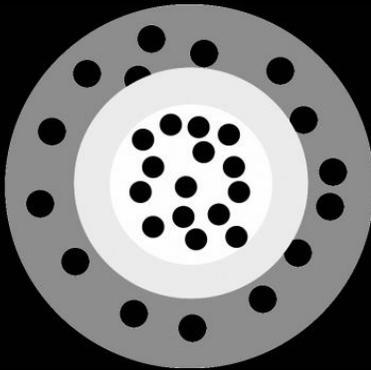


## Chapter 1



**C4/686, Lhinwa 26<sup>th</sup>, Alloday**

Roxwell Jairden-Willowspring knocked out an obnoxious melody, rapping his knuckles against his girlfriend's apartment door. Laminate wood shined neonlike in the blacklight of the posh hallway. It looked as if someone had scrubbed it over with a green highlighter.

The door opened, sudden. Roxwell stepped back, startled.

Pen laDemy stood in the entryway, purposefully allowing him enough space to enter. Roxwell held out his arms, cheerfully expecting her to jump into a hug.

Pen tightened her floof of a ponytail. "I'm not leaving right away. I want to hear more about this so-called connection of yours."

Roxwell's eyes narrowed, contemplative and dull. "I thought I explained everything over the telecommune." Stepping inside, lax and lackadaisical, his slouch seemed to sink down into his legs. The foyer opened directly into a cylindrical parlor. Staircase inlaid in smooth walls swooped across the dim gold room. Ceiling bedazzled in sagging garlands of spun silver, reflecting dewy rainbows. A sunken floor, and, at the lowest point, a white fur sofa faced a sharp coffee table. Harsh-cornered, the table's body was a slab of glass, held up with nubby silver legs.

"Please be quiet." Pen said. "My sister and her friend are upstairs." She sat on the sofa with the reserved poise of a dignitary.

Roxwell didn't sit so much as plop, tossing off his sandals and resting his callused feet on the glass table. "That's no prob, because I don't want to stay long anyways. And if you were smart, you'd come with me. You need to trust me, Pen. I'm totally sure about this guy! For real, he's the real deal."

While speaking with passionate and embarrassing agitation, he pushed a hand into his right front pocket. It remerged with a dollop of red-pepper sunflower seeds. Head tilted back, he poured the snack into his mouth, chewing seed shells, jaw foully agape.

Pen glared a little. "How can you be so sure?"

Roxwell didn't have a logical reason for his certainty, but he had plenty of reasons. He chewed and talked at the same time. "He's just the most talented guy I've ever met. A true pro

on his armonica! And he said he knows how to play with such wild skills because, get this, the guy's been alive for over two centuries!"

He attempted resting his hand on Pen's thigh: she scotched over, stress-gritting her back molars into ever-sharpening fangs.

"This person might have been lying to you." She said.

"Chill out," Roxwell insisted. "He wouldn't lie to me. You'll understand when you meet him."

But Pen stopped paying attention: she stared at the smudges his dirty feet left on the coffee table, imagined her mom coming home to this evidence of her boyfriend, which made her suddenly scared she would see her parents casually arriving, and she impulsively checked the front door. They were supposed to be far away. Vacationing for the weekend in Greenhill, a coastal city they would never, technically, visit. Sun-Chill Airlines expressly delivered them into the isolated paradise of a SkyClear spa and resort.

Except maybe their flight got cancelled, and maybe they didn't bother with an informative telecommune. They never bothered telecommuning whenever their plans changed like that.

"I don't know." She eventually said, uninterested, her thoughts somewhere else. "You can meet up with this guy if you want to, but I won't. I'm not convinced."

Roxwell hopped onto his feet and into his sandals. "Fine then." He theatrically edged backward over the glittering, blue carpet, heading toward the door. "I thought you were serious about learning resurrection, but if you're too afraid to explore every possible avenue, then maybe you shouldn't meet this guy. That's cool too."

Pen stared at him, briefly astounded by how utterly wrong he was. Fear didn't inform her decision; basic caution did. "Seriously, I don't think it's a good idea to trust a stranger."

“But this guy’s not a stranger!” Roxwell stopped moving. “He’s a fellow musician! Didn’t I tell you that? I met him at the weekly open jam in the park.”

“You didn’t tell me much, Roxwell. All you said was that you met this guy yesterday, that he might want to be in a band with you, and that tonight he’s introducing you to a resurrection circle. Then, before I could say anything, you said you were on your way to pick me up and disconnected. I never even had a chance to say anything.”

Roxwell enthusiastically shrugged. “I’m sorry! I’m excited! I mean, this could be it! This could be the night we learn how to live forever!”

