

Praise for Wormwood

“Nevins’ novel dives into a journey befitting its laudable female protagonist... with zeal and no reservations.” —Kirkus Reviews

“The lines will be blurred between good and evil, truth and lies, and hero and antagonist. When I finished *Wormwood*, I closed the book with a WOW on my lips. Extraordinary storytelling, D.H. Nevins. You blew me away. Absolutely 5 stars.” —Tome Tender Reviews

“I have never read a story quite like this. I want you to read it like I did. Unprepared and wide-eyed. Beyond 5 stars.” —FUOnlyKnew Reviews

“...not since I picked up *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, have I been so enraptured by what I was reading! *Wormwood* is a book I want on my shelf, in my collection, to be able to pick up and return to on a whim...!” —Christine M. Butler, author of *Birthrights*

“Nevins writes with an attention to detail and pace that takes you in and drags you along like a strong undercurrent.” —Craig Hallam, author of *Not Before Bed – and other stories*

“Ms. Nevins’ take on the end of days is riveting and suspenseful. And when many revelations were brought to light, I was gasping in surprise. I adore Ms. Nevins’ voice. Her writing drew me into this story and kept me enthralled to the end. Unputdownable! 5 stars.” —Bookworm Brandee, *Reviews, Recommendations & Ramblings*

“Kali is a tough, resourceful protagonist, and Tiamat a half-angel tortured by his orders from on high. The sexual tension between the two is palpable. If you enjoy post-apocalyptic tales with a healthy dose of paranormal romance, *Wormwood* will not disappoint.” —Nancy Brauer, author of *Strange Little Band*

WORMWOOD

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D.H. NEVINS



Black Wraith Books

Wormwood

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This is a work of fiction. With the exception of some names and references drawn from biblical, Hindu and Babylonian mythology, names, characters, places and incidents are either all used fictitiously or are products of the author's imagination. No reference to any real person or event is intended or should be inferred.

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Black Wraith Books
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To Barry, for without his encouragement

this book would not exist.

The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken

Matthew 24:29-34

Chapter 1

Sometimes when people look back on nasty events, they claim they should have known something would go wrong. They list off the signs they imagine they'd seen, or they claim everything occurred for a reason. But I had always been a bit of a sceptic in that regard. I saw those connections as nothing more than wishful thinking, a force-fit to help people make some sense out of a tragedy. Yet on this particular morning, had I been on that path a moment later, or had I been hiking in a different section of the park, the outcome would have been vastly different. And now that I have my own story of tragedy, I can't help but look for my own coincidences. Perhaps this helps define human nature. Or perhaps it defines tragedy.

It was beautiful out, and the woods were welcoming. Patterns of dappled sunlight danced across the forest floor, as a light breeze cooled my face, making me smile. I always felt so at peace during my morning hike. I fell into my habitual fast stride, nearly lulled by it, as I trekked along Cedar Creek Trail. The bends and dips were so familiar that as I moved, I barely needed to glance down at the network of roots and rocks on the worn, dirt path.

Hiking was a pastime I cherished even as a girl, when my dad would take me on frequent treks through the woods near our home. I always felt whole and in balance when my feet propelled me beneath the trees and I breathed the fresh forest air, and this day was no different. Not at first, anyway.

Yet change came with the wind. Without warning, the day's pleasant breeze strengthened into a forceful gust, bending the trees and sending flurries of detached green leaves swirling down from above. The forest darkened and I looked up to see ominous grey-black clouds sweeping in to mask the sun. I picked up my pace in alarm. I had no desire to be caught unprepared by a violent storm, and as I rushed along the path, I racked my brain for memories of any appropriate shelters nearby—a small cavern, the gap beneath the root mass of a fallen tree—anything. But I continuously came up empty.

My foot hesitated on the path as I detected another change around me. I stopped, frozen in place, feeling an eerie stillness permeate every inch of the woods. The birds had stopped singing and everything, even the breeze, silenced. Nothing moved. Leaves hung limp on their branches and the entire forest appeared to be momentarily captured in time—like I was suspended in the midst of a still photograph. The very air felt charged and tense. My pulse jumped, my mind screamed to my body to move, but my legs simply weren't responding.

It was then that I heard it, the sound waves raising the hairs on my arms and neck. Something was dreadfully wrong. I could feel the strangeness of it, vibrating wickedly through my bones, and further rooting my feet to the buzzing ground. It began with a low, far away rumbling, rolling ever forward and growling louder by the second. Just as the tumult ripened sickeningly into a deep, primeval roar, I was bucked by violent spasms deep in the earth under my feet. Stumbling to maintain my balance, I spun to look toward the source, and my blood turned to ice. Something was happening, approaching swift as a torrent, as the trees lurched and fell wildly in the too-close distance. It seemed like the earth had become an awakening monster, its body lashing and cresting as it rippled down the hill toward me.

I ran.

The sounds of my feet pounding down the worn path were quickly drowned out by the strengthening uproar behind me. I tried to run faster, my lungs screaming in my chest, as the cacophony suddenly buffeted the air all around me, almost thick in its magnitude. The ground thrust me up, throwing me forcefully onto the sharp stump of a recently splintered tree, and I felt the skin of my arm tear along its edge. At the very next moment, it seemed like the stump itself threw me off and I flew backward. Landing on a soft, rotten log, my fingers sunk into the moist, vibrating moss. I scrambled across the ground, clutching at roots for support, pulling myself in a vague direction toward Lookout Peak and praying that I was close enough to make it there.

I forced myself up and sprinted drunkenly along the path. It seemed to thrash beneath my feet, as though I was running along the back of a giant, angry snake. Trees reached out and clawed at my body and my face while terrifying, yawning crevasses began to open up in the ground on either side of me. As I leaped over a bush, I realized with a start that I was off the path. Finding it again was useless; the forest was changing all around me. The trees were twisting and falling, rocks were being thrust up from the ground while the earth tilted violently from side to side.

With my panicked senses heightened, everything came into a sharp focus. I took in the violent mess around me as I fled, avoiding all the dangers that I could. I ducked under a thrashing spruce tree and swerved around a birch while clearing a tumbling rock. Then, jumping a tangle of thorns near a ravine edge, a heavy pine branch caught me on the shoulder as the tree crashed down to the ground. It took me with it, but I rolled when I hit the dirt, tumbling down the steep slope into a frothing stream below.

The shallow creek's frigid water swirled around my legs as I lay there for a moment, winded, staring up at the roiling skies above me. The rain began to fall in large, lazy drops, and I closed my eyes to it. With foul irony, it reminded me so much of the beloved summer thunderstorms of my youth. The sharp smell of ozone had flashed me back to a childhood memory of sitting on our screened-in porch with my dad, waiting to watch the lightning and counting the seconds before the thunder came. Sometimes the strikes were much closer than we expected, and the heart-stopping *bang!* would make us both jump out of our skins. We would look at each other's reactions, and always burst out laughing—hilarity and relief both mingled in our giggles.

But this was no time for reminiscing. A sharp series of numbing flicks on my face quickly brought me back to the chaos of the moment. The rain was pouring down now, mixed with large hailstones that were assailing my body and face as I lay there in my stupor. The ground continued to pitch and lurch, while the stream's flow shifted direction under my back. I sat up suddenly, shocked to feel the creek's water change direction. This was no regular earthquake. Something truly immense was happening. That terrifying realization was all I needed.

Frantic, I clawed my way up the steep, jerking hillside. Grabbing roots, crumbling ledges and quivering branches, I was once more on level ground and sprinting flat-out without fully being aware of how I even got to the top of the ravine.

Lightning flashed again and again, though I could hear no thunder; not over the roar and groan of the earth that seemed to fill every possible space in my head. The flashing light and tilting ground sent me staggering headlong into a wall of jagged rock. I smashed my knee against the crag, while a piece of crumbling rock fell and hit my shoulder with blinding pain, leaving my arm numb.

As I reeled away from the rock face, however, I finally saw that I made it. Relief flooded through me as I gazed up to see the massive bulk of Lookout Peak leaning protectively overhead.

I tripped into a clumsy charge, trying to find the path that would lead me up. It didn't take me long. Amazingly, not only was the path there, but it appeared almost undisturbed by the surrounding disaster.

The shaking ground seemed to calm as I began my ascent. The rocks stilled and the trees merely quivered. Yet I did not slow. One foot in front of the other, up and up I went mechanically, not allowing myself to think about what had happened; not giving myself the chance to fall apart until I was sure it was over.

As I walked, I took a cursory inventory. I prodded with my fingers and bent and rotated my arm and shoulder cautiously. I was relieved to find that neither seemed to be broken. Bad bruising was likely all that would come of it. I had a number of gashes and scrapes, though I knew they should heal well enough. Thankfully, there didn't appear to be anything serious or that needed immediate attention.

The deafening sounds from the ordeal, however, were still with me, ringing in my ears. *Terrific*, I thought absently, *hearing loss would be a great reminder of this fun*. With the ground still vibrating mildly, I felt an almost frantic need to survey the damage and, with any luck, get an idea of how widespread it was. I veered to a lookout point that was about halfway up the climb. But I wasn't prepared for what I saw. I simply couldn't take it in—couldn't believe what my eyes were telling me and what my ears had already registered.

It was still happening. Though the cliff was comparatively still, it was hellish below. For as far as I could see, the forest was a turbulent tempest of angry green as the trees twisted grotesquely and fell. Swirls of shredded emerald leaves eddied in the air under billowing inky clouds that flashed with ready electricity. Though despite this, it was the ground far below that chilled my blood and had me stumbling backward against the rock-cut behind me. *No, it couldn't be. It's impossible*, I told myself, *absolutely impossible. This area isn't active...* Yet even as I formed the thoughts, I could see the lava bubbling and spewing up through great gashes in the earth. Smoke and hot ash rose and twisted with the leaves before ascending to further blacken the fermented clouds.

With my head spinning, I turned and dashed away in blind fear. Up and up I went madly, a pinball bashing into nearly every obstacle as I fought my way up the trail to the leveled rock of the Lookout. Then, as I crashed into the huge blind of rock in front of me, I nearly collapsed

with gratitude at having finally reached the main section of The Peak. It would bring me no comfort, but provided safer ground and a vantage point, at least.

