

## Chapter 3

I watched my body from above. I could see the blade sticking out of my middle and the bloody goblin that was holding it. I looked surprised, with my eyes widened. Even in a moment like this I was self-conscious about my looks, but taking a closer look I thought I looked really pretty, except for the bruise on my head and the blood trickling out of the corner of my mouth. I watched Yolla rushing towards me, with her short sword drawn, but she was far too slow. The goblin pulled out its blade and was preparing for another strike, while my body slowly fell to its knees, blood pouring from its wound. *That's a lot of blood, isn't it?* I thought sadly. *Is this the end?* As if in slow motion I watched the goblin's blade swing in a large circle towards my exposed neck. *I won't survive that...*

Suddenly the goblin lost hold of its sword as a figure of wrath personified tackled it from behind. Aeniel landed on top of the goblin and started to strike it with his fists. Goblin's dark blood was splattering with every Aeniel's punch that landed on the poor being's face. Blind with rage, Aeniel didn't stop, not even when his foe's skull cracked open. *He's quite scary, isn't he?* When Aeniel finally rose again, he was covered in goblin's blood. He rushed to where Yolla was fighting for my life. Aeniel's placed his hands on the wound, trying to stop the bleeding, my bright red blood mixing with the goblin's dark. Yolla turned away, her hands shaking and with tears rushing down her face. Aeniel shouted something and Yolla shook her head ever so slightly. *Oh no! That really doesn't look good. They'll be devastated when I die.* Aeniel's mouth was moving, but I couldn't tell what he was saying. I leaned closer, taking a closer look at his face. His eyes were sparkling with tears as he kept muttering. "Stay with me, Mae Mae! Stay with me!"

A chill ran through my spine, even in my bodiless form as I felt a presence, I haven't felt in years.

*"If it isn't poetic, Mae Mae dying in Aeniel's arms once again! Long time no see, little one."*

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"Give our best to your mother ." Helene said, walking me out of their garden.

"I will." I said with a smile. "Thank you for everything!" I turned around and as soon as I did so, a frown replaced my smile. I should have been happy when I left Timmy's parents' house with enough food to last us another week, but all I could think was the cryptic comment from

the shadow. It would never shut up when I wanted it to, but now when I wanted it to talk, it remained silent. *"Ask your mother."* being the last thing I got from it.

The sun had already fallen below the horizon, yet there was enough light coming from the full moon to guide me home safely. The dark sky was punctured by thousands of bright stars, but they held little appeal to me this night, for no amount of stargazing was ever gonna give me the answers I sought. *Is my mum lying to me? What is the nature of the Shadow? Where did it come from?* I always suspected my mother knew more than she was telling me, but I thought she was trying to protect me. *What if she's only protecting herself?*

As soon as I opened the door of our humble shack, I could hear my mother coughing. Immediately feelings of guilt flooded my mind, knowing I was the cause of her current state.

"Where have you been?" My mother croaked as soon as she caught her breath. The years weren't kind to my mother. Gone were the long copper waves, now fully turned to silver and deep wrinkles were apparent on her once youthful face. Now she was feeble and weak where once she stood strong and proud. It hurt to see her broken like this.

"I was with Timmy and his family. Helene sends you food and her regards."

Mother took one look at the packet with food and scoffed. "I'm not hungry." She retorted, obviously in one of her cranky moods.

"But you haven't eaten all day!"

"So what?! Eat it yourself for all I care! You're gonna need it if you want to fill out that dress."

I blushed, forgetting about the dress I was wearing. "My own clothes were torn."

"Maria beat you again?"

I nodded and blushed when recalling how I lost my temper. "I got angry and... I think I broke her wrist." I admitted, hanging my head in shame.

"Melody!" Mother shouted. "You have to be more responsible!" She started to cough horribly.

"I didn't do it on purpose!" I cried, once my mum's cough subsided. "It was the Shadow! Maybe if you'd told me what it was, I could find a way to fight it!"

My mother deflated. "What does it matter?" She said with a sigh. "You're not ready."

"What does it have to do with Mae Mae?!"

My mum's eyes widened. "What are you talking about?"

"I-I've been telling the story about her and the shadow called you a liar."

"I told you not to talk with it! I-" Whatever she wanted to say next was lost in another fit of cough.

"I can't stop it. I don't know how to silence it!"

My mother was gasping, tears filling her eyes. "I... I'm going to tell you the truth, once you're ready to hear it." She said finally. "Tomorrow I'll start teaching you how to stop the shadow from interfering."

I nodded. "Was Mae Mae your sister?" I asked after a minute of silence.

"She was." My mother said, tears now flowing down her cheeks.

I was twisting and turning in my bed, unable to fall asleep. My mind was full of questions and I couldn't shut down my mind. One thought kept creeping up. *Can I really stand up to the Shadow?* Shivers were running down my spine. I was terrified of the confrontation. It was way after midnight, when I finally fell asleep.

