Under the Cover of Darkness

Pre-view Book One

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This edition includes revised character names, updated text, and expanded story elements.

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Dedicated to those who inspired me...
And to those I hope to inspire...

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Pronunciation Guide

Here are a few words you may need help pronouncing.
Enjoy Reading!

Amaël (Ah mail)
Ba'kar (Ba car)
Bashikuto (Ba she koo too)
Ezailate (ex zail ate)
GruDir (Gru Deer)
Inzailate (in zail ate)
Jahi Tahan (Ja I)
Kadyn Akure (Kay den Ah cure)
Lord Jabril Ba'kar (Ja breel Ba car)
Lord Makai Ba'kar (Ma kai Ba car)
Lord Yaqin Ba'kar (Ya keen Ba car
Majilis-Sarel: (Ma ja lis, Sa rail)
***Melik* Amaël** (Meh lick Ah mail)
Mt. Imarcu (Mount E mar koo)
Rabicca (Ra bee ka)
Sareltine (Sa rail tyne)
Virticus (Ver ta cuss)
Zabashi (Za ba she)
Zouko (Zoo ko)

Chapter One

Chamber Of Suxen



Twelve Hours Earlier

It was late—the sun had set hours ago. The rare Red Moon illuminated Zabashi's night sky. Inside a concealed chamber, gathered around a fire pit, stood the Ba'kar brothers—Lords Yaqin, Makai, Naeem, and Jabril—alongside *Sarel* Zouko. All five were draped in dark, long-hooded robes embroidered down the front with Zabashi's symbol: a red sun with a golden star and crescent at its center.

"Are we sure?" Makai asked, his eyes flashing in the flickering flames.

"Yes." Zouko met his heated glare. "Either we find your daughters with the help of knights—"

"We have used knights and *Sareltines* for years!" Jabril cut in, his fist clenched. "Why did we not see this coming? Between the two of you—" He gestured towards Naeem and Yaqin. "You should have known!"

Naeem paced the edge of the pit, ignoring his brother.

Yaqin's eyes narrowed. "You know how our powers work." He frowned, stepping forward. "You understand the decree."

Makai shook his head. "The rules no longer apply, and Virticus is definitely not abiding by the laws."

Zouko held up a hand. "You four need to choose. We only have enough *bashikuto* for one, and time is running out. The Red Moon will be gone soon. Do we find your daughters or hear the full prophecy?"

The brothers stared at one another.

Yaqin broke the silence. "Zabashi must come first."

"How?" Makai's voice cracked with passion. "How do I tell my wife? I promised Anaya I would find our daughter."

"We cannot tell our wives," Naeem said in a somber voice. "It will break them."

Jabril sighed, running his hand down his face. "We must block ourselves—" He hesitated. "From Jalila."

Their eyes snapped to him.

"We vowed to our wives we would never do that," Yaqin chided. "Our word is our bond, Jabril. What is going on with you tonight?"

Zouko raised his hand. "In three minutes, we will lose the chance to do either. If we are to do this, I need an answer. Your daughters or—"

"Zabashi," the Ba'kar brothers said in unison.

Zouko gave a sad nod. "Zabashi."



The brothers watched as Zouko reached into his robe, drawing out a small vial of *bashikuto* powder and a golden, double-edged dagger. Its red hilt was engraved with Zabashi's symbol and the Elemental Guardians' emblem—a wave crest, vine, flame, and tornado intertwined.

Zouko extended his hand. "Yaqin, if you will."

Yaqin took the ceremonial blade and pricked his finger. Blood dripped into the flames as he passed the dagger to Jabril, who quickly nicked his own forefinger. Once Makai and Naeem had pricked their fingers, the energy in the room shifted. The wind howled, and rain thrashed against the stone walls.

Yaqin waved his right hand over the pit, a white light blazing from his palm. Zouko began chanting, sprinkling red powder. The flames flared higher, and the ground cracked beneath their feet.

Makai twirled his finger, sending the fire swirling into a tight circle. Naeem thrust his hand forward to help control the inferno.

"Now!" Zouko shouted between chants.

Yaqin uncorked a vial of water and hurled it into the pit as Jabril tossed a handful of earth. Swirling currents of energy swept through the chamber, forcing the men to shield their eyes. Bright flashes, whispers from unknown voices, and an overwhelming presence filled the room.

A stunning figure appeared in the flames. "Who are you?" she asked in a soft, puzzled voice. "What is happening? Where am I?"

"My name is Yaqin Ba'kar, and the future of Zabashi is in peril." He stepped closer to the pit. "Please, we need your help."

"I should not be here. I must go." She turned her body amidst the flaring flames.

"No, wait!" Jabril reached the edge of the pit. "We sacrificed finding our daughters, the guardians from the *GruDir* prophecy, to contact you." His voice broke. "Please help us."

"The Guardians from the *GruDir* prophecy are your children?" She narrowed her eyes, uncertain. "How do you know this if you seek the words of the scripture?"

"Our ancestors passed down fragments of the prophecy. Our parents believed the timeline added up—that my brothers and I would father the chosen ones who would defeat the demons. But now—" Jabril looked at his brothers. "We are not so sure."

Her brow furrowed. "Why?"

"Shortly after our daughters were born, Virticus found us, and our girls vanished into another world. It has been twenty years, and we are no closer to finding them. If they truly are the chosen ones, they must receive their full powers before their next birthday, or—"

"They shall lose their gifts of the elements," she finished.

"Yes, and their birthright as goddesses," Naeem added solemnly.