I followed the path that wound closely around the edge of the rock blind. As the trail curved to the west side of the towering rocky outcrop, it opened up into a wide swath of fairly level earth, which appeared remarkably unchanged. Surrounding the site were the usual giant-sized boulders—all of which were perfect for sitting on while taking in the once beautiful expanse of lake-speckled forest below. However, that particular view was now so terribly different that I couldn't bring myself to even look at it. Instead, I forced my eyes to the fire pit, flanked by two large logs, worn smooth over the years by use. Many times I sat there, enjoying the warm flames; often by myself, occasionally with friends or routinely with paying groups that I began guiding through these forests just over ten years ago. It was usually a calming sight.

Catching my eye, a spark flew up from the fire pit, which had embers glowing in it from recent use. My heart jumped. *Someone is here.* I raked my gaze quickly around the site, noticing with a start a lone figure standing stark still on the edge of the cliff. He faced the destruction, his arms stretched out before him as though he were giving a benediction over the raving land below.

The recognition hit me like a physical blow. I stared dumbly at him, unable to deal with any more shocks today. Incapable of touching on anything more substantial, his name rose hazily from my memory.

“Tiamat,” I whispered to myself.

He spun around, though I have no idea how he could have heard me whisper his name. At that very moment, I heard a horrifying series of sharp cracks coming from the rocky outcrop high above me. As terror shot through my veins, I noticed his face, looking shocked and surprised, with his eyes locked on mine.

I knew I had to get out the way before the crushing rocks fell, even though the effort would likely be futile. I wouldn't be fast enough. As though in slow motion, my muscles bunched to leap out of the way as I set my sights on landing near the worn fire pit logs. Just as I began my desperate jump, something crashed into my side, hard, and I could feel myself being thrown a startling distance from the impact. Though I tried to roll when I smashed into the ground, my head smacked onto the hard-packed dirt, and everything finally went peacefully black.

Chapter 2

Tiamat was not someone I could easily forget. I could picture the day I met him very clearly, though it was a full ten years ago.

At the time, I was guiding an ill-prepared corporate group along the vast network of trails that veined through Pinecrest National Park. I had led many parties of this type through the woods; their employers so determined to stay ahead in the race, they would happily sign up for almost any initiative that could improve their employees' team-work and productivity—for a reasonable price, of course. Yet even though I grumbled to myself about this particular clientele a little more than was strictly necessary, I tried to have most visitors leave with at least a small appreciation of their wild surroundings.

“The rock under your feet right now is really just the tiniest exposed bit of a much larger rock formation. Amazingly, this formation covers an area that spans thousands of square miles, sometimes buried deep under the soil, but there all the same.” I used my loud guide-voice so that Sarah and Mike, a babbling pair of gregarious customer service reps who were always lingering near the back of the group, could hear me. “If you look closely at the rock's surface here, you'll see the striations made from the passage of the glaciers,” I continued, leading the group along the ancient ridge of exposed igneous rock.

After I finished giving them their abridged history of the area's terrain, I lead them back to the path that meandered toward a wide stream; the site of their last official team challenge for the day. My eight charges fell into their tired, quiet stride behind me. Two straight days of hiking in the bush turned out to be more grueling than most of them expected it would be.

After not ten steps, I could hear someone pushing his way through the hikers, their muffled curses signaling his closing approach. I cringed in frustration as Brian, a middle-aged sales rep for Logistar, wormed his way to my side yet again.

I knew I wasn't beautiful, though I realized that others sometimes considered me to be pretty. Yet I had been trying to look as plain as possible on this particular outing, due to Brian's unrelenting sleazy approaches. I was wearing the most utilitarian of camping attire: my old hiking shirt, its armholes frayed from the sleeves being ripped off during a previous muggy

summer, and my khaki shorts, which had big, practical pockets that bulged unattractively with various useful knickknacks. My long brown hair, streaked with bronze, was tied up into a very sensible ponytail, and probably needed a good wash. For good measure, I reached down and swiped my hand along the tread of my boot. Straightening, I pretended to brush a loose strand of hair from my face, deliberately smearing a streak of muck across my cheek. It wasn't enough.

"For someone that's probably just a sophomore in college, you know a lot of useless information about this area. Is geology your major at...? What's the name of that University, sweetie?" he wheezed, trying to match my fast pace. His legs were long, but he was sorely out of shape, and beads of sweat were forming on his high, balding forehead.

"First of all, Brian," I said, trying to keep a cool head, "this information is not at all useless. If you would care a little more about..."

"Hold on, sweetheart, stop. I'm only making small talk, nothing serious, so let's hold off on the lectures, alright? Not everyone cares about that tree-hugging stuff." Brian flashed me his sleazy version of a flirtatious smile. He was walking far too close for comfort, purposely brushing his sweaty, sticky body against my bare shoulder as he over-dodged low-hanging branches.

I glared back at him before picking up my pace a little more.

"There's no need to be such a cold fish, darling. So tell me again," he said as he lightly touched my arm, sending shivers of revulsion through me, "which college did you say you went to?"

He is such a creep, I thought. Despite the fact that I never told him my age, it was pretty obvious I was way too young for him. And the numerous times I bluntly expressed that I wasn't interested didn't appear to deter him either.

"I didn't say, Brian." I retorted. "And I've never been very good at small talk, so if you want to remain ignorant about your surroundings, I don't have much else to say to you."

I was so sick of his advances, which were getting progressively worse as time wore on. *Damn*, I thought, *it's not my fault that I can't possibly be civil to customers like this. But being rude doesn't frigging work! Maybe if I started singing some 'hippie tree-hugging' song, he would go away*, I stewed. *If only I knew any... or perhaps a good glob of snot...*

Caught up in my brooding, I almost missed the fork in the path that twisted its way down to the rocky stream bed. Turning abruptly, I crashed right into Brian, who caught me solidly under

the elbows and swiftly pinned me against a tree. Quickly, he slid his hands under my arms and up my back, holding me in a close, stomach-turning embrace.

“See, I knew you couldn’t resist me, honey.” He purred, leering at me. “Maybe you’d like me to pin you down tonight as well.”

Disgusted, I pushed him away from me forcefully, causing him to stagger backward in surprise. Abruptly turning away from him, I stomped my way down the path. I could feel my face burning scarlet as I hunched my shoulders against the dart-like sniggers coming from select members of the group behind me.

When I reached the rushing, but shallow stream, I examined the five flat stepping-stones that I had left in a pile on the sandy shore. The group was to use these in their team challenge to step on in an attempt to get everyone across to the other side—without getting wet. I considered the stones for a moment, before picking one of them up and flinging it into the bushes. Petty perhaps, but it instantly made me feel better.

“This is our last challenge of the trip, folks.” I said when they had all gathered on the stream bank. “Your campsite is set up for you on the other side of this stream. Just get across it and then follow the path over there that leads back up into the woods. You’ll notice the site at the top of the ravine.”

I pointed the large stones out to them. “You’ll need to use these four rocks as stepping-stones to get everyone across the stream. It’s shallow, but as you can see it’s fairly wide, so you’ll all need to work together try to stay dry and figure out how to get everyone to the other side.”

Their pathetic, sodden struggles were, so far, the highlight of my day.

Once they finally managed to get everyone across, if a little sodden, I called out my final instructions across the babbling water. This was the point where they had to fend for themselves, I reminded them, filtering water, building a fire safely, cooking their own dinner and breakfast, and finally packing up all their gear in the morning. I told them that I would meet them here one hour after dawn tomorrow to lead them along the rest of the hiking loop, finishing the trip. To respond to their queries about getting back across the stream, I happily revealed the two long planks that I had stashed in the bushes, which I used for a makeshift bridge. I refused, however, to leave the planks spanning the stream, and insisted that they stay on their side of the water until tomorrow.

“But you have the planks, and these four rocks will barely get us halfway across. What if we have an emergency, like if we really need you for something tonight?” Sarah asked, alarmed.

Brian, smirking at me suggestively, muttered something to Mike, who burst out laughing. Chuckling, he leaned over and punched Brian jovially on the shoulder, shaking his head.

It's not about me, it's not about me, I chided myself, thankful all the same that there was a wide stream between me and Brian tonight. I took a calming breath before answering her. “I’ll be sleeping right here on the other side of the stream, Sarah. If there are any problems, remember that the point of this excursion is for you to figure things out yourselves through teamwork.” I gave her what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “However, I’ll be around if you need me for an emergency. If I’m not here, then I’m off on a hike, but I’ll never be gone for too long, okay?”

“Hey, don’t you worry about us. We’ll be just fine, chief,” Mike chirped as he steered Sarah up the path to camp. “We’ll see you in about 14 hours!” The rest of the pack trailed in fairly good spirits, as though primed by the thought of proving their tenacity.

I warily watched them go, as a mouse would intently watch a cat depart, before I could fully relax. Most members of the party seemed reasonably decent on their own; it was the single rancid personality that soured my opinion of the group. As much as I didn’t want to admit it, Brian was more than just creepy; he made me extremely nervous. I stared at the empty path for some time before the tension slowly eased from my body.

After I set up my own camp and had some dinner, I went downstream and hastily washed my face and my hair. The group was leaving first thing in the morning, and I could stand my layer of grime no longer. I tied my hair up again as I made my way back to my tent to change into clean clothing.

Throwing on fresh shorts and a t-shirt and finally feeling human again, my long-anticipated sunset hike could begin. I soaked up the quiet solitude as I made my way through the lengthening shadows of the trees. The quiet rhythm of my muted footsteps on the forest floor was soporific and soothing while I made my way unerringly along the winding paths. Eventually, the trail began to lead me steeply upward, ever closer to the most sublime viewing area for sunsets in the entire park. Experiencing a sunset was always the same for me here: from my favorite vantage point, I would silently watch the sun slowly disappear on the horizon, any stresses from the day fading into insignificance under the ignited sky.

