

## SASKIA

Svorika always left a bitter aftertaste.

It wasn't Saskia's first time there; she had lived nearly a hundred years and had returned countless times. Each visit left her with a strange sensation; when she was there, memories intensified. Memories of when she had been a deity came flooding back: grand parties in halls lit by crystal chandeliers, endless corridors of warm marble, gardens with an unending variety of flowers and plants, massive fountains adorned with marble statues, decorations and burgundy fabrics that brought the castle to life. Svorika had been a warm, majestic kingdom, one of the most respected and admired among all fifteen realms. The place other deities frequently visited to witness its grandeur and attend its magnificent celebrations. It was a place where every corner was steeped in history, power, and beauty.

And now... only sand and dirt remained. There was not the slightest trace of the splendid place Svorika had once been. The land stretched empty in every direction; it was the only thing one could expect, abandoned centuries ago. There were no signs of houses or life for miles. What unsettled her most was not the destruction, but the silence. That was why she had never stayed more than a few hours, the place felt overwhelmingly empty and melancholic. She remembered another reason for not lingering longer: the climate; the sun beat down mercilessly and oppressively upon them, as if the kingdom itself wanted to punish anyone who dared to enter.

As they walked across the vast terrain, Saskia recalled how many times she had returned to Svorika trying to uncover a little more of the truth, to remember her origins and what everything had been like when she had been a deity. All her attempts had been in vain; despite the years spent coming to this place in search of answers, she still did not fully understand who she was or how she had gone from being a deity to inhabiting the body of a woman. That was the greatest problem with the Curses, they knew they

were deities, yet the rest of their history only came to their minds as blurry fragments of a dream, incomplete memories that appeared and vanished before they could fully comprehend them. At least Saskia had learned to control her powers, and she imagined that the rest of the Curses had as well; it was the only thing that, in some way, offered her comfort. Now, being there, she felt everything vibrating within her with an intensity she had never experienced before.

Saskia glanced to her side. Everyone else was exhausted, they had been riding for hours, and they didn't even know for certain what they were searching for. They knew their mission was to find the ancient place where the dagger lay, the one they had to recover, but no one knew what the site would be like, or what obstacles they would face in retrieving it. Saskia was not thrilled at the idea of traveling so many miles and undergoing trials she didn't fully understand, all just to recover the single object capable of killing her. At first, she had been reluctant to take on the task, but it was her only option if they wanted to stop Lucien.

According to the Liber Arcanum, the book of the oldest secrets, there were several daggers forged in the earliest times of the world, when deities still walked among the realms. Each had the power to kill a Curse. For centuries, they had remained hidden, each within the kingdom of the Curse to which it belonged. They had stayed lost for generations, protected by places difficult to find and dared by very few to seek. They needed to gather them all in order to create a key capable of opening the Aetherian. No one knew exactly what lay on the other side of the Aetherian Arch. Some said it was a prison created to contain the true celestial bodies of the Curses; others claimed it was a force capable of destroying them completely. Saskia did not know which of the stories was true. She could only hope that, this time, the legends were not wrong and it would solve their problem one way or another. All she could think of was that she wanted it all to be over.

She felt Caspian's presence at her side and turned her head. For a moment that felt eternal, their eyes met. Saskia didn't feel like talking; the walk and the desolation of her kingdom had filled her with immense sorrow. She wondered if he remembered everything they had been through together. Since she had found him again, all she wanted was to know the truth: where he had been, why he had left her, and why now, after so much time, he had decided to help her. They hadn't had many chances to speak alone, and deep-down Saskia also knew that she herself had avoided every possible

conversation. She wanted to know the truth, but feared what it might imply. She feared that Caspian had decided to forget all their shared memories.

Nikolai interrupted her thoughts.

—Saskia, let us know if you sense anything... any clue as to where the entrance might be. This is your kingdom; your connection is stronger than ours.

She took a deep breath and nodded. She felt that every step in this kingdom brought her closer to memories she wasn't sure she wanted to relive, or at least not in front of all of them. She observed the rest of the group: Dante to her right, always with a serious expression and slightly apart from the others; Eloise walking next to Nikolai, they seemed unwilling to separate for even a second, as if being apart would make them lose the way to each other, Saskia didn't blame them, that was the effect of her kingdom; Shawn always playing with a stream of water between his hands, and Josie at his side watching with an amused expression; Harshaw and Aliona were tense, they weren't used to traveling, let alone through such desolate and vast terrain; Zoya, on the other hand, kept her gaze fixed ahead, imposing, small rays of light dancing around her, Saskia found that girl frightening, even though she was much more powerful.