I was standing in the meadow, next to the charred tree. Suddenly the Shadow appeared from the woods, stomping towards me. Overcome by fear I started to back away, but I tripped and fell in the grass, my heart beating wildly.

*"I won't be caged again, little one!"* The Shadow's voice sounded through my head and I quivered. *"You're not as strong as your lying mother and she cannot help you! I don't want to hurt you little one, but I will if you try to fight me!"* It said, stopping a couple of feet from me.

"You were caged before?" I asked, still worried, but curious to find out more about the Shadow's nature at the same time.

*"I was."* The Shadow whispered after a moment of silence.

"My mother imprisoned you? You seem to hate her."

"Your mother betrayed me!"

"My mother is a good person! All my life she helped people when she could!"

The Shadow let out a humorless laugh. *"Your mother is rotten to the core. I can't tell you what she did, her spell made sure of that, but maybe I can show you. If you let me."*

Conflicted, I stared at the faceless figure, trying to guess its intentions. Finally I nodded. "Show me."

The Shadow extended its hand to me. *"Do you trust me?"*

To my own surprise, I nodded again.

*"Grab my hand."*

I did so, but my hand went through the extended hand and I started to sink inside it. I tried to let go, desperately trying to pull my hand away, but I only sank deeper. I cried out and swung my other arm, trying to push the shadow away, but my other hand went through as well and I

started to sink even faster. Tears were flowing down my cheeks as I started to realize I wouldn't be able to save myself. Then the darkness swallowed me.

I was spinning in an utter blackness. I couldn't tell where was up or down. I tried to cry out in terror, but I had no voice.

*"Relax. It will be over soon."* The Shadow whispered in my ear. It sounded the same as it always did, but somehow I knew it was trying to soothe me, that I was in no danger. I took a deep breath, calming myself of my previous panic. I was still scared like never before, but at least I was starting to be able to think again.

"Where am I?" I asked, my voice quivering.

*"This is the void. The inbetween. The plane between the material world and the dreamscape. I understand it must be a frightening experience for a mortal. I apologize for not giving you any warnings, for I wasn't sure you'd have the courage to go through it."*

"Of course I'd have it! I need answers!"

*"I never doubted your heart, but human minds are fragile and easily misguided. Brace yourself, we're almost there."*

I fell in the grass, my breath knocked out of my lungs. Slowly I rose to my feet, looking around in confusion. I was back in the meadow I knew so well, yet I wasn't, for it looked much different. The tree I accidentally turned into ashes was there, looking as old as life itself, just as I remembered. I heard laughter and when I turned around I saw two girls a couple of years older than I was, walking into the clearing. One of them was tall, with dark hair and eyes. The other one was a bit shorter, but she still had a couple inches on me. She did look a bit like me though with waves of copper hair reaching down to her slim waist and with her emerald green eyes sparkling with joy. Despite the fact she wore loose clothes, I could clearly see she was curvier than the other girl. She was gorgeous! Quite possibly the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. I cried out to gain their attention, but it seemed they couldn't hear me. The one with dark hair suddenly turned in place and started to look around as if searching for something.

"What's wrong, sis?" The redhead asked her taller companion.

"I... I don't know. I feel as if there is someone watching us. It's nothing, I guess."

"Somebody sounds a little paranoid!" The redhead giggled. "Who would dare to follow us this deep into the witch's woods?"

The dark haired one smirked. "Maybe some dumb boy who's hopelessly in love with the witch's pretty sister!"

The redhead scoffed. "Don't even talk about those idiots!"

"Idiots, huh? And what about Aeniel? You didn't seem to mind his company last night!"

Mae Mae, for I was sure she must have been Mae Mae even though she wasn't as busty as I imagined, turned red, her cheeks taking the same color as her hair. "We're just friends!"

The other girl laughed. *If the other girl is Mae Mae, then she must be my mother?! It's so weird to see her like this!* "Sounds to me like you'd like to be more than just friends!" My mother said, placing her hand on Mae Mae's shoulder.

"I would." Mae Mae sighed. "But all he thinks about is going on adventures! He thinks he'll get fame and wealth roaming the world... He's such a child! As if it was possible to just forget everything and go out into the world like that. He'll get killed the second he steps out of the village!"

My mother shrugged. "I don't know, he seemed pretty capable, fighting off those trolls."

Mae Mae gave her a skeptical look. "You know just as well as I do that it was your spell that overcame them."

"Perhaps, but he fought them and stayed alive for long enough, so I could cast the spell. Not many people would be able to do so."

Mae Mae sighed again. "Maybe you're right... Still, he's going to leave and I'll stay left behind. I don't have the magic like you do. I'm just a screw up with only a handful of weak spells and they only work half the time. I don't even know why you want my help with the ritual!"

"I told you I need a second person to stop it if anything goes wrong. Besides, nobody draws circles as well as you do."

"I still don't understand why would you want to do this if it is so dangerous. It is forbidden for a reason!"