It had been far too long since I was last at Lookout Peak. For more than a month, the groups I had been guiding were based out of the park's south-east gate, which was almost as far as one could get from this cliff top. The forest to the south was beautiful enough, with its sharp, rocky hills and sparkling lakes, but it lacked the familiarity of *these* woods. Walking along these trails again felt like a homecoming.

The climb to the Peak's top was invigorating. There was nothing like the feeling of a little exertion out in the rapidly cooling evening air to refresh my mind and work the stress from my body. I slowed when I reached the end of the path, breathing deeply more from a desire to experience the cleansing air than from the exertion of the climb. When I did so, I noticed that there was the scent of wood smoke drifting in the breeze. It couldn't have been smoke from Brian's group that I detected, this smell was much too sharp to be coming from anywhere other than Lookout itself.

I was disappointed when I realized the smoke meant someone else was likely using the site, and I would be intruding if I barged into their camp simply so I could watch the sun set. There were a few other places on The Peak from which I could watch the sinking sun, but their views weren't nearly as spectacular as the one from here.

I walked slowly around the rock blind, guiltily hoping that whoever had used the site had already moved on, and that they were simply irresponsible with a campfire.

And that's when I saw him.

His image struck me instantly as something beautiful and sad, like a statue I once saw in an old cemetery. True to the likeness, he stood absolutely motionless on the edge of the cliff, staring plaintively up at the stunning sky, which was streaked with fiery oranges as they slowly bled into a deep crimson wash. The entire vision pierced me with unexplainable melancholy. Perhaps it was the unexpected beauty of the scene, like the feelings that can sometimes well up when contemplating truly inspiring art. Something permeated and ignited deep within me, leaving me moved and shaken.

Before I knew what I was doing, I found myself slowly approaching him, circling widely so that I could see him in profile. He was quite tall, with rumped-looking dark hair and an overall youthful but elegant appearance that was difficult to place; perhaps it was in the way he held himself. He was dressed plainly, in regular hiker's attire: cargo pants and a rough cream button-down shirt. His hands, I noticed now, were balled tightly into fists at his sides, and his stance

appeared rigid with tension. I was surprised that I did not see this before. Had his entire demeanor changed from a moment ago without me noticing it, or was I just detecting his tension now that I was closer?

With a surge of panic, I again took in his location at the very edge of the cliff, now alarming in light of the overall mood the man appeared to be in, and I instinctively went closer to him. Though he didn't appear to notice me at all, I was careful to steal toward him slowly and smoothly, terrified that I would startle him into a jump or a fall off the edge. I looked over at his face and took in his staring blue eyes that were still fixed upon the bleeding sky, and I wondered at the root of the apparent anguish that twisted across his handsome features.

“What have you done?” I blurted out in a horrified whisper, before reason was able to stop me. *Stupid, stupid, stupid thing to say to a man who may be about to fling himself off a cliff!* I scolded myself, as he slowly lowered his eyes to look over at me.

He didn't look surprised to see me there, and he held my gaze for a moment before answering. I was transfixed. The unnatural blue of his irises was like nothing I'd ever seen before; it was an incredibly vivid azure, like the color of back-lit sapphires, with each iris rimmed in black. His eyes were remarkable, and I found I was unable to break my gaze.

“It's not what I have done. It's what I must do.” His deep, penetrating stare was unnerving, but he spoke with a soft, quiet voice that had the slightest hint of amusement in it. “I must admit, I'm not the most sociable person so perhaps I'm wrong in this, but isn't your question a little direct? Could you not have started with ‘Hello’?”

“Oh. Hello,” I replied lamely, at last breaking off my stare to glance down at my feet.

When I braved a look back up at him, he smiled at me, if a little sadly, and moved to sit down with his back against a large boulder, facing out over the view. Below us, swaths of model-sized trees blended together into a lush, bumpy green carpet, spreading out under a brilliantly colored sky. He looked over at me and raised an eyebrow inquiringly, flicking a glance at a rock near to him.

I slowly sat on the smooth, sun-warmed rock that he indicated, watching the man warily. He had a kind face, but something about his demeanor seemed dangerous; the haunted look behind his eyes or the determined set of his jaw, perhaps. *Yet he doesn't seem menacing like Brian does,* I thought with disgust as I remembered Brian's lecherous stares.

“It’s a stunning sunset tonight,” he said, gazing once again toward the skies, “This is why you came up here, is it not? To watch the sun set?”

“How did you know that?” I asked suspiciously.

His initial gaze was frank, but his mouth twitched into an amused smile. “You arrived here shortly before nightfall devoid of any camping gear, so you must be spending the night somewhere nearby. Obviously, you are simply up here to watch the light show. Am I wrong?”

“No. You’ve pretty much got it exactly,” I admitted sheepishly. “What about you?” I asked, glancing back at his gear and tent. I recognized the look of a site that had been used for several days. “How long have you been camped here?”

“A while—a little over a month, in fact.”

“Over a month? In this same spot?” I asked, surprised.

“I had some... issues... that I needed to reconcile myself to. This cliff top is...” he paused again, as though searching for the right word, “...inspiring.” He shifted his gaze from the surrounding site and stared down at his rigid hands. “I have not had an easy month, to be honest, so it is refreshing to have someone help me get my mind off things for a bit.” He appeared so incredibly wretched when he said this, looking dejectedly down at his clenching hands that my heart immediately went out to him.

Yet I found myself at a loss. What would I say to comfort a complete stranger—a person who is tormented by something completely unknown to me?

“Whatever it is you said you must do,” I ventured, “is it possible that it’s not worth all the pain it’s causing you?”

“Your answer is already in the question. This is something I *must* do. Personal anguish is irrelevant and simply a state I must learn to shoulder—my cross to bear, if you will.”

“So then do it,” I said, as I watched the last of the sun disappear behind the distant hills. “If your feelings have no bearing either way, it does you no good to stress over it. Just do what you need to and stop obsessing over things you can’t control.”

He looked at me strangely for a very long moment, holding my gaze steadily. “You have no idea what you are advising me to do.”

I shivered as icy waves rippled along my spine, but I stayed the course. “My lack of information doesn’t change the fact that you have no choice in whether you do this thing. If you

truly have no other options, then our discussing it and you tormenting yourself over it is pointless. I would still advise you to do it.”

“Even though you don’t know what you’re telling me to do?” he asked harshly.

“Would it make a difference?” I countered.

“No,”

“Then my advice is the same.”

He turned and looked at me with great interest, studying my face intently. When he responded, he spoke with a gentle voice, but it was firm and insistent. “I want you to understand that this task I must do is already written. I cannot change it. Your advice to me today has no bearing on it and did not make me decide to go through with it. There never was a decision to be made. Do you understand this?” He asked cryptically.

I nodded in response, my head swimming with unformed questions.

“However,” he continued, his voice now soft and rich, “you have helped me deal with this more than you could ever know. Thank you for speaking with me.” And at this he turned away and resumed watching the colors fade from the sky.

“You’re welcome,” I answered quietly, conflicted by his warm tone and wondering at his apparent dismissal. “Do you want me to go?”

“You really should,” he answered bluntly. “I try not to be around others, if I can help it. It just makes my task more difficult. But...” he paused, looking at me again, “to be honest, I like you being here. Meeting you today was a gift.”

After an eternal time, he broke his gaze and looked back out at the scenery as twilight fell. I worked to slow my heart as I concentrated on the shift from day to night, watching the first stars shine softly through the haze of waning light. Probably against my better judgment, I enjoyed being with him too, and found that I was very curious about this bizarre stranger. Yet I knew it was more than just that. I was also attracted to him, and not only to his looks, though they were extraordinary. It was his intensity and his apparent morality; his anguish about having to do something that obviously went against some internal code, which drew me like a moth to a flame. *Don’t be an idiot. You don’t even know him*, I told myself. With an effort, I pushed my whimsical musings roughly aside, and focused again on the speckled evening sky.

“My name is Tiamat,” he said hesitantly, as if he wasn’t entirely sure about divulging this information. Giving me a half-smile, he added, “Tiamat La’anah,” and he lifted his water bottle for a drink, scrutinizing me over the wide rim.

“I’m Kali Michaels,” I replied, smiling as he raised his eyebrows in response to my first name. It was, after all, a common reaction in people who had heard of the Hindu goddess I was named after. “My Dad has a sick sense of humor,” I laughed, “I was a bit of a surprise to him.”

Water spewed and he snorted as the realization hit him, probably imagining what may have transpired for a man to name his baby after a goddess of destruction. His bottle had upended all over his shirt, and his coughs turned to laughs as he tried to clear out the water he inadvertently snorted. I couldn’t help the mirth that bubbled out of me as a result. And as we sat there on the cliff top, two strangers both hooting together in the pale half-light, any tension from our earlier conversation was swept entirely away.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Kali,” he said with sincerity, wiping the tears from the corners of his eyes.

Chapter 3

I glanced down at the growing dark of the forest below and shivered, remembering Brian and worrying about whether he would actually attempt a visit to my tent tonight. The wide stream would likely keep him away, or at the very least, splash in warning at his approach. I wasn't eager to test out that theory, however, and dreaded the coming night.

"You really ought to go, but ... would you like to sit by the fire for a bit, first?" Tiamat asked with concern, misinterpreting my shivers for a chill.

I knew that I should be returning to my camp by now, in the rare chance there may be an emergency, but I welcomed the opportunity to put it off a little longer.

"Thanks, Tiamat," I replied, "I'd appreciate warming up before I leave."

He left to put on a dry shirt and I deftly rebuilt the fire from the neglected coals while waiting for him. The flames were already crackling cheerily by the time I noticed him sitting on the log across from me. I started with surprise at seeing him suddenly there, like a silent apparition out of the falling night.

"I take it you've made a fire a few times before?" he asked with a smile. He had changed into a blue fleece jersey, the color augmenting the strange shade of his irises in an almost startling way.

"You could say that," I answered him, tearing my gaze from his unusual eyes with some difficulty. "My dad began taking me hiking when I was quite little and I always loved it; fires and all."

