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‘Keep your head down!’ whispers Alhwin, forcing my face into the blood-soaked sand.

As I hide next to my Soul Protector behind the sand dune, my body trembles uncontrollably and my heart thuds so hard I swear it can be heard above the crash of the waves. The Viking Soul Hunters continue to prowls the beach, looking for any surviving First Ascendants such as myself. Their ferocious whoops and war cries send a shiver down my spine and I peek up to see their coal-black eyes glinting in the darkness. The fearsome form of their leader, Tanas, stands over the twitching body of Mercia, his bloodied axe silhouetted against the dying flames of the hallowed fire.

‘What just happened?’ I hiss, spitting out sand. ‘Why did Mercia’s Light fail her?’

‘I don’t know, Kendra,’ mutters my Soul Protector. He reaches for his pitchfork as a Hunter draws closer to our hiding place. ‘I guess she wasn’t the one foretold by the Soul Prophecy after all –’

I blink away the Glimmer of myself as Kendra in my ninth-century past life and return to the present as Genna.

For a moment there's that strange sense of disembodiment as my soul adjusts to my body in its current life. Kendra's blond tresses are replaced by my familiar ringlets of light-brown hair, her milk-white skin becomes amber-brown, and her short, hardy physique so suited to her life as a farmer's daughter is exchanged for my more athletic gymnast's figure.

Although that incarnation was more than twelve hundred years ago and my soul lived in a different body, the same sense of despair that I felt then engulfs me now.

I watch my nemesis rise from the dead.

No longer an axe-wielding Viking, Tanas lives on in this life in the body of FBI agent Alex Lin. Tall, lithe and lethal, the leader of the Soul Hunters is dressed in a matt-black assault jacket. Her long dark hair falls in a sleek veil over her narrow shoulders, framing her slender, angular face and aviator sunglasses.

'Once more, your revered Soul Seer fails you,' she gloats, glancing with disdain at the injured Caleb writhing at her feet. Blood pours from the wound in his chest where the jade knife that she holds pierced him like a spear.

Spluttering blood, the white-haired and wrinkle-faced Caleb looks from Tanas to me and back again in wild-eyed confusion. 'B-b-but the Prophecy was f-f-fulfilled . . . You should be *dead!*'

Tanas shakes her head. 'Oh, Caleb. After your first feeble attempt all those centuries ago, I'd have thought you'd know better than to put your faith in false prophecies.'

'No! The Soul Prophecy is true!' he insists. 'The Soul Healer Empote and I *both* foresaw it . . . G-Genna's the one

true soul . . . She ignited the spark . . . when put to the Darkest test . . .' Caleb turns towards me, eyes pleading.

I bow my head, ashamed. I feel like a charlatan. The fate of the First Ascendants rested in my hands and, when the time came, I failed to defeat our enemy. Just like Mercia, I'm not the one foretold in the Soul Prophecy.

Tanas laughs, cruel and cold. 'Won't you Ascendants ever learn? My soul cannot be killed. Only *I* have the power to destroy souls.'

After uttering the unholy incantation from her ritual – '*Rura, rkumaa, raar ard ruhrd . . .*' – she gives a final cry of '*Ra-Ka!*' then plunges the jade knife deep into Caleb's heart. Fingers of blue lightning coil round Tanas's hand and dagger. Caleb's starlit blue eyes widen in agony, burning bright for a brief moment before the Light from his soul is extinguished forever. He slumps lifeless to the floor, his lion-headed cane clattering across the white marble flagstones of Haven's shattered glass pyramid.

'NO!' I scream as a fiery pain rips through me. My fellow surviving Ascendants – Santiago, Viviana, Sun-Hi, Tasha, Thabisa and her baby son, Kagiso – all experience the same torment.

The sudden loss of Light leaves me disorientated and sick to the stomach. The starless night sky presses down on me now like a shroud and my knees give way. Phoenix, my Soul Protector, reaches out to stop me collapsing. Our Chief Protector, Goggins, drops his Maori war club and catches the elderly Viviana, while the other Protectors and Soul Warriors close ranks to help their weakened charges. Out of nowhere a grief-stricken mewling howl echoes

round the pyramid as Nefertiti begins to grieve, and more wails from the other cats of Haven join her in a strained chorus for their dear departed Caleb.

