

OTHER LIVES

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

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This work is one of fiction, dealing with characters and concepts of ‘otherness’ and social displacement. This work is further sub-categorized as a work of fantasy or urban fantasy fiction where the standard rules of reality do not apply.

DEDICATION

To my parents, my family, and friends who listened while I talked about this forever; thank you. A special thanks to those from the early days who lived with the ever changing stories, my husband Michael, Chad, Russel, and Maggie. Also, this is in loving memory of all my grandparents who inspired my love of reading and storytelling.

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

There was a moment in my childhood when I wanted to be something other than a writer. I'm not exactly sure if it was an archeologist or a paleontologist, but it involved digging in remote locations. I think it's funny that even my alternate childhood career paths were about searching for buried truth. My journey into actively pursuing writing as a career was mostly focused on the essential part of writing, that of telling a story which unveils something about the truth of the human condition. Like Russian nesting dolls, stories, the truly beautiful heart-breaking ones, have layers that narrow in focus the deeper the reader goes. If the story is too obvious, the reader doesn't have to work at understanding the point, but if the story is too difficult, then the reader will quit without ever coming to the center.

Maintaining balance in a story is one of the most difficult things one can do as a writer, or as a human being, living their own story. While writing my thesis, *Other Lives*, I wanted to focus on many varieties of 'otherness' in urban fantasy fiction and also, examining how a protagonist could maintain balance between his exterior life and internal life and between the 'other' culture and his own culture. Further, I wanted to examine how family pressures add to the conflict within the story. My own interest in these themes have been with me since I was small.

My own love of stories started at home, both in being read to and then by being told stories by my grandmother. Of the many storytellers I have had the pleasure to meet and listen

to, my grandmother was one who excelled in creating the perfect mood for a story. Verbal storytelling is becoming a lost art in the age of media and recording devices, but in the generation born before the advent of widespread cellphone use, storytelling was both a creative exercise and a legitimate way to spend time with the family in a mutually enjoyable away. My Grandma Thais was a spinner of yarns, a weaver of words and a teller of tall tales designed to teach life lessons. She was uniquely Texan, born to west Texas farmers during the economic downturn known as the Great Depression. She grew up living in a wooden frame house, with an outhouse, no electricity and no shoes in the summer. She was the only daughter, with three older brothers and one younger brother.

Of the dozens of stories that she told about her life, and the lives of those that lived during the same time, stories about her family and her journey across the country with her husband. I heard her tell the same story about her older brothers' island jumping in the Pacific Theater during WWII four different ways, from my childhood to my adulthood. Each variation was told to highlight a different aspect of her brothers' personalities, whether it was loyalty, stupidity, rashness, or pigheaded stubbornness. In one iteration, She told the story as a younger, proud sister, as a mother with hindsight, and as a grandmother warning the younger generation about war, with the sadness of a woman who personally experienced the loss of a generation of men who would never grow to be adults, and men who would drink steadily and continuously to forget the sounds of dying comrades. I learned by listening to her that there were many ways to honor the story, the person, and the audience, and that at the center of every embroidery frame the truth should still remain central.

Her embroidery style of telling a story is one that I still copy in my writing. I always start with a single character or idea that I want to highlight and build around that idea. In the case of

my thesis, the story concept is about ‘otherness’ and about being torn between two separate worlds neither one of which is, by itself, an acceptable place for the main character..

While one grandmother told me stories, my other grandmother, Grandma Elenore, taught me to love books and poetry. Stephen King wrote, “Reading is the creative center of a writer’s life”, (142) and as a child my grandmother made it her mission to take me to the library once every two weeks, in order for me to pick out books. Her belief that all women should be educated was a profound motivator in my life because she practiced what she preached. Afterwards, we would go get a lime slushy as a form of positive reinforcement, or at least that’s what I believe.

After a while it got so that I finished my books quickly, and she grew sicker and wouldn’t feel up to going, so she would have books that she had at her house delivered by my grandfather to my house. They were old poetry chapbooks, with poets such as Wordsworth or Keats, Burns, Byron, Longfellow and Frost. Not the kind of books that would thrill a fourth grader obsessed with YA fiction. The first few days I stuck my nose up at poetry, but eventually I broke down and read the little chapbooks. I found myself wondering at the words that I didn’t know and double meanings that I only half understood. Like any child I copied what I read, writing down rhyming poems into my journal in the same stilted language, trying to mimic their style. Their beautiful rhythmic words painted pictures that captured me, but I couldn’t figure out how they had managed it. The poem, “A Night with a Wolf” by Bayard Taylor, was a poem that struck my childish self as perfect. It was both story and poem, it could be memorized because of its rhyme scheme and yet spun out as a story for an audience. It possessed this strange duality of both man and wolf, man existing with nature, not trying dominate nature. Nature, in the form of a wolf, refrained from killing the man. I copied it down word for word, and kept it in a book I had

created full of poems by my favorite poets. After months of frustration, my grade school self, jammed the books of poetry into a drawer and convinced my mom to take me to the library to check out new books. This foundational exposure to poetry and literature would be the start of a long term love that would continue long after the trips stopped. Eventually, when I applied for graduate school, I did so with a sheath of poems in my hand.

As an MFA student the things that I read while pursuing my degree tended to be works I normally wouldn't have picked to read for leisure, but they did help expose me to other styles of writing that were different from those I would normally read. While reading fiction, I developed the realization that the story must represent a larger idea/theme that concerns humanity if it is to be successful as something beyond simple entertainment; it must reflect some truth about the human experience.

Fiction expressed in multitudes of subgenres seeks to entertain as its primary purpose, but to truly move the reader, it must strike an uneasy balance between telling a simple fictional story for enjoyment, and telling a story that contains some truth about the human condition. Writers who walk this fine line and manage to exemplify truth while entertaining the masses are not norm, but exist as examples of the ability that genres or subgenres have to express humanity while creating art. Of the many truths expressed, the uneasiness that most of humanity has dealing with the 'other' is a common theme that I found myself drawn to. Ernest Hemingway's, *The Sun Also Rises* speaks to the truth of a generation trapped between WWI and WWII. These individuals don't identify with the generations before or those after; they are in a place of otherness unique to that socioeconomic time period. The relationships formed during this time period are profoundly different than during any other time due in part to the freedom of expression among both men and women.

Henry James' book, *The Turn of the Screw*, deals with the flexibility of how actions can be interpreted based on individual perception, that of the character who is committing the action and that of the character watching the action. This book also demonstrates how an unreliable narrator can be used to prevent the reader from becoming complacent. The unreliable narrator creates a place of otherness, that of an altered non-specific perception of events. The way that the characters treat the unreliable narrator and perceived 'mad woman', the 'otherness' that has reared its head in the household, is a form of social commentary about the time and another conflict to be addressed.

Another example of 'otherness', Herman Hesse's existential novel, *Steppenwolf*, seeks to look beyond the standard suburban life to the place of pain and alienation within those who feel stifled by societal bonds. It was this book, which I read in high school and as an undergrad that became a way for me to understand that the 'otherness' that I felt, was a reaction to the displacement that I experienced within the society around me. For me, the feeling of being an outsider was linked to my bookish nature and with the joy I took in reading as a hobby, a hobby that was in direct contrast with most of the students around me. It was this book, more than any other, which allowed me to recognize the types of stories and themes that I was drawn to as both a reader and a writer. Those works that deal with duality, otherness, social displacement, psycho-social conflict or mythos seem to catch my interest, regardless of genre. In that vein, Herman Hesse and Gloria Anzaldua are not so very far apart. The pain resounding in their words and through their character/persona is real enough, and strikingly similar. They both use anima/animus as a vehicle to explain the split in their natures and how their 'otherness' causes conflict between them and society.

Further, Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Karin Lowachee's *Warchild* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* all deal with protagonists that are torn between two worlds. In some cases these worlds are very real and it is a matter of cultural or linguistic conflict. In other cases they are fictional constructs designed to illuminate the human experience of 'otherness', and to delineate the internal and external conflicts that people have when attempting to deal with the psychological stress of marrying extremes between ideals, society morals, or cultures. These themes and conflicts are the ones that I chose to address in my own fictional work.

Karin Lowachee's, *Warchild* which begins in second person narration in order to draw the audience in, then smoothly transitions to first person, is about an emotionally traumatized child in the middle of a space war who is captured by pirates. From the perspective of a reader, Lowachee's characters and world building were original and offered a dramatic contrast to the standard male dominated Sci-Fi genre. As a writer I was really thrilled with the fact her child protagonist, Jos, had a very real psychological profile. The character made the same choices as any child in the middle of a war, fighting for survival, would make. Jos was forced to choose between two cultures, two lives, in the middle of war. On one hand, the humans that failed to protect him, and on the other, the aliens that had sheltered him and given him the choice to join them and their cause. The question that arises is, can Jos be the betrayer, or is he the one betrayed? The answer in so far as the story is concerned is that Jos is both depending on the perspective of the other characters, which adds to the depth of all of the characters.

There is a similarity between *Warchild* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* which I read for class and found myself also relating to, but not because it dealt with Native American soldier, Tayo, who was returning to the reservation after fighting in WWII; what drew my

interest and appreciation was the distinct contrast between the society Tayo had fought for and its treatment of him, and the Pueblo culture that he had been raised in. The proceeding internal conflict, mirroring the external conflict between how he was raised and what he had done during the war, is how anyone might feel trapped between two worlds. Tayo's conflict caused his mental distress, his inability to go beyond the war, to even be sober in the sunlight. Tayo's hero's quest was about changing the world for the better, about making himself well by taking part in ceremony. This quest was one very closely paralleled by the protagonist Harry Haller, from "*Steppenwolf*". The journey into the self, the internal conflict and the feeling of 'otherness' is exercised by a physical journey. As an interesting addition to the theme of 'otherness' that had begun to take shape, I read, *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldua.

In Gloria Anzaldua I found a more direct Hesse and I felt more closely aligned with her ideology and mythos, but not because we grew up in the same culture or location, in relation to the same language. I related to Anzaldua in the same way that I related to Hesse, because I have felt like an outsider to my own culture, to my own language, to my place in society, and at times to my sense of self. Anzaldua's book highlights how the act of accepting another's label, or by accepting another's interpretation of our own experience, is a violation of that personal, unique experience and that truer self. Anzaldua explored mythos in relation to culture and acceptance like Silko did in *Ceremony* and Lowachee did in *Warchild*, the same duality of nature found in *Steppenwolf*. The profound difference is that Anzaldua wrote about women and specifically the damage that had been caused by two cultures, the difficulties of divided language loyalties, and how each culture treated women.

All of these fiction and non-fiction writers dealt with otherness, the internal conflict created by two cultures clashing inside of the main character's head. The inability for a character

to marry different, socially unacceptable cultures together in order to be happy and at peace is the continuing conflict throughout all of books. In fact, all of books, categorized in three distinct genres, deal with the same theme.

In contemporary work, poets such as Amalia Ortiz and Jessica Helen Lopez, in the poetry genre exposed me to spoken word poetry. These particular writers and performers spoke to me in the way that they narrated a story in their poems. They managed to take a single event from a first person experience, and broaden it to encompass and unify the audience. Amalia Ortiz's performance piece, "Women of Juarez" begins with location, "At the west tip of Texas a line divides us from them", (0:09) but it is not just a poem about location, but how location and nationality can protect or victimize those most in need of the safety of their country. Her performance piece, line by line, discusses the missing and murdered women of Juarez, Mexico. She draws a comparison between her own eyes and skin color, and that of the missing women. This comparison demonstrates the contrast of how Ortiz is treated as an American and how they, the missing women of Juarez, are being victimized, dismissed and worse, forgotten by the world. Ortiz took a single young female victim, and made her every single young woman. She describes a mother looking through the clothing of victims, "...this skirt was my daughter's but that's not her hat.." (1:13). This mother becomes every mother. She is a study in archetypes made flesh and bone. The power of these comparisons, these contrasts between safety and the lack of safety being experienced less than a mile away across a political border, is the very definition of 'otherness' in society. If some people are safe, and others are not, then 'otherness' is being experienced by those who are not safe in their country.

In contrast, Jessica Helen Lopez's performance piece, "Wednesday's Wife", is a narrative tale about a wife waiting for her husband's arrival from work. Her lines, "...I have been playing

good woman all day...”(3:26), is the standard that society has set for her and her domestic chores. The tension she feels when her husband arrives home, however, is not an easy matter: “I searched your eyes for the weather it is five o’clock everywhere...”(4:24). The narrator’s pace becomes frantic, and suddenly it is not just the story a woman preparing dinner for a husband whose temper is as changeable as the weather, but of her own fear that she is settling for a life of a plain housewife. Each line carries the weight of the intended emotion that the author wants to convey, that of a rushing, energetic frenetic wife seeking to please her husband. The role of wife is highlighted, and that of the wife as a woman and an individual being, is suppressed and at the same time contrasted. This examination between what is socially expected, and the individual’s personal expectations is another form of displacement which creates an internal conflict.

The individualistic use of language and voice demonstrated by Jessica Helen Lopez and Amalia Ortiz, is a new style of storytelling for the modern society, a way of reaching audience through new media. Both of their spoken word poems dealt with women who were being victimized by both uncaring policies and their role in society. They both also took the experience of a single individual and turned it into a shared unifying experience which is easily accessible. What I gained from their performance poetry was not only a way of looking at the world from a different perspective, but also new methods of describing and using those descriptions to enrich characters. Also, that using characters who are being torn apart by their role in society, or by society, can be used archetypically to represent many individuals. Further, that the proper use of a single well written line can add tension, emotion, or meaning to a story. Using poetry, these authors have tapped into the universal unconscious that forms the underlying conflicts and stresses of everyday society.

In myth, poetry, as in fiction, or fable, Joseph Campbell has argued in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, that social desires are represented and have formed archetypes in the expressed collective unconscious. He states, “It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into the human cultural manifestation,”(1). As human beings, the stories that speak to us are those that we relate to on a deeper level. Given the nature of society, the pressures, the flaws and the occasionally rigid social proprieties, fiction is a release valve; whereas non-fiction becomes a voice of advocacy, a fluent report of time, and memoir of relatability. These two separate genres are opposite sides of the same coin in the sense that they both seek to answer questions about what it is to be human, each in their own way. So when looking at the books chosen in my non-fiction workshop and non-fiction forms class, I kept my eyes open for authors that spoke about or advocated for the oppressed, examined the theme of ‘otherness’ or displacement.

With a variety to choose from in the way of styles of non-fiction from memoirs to graphic novels I found myself drawn to writers like Atul Gwande, Tara Westover, and Jenny Lawson as they created spaces necessary to discuss difficult topics dealing with ‘otherness’. Each had unique and varied life experience both with society, education and their individual perception of society as it was established early on by their families.

In Tara Westover’s *Educated*, the author dealt with her experience with an education unique to someone growing up inside of a fundamentalist Mormon culture inside of the U.S. Westover wrote a powerful memoir about living two extreme lives, about how her life changed dramatically when she decided to step outside of her comfort zone in search of more than what she was told she should want. Her search for an education beyond the little homeschooling she received was a search for freedom and access to the feelings of safety and acceptance that most

children receive from their parents early on. Her search for an education, gave her words and experiences that she would not have had access to if she had remained within the confines of the world that she knew, but she had to live with being exiled from her family, and losing relationships, for telling her truth and shining a light on a culture that most of society never sees or experiences. The power in her story was in the specific chosen details, the way she articulated the emotional rollercoaster she travelled when discovering the lies she had been told. One lie that demonstrates the extreme nature of her education by her father, was the elimination of the history of the genocide of the Jews during WWII, an event that both highlighted Westover's outsider status in her history class and the nature of her the type of slanted education she had received. This external conflict was a mirror to the internal conflict that the author suffers between wanting what the outside world has to offer in terms of safety, respect and acceptance, while wanting desperately to still be loved and accepted by her family.

The ideas that Westover's *Educated* examines, of familial expectations and the differences between the world she resided in with her family and the world outside, are both concepts that I explore in my own work. The main character, Ryo Fin, in *Other Lives* lived in a society that was slowly eating his identity by requiring him to channel the dead, exposing him to the memoirs and feelings of others. Ryo Fin also felt pressured to take on the same corrupt morals of the extended family around him in direct contrast to the societal norms he experienced while living with his mother until age seven. This tension between his own expectations, his inability to accept or feel accepted by his extended family, leads to him to run away. Four years later his leaving inadvertently causes the deaths of three of his cousins, which then spirals into his wife being kidnapped at the hands of his relatives. The family that he tried to leave behind, will not let him go. He is forced backwards into a life that he finds morally unacceptable, in

order to save his wife, and a chance at the life that he really wants. The external conflict mirrors his internal conflict. His 'good', that of leaving his family, not being a dead speak and not marrying some stranger, is in direct contrast to his family's 'good' which involves him accomplishing all of those things in order to prevent a possible war.

Similar to Westover's memoir, Jenny Lawson's memoir, *Let's Pretend This Never Happened*, was a combination of her own odd family with their ponderousness of taxidermy animals, mixed with anxiety, the desire for social acceptance and a strange inner life. Her stories found humor in dead animals, awkward moments and even deep sadness. Her gift as a writer is in her voice, which is clear throughout the book. Sentences like, "Usually when I tell people my dad was a Texas armadillo racing champion, they assume I'm exaggerating, but then I pull out his silver armadillo championship ring...", (21) or "When I was little, my father used to sell guns and ammo at a sporting goods store, but I always told everyone he was an arms dealer", (22) are the over the top ways that Lawson uses hyperbole to liven up her stories. This particular author exposed me to telling the truth in humorous ways. Sometimes she did this by giving examples of her perspective in each situation, while other times it was in the differences in how close she chose to focus on each scene. Lawson's method of storytelling involves taking things point by point, telling adjacent stories, and sometimes telling her story within another story. Whereas, Westover's memoir is mostly linear in style. Lawson uses humor to prevent her scenes from becoming too intense, otherwise certain scenes would end up feeling tragic. She has a very unique voice in her work which is distinctly west Texas. In contrast, Westover uses a lens to change focus to specific physical details when the emotions brought up by her story become painful. Her voice is both that of the uneducated girl at times, and then the educated woman looking back at painful events. Each voice brings a true image of what life was like at that time

for both authors, giving them a time and place where they belong. Each of their methods, whether using humor, voice representative of time and setting, or using a lens to draw the reader closer and further away, are useful in non-fiction as they are in fiction.

In my own work I've found that humor is an effective method of making characters more realistic, particular if its humor that falls flat in order to make things deliberately awkward between characters as well as maintaining a voice or accent that is true to the character and location. Ryo Fin and all of his cousins were all raised in a small town in Texas. They switch from a more formal use of English or Shi'ent when addressing their Uncle or someone who outranks them, to less formal language and slang when they speak with each other. The contrast is deliberate, Shijin society requires a certain formality, but when they are not around someone who out ranks them they revert back to easy manners and slang. Maintaining balance between dialogue, pacing and description can be difficult, which is why reading examples of authors who manage to create balance within their work is necessary as a writer.