"And did your dad ever try to leave you behind in the woods?" he joked. "He did name you *Kali* after all."

"Believe it or not, he only objected to me in the beginning," I quipped, "and he always said that he got around to liking me rather quickly. He just needed to discover my charming personality." I tried to say this with a straight face, but I wasn't entirely successful at suppressing my smile.

"Actually, he only left me behind in the woods once, and I managed to find him again before he got too far." In fact, my dad had gone for firewood, but he got turned around and

ended up wandering lost for a while. I found him on a trail quite close to our campsite. I was only seven. Dad took me with him every time he went for firewood after that, and amazingly, I usually managed to keep him from going too far off-track.

When I told Tiamat this, he seemed to find the latter part of my story quite amusing, and he laughed easily. “So if you’re camping with your dad now, Kali,” he chuckled, “have you left the poor man to wander around alone in the dark?”

“No, I’m working as a guide now,” I answered. “I haven’t been camping with my dad for years. Amazingly, he hasn’t gotten lost at all without me—recently, anyway.” I realized that my humor was dry, and hoped he didn’t think I was bragging about myself. “Good thing I taught him so well!” I laughed, trying to make it obvious that I was joking.

“You look young to be a guide. I’m guessing you’re about 18. Am I right?”

I looked at him sharply. “Wow, yeah. That’s my age exactly.” He was good. “And you’re right that I’m young to be a guide,” I answered, wondering at his age as well. He looked to be in his early twenties, but it was so hard to tell. I couldn’t quite put my finger on why that was. “I just started leading groups this summer to save up some money for college in the fall. If all goes well, I’ll do this every summer until I graduate.”

“And you enjoy it?” he asked with apparent interest.

“Ninety-nine percent of the time I love it,” I responded sincerely. “Though to be honest, I sometimes get the odd client that I want to throttle,” I added quietly, thinking of Brian. Just that little reminder made my stomach lurch.

My face must have given something away. Tiamat suddenly leaned forward and looked at me intently. “And who is it you feel like throttling today?” he asked with a note of severity.

“It’s nothing, really, Tiamat. This guy, Brian, makes me kind of uncomfortable; that’s all.” His gaze was penetrating, and I tried to fluff it off so Tiamat would ease up a little. “But I have it under control. If he bothers me, I really will throttle him,” I added with a forced laugh. *Or try to*, I thought. My laugh sounded shaky, but the image of my fist smashing into Brian’s face actually did cheer me up a little.

Tiamat leaned back and was quiet for a time, looking agitated. “Fighting is not a good thing, Kali, but necessary, I suppose, if you are left with no other option. Do you know how to protect yourself?”

He was obviously concerned and meant well, but I suddenly felt like I was being interrogated by my father. I tried not to get defensive when explaining to him that I wasn't completely helpless; that I had studied kick boxing for three years.

The impressed look on his face was gratifying, but I knew I had to come clean. "I've worked hard on all the moves and can really pummel the speed bag and heavy bag," I said, focusing on my shoes. "But to be honest, I just do it to keep fit. I've never actually sparred against another person." Glancing up, I noticed his dubious expression, so I continued, hoping to convince him that I could handle myself. "If it came down to it, though, I'm fairly sure I'd be able to land a few solid blows. It'd be enough, at least, to protect myself and get away."

There was a long silence. I felt like a child withering under his contemplative stare. Yet in the end he must have been satisfied with my response, for after a time he nodded and looked away.

Before long, he started up on a new subject. "And what do you do with the groups you guide through here?"

Our conversation went on like this for some time, with Tiamat asking me questions about my job, and laughing at certain things I did or various quirks I had. He peppered the conversation with so many inquiries that he never gave me the slightest opportunity to ask him any questions of my own. Yet I had no idea how to broach the possibly sensitive queries that I had for him, considering his mood when I met him, so the coward in me was happy to let my inquisitive side lie dormant for now.

His light-hearted scrutiny continued unchecked, and when I told him about withholding my group's fifth stepping stone on their stream-crossing challenge, he just shook his head and chuckled.

"You're a force to be reckoned with, Kali, and your dad was right to name you so. I will be careful not to cross you." He shook his head again and began laughing silently, his shoulders shaking in quiet mirth. I was sure he was amusing himself with the prospect of me being even the least bit dangerous.

Deciding that this was probably my cue to leave, I stood up and announced my departure to Tiamat. I was secretly pleased to note that he looked disappointed by this.

"I'd really like to stay longer, but I have an obligation to the group I'm leading. I have to get back in case they need me for anything,"

“I’ll walk you back to your camp,” he informed me matter-of-factly.

“Really, Tiamat, I know these trails so well, I could probably hike them blindfolded,” I countered. “Besides, the moon is up and you can see that it’s lighting the paths for me beautifully. I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t doubt your abilities, Kali,” he said softly. “In truth, I’m a little sad about parting company. Perhaps you wouldn’t mind if I walked with you part of the way?”

“No, of course not, Tiamat... I wouldn’t mind, I mean,” I floundered, feeling sheepish.

We banked his fire, and walked quietly together down the moonlit trail. We didn’t say much for the bulk of the hike, Tiamat seemingly as lost in his own thoughts as I was lost in mine. Then before I knew it, we were entering my campsite. Tiamat had accompanied me the whole way, quietly dogging my footsteps through the moonlit forest. His steadfast presence behind me filled me with gratitude, and I turned to smile at him.

For once, he didn’t smile back, and a flicker of his earlier pain crossed his face as he looked at me. “Kali,” he said seriously, “will you still be guiding groups through these woods after you graduate from college?”

I grinned wider. “I’ll be guiding here in the summer for the next few years, at least. If you want to see me again, Tiamat, you know where to find me,” I teased. “Please don’t wait until after college, that’s much too long.”

“You didn’t answer me,” he said, looking agitated. “When you *are* finished college, will you still be guiding in these woods?”

“I don’t know. Probably not. I’m going out-of-state for school, so chances are high that I may get a job far away. A lot can happen in all that time.”

Instead of being disappointed that in the future, I may be living a fair distance from here, a look of quiet satisfaction passed over his face. It was maddening. Perhaps I misinterpreted his interest in me.

He paused then, a small crease forming between his brows, looking as though he was deliberating about whether or not to tell me something. I waited a long moment, but he ended up saying nothing, and the silence stretched on.

As I watched Tiamat mull things over, I attempted to distract myself from these little nagging feelings that kept telling me that he couldn’t possibly be interested in me; that he was

just using me to pass the time. I impatiently pushed these notions away and instead concentrated on his face, trying to guess how old he might be.

Determining his age was a difficult venture. He undeniably had an adult face, chiseled, with none of the roundish facial aspects that most male teenagers had ... yet strangely, he lacked certain features that characterized almost all mature men, even those that were only slightly older. In particular, his face was curiously smooth for someone who had been camping for the past month. He either kept it incredibly clean-shaven or it was virtually hairless. It was also smooth in that it was lacking the fine wrinkles and laugh lines that many men seem to develop shortly after losing their boyish features. Again, I had to place my best guess somewhere in his early twenties, though he had an air about him and a manner of speech that made him seem much older. It was perplexing.

Gaining no further ground in my musings, I couldn't resist the urge to ask him. "How old are you, Tiamat?" I blurted without preamble.

His smile was instantly back, lighting up his features and warming the chill from my heart. But I was unprepared for his response. He stepped close to me before answering, and reached up to touch the tresses in my ponytail. His grin vanished, and was replaced by a look of intensity and thick emotion that stopped my breath and sent butterflies fluttering wildly in my chest.

Reaching around me slowly, he gently freed my hair, taking it down and tenderly smoothing the locks out across my right shoulder. "My real age is meaningless," he replied softly. "Compared to tonight, I feel like I have been half-alive the entire time I've existed."

Everything stopped altogether; the world around us blurred and melted. Despite a look of hesitation in his eyes, he never broke his gaze, while I could feel our closeness charge the very air between us. He leaned toward me tentatively, and I closed my eyes as the forest spun. Very gently, he pressed his lips to my forehead, kissing me light as a breath as he ran his fingers slowly through my loosened hair. Time froze as a feeling like electric energy blazed from where his lips had touched me, burned down my spine and shot out along every nerve ending, leaving my limbs tingling wildly.

"Live well, Kali," he whispered against my skin.

There was a cold breeze, and I opened my eyes to find I was alone.

* * *

I awoke suddenly, my heart pounding in my chest. The air seemed very close as I kept myself still, my body rigid with tension. Holding my breath, I listened intently for what noises had alarmed me during my sleep, wishing fervently that I could see through the sides of my tent. The thin nylon walls glowed faintly from the bright moon outside, and I felt blind and exposed.

“Oh, darlin’...!” Brian’s voice called out, chilling my blood. “Your stud is here,” he slurred thickly, like the words formed by a bar fly at closing time. The sound of the chattering stream competed with his somewhat distant voice, and I could ascertain that—for the moment—he was likely on the far side of it.

“‘S time fer the hot stallion ta warm the cold fish,” he announced. “You’d better be ready for a good pinning, baby, ’cause I know you need it. And this time, I won’ take ‘no’ fer an answer—I know what’s good fer ya, you feisty bitch!”

Then I heard it. A faint splashing in the stream sent shocks of terror through me as I realized how negligently naïve I was to put myself into danger like this; sleeping isolated and alone after Brian gave me virtually every indication he might make a move like this tonight. He might have been middle-aged and out of shape, but he was bigger than I was by far, and had looked strong. I was in serious trouble.

My mind reeling with indecision, I quickly went over my options as the splattering in the stream sounded closer and closer. If I came face to face with Brian, I’d have no choice but to try to fight him off. But when it really came down to it, would I even be able to? Frantically considering my options, I immediately realized that any struggle would have to be outside the tent, allowing me a chance, at least, to try to get away. If I could avoid his grasp, I was sure I could outrun him.

The splashing got closer. I *had* to get out of the tent.

Go now! I thought urgently. But if I opened the zipper, the noise would alert him to my escape, possibly ruining my chance to get away unhindered. Should I use my knife to cut my way out the back? I worried, however, that I wouldn’t be able to slice my way out quietly without tipping him off to what I was doing.