She nodded. "My name is Qayya. I may be able to help, but I have not much time."

Makai stepped forward. "Then let us begin."

"I must warn you." Her face turned grave amid the flickering flames. "There is a traitor among you. And you will need his help."

Kadyn—Present Day

The sun shone over the impenetrable territory of Rabicca. Kadyn Akure, a knight of Zabashi, stood on the gilded brick path leading to the exalted House of Ba'kar—where generations of powerful

deities had resided. In his trembling hand, he clutched a summons from Lords Yaqin, Makai, Naeem, and Jabril. It was an honor to be summoned by them.

Sweat dripped from his forehead as he took deep breaths, but the scent of the nearby sea, flowers, and fresh air could not ease his mental strain. Many thoughts raced through his mind, but one stood out above all: why did all four Ba'kar brothers want to talk to him?

His stomach sank. He hoped the deities did not blame him for what happened during his last battle. Sark, one of Virticus's top warriors, had led him away from his team. In his absence, the demons killed four of his teammates, leaving him the sole survivor. It had taken over a month for his wound to heal, and he still bore a scar on the right side of his abdomen where Sark had stabbed him.

Kadyn took another calming breath, forcing himself to center his thoughts and emotions, masking his fraying energy so the deities would not sense any weakness in him. With his nerves steadied, he strode along the path leading to the gold-plated gates surrounding the castle.

Up ahead, four guards in red, white, and gold uniforms watched him approach, their eyes fixed on him with pointed intensity.

"Greetings." Kadyn cleared his throat. "I have urgent orders to see the Ba'kars." He handed over his summons.

One guard, with a somber expression, took the letter. After a quick glance, he said in a gruff voice, "Follow me," and led him into the castle.

Intuitively, Kadyn took in his surroundings as he walked through the halls where countless deities had resided over the ages. As he passed various artworks and statues, the history displayed there warmed his heart. He had been to the House of Ba'kar before, but not through this part of the magnificent castle.

The guard led him to a massive set of double doors marked with Zabashi's symbol and the words *Chamber of Suxen.*

Kadyn's breathing grew shallow as his muscles tensed and his stomach fluttered. He knew he was meeting the Ba'kar brothers, but he did not realize it would be in this legendary room.

Knocking twice, the guard opened the doors, revealing the voices of Lords Yaqin and Makai.

"Excuse me, my lords," the guard said. "I have the knight, Kadyn Akure, here for you."

"Yes, send him in. Thank you, Aazil."

The guard bowed, then turned to Kadyn. "You may enter."

"Thank you," Kadyn said, stepping inside. He felt an instant, powerful energy within the chamber just before the double doors slammed shut behind him.

He gasped, his eyes widening as he took in the breathtaking high ceiling. A vivid celestial scene, dominated by a dark expanse, featured a large, glowing red sun casting a dazzling crimson hue. Beside it, a bright, marble Earth of blue, green, and white, with an impressive greyish-white waxing crescent moon. Glistening orange, yellow, blue, and white stars covered the ceiling, adding to its otherworldly atmosphere. His gaze shifted to the wave-crest flowing beneath—he wondered if it represented the barrier separating the two worlds.

He noticed the curtains were closed as he glanced at the weapons and the sparkling hanging lights along the back wall. There were several arched doorways and a large, beautifully crafted shelf lined with books, antique jars, and various objects, all sealed behind glass. At the center of the room stood a great golden circular table, engraved with Zabashi's symbol and lit by four candles. Near the fireplace stood four beautiful red-and-gold thrones, each with similar engravings along the sides. The room was spectacular.

Kadyn glanced between the two brothers. Lord Yaqin was tall and fit, with black curly hair and deep brown eyes. He exuded a dynamic presence, dressed in a long white robe embroidered with Zabashi's symbol.

Lord Makai wore his formal royal attire—a long-sleeved, red-and-white garment with golden embroidery along the front and cuffs—paired with black pants and boots. He had a muscular frame, short dark hair, and austere brown eyes, which made Kadyn realize at once that he was not someone to cross. Ever.

Kadyn bowed before them. "You summoned me, my lords."

"Yes," Makai said, eyeing Kadyn attentively. "My brothers and I have heard that you are completely trustworthy. We are hoping you can help us with a critical mission."

"Of course, my lords. I am here to serve you and Zabashi."

At that moment, one of the arched side doors opened. Lords Naeem and Jabril entered the well-lit room, wearing regal uniforms that matched Makai's. They nodded to their brothers, then turned to Kadyn with interest.

Naeem shared a similar build with Yaqin. His warm eyes crinkled into a kind smile as he met Kadyn's gaze. As he turned to murmur to Yaqin, Kadyn shifted his attention to Lord Jabril's powerful physique, dark wavy hair streaked with a thick strand of grey, and the faint scar above his right eye. All four Ba'kar brothers exuded power, though Jabril's presence carried a slightly different weight.

Jabril's brow furrowed. "Kadyn, what we discuss today, you must not share with anyone. Do you understand?"

Kadyn's heart skipped a beat. "Yes, my lord." Anxiety surged through him as his pulse quickened with each passing second—being in a room full of prominent deities was intimidating.

"We would like to keep this from our wives as well. We do not want to give them any false hope." Naeem's eyes softened. "Our wives have been through enough."

Kadyn lowered his head. "Of course, my lord."

"Kadyn, are you aware of the prophecy of *GruDir*, where four exceptional Elemental Guardians will come together one day, bringing forth the key to destroy Virticus and his demonic horde?" Yaqin asked, motioning for him to sit.

