's a surprise for me, too.”*

Allowing the conversation to fall into silence, Anya clutched her blankets and took a deep breath. She had to try, even if he fought and refused... *“...Hey, Ray...”*

“What is it?”

“I... want to meet you,” she said. *“In person.”*

He paused, a trait she'd come to realize meant he refused to reveal some secret. She waited as unease crept up on her, though from what, she couldn't be certain. *“That's impossible,”* he eventually said. *“You and I are too far apart.”*

“How can you be so sure? We've been talking through telepathy since we were kids, so...”

“You live in a place where the snow sticks for a long time, correct?” He gave a small pause, but didn't wait for or expect an answer. *“Here, it only snows in the winter, and the snow doesn't stick for more than a few weeks. It never piles as high as you've described, nor does it pass into spring,”* he explained. *“I've never even seen most of the flowers you've mentioned, such as crocuses and snowdrops; the climate here doesn't allow for them... We're truly too far apart...”*

She frowned. Somehow, he'd managed to tell her everything and nothing at the same time. *“Where are you exactly?”*

“It doesn't matter.”

“We can meet up half way,” she insisted.

“I can't. I have school. As do you—you start up again in a little over a week, correct?”

“Then what about in the summer?”

“I graduate this year,” Raymond replied. *“My life will be even busier in the summer. I cannot leave.”*

Something pressed on Anya's mind, but she couldn't quite tell what. A strong thought, perhaps, coming from him, but he repressed it so that she wouldn't be able to hear.

“Ray, what are you thinking?”

“It's nothing.”

“There's something more, isn't there?” For some reason, her heart fluttered in worry. Paranoia, perhaps? Even so, she couldn't ignore it...

“No, there isn't. The simple truth is that meeting is impossible.”

“If you can't come to me, then I'll just go to you.”

“You can't,” he snapped, now harsh and assertive, almost cold... Had he ever sounded like that before? It didn't seem right, not for him...

“Why not...?”

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“*You just can’t...*” After an awkward silence, he broke it by saying, “*I should go.*”

“*Ray...!*”

“*I’m sorry, Anya. Please don’t look for me.*” And with that, he cut the connection.

No matter how hard she tried to think of the other times they’d talked, the happy times they’d spent together, her thoughts always returned to that moment. More still, the same worry from that time continued to haunt her. *I have to find him*, she thought. *He could be in trouble...*

“It’s about time to close up,” Simon said, yanking Anya’s attention back to reality. “Why don’t you head home after I get your final pay together?”

“Are you sure? I can help...”

“There’s no need. Just watch the front for a moment longer.” He went to a back room, leaving Anya alone. She walked behind the counter, storing the day’s profits in a small lockbox.

After she secured the box, she began gathering her belongings until she had all of them in her bag. She then donned her coat to preempt the bitter chill she would soon meet outside before recovering two holsters, each housing a trusted crescent blade. She attached them to her belt, letting out a sigh. With how late it had become, she knew she could encounter monsters on the way. As she slung her bag over her shoulder, Simon returned with a small pouch.

“Here you go,” he said as he walked over and handed it to her. “Looks like I’ll have to find another flower source now.”

Anya smiled. “You’ll be fine. You managed before I came.”

“Want any flowers for the road? You can have one free of charge,” her manager offered.

A flower for the road... or perhaps... Gazing over the flowers, she recalled their meanings. Her eyes finally fell on blue petals. *Yes... That’s perfect...* She glided over and picked up the flower they belonged to. The sweet scent filled her nose as she sniffed it, a small smile lighting her face. “I’ll take this one.”

“An iris? Any reason why?”

“An iris symbolizes hope and faith... It’s also a way to say, ‘your friendship means so much to me,’” she explained. “I want to give this flower to Ray...”

“Is that the friend you’re going to see? It won’t survive on a long trip,” Simon pointed out.

“Not normally, but...” She hesitated, a sheepish grin growing on her face. “You use Taurus and Scorpio, right?” Scorpio was the nebula of the body; it could, theoretically, heal any living thing, though that also depended on the skill and stamina of the user as well as the type of wound. “You could increase its life.”

“Only so much... You’ll need light and water for it, too,” he pointed out.

“I’ll find some, then. Please, Simon...”

