

# THE TRIANGLE SALOON



*A Resonance story by*

Tony Mendoza

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A Resonance Story

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If the world is still turning  
and/or if you are reading this passage,  
then this story is dedicated to you.







# Midnight 1-1

## First Show



*I am ready.*

The small crowd goes wild as the vibrant spotlight shines on a young-looking woman, eyes closed, three steps above on center stage. Her sparkly white halter-top is cut to show off that branded mark across her chest without shame. Her hips, usually swaying carefree to the beats of the drum, are partially revealed by the slit of the glistening skirt flowing down to her high heels. Her arms, typically bare, are covered by long gloves.

“Ladies, Gentlemen, and lovely Persons, our final show for tonight!” A voice announces. “The act you’ve waited

all night for! The wonderful, enchantingly powerful, Paz de la Marina!”

If it was not apparent to the customers, it was Jazz Night at the Triangle Saloon. Jazz Night, popular with the lake town folks, is one of the many themes presented this year in celebration of its two-hundred years in service of the Emerald City. From the American reign and after the Grigorian Conquest, the thirteen-story flatiron building has seen it all. She dresses appropriately for the occasion, invoking the lounge singer she loved watching perform in this bar and anywhere in Seattle.

Paz de la Marina wears a feather atop her bundled hair reaching high to the quill’s tip. A few of her wavy, chestnut brown locks touch low to her shivering shoulders, and her bangs almost cover her eyebrows. The audience expects her to be happy looking all dressed up and ready to go, but her forsaken smile left her long ago and has yet to return. In contrast, a faithful constant in her life is that birthmark under her left eye. It is always there. In spite of it all, there is still a heart beating, pumping blood throughout her bod of pale, brown flesh. Her skin was once described by a swooning poet as a defiant, warm glow radiating the color of summer light through autumn leaves.

The audience settles down as Paz’s rosy lips move away from each other. Hands grip the microphone tightly. The lighting loses its warmth at the start of her cold tune. The band plays their hallowed instruments as she sings wraithlike words that calm the small crowd.

Her voice is said to be like waves of the ocean,



composed of shifts between gentle humming and mighty roars. Of all the things she could give, she slowly came to believe her voice is the only thing left she could offer the world.

*Rain, rain, rain, time to go away.*

*Hiding from that dreary ol' gray?*

*Looking for something to keep you busy?*

*Spin yourself around 'til you get dizzy.*

*Truth be told, to make time pass, all you need is a friend.*

Her eyes open, revealing irises the color of a bright green sea. They are captivating enough that they—and they alone—can charm the devil himself. Perhaps, even soothe him?

The words keep flowing. Paz steps down three steps off the stage as the spotlight follows her lead. She strides toward a red-haired bartender who hands her a tray. On the tray, she balances a rosy-colored drink with a cherry and triangle ice cubes inside a teardrop glass. Swaying away from the audience seated at the tables, Paz arrives at a corner across the room.

She bows to a man in a dull-orange fedora and a trench coat of the same color. She offers him the drink. The man kept to himself, standing far from the tables. This attempt to avoid attention is pointless now that the spotlight shines on them both.

The man accepts the drink, only to place it on the floor, without any sign of gratitude. Paz does not care since the pleasure was hers anyway. She smiles, carrying the empty tray with her.

*That is what you said to me.*

Midnight 1-I: First Show

*You did not say that like the rain, they too would go away.  
Telling me that it's about what I can feel but can't see.  
When I stop feeling it all, what then will you say?  
That everything happens for a reason?  
Life has no remorse in any place or season?  
I say just live life; there's nothing to care for in the end.*

The lighting steadily becomes warmer as Paz's song rises in tempo. She twirls around and sends the tray flying as a discus thrown with Olympian strength. If she tried, it could have been impossible to stop it. The cowering bartender is fortunate enough to catch it before it reached his collection of fine wine and imports.

She sings apologetically and seats herself near him, with an arm wrapped around his neck.

He stops cleaning beer mugs to open a beer bottle with his bottlecap opener.

Moving on, Paz slides across the counter between two sleeping gentlemen. They pay her no attention for the only right reason she can agree with. They helplessly fell asleep.

She returns on stage with only a few lines left to finish. The instruments play her off.

*If I knew what you were getting me into  
And if there was any way you knew,  
Then maybe you can reconsider it all?  
Never answer that call?  
But you couldn't help it; Let's hope this song makes an  
amend.*

The music fades away, and the curtain closes slowly. The singer and the musicians vanish behind them.

“Give it up for Paz de la Marina and our house band the Sea Green Waves!” the announcer exclaims! “And remember, you saw her here first!”

The sound of a single person clapping fills the air. The rest of the room was lulled to sleep or are barely hanging on with their drowsiness. The bartender, not allowed to drink on the job, and the expressionless man in the trench coat, having left his untouched drink on the floor, are the only two left standing, clearly conscious.

The man in the trench coat approaches the bartender whose claps slowly come to a stop. After a brief exchange in whispers, the bartender points to the door.

Backstage, the shades-wearing, proud Seattleite plays the trumpet in a corner. He is actively setting the appropriate ambience. Meanwhile, the grumpy pianist scolded the saxophonist over their singer’s missing *éclair*, despite her not wanting it in the first place. As they argued, the other two bandmates approached Paz, with extended arms. Whether with treats or compliments, they always express their overwhelming affections.

“Great show, *me?* Great show, *you guys*. Not because of me.” Half a smile had risen from Paz. “I only did one song tonight. All of you are the star performers tonight.”

“You mean every night?!” the trumpeter, Sammy, tooted.

“Our show would be nothing without her,” Carlie quickly threw that into the conversation.

“Speak for your own instrument,” Quinn said before

returning to his argument.

Amanda agreed with Carlie, “We would need someone to groove to my bass.” She blushed, “It is as if it is doing a duet with you! What do you think?”

“No!” Carlie’s bangs above her eyes shook with her head, “Our act is nothing to her! Yet, she chooses to sing with us! And they come to hear us because of that! We need her!”

“Calm down, kiddo,” Paz played with the young girl’s hair.

Although she does not say it, deep down, Carlie knows that Paz is dependent on the beat of her drums. Every night she watches every step Paz makes. When dancing to the pulse, they are both in sync.

The music has stopped. Everyone else is too busy in conversation to notice that. Paz is paying more attention to the smaller details nowadays. Especially during weeks like these.

“Paz!” Sammy has noticed the stranger creeping through the door. “You got a special guest!”

She was not surprised. The man in the dull orange fedora was expected anytime now. He is a sturdy, man a little taller than her and with a larger frame from his broad shoulders. The stubble of his beard barely hid the week-old cut from a lousy shave under his chin.

She immediately sensed the strength of a bruiser. She also picks up another familiar scent that wreaked clearly from the way he carries himself: the stench of a law enforcer.

“A Siren’s Kiss?” Paz looks up into his tired, brown

eyes. “A fine beverage, would you be so bold to disagree, stud?”

Paz on her tiptoes, pushes herself against the gentlemen. Her arms are wrapped around him. The aroma of the passion fruit flower is undeniably overpowering. He first smelled it at the bar. He smells it more than ever now.

To distract himself from her feminine wiles, the man looks around the room, making a note of every witness. Sammy is a Black American like himself, a familiar face in his old neighborhood who somehow gets away with not working in service of the Grigori Empire. Quinn, a Chinese American whose piano skills were once considered legendary in Seattle before succumbing to the Grigori Empire’s former ban on music performances. Not much is known about Ralph, the youthful-looking fisherman, except that his father and mother migrated from Hawaii and Samoa, respectively. The question is *when*. Then there is Amanda, who wants to live up to the Jewish American comedians of her elder parent’s era. However, she still needs to figure out her *shtick*. Lastly, who could ever forget Charlie? The rambunctious yet mild-mannered teenager that arrived in Seattle years ago as a child looking for a Guardian.

“You still with me?” Serena Paz asks, concerned.

He nods his head once.

“How about we further our conversations in,” Paz whispers in his ear, “my private suite?”

Before she could give the man a chance to react with a smile, not that he would have smiled, Paz has him by the

hand. She takes off smoothly, gently leading him away backstage with her ring-bearing right hand.

The others mockingly wish her to have fun tonight and to not roughhouse. Carlie and Sammy do not. Carlie stares even after they have gone out the door. Still staring as the solo session continues jamming. The trumpeter confidently smiles.

The *couple* of the night move past a large abandoned dining room. They roam through the dusty halls of the lonesome hotel. Her graceful gait is more than what is expected of anyone at a rundown, dingy place such as this. They both find it hard to believe this place was once considered a palace by the citizens, denizens, and visitors of Seattle near and far.

They stop in front of an elevator's doors. The man pushes the button once. Paz pushes it repeatedly. Every call to the elevator brings Paz to cross her fingers in hopes that only the elevator will answer.

The man looks around. The cool, dark bar with its glaring spotlight was a better sight than what he had for viewing pleasure as they wait for the elevator to drop to their floor. There were no precious paintings to keep them entertained. The flowers drooping out the glass vases wilted a month ago. And the ripped thin red carpet covering the worn-out, water-stained wood floors are duller than the man's hat.

The elegant, royal hotel has seen better days.

The elevator rings. The doors open for them. In no

hurry at all, they enter one at a time, ladies first.

There goes her hand. Toward the control panel, her hand moves. Her finger starts at the first-floor button. Once the door closes, her finger ascends, one push of a button after the other, until her ring-finger caresses the twelfth floor.

Unbelievable. And when the man could have gone the entire night without showing an expression, he looks to her in disbelief.

Serena Paz does not notice him. Her chin is held high.

Who in their right mind would do that while riding the elevator? A better question, who in their right minds continue riding the elevator in awkward silence after that? He could have jumped out every time the elevator ringed, opening its door. Instead, he chose to keep her near, keeping his eyes on the control panel's buttons flickering off whenever reaching the next floor. To him, it was a better view than watching the smug mug keeping her chin held high as if looking towards a light shining on the righteous.

A twelfth ring and the twelfth light flickers off. The door opens a twelfth time. The man steps out, Paz still holding his hand. She strays behind and presses all the floor buttons descending the control panel. Before the closing elevator door can trap her hand in, she steps out to stroll him through the halls.

There are not many rooms on this floor. At one time, only the wealthy upper-class visitors could afford the luxury of the larger living spaces. Now, a man in a blue suit, fixing his unflattering orange tie, stands in front of

one doorway. Another door up ahead framed a woman in an elegant maroon robe drinking wine.

The singer with the white feather and the man in the orange fedora hat approach the only farthest door down the spacious hall. People stay clear of this door, bordered by a wallpaper design of roses and thorns. She now has a key in her ring-barren right hand.

As she is unlocking the door, they hear a condescending catcall. “Paz! Finally earning your keep around here?”

Paz sharply turns back to face her neighbor, a woman in black lingerie with a cigarette in her mouth. The neighbor smirked. Despite already being accustomed to the woman’s begrudging banter, Paz feels disturbed by that remark. She tries keeping any witty rebuttals to herself while opening the door. Still, she cannot help getting the last word in before leaving into the room.

“Shut up, harlot.” Is all Paz could say.

Vixen. Her name is Vixen. But they know that.

The man, puzzled, could not keep his eyes off this woman named Vixen. There was something vaguely familiar about her, which, of course, would not bode well with a missus. Fortunately for him, he is single and could stare all night. Paz drags him through the doorway. He caught a glimpse of her smug lips before the door shut tight.

Paz and the man climb up a metal staircase. Her chin is once again held high, and her eyes are fixated above. A shift in mood compared to her smile in the elevator. She looks upset now. He speculates that staring at that woman



outside made him unbearable to look at.

Perhaps not. More than likely, it was that his face is boring. With that blank face, no one can really tell what he is fixated on. Any average person would assume an ordinary person like him is up to nothing, regardless if his objective was in clear sight. For a man of his profession, it is good to have that kind of poker face.

“Welcome to my humble abode!” She let his hand go, spinning herself around. “Where all my sensually exciting fantasies come together for an incredible night!”

An entire suite, brightly lit, all for herself. The man broke his stoic demeanor once more, as expected by the lavished songstress. As she looked into his eyes, she felt guilty, suspecting he may not have an adequate home to live in. Only his appearance is judged at first glance because his reaction alone would not be enough to support that theory. Considering the compact homes and the minimal space for housing regulated by the Grigori Empire, she realizes she forgot her privilege. Her home houses many art pieces collected from her well-documented travels. Yet, guarding the arts does not ease her feelings of guilt for having more than what others could dream of having.

Contrary to what she is thinking, he is astonished. In this room, there are marble busts sculpted in Renaissance Florence and French paintings surviving the Raid on Paris thought to be destroyed with the Palace of Versailles. A crystal mirror situated on a hand-crafted, wooden drawer cabinet fit for a Mademoiselle is planted against the wall between two arched doorways, no doubt

leading to other rooms holding treasures cozying up at her home. He imagines this room could be the foyer of a museum if racks of costumes and clothing and boxes and bins of props were not cluttering the floor.

The man sniffs long and hard. A faint scent buried with the other smells in the room grabs his attention. His nostrils discerned the floral aroma through Paz's sweet, lingering perfume.

"That smell is lavender. It goes perfect with the wall's color and design," Paz explains, sitting herself in front of the mirror. "Please, take a seat too. I need to freshen myself. I know you are dying to take a seat on that velvet couch. It is like floating on a cloud!"

The only seat the man saw of that material was a bean bag couch. No matter what material it is made from, he was above sitting that low on what might as well be a child's pillow. Although he could have taken a seat on the green sofa that looks out of place, he decides to stand directly in her sights.

She puts down the key and applies a brighter color to her lips. "So, the Siren's Kiss? You see, there are only a few people in the world who know of that drink. When to order it. And who will serve it. It is the only way I can meet trusted friends safely."

He is intrigued but not distracted. He silently watches her hands touch her hair.

"As of late, two more have learned of the Siren's Kiss. And they have tried to kill me." Her hair clips and feathered headpiece drop to the ground. Her hair unravels a long way down past her shoulders.

“There is now a third.” She tied her hair in a ponytail using a ribbon with a black bow attached to it. She picks up a white rose where there was once a key, holding it to her breast. “Will you kill me?”

The man is now cautious.

“Or?” Her hands swiftly move. She turns herself to the shocked man. “Die like the other two?”

Slowly and cautiously, he puts his hands in the air.

There is only one thing he can do now. When there is a madman with a shotgun aiming at his gut, he waits for the silent stare. He knows that stare. Threatened like that many times over his long lifetime, he has come to recognize the hesitancy in a standoff. After a few moments, he could hope that the madman does not fire on the next syllable coming out his lips.

To his benefit, he was sure she is no madman.

# Midnight 1-II

## Living in the Past



Paz waits for him to make a move. The man does not flinch. Knowing she could hold a gun all day and not fire it once, he knows he can at least have the next spoken word.

“I’m not here to kill you,” he says calmly.

She takes a step back, bumping into the dresser, still holding the shotgun. “Then why are you here?”

“I am here on a case. I have some questions to ask. I am not here to hurt you.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“My hands are in the air, and you’re holding the gun.”

“Is that so?” Paz motions her fingers, “Turn around.

Slowly.”

He follows her instructions, hands still in the air. With a sharp, jagged rose stem now in her hand, she pats his body down for any concealed weapons. She starts from his shoulders and arms, working her way down to his back and legs.

“Were the others as lucky as me to be alive during their inspection?” He asks.

“No. Now turn around. And do not pull a fast one. Forget who you are dealing with, and you might lose a finger or something else.”

“Who would forget who you are? No one could forget.”

He does as she asks again. She continues the pat-down from the front of his legs and works her way up. This was unpleasant for both of them.

“And I thought I was lucky enough to have made it to the mirror without being threatened,” she is patting down his abdomen and arms. She saved his chest for last. She looks him in the eyes. “You are pretty stupid to not carry a weapon. Especially during an age like this.”

He replies, “Age like this? We aren’t that old. And things have been pretty calm here for years since the Wall came tumbling down.”

She grabs his hat from his head and checks it thoroughly.

He adds, “Besides, I do not need a weapon to see an old friend.”

“An old friend?”

“Yes, we went to high school together. Remember the

one-of-a-kind mug, like this?"

"How could I forget? You were only the condescending jerk in the back of biology class. I fail to see how that makes us friends."

"I had your back!" He grabbed his hat back quickly, feeling naked without it. "Have you really forgotten the good times in West Coast High? You probably have. It has been a while. Do you still remember the old crew you hung out with? Do you still remember L—"

"Hush!" She held one hand to him and another to hide her vulnerable face. "Please stop there. Do not say any of their names to me! Never say his name."

"I'm not allowed to say our friends' names?"

She calmed herself down with a few deep breaths. "Just follow me."

They walk under the arch left of the mirror into the dining room. No specific theme in this room. Under a German clock, there is a small table holding miniature statues of animals and people in white cloths embellished in painted designs of red and green. Not looking so out of place, the paintings of food complement the wallpaper of the varying patterned shades of red. The color red is said to make people hungry. He could imagine any other person who dines on that large onyx dining table are always hungry for second helpings. He cannot resist feeling hungry himself by merely glancing at it. To distract himself, he studies the painting of a bison rancher and a skirted woman holding each other in front of the backdrop of a dusty red landscape. It was reminiscent of the old days, south of the country, unintentionally stirring

an unusual appetite for buffalo meat.

“I need to verify your identity. I do not know if you are who you say you are.” She asked, conveniently filling the silence between one end of the table to the next, “What are our full names?”

“After all these years, I actually forgot you had a weird way of talking sometimes. What’s up with that?”

“I was raised on literature, theater arts, and a wild imagination. I speak however I want, whenever the occasion calls for it! Please verify your identity.”

“Fine. I am Walter Martin Jones. Detective Walter Jones. And you are Serena, Paz de la Marina.”

“But you can call me Paz. What and where was that high school you mentioned?”

“West Coast High School. It was on Golden State Avenue, on the West side of Seattle. Not directly on the West Coast, but we sure did have good times there, at least, as much of a good time *a condescending jerk in the back of biology class* can have. Looking at you now, it sure seems like those were your best of times too.”