Fierce tears are running down my cheeks and I glare at Tanas in hatred. ‘Why didn’t the Light bomb kill you? There’s no way you should have survived that intensity of Light!’

Tanas gives an amused smirk. ‘Do you have to ask, Genna? I haven’t lived and died countless lives not to have learned from my previous mistakes.’ She nods in the direction of Tarek, who is helping Thabisa with her baby. ‘Tarek’s previous little stunt with the Light grenade warned me of what might come, so I made suitable preparations.’ She proudly pats her tactical assault jacket. Its surface is oddly flat to the eye and impossibly black, like a hole torn in the fabric of space. ‘This jacket has been specially coated with a micro-thin layer of nano-carbon, which can absorb almost one hundred per cent of all light waves. And these –’ she removes her sunglasses to reveal her serpent-like dark eyes – ‘have a di-electric mirror layer that reflects the majority of light. Thus protecting me from your blast of Light.’ She arches a thin eyebrow. ‘I’ll admit, though, I wasn’t prepared for quite such an explosion.’

Tanas waves a hand to take in the destruction. Haven’s pyramid is now a mere shell, its solar panels blown out, the glass scattered like snow. The central altar and its crystal capstone have shattered into a thousand pieces, leaving a jagged stump. Littered everywhere are bodies of the Incarnates – the nameless FBI agents, police officers, soldiers, truck drivers, farmhands and the various other

unfortunate souls that Tanas managed to recruit to her Dark cause. Their weapons surround them like wreaths at a funeral.

As I gaze numbly at the devastation, still unable to believe that Tanas has managed to evade death so cunningly, I notice Damien stir. He groans and stiffly stretches his muscled limbs. The young Soul Hunter's fringe of raven-black hair lifts from his chalk-white face to reveal a pair of cracked sunglasses, their aviator design matching Tanas's shades. Dressed in the same matt-black tactical assault gear as his master, he gets unsteadily to his feet.

'Well, that was a blast!' He dusts off the fragments of glass from his jacket and hair.

'You're alive *too*?' My blood runs cold. The fact that Tanas had survived is bad enough, but knowing that my original Soul Hunter has also survived is almost more than I can bear.

Damien discards his broken sunglasses and grins at me. 'Aw, thanks. It's heart-warming to know you care so much, Genna.'

Phoenix, snatching up his Roman gladius sword from the ground, steps between us. 'Keep back, Damien, or I'll cut you down where you stand.'

Damien wags a disapproving finger. '*Tut-tut!* I wouldn't be so quick to start a fight, Phoenix. Especially when you haven't a hope in hell of winning.'

The sharpened point of a gladiator's trident is pressed against the side of Phoenix's neck. Holding the weapon's shaft is none other than Knuckleduster, the muscular young Hunter who sports a collection of vicious rings on her

fingers and is the meanest of Damien's ruthless gang. I glance round to discover that other members are alive and well too – the wiry and quick Blondie and the muscular, crooked-nosed Thug. But Spider, the rake-thin girl with a black widow tattoo on her neck, isn't among them. I'm guessing she's still pinned to the wall of the Glimmer Dome by her own stiletto blade, the result of her earlier fight with Phoenix.

'Drop your weapon before I drop you,' growls Knuckleduster as she pushes harder with the trident, drawing a bead of blood from Phoenix's neck.

Reluctantly Phoenix lets go of the sword and the gladius falls to the marble floor. The noise rouses more Incarnates wearing the protective gear, namely Tanas's cloaked High Priests and a select group of FBI agents and soldiers. Despite the decimation wreaked by the Light bomb among her ranks, Tanas's motley army still outnumber us almost three to one.

'Your cause is lost,' she declares. 'The Soul Prophecy has proven to be nothing but a fairy tale. Now it's time to extinguish the Light of Humanity . . . *for eternity!*'

2

The Incarnates rise one by one, gradually encircling us. After millennia upon millennia of fighting to save the Light, we've nowhere left to run or hide. However fierce and brave our Protectors may be, the Incarnates have the advantage in terms of both numbers and weapons. They carry guns, knives and even grenades, while we're down to a handful of old swords, clubs and other antique weaponry that Phoenix managed to grab from the Glimmer Dome.