The man sighed. “Well, all right... As a parting gift, then.” He held out a hand for the flower, and she gave it to him. Clutching it in both hands, he closed his eyes. His nebulae thickened enough to show a tint of brown and dark red mist mixing, melting into the flower and making it look more vibrant than ever. Finished, he opened his eyes and offered it to the young woman. “That’ll help it last a little while, but you’ll have to keep up with its health if you want to give it to your friend.”

She nodded as she took it off his hands. “I know. Thank you, Simon.” While she spoke, she took a small tube to protect the flower with and placed it inside before storing it in her bag. “I’ll bring some more flowers when I return to Vesta.”

“I look forward to it. Be careful on your way home, then,” he said. “And good luck finding your friend.”

“Thank you.” With one last wave, she opened the door and stepped out into the snow. She inhaled a deep breath of salty air, holding it in to savor her last evening in the city she knew so well. With no idea when she’d return to this port, she took her time on her trek home, staring at all the houses as she passed by.

As she left the city limits, she glanced back once more. Anxiety built up within her, pulsing relentlessly. The world seemed so huge, everything so far away... Yet she chose to travel into it—into an unknown world ruled by a tyrant. She’d heard stories of people hanged and beheaded for many things considered “offensive” to their current ruler or the nobles of towns. *I’ll just have to be careful. I don’t want*

to get involved in politics anyway, she thought, shoving her annoyance away.

Reaching into her bag, she pulled out a small, gold device—a smooth stone that fit in the palm of her hand. With the press of a button at its center, a faint glow lit her way. She pulled her coat tighter around herself and began walking away from the city, towards home.

Luckily, she made it down the road without running into any monsters. She soon saw a familiar large mansion outshining the rest of the small houses in the village. She'd snuck inside once to visit her friend that lived there. *Edwin... I should've gotten a flower for him as well*, Anya realized.

Continuing into the dark village, she set her path straight for her house. She and Edwin had grown up in the quiet town of Vesta. Though small, she loved every bit of it. She enjoyed the snow, even if it lasted a long time, and she enjoyed traveling to the forest nearby. The forest held her garden, which she took care of every day. It also held the ruined city of Pallas, which she used to explore all the time.

She wondered if she'd come back someday, after finding Ray. She hoped to bring him back with her; she wanted him to see all the things she'd only told him about before. The cobblestone town square, the announcement podium they used during events, the smell of freshly baked bread from her favorite shop... and of course, the flowers in the spring and the height the snow reached during the winter. Though she didn't know his face, she could imagine him staring in wonder at all of it before asking a million questions with the curiosity of a kitten.

Once she finally reached her house, she opened the door and entered before easing it closed behind her. Taking off her boots, she left them at the front and snuck through the house, careful not to wake her grandparents. When she'd made it inside her room, she set her bag and weapons down, sighing as she sat on the bed. She didn't really want to sleep—she found herself far too restless. However, she knew that she would need her energy for the next day. Grabbing her book on flowers in the hopes of tiring her eyes, she curled up in bed and started reading.

Before she knew it, Anya found herself waking up to a new morning. She stared out through the frosted window at the dull village before realization struck: her journey started today. Jumping up, she snatched up the things she wanted to take—the sooner she set out, the better. She didn't know if she could make it to the mountains by nightfall, but she didn't want to camp alone in the forest if she could help it. As she gathered up all the money she'd made, she stuffed it into one of her belt pouches and then added a change of clothes for the warmer southern weather to her bag as well. After running a brush through her hair, she pulled it up into two braids on the side, leading into a ponytail that would be out of her way and stay in place. Double-checking her travel bag, she found the familiar gold stone that would light her way. She then slung her bag over her shoulder and left the room, making her way to the kitchen.

She found her grandmother Rosaline there making breakfast. Hearing footsteps, the older woman turned her head towards her granddaughter.

“Good morning,” Anya greeted in a quiet tone. She'd already told her grandparents that she'd be leaving today, though she doubted they cared. After all, how could they love the girl that they believed the cause of their only daughter's insanity?

“Breakfast is almost ready,” Rosaline replied, her voice as stern and cold as usual. “Tell Aden.”

Anya set her bag down by her chair before walking into the living room. Her grandfather sat on the couch, reading a book. “Breakfast is almost ready,” the teenager told him.