They are now in a living room. There is an entertainment center with a flat-screen television unplugged and unused since the last time a good television program aired. Across from that, there is one more than enough couches and chairs to seat the band for a performance. An antique piano is placed obnoxiously at the center of the room, considering that there is a noticeable empty space in the corner of the room. Detective Jones speculates the possibility that this empty space allows room for her guests to stand. Despite the

accommodation, it still did not make a guest feel less clustered. Many displays holding treasures, such as ceremonial masks and spears belonging to the Zulu tribe, surround them. Above those displays, the historically prominent photographs of people and original artwork—or talented forgeries—hung close together, reminding onlookers that they are never alone in this room.

“Name at least one teacher we shared,” she asks her third question.

“Damn, that would be tough, de la Marina,” he flexed his hands. “If only the name Maria *Hernandez* did not make figuring out that answer a cinch.”

“You are right, that was too easy. Yet, you have not given me a direct answer.”

“Now, wait a minute!”

“New question.” She stops at a locked door. “Retell at least one conversation we had.”

He rubs his chin. “A challenge.”

“Well? We do not have all night.”

“One time,” he snaps his finger, “A friend and I was arguing about which two pistols looked cooler. You showed us up by telling us how the Colt is better because its ammunition price range is less expensive, and the gun has less recoil than the Desert Eagle. You then stuck your nose in the air, like you always do, and continued walking down the stairs. Surprised you did not stumble over your ego.”

“Jealous a girl is more gun savvy than you?” She smiles, “Typical Jones. Always jealous of something you cannot have.”



The white rose in her hand transforms into a key again. Detective Jones was aware of the magic tricks earlier. Seeing the white rose transform in a fluid motion before his eyes without her trying to conceal the act intrigued his interest.

“Where does someone find a Swiss Army Knife like that?” He asked.

“I can tell you that I did not find it at a yard sale,” she responds teasingly while unlocking the door.

The White Rose. It is a legendary, living weapon spoken of in many stories, but never one without the Guardian Siren wielding its serene grace. It can transform into anything at her will, faster than a blink of an eye. Detective Jones recalls the official Grigori Military reports. Some mention that its thorny branches stretched all around her, sometimes shielding herself and her allies. Other reports claim a single vine reached for the soldiers, yanking their weapons out of their hands. After seeing it in action, one could wonder if the Grigori propaganda is true. Was the White Rose ever used as a weapon of destruction?

Serena Paz transforms it back into a ring with a white gem cutout in the shape of a rose. She slips onto her ring finger. Seeing Jones eyeing it, she holds out her hand to him. He watches as the ring liquifies and crawls around all sides of her hand. It ends its playful journey after wrapping around her index finger, turning back into the same ring as before.

“Colt 1911,” Serena Paz says. “You were off by one word. I may not have photographic memory like A—

some people do. But could I have said it any other way if I was really trying to show you off? How would you know? Are you an expert?"

"Funny. But I directly answered your three questions. So. Are we going in now?"

"Someone sounds desperate."

"de la Marina."

"Fine. Due to my generous hospitality, you may enter."

The lighting in the red-carpeted bedroom is noticeably dimmer. The same lighting in every other room could shine like a spotlight every night on the singer. If only this room were any less claustrophobic inducing than the last two rooms. As spacious as this one is, the detective notices Serena Paz tries not to waste space unnecessarily. Where no furniture is leaning against a wall, chests take their place. At least this room seems tidier than the others.

"Excuse me." The songstress sways forward, toward a Japanese privacy screen at the corner of the room. "I have to change into something more *comforting*."

His eyes first followed her until all he could see of her is a silhouette. Behind her are bookshelves aligned against one side of the wall to the left of the entrance's doorway. They partially cover a window. He does not search through its shelves yet, not wanting to give her the satisfaction of thinking he is sneaking a peek.

Serena Paz offered the waiting detective a seat by her desk near the center of the room. He does not sit but does take the opportunity to observe what she could be working on. The globe of the Earth with red, violet, and green pins were irrelevant to his case. There are three

music sheets with lyrics attached to a paper clip and a separate, untitled ballad, also irrelevant. A grocery list and a basket are unimportant to his case, as well.

So far, the detective found nothing of interest to him.

“Why would an innocent woman like you want to own an entire floor of a corrupted place such as this?” He glances at the portraits on the walls, one of them of a woman bearing a distinct resemblance to her. “I’m sure there are better, far less objectionable, places to live.”

“Were you expecting a mansion all to my lonesome self?” Her silhouette strips out of a dress. “You think anything my Mamá left behind would help with that? It did not. When the American Dream fell and turned to this nightmare industrial society, her money became as worthless as the paper it’s printed on. Now I use my voice to get what I can afford.”

“You used your voice, alright. Lull people to sleep while the crooks you’re working with rob them of their hard-earned money. Or maybe you hypnotize them to give you whatever is in their wallet. Isn’t that what the *legend* says?”

She takes off her gloves without care. “That is the truth. Thousands come to hear the legendary Siren sing! But the boys selling the tee-shirts and pins found they sell better at the major ports and cities. Heaven knows the poor we gave back to could only afford a good song. We stole from the corrupt and, in exchange, gave hope to the helpless.” She bends forward to let out a howling laugh, “Hah! And hypnotized? Please! They were in love with me at their own discretion.”

“I remember those stories.”

Serena Paz takes off her stockings. “Good ones I hope.”

“Stories exchanged by lucky sailors and stupid pilots at busy ports after civilization’s downfall. Myths and truths exchanged with the world. But I’m talking about the stories after the Grigori shut down those ports. You traveled with another crew that kept more than their fair share of the loot and robbed ordinary folks.”

“How could you hear those stories if the ports were closed down?” Serena Paz still holds the pair of stockings in her hands.

“Ten years ago. From Los Angeles, word spread that you boarded an airship belonging to the War Lords, the enemies you once fought against. It then returned less than a year later to New York City, flying past a port to be closed within a week. Other reports say you were with them until you found your new band in Seattle.”

“All that from within the country?” She says, grasping onto the stockings tighter.

“Sure. But the Grigori propaganda was beneficial for the stories’ circulation. They were clever. Marking you both a traitor to your kind and a menace to their people. I bet no one remembers the good you have done since you gave up on being their Guardian. And all for what? A free round trip around the globe’s pocket?”

“No! I did not take any money from that trip! I had my own reasons for leaving the Guardians!” She throws one stocking to the nightstand, knocking down a picture frame atop. “I had my own reason to join the War Lords!” She

throws the other onto another picture frame on the bookshelf, knocking it down as well.

Detective Jones had to quickly interrupt with an apology, something he rarely does. For an honest, decent reason too. Serena Paz nearly stepped out of the privacy screen. Realizing her body is bare, she takes a step back to bury her face in her hands from embarrassment and grief.

“Did I upset you?” he asks.

“I am not upset. But you did offend me.” She starts to relax. “Why do you care what I did in my past?”

“You are a person of interest. People look up to you here in Pacifica. I mean, *Washington*. It is still Washington. Washington is our home. Don’t you think our people still need you?” He watches her silhouette throw on a robe. “I believe the entire Resistance was founded upon you. While the Guardians freely protected people around the world, the Resistance dedicated their lives to liberating Seattle. They sacrificed their lives and freedom in hopes you and the Guardians will protect them in the end.”

“Their mission ended when the wall fell. Everyone is at peace.”

“They are starting things up again. Another Resistance. The economy is going to hell, and people are out in the streets. Big changes are going to happen. They might need your help with this. Where do you stand?”

“It is not my fight anymore.” Serena Paz brings herself out into clear sight. “What is the point? Those cities and countries we liberated fell back into our enemy’s hands. They always do. We were first cornered back into the West Coast, lost the West Coast, and roamed Earth while

living on the run. We spent half a century trying to free the world.” She ties her robe. “What is the point?”

Detective Jones answers, “Try putting yourself in their shoes. The Seattleites. They spent a century in hell. And I don’t mean that figuratively. Many of them are just as old as us. They are tired of it and want to rise up and challenge the oppression. They want the chance you had at a truly free life.”

“A century. How do you live with yourself?” She wonders aloud, “Living with yourself for that long?”

“Honestly? I live my life in good company. At least, the best company ten bucks an hour times two can afford. And it doesn’t hurt to take it one day at a time.”

“Is that supposed to be a joke?”

“I wish it were. I can only afford my career these days. Friends are costly. Employees? Not so much.”

Serena Paz, fastening the belt of her robe, approaches her round, queen-sized bed by the wall across the way. She pulls the velvet drapes and drops comfortably on sheets and pillows of silk. Detective Jones would only imagine how soft the mattress underneath felt like.

Catching him staring, she pats the bed with a seducing smile.

He shakes his head. To imagine the bed’s softness would be good enough for him.

“I thought so.” She laughed. “I am just teasing you. Still, rejection hurts.”

Having nowhere else to look, her eyes move to her right, where the nightstand rests at the convenience of her bedside. She stares surprised at the picture frame she

knocked down with her stocking. The detective stares at it as well, but he goes unnoticed. She brushes off the stocking. She hesitates taking the picture frame, fearful of the memories flooding her mind.

The detective turned his sights away from her, looking to his right. He sees a bench under a window. Adjacent to that window's side of the wall, he observes what he thought was another wall protruding. In clearer sight, the doors for a walk-in closet beckon his curiosity.

"You have tremendous power," Detective Jones reminds her. "Stories say you are bulletproof. You could end all this pain and suffering by taking down the Grigori. Why do you instead wait it out here, rotting with everyone else?"

"Contrary to popular belief, we are not bulletproof. We have tried to do what we can for the people, and the world, but—" She tilted her head up to look at him. "Hey! Get out of there!"

Detective Jones closed her closet door. "What's wrong?"

"What is wrong?! You should get permission to snoop through someone's room! Especially when the owner is present! More so when the room is mine!"

"May I look through your room?"

"Go ahead. I have nothing to hide. And if it is anything of monetary value you are after, I have some money in the living room. Take as much as you like."

Detective Jones glares at her cheeky smile for only a second. Opening the closet door again, he stares silently, unable to look into its dark depths. Serena Paz does not

want to figure out what he is thinking. She wants to gaze away from it all.

“Only things in this room are of sentimental value,” Serena Paz turns her head again to the picture frame on the nightstand. She grabs it with a firm grip. Staring deeply into the torn photograph, she adds to her last statement, “Articles from the past. Memories of days that are long gone from now.”

Detective Jones moves on from the closet and to the bookshelves. There are a lot of worn classics waiting to be browsed again. Some titles in Spanish and other international languages. Comic-books are lined up together in order of issue number. An entire cabinet is dedicated to books on music, notably jazz occupying a complete shelf. Technical texts as well, some organized between two sturdy book holders. This collection featured a geography book, a mechanic’s manual, a grimoire, a military almanac, a medical procedure guide, and a writer’s anthology. There is an empty space in that collection barely collecting dust.

“Your voice,” he asks, “is it really true you can control people with it?”

“You tell me,” she almost did not answer. “Did it work on you?”

He ignored the question disguised as an answer. It was a crapshoot for Serena Paz to respond with a *no*, anyway. “Did your voice kill those people in the bar?” he asks to provoke her.

“What?! I am offended.” Serena Paz briefly looks away from the photograph in her hand. “They are asleep! The



poor men and ladies stay the night for a little relaxation. My voice soothes their souls so they can forget their burdens. Even if it is just for a minute.”

Detective Jones looks atop the bookshelf. Seeing the picture frame knocked down, he pulls it out from under the other stocking. The picture is a poorly photographed panorama of many persons of interest. Although some were masked, they were not at a masquerade ball. Their location is indiscernible, unlike the subjects which could be made out by their trademark outfits. The most important thing he notes is that they are happy.

“The Guardian Vigilantes?” Detective Jones sounds reminiscent. “Before they dropped *Vigilantes* and became *the Guardians*. Looks like all your old crew is here. The cold-blooded mercenary. The two pilots. Faris Nejem. The Lynx. That robot and its two maintenance workers. That kid called Bounce. Wanda. Rocketblades. The artificial intelligence hologram thing. The crazy ninja. And a whole bunch of masks. But two are missing. Someone tore them off this picture.”

“Oh yeah?” She says, not paying attention to what he said.

Detective Jones holds onto the picture frame as he approaches her slowly. “I suspect someone torn from the picture is the heroine with the enchanting voice that saved the world. The Siren.” He spins the world model on her desk. “And the one with the weight of the world on his shoulders. The big man himself! The hero-tactician that people all over the world looked up to! Except, you won’t hear anyone talk about him here because we are too

much *Grigori*, and a man like him could only be seen as the true leader of the rebel terrorists and a threat to everything Grigori. Seems someone tore him off too.”

She does not respond, her mind lost in thought.

“Perhaps it is closer than I think.”

His shadow looms over her. He reaches out. She withdraws the picture frame, securing it between her crossed arms and her heart. Looking at the other frame in the detective’s hands, Serena Paz unwittingly pieces the puzzle for him with a glare.

“Is that the missing piece?” Detective Jones asks to be sure.

“Sure,” she answered at first. She questions if she was paying attention at all. “Missing piece to what?”

He holds up the picture frame holding the larger piece of the photograph.

“That is none of your concern.” She closes the conversation as well by snatching her picture frame from him and sitting on both frames. “You are pushing your luck.”

“Am I?”

“I feel it is time we wrapped things up.” Her glare sharpens. “I hope you enjoyed your tour of Casa de la Marina, but we were never offering bed and breakfast. So, go on your way. Or. Tell me. Why did you come here?”

“I told you why.” He grinned. “I wanted to catch up with an old friend.”

“Acquaintances, maybe? I would not consider us friends.”

“Fair enough. I am working on a missing persons case. I would appreciate your cooperation since my trustworthy sources are running dry.”

Serena Paz confidently shares. “There is no luck of you finding a trustworthy source at the Triangle Saloon which will divulge anything to you. I would know, having lived at the Triangle Saloon for the past ten years. I was here, singing, on the nights the two men went missing. The first night, Sunday this week, the detective. The second night, Monday, also this week, one of two lieutenants of the Grigori Army in Seattle. The male lieutenant, to be precise. Witnesses will definitely object to any one of those men attending my late-night performances.”

Although he wants to believe her story, unfortunately, the specifics she constructed into her alibi put her in further suspicion. He never told her who went missing, where they went missing, or when they went missing.

“Do you know where the two men left after you lulled the crowd to sleep?”

“Oh, yes!” She nodded with enthusiasm. “I do know!”

“Well?”

“If I did the job right, they should already be compacted with yesterday’s garbage.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Do I have to spell it out for you? I K-I-L-L-E-D them. Headlines! I *killed* them.”

Detective Walter Jones does not believe her. Serena Paz stares with a cunning grin.

“You don’t kill,” he states. “And they wouldn’t leave

Seattle for any reason. You are hiding them.”

“Nope!” She disagrees. “I believe there are many people I killed on my adventures. Not on purpose. Not directly. Sometimes, innocently killed from inaction. But unlike those times, the ones you are looking for are guilty.”

“What do you mean guilty?”

“You see, Detective, they tried to kill me first!”

“Why should I believe that?”

“Believe what you want to believe. I would not kill unless I am threatened. You heard the propaganda before, and I should not have to remind you what I can do. You saw firsthand how instant your death could come with my quick reflexes. And a shotgun. That was not thunder you heard these past nights. That was their death by the end of the barrel.”

“It has not thundered yet,” he argues, “And I heard no blast coming from this place. You’re an actress living out the roles she never got to play. Ever since you took one drama class at West Coast High.”

She caresses his arm with a coy smile. “What role am I playing tonight?”

“Tell me where they are.”

“Do you believe in heaven, Jones?”

“Not any more than you do, de la Marina.”

He tries another strategy. Serena Paz is the only suspect who confessed to their disappearance. What she did not know is they are hard-working men from the Resistance. He leaves that part out as he further he interrogates about what they intended for her those

nights. All Serena Paz constantly retells is the bloodthirsty consequences of their actions, never swaying from the idea that they tried to kill her.

Detective Jones reveals their connection with a question, “Did they invite you to the Resistance?”

“No! Why would they invite me if they tried to kill me?! If murder is what the Resistance is about, then I am glad to have not received an invitation.”

“How does a living Guardian down the street not receive an invitation to the Resistance?”

“I do not know, Detective. I am getting old. Changing of the Guardians. You know what they say? Out with the old, in with the new.” She jokes, “They really wanted out with the old.”

“You don’t look a day over twenty-four. Know what I think? You declined the invitation. They could have really used you in the fight. You can change everyone’s lives for the better, but you choose—”

“To live a normal life?!” She rises from the bed “If I did receive an invite, that is exactly why I would have declined it. I have risked my life over, and over, to give you and the world a second chance to fight for your freedom.”

Memories flash before her eyes.

“They’re risking a lot trying to keep a home here.” He says. “Without any God-given superpowers like those mages, monsters, and you guys, they’re going to lose loved ones. They might die.”

“Because it is a losing fight!” Her eyes widen as she extends her hands to reach for the sky. “You think I have not lost loved ones? People I loved more than the Earth

and everything on it?!”

He looks past her towards the bed, seeing the picture frames faced up. “Being a Guardian is a thankless job, I bet. But you’re not the only one in Seattle, or in the world, who lost someone. What makes your pain greater than theirs?”

“As if you would know what my pain feels like? Normal people, like you, do not have the entire world to worry about. Only yourself.” Her ring transforms into a thorny branch starting from her index finger, wrapping itself like a vine around her arm. “When you get tired of yourself, you sell your eternal life to the people. And for what? So that they can harvest your soul and dispose of your body like rotten husks?”

“Hey. I clearly never did that. Neither could anyone from the Resistance.”

“What is the difference?!” she says. “Sooner or later, it all ends the same. Always.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

Serena Paz points her index finger to his face. A tiny bud sprouts at her fingertip. “What is one person?!” She closes and opens her hand, revealing a white rose blooming. “Or a resistance?!” The thorny branch wraps itself around her other arm. From the branch, tiny buds sprout and blossom into lush white roses. “Or the entire world?!”

The dreaded memories have not stopped flashing. Unable to stop them, Serena Paz grasps her face. She forgets the thorny vines covered her hands.

“You read the news!” Red trickles off her round

cheeks. “Humanity is learning to live with the world the Grigori created. The assimilation of our own identities and history to adapt to their uniform. Our deaths are the result of their demand for perfection. Our pains are their pleasures. Our tortured lives are their research.”

“That’s all propaganda, de la Marina!” He wants to calm her down forcefully but knows that is the wrong move. Retaining his demeanor, he continues on with his words, “It always has been! Don’t believe what they are saying, not for a minute!”