The splashing stopped. He must be across, I realized with horror. And then the next terrifying sounds came; the unmistakable padding of slow, hushed footsteps on the hard-packed dirt.

Out the back! Use your knife and get out the back! I silently screamed to myself as I jumped into action. My hands shook as I fumbled for my knife and opened it in the thick gloom. Yet just as I began to slice my way out, working as swiftly and noiselessly as I could, I heard a strange wind-like sound that didn't seem to fit the outside scene—a scene that, in my terror, I had pictured all too vividly in my head. It sounded like someone shaking a large blanket ... or wind snapping the nylon on a giant kite. It just didn't fit. The sound was fleeting, ending as abruptly as it started.

I froze mid-slice, the knife in my clenched fist sticking through the thin nylon. There were no other sounds. No footsteps, no splashing; just the impartial babbling of an apparently vacant stream. Holding my breath, I waited longer. Still, there was nothing. My hand slowly relaxed and I released my breath tentatively, all the while listening carefully for the footsteps to resume. Again: nothing.

Sitting numb and motionless for a time that seemed to extend endlessly, I sifted through the usual night sounds of the forest around me—over and over—and for every instance, could detect nothing amiss.

I finally fell into a restless sleep sometime in the final hours of the night. Curled up by the small slit I had made at the back of my tent, I slept with my hand wrapped tightly around the hilt of my knife. I would be ready next time, and naïveté be damned.

* * *

“Kali... Kali!” Sarah's panicked voice called out. It carried across the wide, gurgling stream clearly, and I could hear her begin to tromp through the shallows in her rush to get across to me.

I sat up stiffly, prying the knife from my cramped fingers as I shook myself awake. Something was wrong. I hastily zipped back the flaps, stepping into my shoes as I lunged swiftly from the tent opening.

In the pale light of early morning, Sarah splashed clumsily through the last few feet of the water to reach me. She was sopping wet and near hysterics, and I needed to wait for her to catch her breath before I could make any sense of her broken ramblings.

“Calm down and take a breather,” I said soothingly, sitting her down on a large, flat stump. “Now when you’re ready, first tell me the gist of the problem; we can get to the details later, okay?”

Sarah nodded and took a deep breath before replying. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I would have come to get you sooner, but the guys only just told me...” she rambled, apparently deciding to divulge the inconsequential first. “Mike noticed late last night that Brian wasn’t in the tent anymore. At first he thought that Brian just left to relieve himself, but he never came back.”

My breath caught in my throat, but thankfully, Sarah didn’t appear to notice my reaction.

“For some reason, Mike didn’t think much of it. He said he thought Brian might have just curled up by the fire, or that maybe they would find him snoring under a bush this morning. Brian did hit the whiskey pretty hard last night.”

“But they couldn’t find him?” I asked, unnerved, my stomach twisting in knots.

“No! He wasn’t anywhere,” she said, her voice rising in fear. “The guys looked all over the area before they told me. He’s gone! There’s no trace of him!”

I jumped up with cold decision. Regardless of my revulsion for Brian, he was my responsibility. They all were. Walking swiftly toward the bushes, I fished out the planks that were stashed there. I had the boards straddling the stream and was already halfway across before Sarah gathered her wits enough to come trailing behind me.

“What do we do?” she whined nervously.

“Nothing,” I snapped back. “The last thing I need is to have more people lost in these woods. I’ll look for him alone,” I commanded, “and you’ll all wait right here until I return.”

When I deposited Sarah back at the camp, I gave the rest of the group the same instructions.

“Don’t worry,” I told them. “If he’s out wandering, he’ll likely stick to the trails. If he wandered from one, chances are very good that he would have found another one eventually. This park is riddled with them.” Noticing that they appeared calmer, I continued. “There are a number of places in the area where the trails cross. He’ll likely be stopped at one of these junctions, as people tend to get nervous about choosing the wrong path when they’re turned around.”

They looked relieved, so I turned to go, reluctant to waste any more time. As I strode away, I called back over my shoulder. “I think I’ll find him, folks, so make sure you have everything packed up by the time I return.”

I walked quickly along the trails toward a junction I nicknamed The Crossroads, with a strange feeling I would find Brian there. This intersection had four separate trails that bottlenecked together at the base of Lookout Peak before merging into one. There was a good possibility, given the camp's location, that he would have followed one of those four paths and, hopefully, stopped at the junction. It was my best bet.

Luckily, I wasn't wrong. As I neared the spot, I could hear his voice beckoning impatiently, obviously having picked up the sound of my approach and my intermittent calling of his name.

"Hello? I'm here! I'm over here!" he called.

There at The Crossroads stood Brian, looking like an abandoned child. A bewildered expression was on his face and leaves and other debris were stuck in his hair and plastered up one side of his body. His filthy chicken legs appeared rooted to the ground, and he wore only boxers and a dirty-looking t-shirt that was far too small to fully cover his protruding belly.

I was repulsed, but he was shivering noticeably so I pulled out the emergency blanket I had brought with me. Rapidly unfolding the thin, reflective plastic film, I scrutinized his face, relieved to see that he only appeared genuinely happy to see me and any traces of sleaze were presently absent. I stepped closer to him and passed him the thin heat shield, indicating that he should wrap it around himself.

"It'll trap your heat so you can warm up," I informed him.

"Thank you, Kali," he said, actually calling me by name. "I don't know what happened. I was going..." he paused, "...just wandering last night and the next thing I knew, I was here. I just woke up here, right on the path. I must have blacked out or sleepwalked or something..."

I looked at him, unconvinced, but he didn't appear to be making it up. I didn't bother asking him where he was wandering before he 'blacked out.'

"Come on, Brian. Let's get back. The others are worried about you."

When we returned to camp a short time later, we found the group entirely packed up and ready to go, apparently having faith that I would find Brian and deciding to follow my instructions in the meantime.

Mike dug some clothes out for Brian who scrambled to put them on.

"Where did you find him?" Mike asked me.

"On a junction near the base of Lookout Peak," I answered. "I didn't have to go far."

“Lookout Peak?” Mike asked incredulously. “But we already checked there this morning before Sarah got you. We should have seen him.”

“You went up the Peak?” I asked. “Right to the main lookout?”

“Of course we did. We hoped we’d see a sign of Brian from up there.”

“And did you speak to the man who was camped there?” I asked, eager for an update on Tiamat.

But Mike just looked at me curiously. “What man?” he asked. “There was no one at the site when we were there this morning.”

“You don’t need to look far if you want a man, darling,” Brian interjected. “You already found me,” he said, stepping closer. Not surprisingly, his demeanor had shifted and I was looking at the old, slimy Brian again. It was probably because he didn’t feel so naked and vulnerable in front of everyone now, I guessed briefly, or because the cockroach was no longer relying on me for his safety.

I ignored him, my thoughts shifting rapidly to a more significant person. “The site was empty?” I asked Mike. “You mean he wasn’t in his tent?”

“No. I mean the site was deserted. No gear and no tent. There wasn’t a soul up there.”

I staggered backward. Did Mike mean that Tiamat was *gone*? How could he be gone?

“Hey, don’t look so distressed, Baby,” Brian said as he slithered closer. “He obviously left because you’ve got a real man around now. Want to see how manly...”

Almost of its own accord, my fist flashed out and punched him squarely in the face. The force of it knocked him so hard he reeled backward and landed right in the bushes, his legs splayed absurdly apart like he was some silly cartoon character.

“Go to hell,” I told his legs triumphantly. “Though I doubt you could find your way.” And with that, I spun on my heel and strode from their camp.

Chapter 4

I awoke slowly, my head throbbing, to a suffocating silence that was so complete it seemed palpable. There was nothing to be heard, nothing at all. The thick, tomblike quiet reminded me of something...

I tasted bile in my throat as the memories flooded back, seizing my heart with terror. Hellish images of crashing trees, splitting earth, and lava spewing hot ash into thunderous skies screamed through my head, threatening to burst it apart. *But it couldn't really have happened*, a part of my mind broke in, attempting rational thought. *I was dreaming; it was just an awful nightmare.*

Venturing to open my eyes minutely, I saw the textured bark of a pine tree floating in the fuzzy haze of my vision. I blinked to clear my eyes, only to confirm that a tree trunk was directly in front of my inert head, and I would see nothing else unless I moved. But the terror lingered from my dreams, and even though I needed to ascertain that my world was still unbroken, I was afraid to move. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, forcing myself to be rational. "Get a grip, Michaels," I muttered, opening my eyes again.

Listening carefully and detecting no sounds, I cautiously inched my head off the ground. I could feel that there was a thick coating of something encrusting my temple and the side of my face as I peeled myself away from the leaves and packed earth—but I hardly had the attention for it. Determining the safety of my immediate surroundings took precedence over all else.

Peeking around the tree, relief flooded through my body. There appeared to be nothing amiss. Columns of beautiful, firmly grounded tree trunks stretched off into a blur of tranquil green. The forest appeared peaceful and its floor intact. Perhaps I just fell and hit my head, I thought, and my imagined ordeal was a result of the trauma.

Sitting up, I sucked in my breath as twinges of pain shot through my aching limbs and torso, and I touched my sticky temple in wonder. I couldn't fathom what had happened, and worked to recall what had caused my fall as I prodded at the thickened coating of blood that had congealed down my cheek. It was no wonder my head pounded so painfully. As confused as I currently was between nightmares and reality, I was uncertain exactly how I had hit my head. And

stranger still, if I had simply had a nightmare, why did my entire body feel so battered? I shuddered with a feeling of foreboding as I sat in the oppressive stillness. Knowing that I was missing some integral piece of information, I very slowly turned to look behind me.

My breath caught. I gazed disbelievingly onto the flat grounds of Lookout Peak, shocked that I was actually there and not somewhere in the woods below. I was near the far western edge of the observation cliffs, sitting a few paces into the forest that stood sentinel around the cleared area of the lookout site. *No way*, I thought, panicked. *If I'm at Lookout, then that means... that means I ran up here when... when...* I stopped, unable to make myself form the thoughts. There was nothing for it but to see for myself. Turning my body a fraction more, I was again thwarted in my attempts to view my surroundings. I was sitting in a slight depression and an enormous mass of exposed rock obstructed my view of the landscape below the cliffs, tormenting me with its concealed knowledge.