“I'll be there in a minute,” he grumbled, only half listening. Anya returned to the kitchen and began setting the table.

She and her grandparents had reached a silent agreement. They never really talked except to communicate needs like food. Anya could live here, but she knew she had to help around the house. She often took it upon herself to do things she knew would be difficult for them. She never truly felt welcome here, but nonetheless, she worried about how her grandparents would get by without her around.

Rosaline finished cooking and served breakfast—eggs and goat milk, provided by the nearby ranch. As she placed it on the table, Aden entered the room. The three sat at the table and began eating without a word for most of the meal.

Eventually, Aden said to his granddaughter “So, you're leaving today, right?”

“Yes. Just after breakfast.”

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His eyes glazed over her bag. “That all you’re taking?”

“That and a few snacks to get me to the mountains. There should be a mining town there.”

He surprised Anya when he continued talking. “You’re a Cancer major, aren’t you?” he asked. “Don’t you have an instrument?”

“The kantele I was using is a school instrument, so I had to return it last Friday,” she explained. Her smile drooped a little as she thought of the long journey without an instrument. *I’ll just have to rely on my voice instead*, Anya thought to herself.

“Mm,” came his only reply as he continued eating. The three soon finished breakfast—Anya immediately stood, taking the plates without a word. She began cleaning the dishes as Aden retreated to a back storage room.

Rosaline, on the other hand, followed Anya into the kitchen. She silently opened a cabinet and pulled out a small bag. She set it next to Anya, on the counter. “Sandwiches, a bottle of water, and a few cookies,” she said simply, giving her granddaughter an almost worried look before shuffling out of the room. Left alone, Anya watched, astonished. She then smiled; she’d lived with them for seventeen years, thinking that they hated her... but it’s hard to live with someone for so long with no emotional bonds forming, even if it isn’t spoken... She finished the dishes and took the bag, placing it in her own to take with her.

“Anya,” her grandfather’s voice sounded. She looked up—he now stood in the doorway holding an antique kantele. “This belongs to you.”

“Eh?” Anya blinked, confused by his words. “I don’t have a kantele...” Regardless, she took it and stared in wonder at it. Like all kanteles, it was carved in a long, obtuse triangle with the farthest points reaching to about the length of one arm. Unlike most, though, a black shoulder strap connected the points, making it possible to play while standing. Ten strings itched to be played. Below them, a small hole sat near the center, yearning for music, as only the darkness of the backboard emitted from it now. The wood used for it was dark, perhaps black walnut. Flowers with a worn, childish grace adorned its surface, a leaf on the knot on the top corner beckoning a melody in the back of her mind.

Aden’s hands now free, he opened the bag that it came from and retrieved a letter—an old letter, from the looks of it—and offered it to her.

Now setting the kantele down on the table, Anya took the letter. Though still sealed, on the front it read: “Anya Tamie Ciran.” Was it from her grandparents? Surely it couldn’t have been from her mother—she had lost her sanity the day she’d given birth. As for her father, Anya had never even met him, so he also seemed like an unlikely candidate. “Who is this from...?” she asked.

Nothing could’ve prepared her for the answer. “This letter and kantele have been passed down in our family for generations,” Aden explained. “The crescent blades as well. Misty, your mother... never knew about the kantele or the letter.”

“But then how can it be addressed to me...?”

“It was written by an ancestor of ours—Claire Ciran.” Anya blinked, knowing that name. She was a well-known Virgo—which was the nebula of time. With it, one could peer into the future. “Per her request, the letter is never passed down until after the next generation has already named their children. Though for you, we were going to wait until your eighteenth birthday...”

Anya stared at the letter again. Claire Ciran had addressed it to *her*, almost three hundred years in the past... but why? She considered what little she knew about that time. Everyone knew Claire for being the Virgo that had recovered Ruarc’s artifacts after he’d died and her premonition about the rebirth of him and the dark lord... *What does any of that have to do with me, though?* Anya wondered.

Her grandfather turned away. “You should get going if you want to reach the mountains by night,” he said before leaving the room. Knowing the truth in his words, Anya decided to read the letter on the way. She then placed her kantele in its case and grabbed both bags and the letter before trekking towards the entrance. There, she put on her jacket, gloves, and boots. Finally, she slung both the kantele case and her traveling bag over her shoulder, keeping the letter in her hands.