“Can you explain why you trust him so much? What if he just wants to report you for the reward?”

“You just need to meet this guy, then you would know how cool he is. After the show, he invited all of us musicians to an underground bar where they don’t check your IDs. That’s where him and I just hit it off! Talking about music and stuff!” Roxwell beamed.

“Do you even know his name?”

“I don’t know his real name, but he goes by Razor Blue.” He paused.

Pen waited. “Ok?” She said.

Roxwell sighed. “He’s called Razor Blue because in a resurrection circle that means he’s a recruiter.”

“So he told you a lot about resurrection circles?”

Roxwell nodded.

“But how did resurrection get brought up in the first place?”

“I asked him how he played his armorica so well, like I knew he had some kind of pro tip secret. That’s when he said he practiced for literally hundreds of years. I feel like I’m repeating myself.” Roxwell squinted. “Didn’t I already tell you that?”

Pen breezed past his basic confusion. “So he casually told you he was a resurrectionist, just like that? Why would he trust you?”

“Because he likes me. Like I said, we hit it off! He told me to meet him at the abandoned Heira altar at exactly 9:00. Then he told me we shouldn’t discuss it anymore. It felt very cool, almost like I was in a spy vision.”

Pen thought this was a silly story. She believed in the existence of underground resurrection circles, but she doubted they operated like this, recruiting random teenage boys at public jam sessions in the park.

“Ok.” She said, her skepticism faltering. To her great annoyance, she was tempted to come along despite her reservations. “Can I try telecommuning my friend Beri so she can come too?”

If she was about to break the law, she needed someone she could trust.

Roxwell shook his head. “I wasn’t supposed to tell anyone. I only told you because I.” He paused, thoughtful and long. “Yeah, I love you.” He waited.

Pen didn’t know what to say.

“So uh yeah.” Roxwell stammered. “You should consider yourself lucky I’m offering you this opportunity.”

“I don’t feel lucky. I’ll be trespassing on government property to meet a person I don’t know. We could be arrested.”

Roxwell clicked his tongue. “You want to learn resurrection don’t you? Do you have a better lead?”

Pen thought about this. She didn’t have a ghost of a lead. Roxwell’s dubious connection was better than anything she, as of yet, discovered. According to rumors, the resurrection circles left clues of their existence in old items, junk, and antiques, the random tawdry crap of

resale boutiques. Pen and Beri regularly hung out in the recycle shops. Searching for clues, they never chanced upon salacious information about a clandestine, underground operation, although they did find some pop outfits, weird books, and quirky trinkets.

“Good point.” She admitted, zipping up her black denim cardigan. “I guess I’ll go.”

Saskia and Robin were hidden, crouched at the top of the curving, inlaid stairs. When they detected Roxwell’s boisterous knock-knock ditty, Saskia insisted on spying. Robin joked about how nosing in on her sister’s life was Saskia’s favorite pastime, but that didn’t stop her from joining in on the sneaky excursion. They overheard the entire conversation.

“We need to follow them.” Saskia whispered, while, on their way out the door, Pen and Roxwell argued over whether or not this illicit outing counted as a date.

“I don’t know.” Robin said, her whisper quieter. “Maybe we shouldn’t go. We’d be breaking so many laws: trespassing, possible goddess worship, maybe even seeking resurrection—what if we get arrested?”

Pen and Roxwell’s voices disappeared. “We’re just kids.” Saskia peeked over the stairs to be totally sure her sister was gone, then raised her voice. “We won’t get in that much trouble for trespassing.”

“I don’t know.” Robin stared at the distance. “What if we upset the goddess by breaking into her altar? A goddess won’t show us mercy just because we’re kids.”

“The goddesses don’t care about us anymore. Everyone knows that.”

“But I saw an episode of *When Goddesses Kill* where this guy says he was turned into a rock for a week after he broke into one of Adia’s abandoned altars.”

“Those visions are fake. They just want to scare you.”

Goddesses and people haven't openly interacted for over a thousand years. Pre-history claimed the era of legal goddess worship. It was cast out to the deep black seas of time intentionally forgotten. The time when the divine greedily fed on corporeal worship, and the human, in turn, employed the pantheon for its wars and cultures. Goddesses still provided the names for the months, and their altars stood resolute, albeit in disrepair, small gestures of admiration, which were presumably enough to satiate their need for devotion. A baseline worship to keep them alive.

"Why would a goddess care about us?" Saskia challenged.

"How should I know? I don't know what they're like at all. That's what makes them scary." Robin said.