In Atul Gawande's book, *Being Mortal* the author dealt with both his personal experiences with aging, as well as his profession as a doctor dealing with the aging of his patients, and family. His book was equal parts philosophy, social commentary and personal journey. His ability to balance his message, his examples, and the privacy of his patients, was both skillful and awe inspiring. He made medicine a living interesting part of life, not a dissection of it. Gawande's main concern was the question of quantity of life or quality of life. It is one that repeats in different variations throughout his work and one that I try in a small way to address in my thesis. Whether it is better to live a longer life, but one that is unhappy, or to live a shorter life while being true to one's identity. The balance he attained in writing his book is one that I hope to mimic in fiction.

Other books and authors that I read while writing, were books about writing and guides to various genres. Of the many books that I have bought and read, some of the best were: *Elements of Fiction Writing: Characters & Viewpoint* by Orson Scott Card, *On Writing* by Stephen King, *The Forest for the Trees: An Editor's Advice to Writers* by Betsy Lerner, and lastly, *Writing Fantasy & Science Fiction: How to Create Out-Of-This-World Novels and Short Stories* by Card, Athens and Jay Lake. Each of these books has useful in regards to creating characters, the practice of writing, publishing or world building.

For a stylistic guide to writing, anyone can use the internet and query how to write in grammatically correct sentences. If, however, there is a character that doesn't seem to be doing their job on the page then Card's *Elements of Fiction Writing* helps to clarify difficulties with creating characters with depth, real flaws and a variety of other author created issues such as: too much back history, exposition too quickly, lack of likability, or character overcompensation/perfection.

For instance, when dealing with characters that I need to be unlikeable, I have had to develop ways to still give these characters redeemable traits in the story in order to make them more realistic. In this way, Card's book has been extremely helpful. Maikin, the antagonist in *Other Lives*, is a major catalyst to most conflicts in the novel. He is also the protagonist's guardian. Maikin is an abusive, neglectful guardian, but his character makes an attempt at being understanding in so much as he is able to be, of his nephew. The result is that he demonstrates both negative and positive traits. There are moments where he isn't a complete bastard and therefore the reader sees his human qualities. I wanted Maikin's character to be torn between how he was raised to view love as a weakness and his feelings of love and responsibility towards his nephew.

Another issue in my own writing that I struggle with is pacing and subplots. I try to maintain a fast pace in order to engage the reader, but sometimes story is sacrificed for speed. Subplots become a necessity, but are a difficult area that I still contend with, those smaller conflicts that need to occur to allow for the buildup and release of tension prior to the major conflict resolution can be hard to pinpoint or to create without violating the suspension of disbelief required of any work of fiction.

One subplot that I wove into the main story line of *Other Lives* is Gaby's deceased younger sister, as a means to prove Fin's ability as a dead speak. I realized after I had written the prior scene where Fin is trying to explain his strange life to the wife he consistently lied to, that any rational person wouldn't believe in someone who could speak to the dead, without some form of proof. Much less, a wife believe her husband, after he had spent an entire year practicing some intense levels of deceit, like lying about his actual name and not putting in the marriage certificate. Allyson, Gaby's dead younger sister, coupled with Gaby's guilt over her sister's death and a cemetery close enough to allow for some form of proof to be established while not deviating from the trip to Crux seemed, if not completely reasonable, at least not completely unreasonable.

While writing my thesis, *Other Lives*, I wanted to focus on many varieties of 'otherness', the kinds of 'otherness' that society tries with difficulty to overlook and the conflict these forms of 'otherness' create. As an author my preference is to create duality between my protagonist's rocky inner life and his outer physical reality. Ryo Fin, as a protagonist, is forced into dealing with the double life created by the Shijin culture he was raised in, and the gaitzi world he chose to live in. He lives under constant pressure to pretend that what he sees (the shades), what he knows to be real, isn't real in the society he has chosen to live in. When he is forced to return

with his extended family and the Shijin way of life, he has to convince his wife of his gifts in order to prevent even more conflict. His wife gets to experience how he views the world. This act adds more guilt because he feels that he is causing her, to suffer from her own form of internal religious conflict. Below the surface of the other conflicts is his mother's belief that her gift is actually mental illness and his sister's death caused by his mother's suicide that creates this living guilt which plays out as backstory and exists as another conflict that slowly surfaces in relation to his conflict with his absent father.

Conflict alone is not enough in the fantasy fiction genre. World building is required, and when building a world there are many specifics to be considered. *Writing Fantasy & Science Fiction: How to Create Out-Of-This-World Novels and Short Stories* by Card, et al. had answers to questions I hadn't even considered. A few specifics that I realized I needed to clarify in the world I was creating, after reading that book, were: cultural specifics, language, ethnicity, powers and the limits to powers. The more specific the answers were to each category, the more believable the story would be.

One factor that I considered, as all writers do, was character names and the spelling of their names. In my thesis the culture Shijin has a specific way of naming, masculine names ending in 'in' and feminine are ended in 'ryn' or 'lyn'. This choice was designed to mimic the use of 'a' or 'o' in Spanish pronouns as a way to differentiate between male and female persons in written and verbal language. Also, much like Japanese or Chinese cultures, the surname is first, then followed by the given name. So the protagonist's name, Ryo Fin, in English would be Fin Ryo.

Another linguistic choice was that Shijin writing would be a mixture of Ugaritic and early Semitic overlapping, both forms when combined resemble Hangul which is the name for Korean

characters, after the 15th century. Ugaritic is a type of cuneiform that is written left to right, whereas Semitic is written right to left, so the characters would overlap to create a language with a double meaning for each word, depending on how it was read. This particular choice of writing style goes along with the myth that is at the foundation of the Shijin culture, which is that they are responsible for maintaining the balance between good and evil in the world and have been responsible since before Noah's flood. Their language Shi'ent has been the same language since before the Tower of Babel. Each of the individual families represent one of the cardinal directions from eastern mythology, they are all genetically gifted with supernatural abilities, Ryo inherit their genetic gifts from their father's line, and the direct genetic line only produces male dead speakers. The stronger the gift the more Ryo in the blood line, and the more likely the dead speaker will be more powerful, and live longer than a normal person. Ryo is a patriarchal family, dominated entirely by men. In Suzu, the ability to know and memorize every use of every plant, moss, algae and heal by touch, is inherited by the women, and Suzu is a matriarchy.

When considering powers, the limits of the particular powers in a fantasy story are important, otherwise the character becomes godlike and impossible to defeat with the exception of a single flaw, otherwise known as the Superman syndrome. The Ryo family as dead speakers have developed their own laws about how their gift can be used and when it can be used. Things like: there are limits to the number of dead that can be brought up, seven, and the length of physical space they can allow a shade to travel before the shades begin to physically drain the dead speaker, usually 250 miles. The specifics are important, otherwise dead speakers could call up entire armies of shades to battle for them, which would be distracting to the rest of humanity who are ignorant to the Shijin.

Other rules that had to be determined were the social or physical limits for a dead speaker's powers. The dead should only be raised between dusk and dawn. All shades are confined by iron bars or to where they are buried. In cases of violent death, the shade may remain at the place they died. Dead speakers are forbidden to call up the dead to possess the living. Each of these rules limits the dead speaker's, and the protagonist's ability, to protect himself using anything other than regular fighting skills and allows for more conflicts that can't magically be resolved. More limits on magic allows for a greater suspension of disbelief for readers.

Urban fantasy, a subgenre of fantasy fiction, is about creating realistic fiction that deals with fantastical creatures or magic in present day society. Dead speakers and hidden societies trying to maintain balance between good and evil, qualify under these conditions. In the case of urban fantasy, it is important to deal with main stream society or those who do not believe in magic and are outside of the hidden society in a way that makes sense. This is important in the cultural context of 'otherness' because every culture has those who are outside of their culture. In the world occupied by the Shijin, those who are not Shijin are gaitzi, or outsiders. Gaitzi are not trusted, in some cases not protected, and often are taken advantage of by the Shijin. The protagonist, Ryo Fin, having left his own culture, hides out among the gaitzis and marries a gaitzi, which causes untold amounts of misery for his immediate family. This establishes the external cultural conflict between the protagonist and his family, as well as his wife who is on the outside of the culture.

Other specifics that needed to be established were the older rituals handed down through generations. One way that I included these rituals was through the ceremony in calling the dead. Ritual blood sacrifice is often tied with death, as is food and wine, essentially all the things of

life that the dead might miss. The tools of the trade should likewise be specific, the bone handle of the sacrificial knife belonging to a dead relative, the bread being hand ground, the details of calling the dead are designed to be time consuming in order for the dead speaker to not take their responsibility lightly. The stitching of the shades into the skin of the living becomes a method of controlling the dead outside of the iron gates, and it is another way to limit the number of times any dead speaker will willingly want to call the dead without a very good reason.

Over all, *Writing Fantasy & Science Fiction* helped in creating the specifics that are necessary in order for the reader to believe the world that the protagonist inhabits in *Other Lives*. Another book which helped in regard to ceremonies, gods and goddesses was, *Myths of the East*, by Rachel Storm. The relationship between older religions centered in the Middle East and the Far East helped to create a background myth that made sense in the greater scheme of the world of Shijin. “The Guardian Kings...guard the four quarters of the world and protect Buddhist law.” (126). This idea was the beginning concept as to why the particular families of Shijin would be endowed with gifts to help humanity and why they would be so specific as to their ideology regarding balance. It was an idea that later evolved to include myths from Hebrew and Egyptian cultures as well as a belief in the afterlife and recording death rituals.

Given the nature of fantasy fiction and the amount of research into a background that was both believable and reasonable for readers of that genre, there were times when simple persistence didn't seem to be enough to tackle the amount of work necessary. Reading Stephen King's book, *On Writing*, helped me to put things into perspective as a writer and as a person. As a writer, King has a way of telling a story that is stylistically his own, and he also is very good at explaining methods that worked for coming up with ideas for his writing. His familiarity with the topic of writing, authorship, publishing and persistence makes his book a worthwhile read for

anyone suffering from writer's block, or just middle book difficulties. He states early on in his book, "You can approach the act of writing with nervousness, excitement, hopefulness or even despair...Come to it any way but lightly." (99) My daily writing is in part because of that particular saying, because it lets me show up to my computer however I am emotionally, and force myself to put down words without regard to what I think I should be writing. It also helped that his personal stories were so humorous. This helped to elevate the idea that there was endless work when writing fiction which was helpful during the third draft of my own thesis.

The next and final example of an excellent writing guide is *The Forest for the Trees* by Betsy Lerner. As both a writer and editor her insight as to types of writers she has worked with in the past, and might work with in the future, became a reread for me. I enjoyed her humor and her varied breakdown of writers that she had worked with and how each of those types tends to work best. She has a practical style of explanation when illuminating the process of getting an agent, and editing house. She is very thorough and while it might not be a style guide like Steven Pinker's *Sense and Style*, which goes on about proper usage and sentence structure, but her work is equally necessary in the fast paced world of publishing.

An aspect of my writing that I noticed while reading Lerner's book, is that I absolutely need to multi-draft in order to layer my writing to include the necessary description to slow the speed of the story. More than half of my description is added after I write the scene from beginning to end. Usually, it's not until the second or third time I write a scene that I add descriptions of characters, scenery and finesse the dialogue. This is an aspect of writing that it took me a while to realize that I needed to do in order to get the whole story out and then work out the details that enriched the story.

Another very important consideration that Lerner's book brought up was publishing and knowing the audience for the book. Before reading Lerner's book I hadn't put much thought into who my readers would be, but after I made an effort to research the particular subgenre of fantasy fiction where my book would likely be placed and found that my thesis will fit into the constraints of the field, meaning that there will be an audience for this work when it is completed.

Finally, this work of fiction is still a work in progress. There are undoubtedly flaws, but hopefully only a few. This thesis represents only a third of a full length novel in the subgenre of fantasy urban fiction.

CHAPTER II

OTHER LIVES

Unlike some casinos outside of Santa Fe, The Broken Hart isn't known for its card games. It was known for the variety of slot machines and the all night breakfast buffet featuring every imaginable combination of breakfast foods. The breakfast buffet is the only reason I kept bartending during the late night shift. I get a free comp meal every shift, and the food is oddly fresh at two a.m. when I get off. My phone rings and I ignore it as I pile steaming waffles onto my plate and sandwich scrambled eggs between them. I avoid the meat and grab an entire carafe of orange juice. I walk over to my usual spot in the back corner, with the cracked plastic seat, that has a full view of the entire restaurant and begin eating. I do the same thing every night I work, the repetition is calming, and there's the added bonus that it keeps the shades at bay. As long as I maintain a pattern of behavior, as long as I ignore them and remain emotionally calm, then they don't realize that I can see them.

There's a shade from the early 1800's watching the gamblers from a corner just inside the restaurant. He's been there since I first started working, but he's never bothered anyone. I'm guessing that the casino was built on top of where he was buried since he appears to have died peacefully. I look away before he realizes that I've noticed him.

I check my phone, and it's Gaby. I swipe and her face pops up as my screen saver. She left a voice message, but considering we'd separated three weeks ago, supposedly over a stupid wet towel, I'm not really sure that I want to listen to anything she has to say. Just looking at her

face though, I know that I'm going to call her back because the longer she's gone the more I realize that I need her. I look up from my phone and see three familiar men in top knots. Tattooed from the right side of their throats around the back of their necks to the left side are characters that resemble Korean Hangul, but are in reality two separate sets of overlapping characters. The first is Ugaritic cuneiform written from left to right, and the second overlapping the first is that of Southern Semitic written right to left. I know what each of their neck collars state, even though it was written in a language that fell out of popular use more than three thousand years ago. Hessin who leads the pack of my cousins has a collar that states, "from war to peace or from peace to war let chaos set free the hounds." Depending on how it was read, it had three different meanings, and none of them were really designed to create warm fuzzy feelings.

Hessin and Tamsin sit down across from me in the booth, like two oddly matched bookends. Hessin is light skinned with dark hair and eyes, while his brother Tamsin is darkly tan with light brown hair and green eyes. My third cousin, Greylin stands a little ways away scanning the area scar through his lip making him look more sinister than was entirely warranted. I finish chewing my food then say, "What brings you up to Santa Fe, cousins?"

I don't really have to guess, the fact that our grandfather sent these particular cousins was a rather obvious act of aggression. My eldest cousin, Hessin, gestures towards the windows and the dark outside and says in a bored tone, "Ryo Fin, it's been four years. The Old Man is done waiting for you to honor your word."

I shrug, then pretend Hessin and my cousins showing up out of nowhere was something that I had been anticipating; instead, it is the worst possible scenario coming true. I take a

minute, then say, “I’m not responsible for Ryo anymore. I left because I want no part of Ryo or of anything the Shijin are part of. I’m out, and I plan on staying out.”

Tamsin, Hessin’s younger brother, shifts so that I can see the gun he has under his jacket and the fact that he’s wearing body armor. “Suzu murdered three of our kin, your fiancée’s family,” he said. “Our little sister was one of their victims. You think anyone in Ryo cares that you don’t want to honor your word?”

I can tell he wants to come across the table. Tamsin has always had a problem controlling his temper, and it’s why he’ll never lead his own team. Hessin shoots a look at his brother to tell him to shut up, then says to me, in what for him is a reasonable voice, “Uncle Maikin wants to talk to you. He wants you to come to your apartment in peace. He also thinks you should answer your phone.”

I wait, then say, “I’m sorry that your sister died.” Even though I honestly have no idea who his sister is, since I have over sixty first cousins. I don’t have any idea what she even looked like. Hessin nods and says with mock sincerity, “Thank you Ryo Fin. I’ll tell my mother that you’re sorry her daughter is dead. That’ll make it better.”

Both of my cousin’s slide out of the booth. They stand up rigid like tin soldiers. Hessin turns around and Tamsin takes out his short dagger and cuts off Hessin’s top knot. Then Tamsin turns around and Hessin cut off his brother’s top knot. Greylin who had been standing as look out turns away and in a single quick motion cuts off his own top knot. The hair is placed on my table and the daggers disappear. It’s like a scene out of some Samurai movie, a throwback to some other age, and something I had seen only twice before when I still lived with my uncle.

Shijin, at least those from Ryo family who weren’t active in the gaitzi world, traditionally kept long hair, either braided back or in a top knot, a style which had become popularly renamed

a 'man bun'. Hair that was cut deliberately short, up under the ears, was either out of shame, or out of the feeling of responsibility for the death of a close relative. In Shijin, it was sometimes one and the same. The fact that they'd done it in front of me, meant that this was partially mine, this shame, the three deaths, they were being laid on me. I stand up, and they take a step back, because even if they're willing to call me a coward by cutting their hair off in front of me, to tell me that my actions are shameful, apparently I'm still a prince of Ryo. My grandfather hasn't disowned me, which means I still outrank them. I take another step forward to prove my point, and again they step back. "This shame belongs to Suzu. They killed your sister, not me. Pick up your damn hair and go drop it at Suzu's front door."

Greylin looks at the table and says with a rather mocking smile that twists the scar that bisects his lips, "No, I think we chose correctly. You ran away like a coward, just like you always did when we were little. You want me to take it back, then you do what you're supposed to do. Leveler."

He takes a step back and turns, deliberately giving me his back, then walks away. Hessin, who had remained silent through Greylin's speech, touches his brother's shoulder and sends him away. I wait as Hessin shifts his balance. "You're a prince of Ryo, and I can't touch you. You know that as well as I, but your girlfriend is just a gaitzi. Anything can happen to her."

I don't move, but fear curls inside my guts, and even though I try to hide my reaction to his words, he sees it. His face goes very still and remote as he says softly, "You've always had a weakness for a pretty face. If something were to happen to her, then you might want to step in. You might want to restore balance. Get vengeance."

For a moment I think he might hit me, but then he switches to Shi'ent and says, "I have been loyal. I have done everything I was ever asked to do. And yet, my sister's blood, Greylin's

fiancée's blood, is soaking into the ground and the one meant to be our Leveler, the one able to deliver justice is sitting on his ass in a gaitzi place, working for gaitzi money, for a gaitzi girl? Are you really that broken?" His eyes widen the tiniest bit as he realizes what he's just said to me, but he doesn't take it back. He stands there waiting for me to hit him, for me to cut his throat for the insult. Because any Shijin prince, not just one of Ryo, would have responded instantly and violently to being called broken.

I shake my head. The moment I say anything, the moment I react to what he's said, is the moment he'll know that I still care. He'll pull me back in. His words hang in the air, unanswered. I take a step back and slide into the booth, ignoring him, even though, I really do want to hit him for what he said to me. It isn't what he expected, and he stands there for a full minute before he turns and walks away.

I stare at my food, no longer hungry. For a minute I hesitate, then hit playback on my phone and listen to Gaby's message. Her voice sounds a touch breathless, "Hey Stephen, we need to talk. I know you won't be off shift until after two, but I also didn't want to wait until morning because we've been putting this off for long enough. I'm going over to our apartment to wait for you, so please come home after your shift. I'll even cook."

I check the time of the message and close my eyes. She had said 'our' apartment, which meant that she might be considering changing her mind about the baby. My heart speeds up. If she went to my apartment, then my uncle most certainly has her. At least he does if he was waiting at my apartment as my cousins had claimed. It make sense now. That last part about answering my phone. My cousins must have known that our uncle had leverage, and that's why they hadn't started anything in the restaurant. There's a good chance that after searching my apartment my uncle will know what I've done. Assuming that Gaby doesn't just tell him.