“No. It is true. I have seen it firsthand. If you cannot see it in Seattle, then you are just as blind and assimilated as the rest of them. Who are you, Walter Jones?!”

He questions her motivations for asking that, silently. Having no other sensible action left to take, he waits for her to come back to her senses.

Serena Paz collapses to her knees in a small, dense puddle. Seeing what she has done, she quickly removes her fingers from her face. The thorny branches retract back into a single white rose in her hand.

“The blood of fear dries to a stop.” She inhales hard, her dry eyes wide open. “But, the tears of sorrow are always flowing.”

Raindrops stream onto the windows. Serena Paz buries her face in her hands. Walter Jones extends his hand to her shoulder.

“You offended me again. I am on the floor, and it is raining. You should leave before it gets worse,” Serena Paz warns him.

“I did provoke you. But why do you let your past get to

you like that?” Detective Jones asks, unamused by her dramatics. “You could have stopped talking about it anytime.”

She looks into his eyes with the answer. “Like everyone else, you too are blind from realizing a guardian has vulnerabilities. Until humanity as a whole learns to reclaim itself, they cannot expect one human like me to do it for them.”

Serena Paz personally escorts him through the rooms again. With her head held high, unable to look at him, she follows him down the staircase. Detective Jones looks back at her. He notices the wounds on her face healed fast, abnormally leaving no scar. At the penthouse entrance, he gives her his business card.

“Goodnight, Detective.” She shuts the door on him.

Vixen, the woman in lingerie, beckons to Detective Jones. He does not question how long she was standing there, leaving Vixen behind with her contempt. A fast elevator ride down gets him out of the Triangle Saloon, and into the rain of Seattle. He begins his trek back to his office.

Blood washed from her hands and faced in the bathroom sink, Serena Paz returned to her bedroom. Her robe is loose, and her shoulders are bare. She moves toward the open closet, letting her robe drop to the floor. Serena Paz, as vulnerable as she could be, faces the mannequin wearing her suit. Unable to close the doors on the heroic visage of her past hiding in the closet, she stares silently.

Both hear the pitter-patter of rain. The detective sees



A Little Insomnia

a guardian who has forsaken the world. And the woman  
unable to forget the Guardian of the world is always  
watching her.

# Dawn 1

## A Game in the Shadows



The skies poured for hours until dawn. Streets flooded and sidewalks puddled, but the city's troubles were not washed away. The gray clouds suit the somber harboring the lake town. Seattle is a city in despair. When the Grigori Empire marched in Pacifica a century ago, they did more than change the name of the state from Washington. Buildings of innovative commerce turned into sweatshops manufacturing weapons, equipment, and supplies. Military Humvees and industrial trucks prowling the streets are familiar sights for citizens walking or riding the many public transportations to work. Since the private

vehicles of old were scrapped and melted for precious resources ages ago, escaping on foot to see a brighter world became a perilous journey.

Detective Walter Jones has no reason to leave Seattle. Everything he could possibly want is in his city. Over the century, Jones considered moving out for a new home in a new state. He decided against that when the Grigori Empire appointed a new Commander of Pacifica at the start of the new century. Ever since then, the Commander of Pacifica lifted numerous bans, such as the ban on private operation of businesses. Generals around the world followed his examples, allowing the miserable citizens of the entire Grigori Empire to feel less trapped in misery. At least for Jones, he felt happier finally sleeping at the workplace of his own calling. Although Hatfield & Jones Investigation Agency may be the least regarded in the *Emerald City Beacon's* businesses column, it is his home. It is his little slice of heaven in Seattle.

His attitude towards the paper's ranking of him does not wound his ego. He uses it for the latest scoop and informing himself of recent events, as he is doing now. He stands in front of his business, leaning against a post fixture holding a clock. This is his ritual every morning. So far, nothing new or out of the ordinary in politics or in the community. He does check for an economic section he noticed missing for months. One of its columns is a weekly report of business profitability scorings. The newspaper editor said they excluded it out of printing by order of Seattle Communications. His partner's only concern about that was he would miss the food basket

that came with scoring the lowest net profit. Detective Jones suspects it is due to the recession, but he questions Seattle Communications' motives for hiding a fact that can be seen in plain sight.

"You look tired!" A young woman wearing glasses and a blue-toned suit winks to Detective Jones. "Did Paz de la Marina keep you up all night?!"

Detective Jones snarls, "Grace, you should know better than to talk details about this case outside the office or in public."

"Oh, right! Sorry. I'm so excited! This is my first case! I've always wanted to be a detective ever since I was assigned to learn about Inspector Zed Johnson in elementary school for a report."

"He's a washed-up old man. He couldn't handle the action Seattle's seen."

"I wouldn't know about that. If this case involves—you know who— then, how could we possibly match up to Zed? There were so many stories between their escapades. And he's only caught her once!"

"I'd keep that type of talk to yourself if I were you," for her sake, he checks around for a Grigori watchman on patrol looking for trouble. Without a care, he tosses the newspaper in the street's gutter. "I'll fill you in on the situation when we are *in* my office."

"What are we waiting for? She hurries ahead of him.

"You have a lot of energy, spry kid."

Detective Jones considered leaving her at home with her parents. Grace promised to not disrupt his business if he kept her on board. What she does not know is that he

is financially incapable of canceling her apprenticeship. He was paid generously in advance by her mother, so Grace can begin her career. They saved enough money to pay the expenses for a career path under the Grigori Empire, and still have enough to pay him. For him, it is easy money. And easy money has its price. That price for him is listening to youthful banter every workday.

As he picks up his pace, he realizes he is not much bothered by having her around. One look at Grace takes him back to his days of youth. Three generations apart, her great grandmother, or as the Grigori would say, her eldermother, attended high school with him. Jones and Grace's eldermother graduated the same year. They hardly spent time together there, since she preferred trying to fit in with her White blonde friend and the *popular* clique they made. But if there is anything good he remembered about her, it was that she had a grin that made him feel sunny inside. It seems Grace inherited more than her eldermother's curly hair and the way she stylized it in a top knot bun.

They first enter the waiting room of his building. The walls are bland and void of tasteful décor. A few awards presented by the Grigori for a few minor cases solved are hung on the wall. A few dusty seats line up against the wall near the entrance as if they ever received more than one client at a time. Simple, tidy, unobstructed. It is exactly the way Detective Walter Jones likes it.

The receptionist sitting at the desk next to his office

door felt the exact opposite about the office's look. Out of respect for his name being on the lease, only her desk is decorated the way she prefers it. Lots of family pictures, statues and toys, and trinkets received as gifts. If it were up to her, the entire building would be decorated using the styling tips of the home decor magazines that she saved from oblivion. Her design would be considered old fashioned now, but it would be exactly the way she loves it.

"No need for introductions," Jones greets his receptionist. "Any calls or messages?"

"No need, indeed!" she hugs the familiar newcomer. "Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

"Hello, Auntie Shawna. I explained to Mister Turner I am working with Jones on this case. He gave me the week off."

"Wow! Kids are growing up faster than ever, huh? It feels like yesterday when I was visiting your elderparents, watching you in your children's jumpsuit and then growing into your Brown-Slacks. Now, look at you! Twenty-whatever years young and owning that Blue-Tie. Sometimes I wish time could move slower."

Jones groans. "Don't coddle her. She's a grown woman."

Grace notes to herself the irony in the last part of Jones' statement. It does not take a detective to know the adults in her life treat her like a child, sometimes excruciatingly. Although Shawna's coddling comes from a place of familiarity, Jones' indifference is a part of his personality. Her neighborhood may have known Jones

long enough to learn about his attitude, but he is unchanged by the neighbors' vocal opinions on him. If she were as outspoken as Jones, she would speak up for herself during confrontation. Her timid nature and the need for the private investigation apprenticeship holds her back.

"Um." Hoping to change the subject, Grace looks at Shawna's outfit, and says, "When do you think I could upgrade to one of those fancy silver ones you have underneath that sapphire blazer?"

"When you quit your day job working inside that automobile factory and come work for us. Our independent workers' union the Gray-Overalls will hook you up."

"Now, wait a minute!" Jones reminds her, "We already discussed this. There is no permanent position for you. I could barely afford to keep Shawna. If we couldn't afford to hire her son to work around here for cheap, we definitely can't hire minimum wage for anyone unrelated by blood."

"Hush, Jones!" Shawna sat back to her desk to start a print job. "She's dreamt this ever since she was a child. And to think she found her way in by manufacturing vehicles shows how much you both have in common."

"I don't pay you to recruit competition in the making."

"She won't be competition if she is working alongside you."

He asks, "Any calls, Shawna?"

"No more than the calls you had a few minutes ago. No calls. Who are you expecting?"

“Barney Turner. The old lady that came in a few days ago. And the Queen of England.”

“And who?!” Grace curiously looks at both of them.

“You’re too young, sweetie. You wouldn’t get the joke. He’s acting sarcastic with me again. There’s only one king now. No Queen of anything anymore.”

“I have a terrible sense of humor,” Jones says. “But having more than a few of clients at a time would be enough to make me laugh.”

“Woah!” Grace peeked at Shawna’s desk, seeing a framed photograph of a couple. “Is that you and Mister Hatfield? With an afro?”

“I would hope so. He would be jealous if I had another man’s picture in front of me while I worked. We were so young back then.”

“You literally look like you haven’t aged a day,” Grace says, embarrassed for pointing out that fact.

“No Eternals ever look like they age.” Shawna picks up the picture frame. “But it doesn’t mean we don’t feel like we’re aging. Hatty used to call me his Nubian Queen. After so long, you start to question what words really mean. I may look no different than that day, yet, I do not feel the same.”

“You look beautiful anyhow!” Grace gives her a grin, knowing how sensitive some Eternals can be about the passage of time.

Grace’s eldermother was the one to explain to her what it meant to be Eternal. Eternals are a Grigori term for a group of people who were gifted with immortality and born after the dawn of the Grigori Empire. Her



eldermother remembers that day being on the summer solstice of the year 2020. For anyone else to receive the gift, there are only two ways. A person must live a worthy life in the eyes of the Grandmaster to be blessed by his will. Or, the more common method, an Eternal must surrender their soul, the source of their eternal life, to the person they desire living forever.

The appearance of a first-generation Eternal is locked at the age of when the Grandmaster's magic took effect. Her eldermother may have looked twenty-four years old, but she was ready to move on from life. Her eldermother decided to trade her soul, voyaging to one of a few particular islands where all Eternals go to give up their life. To whom she gave the gift of eternal life, no one knows. Having met so many loved ones, it was a burden to pick only one. Grace imagined her proud eldermother demanding to give it to her whole bloodline.

As Grace grew older over the past ten years, she knew it was not so. She believes it is best that way. To never grow up could be a terrible experience. Although a next-generation Eternal is almost assured of locking at the age they were supposed to die naturally, she is glad to see signs of aging. The wrinkles on her face from stressing over her university's exams are such a sign. Grace believes being born and growing up to live a good, full life is the best gift her eldermother could ever give her.

Before entering his office, Detective Jones reminds Shawna to not bother Grace with any questions about the

case. Shawna does not argue about him withholding the case details, for now, and offers Grace a cup of coffee and a freshly printed, filled-out order form. When Grace is done for the day, she can use it at a local store to redeem an official journal to record her findings and other supplies. Grace thanks her with another hug before shutting the door to the office tight.

Hatfields' and Jones' office room is separated into two sides by an invisible but respected boundary. Each side has a desk with two chairs in front and behind that look cheap, but are durable enough to last another half-century of sitting. On the walls they own for themselves, awards granted to the detective spearheading the case are pinned. On the walls they share, related newspaper clippings active to a case are tacked to a cork bulletin board. There are only two glaring differences between their sides of the room. Jones' side has his futon, and his partner has the file cabinet holding their cases. Some cases solved, some cases unsolved, some cases solved that remain unsolved, and some cases unsolved that remain solved.

His partner's desk has been empty for almost a few days now. Detective Jones hardly slept last night. How could he sleep? Seattle's most trusted Guardian confessed to the missing detective, his partner in business. Until he is safe again, these days and nights investigating will feel restless.

"You can sit on the futon if you like," Jones offered, "But don't put your feet up. I have to sleep there."

Grace sits at the chair in front of his desk, her hands

folded, arms stiff. “So, what was she like?”

“Believe it or not,” Jones continues a sketch he worked on earlier today, “Shawna used to be happier and far more energetic. Like you. That is before the Grigori arrived. They forced her husband to work and then their son when he came of age.”

“Um. I already know that.” She shook her head. “Paz de la Marina. What was she like?”

“Could hardly tell the difference. Except for one thing. The Grigori did the impossible. They broke Serena Paz de la Marina. She can still put up a fight when she needs to, but she’s as helpless as the rest of us.”

“That’s a disappointment. Was she any help to the case?”

“That’s an understatement. She *is* the case.”

Detective Jones turned on the radio and tuned to the station playing jazz music. With the ears of the wall unable to listen in, he described the night exactly how it happened.

Grace could not believe Serena Paz could kill them. Even in self-defense. It betrays her elderparent’s stories. Then again. She is the Siren. She voices her honest doubts and fears to her mentor. Fortunately, Detective Jones agrees with her about Siren not killing them.

“So, now what?” Grace questions.

“Putting that conflict between her character and public image aside, I bet the singer is hiding them somewhere,” Detective Jones affirms his speculation to his apprentice. “But something does not add up about their

disappearance,” he taps his pencil on the sketch. “My partner and that lieutenant of Seattle are part of the Resistance. According to her, that Resistance did not bother to invite a Guardian to the fight. And judging by what she implied about the Siren’s Kiss, both of them had no intention to invite her to that Resistance. They would not have tried to kill her if they wanted to invite her. That being said, she is the only person who last saw my partner and the lieutenant. If anyone threatened a Guardian like her, she would not let that person get away with it.”

Grace looks confused. “So? We are taking her word on the case!”

“We have to consider every angle, kid. That’s what good detectives do. And here is the angle. de la Marina claims they tried to kill her at the Triangle Saloon. Suppose that is true. de la Marina is obviously alive, so what is the logical thing for her to do? There are three outcomes. If they were let go without punishment, then we hit a dead end. That means de la Marina either hid them or killed them. If we can prove both outcomes wrong, then we can move on in another direction. If at least one of them is right, mystery solved. But I seriously doubt she killed them.”

“Ah!” She understands his logic. “Let’s hope it’s the outcome where she hid them.”

“Me too.” Detective Jones adds, “de la Marina may have a strong conviction, but she is only playing *femme fatale*. For Hatfield’s sake, we have to bet that she is lying about killing them. But if at least half of what she says is true, then her life is in danger. She was almost killed

twice. And it's no coincidence both alleged assassins are from the Resistance. That begs the question. Grace, you're also from the Resistance and its automobile factory. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Um." She feels she was put into an awkward situation with that question. "Remember? You wanted me on this case because I was an insider with the Resistance. You told me that here in the office before you left for the Triangle Saloon! Why would I kill her?"

"Aside from making a mystery involving a Guardian your debut case? How do I know for sure you are not involved?"

"Oh, come on! You were so caring to help me launch my independent career! And you had to have trusted me to involve me with this case. I could have taken on any other unsolved case fit for an apprentice, such as the machinery vandals of Fremont Technologies."

"Unsolved only because the case was dropped," he mutters.

"Furthermore, you have known my family for ages. We have known the Hatfield's as long as you. I could not go through with killing anyone. Neither can Mister Hatfield." She ponders, remembering what it means to be in a Resistance. "Hopefully, we would never have to kill. But under dire circumstances, I suppose we would have to. That is to say, only if circumstance prompted it." She considers another scenario that popped in her head. "What if Hatfield was forced to kill? If that was the situation, I would leave a trail of clues for my innocence if I were Hatfield."

Detective Jones leans forward with a smirk of intrigue.

Grace relates her breadcrumb theory to the clues leading to Serena Paz. Although they already discussed these events last night, Grace hopes putting it in context can ease him into thinking how Hatfield left traces of his whereabouts intentionally.

First, the note Jones found on his desk the morning before his disappearance, a breadcrumb meant for Jones to find. He read it after Hatfield sent him to grab a box of doughnuts. The message on the note:

*Gone Fishing! Be Back Soon, Buddy! - Arthur Hatfield*

Jones found a few things suspicious about that note. As he already mentioned to Grace, Hatfield always tells him in person when he is going fishing and would never leave in the middle of a workday. Hatfield also never leaves a note behind. If that were not enough, Hatfield never refers to himself as Arthur and never called Jones *buddy*.

Next breadcrumb, Hatfield's son catching him at the Triangle Saloon that evening. Although Jones considers it a clue, Grace insists on calling it a breadcrumb. Grace told Jones yesterday that she was downtown with Ezra, Hatfield's son, when they saw Mister Hatfield carrying a suitcase. They followed him to the Triangle Saloon but lost him in the halls of its hotel. Ezra does not visit the Triangle Saloon as often ever since it became a brothel. He found it strange since his father was supposed to be fishing if not on duty with him for the Resistance. He would have been more discreet, like wearing a disguise *before* walking through the hotel's doors, if he really did not want to be caught.

The last breadcrumb, the passphrase in the trash bin, took the most effort to find. Detective Jones was on his way to investigate his partner's home office while it was empty until Grace's mother hailed him down the street. She took him to her home to discuss an arrangement for Grace's apprenticeship. After a few hours of debate, he agreed and brought Grace along when she returned from work that evening. Now that Shawna was home, Detective Jones needed a distraction. Grace treated Shawna out for a dinner date at a local restaurant, giving Detective Jones ample time to search Hatfield's home office. He found a passphrase in the trash bin.

*Please restock the fridge with a drink and Siren's Kiss.*

Those phrases written on a torn piece of an advertisement for Serena Paz's upcoming performance would make incomplete sense without the Triangle Saloon in context. After Jones and Grace adjourned their meeting, Jones took the rest of the night to wait at the bar. He ordered his drink and waited until midnight for Serena Paz de la Marina to finally make her appearance. By purest luck or Hatfield's intention, she is the culprit.

"Took you long enough," Detective Jones cracks his knuckles, "Your mother was right. You got it in you. Looks like you're learning."

Grace is relieved. "You don't really think I have anything to do with it?"

Detective Jones laughs. "I trust you both. If you are as innocent as Hatfield, then you couldn't harm a fly. It makes me wonder why he even joined the Resistance in the first place. Turner only told me about the Resistance's

existence when he came to me to tell me that my partner and the lieutenant is missing. He needed help finding them and had no one else to turn to. The Resistance raises a lot of questions for me.”