"Even if I was scared, I can't let Penelope learn resurrection without me. But it's totally fine if you want to stay here." Saskia began to skip down the stairs. "I'm going."

Robin looked backward, as if there might be something there, in the empty hallway, some overlooked temptation to stay. She thudded down the stairs after Saskia.

A blacklit elevator transferred the girls down to the ground floor. Pace set by Saskia, they moved swiftly through an imitation marble lobby. Speckled patterns in the floor resembled lava. Security guards, behind their desk, dutifully ignored them.

Outside, soft plastic sidewalks shone blue. Colored lights signaled the countdown to curfew. The blue hour was the penultimate hour before kids and criminals could no longer wander. Ground lighting soaked giant neon signs, resulting in a mess of colors washing everyone in shifting tones of green, blue, red. Saskia and Robin hardly ever got to walk around Mosswell in the nighttime, and this was their first nocturnal exploration without adults. The air tasted sweet, flavored by spicy, grill smoke.

Robin wished they could stop for a snack: they passed such inviting storefront windows. She pined for rest in a cushioned booth, happily picking at a pretzel of deep-fried deliciousness—this seemed like a lot more fun than trailing Saskia's sister.

Saskia lived in a richer neighborhood than Robin. Where Robin lived, the restaurants and attractions were scattered and modest. There was nowhere in walking distance she could go to for amusement, except the library, but she disliked its stuffy, crowded atmosphere. Robin's neighborhood offered refineries, housing, and, though it was easy to forget, the abandoned Heira altar. They walked toward the same tran stop where Robin waited for her ride home after their sleepovers.

Saskia had never been in Robin's neighborhood. She had never met Robin's family or seen her house, and Robin wanted it to stay that way.

Robin's parents fought a lot. Usually, they contained themselves to yelling, but it always scared her, because sometimes it was more than yells. Sometimes it was accidentally deep cuts and her older brother Mads, panicked, driving mom to the closest Hospitality. Sometimes it was garbage angrily strewn across the stairs, requiring everyone's help to clean. Sometimes it was the soft sound of fists hitting body parts, followed by mature sobs in the bathroom, with nothing but a thin plaster wall separating Robin from the grief.

Sometimes, it bothered Robin how much nicer Saskia's family was, and how little she appreciated it. She especially wished she had a sister like Saskia's, or maybe she wished she could live with Pen, it was unclear. Pen was cool, but Robin didn't entirely know why she idolized her, or why she wanted to keep staring into her violet eyes for longer than was polite. Pen was the only person Robin ever met with violet eyes. They dazzled.

Saskia clung to Robin's arm. "Wait." She sidestepped them away from pedestrian traffic, hiding beneath a furniture store's awning. "I see them, there at the Eastbound stop. Just down the block. Do you know how to get to Heira's altar from here?"

Robin paused. She transformed into a sauna at the sight of Pen. Her insides steamed into airy, hot weightlessness.

"Robin?"

"What?"

"Do you know what to get to the altar from here?"

"Oh right! Yeah, it's actually pretty close to where I live. I know how to get there."

"Perfect." Saskia practically cheered.

It wasn't exactly perfect that Robin's home was so close to Heira's altar—the word bothered her. It hung in the air, misting and rank. Nothing was perfect about where she lived. She dreaded this unplanned return: this was a night she thought she would enjoy in Saskia and Pen's lovely home. Yet a faltering smile nonetheless flashed through her nervous disappointment.

Saskia closely resembled her sister. They had the same pointed hairline, giving their faces the same valentine heart shape. She was intoxicating to be around.

They laid low for a few minutes. An eastbound tran arrived. Saskia keenly watched Pen and Roxwell board.

After that tran fully departed, Saskia and Robin waited at the stop. Rides were supposed to arrive every fifteen minutes. Saskia's knees bounced. She hopped in place a few times. "In all the history of waiting, this has to be the longest anyone has ever waited for a tran."

Robin wasn't bothered. "It should be here in five minutes."

“But we might miss some of the action! If I don’t see how they do the resurrection, we’ll never know how it’s done!”

Robin remained downcast—it didn’t feel safe to look around. The stop filled up. Several glam people arrived, lining up for the next ride. They came from a dark-windowed club a block down the street. Blinking dazedly, still a spry dance in their step.

Everyone around was tall. Looming, they seemed in league together. It felt like every single adult somehow knew the girls were breaking the law. Any one of the adults could report them, and nobody would intervene if officers arrested two shady juveniles, who probably shouldn’t be out unsupervised so close to curfew.

“Maybe we don’t need to be out here.” Robin proposed, worried. “Wouldn’t Pen tell us if she learned anything interesting?”