Kadyn blinked as a spare chair materialized. "Yes, my lord. I have heard the myth." He waited for Yaqin to take his seat before sitting across from him. Naeem, Jabril, and Makai remained standing, observing him. He shifted, his palms sweating under their collective gaze. *They must know about Sark. They had to. Were they going to take away his knight's shield? Wait, what did his feud with Sark have to do with the GruDir prophecy or their wives?*

Yaqin's voice cut through his panicked thoughts. "The stories are not myths. Our firstborn daughters are the women the prophecy spoke of."

Kadyn's eyes widened, doubting he had heard correctly. He immediately glanced at their faces, but their expressions remained hard to read.

Yaqin smiled at his confusion. "Many years ago, an elite group came together to ensure the birth of those who could help take down the demons. The plan succeeded, though they were born not as sisters, as the legend foretold, but as cousins. With their bond, they would be like sisters. My brothers and I each fathered a daughter born under the prophecy's signs. Only a few confidants knew of their existence. The plan was to send our girls to the other world after their birth—safely beyond Virticus's knowledge and reach—to await the day they would be old enough to return and receive their full powers, fulfilling their destiny. On the night of

the girls' departure, everything went wrong—Virticus attacked the grounds. Someone betrayed us, telling him of the girls' birth and our preparations for them to leave this world." Crestfallen, he fell silent.

Naeem pressed his fingers to his temples as Jabril fiercely muttered about what he would do to the traitor when he finally found him.

"We believe Virticus turned someone in our trusted circle." Makai tightened his fist. Yaqin touched his brother's shoulder to calm him.

Makai took a slow, deep breath and continued. "We found the transport pod damaged, and the protectors slain. We have sent many warriors to locate the girls over the last twenty years, but no one has been able to track them down. Our daughters do not belong in that world. We must find them before their twenty-first birthday. Otherwise, their powers will be stripped, and they will lose their birthright as Elemental Guardians. Even if they keep some abilities as enchantresses from their mothers' side, they will still lose the elemental powers they possess, along with any power passed on as deities."

Kadyn noticed the silent glance exchanged between the brothers, as if Makai had said too much.

Yaqin took control of the conversation. "Without our daughters, Zabashi will continue to fall under Virticus's rule. The *Majilis-Sarel* has appointed a *Sareltine* to assist the girls on their journey, but we must first locate them. The future goddesses of Zabashi lack combat training, have not developed their skills, and know nothing of their culture, family, or birthright. You have ten months to find the girls and awaken their powers without alerting Virticus."

All four brothers' eyes stayed fixed upon him.

Kadyn's chest tightened as he contemplated the pressure and responsibility he faced. He knew he could not refuse the request; he was grateful he was not losing his knight's shield. He understood it was a duty for which he would likely have to give his life.

Rising from his chair, Kadyn cleared his throat. "I am here to serve the House of Ba'kar. I will do everything in my power to bring your daughters home."

Naeem smiled as Makai and Jabril gave Kadyn a stiff nod.

Yaqin stood. "We need you to lead a team of knights who will accompany you on your mission: Lazaro, Jahi, and Gregorius. Between the four of you, we are confident you will track down our daughters. Once found, they will need to be trained and escorted back to Zabashi as soon as possible."

Jabril whispered into his brother's ear.

Yaqin nodded. "Kadyn, excuse us for a moment." Naeem and Jabril exited through one of the arched doors while Yaqin and Makai moved aside, speaking in low voices.

Kadyn's mind raced as he faced the task ahead. When he received his summons this morning, he had no idea an assignment of this magnitude awaited him. Even though he had no wife or children to bind him here, he could not shake the feeling that he might not return. *Not that anyone would care. Well, maybe his brother.*

Yaqin and Makai finished their conversation as Jabril returned, leading three men into the chamber. The shortest of the three shifted from side to side, his eyes darting anxiously, while the other two stood stone-steady, radiating confidence.

Jabril clapped his hands, the sharp sound echoing through the room. "Let us begin."

All four knights stood at attention, shoulders back, facing the Ba'kar brothers.

"Kadyn, if you will." Yaqin motioned for him to step forward. "Please remove your uniform."

His stomach fluttered as he unbuttoned his knight's jacket, leaving him in his sleeveless shirt. His legs felt wobbly as he knelt.

"The other knights received the same information given to you today. My daughter will possess many powers, including the element of water. One of her abilities was my gift to her at birth: the power of time. I, Yaqin Ba'kar, bless thee, Kadyn Akure, Knight of Zabashi, to serve the House of Ba'kar. Do you affirm your loyalty to her as her knight? To uphold your duty to find, protect, and help your deity receive her rightful birthright?"

His muscles tensed as his mouth went dry. Raising his right hand, he spoke in a voice stronger than he felt. "I affirm."

Lord Yaqin extended his right hand over Kadyn's head. His palm glowed white as he blessed him.

Naeem passed his brother a small vial.

Yaqin took it and closed his eyes. The elixir glowed, and he handed it to the kneeling knight.

Everyone's eyes were on Kadyn as he took and drank the light blue liquid. His silver knight's crest vanished, and a red, white, and gold shield materialized on his upper right arm.

The top bore a water symbol with the inscription Loyalty. Zabashi's symbol sat at the center, while the bottom displayed the Elemental Guardians' emblem. The shield's corners were engraved with the words *Faith, Honor, Strength, Courage, Devotion,* and *Protection.*

The mark on his arm burned with a cool, tingling sensation. His heart squeezed—he felt not just the honor but the immense responsibility and weight of his mission—it was humbling.