I open my eyes, and my sister is sitting next to me. She still looks seven, with floppy copper hair that half covers her face. She radiates cold as she offers up her translucent hand. Without thinking I take her hand with my left, even though it really isn't physically there. For the dead, the thought is the deed.

She doesn't speak in words. The dead, they speak in images.

We are standing in the middle of a field of wild flowers at dusk and the light is almost gone, turning the sky a dark red. In front of us and behind us, Shijin are lying in pools of blood among the flowers, bullets peppering the ground and guns lying spent, still partial clutched in dead hands. Dark birds circle the sky, by the hundreds. I start walking, looking at the bodies and they are all Ryo. I turn around, and behind me, the dead are all Suzu. Only as the sun disappears, the dead start to rise and they all turn to me and point. I look down at Castlyn, my sister, and she nods, then she hesitates and shakes her head.

I jerk awake, and I'm staring up at a waitress who standing next to me holding a pot of coffee looking disturbed. I note her name tag. "Sorry Helen", I say and push the hair to the side pretending a calm that I no longer feel. "My friends lost a bet. I'll clean it up." I flip the cup upright on the saucer and she pours, adds some packets of creamer to the table and walks away shaking her head. I pour sugar with a shaking hand into the coffee sending sticky crystals across the table, then stir it and drink it scalding hot. It stings going down, but it doesn't erase the image of the dead pointing at me. Castlyn had never done that before. She had never seen a battle field when she was alive. It was something that was going to happen. She was being used as a harbinger, a messenger of what was to come.

Dusk. Carrion birds. Suzu and Ryo killing each other. Castlyn agreeing that it was my fault then shaking her head like it wasn't. Contradiction, or the possibility of another outcome? I

feel around in my pocket for a cigarette, then realize that I'm going to have to go outside to smoke. I get up, put the phone back in my pocket, and grab the chunks of hair that I toss in the trash as I walk out the front doors and out to my car. I need to get home and find out if Gaby is ok, but there's this fear growing inside me. There hasn't been a harbinger in close to seventy years, and it was my grandfather's father who had seen it during WWII. It had heralded the return to gaitzi society, and the gaitzi world, to fight alongside the Americans and Europeans against those looking to kill and take what wasn't theirs. It's why the Nazis had burned their dead victims in order to send those spirits to the other realm. They were hoping to not have their crimes told by their victims, but the dead had been spoken for, and Hitler's search for the secrets of the occult world had gotten him in the end.

The balance had been restored by a righteous war, and those who had taken the lives of the innocent were hunted down and put on trial either publically, or privately. The dead don't forget, and Ryo didn't either. I should have paid more attention to what my grandfather had been trying to tell me with that story. I thought it had been about history, but it had been about how Ryo family always paid its debts to the living and the dead.

I light a cigarette, and take a deep shivering drag. If I'm being told the future, then it's not just my future that's at risk. A war between the Shijin families will erupt, if I make the wrong choice. I lean against my car, then I see Castlyn walking down the sidewalk a few feet away. For a moment I doubt that it's her, but then she stops and motions for me to follow her with a thin wispy hand.

Of course it wasn't over. There were always three images, at least that's what my grandfather had always told me. If a harbinger arrived, there would be three possible outcomes,

three images. I had just been hoping to be spared seeing all three in one night. Why should I be spared when so many others who had shared my curse hadn't?

I follow my sister's shade along the side walk down a hill to an old church in the freezing night air, and then past the church to the cemetery. I'd left my jacket behind the bar. It's close to forty degrees outside, and I take another drag off my cigarette and exhale smoke and heat. She walks through the open gate into the cemetery, and then materializes at a tree a hundred feet away, waiting for me.

I walk cautiously around the gravestones down a tread-worn path, and stand next to her in front of an old skeletal tree stripped bare of leaves. She offers her hand again, and this time I hesitate a minute, before finally taking it.

I'm waterside in some dark place, the sound of water lapping against stone just barely audible. I can smell the dampness, a musk of fear. A door opens allowing a brief frame of light, and that's when I see all the women packed into a metal container. Most are constrained with zip ties, their mouths taped shut. They must be drugged. They're glassy eyed and barely breathing propped against the container walls. The door shuts, and I can hear the seal locking in place. Suddenly I'm standing dock side, a ring of armed men looking at me, and I realize that I'm the one in charge. I look at my hands, and I'm wearing a wedding ring. I hear yelling and I look up to see an older Gaby walking up with a gun in her hand. She lifts the gun and I think that she's come for me, but then puts it to her temple. She looks right at me and mouths something, then I see it, the moment she decides to do it.

Then I'm standing in a cemetery again, freezing and alone. One choice left, one last vision, but I think I already know what it is. I walk back out of the cemetery and back up the hill to my car, climb in and crank the heater. I toss the stub of my cigarette out the window and pull

out of the parking lot. I've delayed long enough. Any longer and my uncle will think that I'm not going to show. That, and Castlyn might be done for the night. Or she might be waiting for me to get home to show me the last image.

I drive down the highway, lights shining over the damp street. My thoughts are unfocused, trying to think of a single thing worse than Gaby killing herself. Was it because she couldn't stand what I'd become...or worse, was she's afraid of me? I can only hope that whatever the last choice is, that it's better than the other two. Harbingers offer options, but there's never any way of knowing which decision will lead to what outcome. I exit off the highway, and then take another right into a series of apartment complexes. I park in front of my building and look up to the lit window of my apartment.

It's four a.m. when I push open the door to my apartment. I know what to expect, but even knowing, I pause in the doorway. There's a broken wine bottle on the floor, red wine soaking into the grey carpet and two glasses lying haphazardly on the end table. Gaby's cell phone is laying on the kitchen counter. There's a frozen pizza box sticking out of the trash, and the smell of cooked pizza, mixing with the smell of lemongrass and lavender, and the scent of red wine.

I grab the baseball bat from behind the couch before walking toward the open bedroom. Before I met Gaby, I would've had a gun taped to the back of the couch, but Gaby hated them. Which is why I had hidden all of the extras inside the wall of our closet, because old habits die hard but not as hard as someone who didn't have a gun when all of Shijin showed up. I know my uncle is in my apartment, and that he's in my bedroom. The light is on, and I can smell the cologne he wears. I take a deep breath, sidle up to the entrance, and dart a glance around the edge of the frame. I pause, and then step into the doorway still holding the bat by my leg.

“Where is she?”

My Uncle Maikin is sitting on the end of my unmade bed staring down at a photo of me and Gaby after we’d gotten married. He looks up eating what seems to be the last of the pizza. He’s got a busted lip and a series of scratches down his arm. His iron gray hair is working its way loose in frazzled curls from the top knot he wears. He lifts an eyebrow and finishes chewing before saying, “You’re wife has quite a left hook. I’ll admit, I was not expecting that much of a fight. Then again, I wasn’t expecting you to have gotten married without your family...or your family’s permission.”

I scan the room looking for blood, my hand tightening on the bat. “Why are you here, Maikin?”

“That’s a funny question, and after such a rough welcome from your wife too.” The way he says *wife* indicates he’s more than angry.

He wipes his hands on the bedspread and hands me my marriage photo. Gaby and I smiling, both of us holding up the rings on our hands. “I mean, I show up at the front door and introduce myself like a civilized person, and your girl tries to shut the door on me. Says to me, ‘my husband is an orphan, he doesn’t have any family’.” Maikin sighs and says, “I was hurt, but then after talking to her for a bit, I realized that she has no fucking clue who you are, or that you never turned in the wedding certificate to the state. She had no idea that your real name isn’t Stephen Winters.”

I can feel my insides shaking. I can’t tell if he’s playing cat and mouse with me or not. If he knows about the baby then this is all just an act, and she’s already dead.

“Gaby didn’t need to know about the life I left because I have no plan on ever going back.”

Maikin takes out a phone which he taps against his leg and says blandly, “She’s fine by the way. Well, for now. You do understand that I wasn’t about to fight you. There was just too many ways that could go wrong, and we need you alive.”

It’s either flattering or insulting, that he thinks the only way I’ll win a fight with him is by calling up the dead.

He stands up. “The Old Man wants to see you, and he’s done waiting for you to get this...gaitzi weirdness out of your system.”

There’s no blood anywhere that I can see, so he’s probably telling me the truth about Gaby. I set the baseball bat down and lean it against the wall near me.

I say it again, this time more emphatically, “Where is she?”

“On her way to see the Old Man. I need you to talk to her and calm her down. I think if you tell her that those watching her are family she’ll behave, and your cousins won’t have to smack her around to keep her in line.”

He says it sarcastically, but there is just enough truth in his threat to set my nerves on edge. I don’t need to ask which ones, I’d just spoken with them, and now they had my wife.

He’s dialing his phone, he looks over at me and frowns. “Don’t look at me like that. They’ll keep their hands to themselves so long as you agree to come with me and pay a visit to your grandfather. Well, there’s also a wedding you’ll have to attend, but the whole thing should take less than a week.”

He puts the phone on speaker and sets it on the bed, then he unpins his hair and combs it back with his fingers while the line rings. After about the fourth ring someone picks up and says, “Sabre santos, that took long enough, Uncle Maikin.”

“Your cousin has agreed to come along peacefully. Put the girl on the line so he can talk to her.” The way he says girl, not wife, is deliberate. I don’t know if that’s to protect her, or because he wants my cousins to know that she’s not considered family.

“....go ahead and talk, girl.”

For a moment all I hear is the sound of cars speeding past and the wind, then Gaby’s shaking voice saying, “Hello? Stephen?”

“Gaby. I need you to listen to me for a minute, and just hear me. This whole thing was just some miscommunication on my part. The people who are driving you, that are with you, they’re my family. They just want me to go and talk to my grandfather, but they won’t hurt you ok? Do what they tell you so long as it seems reasonable. I’ll be joining you shortly.”

“What the hell is going on, Stephen? They barged into our apartment and there was someone else... They hit me and duct taped me and carried me out... What the hell, Stephen! You told me that you didn’t have any close family...”

When I don’t immediately answer she says, “You are such a damn liar. Your uncle told me that your name isn’t even Stephen. Are we even married?”

The only thing I can think about is the last image Castlyn had shown me, Gaby’s eyes when she pulled the trigger. “Gaby, I promise you that nothing is going to happen to you. Just stay calm and keep *quiet*.” I stress the word in the hopes that she’ll understand and not mention that she’s pregnant. I take a deep breath and say, “I love you, please remember that ok?”

One of my cousins says, “So did you guys break up?”

“No, we didn’t. It was a miscommunication, Tamsin.”

Greylin’s voice in the background, “You fell for a weakling cousin, she’s pretty, but your gaitzi girl can’t fight for shit.”

I recognize the twang in his voice and say, “Greylin, what happened before, that’s between us. Do we have an agreement or do I have to task shades to watch you?”

The line goes quiet and then he responds, “Calm down cousin, you don’t have to send spooks out, she’s safe as a little lamb among shepherds. Promise, on my honor.”

The tension eases in my shoulders. “I’ll hold you to it, Greylin.”

The line clicks and my uncle pins his top knot in place. He turns the phone off and tucks it back into his pocket. “That’s a lot of threats aimed at family, over a girl that’s not Shijin, and not your flesh and blood. Is she even your wife here among the gaitzi?”

He doesn’t wait for me to answer, just keeps talking. “She doesn’t know about your family, and while she’s strong for out here, she’s not strong enough to compete with Shijin girls for you.”

“Girls out here don’t compete the way Shijin girls do, but that doesn’t mean they’re not capable of it.”

“Actually it does. You forget who you are? That you have responsibilities?”

“I didn’t forget. I left. I decided to decline the role, or was my leaving unclear?”

He slaps me hard enough that my vision wobbles, and I take a step back because I wasn’t anticipating it. “Well, guess you’re back then. Your grandfather is an honorable man, and your leaving made him look weak with the other Shijin families, and there is no such thing as a weak Leveler. You also broke your word. That has consequences that you need to face.”

I rub my face. “What does he want?”

“I thought that would be obvious. Out of twenty-three sons, and sixty-four grandchildren, you are the only one capable of taking over as Leveler. You can control the dead better than all of the other dead speaks, so you can keep our justice and maintain the balance. He wants you

back to start learning your job.” My uncle looks around my room and shakes his head and says, “You’re a prince, and you live here in gaitzi land and call this a life?”

“I have a normal job that doesn’t require me to hurt anyone, and I don’t have to worry about getting blood on my hands.”

He sniffs the air, and scrunches up his nose. “No, not blood, you just reek of gaitzi booze. Very glamorous. You should shower before we go.”

“I work in a bar, of course I smell.”

There’s no point arguing with him though. I toss the photo on the bed and try to wrap my head around leaving the apartment that I’ve shared with Gaby for close to a year. Subtract the last three weeks after the breakup, which apparently she had been rethinking, if the wine and showing up at our apartment was any indication, and we had almost made it to a year. Without thinking I touch our wedding rings on a chain under my shirt, the place I’d taken to wearing both of them since she threw hers at me.

That last moment before she walked out, when she had squared her shoulders in her green student scrubs, frizzy hair pulling free from the braid she wore down her back, and her hand bunched in a fist as she launched her rings at my face, is the moment that is imprinted inside my eyelids.

I hold the rings over my heart.

It’s a small mistake, a gesture that gave away more than I had intended. My uncle sees it and he stops. His eyes focus in on me and he walks up to me, stopping only when his shoes touch mine. He doesn’t say anything for a moment, then he reaches up and rips the front of my shirt and takes a step back. Not because of the rings, which mean nothing in Shijin society because

married couples don't always wear rings. He saw my hand pause over my heart, the place that Shijin couples tattoo each other's names. And he'd guessed.

He shakes his head, and then hits me so hard that I go down, barely catching myself on the chest of drawers before hitting the ground. I attempt to stand up and he hits me again, knocking me back down. He looks down at me, his jaw bunched up and stands there. I think about getting up, but the look on his face isn't one that I recognize. He takes out his phone and dials it, and I sit up. He takes another step back, and I realize what he's going to do. I scramble up and lunge at him. He tries to dodge, but I catch him dead center. We hit the back wall of the bedroom, and the phone bounces off the far wall and hits the carpet. He grabs the side of my face and slams it into the wall, then tries to pin me using my arm. I push off the wall with my right leg, and he trips, so that we both land on the ground. For a split second I can't breathe, and he uses it to yank my arm behind me and put a knee in my back effectively pinning me to the ground.

He isn't winded when he says, "Do you have any idea what you've done? Do you have any idea what you've done to your wife?"

"So you admit that she's my wife."

He bends my arm back harder until I think he's going to dislocate it. "Does she have your name tattooed over her heart?"

I could lie, but the last thing I want is for him to task one of my cousins with stripping her to find out. "Yes, she has my name tattooed over her heart."

He lets my arm go and when I turn on my side he kicks me in the stomach. "You have no idea what you've done. If you did, you would be begging me to kill you."

I'm curled in a ball trying not to throw up, as he paces back and forth muttering to himself. He pauses and says, "Did you ever stop to think what would happen to her when the Suzu find out that you married a gaitzi and gave her the right to have the heirs to the Ryo throne?"

I try to get up, but he kicks me again. "You fucked up Fin. You can't call the dead right now can you? So I can stay here and beat you for as long as I want. I can call your cousins and have them beat your wife, and you can't do anything."

He's right. The minute I call the dead to ask them for help the information I'm holding inside will break open and run as free as the shades carrying it. What the dead speak knows, the dead know. What the dead know, they use to bargain with dead speaks.

"He won't kill her, there's nothing in it for him. He'll lose his heir if he does."

"Did you forget that you gave your word to marry into Suzu, and that your grandfather gave his word that you would as well? You had no right to marry anyone as a prince of Ryo. You could have married her as Fin, in a gaitzi church, under the gaitzi law, but Prince Ryo Fin, belongs to Ryo. You're not free any more than I am. You committed treason by marrying without permission."

The war that Castlyn had shown me, was becoming a very real possibility. I hadn't realized the difference, hadn't thought it out. Then again I hadn't planned on being found, that was the whole point behind a new identity, by not speaking to the dead, and not registering the marriage certificate even under my fake name. My social security number wasn't legit, and if I had put the marriage certificate in then the fake number wouldn't have matched my fake name. How do I explain any of this to Gaby?

The panic sets in. So I tell part of the truth. “I’m in love with her uncle, and she doesn’t know anything. She doesn’t have to be brought into this.”

He looks down at me and says, “I forget sometimes that you weren’t raised in our community from childhood, that you don’t know all the rules. I know that you chose to leave, but to the entire Shijin community, that makes no difference. They don’t care that you don’t want to be a prince. You were born a prince.” He shakes his head and snaps, “Get up.”

I sit up and flinch, when he offers his hand. He helps me up. “We have a very limited amount of time to fix this. If it can even be fixed..., and our options are limited.”

“You can’t kill her.”

He stares at me, this incredulous look on his face. “Why not? Because you love her? Her being alive is going to get a lot of people killed. If you’re a widower, then you haven’t broken any rules.”

I look away, because I don’t want him to see my level of desperation. I’m trying to save her, but the more I let him see my emotions the less likely it is that he’ll back down. “I need her, Maikin. She makes the dead quiet. I know you don’t understand, but then you don’t have them always around you.”

He doesn’t say anything, so I look back at him and he’s gone very still. “What do you mean, that they’re always around you?”

“I don’t have to call them. I don’t need a cemetery or rituals, that just helps control the dead. They’re always around me. It doesn’t matter if I call them or not.”

He rubs his eyes and says tiredly, “Your mother used to say that. She said that if she didn’t take her pills that she was always surrounded. The stupid gaitzi doctors convinced her

when she was growing up that she was bipolar. The only time she wasn't taking her pills and she felt safe was when she was around your father. She said he made the dead quiet."

It's the most he's ever spoken of either of my parents. It also means that he understands now about Gaby, about how important she is to me, at least as much as any person can who doesn't see the dead constantly. I wait for him to continue, but he looks sick.

"Why didn't my parents end up together?"

He sighs like the whole world should know this story and says, "Your grandfather was against it, he had your father marry someone else. He sent your mother away when he found out she was already pregnant. She married a gaitzi, your stepfather, and you know the rest."

I frown, but he waves away my questions. He rubs his face and says, "Then really, we only have two options. We convince your grandfather that Gaby is an asset, though how we can do that I have no idea...unless one of her parents is a drug lord?" He looks at me hopefully, and I shake my head. "Her father is a lawyer, a real estate lawyer."

"Then we really have one option. Convince the Suzu that you're worth more than a war, and that a new marriage contract could be in their favor. Let me think about this for a while... you go shower. We do have other things to do." My uncle pats my sore arm as he walks by me and says, "When you get out, pack your swords and the guns. Other than that, maybe a change of clothes or two is all you'll need. The Ryo is going to want to see you wearing traditional clothes during the wedding, tournament and when you speak with the Council."

I cross my arms over my chest. "What makes you think I have guns?"

He lifts his eyebrows and says sarcastically, "Don't you?"

I ignore him and say, "And Gaby? What am I going to do about Gaby in the middle of all the wedding festivities?"