—I feel something —she finally replied, in a low voice—. I feel heartbeats...

—Could it be because everyone here is alive? —Dante interrupted.

—Don't be stupid, Dante, let her speak —Josie snapped.

Her own thoughts began to whirl. She didn't exactly know what she should be looking for, but she imagined it wouldn't be heartbeats. It couldn't be something alive... nothing else besides them should be there. Yet there was something: something that vibrated just beneath her perception. It wasn't from them. After so much time together, Saskia had learned to differentiate the heartbeats and noises each of them produced, and those she felt now did not belong to the group. Suddenly, the heartbeats intensified, and Saskia understood. She lifted her head and saw a group approaching. From the way they vibrated, she sensed they were not ordinary humans: they were Mythra, and they were not coming in peace.

—They're coming —Zoya warned.

Nikolai froze, his eyes scanning the terrain swiftly, his expression tightening slightly. Saskia knew him well enough to understand what that

look meant: Nikolai was devising a plan. Dante, Caspian, and Nikolai moved slightly ahead of the others, forming the first line of defense. The rest abandoned what they were doing and focused, attentive to what was approaching. Saskia could feel their hearts; fear and excitement mingled, and she knew that, even if unspoken, everyone was ready for the fight. Her own power throbbed within her, amplified by Svorika, ready to erupt.

Suddenly, a group of twenty Mythra emerged from the horizon. Before they could even react, fireballs were hurled toward them.

—Get down! —Nikolai shouted as he ran to one side—. Shawn, water!

Without a second thought, Shawn raised columns of water that blocked the first flames. The Mythra outnumbered them and were well-prepared; they didn't rely solely on their powers, but also on projectiles. Nikolai and Dante drew their weapons and began firing. Eloise and Zoya summoned currents of air that deflected the projectiles. The exchange was swift, but every enemy attack was calculated. Nikolai aimed and shot, bringing one of them down.

Saskia stayed with the rest, slightly behind. She observed the others' movements carefully, feeling each heartbeat. Not only that, she sensed the blood coursing, the air filling their lungs, every sound their bodies made, as if her powers were amplified. Without thinking, purely by instinct, Saskia moved ahead of the group. She didn't hear what the others said; the sounds of their bodies were too loud that there was no room to hear anything else. She wasn't fully aware of what she was doing; Saskia slowly raised her hands toward the Mythra. She listened with unbearable clarity: the rhythm of their hearts, the air moving in and out of their lungs, blood flowing through their bodies. She focused on that sound. At first, it was almost imperceptible. One Mythra clutched his chest, frowning, as if the air had suddenly grown too heavy. Another tried to inhale harder, but their breathing came out broken. Then it began. Their lungs stopped functioning properly. Air no longer entered easily. They tried to breathe, but each gasp was shorter than the last, more desperate. Some began to stagger, others clutched their chests, trying to understand what was happening. The heartbeats Saskia heard became chaotic, faster, more frantic. One fell to his knees first, trying to fill his lungs with air that was no longer there. Another opened his mouth for oxygen, but all that came out was a dry gasp. Saskia clenched her fingers, and in that instant, the pulses compressed under her power. Their bodies fought against her, but she held the power. Then everything stopped. The

bodies collapsed almost simultaneously, hitting the ground with dry thuds that echoed in the ensuing silence.

Saskia regained a bit of composure and froze at the sight of what she had done. She had mercilessly killed twenty Mythra. Their bodies lay on the ground, bearing the marks of a harsh and cruel death. She looked at the others; all were silent, watching her. None dared utter a single word. She saw it in their eyes, felt it in their heartbeats: they were scared of her. Saskia thought of Caspian; his eyes showed an unreadable expression. «What would he think of me? » she thought. She had just killed twenty people at once; she had made their lungs explode. It wasn't new that she could kill someone simply by destroying their organs, but she had never done it before, much less to so many at once. Before, she would have merely neutralized them, rendered them unconscious, but now she had killed.

—We should keep moving. —Eloise spoke, breaking the silence.