Kadyn watched as the other three men became Knights of Ba'kar. Afterwards, Yaqin guided Kadyn aside. "Is there anyone you would like me to send a message to? Family, friends, or loved ones?"

Sadly, there was not. "No, my lord, thank you. My Knight's Legacy Dossier is up to date. If I do not return—" His heart sank at the thought. "There is a letter for my brother in there."

Yaqin nodded solemnly. "I understand. Excuse me."

Kadyn bowed, then turned towards his new teammates.

Gregorius stood before his deity with a firm expression, handing over a folded piece of paper. Naeem whispered something to Gregorius and shook his hand. Jabril spoke to Jahi, who hesitated before shaking his head. Nearby, Lazaro shifted from side to side while Yaqin and Makai conversed in hushed, urgent tones.

Stepping away from Jahi, Jabril tapped Naeem's shoulder and gestured towards one of the arches. With a nod, they exited the room.

The knights faced the remaining brothers.

Makai spoke to them, outlining their mission and what would happen once they crossed over. "Remember, only contact us in an extreme emergency. We cannot have Virticus finding out what we are up to. I am sure he has men searching for our daughters as well."

Yaqin considered the group. "I apologize. I know it is unfair that the four of you cannot say goodbye to your loved ones. You must leave now before word gets out of your departure."

Naeem and Jabril returned with four large black duffel bags. They handed each knight a bag, then sprinkled red powder, encircling the knights.

"Inside is everything you will need to start: money, identification, clothes, and equipment. Kadyn, as team leader, you will need this." Yaqin handed Kadyn a device the knight had never seen before. "It is a way to contact the *Majilis-Sarel* if there is trouble returning."

"There is a safe house for you to stay and work from. You will arrive in the same town where the girls were to materialize. This world is unlike ours; the four of you must keep our world's secrets. No one from the other side should ever learn of Zabashi's existence. The portal will send you through the closest opening to the safe house. Contact us when you are ready to cross back over," Makai

instructed. While he spoke, Jabril and Naeem stepped forward and handed each knight a black velvet box.

Yaqin looked them over. "Do any of you have questions? Or concerns?"

They shook their heads. Kadyn understood they had ten months to locate the lost Elemental Guardians of Zabashi, or no one would stop Virticus. Failure was not an option. Zabashi would not survive without the goddesses.

Yaqin considered them for a moment. "Very well, you have the blessings of the House with you. Are you ready?"

Kadyn pushed aside his nervousness and nodded.

"Three, two, one." Yaqin waved his hand. The red powder swirled around them. A vortex appeared in the center of the circle, and the knights stepped through, leaving the Chamber of Suxen.

Jabril glared at the empty circle. "Are we sure they are the ones able to find our daughters? Especially since—"

Yaqin held up his hand. "These knights are our last hope, despite—" He sighed, feeling the weight of it all. "Virticus will not seek our daughters until after their powers awaken."

"Even if—"

"Jabril, the amulets will give them extra protection until they return for their ascension."

The deities looked upon the spot where the knights had stood moments ago, hoping they were right. The brothers had to believe that it would all work out.

Chapter Two

Knights Of Ba'kar



The knights emerged under the cover of darkness on a beach in a town called Baycliff.

Kadyn inhaled. The scent of the ocean on the night breeze called to him, and he smiled. He pulled out the device with the safe house details and scanned the area until he spotted a trail. "This way." He pointed west.

In less than a mile, they reached their destination: a picturesque stone villa by the water.

"Wow!" Laz exclaimed, marveling at the grand estate.

"This place is stunning," Greg agreed, taking in the magnificent structure.

Jahi and Kadyn exchanged an approving look as they walked up the stone driveway, past the multi-garage bay and the scenic landscape, towards the front door.

Inside was just as impressive as the outside. The villa held ten bedrooms and ten bathrooms. The lower level featured a massive basement equipped with training equipment, an extra bathroom, a bar area, and a large antique chest near the back wall where previous teams had stored various weapons along with boxes labeled *Elemental Guardians.*

"This place has everything!" Laz said, flinging open the sleek fridge and freezer doors. His shoulders slumped. "Well, almost everything," he muttered.

There were only six water bottles, a full ice bin, and a few ice packs. Sighing, he grabbed four bottles and handed them to his teammates.

They entered the sitting room, which had ample open space, high ceilings, and arched entryways. A brick fireplace stood along the main wall, with two swords hanging above the mantel. Nearby was a beautiful window nook, a desk, and three comfortable couches surrounding a glass table.

Kadyn sat down and took a sip of water.

Laz plopped onto the couch across from Jahi and Greg. "How do the Ba'kars expect us to find their daughters when others could not? I mean, ten months to locate the goddesses, even though they have been missing for over twenty years. And we have nothing to go on!"

The knights all looked at Kadyn. He honestly had no clue, yet he knew he could not voice any negativity. He was supposed to lead these men.

Kadyn met their gaze, masking his doubt. "It will take some time, but we will find them. I believe that, and I need you to believe it, too."

They nodded, the tension in the room dropping slightly.

"We have all these files from the previous team." Kadyn set his water down. "Let us see if they can help in our search for the ladies."

He hoped the files would be informative; they were their only leads.



It was now August. One month had passed since they had arrived at the villa. The knights still had no lead to go on in figuring out who the Ba'kar daughters could be.

"This world is massive, with too many women. No wonder everyone before us failed," Laz said in frustration.