"Infinite power, Mae Mae! Or nearly so... Don't tell me it wouldn't tempt you!"

"I'd be more than happy with what power you have..." Mae Mae shook her head. "Let's get this over with!"

"Very well. Step aside" My mother said. She closed her eyes and started mumbling some words. A small flame appeared in the palm of her hand. It grew larger and larger, until it stood at least a foot tall. Then she tossed it on the ground. The grass around her started burning, creating a circle of hollow ground. When the flames subsided, Mae Mae pulled out a chalk from her pocket and knelt down in the grassless spot. Using the chalk, she made a large and almost perfect circle. My mother knelt next to her and started to write some strange symbols I've never seen in my life along the edge of the circle.

"Are you really sure this is wise?" Mae Mae asked. "You don't know what it will do! What you will summon! What if you made a mistake in translation? What exactly does it say?"

"It says: The essence of magic shall appear pure, its power infinite. Beware evil."

"Beware evil sounds pretty ominous to me... And is that all? It seems a bit longer than that."

"That's it..." She waved her hand. "Have a little faith, sister. After all, we've got the blood of the Ancients running through our veins." Mae Mae didn't look convinced, but she didn't say anything else.

My mother sat down inside the circle with her legs crossed and started to recite an incantation. All the hair on my skin rose on their ends as the air became tingly. It felt extremely wrong. Mae Mae looked distraught, on the edge of tears. "Stop it, Miralen! This isn't right!" My stomach made a cartwheel. Miralen was a name I knew from stories! It became a synonym for evil! Miralen who made pacts with demons and ate children to preserve her eternal youth... I couldn't believe it! *My mother can't be that Miralen, can she?*

My mother, Miralen, continued with the foul spell as if she didn't hear Mae Mae's cries and pleads. Suddenly a strong gust of wind blew, and both me and Mae Mae lost balance and fell to our knees. Mae Mae shouted something, but the howling wind stole her words, so I couldn't hear anything other than Miralen's foul recitation. The wind became so strong that it knocked me on my back, pinning me to the ground.

Miralen went silent and the wind was gone as suddenly as it appeared. With difficulty I rose back to my feet and looked where Miralen still sat inside the circle. She wasn't alone though. A bright blue cloud was hovering above her head, shining in the rays of sunlight. Miralen laughed. "I can't believe it, it worked! It actually worked!"

The cloud, this entity was 'watching' Miralen and after a couple of seconds it started to shift in a more humanoid shape. Then it spoke. It spoke in a language I did not understand and by the look on Miralen's face, she didn't either. Miralen extended her hand and so did the shape. Their hands touched and as they did, the beautiful blue color of the figure started to darken, blackening where Miralen touched it.

"No! No, no, no, that's not supposed to happen!" Miralen cried, trying to pull out her hand. It seemed as if I was watching my struggles from a couple of minutes ago. Or was it longer? I was lost in how much time had passed since I touched the shadow.

"Let go!" Mae Mae shouted.

"I can't! Help me! Help me!" Miralen shouted, her voice filled with panic. The whole arm of the spirit was now black.

"What should I do?" Mae Mae said.

"I don't care, just do something!"

Mae Mae hesitated and then ran inside the circle, pushing Miralen with all her might. Miralen, suddenly released, fell out of the circle landing on her back. She raised her head and gasped in horror. The spirit was now holding Mae Mae.

"Help me!" Mae Mae cried.

"There's nothing I can do!" Miralen shook her head.

"Sister, please!" Tears started gathering in Mae Mae's eyes.

"Calm down and look at the spirit! It's not darkening anymore!"

It was true. About a half of the spirit remained blue and it seemed to stop changing any further. The spirit turned its head towards Miralen and somehow I could tell it was a look filled with spite. I felt it deep in my bones. The spirit's head turned back to Mae Mae and she stopped struggling. "It's talking to me. I can hear it in my head!"

"What does it say?!" Miralen asked, her thirst for knowledge apparent.

"It says it wants to help me."

"With what?"

"With..." Mae Mae stopped and then giggled. "With everything!" Suddenly the spirit started to shine, blinding me. When I could see again, I could see the spirit disappearing. It looked as if it was stepping inside Mae Mae. Mae Mae collapsed, her legs giving up on her.

*"Mae Mae... poor, sweet, innocent Mae Mae! We could have been so good together, if it wasn't for your mother!"* The Shadow said in my head. I'd swear it sounded bitter, though its tone remained the same.

Mae Mae's body started to glow. She was changing right in front of my eyes. Her breasts were filling up as were her hips and buttocks. Her boobs, once the size of lemons, were growing larger and larger, until each of her breasts put even watermelons to shame. *That's more like what I imagined...* At last, she stopped glowing, slowly sitting up as fast as her newly expanded form allowed.

"Are you alright?" Miralen asked in concern.

Mae Mae giggled. "I never felt better!"