“I trust you. And I trust them,” Grace says, confidently. “We are all in the same boat, now that we are all connected to the Resistance somehow. But I am concerned that the lieutenant and Hatfield are involved in this case. What do we do now?”

“More detective work,” Detective Jones cracks his knuckles. “He should know how to cover his tracks. He’s a detective! Hatfield is getting sloppy. On purpose. Now that we are on the same page, how about we find what’s going on with the Resistance? They may provide a clue as to why Hatfield is involved in this mess.”

Before they press on, they leave to handle business. Planning to return in time for their lunch break, Jones asks Shawna if she would like the tuna melt that she usually orders. She requests a salad instead. Her appetite is readying for when her husband comes back from his fishing trip today since he always brings home the bigger fishes. Expecting him at home tonight, Shawna is oblivious to the possibility that her husband may never come back.





Not far from their office, another privately owned business towers over Downtown Seattle. The Triangle Saloon, a thirteen-story hotel, was once highly regarded for its high-quality service. With its former merit came a burdening expectation of yielding to heavy taxation and codes of conduct, setting an example for the rest of the city. As of this past year, not even the regular taxman bothers questioning their declining integrity.

Reigning over its residents high above in the penthouse, tired Serena Paz awakens under a thick number of blankets from a short slumber. She pushes them off to sit up on her knees and contemplate as if kneeling in prayer. Every morning she is greeted by thoughts of how her day will turn out. It always ends the same, back under the covers.

Letting out a solemn sigh, she parts the drapes to see the day through. A bit chilly this morning, so the robe on the floor by the closet finds its way to cover her icy, cold

back. As she is about to leave the bedroom, she notices the portrait that she remembers hiding away in the closet recently. She takes it off the wall again, putting it face down on the floor.

She enters the bathroom from the living room, hoping a hot shower can warm her soul.



Grace has already told Detective Walter Jones why she joined the Resistance. Detective Jones has not forgotten. For the sake of establishing her innocence, she repeated it again over breakfast at the nearest café.

The Resistance was founded after the recent, lingering economic downturn. More people are losing their jobs, and as a result, are becoming starving and homeless. More people live in fear of a wrathful Grandmaster lashing out due to their administration's negligence. Every

day, Seattlites are suffering, unhelped by the Grigori.

The people are fed up with the way Seattle is managed. They are taking back their city, and if their demands are not met, their resistance will reach out to the greater state of Pacifica. If they fail, then they will leave behind a legacy with a lasting impact.

Grace found the letter of invitation hidden by her parents. They did not know what to make of the instructions. However, they recognized the Crimson Hood's insignia as a threat to the status quo. They have faith in their system. In memory of her eldermother's dead hopes of one day living in Seattle revitalized to its former glory, Grace, on her own, followed through with the instructions.

With that said, Grace remembers to keep quiet about the Siren when talking with the Resistance.

As a fighter of the Resistance, she is to report to headquarters at least once a day. Detective Jones joins her today to gather his own insight on their operations. She is well-known by the rest of her fellow Resistance soldiers as an amateur but enjoyable company. The tough shaggy-haired brute standing at the gates of the warehouse recognizes her instantly, allowing her entry without a specialized identification card on hand.

Detective Jones gives him his business card, "Your boss, Barney Turner, hired me to run an investigation for him. Missing persons from your Resistance. They were also employees of this warehouse. And, Turner told me everything he knows about the Resistance, so, no need to

worry about holding any secrets from me.”

“We don’t like snoops. They’re nothing but high-class rats,” the brute grunts.

“I’m not with the Grigori if that’s what you’re thinking. Never believed in serving for a country that is not representing you as an individual. Never believed in kings of the world. That is why I work with the city. That is how the real crooks stay in prison and the innocents out of prison.”

“Militarized city government means militarized city workers. If you are not with us, you are with them. I witnessed personally how your investigations help the Grigori, Detective Jones.”

“But what about my partner, Hatfield? We are in the same business and worked on almost every case together. You let him in, right?”

The security watchman grunts.

That did not work as planned. The security watchman is one who cannot be tricked nor bought. Not even Jones could not get him to budge with logic. When Detective Jones showed him a letter with the Crimson Hood’s insignia, he grunted again and continued blocking entry.

Leina, a tall and fit woman, serving as the entire eyes and ears of the warehouse, observed her companion and Detective Jones. She groans to herself, hurrying to the gates.

“What are you doing, Lance?” She taps the security watchman’s elbow, finally getting him to move. “Detective Jones, I am Leina.” She shakes the detective’s hand. “Sorry about that. I gave him strict orders not to let

anyone in without a worker's ID."

"Got to respect a watchman with that kind of attitude," Detective Jones says. "A real immovable object when push comes to shove."

Leina laughs softly. "He tends to blow up when he gets into fist-fights. So, thank you for not getting into one with him."

"I'm not much of a fighting person. So, I doubt a fight with me would be much of a blast." Detective Jones has not entered yet. He shows her the letter with Crimson Hood's insignia. It was signed by Mister Turner, granting Hatfield & Jones Investigation Agency entry to the Turner Automobiles warehouse.

"Mister Turner told me to expect you at anytime. Follow me. I'll freely answer any questions you might have." Before setting off, Leina instructs Lance, "Aside from Detective Jones, do not allow anyone else to enter unless they have this warehouse's ID."

Lance nods his head. "Yes, ma'am."

Detective Jones and Grace follow Leina's lead.

Leina warns him as they approach closer to the warehouse doors, "Your brief, but significant, career investigating under the Grigori Empire made a lasting impression on some of us. Made it hard to get away with some things over the last ten years. But most of the soldiers of our Resistance are probably thankful for your contributions in making Seattle safer."

"I wouldn't put it that way. I serve the people of Seattle, not necessarily the Grigori Empire," Detective Jones replies. "Some of my clients happen to come from

the offices of the State or are Seattle's elites. Whatever they need investigating, I investigate. And right now, I am investigating this Resistance."

She hesitates taking him any further. "Under whose inquiry?"

"My own. I need to learn more about the Resistance and the goals its people are expecting to achieve. Like any good investigator, I have to question why the lieutenant would go missing now."

"Fair enough. But please do not say anything to our soldiers about anyone going missing. We need to keep morale high."

Leina escorts Detective Jones and Grace around their headquarters. The state of Grigori Seattle suspects they are only manufacturing vehicles. Any industry inspector from the Space Needle must have been fooled into thinking it is a typical large factory. The workflow of the Resistance happens at the ground level, where most of the workers are lined-up, utilizing the machinery to construct and assemble pieces of the weapons for the impending revolt. The upper levels are office spaces reserved for minuscule, but essential clerical tasks. Some of the other workers are manufacturing vehicle parts, a clever ploy as proof of industrial output while strategically matching the Grigori's military Humvee. Anyone else not putting their hands to use roam around on their break, bonding to become blood-brethren over their lives that they will give up for Seattle.

"As you can see," Leina says, "all our people are Seattle folk alike. Rich elites and poorer citizens. Former

Grigori soldiers and Resistance fighters. We all want a free Seattle, or at least our living conditions to change. I hope the tour puts any doubts about us aside, Detective Jones. Mister Turner must have full trust in you to do this for us without telling the Grigori. Bring our soldiers back alive and well for the fight. That is all I ask of you.”

“Speaking of Mister Turner, where is your boss anyway?” Detective Jones asked. “I honestly did not feel like knocking on every door up there. I would like to speak with him ASAP about the case. It might help us find your *soldiers* faster.”

“He’s no boss of mine. I’m in charge. He offered us his business as a front for our headquarters. Nothing more. And I’d bring down his office door for you, but he is not in his office right now. And when he usually is in his office, he does not want to be disturbed.”

“How do you coordinate anything with him?”

“He shares information with us at his will.” Leina turns away, staring at the office door upstairs. “The price for a good hideout, I suppose. We have total control of the workshop floor. All he asks for is his privacy in return.”

“Hah,” Jones laughed dryly. “At a bargain that good, who can resist using a Grigori-owned warehouse as their hideout? Doesn’t that sound too good to be true? Not strange at all?”

“You should already know he is a good-willed person toward this community. Everyone here is a good person. And everyone here has something to lose if we fail. It is always a matter of trust. And, frankly, if he wants to lose

that Violet blazer and the Grigori trust that comes with it, he can go right ahead and rat the Resistance out. It is too late for us all to turn back now.”

“So, tell me.” Detective Jones asks, “How vital are these two people for your operation? Could you strike without them?”

“I am unsure what Lieutenant Taylor had in place if he went missing. We are dependent on Seattle’s Army reinforcing our movement. Although Barney Turner vowed to take the fall for organizing and leading the rebellion, I know better to know that it is Lieutenant Taylor doing the heavy work. It is through his awareness of our late-night activity that he can report nothing unusual to his superiors. It is because of him we can transport the material we need without raising suspicion. It is because of him that we will have an army to stand up against the Grigori.”

Members of the Resistance overhearing that conversation applauded and cheered.

“What about Hatfield?” Detective Jones asks. “And who disappeared first?”

“He was the first. I should have known something was going wrong when he did not check in with us. Your friend, Hatfield, he is as vital. Without common people like us willing to rebel and show their dissatisfaction with the state of society, what good would any of this do? The Seattle Army would have nothing to fight for.”

“And you think the entire Seattle Army will have your back?” asked Detective Jones.

“Of course not. Only the good-hearted soldiers.”



Jones and Grace finished their tour of the Resistance stronghold. Leaving into the streets of Seattle, they talk far away from bystanders' ears. Grace is confident that the Resistance is only up to good. The friendly faces bearing weapons were not those of killers. They were all neighbors to those in Seattle. The only time they picked up a gun was when Bard, a self-proclaimed right-hand man of the Crimson Hood, demonstrated how to handle it.

Detective Jones tells Grace that they avoided interviewing them with questions relating to the Siren to isolate the problem at hand. He will explain more to her later.

"I never understood why they haven't locked her away," Grace wonders aloud. "I don't have anything against her. But isn't she a threat to them?"

"They must've left that out of your history class. If there was a school around here that taught real history, you would know that the Guardians, and anyone like those local rebels we met earlier, were pardoned for their misdeeds. A gift from the big man in charge, in gratitude for preventing a coup of the crown. Or a twisted act of spite."

"*Coo?*" Grace imagines a rooster as a king.

"A takeover. That's what a coup is," he answers her question.

"Oh."

Detective Jones continues, "The point is that some took it as a clear sign to give up and accept the world as it

is now. Fate could've been worse. So, they settled down. Then there are few who didn't see this as a blessed opportunity. They keep fighting a war they can't win."

Grace thinks aloud. "Paz, the Siren, settled down. So far, she poses no threat to the Grigori." She speculates, "Maybe her performance for Commander Silverpace's celebration in a few days is not as farfetched as I believed. Still, why does everyone safely assumes that she will not harm the Grandmaster? She's tried to kill him before."

"Rumor has it, she saved his life." He speculates as well, "I wouldn't bet on the big guy attending the jubilee, though. But those are rumors as well."

Back at the office of Hatfield & Jones Investigation Agency, with the radio turned on, Grace considers a scenario. Two men join the Resistance. They walk into a bar on different days this week, Sunday and Monday. They each order the same drink for an intimate experience with a reclusive woman. Siren kills both men in her penthouse.

Then she reconsiders. Likening it to a bad joke with no punchline, she realizes there may be no motive for Paz de la Marina aside from self-defense. Her elderparents must be rolling over their eternal graves at her soiling the image of their hero. Grace feels ashamed.

Detective Walter Jones teaches her to objectively face the facts. Two men are from the Resistance. They walk into a bar on different days this week, Sunday and Monday. They each order the same drink coded for an

intimate experience with a reclusive woman. The men are missing after meeting with de la Marina. On Tuesday afternoon, Resistance associate Barney Turner contacted Jones of Hatfield & Jones in person about a missing detective and a lieutenant of Seattle. An essential man from the Grigori army and vital to the Resistance is missing.

“So, Hatfield went to go look for him?” she hypothesized. “Hatfield was aware the lieutenant went missing and must’ve been asked personally by Turner to look for him. Being in the Resistance, he did not want to fill you in on what he was up to. But then he went missing himself.”

“The only problem with that theory, Grace, is something I started wondering as well. At first, I didn’t think order played a part in this, and neither did Turner when he called me. She told me the detective visited her first. And then one of the lieutenants of Seattle. Hatfield went missing first! De la Marina’s motives for kidnappings may not be depriving a very important person, such as Lieutenant Taylor, from Seattle’s Army. No offense to Hatfield, of course.”

“So, what theory can we work with?”

“If we are considering all angles, then we will need to work through all our theories. We might need to isolate all the players and consider all facts and motives associated with them. Right now, we have at least five players: Barney Turner, Hatfield, the lieutenant, the Resistance, and the Siren.”

“If I got to be honest with you, Jones, it sounds like

you are working on a hunch.”

“This is the angle that I like the least. If we rule out de la Marina’s claim, then at least we may have Hatfield alive. But if any part of her claim is true, then there is something deeper going on.”

Grace asks with a hesitation in her voice. “This is no longer only a missing persons case, is it?”

“Still too early to say much on that. But in this city, it usually is never only a missing persons case.”



Serena Paz leaves the bathroom, steam trailing behind her. She tightens the strap of her robe around her waist while walking to her dressing room, the gallery room before the staircase. Not in the mood to stare into her reflection, Serena Paz instead grabs the brush on the mirror and sits on the green sofa. She is not prepared for

her morning until she brushes her hair to the rhythm of her humming. Once she is deep in song, she ponders over a disturbing question.

*Why would an innocent woman like you want to own an entire floor of a corrupted place such as this?*

# Chapter 1

## Remorseful Requiem

The year is 2101. Maria Hernandez has finally arrived in Seattle, Pacifica.

She is astonished by how little this part of the city itself has changed. The infamous Space Needle, still standing, now looms higher than she remembers. If anyone is allowed up there, they could see overgrowth stopping at every inch of the city limits. Nothing else pivotal to the national identity of the city has been tampered with by Grigori or Mother Nature.

She does not dwell on childhood memories for long. Down on her luck and feeling the blues, Maria Hernandez searches for a place she could call home again.

Maria Hernandez is but an alter-ego in disguise from anyone who can remember her. To hide her hair usually styled into an energetic ponytail or a sophisticated bun, she let her long hair down. Unwilling to cut her signature bangs, she wears a sunhat with a white rose. Makeup temporarily removes the birthmark under her left eye. For an extra measure of privacy, sunglasses cover her recognizable bright sea-green eyes. As if wearing a long black coat was not enough, under that she wears a red scarf. It covers her brown chest, concealing her branded mark and a freezing heart.

Carrying only a purse, she trudges through the city in her dust-stained, short cut combat boots.

Maria Hernandez considers temporarily moving back into the home that once belonged to her mother. It was a home she could go back to for anything. That was a century ago when it was her home.

Reluctance sets in at the thought of nothing to be found. Long ago, the Guardian called Siren sent her Mamá to the stars during the Evacuation. Without her alive on Earth, any remaining mementos they did not salvage will always be nothing but memories.

Maria Hernandez chooses to remember a day in that lake house. With her Mamá's constant lecturing, she grew up open-minded. Therefore, she must keep her mind open and take the chance of rediscovering the city of her former home. Maria Hernandez carries on without a care whether or not it is empty and whether or not it is pointless. Despite her Mamá's etiquette teachings, she will kick down that door if she has to.

Still, doubtfulness consumes her hope.

After visiting the city hall— located at the base of the Space Needle— Maria Hernandez walks miles south. She walks past awkward stares from the color-coded, uniformed citizens.

Hoping to escape their quiet judgment, she is relieved to take a break at a run-down, thirteen-story flat-iron building. She remembers the path from the Space Needle to the abandoned flat-iron. Without a doubt in her heart, this is the flat-iron she is looking for. She promises herself

to spend at least ten minutes before moving on. And no more than that. After all, Maria never breaks a promise.

Nothing inside is as she remembers. Dust collected over what should be polished floors. Posters of medical information and motivating images have been left behind. Trash and rubble from broken walls and fixtures are leftovers from a renegade battle in Seattle. Other mementos are left behind by the workers that moved to the general hospital closer to the center of the city.

At least the bar stools are still there. Maria Hernandez takes the seat at what became a receptionists' counter. The weary traveler takes off her shades so she can lie her weary, wayward head on the counter.

She yearns to cry. Her pride in keeping an unforgotten vow prevents her from doing so. As always, her tears are held back with an unnatural force. To compensate, she lets out a groan of frustration and remorse.

“Ah! Monster!” shrieked a red-headed, white man from behind the counter.

As she was about to store her shades in her pocket, Maria Hernandez drops them to the floor, gasping loudly. From the hand over her chest, a rose vine wrapped around her arm extends its thorns.

“I’m sorry.” The man could breathe again, feeling relieved. “You’re no monster. I think.” He looks at the thorny vine, following it to the white rose on her sunhat. “Wow! A real mage?! Here?! You look more startled than me! You caught me at a bad time. I woke up from a nap.”

She is no mage. She was not about to tell the man that either.



“I am sorry for disturbing your sleep,” she hides her vine-covered arm. “I should be going now.”

“Wait! Since you’re here, can you buy a drink?”

Her white rose’s thorns retract.

The man grabs a bottle of rum, delicately pouring the brown liquid into a pint shot glass. He puts the bottle down and pushes the glass to her.

She takes the bottle and pays him fairly for it. He hopes she will be a usual customer. He thinks the extra Grigori money she put back in her purse looks like they could use a new friend.

Maria Hernandez uses the time drinking to study the man. He is in a dirty tee-shirt and wine-stained jeans. Unlike his clothes, the shave of his face makes him look clean and presentable enough. He seems humble and respectful, but she does not trust him completely. They are the same height, and she is sitting down. Lunging at him with a broken bottle is overkill. As thin and lightweight as he looks, he cannot physically overpower her.

“Don’t down the whole bottle yet!” He raises his pint glass. “A toast!”

She stops drinking, raising an eyebrow. “What are we toasting to?”

“To life’s many surprises! To you, my first customer!”

The young man’s name is Arman Rousseau. He lived in Wine Country his entire life at his family’s vineyard. Like his grandparents, who saw the opportunity to claim an unowned vineyard, he took the opportunity to buy the cheapest property in Seattle to start his first bar.