Anya stopped in the doorway and stared back into the shadows of the house. Both of her grandparents had gotten so old... Would they be all right without her? Or perhaps she was the one who would be lost without them...

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She shook her head, forcing herself to turn away from the house she'd grown up in. "Goodbye, Grandmother, Grandfather..." she murmured, half wishing they could hear.

With a heavy breath, she stepped out of the house and began her journey west. She glimpsed back at the houses as she reached the edge of town; she knew the names and faces of the people who lived in each of them, but not on a friendly level. Perhaps they thrilled at the idea of her leaving for good. Even if she hated their stupidity, their assumptions... her heart couldn't help but fall as she left behind all that she'd ever known to take her first steps into an uncertain future.

"Even if everyone hates you, even if they hurt you... I'll always be here; I'll always protect you," Raymond had once told her. *"You don't have to rely on anyone else..."*

You said that, but... Where are you now, Ray? Didn't you promise that you'd always be here? You promised, so why...

She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. Her courage renewed, she turned away and set off towards the snowy forest. *Goodbye, Vesta.*

Upon entering the forest, she followed a beaten trail. Snow still clung to the ground all around, despite the coming of spring. Pink flowers managed to poke out of the white blanket along the sides of the path, and the sight summoned a light smile to her face. Turning her vision ahead, she stared up at the trees, the green leaves basking in the sunlight above. They cast shadows over her path, cloaking the life that grew below.

She increased her pace through the snow, allowing the rustle of leaves to sooth her mind. Looking up, she noticed a small bird in the trees. It chirped a few times before flying off, perhaps to find food. A few more birds chimed in unison, forming a song. Slowly and steadily, their voices rose as more and more joined in.

No, not a song, Anya realized as the calls grew chaotic—a warning. Following her epiphany, a much louder call echoed through the trees. Her hands shot back to her crescent blades, and she hastily readied them. Her hand curled over a hilt that sat snugly in the center of its design, the weapon itself about the length of a dagger. The metal emerged from both sides of the grip before curving up over her hand in a half-oval shape. With a slit on the front of each blade, she'd always wondered if she could catch a sword if angled right—though perhaps she'd be safer not venturing to find out.

A cockatrice sauntered out of the brush. Quite large in size, it stood on thin, avian legs with sharp talons rooted deeply in the ground. Its head and beak matched the bird-like image. Over the course of its body, though, it faded from bird to lizard, ending in a row of feathers before gray scales took over to cover the wings and tail. Caging the air within her throat, Anya kept perfectly still, hoping it wouldn't notice her.

Its gaze shifted to her, holding hers in a sharp glare. Its feathers ruffled, and it shifted between its two feet. Anya glared back, preparing herself for any attack. In the side of her vision, she caught a glimpse of a sepia mist beginning to engulf the area—a sub-nebula of Taurus.

Anya dove away, moving behind a tree. Glancing back at the place she previously stood, she noticed the ground turning to stone from the monster's power. *That was close,* she thought.

The cockatrice rushed at her, lunging at her with its beak. Anya dodged out of the way, swinging her crescent blade out just in time to catch its belly. The creature screeched in pain as it pulled away, bleeding. With a moment's rest, she turned to it and waited for it to move again.

It lashed a sharp gaze at her before charging forward a second time. Anya darted to the side again, attempting the same move. However, her heart sunk as her right foot hit a hard patch of ground. Before she knew it, she slid on the ice and slammed down on her side. She winced, forcing herself up into a sitting position as her head spun. Biting her lip, she forced herself to concentrate as her gaze rose up to her enemy once more.

She found the creature almost on top of her, its sharpened beak diving towards her. Unable to move in time, she held her arms up defensively.

The cockatrice shrieked, and a sudden warmth surrounded Anya like a blanket. She opened her eyes and lowered her arms, only to find the beast on fire. She watched as a large spinning object struck the creature, going straight through its neck and around in an arc before returning to where it'd come from.

A young man, a little older than Anya, held up his hand to catch the weapon, spinning it around his

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body as he brought it to a stop. Once the motion ceased, she recognized the weapon as a boomerang glaive; its center fit into the palm of his hand with five blades protruding to form a circular pattern. With no apparent movement from him, the blades retreated into the weapon.