No one spoke along the way. On one hand, Saskia was grateful, they allowed her to organize her thoughts; on the other, the lack of conversation made her nervous. Were they afraid of her? All of them had powers capable of killing anyone. That had never been the problem. The problem was that, until now, none had had to use them in that way. From the beginning, they had made a silent agreement: they would try not to kill the Mythra that were with Lucien. After all, they weren't their true enemies. Many of them had grown up together, trained together, shared years of their lives before everything broke. The Mythra community had never been very large; in a way, everyone knew each other. Humans had feared them for centuries. They had treated them as something dangerous, something to keep under control. That was exactly the wound Lucien had learned to exploit. He promised them power, respect, a world where they would no longer be marginalized or hunted. But his solution was the worst of all: to take control and kill the entire human race. Saskia and the others knew that wasn't the way. That's why, even now, when some Mythra fought alongside Lucien, they still tried not to kill them. Whenever they could, they neutralized them, left them unconscious, or simply forced them to retreat. Because, at the end of the day, they were still their own, friends, people they had grown up with, and no one wanted to be the first to cross that line. But now Saskia had done it; she hadn't just taken life; she had done it cruelly.

They rode for another half hour. Nothing in sight, just earth and desolation. Saskia was fed up with Svorika, swore she wouldn't return after finishing their mission. She thought about what had happened, trying to

recall what went through her mind when she did it. She wanted to say that it had been her powers, her divine impulse and instinct that had led her to commit the act, but something deep inside told her she had known, that she had wanted to test herself, that it was she who had accepted that power consume her, just to feel something she had never experienced before. She also thought about how she didn't know that she was capable of doing that. Ninety-three years were not enough to fully understand her powers as a deity; she still wasn't sure of her limits, and in the years after separating from Caspian she hadn't wanted to explore them either. She had sought a life that allowed her to forget all that, to be normal.

—How can you be so calm, damn it? —Shawn said, snapping her back to the present—. We just killed twenty Mythra, twenty of ours.

Josie glared at him.

—It was an accident —Josie said.

—Do you think they wouldn't have killed us? —Caspian replied—. If you think so, you're being an idiot.

Shawn stepped toward Caspian, looking like he was about to punch him. Harshaw and Nikolai rushed to separate them.

—What the hell do you think you're doing? —Nikolai said as he pulled him back.

—He just called me an idiot, he is the idiot —Shawn said, struggling to free himself—. Don't you understand she just killed our people? —Shawn looked at her—. And not just killed them, she did it cruelly, made them suffer, and showed no sign of remorse.

Caspian stepped closer to Shawn.

—We're at war, what did you expect?

—But our war isn't against them.

—You're right —Saskia finally said. She couldn't let them keep fighting over something she had done—. It's my fault, but I assure you I don't know what happened. I've never felt that before. It was like a force acted through me. I didn't plan it; my powers went out of control.

Shawn gave her a hard look.

—It wasn't your fault —Josie said. She moved closer to her—. You just saw the situation we were in and acted on instinct to protect us.

—I want you to know no one blames you. You did what you had to do —Nikolai said.

—I do —Shawn replied.

—You have no right to speak —Aliona said firmly—. You've killed Mythra too.

Shawn opened his mouth to reply, but Aliona continued before he could.

—We've all done it. We're at war, whether you like it or not. And in a war people die. Not because we want to, but because it's inevitable —Aliona continued—. We do it for a good cause. For something bigger than any one of us. And yes... that means, whether we like it or not, there will be moments we have to kill.

Shawn fell silent. Silence settled among them. Saskia didn't say anything either. She didn't trust what she could said at that moment. She was grateful that Aliona had spoken. For a moment she had thought Aliona was terrified after what she had done. She had feared seeing rejection in her eyes, but Aliona hadn't stepped away. What Aliona said was true. Everyone had had to face Mythra before, and they had to fight if they wanted to survive. Caspian looked at Shawn harshly one last time, and they kept walking.

Josie approached her while the rest moved ahead. For a few seconds, they walked in silence, until she finally spoke softly, just to her.

—Don't worry about what Shawn said —Josie said, trying to calm her—. For Shawn all this is... different. He is not only a Mythra, but he grew up among them, lived with them from a very young age, knew them even before us. Much before all this began —she paused briefly before continuing—. To him, they aren't just friends, they're family. He thinks that no matter what, we shouldn't kill them.