She takes smaller sips to savor the rest of the bottle, forgetting about her ten-minute promise. “Why did you and your family stay behind?”

“I wasn’t born yet. But my *grand-mère*, my grandmother, was there during the launch! She saw the Grigori in the sky and decided it was best to stay away from the Ark.”

“Peculiar.” Looking into his eyes, Maria Hernandez laughed under her breath. “I suppose your grandmother took an emergency abort shuttle back to California?”

“Yes! It’s been called Luzifornia for a while now, actually.”

“I am not calling it that. I would rather call it North California than that.”

“Okay! North California! Anyways, my *grand-mère* condoned their actions, she did hope the Guardians would deliver justice and stop the destruction eventually.”

“Stupid gamble.”

“It worked out for us!” He grins.

“Not for everyone else.”

After the Rousseaus competed vigorously, they wound up buying out all the other vineyards. Their financial empire was noticed by the Grigori and made them an offer they could not refuse. They retired with coats of violet given to the notably esteemed elites at the cost of their life’s work. He was told that for over half a century, their imports were renowned in international trade, making their property an eye for both the Grigori Empire and the United Allies.

He sighs, “*Quelle chance!* I hope someday I too can earn

my very own Violet blazer.”

“Never worked a day in her life again.” Maria Hernandez pitied the old woman in his story. “Can you tell me where she is now?”

“*Grand-mère* does what everyone else with Eternal life does. They give up their soul for paradise. She and *grand-père* left behind a fortune and some other stuff to split between the two of us.”

“Two of you?”

“My sister and I.”

“You both should have stuck together. Why leave beautiful California for dreary Seattle? You had it made.”

“The Grigori and Guardian conflict may have ended, but all of us regular people always wanted to get out of there alive. Being on the border of the state isn’t pretty! I don’t want to get killed in the crossfire! I’d rather live in a safer place. No place safer than Seattle, since Guardians never come here!”

She does not say anything.

“My sister believed we should venture out. Expand our businesses. She went to France, and I here. Someday, when we know things have gotten better, we hope to return back home with more knowledge.”

“I understand. It is wisdom you want to return home with. And safety you want to return to. What about your parents?”

“That’s nothing I’d worry about. Right now, I am keeping my focus on this bar. It’s going to be the best! I’ll make them proud!”

Maria Hernandez started paying closer attention to

people's wording. He does not want to talk about his parents. For a reason she suspects, she does not push him to reveal any more information further. However, she would feel worse if she leaves his woes unsettled.

"I have never seen you around here before. I've been living in this old hospital for a year, going out to town for supplies. But I never have seen you. Are you from around here?"

"I am a woman of the world. Yet, we are all born somewhere. The place I called my home was first built as the Triangle Bar and Hotel. Then it was a pub. And then a lounge." She sighs heavily. "I already feel welcomed back. Thank you."

"This place?" He looks around. "I suppose I could see it as a hotel. How long have you been gone from home?"

The place she called home had not received a visit from her in about eighty years. She was born twenty years before that last visit, born in 1996. Around that time, the establishment was renamed the Triangle Sports Lounge. As a young girl, she watched sports on the television sets while eating in the rock 'n roll themed diner. She ran down the red-carpet halls, causing mischief for all her neighbors and paying guests. After closing time, she would pretend to order the most elegant wine while sitting at the bar counter that she now sits at almost a century later.

Maria Hernandez tells him nothing. She turns away from looking Arman in the eye.

Without caring if his question will ever be answered, he changes the subject. “Do you have anywhere to stay?” He asks.

“Do not worry about me. You are the one sleeping in an abandoned hospital.”

“Not for long.” He feels more hopeful. “Your short story has inspired me. I would like my own *Triangle Sports Lounge*. That will bring people here! Business can finally boom!”

She digs in her purse. “If you are going to make it in Grigori Seattle, you are going to need to fix this place. And you cannot do that without capital. I want you to take this.”

Maria Hernandez gives him more Grigori money than he could afford to pay back. Although Arman is humbled by her generous donation, he kindly declines it.

For those barely meeting Maria Hernandez, they will soon learn in time that she will not let a good deed go undone or let the opportunity to make things right slip through her grasp.

“My money not good enough for you?!” she asks.

“You are handing a random stranger more than he can accept. My *grand-mère* would never accept a handout she did not work for.”

“Then work for it! It is an investment! Spend it wisely to grow the bar into the one in your dreams!”

Arman has a better idea. “We can be partners. You and me. Imagine how much we can make, starting with all this capital of yours! Three times fold, at least!”

“I would not give you this much money if I felt the

money was good for anything besides helping others. Besides that, I do not care about money. So, take it!”

He spaced out, most likely envisioning their future. “Tell me more about the Triangle Sports Lounge. Together, we can make the hotel from your past! What do you say— say, I never got your name.”

“I never gave you my name.”

“Who are you?”

She is reluctant. She planned to give the name she gave to everyone else. After getting to the know red-haired young man, she felt no reason to lie. The truth shall set her free.

“I am Serena Paz de la Marina. But you can call me Paz.”

Arman shudders, looking back at *the* White Rose. “Siren? The Guardian? Here? I didn’t think you were actually real. Only another story from my *grand-mère*.”

“Here I am. In the flesh. Lived in Grigori territory your entire life, have you not, child? The stories they tell of me make your skin crawl, huh?” She cackles “Sharp Fangs. Scaly skin. Feathered knives for claws. And eyes that stare deep into your soul, if I have not already consumed it.”

Arman does not back down.

“When the Siren gives you a gift, you take it without refusal.” She clanks his shot glass with her bottle. “A toast to a long, wonderful stay in Seattle. Be the best you can be. Decide whether you will give the people what they want or what they need. If you want a future here, then give them what they want. But if you are brave enough to

give them what they need, then bring back the past.”

Arman is left alone with the money and her haunting advice. He watches her walk out the door with nothing in hand but an empty bottle.

Maria Hernandez lets the door close behind her. She thinks about what happened a moment ago. Did she come off as too scary? So scary that he will move back to Wine Country? Or if he was truly the type that never accepts a suspicious amount of money, would he return it to the Grigori, thinking it was stolen? Then she thinks about other things, letting her mind wander off.

What a crazy life.

She held two fingers to her temple. She lowers her thumb.

# Chapter 3

## Maria Hernandez

Anyone looking for a job can find city-approved, precinct-specific listings on the job boards posted in the many districts of Seattle. An alternative to doing random chores for others is to visit the employment office uptown, highly recommended by city officials for a stable income. For those who prefer reading newspapers, the *Emerald City Beacon* has a few pages dedicated to professional jobs in Seattle and Pacifica. For a Grigori citizen bred for work, they can find a job with little effort, unlike Maria Hernandez, who was already prepared to be disappointed but tried her luck.

No jobs for singers. No jobs for dancers. No jobs for actors. No jobs for performance instructors. It goes without saying that there are no jobs in Seattle requiring the skills of this Guardian.

She puts down her basket of food and her rolled-up copy of the *Emerald City Beacon*. Tired of searching, she rests lying down on the grass at a park under the warm sun. For her first day out in public within the city's center, she stowed away her sunglasses. Makeup covers the birthmark under her left eye. She wears the same long, black coat and the red scarf to cover the brand on her chest.

No one seems to recognize her. There are a few looks



here and there, a few curious whispers but no look of fear. Her disguise worked well enough.

The only person that talked to her up until now is a roaming patrol officer in a green uniform. She is told to get to work. He leaves her alone when she tells the patrol officer that she is an ordinary Brown-Slacks citizen on break.

She whispers to herself when the patrol officer is gone. “Been on the longest break. Over a year since I stopped being Siren. And already, I am going mad. Who do I think I am talking to?”

She fixes the red scarf, making sure it is still covering the mark on her chest. Then she places her hands over her heart. Maria, acting to her mood, feels the spirit to sing.

*Maria! O', Maria!  
What's in your head today?  
Mamá gonna need some cash  
If she wants to feed baby.  
Get your head out of the sky, Maria!  
Starving baby cannot play.  
Baby! Gotta dash!  
Hopefully, I win the lotto, maybe,  
So, you never have to cry, O' Maria!*

“Lovely voice.” The red-haired bartender stares down from above. “The lyrics weren’t that great. But your voice does make it sound better.”

“The boy from the bar.”

“I was hoping to find you here!” He sat beside her. “It’s been almost a month!”

“Give me one more week, and I would have completely forgotten your face.”

“Bad memory?”

“Not always,” she says, “but you try remembering a century worth of details without forgetting one thing. Not many alive today can do that, you know? Not that there were many alive before that could.”

Arman Rousseau had looked all around the city for the mysterious woman that entered town months ago. Visitors to any Grigori city are required to stop by the city’s headquarters and log their name and date of arrival for public records. Maria Hernandez was the name last recorded on the day of her visit to the bar. The receptionist matched her description to the name. But no one else in Seattle recognized or remembered her. Asking for her true name would result in a witch-hunt, which he was careful not starting. It was Maria Hernandez, and that name alone, he needed to pay back a loan.

When describing her, no one knew where the mysterious stranger that rode into town stayed. They figured she was a visitor until today when she was spotted carrying groceries into the park. Now he can settle his debt with her.

Maria Hernandez looked uninterested in hearing a word. Her eyes seemed preoccupied with sunlight sighting through the gray clouds until she addressed him.

“Have you not made any other friends you could bother with this?”

“Actually, no. It’s a little hard for me to make friends here for some reason. Please don’t misunderstand what I am about to say. Although they are friendly to me, they only greet me and leave it at that. Ever since that day, you are the only person I held a conversation with.”

“Feeling the Freeze already? I hate to do it to you too, but I got to tell you the truth. Especially since you put a lot of effort into finding me. Effort wasted. I have no interest in becoming your partner. I am okay with being alone.”

“How about a temporary partner? Until we make your money back?”

“No.”

Arman sees she is paying attention. He wonders if she is only uninterested in making money.

“Then, that means I have to pay you back. And there is a problem with that. I already spent most of it on supplies and contractors for renovation.”

“So, what?” She asks.

He answers, “I want to give the people what they need. And to do that, you told me to bring back the past. I want to make that Triangle Lounge exactly like you remember it! The people of Seattle will come in for a taste of nostalgia and stay for the drinks. Visitors from everywhere will need a place to rest, the hotel will provide exactly that! But to make that happen, I need you.”

“Nice pitch,” she rolls her eyes, a gesture signaling she is bothered by something someone said.

Although she meant that compliment to politely show her unenthusiasm, she reconsiders its ambiguous meaning

for her. Maria Hernandez strolled in Seattle without much left of a purpose. The Guardian Siren already tried to bring the past into the many domains she resided in. The Guardians tried and failed to help other cities change, so why should Seattle be any different? A better question she ponders, what if something can change?

Then another thought crosses her mind, this time, a feeling. A desire.

Her heart beats faster.

Her last chance. Opportunity is extending its hand. All she needs is to shake on it.

“Looks like the mountains are out.” Her face gleams with the sunbreak, a little ray of sunlight piercing through the clouds making her smiley grin glisten. “I have one condition for being a temporary partner. The penthouse is mine. I will include it in the contract I will write up, assuming you are not considering disavowing my generous loan.”

“What’s a penthouse?”

She laughs, unsure if he is serious. After staring him dead in the eye, she knows he is serious. “It’s the highest floor of your building. Just so we can establish some honesty, the penthouse of any hotel is meant to be a luxury suite. Although it is one less selling point for the business, having that as my home would mean everything to me. The money could not compare. The money would not matter.”

He considers her proposition only for a second. “I will pay you back in full, with interest, and give you this *penthouse* to live in. You can put that in your contract,

Paz.”

“Maria in public. Paz in private, someday. Ms. Hernandez, for now.”

Their deal is made.

The next morning, Maria Hernandez returns to the abandoned hospital with a paper contract and a pen.

Arman signs the contract, without bothering to read it. He simply fills in the lines where he is supposed to autograph, print his name and the date, and initial. He hands it to her.

“Are you seriously not going to read it all the way through?” Maria Hernandez questions his folly.

”Fine.” He skims through, skipping sentences and hands it back to her.

“You must read as fast as me,” Maria Hernandez shakes her head.

“How fast are you?”

“I do not bother keeping count of my words per minute anymore.”

He looks at her signing the contract, and comments. “Maria Hernandez. Will the Grigori allow you to use your alias? Is it illegal?”

“It is for anyone else. But the Grandmaster pardoned the Guardians. He gave us a letter as proof. It says I can use an alter-ego to start a new life in the Grigori Empire. Maria Hernandez is the name that I will use to start my new life.”

After they finish signing, he escort her up to her room. In advance, he apologizes for the broken elevator. Maria Hernandez does not mind, preferring the extra exercise more than riding the elevator anyway. Although Arman offers to help carry her belongings up to the penthouse to make up for it, she unintentionally demonstrates her strength carrying two larger bags over her shoulders. At the same time, he drags one smaller bag up the flights of stairs.

By the time he arrives, he sees her staring at the lock on the penthouse door.

He shudders, “*Je suis vraiment désolé!* I have never seen that door before! And I been up here many times to check for scary monsters. Do you think this leads to the attic? Never mind! I do not want to know what lies in the attic of an abandoned hospital. I will call a locksmith to open this door at once!”

“No. It will not be necessary.”

“But then how will you sleep? How will I sleep?! I have to—”

“No locksmith. I will get it open later today, and protect you from any *scary monsters*.” She sees he is still uncertain about that. “Trust me. Or think of the money we can save by not calling a locksmith.”

“If that is a decision you want to make, then I trust you.” He leaves her to her privacy.

The following day, a Monday, Maria Hernandez started

her first day of work. She donned a blue apron over a gray jumper, an essential but generic combination of uniforms given to all starting independent Blue-Tie workers. Following the Empire's dress code policy outlined in her copy of the *Grigori Citizen Handbook*, Maria Hernandez purchased the attire necessary to roam around Seattle without breaking social conventions. Noticing the style of bottoms are not as heavily enforced, she planned out her outfits for the week. Black slacks and natural-colored skirts for workdays and various blue shirts and blouses of different textures for casual wear. It is what she would have worn anyway.

Maria Hernandez works alongside the Orange-Vest crew of contracted renovators on the hotel. She prefers to stay active to avoid troubling thoughts, participating for free in the work they were being paid to do when it came time for a distraction.

So far, only one not-so-distracting question has reached her mind: Why is she considered a Blue-Tie worker?

She remembers a time when white-collar workers were those who worked inside while blue collars worked outside. The colors were not meant to be taken literally as they are now. It was roughly a mandated uniform for blue-collar workers as it was for white-collar workers. Nevertheless, the term was meant to be an observation of work culture. That observation was taken too literally by whoever came up with the labor system based on color-coded threads.

She then wonders the other ways that people suffer

inately at the hands of the Grigori Empire's policymakers.

"Excuse me, Miss Hernandez." The crew's supervisor snapped her out of a daze. "What should the carpet be? Have you picked any yet?"

She gives her a card with the color. "I have this picture I saved. It should look like this."

The supervisor got back to work.

Maria took a break to stare at them, studying them. Their orange overalls over their dull shirts confuse her. Were they Violet-Blazer elites with dirt-stained clothing burdening themselves with manual labor? If they were Orange-Vest, why are they working inside? Are Blue-Tie's not allowed to work outside or perform manual labor inside? What about the other colors? What are the freedoms and restrictions imposed on green, yellow, violet, and red collars?

Maria Hernandez did not worry her head off over insignificant questions when she was with Arman Rousseau. She looked forward to him finishing his afternoon shift on weekdays and taking the day off on the weekends. In the spare time they made for each other, he makes conversations about his youth. Either during construction or while dining in the bar still undergoing renovation, she takes the time to listen.

At dinner one time, in the break room, he rubbed a bottle opener against his head. "My *grand-mère* used this to help us feel better. She said it is *magic*. But I don't believe in that kind of stuff. She is not here to argue with me, so



she won't mind if I tell you."

"I am sure she would not care." She picked at her ready-to-eat meal of steak and mashed potatoes.

"I got to say, it works like a charm." He puts it down and takes a bite of his meal. "Paz?"

"Please do not talk with your mouth full," she reminded him again of her pet peeve for the twelfth time.

Arman apologizes with a nod. After he is finished his bite, he speaks. "Do you believe in magic?"

"Of course not. There is always a logical explanation for everything. Despite how impractical or improbable, magic is only technology without reason. Although our scientific developments stagnated over the century, and after everything I went through, I am still a firm believer in logical explanations."

"My *grand-mère* says this charm was blessed by a cybernetic human. Does that count as a logical explanation?"

"No."

He has noticed her short responses usually indicated one of two feelings. She either had more to say but wanted to divulge less, or she tried to avoid the subject completely. It becomes clear which one when she is asked a follow-up question.

"What about that white rose in your hair?" He asks. "Is there a reason for that? Why do you have it on your arm sometimes?"

"It makes me feel better too. Can we not talk about my White Rose?"

In this case, she is feeling both.

Then there are particular evenings. Rare moments they were when the roles reversed. Serena Paz talked, and Arman listened.

It started on a day they were painting a room. Looking outside the window, they noticed it is raining hard.

Serena Paz put the brush down and walked out of the room. Arman followed her up nine flights of stairs.

Although he did not ask her what was wrong out of respect, he feels curious to know why she generally acts without a word. He heard the Siren was the greatest actress of all time when it came to espionage. He wonders if her dramatic, theatric flair and mystery is something she honestly cannot turn off.

She invited him into her penthouse for the first time.

This is the first time he entered that room. He did not need to call a locksmith after all. She had a key. A makeshift key that transforms back into the white rose she ornaments onto her head.

“So, you do believe in magic?”

She does not answer him.

The steel staircase they climb spiraled up into the living room.

Arman did not see her move any furniture, but he sees them in the room. First catching his eye, there is a sofa at the center of the room. It is in front of a mirror on a table against the wall. From where he stands, he sees a dining table in one room past one archway and a filled kitchen past the other archway.

She escorts him to the kitchen, where she opens a window. Serena Paz looks up to the sky, letting the raindrops hit her face.

“Are you okay?” He leans against the table.

She leaves the window open, bringing her head back inside to talk to Arman.

“Although not the appropriate place for this conversation, we used to make love during the rainy days.” She swoons over her memories. “Once here. Right where you are standing.”

“Who?” He asks, confused. He leans away from the table. “Who are we talking about?”