Walking over to Anya, he offered her his free hand. “You okay?” he asked, a grin on his face. His skin was darker than hers, though not from a tan. A foreigner, perhaps? He had dark green hair pulled back in a low ponytail, and he wore a robin egg green shirt with white sleeves cuffed at into dark gray at mid-calf. Three gold buttons brought the center loosely together, revealing a light grey shirt underneath. Over it, he wore a viridian vest, stitched together down the middle to tie the strange outfit together.

“Yes...” Moving her right crescent blade to her left hand, she took his help. Once on her feet, she said, “Thank you.”

“No problem. I couldn’t just leave a cute girl like you to die,” he replied, his voice light and flirtatious.

Anya grimaced at the tone, wondering if he meant to charm her. Stubborn, she said full of disdainful confidence, “I’m sure I would’ve been fine. I can fight on my own.”

“My bad. Maybe I should’ve let it break your arm, then,” he joked. “Name’s Zain.”

She grinned despite herself. “Anya.”

“Ohh, that’s a pretty name!”

Anya sighed, shaking her head and brushing the snow and dirt from her clothes. “Thank you, Zain, but I’d prefer it if you stopped with the silly compliments...”

“Silly? Wait, how is complimenting a girl on her looks silly?”

She pulled a cloth out of one of her belt pouches, using it to clean the blood off her blades. “I’d rather be complimented for my accomplishments. People are more than what’s on the outside.”

“That may be, but you can tell a lot about a person from the outside,” the young man argued.

“Like what?”

“Well, for instance...” He ran his eyes up and down her body, fully taking her in. Once ready, he began, “You work out a bit—probably from fighting, considering your skill with such an odd weapon. You’re a bit stubborn—you don’t like to give in to people too easily. But not so stubborn that you won’t find a way to escape if you know you can’t win—either that or you just have a *really* good healer. You may say you don’t care about your looks, but you do—after all, that hairstyle must’ve taken some time. Perhaps you’ve learned to care so you’ll fit in a little better. You’re planning a long trip, but you haven’t gone far yet and know little about what’s out there, so I’d guess that you’re from Vesta. Looks like a small house with little money. And...” He grabbed her right hand and held it up so her palm showed. He ran a finger over her calloused ones, though his eyes never left hers. “You play a string instrument... You’re a Cancer, right?”

Anya gaped, taken aback. She drew her hand away. “Y-yes...”

His hazel eyes fell on the black bag hanging over her shoulder. “That must be the instrument. Mind if I see?”

“Ah, sure...” Pulling the bag around, she took out the instrument out for him to see.

“Oh, that one’s nice! I’ve never seen anything quite like it, though.”

“It’s a kantele,” Anya told him. She played a few notes on it, only to find it out of tune. Finding a zither pin in the bag’s front pouch, she began adjusting the strings while Zain watched. “What about you? That fire’s Aries, right?”

“Yep. It’s my minor,” he explained. “I major in Leo.”

Light and fire, Anya noted. Once satisfied with the kantele’s sound, she returned the instrument to its case. “Well, I think we’ve spent more than enough time talking. You must be freezing in those clothes,” she said. Though he wore layers, the cloth for all of them appeared thin...

“Yeaahhh, a bit. Wanna keep me warm?” She threw him a glare for an answer, making him laugh. “I’m kidding, I’m kidding.”

The Cancer sighed, letting his jokes slide. Besides, in a strange way, she found his carefree attitude refreshing... though she wasn’t about to feed his flirtatiousness. “If you’re going to Vesta, it’s straight down the path. Egeria’s just a little bit past it.”

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"I'm not going to either of those places," he replied. "I'm looking for the town of Pallas."

The girl blinked. "Pallas...? Why do you want to go there...?"

"Sightseeing?"

"...Sightseeing. Really." Not impressed with that answer, she shrugged and turned away. "Sorry, you're going to have to give me a better one than that."

"All right, all right, I'll be serious," he said, and she stopped to give him another chance. "I'd like to know what happened there."

"Why?"

"Research," Zain answered. "That okay?"

"What sort of research?"

"On ruins and things that happened in the past. The bandits blamed for it pleaded innocent, right?" he said. "I'd like to take a crack at the mystery and see if they really did it or not."