A smirk of triumph crosses Tanas's thin lips as she sees the defeat in our eyes. Her smug expression reminds me of the way one of her past incarnations looked at me and my Protector once. She has the same keen cruelty on her face as the Roman commander of the infamous Twelfth Legion when he had us trapped at the edge of a sheer cliff. Our situation then was hopeless, and in this life it seems equally so. Despairing at our options, I'm forced to come to the only possible decision.

'Kill me,' I whisper to Phoenix.

He stares at me, horrified. Then he firmly shakes his head.

'Do it now!' I insist. *'Before it's too late.'*

The Incarnates raise their weapons, eager to attack yet awaiting their master's command. Our only escape, our only way of protecting the Light of Humanity, appears to be a quick death – one that will lead to reincarnating in a new life. But Tanas seems well aware of this as she holds back on their attack. She knows that in order to perform the necessary ritual to destroy our souls and snuff out the Light she must first capture all First Ascendants alive.

‘No, I can’t!’ Phoenix replies through gritted teeth. ‘I vowed: never again.’

His face contorts into a harrowing expression of guilt and abhorrence, and in his sapphire-blue eyes I recognize the same wretched look of anguish that he wore as the Roman slave Custos when he was forced to push me off that cliff to my death. But as he explained countless lives later: ‘*A violent or wrongful death damages the soul, weakens the Light, as well as the bond between us ... Killing you is the very last resort.*’

I glance around at the gathering of black-eyed Incarnates. Our current predicament surely warrants a last resort!

Damien and his gang shift like a pack of hungry wolves. The cloaked High Priests, their faces hooded, are murmuring their incantation while swaying in unison. The other Incarnates stand as still as sentry guards, weapons primed. My gaze turns to my fellow Ascendants. The all-too-young, ice-blond Tasha is weeping silently, a glistening trail of tears running down her snow-white cheeks. The irascible, bearded Santiago scowls at our foe, while Viviana, hardy as a gnarled olive tree in her old age, has found her feet and looks on defiantly. Sun-Hi and Thabisa huddle

protectively round the crying Kagiso. The Soul Protectors and Warriors that stand beside them put on a brave face, but the tense manner in which they grasp their weapons betrays what they really believe: this may be our last battle.

Still, Goggins' scowl shows that he's determined to take as many Incarnates as he can down with him. 'Come on!' he growls. 'What are you waiting for?'

'There's no need for you *all* to die,' says Tanas in an insidious tone, tapping Caleb's body with her foot. 'Goggins, tell your Protectors and Warriors to lay down their arms and surrender.'

'Never, Tanas. *Never* in a million years.'

Tanas sighs. 'It's over, Goggins. Even a blind man can see that!'

My gaze drops to the slaughtered figure of Caleb. The Soul Seer had put all his belief in me. Shown me my past to prepare me for the future. By building Haven as a secret sanctuary, safe from the Incarnates, he did his utmost to protect not only me but every First Ascendant. My stomach twists into a knot of guilt. It was my error of judgement in rescuing Phoenix that has led us here, to Haven's discovery and downfall. And it is partly my fault too, I realize, that Caleb is dead.

I see now that the only way to honour his life is to keep the Light burning.

I turn to Phoenix. 'Do you trust me?' I whisper, echoing the question he asked me long ago as Custos. He nods. I look him in the eye, seeking out his soul and willing him to do the unthinkable. The deep connection that binds us – the one forged between our souls on that fateful night he

first saved me from Tanas in the Great Rift Valley all those millennia ago – still burns bright and strong. I know that whatever happens that bond can never be broken . . . or, at least, I hope it can't.

'Your life with mine, as always?' I say softly, repeating the phrase that binds us.

He smiles with immense sadness, reluctantly accepting what must be done. 'Always,' he replies, his voice quavering. However, even as Phoenix prepares to take up his sword one last time and I steel myself for the pain of death, Nefertiti slips past and boldly strides up to Tanas. The Incarnate leader peers snootily down her nose at my sleek, sandy-coloured cat.