I crept toward the cliff's edge, my heart in my throat, hoping desperately that I was nothing more than paranoid, deluded by my vivid imaginings. Yet even as I neared it, my hopes crumbled and drifted away; mirroring the black ash that fell around the look out, drifting toward the earth like tainted snow. My nose was assaulted by the sharp stink of sulfur, prefacing the view that awaited me. I knew what I would see. I stood to face it, and taking a steadying breath, I forced myself to step out from behind the protection of the shielding rock.

The unobstructed view was horrific. Shock ripped through my body as I gazed out over a land of pure devastation, and I saw a world that was completely different from what I had known before. It was a world that didn't fit, which was surreal in its terrifying strangeness.

Stay focused and get the hell out of here, I told myself firmly as I felt my knees weaken at the sight. *I will not fall apart... I will not...* I reached blindly for the solidity of the rock beside me, numbly gazing at the cooling lava, blackening over the torn, exposed earth. Fallen, broken matchstick trees lay scattered and jumbled for as far as the eye could see, far outnumbering the forlorn trees that were left standing here and there—like a few remaining soldiers wading through fields of the dead. Lakes, whose locations I knew intimately, were simply gone, in some cases replaced by new protuberances of exposed rock. There were some new lakes—large, silty and debris-laden—that occupied areas which were never before under water. And surrounding everything was the eerie stillness, like I was the last living thing around for miles...

The next memory smashed into me full-force: Tiamat. Tiamat was here...

Spinning around, I nervously scanned the area for any danger. I didn't know if Tiamat was a threat to me; couldn't even fathom what he was doing here, or why my stomach lurched when I remembered him standing over the destruction—if that's what you could call what he was doing—in those moments before I blacked out. I cautiously checked the cliff area, which appeared to be deserted, and moved on to search the campsite.

I didn't need to go far. There, under the shattered cliffs at the opposite end of the site, lay Tiamat. Immense piles of sand, that I was certain were not there before, surrounded and partially overlapped his prone body. Scattered amid the sand were numerous vicious-looking rocks; any of which could have killed me as I stood there earlier. Remembering the terrifying crash of the rocks collapsing overhead, I realized Tiamat must have pushed me out of the way, only to be struck down as he saved me.

Never in my life had I been so conflicted. For ten years, I had hoped desperately to see Tiamat again, had thought that I would give anything in the world for a reunion ... but I was grossly wrong. Not only did the park—and who knows what else—now lay in ruins, I feared terribly for Tiamat. And now, I was also afraid of him. *What was it he was doing when I surprised him today?*

Concern for Tiamat tore at me, clawing angrily at my trepidation, but I wouldn't move. Something was wrong with this scene. Great holes were gouged out of the looming cliff face, but where were the boulders that should have fallen? Why was there only this inexplicable sand mixed with some rather large rocks?

Unable to come up with any plausible explanations, and as the strange piles of sand seemed to be presently harmless, I shifted my focus to the still body that lay among them. I didn't know if he would be a danger to me, but because he risked his life to save mine, I owed him. I knew that I must, at the very least, determine if he was okay. I bypassed my apprehensions as I crept toward Tiamat, my body tense and ready for flight.

He lay on his stomach; his motionless, blood-stained face was toward me, with his left arm flung out beside him. His arm was certainly broken, the skin bulging grotesquely just below the elbow. He looked dreadful, but I was relieved to see that he was breathing evenly and deeply, as though immersed in a restful sleep.

I knelt down beside him and looked at his tranquil face. He hadn't changed at all since I last saw him ten years ago. His face was still smooth and the lines of his nose and chin held the

same note of elegance, like a typical subject one would see in a renaissance painting. Marring the impression, dried blood from a gash on the side of his head had left numerous crisscrossed red trails covering the upper part of his face, creating a gruesome masquerade visage.

“Tiamat...” I said hesitantly.

His eyes fluttered, but remained closed.

“Tiamat, it’s me. It’s Kali,” I said, noticing his face flicker at my name. “You’ve been hurt. I’m just going to...”

Tiamat’s eyes flew open, stabbing with their blue intensity. “Don’t touch me!” he cried suddenly, attempting to raise his head.

“It’s okay, I won’t touch you yet. Not if you don’t want me to,” I said soothingly. “I’m a trained guide, remember? Yours wouldn’t be the first injury I’ve treated.”

He relaxed and closed his eyes again, as though his body wasn’t quite ready to keep them open. “Kali, as I told you when we last saw each other, I do not doubt your abilities,” he said softly. “Am I bleeding much?” he asked after a pause, opening his eyes a crack.

“From what I can see, you’re only bleeding from this cut on your head here,” I said as I thoughtlessly reached toward him.

In a flash, he was up on his knees and right arm, scrabbling backward in an attempt to get away from me. But the instant he put weight on his left arm, he roared and fell over in agony. He pressed his forehead into the dirt with a moan of pain.

I was baffled by his behavior, but stayed where I was so as to alarm him no further. It was incredibly strange: shouldn’t *I* be backing away from *him* and not the other way around? Unable to help, I impotently watched him struggle into a sitting position as he cradled his left arm. He watched me warily.

“Kali,” he began, gritting his teeth and breathing hard from obvious pain, “you must not touch me when I am bleeding. Please, promise me you won’t.”

I stared at him blankly. “When you’re bleeding? But ... why not?”

“Please trust me in this. Will you promise me?”

I was quiet for a moment as I thought over his request. I disliked making promises. The future has a habit of planting landmines when you least expect them, and giving your word always seems to end with that nasty click under your foot; it really limits your options. “Is it just that I shouldn’t touch your blood?” I queried.

“Yes,”

“But not that I shouldn’t touch *you*?”

“Not when I am bleeding.”

“What if I just promised to never purposely come into contact with your blood?”

He appeared to ponder this, looking pale. “Alright, Kali. Will you give me your word then? Promise me you will never touch it.”

“Okay, Tiamat. I’ll never purposely touch your blood. I swear it.” I paused. “Do you have Aids?” I blurted tactlessly.

“No,” he said. “My blood is far worse than that.”

I blinked. Was he joking?

“Are you badly hurt?” he asked me, scrutinizing my probably haggard appearance, my own head caked and crusted from a wound above the temple.

“Mostly bruises, I think.” I touched my head gingerly. “I’m pretty sure this isn’t deep, and the bleeding has stopped. Like yours, from what I can see.”

He touched his own head roughly, and inspected his hand afterward. Appearing satisfied with what he saw, Tiamat stood, staggering a little, and started off toward the woods. “There is a creek in the woods here,” he said, turning to me. “I will return shortly, after I have washed this off.” He indicated the blood on his head, and began to stride off.

Unwilling to be left behind under the current circumstances, I immediately jumped up and followed him. We walked to the little brook that gurgled happily through the woods before it plunged off the cliff into the devastation below. *A sick parallel to my life*, I thought bitterly, stooping down beside Tiamat to wash my face.

He leveled a look at me.

“Oh, right. Not downstream,” I said, trying to look apologetic as I jumped up and walked numerous paces upstream of him.

As I washed, I surreptitiously watched Tiamat struggle to clean the blood from his face and head. A sheen of sweat appeared on his paling neck, and he froze, his jaw tightly clenched, every time he jarred his left arm. He was swaying noticeably by the time he finished, and fresh blood was lightly trickling down his face again.

Using my pocket knife, I quickly cut a strip of fabric off the bottom of my shirt. I gave it a fast rinse in the brook, and wrung it out as I passed it to him. I couldn't stand to see him attempt to wash his face again; he would certainly pass out from the effort.

"Just press this to your head to stop the bleeding," I said. "In a moment you'll be able to splash off the last of the blood from your face."

Taking the cloth, he leaned up against a sturdy poplar that grew on the moist creek bank. A look of warmth spread out across his features when he looked up at me. "Thank you, Kali," he said, pressing the fabric to his head and closing his eyes.

Tenderly feeling my own gashed head, I was pleased to find that the cut had not reopened. I must have been a little gentler cleaning it out than Tiamat had been when scrubbing his wound. Careful not to be too close, I chose to sit on the smooth wood of an old fallen tree that lay a few paces across from him.

"You should let me splint your arm," I told him, knowing it would be a long time before we could get anyone else to look at it, given the situation. "Once your head stops bleeding, of course," I added hastily.

"I would be much obliged," he replied warily, giving me a weak smile, "though I must admit that I am not looking forward to it."

I smiled at him. "I'll go easy on you. But I'll need to do it soon," I said, nodding toward his arm. "It's starting to swell, and I'll have trouble setting the bone if we wait."

Despite needing ties for the splint, he refused to let me cut my clothing more, sending me back to his camp for some rope. I hurried to gather the other supplies I'd need on my way back, and managed to return in a few short minutes.

He was patiently holding his arm up as I had instructed him, to discourage further swelling, and he watched me in silence as I set out my materials: smooth, sturdy sticks for the splint, moss to pack in for cushioning, and short lengths of rope to hold it all together. I was relieved to see that the bleeding on his head had stopped, and he no longer held the cloth to it. Additionally, all traces of blood had again been rinsed from his face and he looked much recovered in the short time I was away. Under normal circumstances, I would have been almost happy.

Yet despite the calming nature of having something purposeful to do, my hands shook. It had been impossible to ignore the view of the devastated landscape when I entered Tiamat's

camp, and it was with great difficulty that I suppressed the panic that was bubbling up inside me. I clenched my hands together and tried to focus.

“This is going to hurt, Tiamat,” I warned him, wiping my shaking hands on my pants. “But it will be easier if you try to keep your arm relaxed.”

He nodded and leaned his head back against the tree, waiting for me to begin.