It had only been four weeks, and Laz was already irritating Kadyn. Laz was passionate—the bad boy of the group—with his rugged features, black curly hair, dark eyes, and a scar right above his left brow. Kadyn sometimes wondered if someone had given Laz his scar for being so annoying all the time.

Greg was quiet, the tallest of the three, with a more muscular build. His deep brown eyes, though kind, seemed haunted, yet he appeared more emotionally stable than Laz. While Jahi was not as outspoken as Laz, he was intelligent, competent, and well-trained; he took their mission to heart, as did Greg. How Laz came to be on the team was beyond Kadyn's comprehension.

Greg leaned forward. "Laz, this mission was never going to be easy. We knew we would not find the goddesses in only a month." He gave Laz a sympathetic smile. "You must be patient."

Kadyn gave Greg a grateful nod and mouthed, *"Thank you."* Talking to Laz could be exhausting.

"I know, but all we have accomplished so far has been training and—"

"Laz, what do you suggest?" Kadyn took three deep breaths, trying hard not to yell. In a calmer voice, he added, "We have been reviewing all the case files from the previous team chosen to find the Ba'kars' daughters. From the looks of their investigation, we had agreed that the goddesses might still be in Baycliff. Yes, years have passed; maybe they moved or—" To be honest, he did not know, but no assignment was ever easy. It had only been a month, and they could not afford to be at one another's throats.

Jahi placed a file on the table and rubbed his face. Sitting back, he ran a hand through his dark hair, revealing deep exhaustion in his dark eyes.

Laz picked up a few folders. "Kadyn, how are we supposed to find the deities with only these files to go on?" He eyed Jahi and Greg for backup. He had been asking the same question for weeks. "Nothing in here has been of any real help!" he snapped, throwing the files into the box. "I do not know how long I can be in this world! It is almost as bad as some parts of Zabashi!" He kicked the box across the floor. "Except in Zabashi, I am not required to suppress my powers!"

Greg and Jahi kept their eyes on Laz—he was like a child having a tantrum.

"That is it!" Kadyn stood up. "We are going about this all wrong. Let us break it down. What are their gifts? According to the legend, each Guardian will possess and control an elemental power. However, since the Ba'kar children have deities as fathers and powerful enchantresses as mothers, they will also possess other unique gifts."

Greg sat up, catching Kadyn's train of thought. "Can you imagine the power they will embody once they have their ascension and receive their full birthright?" He shook his head, impressed.

"Wow," Jahi breathed. "If they attain their full capabilities, they could be unstoppable."

Laz frowned, confused and annoyed that everyone got it but him. "Yeah, they are powerful, but how does that help us find them?"

Kadyn's eyes twinkled. "We will track them like we have tracked anything else. We will pursue the Elemental Guardians' powers. Until their twenty-first birthday, the element they each possess will be a part of who they are."

Grinning, Laz caught on. "So they will be creatures of habit even if their powers are not yet fully awakened?"

Jahi nodded. "Let us hope their connection to the elements is strong enough to track."



After thirty minutes of heated debate, the knights were no closer to a plan.

"Even if they have not awakened their elemental powers yet, just being a descendant of the Ba'kar line—" Jahi rubbed his head. "You cannot suppress an abundance of energy for too long. Think about it. Decades have passed. Their powers will want to be released if they have not already. We will need to track every elemental surge that might be linked to them."

"How?" Laz threw his hands up in frustration.

Kadyn and Jahi turned to Greg for help—he remained the only one who could reach Laz.

"We are thinking that if there is any unexplained elemental surge in the area, like an earthquake above magnitude five, we will make sure it is not the Earth Guardian," Greg said in his deep, soothing voice.

"I got that. I am not stupid," Laz replied.

Kadyn and Jahi glanced at each other, believing differently.

"That plan will not work for all the goddesses. What about the Air Guardian? How do you suggest we track her, huh? What, watch the weather station all day for high winds?" Laz rolled his eyes. "The Ba'kars sent their daughters to Baycliff twenty years ago. We need to pray that they have never left the city. How do we know they are even still here? They could be—" He pointed to the map on the wall, squinting as he traced his finger across the paper. "In Ohio."

They realized Laz had made a valid point.

"You are right," Greg agreed. "We are just trying to figure it all out, and there is nothing else to go on. We ought to at least try."

"How about we investigate all the babies found and adopted the year they arrived?" Jahi suggested.

"That is brilliant!" Kadyn clapped Jahi on the shoulder. "We will narrow it down to the ones who fit the criteria, then test them to see if they show any signs of elemental powers. Search for—" His brow furrowed as he rubbed his chin. "Four babies that were found in Baycliff twenty years ago. We will rule out ethnicity, and I am sure they will resemble a Ba'kar, right?"

Greg and Jahi nodded in agreement.

"Let us hope they have strong genes." Laz got up and grabbed his computer from the side table. "Why did no one think of this before now?" he grumbled, typing rapidly.

As annoying as Laz could be, he remained the best hacker among them.

"That is why." Jahi pointed to the screen as countless names popped up in quick succession.

Laz whistled, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Wow! That is a lot of names," Greg said, looking over Laz's shoulder.

"It is depressing," Laz muttered. His face continued to fall as he reviewed his findings.

Kadyn's stomach lurched as he scanned through the rows of data.

"Input females between the ages of newborn and one," Jahi instructed.

"I need more information and a snack!" Laz snapped as he searched the database's records.

Kadyn opened his mouth, but Greg caught his eye, shook his head, and stood up. "I got it."

"Thank you," Kadyn said, once again grateful for Greg's calming presence. He turned back to the screen. "Did you put in the ethnicity?"