“Relax, I’ll make sure your gaitzi girl is protected.” He pauses just inside the door and smirks. “Does she know anything about your previous engagement? Does she know anything about you at all?”

I shake my head. “She doesn’t know anything about the Shijin. I kept it from her because it wasn’t supposed to matter. I wasn’t supposed to have to go back. I don’t even know how to tell her about everything.”

He slowly shakes his head. “It’s amazing how much you’ve lied to her and yourself, Fin.” He pauses then states with a smile, “Does your girl even know about your gift?”

Of all the things I don’t want to discuss after being blackmailed into returning to my weird, law breaking family. “She doesn’t have any idea about my particular curse. And there’s a good chance that once she does know that she’s going to leave me.”

I grab some clothes out of the dresser and throw them over my shoulder. “I need to call my boss to tell him that I’m going to be out of town for what... a week?”

I look over at my uncle, and he’s fighting a laugh, he says, “I was guessing about the time. You know promptness doesn’t matter to the family except during shipping time. Family parties could take a day or three, or two weeks; it goes on until Ryo says it stops.”

I’m going to lose my job, and probably our apartment before I can get back, and that is no doubt deliberate on my grandfather’s part. Give no ground for the opponent to fall back to, the Sun Tzu rules of family politics and just one more of the weird contradictory rules of Shijin society. Balance, family and place, the three essentials of Shijin society that were inviolate, specifically, in that order. I hate that I’m going to be forced to play Shijin games again, or at least forced to play until I get Gaby back.

Just thinking about her stuck with people that she doesn't know, afraid that the people with her are going to hurt her, makes me feel sick. My uncle snorts. "Better work on your poker face, Fin. The Old Man finds out how weak this girl's got you, and I promise you he'll kill her and consider that he's doing you a favor."

I stuff the fear down into my guts and make my face emotionless. Maikin sighs and says, "I was worried there for a minute that you'd forgotten everything I taught you. You had me going, showing all your guts like that. Everyone is a predator in Shijin..."

I walk to my closet and take out the clothes, then open the panel in the back of the closet and take out my stock pile of guns, and say like I've planned this reveal. "I understand perfectly. Did you really think that I was just a bartender? Or that I'd forgotten everything?"

Maikin looks at the pile of guns admiration on his face as he says, "Where did you get the AK-12's? Those are Russian make."

In reality, the guns were part of the last shipment I sold before going clean. For the last three years I'd tried to be an average gaitzi. He doesn't need to know that. I shrug. "They fell off a truck. Haven't found homes for all of them yet."

"We'll take them with us. They might make a good wedding gift, or an act of contrition if we see the Old Man first."

"Whatever you want, Maikin. I'll go shower and leave the guns to you."

I shower, dry off and dress in under ten minutes. Fortunately, Maikin didn't mention the need to be ritually clean. Which could only mean that where ever we finally stopped, there would be a cleansing ritual which would take the better part of three hours in various tubs, soaps, sweat rooms and would involve scalding hot water, because gaitzi were of course dirty. Having lived in

their dirty society would make anyone dirty, and thus the cleansing ritual for anyone living among the gaitzi for more than a few days.

Much like everything else in Shijin, the cleansing ritual was meant to help maintain balance. Water couldn't wash away the memories the dead left with me. Not when I'd channeled the shades of murders and rapists into the world for them to do my family's bidding. Those memories left slime trails inside that didn't scrub clean no matter how many baths I'd soaked in.

I grab a bag from the closet and toss in some clothes and toiletries, then pull my hair up and into a severe ponytail, then wrap it into a bun and pin it in place. Maikin walks into my room and looks me over. "Well, you almost resemble a Shijin warrior from Ryo family, but I guess we'll see if your prospective Suzu bride agrees."

I grab my bag and look around and say, "I'm ready to go. There's nothing else I need here."

He snorts. "Leave your phone and your wallet. I don't want anyone tracking us, and you don't need them where we're going."

I toss my wallet and phone onto the bed, and as we walk through the kitchen I turn off the oven and toss the pizza remains into the trash. I feel odd leaving, like I'm forgetting something important. I close the door, lock it, and tap the alarm code. I hate being rushed. I follow him and the huge bag of guns he's carrying down two flights of stairs to where his metallic green Monte Carlo is parked. I climb into the passenger's seat because I already know I'm not driving, and he dumps the guns and other bags into the trunk. He climbs in and starts the car. The engine growls to life. "Put your seat belt on and pretend to be a good gaitzi boy long enough for us to get out of New Mexico. I don't need dogs sniffing the damn car."

I look over at him. "Wait, are you transporting right now?"

He lifts an eyebrow at me and says, “No, not now. I was before I got here, and we’ll be called later when we get a little closer to the border with Texas. We’ll stop in Tucumcari for a few hours. I just don’t want to be pulled over.”

I look at the time. Two hours until dawn. As soon as the sun rises the harbinger has to wait until the next day. That almost never happens.

“Relax, we won’t get called until five p.m. at the earliest. The shipment should be moving by seven p.m. tomorrow. You’ll have plenty of time to take a nap before you have to wake a few haunts to spy out the checkpoints.”

I stare at him, feeling the impending headache in advance of the one I’m going to have if I have to summon the dead on the fly. The distance to the check points in Texas could also be a problem unless I amp up. Not to mention that as soon as I talk to the dead, the other dead speaks will know about the baby. Shades love gossiping, they love interacting with the living and will do anything to stay and talk. My grandfather will know that I’ve married, and about the baby, as soon as he commands the dead during a trial or to protect a shipment. I need to find a way to protect Gaby before he finds out. Suzu will only find out if my grandfather or another dead speak tells them. Which only leaves the problem of summoning and tasking the dead to guard a shipment two hundred miles away.

“You do understand that there’s a limit to how far I am from the dead I control. Anything greater than maybe 150 miles and they could break free, or just decide to not listen.”

“Well, we don’t have much of a choice. You could always use some Shadow to amplify your reach. It would let you control them even from two hundred miles away.”

I look out the window, it’s still dark, but it won’t be for long. This is deliberate on his part, and he had even warned me not to trust him. I just hadn’t paid attention.

“Let me guess, you just happen to have some Shadow on you.”

“Of course. I was supposed to have a dead speak with me, but two weeks ago someone killed three of my nieces. So a long story told short, we’re down a dead speak on this route, but I knew you’d want to help your family out especially since the girls were poisoned by the Suzu, your spurned fiancée’s family.”

I turn to look at him, my unease growing. It was the image that Castlyn had shown me first, war. A marriage to cause a war, or prevent one.

The death of my female cousins was strategic, they were weaker dead speaks, and because they were female they were also considered not dynastically important. It was a warning written in blood, designed to motivate the Leveler to honor his grandson’s oath. A wedding to prevent a war. Only now my wedding could help contribute to a war.

“You show up, kidnap my wife and then you suddenly need me to help you protect a shipment through a check point. Was this your idea or grandfather’s?”

My uncle shakes his head, but there’s no regret on his face, to him, whatever happens next to me is justice. “This was the inner council’s decision. Your lack of responsibility has caused the death of three of your cousins, so the heads of all the families in Ryo have spoken up, and your grandfather had no choice but to listen. No one wants a war with Suzu over your inability to honor your word. The inner council doesn’t know about your marriage, otherwise they would have chosen a bloodier way to get your attention.”

I watch the blurs of green cactus and mountains creeping up to the sky and close my eyes. I lean my head back against the head rest. Tucumcari is at least four hours away, and there’s no point trying to discuss it. I need to make sure that when I summon the dead, and that the information about my marriage and the baby, is kept inside Ryo family. The only person who

can guarantee that is my grandfather. He's also the only person who can renegotiate a marriage contract for his heir, assuming he doesn't decide to kill me. Though, I do have sixty-one reasons to not be worried about that. When I call the dead to help with the shipment, I'll have to send a shade as a messenger to my grandfather. The other option would be to gain access to phone, but Maikin would be keeping an eye on his. I lean my head against the window and touch the rings under my shirt.

The first time Gaby had stayed over, she had curled up on the couch next to me, her short frame tucked up against me as we watched some movie that she had picked. Slowly, over the course of a two hour movie, she had ended up on top of me. Looking up into her face, into those amber eyes that seemed to be lit from within, I hadn't been able to breathe. I was struck dumb until she'd leaned down to kiss me. Then it was like she had curled into me and had taken possession. Her clothes on the floor of bedroom, dishes in the sink, damp towels hanging on furniture until it was no longer my apartment, but ours. Until the lack of her arm holding me down, while she slept half on top of me, was something to fill me with an unspeakable fear.

I close my eyes and try to picture her safe. I try to picture her forgiving me.

CHAPTER III

I wake up when the car stops. It's still dark, and we're parked in front of a hotel with a large turquoise cactus sign and a smaller, "Welcome to Tucumcari" sign, right next to it. I yawn and open the door, flip my legs out and stretch. I light a cigarette and look around, just mountains and a few buildings along a single four lane highway. Uncle Maikin comes out of the front office with a key. "We're good for the day. Tonight we'll locate a cemetery and you'll provide your family some help protecting our shipment. Then tomorrow we'll drive down to Crux, and you'll speak with your grandfather."

"I want to talk to Gaby. She deserves to know what's going on. Did they stop for the night?"

"Fair enough. One more call to your gaitzi girl. Let's get breakfast first since it's almost dawn. I'll text and see if they've thought to stop for food."

He starts walking towards the cafe attached to the hotel, expecting me to follow. I finish my cigarette and walk towards the building. Then I hear a child's laughter. I pause, I turn around and there's a tall brunette woman in a white dress in sandals walking hand in hand with her daughter toward a donut shop across the street. Light is starting to crest the mountains, and I find myself following her at a distance. Maybe it's her voice as she talks with her daughter or the way she seems to walk on her toes, but she seems so very familiar.

She walks into the donut shop with her daughter, and I trail behind them. I walk into the store just as she gets a cup of coffee from a large silver percolator, she turns and looks over at the

glass cases of donuts. The little girl is wearing almost the exact same dress, except that it's calf length and has small flowers along the top. The little girl picks up a tray and starts putting donuts on it. The woman smiles at the teenage boy behind the counter. "We'll have the usual this morning. Can you ring us up, Martin?"

The kid smiles and presses some numbers on the key pad. "It's going to be cold later, don't forget to take your jacket Mrs. Kramer. That'll be six dollars, same as always."

"I'll be sure to, Martin." She hands him the money and then pauses. Her hand frozen midair. Martin bites his lower lip, then picks up the phone and dials it. He lowers his voice and says, "Mr. Kramer, she's here in the donut shop and she just paused. No, she's not bothering anyone, but you just said to call....ok. I'll set Mayra up at a table until you get here."

For a moment Mrs. Kramer is perfectly still, then she puts her arm down and turns towards me and says, "I never got to be this tall. I always wondered...what it would feel like to be this way."

The hairs on my arms stand up, because it's my sister's voice coming out of this stranger's mouth. Body jumping isn't something that most shades can do. Just the ones that used to be dead speaks. I swallow and manage to get out, "I'm sorry that you didn't get to be taller..."

Martin behind the counter sees her talking to me and nods, then he whispers, "She's sick, just play along."

Mrs. Kramer doesn't turn around. She smiles sadly at me and says, "I know that you are. You also never tried to come home. Mama waited for you, and she called to speak with you, but they never let her talk to you. They threatened her all the time."

I take a deep breath. "I know that they kept her away. I was ten, and I didn't have a choice where I went."

“You broke her heart. She died because you broke her heart. I died because you broke her heart. I never got to fall in love, to marry, to have a child, the ghost of possibilities are all I have,” she pauses and Mrs. Kramer’s face half smiles as she says, “ghost, come on, that was funny.”

The emotion of her words, the way her accent changed, it was the same way our mother had spoken English, with the same flavor of Russian mixed with Armenia vowels. It was hard to breathe, because the last time I’d spoken to my mother was when my uncle took me away from her. It was the last time I’d seen her. Death by fire had removed any chance I had to say good bye to our mother, she’d been reduced down to ash because of the accelerant she used. Her shade gone beyond my ability to speak to her. My sister hadn’t been so lucky. Someone had tried to save her from the fire. She’d been burned so badly that it had taken only a day for her to die in the hospital. Her shade had been trapped by well-meaning gaitzi who had stored her body in a freezer after she’s died. To any other Shijin, it would have been a harmless amount of time, but because she was a dead speak, she’d become trapped even after they’d cremated her body upon its release. How could have anyone have known that our mother could produce another dead speak when she was married to a gaitzi?

“Castlyn....” What can I say to her? She’s right. I hadn’t tried hard enough to go home. Not when I knew our mother was hanging on by a thread, not when I knew she was seeing things that were driving her slowly crazy with paranoia. Not when my grandfather had promised retribution if I tried to visit her.

My sister holds out a hand. “One last time and I can go. I was promised that I could go beyond this place.”

I take her hand, and suddenly I'm standing on the edge of a cliff, the sun rising over red rocks similar to those in the Garden of the Gods. A woman wearing a black veil holding a silver urn stands at the edge of the cliff next to me and opens the container, she tosses the ashes out where they're caught by the wind and carried off. A little boy is holding onto her dress. He's looking right at me and he says clearly, "There's a man over there."

The veiled woman says, "Don't talk to him. If you do, he'll stay and be trapped here. He needs to go."

I recognize her voice, and the name on the silver urn. I take a step towards them... and I'm suddenly back in the donut shop. I'm still holding the Mrs. Kramer's hand, and when I let go she blinks at me. She says, "I'm sorry. Did I grab you? I just... I have this weird form of epilepsy that makes me space out... Are you ok?"

I wipe my eyes. "I'm fine. You didn't do anything."

I turn and leave. Her questions, "Did something happen?" echoing behind me, as I walk out of the donut shop and try to catch my breath. I cross the street to where my uncle is standing in front of the hotel cafe with two coffees and a white bag.

Maikin looks me over. "I thought you were going to follow me in, then I turn around and you're following some woman into a donut shop across the street. Not for nothing, but don't you have enough women to occupy you already?"

I take one of the coffees, and try to think of a single thing to say, but I'm numb. Three choices, but only one real option. Castlyn, my own personal harbinger, the one who had been betrayed by everyone, including me, was gone. No more options, just another day.

"Here, don't drink coffee on an empty stomach or you'll end up with an ulcer." My uncle hands me a taco from the bag. I unwrap it, but the smell warns me before I take a bite.

“This one has bacon.”

He frowns. “Ok, so take this one instead, potato and egg with cheese.”

I take the breakfast taco and take a bite, then spit it back out. “That one was cooked in bacon grease. Can I just get a cinnamon roll or some toast?”

“You’re still a vegetarian?”

“Yeah, still am. So bacon is pretty much the worst thing for me.”

He sighs and says, “I thought that you’d outgrown your mother’s weird dietary habits.”

“You say weird dietary habits, but I say prevention of nightmares in which I experience the dreams of dead animals.”

He tosses the breakfast tacos into a trash can. “I had always assumed that you keeping to your mother’s diet was a way of annoying your grandfather.”

I snort and mumble, “I rarely had to work at making him mad.”

“Your mother was a vegetarian too, she’d eat fish and eggs, but she couldn’t eat meat. Not even when she was pregnant with you or Castlyn.”

“I thought you didn’t know her all that well?”

For a moment he looks like he might say something more, but then he says, “Let me go grab some pancakes, take the key and go back to the room.”

I take the plastic key from him. “When are you going to tell me the truth?”

He shakes his head and says over his shoulder as he’s walking away, “I don’t know what you’re talking about Fin.”

He walks back into the cafe, and I check the room number. Five seven five. I look at the doors lining the outside of the building and spot our room number six doors down.

When Maikin returns with the food it takes about seven minutes to eat, nine minutes to finish my coffee and about three hours for my cousins to return uncle Maikin's text. They call around noon, their phone crackling on speaker from the distance Hessin's voice. "We've stopped in Abilene for a few hours of sleep. We'll be home in about six hours."

I stare at it on the bed, trying to figure out how I can make this whole weird situation a little less weird. I hesitate because I hate having to ask him for anything, but I don't exactly have a choice. "Hessin, could you put Gaby on?"

I hear crunching as the line goes silent, but instead of Gaby speaking it's Greylin's voice that comes over the line. "She doesn't want to talk to you. Apparently she didn't know that you're engaged. She also has no idea that you talk to dead people. Funny, I didn't think she'd take it that hard."

And there it is, he didn't have to touch her to inflict pain. He kept his word in typical Shijin style. It was unnecessary and generally mean natured, which is how I know that it was Greylin who had talked in front of Gaby. "How kind of you to enlighten my wife. Please let me know how I can return that favor."

"Oh, no problem cousin," he says sarcastically, "you've done plenty for me already."

Before he hangs up, Maikin says, "Hessin, stay there in Abilene until I tell you to move. I want to make sure that everything is set before we go to Crux."

"We'll stay put, on your orders uncle. Anything else I need to know. Darlyn mentioned that our little gaitzi has a tattoo over her heart. She said it looked a lot like Shi'ent script."

"It's being handled on this end, Hessin. Please tell Darlyn that while I appreciate her taking it upon herself to investigate, that she needs to keep her mouth shut about anything she might see until I tell her to talk. And that goes double for Greylin. Last thing I need is him saying

anything in front else in front of the gaitzi that sets her off. Ryo family is about to get put in an uncomfortable position, and I need to be holding as many cards as I can.”

I should have known that Hessin would have a full quill with him. When I’d left, he’d already had the rank to command a full quiver of soldiers. A quill was the minimum he probably traveled with, and Darlyn was an obvious choice for a fourth since she was Uncle Maikin’s eldest daughter. It also meant that Hessin was politically aligned with Uncle Maikin because most Ryo soliders wouldn’t add a woman to their command, not even one who was half Zhen.

“Don’t worry about it, Uncle. Darlyn has never talked out of turn.”

“Hessin, until further notice you don’t talk to anyone but me. I need you to understand that we have a situation that could seriously make waves unless it’s handled with discretion.”

“I understand, Uncle. I’ll make sure that we keep radio silent until we hear from you. Are you sure you won’t need us down in El Paso with the second shipment? I’ve heard that the border cops are getting a little difficult to bribe lately.”

“We should be fine. Fin will manage the shipments, but if push comes to shove I’ve planned for some Zhen to be hanging around at the checkpoints ready to tag in.”

“Alright, I’ll sit on standby.”

Maikin swipes across the screen ending the call.

El Paso is over three hundred miles away. Not two hundred. And this is the first I’m hearing about a second shipment. I look over at Maikin and say, “So, two shipments and three hundred miles. That’s not suicidal at all.”

He lifts his eyebrows. “Are you saying you can’t do it? Or are you scared to do it? I need to know which it is before I agree to help you. Because if you pull this off, you have something

to bargain with. If you don't succeed and you die, then I promise on my honor that your wife will be safe."

So a win- win in his book. I calculate the likelihood of my survival at less than thirty percent. Three hundred miles was stupid far, and if I lost control of the dead or they broke free, then, I'd have no way to put them back and they'd drain me to death. Added to the distance was the difficulty of two separate shipments. It meant dividing the shades and dividing my attention which increased the chance that they'd slip free and drain me to death. This could be Tulsa all over again.