Saskia understood. Everyone understood.

—And in a way, he's right —Josie finally admitted—. We can't kill them, none of us have the right to decide who lives and who dies —she sighed wearily before looking at Saskia again—. But what happened today wasn't your fault, it was an accident. And no one here will blame you for it. Besides... as painful as it is to say, we are at war, and these deaths are inevitable.

They walked a few more steps in silence.

—I don't understand what happened —her voice came out weaker than she expected.

—It's this place, it has that effect on everyone. It's dead, destroyed, places like this... they affect the mind —Josie said after a moment—. But I suppose in your case it must be even stronger, after all, you used to be the queen.

The words hung between them. Saskia felt a strange weight in her chest. For a few steps, she said nothing. Her thoughts swirled with an uncomfortable intensity. Josie had become, without Saskia realizing it, the closest person she had there, a friend she could trust. And perhaps that was why, for the first time since the attack, she felt she couldn't keep it to herself any longer.

—Josie... —she began, stopping halfway through the sentence, saying it out loud was harder than she imagined—. It's my fault.

Josie slowly turned her head toward her, listening attentively.

—I could have controlled my powers —Saskia interrupted herself—. I know. But... something inside me wanted to do it. I wanted to feel them. To release them —she gripped the reins tightly—. I caused those deaths. And the worst part is... I didn't hesitate for even a second.

Josie didn't respond immediately. She just watched her for a moment before asking a simple question.

—Do you regret it?

Saskia frowned.

—What?

—If you regret it —Josie repeated calmly.

Saskia took a few seconds to answer.

—Now I do —she finally admitted—. I can't believe I did something like that —she lowered her gaze—. I used to think like Shawn, no one deserves for someone else to decide if they live or die. That's why, when you called me, I agreed to help. Lucien believes he can create a better world for us by eliminating humans... but he has no right to take their lives —her voice grew more bitter—. And I had no right to do what I did, even if they wanted to kill us.

Josie shook her head gently.



—You just said it yourself —Josie said, looking at her reassuringly—. You regret it, and that’s what matters. Besides, your powers... they’re not like the Mythra. We are Curses. We feel that energy more strongly —she made a small gesture with her hand, as if searching for the right words—. It’s like a constant pressure inside us. We need to release it from time to time. If we suppress it too much... it ends up consuming us.

Saskia remained silent.

—So, stop punishing yourself for this —Josie continued—. We’re at war. We’re Curses. These things happen —she sighed—. You’re supporting a good cause, so that all those humans still out there can keep their lives, so that the Mythra can live in a better world; and if you have to take some lives in the process, you will, and you’ll have to forgive yourself for it.

Saskia felt a small chill. Because, although Josie’s words comforted her, they also revealed a disturbing truth: this probably wouldn’t be the last time they would kill someone, neither for her nor for any of them.

Josie held her gaze for a moment longer, making sure she was truly better, gave her a small smile, and then stepped aside.

She headed toward Shawn, who was walking a few meters ahead with an annoyed expression. As soon as she reached him, she began to say something in a low voice; by the way she moved her hands and her expression, it was clear she was scolding him. Saskia only watched for a moment. She didn’t have the energy or desire to try to listen to what they were arguing about. Her mind was already too full.

—Wait

Zoya’s voice cut through the group’s silence. Everyone lifted their heads almost at the same time. Zoya had stopped a few meters ahead, staring fixedly at the horizon.

—There —she said, pointing with her hand.

Everyone followed her gaze. At first, it just seemed more of the same: dry, empty land. They moved a few more steps and began to make out shapes. Ruins. Saskia could distinguish low, fragmented structures emerging from the ground; broken columns, half-buried stone blocks, and collapsed arches formed an irregular maze of worn stone. They were incredibly old; the first sign that this place had once been inhabited.

—Do you think...? —Harshaw began.

—It's possible —Saskia replied—. If the Liber Arcanum was correct, this could be the entrance.

Saskia felt a strange pressure in her chest as she approached. There was something in that place, something ancient, that seemed to be waiting.

—Let's go —Nikolai said after a moment—. It's the only sign for miles, if the dagger is anywhere... these ruins will guide us.

They followed Nikolai and hurried toward it. They moved cautiously among the ruins. The stones creaked under the horses' hooves as they slowly ventured into the remains. If this was really what Nikolai thought, then they were one step closer. Saskia, like Nikolai, hoped to find, beneath that dead land, an entrance to the place where the dagger lay.