The past... Her mind flickered to her childhood friend Edwin again. He'd always been obsessed with history, and he, too, had studied Pallas many times for that same purpose. *How can I refuse that...?* she thought as she gave Zain a small nod. "Mm... Pallas is this way, then." With that, she led the way off the path and further into the woods.

As they walked, Anya studied her companion closer out of the corner of her eye. His long, handsome face stayed relaxed, not at all worried by the prospect of another attack. She noted that two belts hung at his waist—a brown one for housing pouches and a dark blue one with a gold pattern that he clamped his weapon onto. From the second, crystal droplets hung like frozen tears, clinking together musically as he walked. His flared, viridian pants split down the front seams, and a gold cord held the two sides in check at the bottom. Beneath those, he wore yet another pair, this time white in color, tucked into the tops of his leather boots, tied at the top with a blue chord and ruby pendant. As a final touch, a white hooded cape covered it all, easily hiding most of his left arm as it fell down just past his hands. His right remained unhampered by cloth, freedom graced by two ruby sun clasps bound together by blue straps that wrapped around his back. Their positioning over his left chest and right shoulder proclaimed the asymmetry as intentional rather than needing adjustment. Some might have found the appearance roughish or dashing. Anya, on the other hand, wondered if he knew how to dress himself properly.

Noticing her, Zain threw a cocky grin her way. Her cheeks grew hot as she tore her eyes away and focused on her makeshift path instead. She pushed a low branch out of the way, holding it until he took over before she moved out of the way, allowing him to see into the clearing that lay before them.

The forest gave way to old buildings of various shapes and sizes, all partially destroyed by the fires that once ravaged them. The buildings, the streets... even a small fountain all now laid buried under a blanket of snow. Still, bulges in it revealed fallen rubble.

"So this is Pallas...?" Zain asked as he walked between old houses lining the frozen street. "It was destroyed almost eighteen years ago, right?"

"Yes... On Mithuna 28th."

"You know the exact day?" He glanced back at her, surprised.

"Yes," the girl answered. "I was born that day, after all..."

"You were born that day...?" Frowning, he leaned against a broken wall. "Are you from here, then?"

"Yes..."

"Mind telling me what you know?"

"Bandits raided, killed everyone they could..." Staring out across the broken village, she sighed. "They killed my father and turned my mother insane... And yet, somehow, I survived..."

"Turned her insane...?"

"Yeah... They used Gemini or something on her... She lived for a few years after that, but... What little I remember of her is mad ramblings. Meanwhile, I'm the 'Cursed Girl' 'cause somehow, I destroyed their lives the day I was born." Sarcastic and dry, she added, "Makes a lot of sense."

"...I'm sorry..."

"It's fine. People will always make stupid assumptions like that..." Even as she spoke, her eyes dawdled on the ruins. Once upon a time, her parents lived happily in this town... until the bandits snatched

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that happiness away the same day she joined the family...

"Yeah, guess you can't really stop that." He patted her on the head, grinning. "Doesn't mean you have to listen to them, though. You seem like a nice girl to me." Switching back to his flirtatious tone, he added, "In more ways than one."

"Keep that up and I'll show you that I can be mean, too," she warned, half joking.

Zain chuckled, turning to the building behind him. "Bandits, huh...? I heard that for years, no one could find the ones that did it, 'til the Alaire family finally found 'em with Virgo... No one else has ever confirmed that, though, have they?"

"Are you calling them liars...?" Anya questioned. Everyone trusted the word of the Alaire family. After all, they consisted of powerful mages, one of which she knew personally. Even so, his question sparked her curiosity.

"Not exactly, but... Well, was any physical evidence ever found?"

"No, not really..." she replied with a frown. They stood in silence a moment, both contemplating it. Soon, though, he pushed himself off the wall and walked over to study something. He brushed snow off a broken doll in one house before moving to a rotting table. Biting her lip, Anya considered her words. He might think her insane, but... He was only a traveler that she'd never see again, right? So she had to try... "Hey, Zain...?" she ventured.

"Yeah?"

"How far have you traveled?"

"I've been all over the country," he answered as he glanced back at her. "Why?"

"Have you met anyone named Raymond?"

"Hm... I've met a few. How does he look?"

"I...I don't know," she admitted. "All I know is his name..."

Zain paused, forgetting his own task in favor of hers. "How do you know him?"