My teacher, Uncle Gawain, had forced me into summoning a full seven shades in order to protect a shipment moving from Tulsa down to Wichita Falls some two hundred and fifty miles. It was under his supervision, and it should have been safe, but I'd lost control of the shades because of the distance and panicked when they'd dragged me out of the cemetery. The only reason I'd survived was because I'd made it a habit to keep a knife on me, and I'd cut the shades free. I was thirteen, and I hadn't known that the cost of my failure to control the dead would be sixteen gaitzi drained of their life force by the escaped shades, dead by morning. Uncle Gawain had beat the hell out of me, then he'd taken me to help catch the shades I'd released. The beating was less painful than experiencing the joy that the shades had felt when they'd drank down the living like they were walking bottles of wine. My Uncle had introduced me to Shadow the next time I'd summoned the dead and to the single worst hangover the next time he forced me to summon the dead.

Neither experience was one that I wanted to repeat, but if I didn't at least attempt it, then Uncle Maikin would probably kill me. The funny thing about it was that Uncle Maikin and Uncle Gawain are full brothers, not half-brothers like the rest of the uncles.

“I can do it, assuming you have some of our dead to pull it off.”

Seven o'clock.

We pull off of the expressway near a clump of scrub trees and faded picnic tables and keep driving down a narrow road that winds for the better part of five minutes. I fold my arms over my chest and ask, “Whose cemetery are we going to?”

“Just one of the oldest Shijin cemeteries in New Mexico.”

He turns the car, the head lights pointing out into the dark, before landing on a tall narrow tombstone behind a rusted wrought iron fence. The faded carved letters spelled Suzu. I stare at the tombstone. It had to belong to one Suzu's past matriarchs.

“Are all of the dead Suzu?”

He looks over at me shaking his head and I'm not sure if it's in disbelief or sadness. “Did you think that the inner council was going to make it easy for you to come back after abandoning your family for four years? I taught you better than running away. Consider this just another test.”

I didn't think it would happen this way, but in their eyes I had run away. I was practically gaitzi, no, I was worse since I had chosen to leave. This was what Shijin did to make a point when reasoning with a gaitzi, or a fool, didn't work. There was even a name for it, tzi'chi. In English it was pronounced fucked.

Taking a girl they thought I might care about, was just about snaring me in order to force this situation. The Ryo inner council wasn't known for half measures. The Suzu dead would know the minute I called them, what I had done and how I had betrayed my word. If I could

convince them to do what I wanted, and survived, then I was strong enough that I was worth forgiving for my crime of running away. They didn't know about my wife, or the baby, so I had to make sure that I got grandfather on my side before they found out.

The only option that I have if I want to live long enough to prevent a war, means snorting enough Shadow to wake and hold the dead across three hundred miles, which if I was in practice would only be amazingly difficult, instead of possibly fatal in my current state, and then agreeing to whatever deal the dead decided to hold me to. Obviously, I would also have to honor my word and marry into Suzu, with whatever added crap they decided to add to the marriage contract when we renegotiated. Tzi'chi didn't begin to cover my situation.

I listen to the wind moving through the trees and climb out of the car and ask numbly, "Did you bring everything I need to call them and lay them?"

"I told you that I had planned on having a dead speak with me," he says casually as he pops the trunk. "Everything you could possibly need... plus enough for twice the number."

Of course, there's the lovely third option, which is really just insulting. "Which of my uncle's is offering me the option of suicide?"

He pulls out a large bag full of probably everything I have ever used, and sets it down next to the wrought iron gate. "That particular gift was from Camlin, father to Corlyn who was poisoned by your fiancée's family. If you died foolishly calling more than seven of the dead, then his grudge against you would be ended." He lifts his eyebrows and says, "You need to get started. We don't have much time before they hit the first check point."

"Would you really have killed me if I didn't agree try to do this?"

My uncle looks me in the face with what is a typical Shijin bland expression says quietly, “If you hadn’t agreed, then you wouldn’t be my nephew and killing you wouldn’t be a crime, but a necessity.”

Some people have normal families. I walk past him and pick up the bag. “Wait outside the gate. When it gets within ten minutes of the sun, let me know with a whistle.”

He follows me to the gate and says to my back, “I raised you Fin, but I didn’t raise a coward willing to let other people die....”

I stop to let him finish, but he doesn’t finish what he was saying. I turn and walk toward the large Suzu matriarch stone in the center of the cemetery which has fresh camellias sitting in front of it. Even though the stone is old, there are signs that it has been kept clean. The grass has been watered and the flowers sitting in front of it are only a few days old. There are signs that someone has come to pay tribute with candles and wine, small bits of wax near the base of the stone.

I set the bag down and dig out only seven small silver chalices, and an equal number of bee’s wax candles wrapped in new born lambskin. I pull out a parchment wrapped loaf of homemade bread made from hand ground flour that still smells of rosemary and thyme. I open a bottle of wine that had fermenting for the better part of a hundred years in a Kyrin cellar, with a corkscrew that I’d bought from a dollar store back in Texas, and then go to each of the seven largest graves and set a chalice full of wine at each of them. I light candles and pull out incense sticks that are so strongly scented, that I’ll still be able to smell for two days after I put them out.

It’s been more than four years since the last time I called the dead and tasked them, but I had done it some many times before I left, that my body remembers each movement. That is the danger in it, power wants power, and once I call them up it will be hard to not enjoy the rush. I

take out a knife honed to the sharpness of a katana. The handle is five hundred years old, and formed from the jaw bone of one of my direct progenitors. I slice my left hand along the heart line, over the old scar, blood wells up and the rush hits. I run my hand over the fresh bread, and then divide the blood soaked bread into equal sections with the same knife. I set a slice down on top of each small chalice. My grandfather had always said the reason for feeding the dead was that the dead can only take what they are offered, but if offered, they will take the essence of food, the flavor of wine, but they always preferred the taste of life. Blood was a conduit, a line that they could hold onto to pull themselves out of the darkness of the between place where they existed until they turned to dust.

I take out the packet of Shadow and create three generous finely powdered gray lines on the top of one of the tombstones, then snort all three lines. It's like being punched in the face. There's the initial shock, followed by dizziness and then acceptance of the truly terrifying clarity of being able to see not only the dead, but past them into the darkness from where they've entered the living world. I chant in the Shi'ent, what my grandfather called the language of trapped angels. It sounds very like the soft whisperings of a hundred voices, the syllables all roll around in the mouth, because it was never designed for human tongues.

In the Chronicles, the records mention that to outsiders, Shi'ent sounds like nonsense, but Shijin hearing a priest chant will take three steps back because they know that the dead are coming. I lift my arms up and take a deep breath, they pass through me into the world, and as they pass through I gain knowledge of their names and their lives. I am their language, the names of their children and a thousand, thousand days lived in the sun. I am their memories both kind and cruel. The power hits with a rush and for a moment, the darkness whispers that there is so much more that I could do.

Even with my eyes closed I can feel them gathering around me. Their cold still forms, their icy thoughts traveling through my own like a freezing river through a crack in a dam. A small cold hand touches my arm, and I open my eyes to see a child's shade standing next to me. The boy shakes his head at me like he's sad for me, then puts his hand in mine. His life was a brief candle's flame blown out by his own mother. His memories up until the last moment are full of warmth which makes the last moment so much crueler. All because he had started to see the shades which was something no child born to two Suzu should be able to do.

I look out at the other shades that have gathered. Suzu men and women staring at me, waiting. They are dark starless outlines against the night. I pick up the silver needle with the black thread and say in my thoughts, "I ask your service to Shijin, to the Ryo family. What price would you have of me to protect what is ours?"

The shades that I have called, shift closer, and I can feel their words more than hear them, the images of things. They are dressed for the late eighteen hundreds, early nineteen hundreds. The women are in long dresses with long sleeves, the men in jeans and leather chaps, long hair hidden underneath their huge cowboy hats. Their eyes are almond shaped and their high cheek bones sharply angled. They could be any one of a dozen different races, but during that time period they were most likely descendants from either the Chinese who had arrived to build railroads, or Native Americans in the area.

Suzu was matriarchal and matrilineal. Women controlled the herb craft, whereas men controlled the cash flow and money laundering. The Suzu Matriarch, Cateryn, stood at the front of the dead, a head above all of those around her, chin up. She moved close, standing in front of me, her thoughts were twisted spikes of cold, and her condemnation of me was designed to push

me back. When I didn't move, she pushed harder until just standing in front of her was like being crushed slowly by an ice flow.

Then, suddenly she stopped. She nods once. I have passed her test. She holds her right hand over her heart, and her ask is that she be invited to the wedding. As soon as I accept her terms the others step forward and present their terms. Their demands are exactly what I thought they might be, each new demand similar to the previous. I don't have to accept their demands. I don't have to have seven tied to me, but seven is the strongest number and for the distance, I need a full string. The boy's shade looks up at me and his ask is simple enough, just to pass on a message to his mother, and to burn his body. His secret, his bastardy, his Ryo blood, and the ability that had gotten him murdered, was crying out for reparation. I agree to his demand, and to five others. The last demand is to move these dead to be with the other Shijin in Crux, Texas. I say yes to all of their demands.

Each of the shades offers me their hands after touching them to their hearts, a pledge of honor. I hold up the silver needle and run it through their offered hands, before pushing the needle through the skin on the top of my left arm and pulling it through, lacing it back and forth through my skin seven times. I tie a knot and slide the needle under the stitches. Blood drips down my arm as I walk out of the cemetery. The dead who had been trapped by the iron bars walk free. Just like the old Ryo nursery rhyme, "attach the living to the dead, and watch as reality bends" followed by the last line, "from dusk until dawn, only, or join them forever in rest". I set them to their tasks.

My uncle's voice breaks through my concentration, "Have them scout the roads, those blocking and watching them, which are guarded by dogs, cameras, how many and where. I need to know now."

I can feel my uncle's eyes on me. He's watching from beside the car. I look at him and say, "Call the Zhen who are guarding the shipment. I'll know in a moment which direction. Have them keep the line open when they travel because they may need to make adjustments."

He dials the number, but he doesn't look away from me. "Where are you? Ok, hold on he's got them searching the routes..."

They are hunting for what I need, and I get images fed to me of the roads, the checkpoints and the spots with cameras. I am given a thousand, thousand details that I have to organize and prioritize. My uncle has a map spread out on the hood of his car, and I draw x's through the routes with camera's, and those with dogs, the routes with multiple guards and those close to shift changes.

My mouth starts spewing information, "Find a way to get on the expressway, and then get off on route 7. There's a better chance that direction and it's close to a Ryo warehouse where we can open the shipment and change guards."

I can feel all of the shades condensing over the shipment, and I can feel the life inside of it, and the death. There were mistakes, they'd over packed the shipment and people were dead inside it. Time has no meaning, it simply draws out as the miles blur by. Then the check point. It's a two lane with a small office attached, no dogs, two men in green uniforms both look tired. The shades blur the images being received by the cameras and stand next to both of the checkpoint guards. They start to fidget, the uncomfortable feeling of being watched. The weird cold on an otherwise warm day.

One of the guards has the driver stop. I snap back to my body and there's silence on the open phone line. Then there's a voice speaking in the background to the driver, then the driver saying, "Thank you, appreciate it."

The big rig gears shift and a voice says quietly over the line, “I’m clearing the checkpoint and heading toward the warehouse. Call ahead to let them know I’m coming.”

I can feel the tug of the shades trying to follow the shipment, but I hold them still...waiting. Maikin dials the phone again, another call and says, “Change of route, they’re going to the warehouse outside of Midland. We have to find a suitable vehicle so we can divide the shipment. Also, have one of the Suzu healers around. They might have over packed the shipment again.”

The fatigue is starting to kick in. My head is starting to ache. “When I can cut them loose?”

“We have one more shipment going out to Mexico, and we need the route closest to El Paso. They’ve also got a suspicious tail. It looks like someone might want to jack the cargo.”

“Give me a minute,” I say before using the knife that I didn’t realize that I was still carrying to take a hit off the bag of Shadow in my pocket. The rush hits; it’s a high pitched whine beginning in my ears. I feel my uncle move closer and say, “Which route can we use?”

“Take 54, onto 375 then cross I 10, it should take you over the border. I’ll blind the cameras, but there’s a chance that it was left open as a channel by the border patrols to funnel traffic. Keep the line open until you’re clear.”

I close my eyes and wait for him to say they’re clear. Exhaustion is eating at my concentration, the pull is like physically being stretched, and my joints feel hyperextended. My bones ache. My uncle’s voice cuts through my pain, “The second shipment is being jacked. We have two trucks both loaded with armed men coming up behind the rig. Our semi is a red and white, there are two black trucks hassling it. They brought another semi to transfer the load if they can take it.”

I task three shades to guard our semi and turn the other four to one of the trucks loaded with men and guns. The shades are burning with rage, so I have the shades send small rocks at the truck's windshield, one, two and then dozens rain down. The driver tries to slow down, but it's too late. The shades pinpoint the front left tire until it pops sending the truck off the road as the driver tries to control the spin out. The truck skids off the road and hits a fence post and rolls, sending gun men like a spray out of the back of the truck. The shades try to circle the downed truck and the bleeding men, but I yank them back.

I refocus on the second truck which is slowing, and the gun men are trying to find a target. I point the shades at the triggers, so many triggers. Gun fire erupts and a bullet catches the driver. The men fire upon themselves, triggers pulled by unseen fingers. Confusion followed screams. The truck slows to a stop and one lone gunman climbs out from the back of the truck, he drops his gun and is running. For a moment I want to hunt him down. I want him to bleed. There's a dark pull of power from blood shed... I force myself to look away as the shades circle him like carrion crows. The shade of the boy tied to me stands in the way of the other shades, preventing them from taking down the survivor.

The dead are drawn back to the blood pooling in the back of the truck, the men's cries. I pull them back with my will, and physically start walking back toward the cemetery. The boy shade, the child dead speak resting in a Suzu cemetery follows me, somehow commanding even the Suzu matriarch. I need to cross back behind the fence and bring them back in before they realize that I'm getting too tired to fight them, too tired to hold them back. I drag myself the first two steps and grab the corner of the gate before they realize that I'm taking them back to their graves. They try to weigh me down as I cross the threshold, and it's like carrying six people on my back, but the boy is helping me, pulling me forward. I can feel him walking with me, and his

will inside mine, combining with mine. I'm just inside the gate. I open my mouths and say, "I, Ryo Fin, gatekeeper, dead speaker, Lord of Dusk and Dawn, the time between; I demand you return to the deep, return to the place between."

I call them by name. "Suzu Shaimin, son of Ryn return to the deep." I cut the first tie and the shade bows out over his grave. "Suzu Herlin, son of Remin, return to the deep." I cut the second tie and he fades into his grave. With each dismissal I find myself more exhausted until the matriarch appears. She holds out her hand to me. She's offering her knowledge freely to me. I shake my head, put a hand tiredly to my heart and say, "Catryn, Matriarch of Suzu, I ask you return to the deep, I will keep my promises to you." Her form steps over her grave and she bows, holds up her hand and fades back into the stone. Last, the boy. He stands next to his small plain head stone. "Aarin, son of Sharyn Matriarch of Suzu, return to the deep. I will return to free you before the end." The boy, who would have been a powerful dead speak had he lived, touches his heart and fades. He could have taken my body. At one point when he had controlled the other shades I'd felt him wanting to linger, but he hadn't tried to stay. Yet, I knew that he wasn't tied to his body the way the others were.

I wipe tears off my face with the back of my hand and force myself to continue moving when all I want to do is collapse. I take the salt from the bag I've left on the Matriarch's tombstone, and as I walk backwards out of the cemetery I draw a line of salt between the two iron gates, before closing the actual gate. I'm bleeding from the places on my arm that I'd tiredly hacked into while cutting the shades free. I stumble back and Maikin grabs me, he looks at my arm and sets me down in the back of his car, he pulls another bag out of the trunk of his car and opens it, digging out bandages and tweezers. He wraps the deeper cuts and plucks out bits of string. "The shipment made it across the border. You did it."

I lean my head against the front seat blood running from my nose. “They know, so he knows. I need to speak to him before the inner council gets to him. You promised that you’d help her.”

He sighs and says, “You’re in no condition to talk to him. I’ll call him and let him know what you did, and that you want to talk to him when you’ve recovered. This will be enough to sway him.”

I look up at him everything starting to go black around the edges. “Promise?”

Black.

I wake up to agony of light piercing my eyes and my nerves are exposed wired it’s like I’m on fire. I feel someone grab my arm and then the pinch of a needle. In a moment, I’m floating and the pain is gone. I blink and the light fades to a normal level of bright. I can see the edges of a person, and then someone putting something on my face. I raise my hand and touch metal frames and realize that they’re sunglasses. My uncle is sitting on the edge of the bed next to me. “You nearly over dosed. Too much Shadow was screwing with your adrenal glands, made you hypersensitive and hyper reactive. I had to dose you with morphine.”

With the pain gone I feel like I’m floating. “I feel really good now.”

“That’s because you’re not feeling anything, and you’re high as a fucking kite. I wouldn’t normally use morphine, but I didn’t really have a choice.” He stands up looking exhausted and says, “When it wears off you’re going to be in pain, but the Shadow will be out of your system, so it should be tolerable.”

“Gaby?”

“She’s still with your cousins, but I’ve gotten an audience for you with your grandfather. He was impressed with what you did, and apparently it also impressed the other families enough that they’ve agreed with his choice of you as heir. You are unofficially the heir to Ryo.”

“And the men attacking the shipment?”

My uncle shrugs his face mystified as to why I’m even asking. He says, “What about them?”

“What happened to them?”

He sighs and I can tell he wants to be done with this conversation. “You know what happened to them. They’re dead. Zhen reported back that most died from either a truck flipping, or from self-inflicted gunshots. The Zhen only had to clean up two that were still moving on scene and tracked a third who had tried to escape across the border. Poor guy apparently lost his mind, said the dead were attacking,” Maikin says it with lifted eyebrows, “imagine that.”

There were ten men between both of those trucks. Ten people that were dead. For what? I stare at the wall. If I bring them up he won’t understand, he doesn’t count them as important because they’re thieves. Their loss is less than nothing. “What was in the second shipment?”

My uncle shakes his head and mutters, “That doesn’t matter. You know it doesn’t matter. We just move the shipments for the other families and collect our cut. Not knowing is part of the deal.”

“It was guns. The only thing that Zhen could be that worried about. It’s why I got tasked with it. They’d already been paid up front.”

“Like I said, it doesn’t matter. You did what I asked you to do and you helped your family. You’ve demonstrated that you belong, that you’re loyal.”

I shift and stare at the bandage around my arm, then I turn my head to look at him, what I want to say is that I only did this to get my wife back, but in his eyes that's weakness. Worse, it was more than weakness, it was gaitzi foolishness. So I say something that he will understand, "Their blood is staining me."

For a moment he just looks at me, then he pats my cheek like I'm a child again. "I understand. We'll go home to Crux and you can be made clean." He stands up and says, "Let me settle with the hotel manager and I'll take everything down to the car. We can be home in less than two days."