"Yes, and it did not help. Like, at all," Laz huffed.

Greg returned, handing over a small bag.

"Thanks." Laz ripped the bag open, tossing a few pretzels into his mouth.

Kadyn paced the sitting room. The only sound was Laz munching. He did not know what to do. The list was the best idea they had had in weeks.

After a moment of deep reflection, Kadyn faced Laz. "Split up the list. We will investigate each woman. Look into their lives, schooling, work, and hobbies. Focus on their personality, character, demeanor, and anything else you think will help." A sudden realization hit him; he should have thought of it earlier. "Go grab the velvet boxes the Ba'kars gave us."

Kadyn went upstairs to his room, grabbed his bag, pulled out the black velvet box, and returned to the sitting room. His teammates were already there, each holding their own box, with confused expressions.

"Open them."

Inside the velvet box lay an exquisite amulet. Its platinum band bore the Zabashi symbol, the Elemental Guardian's emblem, and a sharp water crest. At its center, a breathtaking star-shaped sapphire sat nestled within a shimmering diamond crescent. Engraved on the velvet box was a water symbol above the words *'Water Guardian.'*

Kadyn's blood chilled as he thought back to the Chamber of Suxen. He was so shocked to be knighted that he did not consider why Lord Yaqin assigned him to his daughter. So, the Ba'kar brothers knew. Or maybe they just knew who would suit their daughters—he hoped it was the latter. He swallowed hard, staring at the magnificent jewel. Were the others chosen for similar reasons? He could not ask them—not unless he was willing to share his secret. For now, he had to keep it to himself.

"Kadyn?" Greg's brow furrowed with concern. "Are you all right?"

He blinked. "Yes, I am fine," he lied, turning the box around to show his teammates.

Their amulets were identical in design, differing only in the core element and the centerpiece gemstone. Greg's was a fierce flame with a deep ruby at the center. Jahi held up an intricate earth emblem with a vibrant emerald, leaving Laz with a brilliant diamond amulet bearing the mark of the Air Guardian.

"Wait! Why do I get stuck finding Air?" Laz threw his hands up in sudden outrage. "She will be the hardest one to locate. How will I test her, huh? By throwing her out of a window and seeing if she can fly away? From her own death!"

Jahi rolled his eyes at the dramatic outburst while Greg chuckled.

Kadyn stepped in front of Laz. "No, we do not test anyone until we are sure, and we do not do it alone, just in case something goes wrong. We will narrow down the list, investigate their backgrounds, and shadow them to see if any of them could be a Ba'kar. We will

check in with each other to set up a test that we all agree upon. And remember, no using your powers. Do not even ezailate—"

"Ezailate, really?" Laz rolled his eyes. "No one would see us ezailate or inzailate anywhere."

"We cannot risk exposing our world. What if someone sees us disappear or reappear out of thin air? We must blend in. Agreed?"

"Of course," Jahi nodded.

"Yes, sir," Greg saluted.

"Do we have to?" Laz grumbled.

The three of them stared at him in dead silence.

"Fine, if we must," Laz conceded.

Kadyn moved to the window nook and sank into the cushioned bench. "Guys, the Ba'kars—" He shook his head. "No, all of Zabashi needs us to find these four women in less than nine months, and we still need to train and return them to Zabashi, or—" He did not want to think about failing Zabashi—it was not an option.

They sat in silence. The air in the room felt heavy. He knew they were all contemplating the same grim reality.

After a moment, Laz picked up his laptop and retreated into the kitchen.

Jahi offered a quiet "Good night" before heading upstairs.

Greg stared at the fire amulet for a few lingering minutes before leaving Kadyn alone.

Swinging open the large window, Kadyn inhaled the cool, crisp ocean breeze. He gazed up at the stars, lost in thought.

Laz

Laz entered the kitchen and headed straight for the fridge. He grabbed a water bottle and an apple, biting into the crisp, sweet fruit.

Slamming the door shut, he sat at the table and opened his laptop. He pounded his fist on the table. The endless rows of names on the screen were overwhelming. After another bite of his apple, he began researching the first girl on his list: Alison Anderson.

Ten minutes later, his blood was still boiling when Greg walked in.

"Are you okay?" Greg asked, sitting across from him.

Laz did not know which irritated him more: the concern in Greg's voice or the way Greg's eyes stayed fixed on him. He was tired of his teammates acting like he was a bomb about to go off at any moment—which, to be fair, he was. He took a few breaths, trying to suppress the urge to hurl an energy ball into the wall.

"Splendid," he replied, his tone laced with sarcasm as he scrolled through Alison Anderson's *iSpace* account.

"Laz, I understand it can be frustrating. We did not have the time to say goodbye to our family, friends—"

"It is not that." He sighed. "I do not understand why they appointed me a Knight of Ba'kar. Nor do I get why I am assigned as the air goddess's knight." He avoided Greg's gaze, wondering why he always had to speak his mind. Maybe it was connected to his other gift—the ability to enter minds. Perhaps subconsciously, he felt the need to share his own.

Greg raised an eyebrow. "You do not want to be a Knight of Ba'kar?"

"I want to be." Laz shifted in his chair. "It is an honor, a dream." He lowered his head. "But I am not like you, Kadyn, or Jahi." He forced himself to look back at the screen, concentrating on Alison's background check.

"I trust the Ba'kars." Greg offered a reassuring smile. "Lord Makai must see something in you to entrust you not only with Zabashi's future but also with protecting his daughter."