“I always wondered why I wanted to during those rainy days. *He* wondered why. It was when I felt the saddest. I could never admit it to myself or to him then. Now that I am back, I can see everything clearer. I was homesick. Feeling the warmth of home again, in the arms of my man, took my mind off the painful teardrops of the Seattle skies.”

“Paz.” Arman reaches for her hand.

Serena Paz holds her hands close to her chest. “It is ironic. I traveled to sunny, hot, and dry Los Angeles to escape the tears. When it poured over there, everyone was happy to see the rain, except me.”

Arman could see she was holding back. He could see it in her reflection on the windowpane.

That moment would be the beginning of the trust born from their friendship.

# Chapter 4

## The Guardian Siren

As told by Serena Paz de la Marina.

“Are you sure this is going to work?” The Phantom Soldier Mikayla asked when pulling down the hood of her ghillie suit, letting loose her curly blonde hair. Her rare, hopeful smile shows itself as her eyes look out to the afternoon sky. Our fearless commander leads us on a new mission, with the same sense of purpose that drives us to follow her all around the world.

Together we stand on the watchtower on the premises of the abandoned mansion we sought refuge in. A tree the size of the tower was relocated in our sight.

The red-haired Mage in the green cloak named Gavr'l looks up to the sky with a soft smile. She answers, “I never attempted a rain dance in my life. And certainly not a spell as powerful as this. Let’s hope we got the right god this time.”

Her plan is to burn the tree using fire magic. Using her ability to control the space around the particle’s matter, she will redirect the smoke into the clouds. This will force rain to pour down with a prayer to a deity.

“As I said before, I believe there’s only one God!” Raf declared with a loud voice. Our giant-statured friend, both a fierce strongman and a gentle medicine man, holds

firmly to his faith with an open mind. “But that witch’s destruction and this cursed drought is the devil’s work! So whatever god you’re praying to, I hope it brings the rain back to my home.”

Ritono-Albahr, the reclusive seaside village near Syracuse was once known to all as an enchanting place in scenery and of magic. Raf was born here and grew up under the tyranny of a mage in disguise. He overthrew the despot, taking control in governing the city and protecting its secrets from greedy mages. Decades ago, Ritono-Albahr suffered Desolation by the Horseman of Famine. Her air fleet set fire to the land, burning all vegetation. When the Grigori do this to rebellious cities, their goal is to force people to settle into the closest Grigori capital.

Now that decades passed since then, life begins to grow again. But it needs help if we are to settle in a territory free of the Grigori Empire’s control.

“Our home,” the warrior tactician Vanguard wielding the Shield of Flames says in his low, tired voice. He glances at everyone and then to me. “We can all settle down to make a permanent base here. No more running. No more hiding. A home where we can finally call our own. It is certainly a change in events. Forsaken by the Grigori, this land will be free from their rule. And—”

“I hate to cut you off, big guy, but look!” Faris Nejem, the genius futurist, shares his laptop to look at. He points with the finger of his metallic prosthetic arm to the radar image of the sky. “Volt’s got a bogey on him.”

The sky turns pitch-black.

“Guys! You want the good news or the bad news first?” Volt the Pilot tries joking. His plane, the Lucky Coin, emerges from the clouds. He did not need to tell us that the good news is that his aircraft finished cloud seeding, a scientific method of bringing rain for extra measure. Unlike how some of us may feel about his jokes at times, we never doubted his excellency for flight. As for the bad news, it followed right behind him.

The Grandmaster’s winged beast of the air Ziz howls a monstrous cry, hurtling towards us. The eyes on its lion-like head gaze on the tower. For a monster its size, the tower is comparable to a toothpick. Which is why when he finally finds us on the tower, it makes no hesitation to ready its talons for the fearless dive. We keep a steady eye on its long lizard-like tail as well, knowing the strength of its swing can knock us all down.

“I am ready.” I put on my Guardian Siren mask.

“What about you guys?”

“Do the battle cry.” Faris mocks.

“I am not in the mood.”

“Gavr’l!” Vanguard orders. “Contain Ziz! Make it smaller!”

“Damn. I was looking forward to making it rain.” She raises her Lantern Staff to the sky, towards the oncoming winged beast. “This will take a lot out of me.” A bluish aura radiates from her and the staff. The space around Ziz tightens as much as she could imagine.

Trapped in the cube controlled by Gavr’l’s mind, Ziz flies over the tower, missing us. It slams around back and forth. It shrinks in size as an attempt to slip out of her

magic spell, but Gavr'l only tightens the box more.

“This is as small as it is going to get!” Gavr'l shakes, steadily enduring the mental fatigue of containing the beast that overpowers her alone in brute strength.

“It is still big enough to be a problem.” Faris Nejem takes off to the sky in his ATOMIC armored flight-suit. “If we are going to survive this, we have to fight back.”

Rarely taking Faris' suggestions, Phantom Soldier does not wait for another second to fight in a battle. She fires energy beams from her Guardian Rifle in rapid succession, hitting every shot in Ziz. Raf, although a healer known for his golden flask, carries whatever weapons of his own to help his friends in times of danger. This time a rifle. Vanguard and I join them with our rifles. With Faris Nejem firing rockets and energy beams from his flight-suit, that made five of us weakening the winged beast.

“Where are the others?” Vanguard asks Faris Nejem through the COMMs.

Faris Nejem's helmet is equipped with a Heads-up Display. He uses it to locate the position of the other Guardians scavenging for provisions. “They are wandering away from us. I don't think they saw us. Did we have to send them out for food?”

Raf yells into the COMMs, “We needed food!”

“No need to shout. Save the calories for the fight. I hear you loud and clear.”

Ziz attempts to outmaneuver our combined fire. It swings its lizard-like tail, narrowly missing Faris Nejem. Volt's aircraft, however, is struck down.

“I’m losing control!” He warns us. The Lucky Coin transforms back into a literal coin. He catches it while descending, speeding close enough over the tower. He does not have enough reaction time to save his fall.

Thinking in a split second, I summon a vine to protrude from White Rose, slinging it like a lasso. It clutches onto his leg, pulling him closer to the tower’s surface. I toss White Rose toward his shadow. The last thought in my mind before letting go was White Rose transforming into a soft cushion. The vine of White safely slows his fall. His descent brings him to the cushion, leaving no pain but nausea from non-stop spiraling out of control.

“Can you stand on your feet, old friend?” Vanguard takes his hand, helping him up.

“I think so.” He dusts himself off, barely losing balance. “Thanks, Paz.”

“Thank me later,” I tell him, pointing to Ziz.

Ziz turned around, letting out a ferocious screech. It looks ready to charge at us again.

“Keep firing!” Phantom Soldier tells Raf and the rest of us.

“We need to get out of here,” Vanguard reasons with our commander, “We are safer on the ground than we are up here.”

“Yeah,” Volt adds, “I already almost fell to my death miles high once today.”

She agrees and changes orders. Volt transforms the Lucky Coin again into the aircraft we need to get to safe ground. Faris Nejem distracts Ziz one last time as we



board the aircraft, one-by-one. Retrieving my White Rose, I am the last one left to board.

“Look out!” Faris warns almost too late.

Volt maneuvers the Lucky Coin away from its swinging tail.

Crash!

Ziz’s tail slams into the tower. While holding on firmly to the casing of the aircraft’s passenger door, Vanguard extends his hand. With nowhere else to run and nothing but air between us, I make a daring leap off the falling tower. I reach forward. He grabs my hand.

“Do not let go!” Vanguard cries.

I dangle in the air, waiting for him to reel me back to safety. Despite usually only needing a bit of it, Vanguard uses all his might to try pulling me inside, but something holds me back. I feel its talon wrap around my waist.

“I’m stuck!” Volt warns over the COMMS. “I think Ziz has its claws dug in my plane!”

The others hold on to Vanguard, trying to help him pull me back into the aircraft. But it is no use. At this point, I am surprised they have not torn me apart in their tug of war.

“Let go, Atlas.”

“Serena—!”

“Trust in me.”

He lets go. The Lucky Coin is set free, only to turn around to pursue the Ziz on Vanguard’s order. They can only follow Ziz up so high. They lose me through the clouds.

Now that it is just me and It in the air, it is my time to

shine over the clouds.

“How many times do I have to tell you? You cannot have me.”

Face-to-face with death once again, I greet It with tender confidence as my White Rose wraps around its feathered body. White Rose’s thorns reveal themselves, deeply piercing its thick hide. When I saw its red blood, I knew it was time for me to let go of White Rose.

Without my vessel as a conduit, White Rose’s unhinged, raw energy shocks Ziz to the core. Resistant to White Rose’s electrical currents, I feel no pain and am free to retrieve White Rose after enduring the few seconds of Ziz’s awful screeching.

Ziz is in shock. Its talons let me go, leaving me to fall back to the Earth.

Free-falling through the sky, I do feel afraid. Who would not? But I am high enough to not care for the brief moments. I pierce through the dark clouds, dropping down like the rain all around me.

The world I am crashing into is fantastic. Anything can happen. With White Rose’s power in my hands, I can transform reality into anything my heart desires.

A parachute to float down with ease. A hang-glider to glide across the Sicilian landscape. Or a parasail to sail over the heights. However, I suppose there are natural laws to obey when transforming reality. As long as I do not transform White Rose into anything that challenges those laws. For instance, creating an umbrella that cannot handle the weight of the downpour or my own, then I can expect to live to see my fate changed.

I reconsider. Maybe a long stick, like the pole vaulters use, to use as a makeshift spring that would store my kinetic energy and allow me to reach the ground at a slower speed? No, too much physics involved. Perhaps I need to think safer. A stationary pole to slide down with the grace of an exotic dancer with the urgency of the firefighter. Or, I could also cushion my fall like I did with Volt when he was tumbling through the air. But I used some of his luck that time.

I am not always so lucky.

Before I could settle on a decision, I am intercepted by a speeding hero. Using his technology's precise calculations, he curves his trajectory to break my fall safely. He holds onto me with both arms. I hold on to him tight, lucky enough to survive this time.

"Can you not grab my neck?!" Faris Nejem is thrown a little off course.

I readjust my arms, one arm at a time, slowly, switching my grasp to his metallic frame instead. "Thank you, Faris."

"You're welcome. You know, if you want to show your appreciation, you can do more chores for a week. No, a month. Consider that I am the only one with the tech that could've followed you this far. And my casual suit isn't exactly made for the rain."

"That explains the turbulence. Sounds like a design flaw you should have thought about when making this model," I laugh with a huge grin.

"Send me a feature request ticket later. Be glad it's working, and we're not crashing."

The others were waiting back at the mansion when Faris reported he retrieved me alive. He was careful not to use the word *saved*. They met us at the balcony where we landed. Aside from Phantom Soldier, who never wraps her arms around another fellow soldier except to carry them, the others greeted me back with a warm hug.

Expecting nothing from him, Vanguard defies my expectations. He embraces me the longest.

Too long for comfort, it must have seemed to the others.

Faris starts a conversation, “Look at that rain! Science wins yet again, Gavr’l.”

“Do not be foolish, my young friend. As I always say, there is a lot more to nature you need to learn. My spell of smoke would have directed the rain here without a doubt! Don’t forget, your fancy science is immature magic to me.”

Faris takes off his helmet, showing his disappointed face.

“But you are indeed a smart mage for someone who is not a mage.” She laughs heartily. “Not everyone can create what you can at will like you can.”

His ego is bandaged by that compliment.

I pushed Vanguard away with a soft nudge when I realized I was embracing him just as hard.

Volt smiles. “It’s gonna be a while before the others are home. Let’s celebrate? After all that hard work and almost dying, I’m in the mood to enjoy the fact I’m alive! Drinks on me!”

“Can’t give away what’s not yours, Volt.” Mikayla chuckles softly.

Raf guides Volt out the door with a hand on his back. “It’s my cellar, and for a price, I’ll give it away to whoever wants to give it away for free! What were you thinking, Volt, buddy? I have red wine, white wine, champagne, wines of vineyards from all parts of Italy, and from different times! Some a few decades old, others over centuries-old! The Grigori destroyed my lands, but they couldn’t destroy our spirits! Get it?”

Volt laughs.

“Got anything *halal*?” Faris asks Raf.

“In Ritono-Albahr, I had many Muslim friends who warned me alcohol is forbidden for them. I can brew tea or anything else you like!”

Everyone except Vanguard and I head to the cellar. Their voices trail off down the halls. We expect to reunite back at the dining room later. For now, our friends give us our space.

“What is on your mind, Atlas?” I ask, concerned about his estranged affection.

“Serena. That was a close one.”

“We are Guardians, Atlas. Almost every time we go out there, it is *a close one*. Comes with the job. We have been doing this for about 75 years. I thought you would already be used to it. Come on, Atlas. You should know this by now.”

“I’ve known you long enough to know when you are avoiding a talk. This is the most you said to anyone today. And even now, it’s not enough.”

I rolled my eyes, shaking my head. “I do not need to hear this from you every damn time I do something *you* think is reckless. I am not in the mood for it right now.”

“It’s not that. There was nothing different you could have done in that situation anyway. But that is not what is on my mind.”

I sighed, half relieved. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Us.”

“Atlas.” My relief fades away, knowing what he means by *us*. “What do you want from me that I have not already asked from you in the past?”

“Asked for?” He looks confused. “What exactly are you referring to? I could give you anything you asked me for. I probably already have.”

“Trust. What about trust?”

“What about earlier? Wasn’t that *trust* back there? When you told me to let go so you can fight off that monster on your own?”

I give him a sharp look.

“This again?” He becomes defensive. “That’s not fair, Serena. And it wasn’t even a trust issue. Every decision you make about *us* is based on the *one* day I made my decision to wholeheartedly disagree with you. And it was for a good reason. Please try to see it differently, it is in the past now.”

I shake my head, wholeheartedly disagreeing.

He takes a deep breath, regaining his composure. His tone softens. “We both are trying to move on from that.” He hesitates to speak for a second. “I know you are

still grieving from trying to move on. But look where you and I are now. For the first time, I feel life can be different for us.”

“Life would be very different if you trusted me that day.”

“Why does that matter after all these years? It does not matter anymore. Let it go. It’s time to let it go, Serena.”

I agree with his rationality for moving on. I do not agree with moving on yet.

“What about you, Atlas? Are you truly ready to move on? Last time I checked, we both agreed to keep on fighting this war to get back what we lost. We became the Guardians to preserve our past and all our cultures. After all these years, are you finally giving up?”

He takes the Shield of Flames off his back. He contemplates letting it go, staring intensely into its sigil, only for it to return strapped to his back. Just as I thought.

He says, “The War Lords would have been stopped a long time ago and many times after if I had your same courage to pull the trigger on them. Sometimes I think about what would have been if I did.”

I shake my head, holding his hands. “I know he is not your namesake, but you do not have to be the Atlas that carries the world on his shoulders all by himself. That is why we are all here, together. The Guardians exist, so not one of us has to carry that burden alone. That is why I am with you the way I am, so you will not be alone.”

He holds on to my hands as well. “I feel regret for the way things turned out. But it does not mean I would change my actions. In time, history will reveal the truth.

The way we do things is more than simply to settle things peacefully. We do not kill because, at the end of it all, we have to show them all the light of another way.”

“I know.”

The rain stirs feelings in both of us. Feelings that we are learning to connect back to. A long, drawn-out series of back-and-forth tug of emotions. With our only choices being to fight for life or love, we have found no middle ground between *us* and the responsibility to the world given by the Orbs we wield. The Siren and the Thief that stole her heart yearn to embrace each other once again. The White Rose and the Shield of Flames are our own inability to accept the peace given in our life, yearning more for the life we could have someday if we do not give up the fight.

For now, we dismiss our rainy-day feelings as something we can save for another time.

We could not stop staring at each other, walking down the halls. As I look into Atlas’ brown eyes, I begin feeling hopeful after that conversation. When he reaches for my hand, and I for his, I can tell that when we both are ready to settle down, we can finally live the rest of our lives together.

Then reality sets in. That will not happen.

It does not happen.

Why am I telling you this, Arman? I tell you because when it rains, I want to cry. But I do not cry. I want to be held. Not by you who is obviously not into me, but by someone else. Someone who wants and needs me as



## The Triangle Saloon

much as I want and need that person. I am telling you this because I do not know how to deal with these feelings. At one point in my life, I thought forgetting about ever returning to Seattle would cure me of it. No matter how better things seem to get, the feelings will not go away. It seems the macabre melancholy will follow me until the day I die.

# Chapter 5

## Memory Envisioned

Over time, at her own pace, Serena Paz shares stories of herself and the long journey leading to her return to Seattle. Having entrusted him with that story, she starts retelling her story from the beginning when she was causing mischief with the Thief. Next, Serena Paz describes her years working with a group of vigilantes bringing justice all around the country. She scares him with the stories of the War Lords, informing him how they successfully created a World War, and how she and her new allies stopped them from furthering their agenda. However, they were only a part of the Grandmaster's plan, which next involved summoning the meteor to strike down Earth if they did not comply.

And every other story of saving the world after that is Guardians' history.

Arman listened carefully. He did not tell her, but his *grand-mère* also told him and his sister stories like that. Her stories involved the Siren and the other Guardians. According to her stories, they were vigilantes before becoming Guardians. His *grand-mère's* stories matched with the Serena Paz's stories.

He noticed something else. For every tale about how the Guardians helped others and saved the day, there was always a report the Grigori released that gave a counter-

perspective. Arman grew up trying to balance the truths of the words between the Grigori Empire and his *grand-mère* stories. Now that he has heard the Siren's accounts from the very source, he believes her stories and that the Grigori Empire twisted the truth.

Any fears lingering in the depths of his heart vanished. The Siren the Grigori created is no more to him. There is only Serena Paz de la Marina and the White Rose.

She does not dwell much on parts of her past farther than those early days of her adulthood. When it came time, Serena Paz shared fond memories of her childhood.

The way she described her memories was not the same as how she told her Guardian stories. Rather than creating a narrative, she shared those memories in an objective tone. She would often leave the people in her description nameless and faceless, only telling their purpose and relation to her. When it came to her childhood, Serena Paz only gave Arman the necessary details to design their hotel.

One such time is when their crew finished fixing the floorboards of the hotel. They placed down a red carpet at the lobby and left it to Arman to review before moving forward to the other twelve floors. In turn, Arman brings the carpet to Maria Hernandez's attention to assure it is the color she remembers.

"The carpets are fine with the red color." Maria Hernandez explains, "When I was a kid, I sometimes pretended to be a popstar princess walking down the red carpet."