The last thing I want to do is return to Crux, Texas, but it is the fastest way to ensure Gaby's safety and figure out how to prevent the casualties that I've seen in the future. It is also the fastest way to get dead, especially if I'm not sober enough and quick enough around the Suzu. I swing my legs over the side of the bed. The floor is a thousand miles away even though I know my feet are touching it. I can't get to the phone to call Gaby, and it's barely three feet away. Even if I could, I don't have my cousin's number.

I look around the room and see my uncle's cell phone on the side table next to the bed under a magazine. I reach across and pick up the phone. The screen is unlocked and it's fully charged. It's also a trap. Maikin isn't forgetful, and he doesn't want me contacting her, so leaving the phone is deliberate. He wants to be sure of me, and he wants to see how addicted I am to her, what I'm willing to risk. I hold onto the phone and feel sick. I can't call even though I want nothing more than to hear her voice.

I set the phone back on the side table, on top of the magazine where Maikin will see it, and know that I saw it as well. I lie back down on my side and pull the covers up. I fall asleep.

CHAPTER IV

Uncle Maikin wakes me up by shaking my shoulder. It only takes once, and I'm awake. I open my eyes to a room full of daylight and quiet. Well, quiet if I ignore the shade pacing in the corner. My uncle looks worried, as much as he is capable of demonstrating anyways. "You slept an entire day and a half. I tried to wake you up and you didn't respond at all. I was about to call for a healer."

I slowly sit up, every muscle in my body straining and joints crackling as I try to get upright. "I feel like shit. What time is it?"

"It's almost noon, and you need to get up and shower. I brought you a change of clothes, but we are running late. We should've started back to Texas yesterday, so I had to call and adjust the meeting with the Old Man."

I stand up and parts of my spine pop. There are pins and needles moving up my left calf muscle. "I want to stop over and speak with Gaby before I return to Crux. She can't walk into that town without knowing where she is and at least some of the rules."

"We can probably stop over for a few hours without it making much of a difference. Your weakness is showing. Be careful not to demonstrate it in front of the council or your grandfather," he says it casually, but there's also judgement.

"I need her because I am stronger than every other dead speak in Ryo. You brought me to a hotel that feels clean to you, but it's a place where I know twenty-two people have died in the

last two hundred years. I know this, because they gather in the corners of the room and whisper their lives in my dreams, and even right now, into my waking mind.”

I take a step towards him and say, “She’s not my weakness, more like she’s what keeps me sane and calm.”

He looks me in the eye and pats my face very deliberately. “There’s my nephew. I was wondering how long it would be before you started pushing back. You almost sounded like a Shijin warrior. You are forgetting one thing though...”

He hits me in the face, and I feel the crunch as my nose breaks. I take a step sideways in hopes of avoiding getting hit again, but he catches me in the ribs. I hit the ground because I wasn’t expecting to fight and that’s the point. I had stepped up to him, but I hadn’t been able to back it up, and he called me on it. Just like any Shijin warrior would the moment I stepped up to them and I’m not ready to back it up. He offers me his hand and I hesitate, he nods, “Now you’re starting to act like a Shijin. Anyone, even I, can have other motives for helping you. What you do, reflects on me as the one who raised you. Your leaving, harmed my standing in Ryo. When I return with you, I gain it back but only if you are returned as Shijin. Do you understand my motivations now?”

It’s not exactly a threat, but it is a promise. I take the offered hand, and he helps me halfway up before hitting me again and letting me drop to the floor. I sit on the ground for a moment absorbing the anger and sadness and the feeling of stupidity at being betrayed when he had warned me about it in advance. No one in Crux has only one motivation. My uncle has motivations he will never tell me. I keep my face composed into a mask. I had accepted that he was telling me the truth, but I only knew what he’d told me. I had trusted him. He’s still standing over me, and I’m seven again, looking up at him, but this time I’m not afraid.

“Get up Fin, and this time learn.”

I keep my eyes on him as I get up. “That depends, what am I supposed to be learning?”

He watches me get up. He says casually, “Now that you’re finally acting like a Shijin, but you’re still thinking like a gaitzi. That was your mother’s doing, or perhaps it’s your wife’s influence. We’ll have to keep working on that before we get to Crux. You’re are right though, we really should stop to see your wife and cousins before we continue.”

There’s something about the look on his face that I don’t trust. Something happened while I slept. If he spoke to the Old Man then there’s a chance he knows about the baby. Meeting up with my cousins and Gaby in Abilene could be a trap. The problem is that I didn’t know what kind of trap.

He motions in the direction of the shower. “I’ll be waiting downstairs for you. We should get on the road in the next hour.”

I watch him leave, and wait until the door is closed and I hear his footsteps walking away before putting a hand to my ribs. I run my fingertips over them lightly, and I know that at least one is broken. The rib, plus the busted nose, was deliberate. He wanted to see if I would crack and show emotion if he attacked me when I wasn’t prepared. It was just another test to see if I am ready to face my grandfather. There would be more tests, and they would get more vicious. That’s what made Shijin society so very different from gaitzi society. Shijin constantly tested each other, their families and their friends for loyalty, level of responsibility and worthiness. More importantly, Shijin tested each other for dominance, and to establish their place. Without a place, without balance in that place, then a person was just a gaitzi or worse... broken. Either word was seen as an insult.

I walk into the bathroom and wash my mouth out in the sink. Unfortunately, tests were always painful. I wash the blood off my face and snap my nose back into place, which almost makes me fall over it hurts so damn bad. I turn on the shower and pull my hair free, then drop my underwear. I shower quickly and towel off, then dress in what my uncle left me. I brush my hair back up into a ponytail and then wrap it into a bun. I'm all the way dressed when Maikin returns, he looks me over and hands me an ice pack. "Your choice as to where you apply it. I also bought some over the counter pain killers and water. They're in the car."

I take the ice pack and apply it to my nose which is throbbing in time to my heartbeat. After living with him as my guardian for years, I know that this is as close as I will ever get to his type of apology. "Thanks. How long until we reach my cousins?"

"You mean how long until you get to see your wife?"

"Yes, that's what I mean."

He shrugs and says, "Five to six hours depending on if we decide to stop to eat."

I move the ice pack to my ribs and flinch as I press it against them. "Then we should get going. We might be able to get there in time to have a nice family dinner."

"I'm glad that you've decided to acknowledge that we are your family again. I'll be sure to tell your cousins. They were worried that you would hold this abduction against them, when you and I both know that they're only following your grandfather's orders."

I follow him out of the hotel room and down the stairs. I try not to think about what would happen to them if she's not ok. I was seven and helpless when I was taken from my family. They're not going take Gaby from me. "As long as Gaby is fine, then there's nothing for them to worry about."

We walk outside, and I blink against the glare of the sun, and start to feel nauseous. “Did you buy any food for the trip?”

“Yeah, I packed some protein bars and fruit, you haven’t eaten in almost two days. Go ahead and sit down, and I’ll bring it to you.”

I open the passenger side door and slide in. Uncle Maikin walks around the car and hands me a protein bar, apple and bottle of water. I start with the apple, which adds instant sugar to my stomach, then sip some water before moving on to the protein bar which pretty much tastes like chalk covered in chocolate. It works though, no more feelings of throwing up. It’s slightly cool outside, even with the sun in the center of the sky. I slide my legs in and close the door, which is the signal to start the car.

We start down the highway and as soon as we clear of the town Maikin steps on the gas. Apparently being trapped in Arizona while I was unconscious wasn’t great. He fiddles with the radio stations, then finally lands on a country station. I stare at him and say, “Please tell me that you’re joking.”

“It’s got a nice rhythm and I can understand the words.”

“Really?”

He looks at me and turns the radio off and says, “Better?”

“Actually yes, if you’re not going to play good music then quiet is better.”

Silence fills the car. I lean back and move the ice pack back to my face. I slowly close my eyes and then he says, “Why a bar? I can understand leaving if it were to pursue your calling elsewhere, but why a bar? Isn’t that just a glorified waiter?”

I open my eyes. “Considering that I never graduated from high school, and had zero actual job experience when I left at sixteen, it’s not like I could walk into a management position.”

“You had more school than most of your cousins, and you don’t need it for what you do. Ryo has enough lawyers and dentists. We need a dead speak and a Leveler, and no one else can do what you do. Why can’t that be enough?”

I reach over and turn on the radio. “Maybe country music will grow on me.”

He pressed the button and turned it back off. “I know that I wasn’t the best guardian, but I tried to do what was best for you. I fought to keep you in school for as long as I could because you are very smart, but your grandfather has always had the last say.”

“You fought for me to stay in school, but you also lied to me when you said that my mother didn’t want me anymore.” Dammit. I know better than to engage, but it just slipped out.

He shakes his head. “I said that you leaving her, would remove a burden.”

The fact that he remembers word for word is enough to stop me in my tracks. He stares out the windshield and says slowly, “You were a painful reminder to her Fin. Even as a child you could see the shades. You saw what she refused to admit was there, what her doctors called hallucinations. Your gift scared her. She wanted to get you put on the same drugs she was on. There was no way that your grandfather would allow it, so he sent me to bring you home.”

I hadn’t know about her plans, but it made sense. She had hated the shades and taking her pills made them invisible, at least to her. That didn’t explain the rest. “What about refusing to let me see her? Or even talk to her?”

“She wanted to convince you that you were seeing things that weren’t there, that you were crazy. I couldn’t let her do that, and I couldn’t predict her actions. I let her write letters

because I could read them first, and then, I could prepare answers to whatever questions she stirred up in you.”

Just like he was doing now. Stirring up questions, just so he could answer them. Some of his answers made sense from his perspective, but it didn’t excuse him. I didn’t want to talk about the past, but since we are. “In all this time, you haven’t heard from my father?”

“Please don’t start with this again. You know I’m not allowed to discuss it.”

“So, I should just ask my grandfather when I talk to him?”

My uncle looks over at me and says, “Yes. If you really want to know then ask your grandfather. I’m sure he would tell you.”

Something about that sounds too easy. “If you won’t answer that question, how about an easier one?”

“If your grandfather hasn’t forbidden it, then you know that I’ll answer you.”

“When you took me from my mother, you didn’t take me to your home. I know that you’re married, and I know that you have a family. Why didn’t you ever bring me to live with your wife and kids?”

He looks out at the road, “My wife is Zhen, and you know what that means. She’s territorial. I asked her, and I brought up the subject every few months after I became your guardian. At first she told me that you were still too gaitzi, even though you were my nephew and your mother was half Shijin. The second time she said that you would upset the balance because I would favor you as you were a boy, and at the time I had no son, only three daughters.”

I look out the window. “And when you had a son? He’s thirteen this year isn’t he?”

I see him looking at me in the reflection in the side view mirrors, he looks away. “When our son was born, she said that you would be jealous and would be a bad influence on him. It’s why I tried not to have you over very often. I was worried that she would say something to you, and I didn’t want you to feel like an outsider.”

Which is exactly what I’ve always felt like. My aunt had always seemed distant with me, and now I know that it was my aunt that had kept me out of her house and her family. Other than the few friends that I had made in grade school, or middle school, I had spent most of my days alone with my babysitter Syndyn or with my uncle on the days that he came home after work. After I turned nine Syndyn had disappeared, I was expected to go to the youth center to play with other kids after school. Only after about five in the afternoon, most returned home to eat with their families while I waited to be picked up by my uncle, or walked home and let myself into the apartment, and then made myself a sandwich or macaroni for dinner.

I turn to look at him. “Do you remember when I would beg you to stay? When I told you that I was scared that someone would break in, and that there were shadows living in the corner? Do you remember what you told me?”

His hands tighten on the wheel and says, “I did the best that I could, but I had to spend time at home as well as with you. I told you that the shades were there to protect you and that no one would break into the apartment.”

I was nine the first time he left me alone for weeks because he was called to work in the north. I ran out of food, and when I finally broke down and told the volunteer at the youth center, CPS came to collect me. I lived with a gaitzi family for nearly a month before he returned. Not one of my so called family had come to look in on me while he was gone. I was alone, starving

until the gaitzis took me in and cared for me. When he'd finally found me, we had to move to Crux, Texas.

"Uncle, I've been alone more than any person I know. When we moved to Crux, you said that I would have a family to count on. Do you remember what happened when you left me there and went on a month long trip?"

He'd left me in Crux, but it hadn't been at all what he'd claimed. At ten I was an easy beat down for my cousins. Of course, the more I tried to avoid them, the worse the beatings got. Then, there was Uncle Gwain who was supposed to train me to use my gift. He would spend time complementing me about my skills, then leave alone with his sons, Hessin and Tamsin, who hadn't inherited his gift. But only after he'd called them useless to their faces. Jealous didn't begin to cover what they felt towards me. I had tried to avoid them by staying home, and it had worked, but after a while I'd run out of food.

"I remember." He shifts and clears his throat and says, "I got home and I thought that you had died you were so thin. That was when I quit taking the long trips and stayed in Crux. Your grandfather also decided to task someone to you then. You never noticed but he's had you watched ever since that time. I know I failed you, and that the community failed you. The problem was that you didn't know who to ask, or how to ask for help."

Of course it was my fault, gaitzi raised boy, doesn't know how to ask for help. I press the button on the radio and say, "I'm done with this conversation." In Shijin, cutting off a conversation is allowed and respected. Probably the only good thing about Shijin society, the right to shut up when you didn't want to talk anymore. Admittedly, not a rule that most Shijin used in the middle of a conversation, because it meant that the other person had managed to provoke an emotional reaction.

My uncle turns and looks at me, then turns back to the road. He wants to explain to me how everything happened. He wants to reason with me about how Shijin society maintains balance with cruelty as well as kindness, but I'm done listening to how virtuous Shijin society is and how I should behave like one.

His phone starts ringing and he hands it to me. "Answer it. It's probably your cousins."

I swipe across the screen and say, "This is Fin."

"So are you both finally on the way? Your girl is getting a bit agitated. I think she might talk to you now."

"Put them on speaker, Fin."

I hit the button. "Put her on the phone and let her know that she's on speaker."

There's background noise followed by, a teary voice, "Stephen, I want to go home. I'm tired, and this whole thing isn't my business. I can catch a bus or call my sister to pick me up."

"Gaby, I'm on my way to you. I'll stop and we can talk there. I know this is scary for you, but I promise that no one is going to hurt you. My cousins are there to protect you, even though I know it doesn't seem like it."

It's also a lie, but I don't want to upset her by telling her that my cousins are really holding her hostage right now, and that things could go horribly wrong in the next few days. I try to think of anything I can to distract her. "Why don't you read that book for class, the one that you were halfway through?"

"You mean, *Catcher in the Rye*?"

"That's the one. It will give you something to do while you're waiting. Have them pick up paper so you can take notes and a few pens."

There's movement again, then Greylin saying, "We can pick that up for her, when will you and Uncle arrive?"

Maikin says, "Should be in four hours, make sure to set up a room for us next door. We, most likely, will stay the night before continuing on tomorrow."

I look over at him, then I hear her say, "We need to talk Stephen. This isn't normal. This whole thing isn't anything like what you told me. You need to explain this."

"I will, I promise, just catch up on your work and I'll be there in a few hours. We can talk it out, you can even yell at me if you want."

Silence. Followed by her muted voice saying, "I think I'm past yelling Stephen. You lied to me about everything. I don't know if I can ever trust you again."

Of course she's going to feel that way, why wouldn't she when she's right. I had lied, and while I had done it to protect her from unnecessary worry at the beginning of our relationship. I should have told her everything before we had gotten married. I hadn't trusted that she would stay.

"I love you, Gaby. That hasn't changed."

"I'll see you soon."

"That was really touching cousin, like quality over quantity when it comes to words. Anything else you want, Ryo Fin? Should I buy her some roses or draw her a bath?"

Maikin takes the phone and switches it off speaker, "Listen, Greylin, do as you're told and get a room next door; fetch a few things for your cousin's wife. We will discuss the situation when we arrive. Make sure the things that I asked for earlier are also gathered."

He swipes the phone off and tucks it back into his pocket. He flicks a look over at me and says, “When we arrive I’ll let you talk to her before we make plans. I need your word that you’re not going to help her escape before you speak with your grandfather.”

I look over at him. “I promise to not help her escape, so long as, you don’t give me reason to.”

He nods. “Agreed.”

That felt a little too easy.

CHAPTER V

Four and a half hours later we pull into the parking lot of a Hotel 6, in Abilene, Texas. There are dozens of cars parked, but only two that seem familiar, a silver Mach 1 and a rather battered truck that has been fixed with a myriad of different colored parts. We park and I slowly climb out of the car, my heart racing as I force myself to walk around the car and take a bag out of the trunk. Maikin looks at me with a cocked eyebrow. “You almost look like you don’t care, except that you’re white knuckling the bag.”

I shrug, “She’s my wife. Not caring would make me a sociopath.”

His eyebrow goes higher, but doesn’t say anything. I follow him to the room and he knocks on the door. A voice inside says, “What’s the password?”

“Open the door Tamsin, quit fucking around.”

“That is the password.” The door opens and Tamsin is just inside barefoot and shirtless, his light brown hair has been trimmed down since the restaurant. “Welcome Uncle... Cousin.”

“Your room is next door. I’ll go get the key.” Greylin stands up touches his heart, murmurs, “Uncle,” then brushes past me.

Tamsin belatedly touches his heart, and says, “Sorry, Uncle. Forgive my manners.”

Hessin exits the bathroom, touches his heart. “Uncle, we rescheduled the meeting with the Old Man, to reflect your travel time. The gaitzi is in the adjoining room.” He points to the door behind him, not the one he came out of. “She and Darlyn have been sharing a room while

we have the front room. Since the gaitzi doesn't have a change of clothes we washed lights yesterday and today we washed darks so her jeans are in the dryer in the front office."

I set the bag on the ground and say, "Excuse me, but I need to talk to my wife."

Hessin stands still in front of the door, blocking me until Maikin says. "It's fine, Hessin. She is after all his wife. He has a right to check on her well-being."

Hessin steps out of my way, and I open the door. Darlyn is sitting on a couch reading a magazine, and Gaby is sitting on the bed with a towel wrapped around her waist reading her book, or pretending to. I feel like I've been holding my breath the past few days, and seeing her safe, is like exhaling. Behind me Hessin says, "Darlyn, give them the room."

Darlyn looks up and sees me, she tosses her dark red curls and smiles flatly and says, in the same disdainful voice she would use on the few times I was allowed over for dinner, "There's the man of the hour. Welcome prince of Ryo. I've kept your little gaitzi safe as ordered."

I touch my heart without thinking and say, "Thank you, Darlyn, I will remember all you have done."

She pauses, unsure how to react to my serious tone, then she touches her heart, and leaves, closing the door after her. I stand just inside the door staring at Gaby sitting on the bed. Her brown curly hair is pulled back into a messy ponytail. She looks over at me with a very still expression. I walk over to her planning what I want to say, but as soon as I'm near her everything dies in my throat. Gaby stands up and I wrap my arms around her, and her arms go around me. I feel her heart racing against me, and she makes a sound in her throat. Leaning back a little to look down at her, I can't tell if she's laughing or crying. I wipe the tears from her face while she laughs. She hiccups out, "You're face. Oh my god, what happened to you?"

“So me injured is funny to you?” Which apparently is also funny, because she starts really laughing, followed by more crying this time with more hiccups and her shaking her head.