"Telepathy," she answered, bracing herself for his rebuttal.

"Without meeting him in person?"

"That's right."

"Huh... Interesting," the young man mumbled. "Anything else you can tell me about him?"

"Eh...?" Anya found herself staring in shock as he resumed his examination of the area. "You don't think I'm crazy...?"

"Why would I? It seems plausible to me."

"Really...? Most people think it's impossible that I've never met him or that I used Gemini to make him up..."

"Let's just say that I've seen weirder," he replied with a grin. "So?"

Anya gawked at him, wondering what he could've seen that's possibly stranger than her own tale. Then again, he knew far more about the world than she did. *Just what am I getting myself into...?*

Shaking her head, she answered, "He's about my age, though he's the most clueless person you'll ever meet. I don't think he *has* common sense." She grinned as she spoke, memories of him playing in her head again. "Still, he's really smart, and he does all he can to help others..."

"Sounds like you know him pretty well," Zain replied. "Well, I'm afraid all the Raymonds I met failed at the first sentence. I'll keep an eye out for him, though."

"Thank you..."

"No problem."

A smile crept up on her face as she stared at him, her fears banished as she stared into his eyes. Finally, she found someone who believed her, who would help her... And with such a jovial demeanor, how could she worry?

He tilted his head, almost confused by her expression, before his grin widened. "Ahh, have I already captured your heart?" he teased.

She scoffed, letting her previous thoughts fade into nothing. "You give yourself *far* too much credit if you think you can win me over that easily."

"Apparently... You don't like making things easy, do you?"

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“Not particularly.” She gazed up at the sky, judging the hour. She’d wasted far too much time here... “Well, I should be going now; I’m trying to reach the mountains by nightfall.”

“The mountains? ...Please tell me not by foot.”

“No... With any luck, I’ll be able to catch a caravan once I’m out of the forest.”

“Why the rush?”

She smiled in return and answered, “I know Ray’s further south, so the quicker I can get there, the better.”

“I see... Guess you want to get to town at a good time, then. You should hurry. I just came from that direction, so the path should be clear. No cockatrices or anything.”

“Thanks...”

Zain offered her another grin. “Hope to see you again, Anya. Be safe.”

“You, too.” With a wave, Anya left the ruined village and continued on her way west. Ducking under some low branches, she found herself on a wide enough trail that she could follow it, hopefully to the edge of the forest.

Finally alone, she opened the letter to find clean and neat handwriting, as if the writer had taken her time.

Dear Anya,

I apologize, but I must leave everything to you. There is only one path remaining, and I’m afraid my help will be extremely limited now. I know that you have no idea what I mean or who I am, but please understand that I cannot answer most of your questions—it’s too risky to explain in a letter that could fall into the wrong hands. There is only one thing I can tell you, so please take this to heart.

There is a boy. Perhaps you’ve met him already, or perhaps you will soon. You will recognize him by the artifact that belongs to him: an armband that blooms like a flower. His life is in danger, and he could lose himself completely. More to the point, you are the only one that can save him.

I am placing all of my trust in you. For the sake of this world, you must save that boy.

*May your future bring good tidings,
Claire Lorena Ciran*

Anya stared blankly at the letter, not sure what to make of it. A boy that only she could save? Where would she meet him, or would he find her, or...

What if it means Ray? she thought, her breath growing short. What would happen if she didn’t make it in time?

No... She couldn’t be certain of anything, really—there was still a large chance that it didn’t refer to Raymond. Still, now she had a clue to search for: an armband. After rereading the letter a few more times, she tucked it away, storing it next to the iris flower. *If I make it to the mountains by night, then I can set out towards Eunomia first thing in the morning. That trip may take a few days, but... maybe Edwin can help with this letter,* she reassured herself.

With her destination set, a poem rose in the back of her mind, and she remembered her mother rambling it off like a string of broken words. Adding a tune, she sang as she walked:

“Little one of darkness, little one of darkness,
You let yourself fall from being so gracious...
Little beam of light, little beam of light,
From protected to wise protector of right,
Both of you will fly tonight...”

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To the dreams so far, to the dreams locked away,
That is where they are, where the forgotten will always stay;
To the bond shared, hidden out of sight,
And dark wings ensnared, always kept sealed tight,
Both of you will fly tonight..."

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