They stopped in front of the ruins. They dismounted and secured the horses to the side. Saskia scanned the remains and couldn't help but feel that this site had once been a temple dedicated to her in some distant past. There were no complete walls left, only scattered blocks that had once supported columns and roofs. On them, she could distinguish some symbols of deities evoking her own power: figures representing a healer helping others, tending wounds and mixing potions, and at the same time a figure seemingly killing another. Saskia shivered at everything she saw; in all the times she had been there, she had never encountered this place. The markings carved into the remaining stones evoked ancient ceremonies, offerings, and a cult that, in some way, had celebrated her power and presence. She began to remember ceremonies, herself dressed in magnificent burgundy robes, with all the people around her cheering; it was a vague, fragmented memory, but enough for Saskia to understand that this place had been made to honor her.

Zoya approached where they were, examining the symbols closely. She pointed to the fallen stones and confirmed what Saskia had been thinking.

—This... isn't just simple ruins —Zoya said softly—. It's a temple... in your honor, Saskia.

Before she could think further, Nikolai stepped forward a few paces and examined another set of symbols carved into the stone. His eyes narrowed as he carefully traced the engravings with his hands, passing them over the inscriptions worn by time.

—Look —he finally said, with a firm voice—. These... aren't just decorative symbols. They look like a mechanism.

Everyone stepped closer to where they were, observing the broken marble remains. Dante took a step forward, crossing his arms.

—I've heard of places like this —he said with a hint of seriousness that made them fall silent—. Before... before I was with you all, I helped Lucien interpret a part of the book. Places where the daggers remain, always come with a price to open them. I didn't expect them to be just simple ruins.

Saskia watched him silently as he spoke. There was something about Dante that seemed strange, familiar, and at the same time unsettling. He had once served Lucien, and according to what she had been told, he had participated in capturing many Mythra and humans to work for him; he had even tricked Josie into being forced to marry him, forming a supposed alliance that only served Lucien's purposes. Saskia had not witnessed any of those actions; Dante was already with them when she arrived. She knew Dante had realized Lucien was deceiving him, that he had betrayed him after Josie showed him the truth. But that same fact made her doubt, he had betrayed someone he had defended his whole life with impressive ease; could he do the same to them if Lucien offered a better benefit? The rest had already forgiven him, but Saskia didn't know if she could trust him, nor to what extent his experience with the dark side would influence his actions now.

—A price? —Saskia finally said.

Dante nodded slowly.

—Yes... someone must offer something of themselves. Not just anyone. It has to be a Mythra, or... a Curse. Someone capable of giving something valuable to open it. They will have to sacrifice part of their soul, so that the rest can enter —he paused slightly—. There's more. When you enter, this place... will take something from each of you, something you won't be able to fully recover.

Eloise stepped forward.

—Wait... you mean only one of us has to give their soul? But the rest are also at risk? What kind of sacrifice is it? Blood? What exactly will it take from us? What happens if...

Dante interrupted her softly but firmly.

—Yes, that's more or less the idea. One of you must offer part of your soul, as a conscious sacrifice, and yes, it is a blood sacrifice; you will give your blood and it will take part of your soul. But even the rest, upon entering,

the place will take something from us... something we won't be able to recover afterwards. I don't know how much, I don't know exactly what, but it will mark us in some way. It's the price we all must pay to find the dagger.

Saskia swallowed, feeling her own heart racing.

—So... we're all going to lose something, in some way.

Dante nodded again. Saskia looked to her sides; everyone was tense, they hadn't expected that everyone would have to pay a price to enter.

—No one enters for free. No one leaves intact. And that's the risk we must accept if we want to reach what we're looking for.

Saskia thought about what Dante had said: one of them would have to offer part of their soul to enter. For a moment, the responsibility felt heavier than she could bear. «It has to be me, right?» she thought. It was her kingdom, her dagger...

Before she could react, Caspian stepped forward and approached one of the stones indicating the mechanism. On the cracked marble surface was carved the image of a deity like her. Caspian drew a blade from his belt and, without thinking, extended his hand to spill his blood over the stone. It was such a fast movement that Saskia barely had time to react. Instinctively, she stepped forward and caught his hand, stopping him.