Laz focused on Greg's words, and his muscles relaxed. He would not let Lord Makai or Zabashi down if he could help it.

"Thank you." He stood and gathered his things.

Greg's eyebrows shot up. "Where are you going?"

"To check out Alison Anderson." Laz patted his teammate's shoulder in appreciation, then left the kitchen.

Shaking his head, Greg grinned and began searching for the Fire Guardian.

Kadyn

Kadyn's chest tightened as he tossed and turned, unable to wake as his dreams overtook him. He was back in Zabashi, fourteen years old, begging his father to stop the brutal training he was forced to endure every day for hours at a time.

"Father, please!" Kadyn pleaded as his father, Khalil, handed him a black blindfold.

"No," Khalil said in a tone that sent chills down his spine. "You are my son! Which means one day you will become a Knight of Zabashi."

"Kadir can be—"

"Kadyn, becoming a knight is a calling. I am honored to serve as a Knight of Ba'kar. You will follow my path, as my father and his father have done for generations. Kadir does not possess the calling of a knight, but you do. One day, if you are lucky, you too might become a Knight of Ba'kar."

"What if I do not want to be a knight?" Kadyn quailed under his father's harsh glare.

"You would rather have friends than protect Zabashi and your home from Virticus's destruction?" He shook his head. "No, you

are an Akure! We serve! We fight! You do not have a choice! Now pick up your sword!" he commanded.

With shaking hands, Kadyn tied the blindfold over his eyes and grasped his hilt.

"Stop shaking and focus! I will make a knight out of you, and one day you will thank me for teaching you to survive. Friends can come into your life, and they can leave. Survival skills last forever. To become an excellent knight, you will learn to fight in the darkness, take a punch, endure pain, and overcome torture and sacrifice."

Kadyn's muscles tensed and his heart raced as he sensed his father circling him in the dark.

"One day, you will be called upon to fight, to persist against the odds, and choose to do what is necessary for Zabashi, even if it means going against blood," Khalil snarled.

Without warning, his father struck. Kadyn jumped back, lifting his sword just in time to block his father's blade. He swung his weapon twice in retaliation before the sharp metal from his father's blade pierced his side. Severe pain shot through his body as he hit the ground, bleeding.

Kadyn shot up, screaming, holding his right side.

He was safe—back in his bedroom. He took deep breaths, trying to slow his heart as it pounded for release from his chest. Cold sweat covered his body, a single drop sliding down his face. He stumbled into his blue-and-grey bathroom and turned on the faucet.

After splashing his face several times, he gazed into the mirror above the sink. He flinched. For a terrifying second, he saw his father staring back at him. He lowered his head. He hated it when people compared his features to his father's: the same broad shoulders, brown eyes, and dark hair. His hands clenched the sink as he glanced back at his reflection, shivering.

Turning off the water and light, he returned to his bed, hoping the others had not heard him scream. Clearing his mind of the past, he focused on the mission ahead and on how they would find the lost goddesses.

Thank You

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Much Love,
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Sneak Peek The First

Qayya

Mt. Imarcu was vast, with Malice's compound in its center. Outside, near the rocky sea, was the site where demonic factions enforced their torture and punishment on others. They wanted everyone to witness what would happen if they stepped out of line—death.

The stars and moon glowed in the cool night as villagers watched the guards drag me to the spot where a massive fire blazed.

I shivered—partly from the cold, partly from a sudden, unexpected fear. I would be lying if I said I was not a tad afraid, not of dying, but of what comes after. Is it painful? Is it darkness? Or just nothing? Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to ignore the ache in my chest and awaited my fate.

I stood there, listening to the demon explain what my crime was. My crime—HA! I had stopped a demon from beating a woman to death in front of her child. My crime was stepping out of line and laying hands on a demon.

"Anyone who disobeys us will receive punishment under the law, as we have told you many times before. Our Lord Malice has come tonight to hand down this girl's sentence personally."

Malice? For the first time that day, I shook violently as my heart twisted and my blood boiled—not out of fear, but with utter anger. Malice was the Dark Lord who had ruthlessly tortured and murdered my mother right in front of me many years ago.

Standing tall, I gulped back the bile that threatened to surface as Malice strolled into the clearing. As his cold, dark eyes swept the crowd, the air grew tense with fear. Even the sky shifted from clear to stormy.

No one spoke. Malice's demeanor spoke volumes. The only sounds were the falling rain, the whistling wind, and the crackle of the flames.

Malice met my gaze, and another shiver went down my spine.

He grinned wickedly. "Tonight, we must execute four women who have defied the laws I have set to make this world more... durable. I give you food, clothing, and shelter. In return, you are only asked to work off your debt and to follow the laws I have put in place to maintain order. Am I not considerate?"

No one dared speak.

"Do not blame me for your inability to listen and follow the rules. You brought this on yourselves. If I do not punish you, we will have a society where things get out of hand and become chaotic, a world you do not want to live in."

The wind picked up, blowing through my hair. The waves crashed fiercely as thunder and lightning streaked across the sky.

Malice finished his speech, and cheers erupted from his demonic followers. Without warning, two strong, oversized hands lifted me off the ground.

My pulse quickened with each second as they dragged me across the terrain and tossed me at his feet. I noticed the mark of a snake coiled around a dragon on Malice's shoulder as he wrapped a stiff hand around my neck and lifted me.

He squeezed, and my right eye twitched. Summoning as much saliva as I could in my dry mouth, I spat in his smug face. Satisfaction coursed within me as fury blazed in his dark eyes.

His fist met my face, and pain struck me for the third time that night.