“No...not funny, but funny.”

I hold her until she finally stops laughing, and then the crying starts back up. I rub her back. “It’s going to be ok, Gaby. I’m sorry that you’ve been scared.”

She puts a hand up and shoves me back. “Scared? I’m past scared. I’m fucking pissed. You show up looking like hell, and I felt bad and scared for like a minute. Only then, I remembered that this whole thing is your fault!”

I take a step back. “Gaby, I’m sorry. You are completely right this is my fault, and you shouldn’t have been dragged into it.”

Her face goes through a series of expressions before stopping on tired, she lets out a long sigh and says, “You’re not supposed to agree with me. How am I going to get to yell if you agree with me?”

I reach a hand up to brush away the dampness on her face and she knocks my hand away. “Stop it. I’m still mad.”

I sit down on the edge of the bed, and pat the bed next to me. “Gaby....” There’s so much that I have to find a way to tell her.

She looks at me, then sits down a foot away on the bed. “Can you just explain what’s going on?”

I turn to face her, and say carefully, “My name isn’t really Stephen Winters, I made that up. My name is Ryo Fin; in English, Fin Ryo. Technically, I’m Prince Ryo Fin, but there are like twelve princes in Ryo family so, not a super special title...” I tapper off because her face is sending volumes of disbelief in my direction.

She lifts her eyebrows and says in a sharp voice, “Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

“I know that I lied about my name, but that was just so my family wouldn’t find me. I planned on telling you before we got married, but I wasn’t really sure how to tell you, and the longer I left it, the harder it got.”

She nods, her lips pressed together. “And then? What else?”

It feels like she’s daring me, and I know that can’t be a good thing. “My family is into shipping things that aren’t exactly legal, and they are... let’s say they’re culturally ‘different’ from pretty much everyone else.”

Gaby’s eyebrows are almost in her hairline. “So you belong to a crime family, and you ran away? Is that why they grabbed me?”

Her hand is on the bed curled into a fist. I reach out to touch her hand and she pulls away. “I never planned on them caring enough to come for me. I wasn’t raised with the rest of my family. My mother left with me and I spent the first six, almost seven years, living in the regular world. I thought that if I left, they would just let me go.”

She shakes her head and says sarcastically, “Guess you were wrong huh?”

Hands balled into fist she gets up, her body a tight line of anger. “And so you just lied about being an orphan? You have at least four cousins out there and an uncle, and apparently you have like twenty or more uncles, at least that’s what I heard from Darlyn.”

“I do have like twenty uncles and sixty odd cousins, but I’m not very close to any of them. My uncle Maikin raised me, but we didn’t exactly live under the same roof.”

She doesn't move so I get up to move closer to her and she shifts back to sitting on the bed, leaving me standing. I pretend that I wasn't trying to get close to her and walk over to small end table and move the pens around.

I continue by saying, "I went to school with most of my younger cousins, but we were never close. So when I said that I didn't have family, I meant it in the way that you have a family. The way you and your sisters and parents are close with each other."

I turn around and she's looking down at her hands, eyebrows furrowing like she's trying to not cry. Her voice barely audible when she says, "Am I going to get to go back home to my family?"

I don't want to lie to her, but I don't know the truth. "There's no reason you can't. I just have to speak with my grandfather first to clarify everything."

She crosses her arms, but she seems less angry and more scared. "Your cousin said that you speak to the dead. That you can raise them and control them. That you use the dead to help protect the family's shipments."

I turn to look at the closed door, and my cousins lurking just outside. Fucking bunch of assholes. I turn back to her and say, "I can the dead and yes, that's what my family does, among other things."

She gets back up and paces back and forth around the room, then sits back down. "I feel like this is some elaborate hazing ritual, and that your family is going to jump out and yell surprise or something."

God forbid Hessin or Tamsin decide to prank someone. Someone would probably end up shot.

“The Shijin don’t make jokes like that. They’re too dangerous to play around people who are always armed.”

She stares at me, and there’s some definite judgement. “So it’s not just your cousins who carry that many weapons, the whole family does?”

Her voice has gone up an octave higher. I stand up and try to touch her arm. “Gaby, I know that this whole thing is surreal as shit. I promise I’m not crazy, but for the past four years I’ve chosen to ignore what I see. Please understand that I didn’t chose this life. I was born into this.”

She shakes her head and backs up again. “So what you’re saying is that the whole time we’ve been together, you still see things. And this culture you were raised in... everyone believes that you see the dead?”

“I’m not the only dead speak in Ryo family. All of those who have the title of prince of Ryo can speak to the dead. I’m just the strongest, with the exception of my grandfather. And yes, everyone who is Shijin believes that I can speak to the dead.”

She points to the door and says, “And your cousins? Do they speak to the dead too?”

“The jackasses in the other room are not dead speaks. They are sensitive to the dead, but they can’t speak with, or see, the shades.”

For a moment she just stands there like she can’t decide what she wants to do. She shakes her head and decides something. She says, “And the Shijin? Is that the name of your family? Or is that your culture?”

“I think you should probably sit back down.”

She walks past me and thumps down on the bed. “So?”

I sit down on the end of the bed away from her, because I realize that she needs space.

“There are five families of Shijin, well in reality it’s four families and the Leveler. The four families make up the High Council and each family has its own inner council. The Leveler is the strongest dead speak from Ryo family and their job is to maintain the balance between the four families and the gaitzi world.”

“Ok, pause...”, she says quietly and holds up a hand, “What does gaitzi mean? Your cousins keep calling me one.”

“It means outsider, foolish one and sometimes broken, and yes it’s an insult to another Shijin. When they call you gaitzi, it’s meant to be a reminder that you don’t play by Shijin rules.”

“So it’s not an insult for me, but just a reminder that I’m an outsider?”

She looks offended, but then again, they are her in-laws, my family, and they’re treating her like she’s something they scrapped of their shoe. Having had the same treatment from them, I can sympathize, but it’s not really an insult considering the number of laws they break on a daily basis.

“You don’t have to follow the same rules that the rest of Shijin does because you don’t know the rules. It’s a form of protection, in a way.”

“Ok, so your family is Ryo and your grandfather is the Leveler, and the head of the High Council.”

“That’s right.”

She nods, and I can’t tell if she’s just humoring me or if she believes me. She flips a dismissive hand and says, “Ok, continue.”

“The Shijin are the guardians of humanity, each family holds one part of the knowledge passed down through the centuries. Each family is responsible for keeping humanity balanced, but the gift for each family is limited, and the power required to keep the gaitzi government out of Shijin business sometimes means that we dabble in the darker side of human nature.”

“So all four families break the law in the name of protecting humanity.”

Said like that, of course it sounds like some sort of justification. Which is one of the many reasons I’d spent years away from them, planning to never go back. Money equals power, and clean money was always harder to come by than the dirty kind.

“Yes. We use our gifts to break the law, and to help people. Ryo speaks to the dead, and we use the dead to secure illegal shipments. We also use the dead to bring justice to living. The dead witness all of life. So when justice is broken by lies, we correct it and balance it.”

“So if someone who is guilty of murder walks free, the Ryo family is responsible for righting the wrong?”

“Not exactly. Ryo family discovers the truth and then Suzu or Zhen corrects the imbalance.”

“How exactly?”

“The murderer receives a sentence that balances out the death of the innocent.”

“So not every murderer that goes free, gets Shijin justice, just those that kill the innocent.”

“The victim of any murderer must not have committed a crime worthy of death. Those who have, are merely reaping their just rewards.”

She rubs her eyes and says, “So your family is on one side, crime bosses, and on the other side judges of the guilt and innocence of others? Do you hear yourself? How is that a justification for vigilantism?”

I shrug, but I can tell that it’s starting to be too much. “Every Shijin family serves two purposes. The only religion that we worship is that of balance. Every action has its opposite and equal reaction, and Shijin is both the cause and the effect. I’m a dead speak, and I can’t eat anything warm blooded. That’s one of the ways that I maintain balance in my own life.”

I’d just unleashed the dead on the living, in order to protect a bunch of guns, and now ten people were dead. Did they deserve death? They were thieves with guns, but they hadn’t killed anyone when I set the shades to stop them, to maim and injure them. How much would I have to atone for that? Was there even a price at this point that I could pay that would cover me?

“And me? What does marrying me have to do with all of this? Because your cousins mentioned that you were engaged when you ran away, and that you’re still engaged.” She reads my face and says in disbelief, “You’re still engaged? We’re married, and they still want you to what...go through with it?”

I take a breath that I hadn’t realized I was holding. She didn’t mention the baby.

I nod and say, “I gave my word. If I break it and refuse to marry into Suzu, then they will declare war with my immediate family and all of Ryo. Three of my cousins were recently killed as a reminder that I have been remiss in keeping my word.”

Horried confusion moves across her face, then says, “I’m sorry, but you’re ‘remiss’ in keeping your word? And just like that, your ‘fiancée’ ordered your cousins to be killed?”

“Not my....fiancée, ok fine, yes, her family did, because I haven’t honored my word. I disrespected them and the cost was the lives of three of my cousins.”

She sits there and looks down at her hands. “So you were engaged to be married and you left, and then three years later your fiancée’s family kills three of your cousins because you disrespected them?”

“I was sixteen and the agreement was that I marry her at eighteen, my grandfather negotiated for another year after I left probably to buy time, and then when that passed Suzu took revenge for the slight.”

“Did you know them, your cousins? Because you don’t even look sad.”

“One was Hessin and Tamsin’s sister, and another was Greylin’s fiancée. The third girl was Corlyn, and I didn’t know her personally. I wasn’t very close to them. Shijin culture has specific roles for men and women, and most of the time, only immediate family spend time with the opposite sex of their family.”

She looks at me and asks me, “Did you know when you left that your fiancée’s family would retaliate against your family?”

I look away from her. I should have realized it, but I was too busy trying to escape. That’s not what I say though. Instead I say, “I didn’t think that far ahead. I was pushed into agreeing to the marriage. I didn’t want to get married at sixteen, much less to a professional killer. All I wanted was to live a normal life away from all the death.”

“So rather than stand up to your grandfather, you gave your word to marry, then left your family to pay the price? That doesn’t sound like you, Stephen. You don’t let people get hurt when you can prevent it.”

I look over at her, but her expression is easy to read. “Honestly, I didn’t know that my gift was such a big damn deal. I thought that the Suzu would just have her marry a different prince.”

She moves closer to me, but only because she thinks that my family will hear her and says quietly, “What do they want from you?”

“My grandfather wants me to take his place. That’s why he sent my cousins and my uncle after me.”

Gaby shakes her head and says in her very calm voice that seems a little too calm, “That’s it? Just take over the leadership of four criminal organizations?”

“And marry a professional killer.”

She snorts and starts laughing, “Because what’s bigamy when you can speak to the dead.”

When I don’t respond, she pauses and looks over at me and says, “You’re joking about this whole thing. Right?”

I look at her. “I’m not joking. I have to marry the Suzu princess that I promised to marry, or at least two of the Shijin families will go to war. They’ll pull in the other two families and it will spread and cause collateral damage.”

She looks at me, but the expression of her face isn’t one I’ve seen before. She stands up, walks over to the door and opens it, and Darlyn is standing just outside. She offers up a pair of jeans and says, “They just got done. I was going to bring them in to you.”

“Thank you, that’s what I was looking for.”

Darlyn closes the door, and Gaby walks in with her jeans. She pulls them up and then tosses the towel onto the floor. She turns to me, but I can’t tell if she’s angry or sad. “So what happens to me? You marry this woman and I get to go back to my life?”

I can’t even look at her, because it’s finally hitting me, what I’ve done. What I’ve done to her. She walks up to me and pushes me playfully at first, then harder. “This is all just some made

up shit. You're getting back at me for what happened before. Because I wouldn't get rid of...."

She stops, realizing what she almost said out loud. Then she says, "While I appreciate your particular brand of crazy, I just want to go home. My sisters don't know where I am and they will call the cops, Stephen."

When I stand up and start walking toward the door, she shoves me harder and says, "Seriously, you're not going to answer me? You think you just get to walk away?"

I stop at the door and lean my head against it, she starts hitting my back. "What did you do? Why can't I go home, Stephen? That's it, right? You did something."

I turn around and she stops hitting me abruptly. I look at a spot above her head to avoid her eyes. "You can't go home, not for a while. Not until everything calms down."

"And the woman you're marrying, the killer? Do I just attend the wedding? Because you can't keep me here forever," her voice has gotten higher and louder.

I walk towards her and she takes two steps back and sits down abruptly on the bed. She wraps her arms around her upper body. "If you love me you'll let me leave. I can't stand this stupid game you're playing."

I kneel down next to her and say quietly, "I know right now you're scared and this is all seems crazy, but I swear to you that I love you. I will find a way to make you happy and for you to go home."

I try to touch her arm, but she pulls away. I stand up. "Don't give up on me, Gaby. I can fix this."

I hear the door open, and footsteps come in. Darlyn says, "Times up prince of Ryo, things to discuss next door while your gaitzi gets some sleep."

Darlyn is holding a bag of Chinese takeout and gestures at the door with her pointed chin, “Uncle wants to speak with you and Hessin. I’ll make sure she eats.”

I nod, and walk out, sick inside at what I’ve caused.

The first time I’d met Gaby she’d just started her associate’s degree, and was moving into the building next to mine with her sister Blanca. She had been carrying boxes up the stairs, and had missed a step and nearly gone down the flight of stairs, except that I’d been walking behind her, and caught her. It was the first time I’d ever held a girl in the middle of the day, my arms around her, her heart racing. She’d thanked me, and two weeks later I had asked her out. And after dinner on our fourth date she’d stayed over, and I’d woken to a silence without shades and an angel sleeping beside me.

I close the door and take a deep breath. Hessin is waiting and I walk past him out of the hotel room and into the open door to the right where Uncle Maikin was waiting with food spread out on the small table. “We need to discuss the situation, and I need you and Hessin to be civil with one another.”

I can feel Hessin behind me and I take a step to the right so that he can have the open chair. We both sit at the same time and proceed to eat the Chinese food that Maikin had found somewhere. He’d bought enough for six meals. Bone white ceramic plates filled with almond chicken, broccoli beef and bowls filled with hot and sour soup. Smaller plates were filled with sides of fried rice, spring rolls, and beef dumplings. The aroma curls around me bringing me to the table, even though I’m not hungry. Maikin pours the soup into ceramic bowls which seem very familiar and picks up his bowl and says, “To family, health and wealth.”

I lift my bowl and bow my head. “To Shijin, Ryo and the dead.”

Hessin lifts his bowl and bows his head over it. “To the honored dead, and vengeance so they may rest.”

It’s far from a standard salutation, but our Uncle says nothing, just simply sips his soup in the strange thoughtful manner he has when he’s thinking of other things.

I follow suit as does Hessin, and we move through each of the courses in contemplative quiet typical of most Shijin meals. When I get down to dipping the beef dumplings into soy sauce, I’m starting to chew mechanically, finally full. The last remains of the meal are pushed aside, and drinks are poured into long thin silver shot glasses. Maikin says quietly, “She’s a liability, Fin, and it’s obvious that you can’t control her.”

“She’s my wife.”

Hessin who has buzzed his hair down almost to the scalp, shorter than his brother Tamsin’s, takes a sip of the whiskey that Maikin has liberally poured for us. He says, “I understand that you love her, but Uncle is right, this girl is a walking death wish. She knows nothing about our rules or our culture.” He pauses and looks at me as if he’s trying to read me. “She won’t conform, and she will disobey you in public. You might be the strongest dead speak compared to all of the other princes, but they have more political power and have married for connections. They also aren’t runaways.”

The vision of Gaby’s death haunts me, and her unhappiness was like another person in the room when we were together. I slide the glass on the table in front of me. “Give me all the options.”

Maikin leans back and looks me straight in the eye and says, “There aren’t many. If you were a widower then there would be no problem, but considering your wife’s condition that’s no longer an option.”

He doesn't explain, then again he doesn't have to. My grandfather knows about the baby, and now so does everyone in the room. It's also a message. The Old Man wasn't about to let anyone kill one of his grandchildren, even if it caused a war. Gaby was safe, at least until the baby was born. Hessin shakes his head and fold his arms over his chest.

Uncle Maikin continues as if he hasn't just dropped a bomb. "There is the option of a redrawn contract with Suzu, which still doesn't address the problem of you wife being clueless as to Shijin customs. She also doesn't know how much her behavior will reflect on you."

I lift my drink and knock the whole thing back. "What about letting her return home? What would that cost me?"

Maikin shakes his head and says tiredly, "Not possible. You can't dissolve the union, and there hasn't been a single separation since the Shijin arrived on these shores."

"Not a separation, call it an extended stay with her family. We would still be married, but she would live with her sisters and parents, and would visit me from time to time."

Hessin raises his eyebrows. "That won't go over well, but there aren't any rules against it. She would have to have protection though. As your wife and.... mother to your children, she must have at least the minimum bodyguard retinue. Anything less is an insult to you and therefore to Ryo."

Four, the minimum is four, and she hates being watched.

For the first time since I've known him, Hessin is actually trying to be...nice. He says quietly, "The only way she can leave, is if she has a set of bodyguards, lives with her immediate family and has the Old Man's permission. We could say that her parent is sick...but it would only be temporary, Fin."

Maikin holds up the bottle in the form of a question and then pours another round in the empty raised glasses. “As your wife, Gaby has no other place but the one you make for her among us. I’ve been told that she wants to be a healer, and that she’s going to school for it. That could be another option. She becomes a healer and trains with Suzu. Your second wife will be capable of training her, and it might balance out their relationship.”

I pick up my drink. “So your idea is to have the scorned trained poisoner teach my very angry wife how to heal people?”

I toss the drink back, and Hessin snorts, “He has a point. That seems like a really bad idea.”

I look over at Hessin and he stares right at me, not exactly a challenge, but he’s not looking away either. I don’t break eye contact. I lift my glass and Maikin refills it again as well as his own. I say, “Forgive me for my thoughtlessness cousin.” I put my right hand over my heart. “I cost you and I did not properly acknowledge my guilt. I do so now. Forgive me my part in your sister’s death and the deaths of our other cousins.”

I toss it back, stand up, and set the glass on the table. Hessin stands up as well. “Words don’t mean anything.”

I take the pins out of my hair and let it down where it hits the middle of my back, and hold out my hand. “Can I borrow your knife?”

Hessen pulls his knife and Maikin blocks my hand from accepting it, “You don’t have permission to do that.”

I look at him, but I can’t tell if he means it. “My grandfather sent you to fetch me home because I have shamed him by not honoring my word. My actions have contributed to the deaths of three of my cousins, so I have harmed my family twice.”

Maikin slowly drops his hand. “Doing this now can affect your ability to bargain your marriage contract.”

I nod, because he’s right. Admitting my guilt won’t gain me any concessions when I bargain with Suzu. Admitting to being a shitty cousin though, might gain me some allies. Right now leaving Shijin isn’t an option, and most likely will never be. Hessin hands me his knife in complete silence. I roll my hair up with one hand and cut through it with the other. I take the length of hair and set it on the table. “I have acted in a shameful manner that has harmed my family, and that has harmed Suzu. I ask your forgiveness and pardon.”