'Nefe!' I call sharply, as she sniffs at the limp and lifeless form of Caleb. Nudging the Soul Seer's wrinkled cheek with her soft nose, she gives him a tender lick. When she gets no response, her emerald eyes turn accusingly to Tanas. Hissing, Nefe bears her fangs and bristles her tail while Tanas looks on, indifferent to my cat's fierce display. Then Nefe meows in what she must imagine to be a cougar-like roar, but it comes out as a plaintive high-pitched cry.

Tanas chuckles at the pitiful challenge. 'Is that all you can offer, kitty-cat?'

Nefe, though, doesn't back down. Her call has summoned the other cats of Haven. They materialize out of the darkness, mewling their mournful lament at the death of their beloved Caleb. Bright green eyes shining and claws glinting, the feline army encircles the Incarnates.

'Well, if these are your reinforcements,' Blondie scoffs in a thin, reedy voice, 'I'd think seriously about surrendering

now.' He lashes out with his boot at a ginger tom that's stalked too close. The cat nimbly evades the kick, leaps up Blondie's leg and lands on his pockmarked face. Claws out, the animal tears at the Hunter's eyes. Blondie bawls in pain, drops his nunchaku and frantically tries to pull the cat away from him, but Nefe gives another cry and, as if on command, all the other cats go on the attack. With ear-piercing screeches, they launch themselves at the Incarnates, who are quickly overwhelmed.

'FIGHT FOR THE LIGHT!' shouts Goggins, seizing on the distraction and snatching up his Maori war club.

As a black-and-white cat pounces on Knuckleduster's back, Phoenix knocks away the trident and picks up his gladius sword. I dash over to where I'd dropped my katana earlier. I see Damien rushing to intercept me but a tabby leaps on him and sinks her teeth into his neck. He shrieks and drops to his knees, wrestling with the furry beast.

With my katana in hand, I feel a sense of renewed power and join the fight against the Incarnates. I fend off a truck driver wielding a crowbar, then deflect an iron pipe aimed at my head. To my right Goggins is swinging his war club with wild abandon, knocking down Hunters like they're skittles. To my left Jude is whirling her bo staff, striking any target in range while trying her best not to hit any of the cats. Tarek is standing close beside Thabisa, lashing out with his fists and feet at a High Priest trying to snatch her baby son. The remaining Warriors – Kohsoom, Steinar and Zara – have fanned out alongside Protector Blake to tackle the High Priests who have evaded the worst of the feline ambush.

I duck as an Incarnate swipes at me with a baseball bat, then I retaliate with a slash of my samurai sword. He rapidly retreats and in the process stumbles over a Siamese cat, landing hard on his backside. Before he can rise, Phoenix slams the pommel of his gladius on top of the man's head, knocking him out cold.

'Let's get out of here!' orders Phoenix.

'But we have the advantage,' I reply as I disarm an Incarnate of her hunting knife.

'Not for long,' says Phoenix with a grunt, as he deflects a steel pipe swung at his head. 'The Incarnates still outnumber us and –'

'Get off me, you stupid cat!' screams Tanas.

I glance round to see Nefe clawing at the Incarnate leader's face, Tanas clenching her by the scruff of the neck. Leaving Phoenix's side, I dash over to save Nefe, but before I reach her Thug's imposing bulk steps into my path. He kicks me hard in the chest, the blow feeling like a battering ram. Gasping for breath, I stagger backwards and hit the jagged stump of the altar, lose my grip of the katana and sprawl across the floor. Thug lumbers forward and brings down his mace-and-chain. I scramble away just in time as the spiked iron ball shatters the remains of the altar to pieces.

'Next time, I squish *you!*' he snarls, whirling his mace faster.

I hear Nefe let out a pained cry and whip round. Tanas is wringing her neck. I cast my eyes desperately about me for a weapon – anything to stop that monster killing my cat! – and spot a smoke grenade clipped to the belt of a

dead Incarnate soldier. Grabbing it, I pull the pin and toss the grenade at Tanas. It detonates with a deafening *bang* at her feet, sending up thick clouds of choking gas into the air. Eyes water, cats scatter, confusion reigns. Tanas, Nefe and Thug all disappear amid the suffocating smog.

As I crawl away, coughing and spluttering, I feel a hand seize my arm and wrench me to my feet. I go to punch my assailant in the jaw, then just manage to stop myself as Phoenix's face looms out of the mist.

'To the tunnel!' he rasps.