Saskia laughed, a fake, unhappy laugh that sounded more like a bark. “Pen never tells me anything.”

“That’s so not true! Pen tells us lots of stuff!”

“Then why didn’t she tell us she was leaving?”

“Probably because she wouldn’t want us to follow her. I think she knows this isn’t a good idea. She obviously didn’t trust her friend.”

“You mean her boyfriend?”

“Really? Are you sure they’re dating?” Robin’s voice titled.

“I’m pretty sure. She calls him her boyfriend.”

“Huh. It doesn’t seem like she likes him very much.”

Earlier than scheduled, another transport arrived, silver and tubular, hissing as it slowed. Tiny red lights dotted its side, glowing whenever it halted. Waiting for the adults to enter first, the girls hopped inside. Saskia paid for both their fares.

They rode the tran for ten minutes. It was a ride Robin knew well. Plastic seats wore handmade stickers and cursive, neon markings on their backs. Dirt trails on the bare walkway. A cough reliably sounded off every minute or so.

While Robin pondered dangers, Saskia gazed out the window. Noticing the street was getting darker and darker. No towering malls. No apartment buildings. A darkness only occasionally punctured by the lights of a transport stop. Saskia thought it looked peaceful.

Robin nudged her when their stop arrived. Stepping off the bus, Saskia noticed the sidewalk wasn't as soft as it was in her neighborhood. Its light flickered murky, making it difficult to tell if it was blue or purple, which was important to know, because blue would mean they had more time.

Robin led the way to a piece of mundane scenery she walked past every single day. She hoped they'd make it back before curfew. Flagrantly disobeying more than two laws in a single night seemed excessive.

"Are you sure this is the right way?" Saskia asked.

Robin was surprised at how defensive she was. "Yes I'm sure! We're super close."

They soon reached the dark chain link fence that surrounded their destination. The barrier wasn't there for protection; it was a warning. Saskia climbed first, with Robin close behind.

The conical altar sank in on itself, a minor sag. Dressed in dead ivy. Windows and doors blocked with boards.

"I don't see how they got in, this place is like an impenetrable fortress." Saskia said, after they circled the structure.

She inspected the wall, desperate for any indication of a way inside.

Robin nervously glanced around her shoulder, over and over again.

It didn't take long to find it. Along the bottom, Saskia noticed a small hole, just big enough for a person to squeeze through. She moved aside the mulch that covered it, and she nearly cheeped with joy at the sight of a possible passage.

"That's the way in! It has to be!"

"I'm not sure a person can fit through there. It looks like it might be a raccoon hole." Robin's mind, rarely her ally, was inappropriately, and irritatingly, delighted with the idea of a raccoon living in an abandoned altar. Don't mind me, a tinny raccoon inhabiting the ruins of a living goddesses!

Robin half-laughed, half-hiccoughed, caught between cautious anxiety and manic hilarity.

Saskia shrugged. "I guess we can only find out by trying."

And with easy confidence, she practically dove into the small opening, successfully wriggling through to the other side. Robin hesitated, but followed her example, convinced it was a bad idea but too shy to say so.

The hole led to a cozy basement pantry. Its cupboards, in their prime, were goldenrod, but the paint grew sickly with time, aging into a drab paleness. The tables were covered in blotches of clumpy soil.

"Smells like something died in here." Saskia said.

Robin gasped and shushed. "I hear something." She whispered.

Saskia, attentive, paused. "It must be Penelope!" She whisper-shouted.

She was the only person who persisted calling her sister Penelope. For years, Pen requested others call her Pen. She gave up on correcting Saskia whenever she misnamed her.

“I guess it must be them. But maybe we shouldn’t talk unless we really need to.” Robin’s whisper wisped thinner with every word.

Saskia agreed.

Together, in silent resolution, they nudged at the pantry’s flakey door, guided by the faint murmur of distant, melodious voices.

They weren’t expecting such brilliance on the other side of the decrepit door: the long hallway, with shiny, goldenrod walls, papered over in net patterns iridescently shimmering red. A string of lit beeswax candles hovered in the romantic dim air, which smelled so rich their eyes watered.

Robin was more unnerved than awed. Something wasn’t right, she knew it, but couldn’t give the feeling words.

Nonetheless, she attempted to do just that. “This hallway is way too nice.” Robin whispered. “This feels dangerous.”

Saskia was silent for a while. “I thought we were only supposed to talk if it’s really important.”

Frustrated, Robin wanted to scratch the hot flare in her cheeks. She didn’t say anything else, sharing her misgivings with herself solely. An ominous tingle in her mind screamed *turn around and run*.