“Pop star.” Arman tries thinking back. “Like a singer but popular with the people.”

“Yes.”

“And did any of your friends try doing the same?”

Arman tries getting her to reveal more, hoping she does not take notice of his intentions.

“Yes. I had a friend that would pretend with me.” She shakes her head. “Focus. The point is that anyone should feel the way I felt when walking down the halls.”

Arman shows her a sample fabric of the hotel blankets.

“Too bright,” she says. “Remember. Emerald City for metallics and glass ornaments. But the green fabrics should match the pine trees of Washington. I mean, *Pacifica*.”

He nods his head.

Each memory holds a unique detail that helps in the construction of their vision. Slowly, the glimpses into Serena Paz’s childhood bring the past to the hotel.

Five more months brought them closer to their dreams. Memories of the awe-inspiring Triangle Sports Lounge and Hotel start manifesting into reality. The red carpet stretches from the lobby, on every floor of the hotel, and ends at her penthouse door. Wall décor precisely as her pictures show, and new tables of vases against gold walls make their vision match with Serena Paz’s past. The pub-like bar is recreated in the old-fashioned, 1900’s style exactly as her Mamá described to her.

She is aware that not everything can be made as she

imagined. When she was a child, she made it a point to visit every room in the hotel at least once. Yet, her detailed memories of her youth fail her after so long. Besides the necessary furniture for a living space, she would leave the wallpaper and flooring to the designer's imagination.

The diner has yet to be renovated. Maria Hernandez warns Arman that they are not prepared to start an eatery establishment. Needing to better understand the Grigori's policies on diets and attain the appropriate licenses and staff, they leave it closed off from public access on both sides by using a retractable wall. Realizing it would be a long walk around the building to get to the hotel and back, a door is installed in the retractable walls for employee use only.

Now all they need is a private place for business negotiations and discussions. Arman decides on a particular room on the first floor because it holds an iron door. Behind the iron door is a room plated with metal walls, which is also inaccessible from anywhere else. He plans to use it as a vault, since he does not trust the Grigori banks. Neither does Serena Paz, so she agrees to him holding onto her money and to using the room before the iron door as their office space.

They discuss the vault room while painting their office space.

"What would a hospital do with a room like that?" Arman brushed up and down.

Maria Hernandez took long strokes around the room. "They might have used it as a cooling container. It could

have been a morgue. Maybe a panic room.” She recalls, “It was not here when I was a kid. I used to play in here — I never saw it before.”

“Panic room?! Not a bad idea. If we can paint over it, conceal the door, we can fool any Grigori soldier that tries taking you.”

“Can we think with a positive and peaceful mindset? I want to try to get along, seeing as how I am stuck here with them for the rest of my life.”

“Forever.” He considers where she left off in her story. “We’ve both lost someone we loved. And I would like to have him at least see what we’ve accomplished, if not forever. If the myths of the Trinity Instruments are true, should we want to bring them back to life so bad?”

Maria Hernandez lets the brush drip down the wall without another stroke. She looks down at her red scarf.

“I’m sorry.” He lowers his head. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

She returns to painting. “His last words to me were to let go.”

“What did he mean by that?”

She does not answer his question. “I never wanted to think about those things. The question before, I mean. Some questions do not deserve an answer. It is a question left better unasked and unresolved. To be honest, I would not know how to answer that. I tried to think of an answer right now, but I could not come up with one. How about you? Would you?”

“No.” He sighs. “My father wouldn’t want me to bring him back.”

“But is that how you feel?”

He thinks about it. “Yes. He died standing up for what he believed in. I couldn’t take that away from him.”

She understands his beliefs. “As much as I want to blame the entirety of the Grigori, we should not blame the Grigori people as a whole for what happened to us. Most of their leaders follow their commands strictly. It is the individuals in high positions who abuse their power to reform society to their own corrupt, selfish ideals. They should be blamed.”

Arman nods in understanding agreement.

“Although they want a unified globe,” she says, “the truth is everyone has desires for a smaller world of their own. Leaders happen to have more say and willpower in that.”

“Why don’t we make our own little worlds?”

“We have always tried branching off into our own governments. Although it is faster when we betray ourselves and surrender to the Grigori Empire, we all share the same fate eventually. It is that fear of that fate that binds them together and the same fear that allows us to embrace the most from the little time we have living in our settlements.”

“What fear is that?”

She stares into his eyes. Smiling, she answers, “The fear of death.”

# Chapter 6

## Heading Out

The contractors are finally sent home. After all the hard work, the interior design is done. Maria Hernandez and Arman Rousseau begin to relax. Several months of labor that lasted through the autumn and into the middle of winter has come to pass. Proud of themselves, they step outside to marvel at their beautiful recreation. It is then that they realize they forgot about the exterior of the building. Its fading surfaces and discoloration will not bring anyone in. And the crumbling bricks need repair.

The answer to why they did not consider fixing the outside of the building is a mystery to them. Perhaps they were engaged deeply in their conversations or too busy working to think about appearances. Regardless of the reason, the two can be foolish individuals at times, often forgetting essential details in the bigger picture.

As Arman Rousseau is learning to expect from Maria Hernandez, she uses the inconvenience of a situation for a timely improvisation.

She angles her thumbs and index fingers into a box, framing the flatiron in a portrait of her imagination. “I can see it now! A redesign! Inside and out!”

“So, we are not going with your vision to bring back the past?”

“Oh, no. The people will see a glimpse of the old bar



and hotel when they are inside. The truth is, this old flatiron building was not always a sports lounge. Do you want to know a secret?"

"Another secret?" He smiles. "What is it this time?"

"This place has a longer history than the one I gave to you. First, it was a bar and a hotel in the 1920s. Then it also became a brothel. The brothel closed down, and it became an honest pub that my great grandfather would eventually come to own. Other companies would come to rent the hotel space."

"Great Grandfather? That's a surprise. After all this time, now, you have come to inherit it."

"There is still more. After my great grandfather, a friend of my Mamá's bought the Triangle Sports Lounge. He is the one that bought all the space on this block and turned it into a massive hotel. Many years later, Mamá ran it for a while and eventually sold it in 2020. Whoever bought it must have turned it into a hospital. As you can see, this building stands strong for almost two hundred years!"

Arman glances at her, and the white rose blooming in her hair. "I suppose it is truly in your hands now. I don't think I ever have seen you this excited before."

She hides her smile in an attempt to maintain her composure.

He laughs. "What were you thinking of for a new design?"

"A saloon," she suggests with a heart-warmed smile she could not hide. "We will call it the Triangle Saloon."

"Like the Western stories you both read, and the

television programs *he* watched? I don't understand. With all the drunken fights and debauchery, why would you want that in the palace of your memories?"

"It does not have to have that. We certainly will not have any gamblers, prostitutes, and outlaws carousing and causing trouble in our fine establishment."

"Prostitution?" Arman looks confused.

"I mean that we will abide by the Grigori laws. We will not cause trouble or allow trouble."

"Oh."

"Now, imagine with me! When people visit— and visit, they will— they will be granted an experience away from the dreary, dry Grigori life. The Triangle Saloon will be the spot where you can grab a beer or two with happy friends to celebrate life. The Triangle Saloon will be a place where you can rest your troubles away. The Triangle Saloon is home. It will be our home. It will be a home for all."

He is convinced. "I will start working on a sign."

She plans to acquire the paperwork they need from the Seattle Community Resource Center at the Space Needle. After filing the paperwork, they will hire workers based on demand. The more visitors that arrive, the more hosts they need to hire to make them feel welcomed.

"What then?" he asks. "How will they know?"

"Promotion. I have seen advertisements on posts and bulletin boards. They now call it awareness posters. Back in my day, we called them adverts or advertisements. My educated guess is that the Grigori want to avert from capitalist ideologies. But I am going to call it whatever I

want to call it.”

“Capitalist? Big words again, Paz. I don’t get it.”

She disregards that comment. “I was told there is another world in Portland. Chaos runs rampant in the street. A world within many worlds is how they describe it. Yet, human life to thrive there is the least I expected from a state that suffered from desolation.”

“I passed through there to get here.” Arman warns her, “There is a town that is like the Western you described. I would try to avoid that town again. There are other ones nearby with a little more hospitality. From what they say, no one is native. They all immigrated from other parts of the country.”

“Almost no one in America is truly a native except the Native Americans.”

He thinks he knows why she brought up Portland. “You are going there?! Aren’t you?! To that Western town.”

She nods.

“But I need your help with the Triangle Saloon. Will you be back within a month?”

She shakes her head. “I also have some things I need to take care of outside Seattle and Portland. The circumstances have changed. Now that I am permanently residing here, I need to collect my personal belongings that I scattered safely across the country. And I need to settle some affairs I cannot leave open. And, I can come back with more than enough field research for our Western saloon.”

His look of uncertainty reveals his feelings to Maria.

She tries to cheer him up, “Come on. Our customers will not all rush in. They will flow in naturally. A trickle first and then a steady flow. You will be fine here. And I will be fine out there.”

Arman keeps himself up at night, thinking about the dangers she may put herself into.

At dawn on the second Friday of February, Maria Hernandez is ready to leave the Triangle Saloon. Arman studies what she is wearing. A long-sleeved buttoned-up blouse, and a skirt that touches the laces of her combat boots. She could never forget her White Rose and the red scarf she always wears to hide the mark on her chest. To top off her outfit, a wide-brimmed hat. He figures she was dressed to blend into Oregon’s most ruthless part.

Arman looks up to the sky. Although he could not see the mountains, he knew the sun would shine down on her wherever she goes. Any dangers that are waiting will be no match for her. That is what he tells himself.

Maria Hernandez stretches her legs before embarking on her trip.

Arman gives her a satchel. “I packed some food and a thermos with cold water.”

“Aw, you should not have.” She laughs. “You should have filled it with rum and coke instead.”

He laughs, “I don’t think I ever heard you joke around before.”

She was only partially joking.

There is a brief moment at the start of a journey when the adventurer hesitates to leave home. Sometimes, they

never look back. She was ready to turn her back on her home again. This time, she takes a look back.

“What’s wrong?” Arman asks.

She replies, “I am going to miss this place and you.”

“It’s not goodbye, right?” He begins worrying. “You said you were coming back.”

“I am. I mean, I want to. But if I have to be honest, I cannot promise I will come back. Do you understand?”

Arman takes a moment to think about it. He remembers when he left home for Pacifica. Although he writes letters to the caretaker of his family’s estate, he has no desire to return to the Rousseau Vineyard yet. There is so much to do for the Triangle Saloon. His own dreams of success he wants to fulfill. If not by peril, then it is by living the life he truly desires that keeps him from going back. Seattle is his home now.

He nods, understanding that their meeting may be an intersection of their journeys. And if it is that, then their meeting was a memorable experience.

“Goodbye, hopefully for now,” she says.

“Be safe out there,” he says, ready to bid her farewell for now. “I hope to see you again.”

Arman watches her walk away from the Triangle Saloon. She heads south. When he loses sight of her, he goes back inside the bar.

Three hours pass by. Arman sits behind the bar counter. There is nothing else for him to do today. He has not felt as alone as with his thoughts since before meeting Maria Hernandez. Not yet ready to venture out to find guests to

distract, he contemplates about his worries. His eyes are focused on the clock.

Not everyone is fortunate enough to have time. Arman considers Maria Hernandez lucky enough to have all the time in the world, should she stay out of trouble. Her story could go on long after his is finished. It would be a shame if their paths never crossed again during that time. He dreads the thought of her never coming back, but not as much as the thought of her coming back to the Triangle Saloon and him not being there to see her.

An idea comes to his head. His anxiety melts away. The Triangle Saloon is not only a part of her story, but his own as well. He plans to write down his experiences at the Triangle Saloon. When she comes back, he will have interesting things to share with her as well.

# Chapter 7

## Letters from Maria Hernandez

Like she said, the customers did flow naturally into the Triangle Saloon. At first, like a trickle, few seeped through the doors. Those dreading their jobs tried to smile when the tasteless tapped beer met their tongues. The few wanting a break from their homes near and far, slept while staring at the empty but nicely painted walls of their hotel room.

Arman takes all his customers' suggestions, critiques, and advice to improve their bar and hotel.

It felt forever since he saw her off. It has been a couple of weeks since then.

Arman looks upon this week's achievement. A set of installed saloon doors per Maria Hernandez's request. At first, he questioned its aesthetic. Being made of lightweight wood, the saloon doors did not match the hotel's sturdy appearance. They also did not cover the top and bottom portion of the door frame, which he considered unwise in a city with constant rains and cold breezes that could chill the guests during the winter. She explained that a set of doors outside would also be installed, solid enough to close out the drafts. These secondary doors would also shut the bar during closing time.

Now that two of the bar's guests were complaining

that it was too warm for their comfort, he was glad to have the saloon doors for their convenience and the solid doors for his own.

He returns to tending to the drinkers. One of them, a Seattleite that came in for a quick drink. The other, a bum wearing shades that often visits, carrying with him an instrument case.

“What do you play?” Arman asks.

“A trumpet.”

“Maybe you can play it here sometime?”

The bum stares at Arman, without a word.

As if out of a Wild Western story that Serena Paz told him, the sound of a creak from the floorboard grabs their attention. They look toward the swinging saloon doors. He and the two bar guests stared at the man in a charcoal colored coat, a cowboy hat, and a scarf covering his mouth. The man slowly strides to the bar counter, taking a seat away from the others.

Arman approaches him cautiously. He asks, “What can I get you?”

“Ginger ale,” the man says through his scarf. “Not the liquor ale. I only want the pop kind.”

Arman could barely make out what he said, but he could smell the stench of a long journey’s walk coming from him. Sweat and possibly blood.

“So, you must be that Portlander they say rode into town today. You look familiar,” the bum says with suspicion. “Have we met?”

The man shakes his head. He reaches the inside of his



coat.

Arman and the two bar guests flinch, startled.

The man gives Arman mail, a single envelope large enough to hold more than one document.

Arman reads to himself the name of the mail's sender with a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"She said to put this drink on her tab." He pulls down his scarf, chugs the drink, and walks away slowly from the bar counter.

"Did Maria Hernandez already pay you?" Arman asks.

"No. And it won't be necessary. I came here for my own business. And I heard the Triangle Sports Lounge is coming back in a new way." He looks around with a smile only for a brief moment. He puts back his scarf over his mouth. "Nice meeting you, Arman. Goodbye, Sammy.

"So we have met," the bum with the instrument case says to himself.

Arman opens the envelope without another minute wasted. Inside, there are pages of descriptions of her field research. Arman now has everything he needs for the construction workers to redesign the Triangle Saloon's exterior surface. She also included a letter that explains how she has been doing.

The first letter from Maria Hernandez to Arman Rousseau, on her journey to collect her belongings, dated February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2102.

*Dear Arman Rousseau,*

*By the time you receive this, I already left Portland. You should not worry about me. I have been through worse. With your limited experience in life, I understand why you were fearful. Rest assured, I am in good hands. My own good hands.*

*I am not traveling alone this time. I met this rancher named Rex, a simple, rugged buffalo farmer. Like you, he is young and lively. Unlike you, he is a fool.*

*His entire world revolves around the Westerns his clan picked up. They migrated to Portland after the Grigori found their hidden city.*

*Recall that I mentioned in one of my stories that desolate cities are abandoned by the Grigori Empire? They figure anyone sensible would start anew in the next Grigori town, doing better this time around. Those who stay on those lands are destined to perish with a lack of growth and resources. Despite that reasoning, we use it as a loophole. We make things work for us, make things grow.*

*Oh no. I am starting to sympathize with this man. The last thing I need is another partner to die on my voyages.*

*He probably will die.*

*We are heading into Grigori occupied territory in a buffalo-drawn wagon! Unfortunately, this is the fastest transportation I can afford without drawing much suspicion. We will be noticed. If I am recognized, they can kill either one of us.*

*But Grigori will not kill me. They will not be the death of me. So, do not worry about me.*

*With love,  
Maria Hernandez*

*P.S. I hope you are not saving me any money you make. I appreciate you holding on to my money. I trust you more than the banks. But any money you make at this time should go directly to*

*your pocket since you are running the show without me for now.*

After a decent amount of business transactions, the Triangle Saloon caught the attention of a tax collector. As a Grigori citizen that is no longer situating, Arman must pay taxes, and more so now that he is running a business. The tax collector informs Arman of the necessary paperwork to complete by the tax collecting season. Although he seems uptight, he enjoys a single beer after fulfilling his duty every day, savoring each sip.

Arman wished he could tell Maria Hernandez about the further legitimization of their independent business , but she was on the move with no permanent address. The only way she could communicate with him was letter by letter. The letters were not as frequent, which always left her fate lingering.

Today, he is missing her a lot.

He looks to the tax collector sitting in front of him for company. He usually visits to collect taxes from the Triangle Saloon. He also enjoys a beer, always reminding the usuals at the bar that he is on break. It is known that workers of any state of the Grigori Empire should not be idle or lounging while at work or on duty.

“So, this is your job?” Arman asks the tax collector.

The tax collector nods his head with a smile, drinking his beer.

“Do you like your job?”

The tax collector nods his head with a smile, curious as to why anyone would ask such a question. Not for the reason that it could be interpreted as treasonous to dislike

his mandated job, although a legitimate reason to suspect any Grigori citizen asking that question. The tax collector wonders how could anyone not want to be a tax collector?

“Everyone in Seattle is so friendly!” Arman looks around the bar. They are not impressed with his observation. “Know of anything exciting or fun to do after work?”

Everyone in the bar laughs at him, not with him. Arman cannot tell the difference.

“Fun is what you do at home, by yourself.” The tax collector explains. “You’re from Luzifornia, right? People may get away with *fun* anywhere else. But here, we are subject to a simpler life. We play with our kids or entertain our wives or girlfriends or husbands or boyfriends. And even that sounds like it would get boring after so many years. I would rather go to work.”

“Does anyone not hang out with their friends?”

“Of course we do. On mandated hang out hours. Which is before curfew time.”

“So, we could all hang out here, right?”

“What do you think we are doing?”

Arman stares at him, smiling suspiciously. “Do you have any friends?”

“What do you mean? Of course, I do. Do you have any friends?”

“I have one.”

The tax collector stares in disbelief. “Who?”

“Who?”

“You were only here for a year. And you made only one friend?”

“Yes,” Arman is unsure what to say next. “How many friends am I supposed to have?”