Hessin isn’t one to let things go, and my gesture has barely altered his regard of me. “Cousin, I ask that you remember who you are. You are a prince of Ryo, and you are born to keep the balance. Never forget that our lives shift in your wake.”

He takes my hair off the table along with his knife and tosses my hair in the trash as he leaves to go next door. His words implied acceptance, but he wants more proof before he will accept that I’m capable of leading. He’s offering me a chance of changing his mind and if I change his mind, I win the other three as well. I look over at my uncle and say, “I need to get it shorn down. My hair needs to be shorter than Hessin’s. My responsibility was greater, therefore my shame was greater.”

“Now you’re thinking like a Shijin. Tell me, what will you do with your gaitzi wife?”

He won’t let me rest. “She can’t leave because she won’t accept protection, and I’m not sure if I can command her to return. She’ll have to stay until I consolidate enough power with the inner council and marry into Suzu. When I’m named heir before all of Shijin, then I can let her go to her family. By then she’ll accept a retinue just to get away from me.”

Hopefully, I can manage it before one or more of the horrible foretold futures comes true. I look at the pile of dishes on the table trying to figure out what he plans to do with them in a hotel room and ask him, “Do you need help clearing?”

He lifts an eyebrow because all cleaning falls under women’s work. “The maid will be by shortly. I’ve paid her extra to come and take away the dishes, wash them and repack them for me. Tomorrow we’ll be able to eat real food in a real place.”

“This is a real place Uncle. It’s just not Shijin enough for you.”

“That doesn’t make sense if you think about it.”

I shake my head and stare at the wall of the room next door. There’s nothing I can do to make her understand except the one thing that I shouldn’t do. I close my eyes, and try to picture anything else that might convince her, or bring her over to my side. I decide to try one more time.

“Uncle, I need to speak with Gaby again. I think that maybe she’s had time to digest what I’ve told her.”

“She’s your wife. You don’t need my permission to visit her.”

That’s not necessarily true and we both know it, but he’s saying it so that I know whatever happens next is my fault. “Thank you for your advice, Uncle. I’ll return in a bit.”

I walk out and knock on the adjoining room. Tamsin opens the door and Greylin who is standing behind him says, “Shit, looks like Hessin wasn’t lying. This particular prince of Ryo has decided to take responsibility for his actions. Come in. Darlyn hasn’t been able to stop your gaitzi from crying for the past twenty minutes. Seriously, she’s getting on my damn nerves.”

I step inside and walk to the second door which I open slowly. Darlyn is standing near Gaby chewing her thumb nail in a disturbed fashion, as Gaby makes the whimpering sounds of a

baby animal in pain. She looks up and sees me in the doorway and gestures in what to a normal person would be a bored twitch of the hand and a deliberate quick back and forth of the eyes, but in a Shijin woman, it's pretty close to frantic gesturing.

I walk over and as soon as I'm three steps in the room she says in my ear as I pass her, "Your gaitzi is not hurt, she's not hungry and, as far as I can tell, she's had plenty of sleep. This is clearly your fault, so you fix it."

I reply in a very low voice, "She's angry at me."

"Then she should have stabbed you a few times and called it a day. Not tortured all of us with her...just make her stop."

Typical Shijin solution, if it makes you mad, if it is impolite, then stab it until it stops. Then again, Shijin culture was unfailingly polite, so it was rare to find someone bleeding when they didn't deserve it. With the few exceptions of those who broke cultural rules repeatedly, essentially my entire life from age ten to thirteen, most disagreements were nonviolent.

I walk over to her, sit down next to her, and put an arm around her. She just keeps crying and doesn't say anything. She doesn't try to shove me away or yell, and that is perhaps the scariest thing. Mad is easier to deal with than sad. I take the band out of her hair, reach around her and pick up a brush. I start to carefully brush out her curls. She doesn't knock my hand away, doesn't say anything, and so I brush her hair out then flip it back into the band. I set the brush down and she says quietly, "You got mad about a stupid wet towel...the morning after I told you I was pregnant."

She turns towards me. "It was a stupid wet towel on the bathroom floor, and you never once stopped to say anything about the baby. You yelled at me over a towel. I told you I was pregnant and all you said was 'no' and 'we use protection for a reason'."

It's clear that she's been thinking about it for a while, just like I have. How do I explain my brand of strange? How can I explain that I want her to have our baby more than anything in the world, and yet at the same time the moment she told me, I wanted her to walk into an abortion clinic and terminate it?

I take a deep breath and say, "It's hard to explain, but if you'll let me, I can try to make you see what I see."

She looks at me, torn between wanting to know the answer to her question, and not wanting to hear me say something that will hurt her. She nods and says, "I want to know."

I get up and say, "While we're together I don't see the shades, but when you're away from me they're everywhere. The only way to fool them into believing that I can't see them, is to keep as calm and collected as I can. I was born this way, seeing them."

She shakes her head. "You know I don't believe you. Why do you keep trying to convince me of this strange lie?"

I exhale. "Gaby, please just let me finish, and if you still don't believe me then I will demonstrate what I do."

She shakes her head and sighs, "Fine, go ahead."

"Do you remember that woman, Helen March, she lived in our apartment complex? The one that was raped and murdered two years ago? Her two year old son was reported as missing, abducted the same night."

Gaby shrugs and frowns. "I guess? What does that have to do with a baby?"

"About four days after she died, I was walking by her apartment and her shade was walking around. She realized that I could see her. She walked through me, and she begged me to find her son. Her killer's face was fixed in my mind, and her pain was so real that I went and

searched. I couldn't stop reliving the memories she'd put in my head. I found her killer, but the piece of shit was already dead outside of the city. Some dealer he'd cheated killed him in retaliation, so I called him up and pulled the information about Helen's son from him."

She doesn't want to ask me, but she can't stop herself.

"And the boy?"

"I located the boy ten miles into the dessert. He died the same night his mother did, but he was buried alive. He didn't even know he was dead until I dug him up. I called the police from a pay phone outside of a restaurant and told them where to find the body, and who had killed him."

She doesn't look at me, and I know that she doesn't want to hear me talk about what I do anymore. She's sighs, "What does this have to do with our baby? Everyone in the apartment building knew about a woman being killed and her son being abducted. It was on the news."

"Gaby, I need you to just hear me. My condition, my ability, is genetic. It's why I never wanted to have children. There's less than a fifteen percent chance that our child won't have what I have."

She stands up and says, "I'm not sure if you're sick or if you believe all of this, but I don't know if I can believe you. Not that it even matters, I won't abort this baby."

I haven't gotten around to telling her about my grandfather yet, or that abortion isn't even an option anymore. I'm sure it will even seem like good news, until she meets my grandfather and begins to understand what it is that I've trapped her in.

I reach out and touch her arm. "Look, there's only one way to really prove that I can do this, but it will remove all doubt about what I do. If I prove what I can do, will you stay with me until I can explain what's going on?"

“I can try. I just can’t...there better not be any sacrificing of animals or people involved.”

“There’s no sacrificing of anything. It’s just my blood that I use to call and control them.”

She looks at my bandaged hand. “That’s what the scar on your left hand is? You told me it was from climbing a wire fence.”

“I had to tell you something because you kept asking. Bloodletting to call spirits didn’t seem the right way to go on our third date.”

“I can’t believe you remember that conversation, or that you started lying to me on our third date.”

I look at her. “So if I had told you the scar on my hand was from calling up the dead you would’ve gone out with me again?”

Her lip turns up on one side in an almost smile. “Ok, so no I wouldn’t have. When we were six months in...nine months and living together... I probably would’ve listened to you. Everyone is entitled to a past, but this... why couldn’t you have been from some normal religious cult?”

“That’s making an assumption that there is a normal cult. As a Catholic you believe that your religion is the right one, but so does every other religion. In your religion you believe that the priest can turn wine into blood, and wafers into flesh, and then you eat it to remember the demigod that saved you. Shijin isn’t, at its heart, a religion. We believe that there is a life after this one, and that if you maintain balance, your soul will be light and when your body finally turns to ash your soul will ascend from the grave because it will be lighter than a feather without the body to weigh it down.”

“That’s very similar to Egyptian mythology. I thought Shijin would be more Eastern thought processes, similar to Buddhism.”

“Shijin is older than most modern religions, and yes, there are some Egyptian ideas and some Buddhist, some older practices that take their roots from shamanistic cultures like those of the Cherokee, Caddo or African Voodoo. There have been Shijin on every continent in every time period, our language survived the Tower’s fall because we speak a language that isn’t particularly human.”

Gaby sighs, “Why don’t you just show me what you can do and let me see this calling the dead?”

I know it’s probably a bad idea, but there’s nothing I can tell her to convince her.

“Alright, do you have any family that are buried around here?”

“So we’re going to go talk to my dead family members?”

“I could pull up a random stranger, but what would that prove? A family member you were close to could give me information that no one else could tell me, and therefore would be believable.”

She goes very still, the idea forming in her. “My youngest sister died in Abilene when she was nine. I was thirteen at the time. We left Abilene the next year and moved to New Mexico for my father’s work. Mom didn’t want to leave, but we couldn’t afford to stay.”

“Then let’s go talk to your sister. I’ll go out and convince my uncle that you need to see this for you to agree to stay.”

I stand up and she grabs my arm. “What happens if you can’t answer the questions that I ask you? Do I get to go home?”

I nod my head, even when I know that I’m lying, and say, “Let me go talk to them as see about a trip to the local cemetery. Which cemetery is she resting in?”

“Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, it’s a small cemetery behind the church.”

I can tell what she has planned. The church is a public place on the weekends, as is the cemetery. She plans to go, and then yell for help. She doesn't realize that Shijin are very good at keeping people quiet and clearing out places in advance. It's going to take about an hour, but it shouldn't cut much into travel time back to Crux. I take her hand and kiss the top of it. "I promise that this will answer your questions."

I walk back into the first room and close the door. My cousin Greylin is in the process of cleaning his gun on one side of the bed, and Darlyn is sharpening a knife on the other. Tamsin and Hessin are playing cards on the only table. I walk through the room and say, "We're going on a road trip to a cemetery in about ten minutes, I need to know where Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception church is, and I need someone to take me in a lead car to clear the place out."

Hessin looks up from his hand. "Is Uncle ok with your plans? Because I would rather hear all of this from him."

"Alright, I'll have him deliver his orders personally."

I go out the door, then back into the neighboring room. Uncle Maikin is reloading his basket of dishes. "How did it go with your wife?"

"She doesn't believe me, but her sister is resting in a cemetery near here. It would take less than an hour and then I can have her on board with what I'm doing, or at least willing to wait it out."

He snorts, "She's going to try and run."

"Of course she is, it would be stupid not to when she thinks she's surrounded by a bunch of weird cultists." I carefully say, "Maikin, this is my chance to fix things with her. She'll either

believe what I'm telling her, or be so freaked out that she won't try to run. In either scenario the problem is solved at least in the short term."

"Seems like you've thought this through. Tamsin can make sure the cemetery is clear and set up your things while we escort your wife."

Without thinking I touch my heart, something I haven't done in years, and he tilts his head not about to let it go. "We've been in each other's company for three days, and this is the first time you've shown me this respect."

I consider what he's saying to me, what he wants me to say. "I've spent four years without Shijin manners, and it has taken me some time to remember who I was and try to blend it with who I am now."

"So who are you now, Ryo Fin?"

Again, what he wants is obvious, but not something I can just hand to him without increasing his suspicions. "I am who I have always been Uncle, a man with no father, no sister, no mother and no home except for the one that I found and made for myself. While I accept that I am not gaitzi, that I belong with the Shijin, part of my ability to cope with what I see and live with is about maintaining my own balance, and Uncle, my balance is skewed."

He stares at me, then blinks. "That is the best answer you've managed yet. Grab your bag out of my car and meet Tamsin over at the Mach 1. We'll follow behind in a half an hour to give you time to clear the place."

Tamsin is annoyed. It's close to dark, and he's being forced to baby sit me in a cemetery in the middle of nowhere. Not that clearing the cemetery had taken more than a few minutes

considering the temperature drop and the creepy movement of the trees in the near total dark. When the last of the visitors had scurried out to warmer more human environments, I waited under a tree smoking a cigarette. My Uncle and my cousins arrived, and they surrounded Gaby as soon as she got out of the car.

They walk her in through the gate and meet me under the tree. She's got tape over her mouth and looks pissed. I peel the tape off her mouth and say, "Sorry about that."

She glares at me. "What the shit, Stephen? I said that I would let you do whatever it is you do and would let you explain."

"You also were planning on trying to escape. So, let's let bygones be bygones and you show me where your sister's grave is."

She looks around, her arms folded in front of her. "I'm pretty sure it's this way. There was a huge tree next to her grave, and she's next to my grandmother who has a stone angel headstone."

I offer her my hand and she just looks at me. I start walking in the direction she pointed, bag over my shoulder. She walks a few steps behind me, and my cousins are a few feet behind her. I find the small head stone next to a stone angel and say, "Is this it?"

"Yes that's my sister's grave. Allyson Hernandez, age nine. I can't believe I'm here."

"Take a few steps back please."

She notices the duffle bag over my shoulder. "What's in the bag?"

"Things to win over the dead. Wine and candles, flowers and incense."

She steps back and I can hear my cousins moving toward the iron fence in a ring formation. I set the bag down and pull out a silver chalice and set it on the top of the stone, then take out a packet of orange drink mix and a bottle of water. I open the bottle of water, toss out

some of the water and pour in the mix, then put the lid back in and shake it. When it's mixed I open the lid and pour the contents into the chalice. I dig around and find a packet of bubble gum, I open all of the pieces and set them on top of the stone.

I take out a candle and light it, along with a sweet smelling incense stick. I take out my knife and cut along the half healed scab on my hand and drip blood into the chalice. Then I take out a doll that Tamsin and I had stopped for at a store on the way to the cemetery. I take out an orange bouncy ball and set it next to the doll, last I take out the rainbow daisies.

I close my eyes and start chanting, the syllables flowing easily out and I can feel the shift in the darkness. Then suddenly she's walking around, I barely feel her pass through me. She looks at the tombstone and over at her sister. She flitters through my mind, and I let her, the slim girl with green eyes and short brown hair riding her bike around the neighborhood with her three older sisters. Their scrappy looking white dog following behind them, Silencio, the dog without a bark. She focuses in on the fight, the one that happened before the ride that ended up in a horrible crash. Gabriella yelling about her doll, angry that she had touched it. Gabriella crying over her begging for forgiveness long past the point when Allyson could tell her that it was nothing. A stupid fight that wasn't anything.

I take a deep breath and say, "Ask me what you want to know Gaby."

"Ask her what the last thing I said to her was."

"You asked her to forgive you for yelling at her about touching your porcelain doll, the one that you got from your grandmother, abuelita Gloriana. She said that she forgave you earlier in the car, when you let her have the back seat where you normally sat."

Gaby exhales sharply. "Only my sisters know about that fight, and they would never tell you about it. Describe my sister."

I don't even have to think. Allyson feeds me images. "Your sister has green eyes and reddish brown hair that she wore in two low ponytails, and she enjoyed riding bikes with you and her other sisters." I feel a push as if she's trying to climb inside my skin, but I push her back and continue speaking. "It was the most fun in the summer when mama was home to bake and cook. Everyone would come over, los primos, tios y tias, bar-b-que and everyone playing games. Until tio Mario and papa got into a fight and stopped talking."

I know what she wants me to say, and I say it. "I'm fine hermanita, no lloras por mi. Next time bring the pretty pink roses and a little cake instead. I like the doll though, hermanita bonita."

Gaby has tears sliding down her cheeks. "Allyson?"

She looks me in the face, searching for her sister behind my eyes. "Where is she? Why hasn't she gone to heaven?"

I close my eyes and dismiss Allyson back to the space between. She tries to hold onto me, but then take I take a breath and command her out.

I open them and say, "She's between spaces. When her body disappears into soil then she'll move on. She's not scared, just sleeping."

Gaby shakes her head, her hand over her mouth. "No, this isn't right. This isn't how it's supposed to be. We were promised a better place after and now she's in the dark?"

"Gaby, your sister is sleeping until she moves on. She's dreaming of all the wonderful things she enjoyed while she lived. She has no regrets, just sadness about you blaming yourself."

She stumbles away from the tombstone she had been leaning against, her whole body shaking. "You can really do it. You can speak to them just like you said you could."

"Come here and let me hold you for just a minute. You're shaking."

Maybe it was the shock, but she walks over to me and wraps her arms around me then starts sobbing. I'd done what I'd set out to do. She believed me. Only now she's questioning everything else she believes in. I rock her slowly back and forth, her head curled up under my chin. I start humming, the same way that I would when my sister was born. It's a familiar song that I can't quite place.

"That's my sister's favorite song. The one my mother sang when we were little and wouldn't go to bed."

"When she walked through me into this world, she left a copy of her memories with me. Right now I know everything she knew, but in a few days I won't remember anything except what you asked from her. Allyson's very funny. She would chase you with dead bugs just to watch you and the twins scream and run away."

She laughs a little against my chest. "Roaches, not even the roly bugs, it was always roaches or the locust shells. Then she terrorized the neighbor boys, racing them on her bike, making them play soccer with her or else she would tattletale to papa."

"She's happy, Gaby. Her thoughts were at peace when she walked through me, and now that she's had her say, she will sleep deeply."

She goes very still and looks up at me. "How many people's thoughts have you felt, have you lived with?"

The fact that she was thinking about how it affected me, that she cared, was more than anyone else had ever bothered to do. I touch her hair. "You're actually the first person to ask me that. The truth is I don't know for sure, but it's probably in the hundreds. I started helping my grandfather when I was thirteen. I can do what the other dead speaks can't. I absorb the knowledge of those that walk through me."

Her hand touches my face, and she stands looking at me in silence then she says, “This is why you left, isn’t it?”

I put my hand over her hand; she’s alive and warm. “I woke up one morning, and I couldn’t remember what my mother looked like, or what my sister’s name was. I couldn’t decide if my favorite flavor of ice cream was mint because I like mint, or if it was the favorite flavor of the last person I called up. I had no line that I could hold, not like the other dead speaks. They can only call up the dead in a graveyard, and when they leave, the dead stay behind the iron fence. My whole life I’ve been able to see the dead all the time, while washing, eating and trying to sleep...”

I lean my forehead against hers. “Forgive me for dragging you into this. This is what I meant when I said I was cursed. This is what our child stands to inherit.”

Even in the dark I can see the worry on her face. This wasn’t something that she’d ever thought she’d have to consider when pregnant. Somehow she manages to say, “Don’t ever lie to me again Stephen...Fin. I understand now why you did it, because who could believe this without seeing it? I just wish you had told me about everything sooner.”

She moves her hand from my face, but lets me hold onto it. We walk back to the cars, and Greylin walks past us to gather up all my equipment while watching me out of the corner of his eye. And I remember that this is what I stole from him. He would never have a moment like this, with his fiancée, and I can see the knowledge of it on his face. He won’t ever forgive me for my part in it. I don’t want to think about what I might have to do if he decides to escalate things.

Hessin is standing by the Mach 1, and Darlyn and Maikin are already in his car with Tamsin. I open the door to the Mach 1 and Gaby climbs in. I let go of her hand.

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