For a moment, she froze. Her heart pounded as she looked at him, and a thought struck her: «Why did I grab his hand? Everyone is watching... and I... why did I do that?». The gazes of the others and the silence stretching between them, made her feel a strange vertigo.

—What are you doing? —she managed to say, trying to regain her composure while holding his hand, still surprised by Caspian's determination and unexpected action.

—I'll do it —he replied calmly, almost without hesitation.

Saskia frowned.

—No, Caspian... I'm going to open it. It's my responsibility.

—No —he replied firmly, but without raising his voice—. No, you don't have to do this alone. You didn't come here because you wanted to, you came for the rest, for the group. It's not your obligation; this affects all of us, and any of us should be capable of doing it for the good of everyone.

Saskia looked at him, searching for a sign of doubt, but she only found determination. She swallowed, lowered her gaze for a moment, and let go of his hand. She could feel Caspian's breathing and heartbeat; he was a little nervous, but he didn't show it. She stepped forward toward the stone.

As she watched Caspian place his hand on the carved surface and let the blood slide into the rune, her mind wandered. It wasn't an act for him, not exactly, nor for the cause. From the beginning, Caspian had made it clear to her that his support wasn't for the war or the goals of the others, but for her, for his judgment, for her ability to choose the right side. Every action he took, every risk he assumed, was out of loyalty to her. And now she had involved him in this; because of her, he was about to lose a part of his soul.

A strange warmth ran through her chest. She couldn't take her eyes off him. Every fiber of her body seemed to vibrate in unison with what was happening, and for a moment she thought she could feel what he felt: a sharp, strange pain, as if something inside Caspian were breaking, as if a part of his own essence were being absorbed by that ancient mechanism.

—Caspian... —Eloise whispered beside her. Her voice cut through the heavy air.

Saskia didn't need to look at them; she could feel how everyone was holding their breath, how time itself seemed to stand still.

The mechanism began to react. The stone creaked, and a beam of light shot from the carved symbols, illuminating everything that remained of the temple. Saskia could not look away; her entire body tensed as she sensed something of Caspian's soul seeping into the air, into the earth, as if connecting him to the place, and to her.

And then it happened. The stones began to move, and the ground beneath them suddenly split open. A dark tunnel appeared in the center, descending into the depths. Everything cracked apart without warning, as if the passage had always been hidden, as if it had been waiting for a sacrifice.

A shiver ran down Saskia's spine. She lifted her gaze and searched for Caspian. He didn't meet her eyes. His eyes were fixed on some undefined point, with an expression Saskia could not understand; he seemed lost, distant, as if something inside him had changed forever. She stepped closer to help him. She placed a hand on his shoulder and was about to ask if he was okay, but the instant she touched him, a current of energy surged through her body. It wasn't just cold; it was as if a void had opened between them, a sense that something was missing. She felt as if a piece of herself had

connected to what he had given, and fear ran through her immediately. He seemed to shudder in response; his eyes widened slightly in surprise, a tremor running through his shoulders.

They both jerked away from each other. Their hearts raced, their breaths came in short gasps. Using her own powers, she slowed her heartbeat, trying to calm herself. She felt the rest of the group watching them in silence. Dante was the first to break it.

—We'd better go inside. We can't afford to waste any more time.

Saskia barely nodded, still processing the strange connection, and stepped toward the tunnel that had appeared. Her heart continued pounding despite her attempts to calm it, and for a moment, she found it ironic: she could calm the fear of others, even alter the life force of those around her... but she couldn't even control her own. Her own body seemed to rebel against her.

—Are you okay? —Eloise asked, approaching her cautiously.

—Yes... yes, I just need a moment. Go on in.

One by one, the others began to descend into the tunnel, all in silence. Caspian stayed by her side until the very end. Though he avoided her gaze, he remained close, and Saskia was grateful for that.

After regaining her composure, it was finally their turn to cross the threshold. The moment she stepped in, Saskia felt darkness envelop her completely. Everything around her turned black; the light, the symbols, even the footsteps of the group and the sound of their heartbeats seemed to vanish. She felt the weight of everything that had happened, of everything yet to come. Her breathing became uneven, as if she were suffocating; her legs trembled, and a deep chill ran down her spine. Everything felt oppressive, and the last thing she sensed before losing consciousness was that the cave was claiming her, as if it had been waiting for her all this time.

And then... she lost all sense of everything.