After shaking my hands out in an attempt to ease the tremors, I reached over and firmly grasped his injured limb, perhaps a little rougher than I should have. Immediately, bizarre ripples of some kind of energy shot savagely through my hands, burning fiercely up my arms. I threw down his injured forearm, leaping away from him in panic.

“Augh!” he grunted in pain, cradling the offending limb. “You certainly have an interesting way to set bones, Kali. And I apologize about the shock; I should have warned you,” he added.

“*What?* What do you mean, you ‘apologize about the shock?’” I sputtered, the bubbling panic beginning to well over. “What the hell is going on here anyway? None of this can be happening! *It can’t!* And your arm... your arm *shocked* me! No, keep it elevated, damn it! It will swell!” I glared at Tiamat as he raised his injured arm again, his expression guarded. “What’s happening, Tiamat?” I demanded again, taking in his tight-lipped expression. “I’m losing my mind here and you won’t even say anything!”

I stared at him, waiting for him to elaborate on the strange shock that most certainly originated from his arm... waiting for him to elaborate on *anything*. But after a long, drawn-out silence and no change to his guarded expression, I had to resign myself to the fact that I wasn’t likely to get any further at this moment.

“Fine!” I huffed. “But at least tell me this. If I touch you again, will I get zapped?”

“You will feel it, but I will not shock you again,” he promised. “I was taken by surprise before. You have a very firm grip,” he said with mock injury.

Annoyed, I crouched down beside Tiamat again, resolving to get some serious answers from him in the very near future. However, despite my anxiety, curiosity won over, and I hesitantly reached out to touch his skin. Gently this time, I ran my fingers along his broken limb as tingling pins and needles undulated through my hands and crept up the skin of my arms. Feeling carefully for the broken ulna bone, I braced my hands on either side of it and began to pull apart slowly.

Letting out a yelp, Tiamat suddenly writhed. He flung himself on top of me, pinning me down as he stretched his arm high in the air, far away from my grasp. “Ow,” he said, as his lips twisted into a surprised, sheepish smile. “Contrary to what you obviously believe, I do have an aversion to pain. Is it not possible for you to be gentle?”

That did it. I had no patience for this crap today. “Maybe I’m just not a gentle person. Deal with it.” Taking him with me, I rolled and pinned him in return, surprised by how heavy he was. “Oh, just hold still, Tiamat!” I scolded, scrambling to sit on his chest as I restrained his upper left arm with my hands. I used my left leg to immobilize his uninjured right arm, though he had stopped struggling for the moment. In fact, he looked amused by my response. That only annoyed me further. I continued to hold him down as I finally set the bone, the strange energy that emanated from him crawling like armies of ants all over my skin. Only my irritation with Tiamat—fueled by my occasionally stubborn nature—kept me from leaping up and smacking the creeping sensation away from my flesh.

Looking for my splinting materials, I realized with frustration that they were still over by the tree, where I first attempted to set his arm. They were maddeningly just beyond my reach, and although I shifted my position backward and stretched as far as I could, I was unable to put my hand on them. I would have to release Tiamat if I was going to splint his arm. “Stay put,” I told him sternly, flicking a glance at his face.

I stopped, puzzled. Tiamat wore the strangest expression, which smoothly shifted back to that infuriating look of amusement. He slowly raised one eyebrow at me, taking in my current position on top of him.

It only took me a moment.

All at once, in one mortifying flash, I understood the source of his amusement. In my efforts to reach the splints, I had shifted myself much lower down on his body, and was currently straddling Tiamat in a rather compromising position.

Jumping up quickly, I could feel my blush blazing into a beacon of my embarrassment. I was completely at a loss: *how the hell do I save face after this?* I simply stood over him, struggling to find something to say that would help me bounce back from my humiliating blunder.

“Was that okay?” I asked him stupidly. “Um... your arm, I mean. I didn’t hurt you too much?”

He looked at me, his mouth twitching, and took a deep breath before answering. “Actually, it was quite bearable after all,” he said with an obvious effort to keep his voice even. “Especially that end part...” He snapped his mouth shut before finishing, looking like he was going to burst from the effort of holding in his laughter. Shutting his eyes tight, his shoulders shook while his face turned red with concentrated suppression. I watched in exasperation, waiting for this rather uncomfortable moment to pass. I had to wait a long time.

Finally, as Tiamat’s amusement began to subside and I, at long last, finished putting on his splint—a little more roughly than was strictly necessary—I knew that the time had come for some answers.

We exchanged a long look and, without waiting for him to follow, I stalked off to a place I had in mind, a little upstream. Here the creek widened and deepened into a small pool before it swirled out and continued on its merry way. I had always found this place soothing, and I had need of its calming affects now. I sat on the edge of a large rock, which jutted out over the pool, and took off my shoes and socks mechanically. Plunging my toes deep down under the water, I watched them a moment as I worked to steady my breathing. The cool water flowing around my feet was bracing, helping me anchor my hold on reality—a grasp which seemed to be getting more and more tremulous as the day went on.

I looked up to see that he was there, as I knew he would be, standing silently on the other side of the wide pool, his strange blue eyes thoughtful as they locked with mine.

“I think we should talk,” I began.

“Yes,” he agreed softly. “But weigh your questions carefully, Kali. I am afraid my answers will bring you no comfort.”

Chapter 5

It was not difficult to follow Tiamat's advice. I was terrified of the answers I might receive and, as a result, the best strategy I could fathom was to start with a comparatively simple question and work my way up from there.

"Are you happy to see me?" I ventured.

"Yes," he blurted, looking startled by what I asked. But after a few seconds, a shadow crossed his face and he shook his head. "And no."

That amendment didn't matter as much as it should have, and despite the circumstances, I managed an unsteady smile. "Well, Tiamat, it looks like you were wrong," I told him boldly. "You did say something that brought me comfort after all, even if you're only *slightly* happy to see me. And there may be something else too," I added, "another positive thing you can tell me."

He looked at me expectantly, and waited. And though I tried to appear collected, there was something about his demeanor that made me think he could see right through my unruffled façade.

"Earlier today, when we first saw each other, there were some boulders..." I had to pause and hold the edge of the rock I sat on to still my shaking hands, "... falling boulders that were going to crush me. Did you push me out of the way?"

"Yes," he admitted hesitantly. "But Kali, you must face the truth. Though I asked you to weigh your questions carefully, I did not anticipate your avoidance of real answers." He looked at me and shook his head. "I am sorry, but even the mundane questions you selected can't have the soothing responses you expect. So while it is true that I pushed you from that particular path, my exact role in that incident has not yet been addressed."

"What role?" I asked, feigning ignorance. I was under a great deal of stress when I reached the lookout and I must have been imagining things; Tiamat couldn't really have been doing anything... it wasn't possible...

But he interrupted my musings with a harsh shock of reality, one that he appeared to lift straight from my twisted imaginings. "Do you not realize I was the one who caused the cliff to

collapse in the first place?” He looked at me steadily, his gaze strengthening the impact of his message and turning my insides into ice.

I gripped the rough, unyielding stone of the ledge, whitening my knuckles and willing my world to stop shifting. Trying to keep my face blank, the implications of what he said whirled in a dizzying vortex of thought and panic. *Somehow, impossibly, he caused that... almost crushing me...* “W-why...” I whispered, “...Why did you try to *kill* me?” I asked, my perspective shifting painfully when I worked to recall the moment. “And then... you almost killed yourself to save me... I don’t understand...”

“No,” Tiamat said, his voice even. “I did not try to kill you. That was an accident that occurred when you startled me. And when I saw the danger you were in, I pushed you out of the way.” Then, almost as an afterthought, he added quietly, “I could not help myself.”

“Wait a minute!” I exclaimed, confusion and anger exploding out of me. “You couldn’t help almost crushing me, or you couldn’t help saving me? There’s a big difference, Tiamat!”

“I could help neither one,” he said quietly, his eyes steady on my face.

I blinked, surprised. What was he implying? “When you said you ‘couldn’t help’ saving me, it’s like you were insinuating that it went against your better judgment.”

“That is exactly what I meant. I *should* have let those rocks crush you, Kali, but I couldn’t stand it. And now I don’t know what I am going to do. Your presence here has complicated things a great deal.”

“I could say the same thing about you, couldn’t I? Except ‘complicate’ is too mild a word to describe your effects on my present life!” I threw back venomously. “Yet in my case, I tried to help you, and I never wished *you* were mashed by boulders...”

“I do not wish that, Kali!”

“...and speaking of boulders, *how*, exactly, did you cause them to fall? And then what the hell happened to them? When I looked afterward, there were only huge piles of sand and some rubble—but there shouldn’t be any friggin’ sand there,” I fumed as I reasoned, the fury keeping my mind from crumbling apart.

Tiamat watched me quietly, as though deciding on a course of action. Then, having reached some conclusion, he stooped beside an anvil-sized rock and placed his hand on it, palm down.

I could feel it the moment before it happened; gooseflesh crawled along my arms as the little hairs stood on end, prickling in the swiftly charging air. Then, abruptly, the ground lurched—

like someone was blasting with dynamite a short distance away—while thick and forceful, the *fwump* of a shock wave immediately rushed outward, kicking at my eardrums. I grimly recalled hearing, earlier that very day, that exact disturbance while the entire forest became chaos all around me, and I shuddered. And though I knew I did not take my eyes off that rock, I could not see *how* it happened. One second, there was a rock under his hand, and in the next, it was a great heap of sand, its edges cascading softly under his touch.

“I do not need to touch it,” he explained. “But I thought this would be less alarming for you than if I were to crush the rock from a distance.”

I nodded, the only response I was currently capable of. My mouth had gone completely dry, as if I had taken a great bite of his newly created sand.

“Falling sand would be less dangerous than the boulders,” he explained, as though he were using this information to try to temper my reaction. “But preoccupied as I was with pushing you out of the way, I failed to reduce everything, and was struck by the rubble.

“And as to *how* I am able to do this, that is something I cannot tell you at this point. The power to do these things does not originate from me, so I am not at liberty to disclose this information to you. I do feel compelled, however, to make you understand what has taken place here.” His haunted eyes found my face, and seemed to plead for understanding. “Kali, if you were to remember back to when we first met, could you recall our initial conversation?”