Without regard for the consequences, I scratched his haughty face as hard as I could. Blood streaked his cheek, and gasps rippled through the night.

We stared at each other, and a glimmer of rage and lightning flashed across his face. Seething, he tossed me to the earth, and all the air left my lungs. Covered in dirt and blood, my body throbbed. I endured the aching pain, but did not move. Trying to focus on breathing, I kept my eyes closed until hands gripped my body once more, yanking me towards the water as thunder boomed.

Leaning in, he whispered in my ear. "Too bad—you will never know why I killed your mother."

My eyes widened as I met his wicked gaze, and my heart stopped.

"If you see your mother again, ask her why."

Shocked by his words, I did not notice the ball of fire he hurled at me until flames seared my body. The force of the blow lifted me into the air, and I screamed as the fire consumed me. Lightning struck mid-flight, hitting the ring my mother had given me on my right hand. The ring glowed brightly under the cover of darkness. I shut my eyes against the fierce glow, and darkness filled my mind as I crashed into the depths of the sea.

Sneak Peek Zabashi UCD Book Two

Mt. Imarcu, Virticus's Lair, Twenty-Nine Years Ago

"I need that prophecy!" Virticus roared, hurling glowing orbs across his lair and shattering them against the stone wall.

"M-my lord," his servant stuttered. "If I may, we have been searching for the Books of *Za*' for—well, years. There may be no such books. Maybe they are just a—a myth."

Virticus glared at the short, round man with pale skin and a large red bump on the side of his bald head. "Norman," he hissed through gritted teeth. "The *Books of Za'* are real. I know your little mind does not possess the aptitude for knowledge that mine does, but that is no excuse for being so ignorant!"

Norman flinched.

Virticus looked at his servant with distaste. "Long ago, a passage from the *GruDir* Prophecy was revealed to me. It foretold the birth of a being who would be my downfall. Now I need to find the *Books of Za'* so I can have the entire prophecy. Do you understand?"

"Y-yes." Norman bobbed his head. "Of course, my lord."

"Now, go find me someone who can be of use to me, someone with the foresight to find my books—"

"Someone like me," an unfamiliar voice said.

Virticus's eyes snapped to the intruder as a flame ignited in his hand. Leaning against the doorway was a young woman with long, dark, wavy hair. He did not know what was more mesmerizing: the tight royal blue dress or her deep, intense grey eyes. The mystery woman strolled through his lair as if she owned it.

Virticus's eyes narrowed. "How did you get in here?"

"It was not hard, really." She shrugged. "You should have better men watching the place."

Usually, he would have killed anyone who came into his fortress the way she did. However, there was something about her, something intriguing.

"My name is Larissa, and I have something to share with you." She ran her finger along the dragon-and-wolf heads of his large, dark throne, never taking her eyes off him.

"Norman, you are dismissed," Virticus said, eyeing her closely. He wanted to see what she had to offer—alone.

Norman fled from the lair at once.

Virticus's lips curved wickedly. "You have one minute to tell me what you are doing here before I kill you."

With her mystical gaze fixed on him, Larissa slid onto his throne and crossed her long, toned legs, completely unintimidated. "The being you seek will be born in the year of the Red Moon."

"How do you know that?" he asked, taking her in with much more interest.

"I saw it." She leaned back into his chair, running her hands along the engraved, sculpted sides. "I have the power of foresight."

"Who—"

Her gaze lowered. "I cannot see who the person is. I am being blocked somehow. It could be that the child is not yet born, or someone immensely powerful is blocking me." She met his gaze once more. "You may want to kill me, but I see myself being of exceptional use to you—and your legacy."

He eyed her—he trusted no one. "Why do you want to help me?"

"You are the most commanding force Zabashi has had in centuries—not since Malice. I would like you to stay in power. In return—" She plucked a berry from a bowl on his side table. "I would like to be by your side when we make history."

His grin deepened. "We?"

She bit into the berry. "We."

"How do I find the one chosen to stop me?"

"From what I can foresee, it is not during this moment in time. You will have a few years to prepare and build a better infrastructure. You have until the end of the third Red Moon. That will be your chance to kill the child."

"The end of the third Red Moon?" He furrowed his brow. "That is nine years away!"

Smiling, she rose from the throne. "Exactly," she cooed, standing before him. "That is more than enough time to build a stronger force." She twirled a strand of his long, dark hair around her finger. "Among other things. So, do we have an agreement?"

Virticus stared into her eyes. He had to admit she seemed like fun. He clapped his hands, summoning his top lieutenant. "If you can take Lance, the position is yours."

She winked and turned towards the towering demon.

Lance lunged.

Virticus watched her move effortlessly as she took on his lieutenant with precision. He raised an eyebrow, somewhat surprised. Lance was formidable and twice her size—yet the way she

flipped onto his shoulders and brought him to the ground proved size did not matter.

Larissa's moves were impeccable. It took her only a few minutes to defeat Lance. If she could beat his top lieutenant in that time without a scratch, he wanted her on his side. No, by his side.

Roaring, Lance got to his feet, charging towards her in a rage.

She blew purple mist from her palm, immobilizing him.

Virticus's brow furrowed. Impressive and useful, he thought. He was powerful, but even he did not wield that ability—yet.

Keeping his cold eyes locked on hers, he hurled a fireball at Lance, who let out a pained scream as he exploded into ash.

"Welcome aboard." He stepped closer. "Now, tell me, Rissa—where will the chosen one be born?"

She tilted her head slightly, a coy smile playing on her lips. "You will find the child near Rabicca."