Before the tax collector could say anything, a creak on the floorboard grabs their attention. Arman and the bar’s guests turn their attention to the swinging saloon doors. A new visitor arrived, carrying himself heavily through the bar and dragging metal boots across the wood floors as each step delivers a loud thud. The visitor carries a messenger bag hung over his shoulder. Sitting at the bar counter, the visitor in a monotone voice orders a Lager, a pale colored beer brewed and kept cool for a while.

Now that the visitor was close enough, Arman saw that it may not be human. Although it had a set of hair, it had a metal face. And as it grabbed the beer mug, he saw it had metal hands. Arman presumed it was like the robots in Serena Paz’s tales.

The visitor lifts off his metal mask, revealing his true human face underneath. He drinks, unaware that he is being gawked at for his strangeness.

“I thought you were a robot.” Arman says aloud.

The man laughs, taking off his metal helmet to show his full human visage. “Robots? In Seattle? In Pacifica?! Never! Robotkind would be destroyed on sight if they set foot here. That old Commander would never allow it.”

“We have a new Commander,” the tax collector says.

“Is that so? I still doubt they would be treated so kindly here. For all my life, all I have known is robots. I am a metalhead—”

“Not in the traditional sense,” the bum with the instrument case says.

“Metalheads are raised by robots, have their parts replaced with metal ones when they are torn from. battle, and live life in peace with robots. Nothing can change what I learned from my robot parents. It is my nature. Any changes with a Commander cannot be any different from the old one.”

“We are glad to have a metalhead here with us.” Arman changes the subject, sensing it can turn into a political debate quickly, “What brings you to the Triangle Saloon?”

“Arman Rousseau.”

“That’s me.” Arman takes a step back, wary of any stranger wanting to see him.

“My name is Driscoll.” He searches his messenger bag, pulling out a single envelope. “Networking has been a little different for robots since the space satellites built by Night Star Innovations were taken down. They resorted to hand-delivering messages. I am a mail carrier for robots. In this case, however, I am delivering for a certain human, an ally to robots is all I can say.”

Arman receives the mail. It is another letter from Maria Hernandez. He waits until closing time to open the letter, continuing work for the next eight hours.

Near closing time, Arman offers Driscoll a hotel room to stay for the night. Driscoll takes him up on his offer, warning Arman that Seattle is not a place for him due to his own metal parts. Considering himself a cyborg, he does not expect to be treated fairly by the other humans. He only plans to stay one night and return to Georgia for

more national deliveries for his Robotkind.

With the bar closed, Arman would only have the hotel left to run. However, he hired a handy-woman named Jacqueline, who asks to be called Jacque, to serve as a concierge for the time being. Hailing from Toronto, Canada, Jacque is an immigrant in need of work in a new setting. The officials at the Space Needle in charge of work placement directed her to the Triangle Saloon, which they described to her as a new independent business in desperate need of helping hands. Arman finds common ground with her in their French upbringing. They also share an abnormally strong work drive, only desiring to work when they are not resting. Since she manages the hotel at night, Arman can sleep easier at night knowing someone trustworthy will take care of their guests

Arman returns to his office to conclude his business for the day, logging everything that happened and updating his work hours. After clocking out, he opens the letter.

The second letter from Maria Hernandez to Arman Rousseau, on her journey to collect her belongings, dated March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2102.

*Dear Arman Rousseau,*

*Nothing says friendship like bonding over moments of certain death.*

*A few of my lockers and vaults are in cities left in shambles over some battles. Heartbreak Crisis did a number on their Grigori resolve. Perhaps there was more hope in humanity than I thought.*

*Then again... Civil disorder is expected when your leader is incapacitated.*

*Whatever the case, like always, the Grigori wins. I tread dangerous wastelands, maneuvering around ruin-like structures that I hardly know. I pray to an imaginary god that the Grigori have no use for a warehouse they cannot access. Alas! I discover they ~~guard~~ (sorry) “watch” over it as if it is the Grigori idols they worship. With extreme vigilance, they wait for the day I return!*

*Thankfully to my own tactfulness, I negotiated with most of them. I trade money I earn on the road or possessions I realize are cluttering valuable space in the wagon! I do not need the lifeless technology in storage. I say LIFELESS as to not offend my robot ~~guards~~ watchBOTS that appear to have a mind and life of their own.*

*When the Grigori or dangerous scrappers and bandits wanted everything that I possessed or to take the robots for their own, you can bet my combat training took over. I am grateful to have come across my ammunition repository first on my journey.*

*Do not worry, they are alive. The only pain they feel is hitting the ground after a shocking stun from the blasts of our non-lethal, military counter-combat weapons.*

*I wish I can avoid involving that Rex in combat. This is why I start this letter by saying, “Nothing says friendship like bonding over moments of certain death.” If only he listened as well as he shoots. He practices firing on the range. The same cannot be said for his people skills.*

*He lives off on his own, some distance from the other Westerners. Now I know why. They do not want him because he cannot get along with anyone. Am I glad he has my back? Not so much when I have to bury his carcass.*

*But it is not all bad. Like I said. “Nothing says friendship like bonding over moments of certain death.”*



*With love,  
Maria Hernandez.*

Arman hires workers as the customer count grows. He hired a balding, bearded bartender named Phil to help him pick up the slack at the. In turn, Arman can dedicate more time to handling the Triangle Saloon's managerial duties. He also hired a few housekeepers to clean the hotel rooms and attend to the guest's needs. To help Jacque, a bellhop for the hotel. Jacque feels relieved she does not have to carry the bags all the way to the twelfth floor. The bellhop only agreed to take the job if the elevator would be fixed, so Arman requested an engineer from the Space Needle to repair it. All at the Triangle Saloon eagerly await that day.

As for his communication with Maria Hernandez, no more letters arrived. It has been about two months since she last sent the Metalhead to deliver a message. For weeks he was eagerly awaiting her next message. By the sixth week, he tempered his hopeful expectations with the acceptance of change. He cannot let his mind linger long on his friend's whereabouts, especially if there is no way to contact her. Still, he remains hopeful while carrying onward for now.

On the day of the appointment with the engineer, Arman waited in the hotel lobby. The engineer is supposed to arrive later in the evening. While Arman waits, Jacque reviews comments from his guests.

She reads them to him, flipping through the cards with their written statements.

Card 1: Spending a night here is worth it because of the hotel's friendly atmosphere.

Card 2: The beer is excellent, and so are the staff!

Card 3: I wish that cute bartender would come back, otherwise, beautiful concierge and staff!

She blushes after reading that one.

Card 4: The look of the bar is refreshing! Different, but an exciting design. Also, is the floor by the doors supposed to make that sound? I avoid stepping on it, now that I am coming here often. I thought you would like to know.

Card 5: Room service would be preferable, but I cannot complain. Who can beat the competitive pricing?

Card 6: Five stars! I will come back again! I have to tell all my friends about this place!

Card 7: Better than how I remember it. Seattle will fall in love with the Triangle Saloon, just as I have.

"Way to go, boss," Jacque cheers. "With your leadership, we are going to the top!"

"The top, yes," Arman grins. He can only imagine that Violet blazer in his possession for now.

"Don't let it get to your head, though," Jacque warns. "That's what my Baba would tell me. Whenever I was showered with compliments, he advised me to stay humble. So, I try taking these compliments with a grain of salt."

"Something about this Triangle Saloon. There is a spirit."

Jacque shivers. "Baba warned me about spirits too."

Sometimes they can be haunting.”

“No, not that at all. What I mean is that I feel different here. I was terrified of coming here to Seattle. I was nervous about purchasing this abandoned hospital and turning it into a bar and a hotel. I was afraid to take a chance. Now, I feel something else.”

“Courage?” She asks.

“More than that.”

Before Arman could figure out that feeling, Phil interrupted politely.

“Hey, boss, sir. I have a woman here who says she is looking for you. She entered through the bar.” He then whispers to Arman, “Another note, we really got to fix that creaky floorboard, it’s distracting to the customers.”

“Maria Hernandez says it is part of the aesthetic,” Arman explains. “I don’t understand it either, but so far, my partner’s ideas have not steered us wrong yet.”

Phil returns to the bar. Jacque greets the woman wearing gloves before running off to give them privacy.

“Welcome!” Arman greets the woman. He offers his hand for a handshake.

She takes off a glove and pockets it. Using both hands, she shakes Arman’s hand with a smile. “Arman Rousseau.”

The woman wears the color black, but not in uniform. She avoids wearing the shade of black olive belonging strictly to the Grigori army and the shade of jet reserved for death ceremonies. Her beanie, the color of night. Her shorts, the jacket tied around her waist, and the vest all a different shade of a gray. Ebony, taupe, and gunmetal,

respectively. Most notable in her choice of clothing, her gloves adorned in gems of onyx on the knuckles.

“How can I help you?” He asks.

“Red hair. Skinny. A little on the meek side. French boy. You are him! Call me Chrys.”

“Hello, Chrys.” Arman feels awkward by that blunt but accurate description. “Are you looking to stay the night? The bar is closing in a few hours, so you may help yourself to that as well. Should I get you checked in?”

“Oh, no. That won’t be necessary. I am actually about to leave. I had to drop this off.” From her handbag, she gives him a single mail. “The woman called Maria Hernandez wanted me to deliver this to you. I accompanied her and Rex for a while on the way up here. Since my plan was to get here before them, I figured I could deliver this to you!”

“She is coming back! Thank goodness.” Arman takes the envelope. “When is she coming back?”

“Can’t tell! I can’t see the future. Hopefully, she arrives soon enough!”

He looks at the woman again. “You seem familiar somehow. Have I seen you in Seattle before? It’s those clothes.”

“I do not think so. Maybe you smelled me before? I heard you have a powerful nose. You can distinguish between different smells. Sometimes, you can recognize people because of it!”

“Did Maria Hernandez tell you about my nose?!”

“She did not need to tell me anything,” Chrys giggles. She looks around the lobby. “I see so much in your future!”

But I cannot say for sure what that is. But I hope it is as lovely as this.”

Realizing he was still shaking her hand, he let go.

“Were you the one that wrote that comment?”

“Comment? I have never been here before. But I am almost tempted to stay.”

Arman, a little tired of this messenger’s playfulness, wants her to be on with her business so he can get on with his own. “Thank you, Chrys. If there is nothing else I can do for you, I must get back to waiting for the engineer. He is supposed to be here any minute now.”

“Oh. I do have to get back to searching Pacifica for something else. That’s why I jumped ahead. But before I leave, I wanted to ask you something. About Maria Hernandez.”

“Sure.”

Chrys takes one of his hands, resting it in her palm.

“You both are close, right?”

“Yes.”

“Is she happy here?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I can’t say. But can you tell me if she is happy here? In Seattle.”

“She is not here, so I wouldn’t know for sure.”

“Okay.”

Arman explains, “I don’t know. I sometimes worry that Maria will not want to come back. It seems that life out there is all she knows. But, if she is coming back, then she must have some happiness here. Yes?”

She replies to his worrying thoughts, “Be natural with

her. Be yourself. Let her know who you are and act accordingly. I think too many men try to be something they are not. Or overcompensate for a woman's affection."

"No need to worry about that!" He grins. "I do not have that kind of affection for her!"

"That's not what I meant, but— never mind." Chrys lets his hand go. She walks out the door of the Triangle Saloon's lobby. "Goodbye, Arman Rousseau. It was a pleasure meeting you."

Arman looks at his letter. He realizes something.

He runs out the lobby door, hoping to get one last look at her.

She is gone. Arman scopes down the corners in each direction. Still, no sight of her.

The only people he sees are the Seattle citizens greeting him with friendly smiles. Couples and lonely people stroll Seattle's sidewalks, often paying the bar a visit. After inviting a new customer, inside the hotel, he pays the thought of Chrys no more attention.

After closing time, again, Arman responds to Maria Hernandez's latest letter. He did the same thing for the last two letters, as well as writing up fifty other letters about his experiences running the Triangle Saloon. They will be delivered personally by him upon her return.

The third letter from Maria Hernandez to Arman Rousseau, on her journey to collect her belongings, dated May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2102.

The Triangle Saloon

*Dear Arman,*

*It has been a while. I apologize. And I apologize in advance if there is any further delay. Just know, it may be a necessary detour. But I am nearing the end of this journey.*

*I ran into R—'s Tribe the other day. Their base of operations has yet to change, surprisingly, after everything that has happened. To them, there is no place like home.*

*That character of a person in a black hat has offered to retrieve my belongings. The entire tribe has. It would be after I have filled my wagon that I realize how blessed I am by their kindness. I take them up on their offer. They have the storage space and the means to hold and protect my possessions.*

~~*But enough about them. I want to tell you more about Rex! But I don't know what to say, to be honest. I have this feeling in the pit of my heart. Oh my— I'm falling in love!*~~

~~*It makes sense! He's courageous, carefree, speaks his mind, and owns a buffalo ranch! That's all the qualities I'm looking for in a man.*~~

~~*I hope you don't mind, but I thought I should tell you now, so you won't feel hurt in the end. But I think Rex is cuter than you! He's also super masculine. That riveting chest. Those biceps. Did I see abs the other day? And his legs look like they can do some heavy lifting on their own! Oh, man! I'm in love!*~~

~~*I'm gonna ask him to dance with me tonight, like in those movies. Then we can spend an evening under the moonlight. I wonder what will happen next?!*~~

~~*I know! I'll move to Portland.*~~

~~*Goodbye,*~~

~~*Tottie*~~

*If you do read through the scratching above, I hope you find the above FANTASY in good humor. I only have this sheet of paper left, so I cannot throw it away. You know me well enough to not be THAT intimate with a stranger like Rex's writing would suggest. He lives in a bubble, remember? He thinks he knows what all ladies like. He could not be any more wrong.*

*And his muscles are actually not THAT impressive. I would know since I saw them at the lake. He thinks he is SO machismo, what else do you expect from a man who has only classical films to reference?*

*I might take him up on dancing under the moonlight. His sturdy legs wobbling when he attempts basic steps would be a sight to see. Afterward, we will sleep by the campfire that separates us.*

*Although. I do admire that Rex has taken my lessons in reading and writing seriously.*

*He is laughing at me now. And I am laughing too. I am going to have to end this nicely since he is looking over my shoulder.*

*We survived. We are coming home. And for your reference, "Tottie" is NOT a name you can call me. I am unsure if I like him calling me that either. He says it means "fast girl." I never heard such a word in my life. And what is it with these men I find and their obsession with the speed of my reflexes? At least you have patience with me.*

*See you soon, my friend,  
~~Maria Hernandez~~. Tottie.*



# Chapter 8

## Home

Arman grew more anxious with each passing day. Will Maria Hernandez make the trip home? Is she safe? Did she lose anything on the journey? Are there anymore *necessary detours* holding her up? Is she alive?

He does not think about the answers. The questions linger in his head as he works.

An unusual odor came into the bar two weeks after the last letter he received. He did not give it any attention, as unusual as it was. Maria Hernandez was on his mind.

“Can I get a shot of whiskey. Make it two.”

Not only was she on his mind, but Maria Hernandez was also in his bar.

“You’re back!”

“Of course, I am back! We are partners. Remember?”

“I do remember. But if I could be honest,” Arman hesitates to finish.

She remembers. “I did not sound so certain of coming back when I left, did I?”

He shakes his head.

“If you still want me as your partner, I will have so much to share.” She looks around, remembering she has to speak like Maria Hernandez. “It took a while to get the trades going, but we did it! Paintings. Statues. Some furniture, as well. And all for the Triangle Saloon! And

there will be more shipments later. Our investors will be happy.”

Arman smiles. “As long as you are here, that that is all that matters, friend.”

They hug, but not for long. She warns him that she needs his help. He leaves Phil with the customers in the bar as he attends to the bison-drawn caravan.

The caravan is cloaked by dusty brown drapes over frames made of wood. The buffalo are shaggy and unkempt, but their heaviness and sturdiness are a marvel. But not much of a marvel as the man she rode in with. Her driver looked like a cowboy she described in the Western stories, with a wide-brimmed hat like hers and the peasantry clothing suited for field work.

It is everything he imagined. He turns to Maria Hernandez to ask about her treasures. He sees her busy marveling at the Triangle Saloon.

“Wow!” She says.

Maria Hernandez first gazes at the large metallic sign. The word *Saloon* is stylized and overlaps a large green triangle. The sign is posted on the roof at the flatiron’s tip. The red bricks of the hotel are repainted exactly how she remembers it. The bar, although made of the same building material, is painted to resemble the texture of wood. An awning stretches over the saloon doors and two large doors in front of them to shield the guests from the rain. She knows right then and there that she will never get bored looking at it.

“It is beautiful, Arman. And you did that on your own.”

“I doubt I could have done it all on my own.”

“Do not ever doubt yourself. You can achieve anything you put your mind to. If you want to fly, then always aim high.”

“What I meant is that you did give me the design instructions. And I got to hand it to Seattle’s finest construction workers for building fast! They got everything fixed! They also repaired the parking garage below. I told them to seal off the outside entrance with concrete and reconstruct it as an basement. I was thinking of using it as a cellar.”

“Howdy! Pleasure to meet you,” Rex jumped off his seat to shake Arman’s hand. “Don’t mind me. Go on and kiss her. I figure you’ve been dying to that.”

“I can’t do that!” Arman let his hand go. “No way!”

“Why?! Aren’t you Tottie’s husband?”

“No. He is not.” Maria Hernandez playfully pushes Rex. “Shut up and help me unload.”

Opening the drapes behind the caravan shocked Arman. They filled it completely with many of her treasures. Boxes hold small statues and wood carvings. Books are strapped together. Paintings grouped by size. Then there were a few items that could not be organized to fit neatly.

Arman did not know where to begin and followed her lead, taking the box next to the first crate she removed.

“What’s in here that belongs to you?” he asks.

She answers, “Everything. But like I said, some of the stuff is going to the Triangle Saloon.”

“I thought you left it all with those mages?”

“We left most of them. But there will be more carriages on their way.”

They enter the bar with a few boxes. Arman tells Phil the bartender and Jacque that he will be busy and to take care of the customers. To Phil’s disappointment, there are more customers at the bar than he can handle on his own. Jacque tries to assist Phil, but the workload is too much. Maria Hernandez hesitates leaving the bar, feeling the urge to help them as well.

Knock, knock. One of the customers taps his mug on the counter. “More beer!”

“One moment sir!” Phil fills the pitcher.

Knock, knock.

“More beer!”

Knock, knock.