“Yes,” I answered softly, looking down at my knees. “I have thought of that day often over the past ten years.” I looked up at him as it clicked. “You told me there was something you had to do; that you had no choice,” I said slowly, a horrified understanding creeping into my voice.

“And now we have come to it, haven’t we?” he said gravely. “You know what I was doing on the cliff today, Kali. I can see it in your eyes, though you are afraid to voice it. You even know how I feel about it, as that was the topic of our conversation ten years ago.”

Smooth, fast and graceful, he was suddenly standing in the water, though I saw no specific movement that brought him there. He approached me cautiously, like one would for a frightened animal, across the creek’s buffering pool. “Little has changed since that time. I remain in suffering over the task I carried out and the ones I still must do.”

But his tasks were horrific and destructive, and when I thought about this, somehow his *feelings* about them carried little weight when placed in the shadow of his actions.

“Tiamat,” I began quietly, watching the water eddying around my feet. “Are you evil?” I asked, glancing up at him. “Or would you say you’re good?”

“That is a very difficult question, that shifts, depending on one’s perspective,” he responded slowly, stopping mid-stream. He stared off into the trees, his forehead creased and his brow knitted, holding his splinted arm across his chest. “I would have to say that I am good,” he said, cautiously stepping toward me again. “But most people would almost certainly consider my actions to be evil.”

He was across the pool now, oblivious to his soaked clothes, holding his focus on me. Standing waist-deep in the water that lapped against my ledge of rock, his head was now equal to the height of mine, so we found ourselves eye-to-eye. He reached out slowly, pleading for calm with his eyes, but I recoiled, leaning far back away from him in alarm.

“Do not fear me, Kali,” he said soothingly. “I only turn *rocks* to sand,” he said with a little smile, “not people.” Carefully grasping my hands—giving me the tiniest quiver of shocks—he gently pried them off the stone ledge and examined them.

I was taken aback by what I saw, and realized I must have clawed aggressively at the rough surface I sat on while I tried to digest what he was telling me—as I worked so hard to remain rooted in reality. My fingers were scraped raw and oozing blood, my short nails deeply split and broken. Yet I had had no recollection of doing such a thing, and I simply stared at them numbly; like they were someone else’s hands and not mine at all. Certainly I would not do something so unhinged...

Reaching down, he scooped up a palmful of water and dribbled this over my stinging fingers. He continued this for a moment, while he restrained my wrists in his right hand, as though he was afraid I would injure myself further. A numbing buzz of energy rippled deeply into my skin and crawled unnervingly up my arms, but I fought the urge to pull away, and I watched him closely instead. The ungainly splint on his left arm knocked frequently against the rock, but he ignored this in his tending, doggedly reaching again for the soothing water.

“In spite of how people may feel about me, though, I must conclude that I am good,” he said definitively. He bent his head and reached into the pool once more, his dark hair falling forward to obscure his eyes. “Yet, if we had not had this conversation, Kali,” he said softly, “I would never have paused to consider the positive, like your question forced me to do just now. You see, even though I understand that my tasks are for the greater good, I have always despised

myself. I am nothing but a servant whose requisite duty makes him a monster. And it is torturous for me when my only obligations in life involve causing the pain and suffering of others. Ironically, I truly am merciful by nature,” he said heavily. “Yet now I wonder... Though I have little choice about what I do, perhaps these scruples help to make me a better man,” he said thoughtfully as he dribbled more water across my bloody fingers. “And you have helped me to see that possibility.”

I watched as the blood mixed with the water and dripped gruesomely off my fingertips, splattering onto my rocky sanctuary. As usual, I found his responses cryptic, but something in particular niggled at my mind, not seeming to fit.

“How can destroying the forest be for the greater good, Tiamat?” I asked him searchingly, ripping my eyes away from the grisly red splotches.

He stopped reaching into the creek and smoothly turned to put both of his hands on my wrists, squeezing them firmly. “It wasn’t just the forest, Kali,” he said, watching me closely.

“What?!” I choked out, “How far, Tiamat? How much land? Tell me!”

“All of it. Everywhere.”

No, he can't be saying that, I thought fiercely, as I felt the blood drain from my face. *I can't listen to this...*

“I must tell you,” he paused, taking a deep breath, “that I am personally responsible for the catastrophic events, not only in this area, but spanning an area of approximately one million square miles. And I am only one of a hundred of my kind. Every one of my cohorts, each having a task similar to mine, began at precisely the same moment today, and we have all completed this stage now. Do you grasp what I am saying to you?”

“No,” I whispered, shaking my head and denying acceptance of his explanation. “This can't be happening.” This was something that you saw in the movies for a thrill, and then you left the theatre, all safe and sound, to continue on with your life. This wasn't the sort of thing that people actually experienced. “I can't believe that there are more of you doing this... all over... what is it?... 100 million square miles!” Reason told me that this couldn't be, and it fought against my scattered thoughts as they attempted to focus. “You're saying this is happening all over the *world?*” I demanded, my voice rising in panic.

Releasing my wrists, he placed one hand on either side of my face, anchoring me with his gaze, his energy tingling through my flesh. “Not ‘happening,’ Kali... *happened*. It is finished. Every inch of land has been cleansed, and some ocean area as well.”

My mind recoiled and my vision blurred. I could hear Tiamat’s voice echoing through a haze of fuzz, could feel his hands on my face, but it was all coming disconnected, thoughts and senses unraveling and floating off in different directions; seeking solace elsewhere.

“Kali,” he said urgently, his distant voice sounding anxious. “Kali, look at me,” he said, giving me a mild shake. “This is the way it is,” he persisted. “Refusing to accept it will not make it disappear. Now focus. Keep your mind busy and ask me some more questions.”

I struggled to gather my shattered thoughts, to salvage whatever reason I could muster. Tiamat was right, I needed to think, to fight against the numbness that was freezing over my brain, threatening to shut everything down. I worked for what seemed like a long time, and finally seized upon a question that seemed integral, but didn’t require me to ponder the annihilation of everything I ever knew.

“You said that you were one of a hundred of *your kind*,” I forced out. “So, if you’re saying you’re not human, what exactly are you?” I asked, pulling various disturbing images into somewhat coherent thoughts. “Are you some kind of a devil? ...Or an alien? Who else would want to destroy our planet?”

“To start with, I do not recall saying that I was not human,” Tiamat replied, appearing to relax a little. “In fact, my mother was a human woman, flesh and blood. My father, however, was not. And though I am of celestial decent, I am certainly not an alien.” He held my gaze with his alarmingly strange eyes, though they were kind now, and calming. He moved his hands from my face and placed one again on my wrists, but he held them gently, stroking my raw fingers with his other hand.

“You guessed closest when you asked if I was a demon,” he said softly, firming his grip as I tried to pull away from him. “We came, originally, from the same place. But my father never fell from grace, and neither have I.”

“Wait,” I said urgently, as a horrible feeling burst open inside me, reminding me... “My father!” I shrieked, tearing my hands away from his grasp. I was immediately on my feet, pacing and stamping like a confined horse, green and wild. “Tiamat, is he dead? *Is everyone dead?*” I asked him desperately.

“I do not know if your father lives, Kali.” Tiamat placed his right hand on the rock ledge and leapt effortlessly out of the water before continuing. “There will be some survivors, though the majority of the human race has fallen. I am sorry, but it is unlikely your father survived.”

I turned and ran, frantically needing to flee, desperate to find my dad, but also driven by an acute desire to get away from Tiamat’s horrifying revelations. I could take no more. The trees lining the path blurred, though whether it was from speed or tears, I could not have said. And as I ran, an eerie noise floated on the air, high and keening, seeming to pursue me in my flight—until, suddenly, I realized that the din was ripping from my own throat, and I choked it off abruptly, sounding like a murder victim that finally met her end. I exited the trees, raced through the campsite, and tore down the path that would lead me off the Peak.

Yet I did not get far. Rounding a bend, I smashed headlong into Tiamat. He grasped me in a close embrace and held me firmly, though I thrashed and struggled against him. I didn’t even pause to consider how he could possibly be on the path *in front* of me. “My dad,” I wailed, “Please, Tiamat! I have to know if he is alright! Let me go,” I begged him.

But he did not ease his hold. I fought uselessly until the last of my energy was spent, and only then did he venture to hold me at arm’s length, so he could look at me as we spoke.

“I cannot let you go, Kali.”

“But he’s my dad,” I cried piteously.

“You must think about this. Even if I did release you, there is *nowhere* to go, and no means for you to get anywhere. Do you not recall seeing the state of the forest from the look out? You will find no intact vehicles and you will find no roads. It is over.”

“It is *not* over! Not until I know if he is okay or not. Never until that time.” Again I tried to push past him, but he held fast. “You obviously don’t know what it means to love someone, Tiamat, or you would understand this!”

He looked suddenly stricken, and blanched noticeably before responding. “Perhaps I do not, then,” he said in a soft voice, his thoughts apparently elsewhere. “But regardless of this, I cannot let you run off.”

Each of his hands was wrapped firmly around my upper arms, and he looked over to stare critically at his splint, a crease forming between his brows in the silence. The moments stretched on before he brought his gaze back to my face. “I believe I can help you to discern his fate, if you would like me to, Kali,” he said, surprising me.

“Do you know where my dad lives? His house is—”

“In Pinecrest, yes.”

I opened my mouth to ask how he could know this, but he cut me off before I could begin.

“Now is not the time to go into details of how I know. My question remains; would you like me to help you to discern his fate?”

“*How*, exactly?” I asked, unsure of what this may entail.

“I will need you to trust me in this,” he said as he raised his hand to my cheek. “As difficult as this may be for you at this moment, it is the only way.” My skin prickled and tingled as his fingers trailed leisurely along my cheekbone. “Will you trust me, Kali?”

Locking my eyes with his, I slowly nodded my assent, while his fingers gingerly traced their way up to my forehead. Almost immediately, my entire world was shot with a startling, electric blue, and then—for the second time that day—I felt a crushing dark wave engulf me, pressing me into the black, empty void.