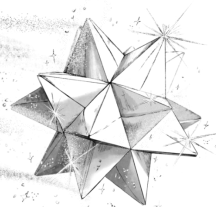


THE
**AGAPÉD
BEARER**
PARAGON GAMES

BOOK 2

HANNAH LINDSEY





I
FLYING PAPER STAR

“Tuff... I’m about to lose it.”

It was night 92, and I was surprised I hadn’t already lost it. I sat alongside my orange glainie, a memory sprite, as he perched his round seven-inch body on the window seal near my elbows. We were staring up at the stars like usual as my digital clock ran past midnight on Earth. Took every bit of my magic-filled, sane heart not to burst through the glass and jolt toward the starlit sky. Patience—I began to *loathe* that word, and all the unheard wishes tagged along with it.

Just like every summer night in 2011, we waited for a magical sign, a Keeper, or even a fallen star to signal my return to the magic world. I began to see permanent nose smudges on the window pane after the first month of agonizing waiting; even Tuff left his own stubby fingerprints. Both our hopes were dwindling. I thought I would never have wished for summer to hurry up, but now, I was *begging* for the season to fast-forward.

Tuff’s diamond, embedded onto his spherical body like a magical backpack, lit my freckled face with a tangerine glow as he turned toward me.

“*Hoot-hoot!*” His encouraging little whistle was the cutest thing, and he couldn’t be more right.

Another sigh seeped through my lips, causing a blur of clouds to form on the window from my warm breath. “*I know* they haven’t forgotten about me, but it’s officially been three months to this day.” I pinched my lips together before blurting, “How long is this going to *take?*”

A pinpoint dot of light *zoomed* across the sky.

Our faces pressed on the window, my nose and cheeks squished so hard my eyelashes flickered against the glass. *Could that be it?*

After a moment of waiting, nothing but silence followed. My fingers ran through the scalp of my long hair before bunching up the brunette waves in defeat, and my eyes sagged. I released another deep breath as my gainie whistled a saddening *whoot*.

Nothing but another normal, boring, magicless shooting star...

After the Wishing Star release around early May, Lady Ariela said I should take a break from training and enjoy relaxing back home. *Who said practicing magic wasn't relaxing?* I honestly couldn't think of a better way to spend summer than flying around planets and moving rocks with magic, all the while fighting monsters with a Keeper and Prince by my side. Everyone—including all the celestial Guardians and Keepers of Stars—said my heart needed a break from magic even though I didn't think so. I mean, sure, I defeated a hundred-year-old dark Mystic and almost died—but that didn't mean I wanted to take a vacation from magic training. No matter how much I wanted to disagree, I couldn't say no, especially to Gaius. If he said I needed rest, then I *really* needed rest.

So I rested... *mostly*. Unless Mom was at work, then I'd stay in my room, making it snow on my bed from the water I would manipulate from the running sink. I also discovered I could heat water as well, meaning I never had to suffer a lukewarm shower again. If the weather was clear in the mornings, I would run out to the woods and practice my terrain magic. Had to admit, I was getting pretty skilled at splitting branches off of trees with nothing but pebbles—even shooting a rock all the way through a pine's trunk like a bullet. Maybe that was something most terrain Mages could do, but I was proud. It was as close to magic training as I was going to get on Earth anyway.

The one magic I couldn't practice very well—the one I desired most in the whole world—was flying. Floating around in my room was fun for the first couple of nights, but I wanted to be soaring in the clouds again. That sensation of freedom, the drop of my heart when I would start free-falling, was something I kept dreaming of each night—another reason why Tuff and I scouted the skies through my window, in hopes of a sign from Gaius, Kamari, or the Guardians... yet nothing ever arrived.

It wasn't like I never tried to go back to Calendula or Boolavogue—I really did! Back in May, I evanesced to Planet Zena, just once, and the moment my foot stepped onto Kamari's asteroid, she belted out, "*Na so—yo best be restin' and not returnin' just yet! Dey will let yo know when to return, abi!*"

The thing was... *how was I to know when that was?* For a court of magical beings, *none* of them knew how to give proper instructions. So, here I was, August 2nd, running out of patience and my hidden stash of Oreos as I sat quietly in my bedroom with my magical, whistling pal, waiting in hopes of a sign from my silent teachers. Could be waiting for a star to fall, a magical creature to pop out of nowhere, or even for a portal to reappear back in my purple suitcase (the one I had before expired *again* without warning). *I just hope they don't show up at my—*

"Lisa! Are you awake yet?"

My eyes jolted open at the sound of Mom yelling through my closed door. *Wait—when did I fall asleep?* I looked at my alarm clock and immediately fell out of bed at the nightmare displayed in green on its digital face. With summer done and school starting, I completely forgot to reset my alarm.

"Why didn't you tell me it was already seven?" I yelled back, frantically grabbing clean clothes. *I knew I should have laid out my outfit on my bean bag last night!* "You know how important today is—I still needa shower!"

The moment I shot out of my room and toward the bathroom, Mom was standing there, brushing her teeth—hair already clamped back with her makeup finished for work. She wore a loose pastel green blouse and creamy slacks that were tight at her thin waist. The summer sun glossed her tan skin, making her even more beautiful with a healthy glow; I was jealous. I tried to tan myself and ended up sunburnt three times, receiving more families of mocking freckles in return.

So, she woke me up after already getting ready herself!

"I just thought you were trying a new sleeping schedule," she said as I rushed past her in our bathroom, toothbrush still scrubbing away at her straight teeth, morphing her words; I understood her perfectly, though. The room was narrow, but we were small, so it was easy to run past Mom without knocking her face-first into the sink. "Wait—how is it my fault you slept in?"

I jumped in the shower before whipping my clothing off and throwing my pajamas over the curtain rod onto the floor. "Because you're my mom," I rushed,

“and you should care about your daughter’s reputation—I can’t show up the first day of high school looking like I just rolled out of bed!”

Mom laughed before spitting her toothpaste into the sink. “Well, I think you look gorgeous either way. Be downstairs in twenty or I’m leaving your sleepy butt.”

Feeling Mom’s smirk burn through the polyester cobalt curtain, I shouted, “MOM—don’t you dare leave me! I still need breakfast!”

“Make it nineteen, then.” She laughed again, closing the bathroom door the moment I shut off the water.

Today was huge—probably the biggest day for any teenager on Earth. It was the first day of high school and not just any high school; it was John Belle High, the first all-choice school in our county. Back in 2007, it opened, and all the surrounding towns were sending their kids there. New desks, new gym, new football field, new teachers—who *wouldn’t* want to go there? Now, almost 700 students were enrolled, and Jenny Kim, Lily, and I were three of them.

The new school was bigger than any school I had been to before, and there would be more people I didn’t know. Looking my best mattered. I was never too concerned about the way I looked... until now. Until the thought of high school boys and cheerleaders and their thoughts invaded my mind. In the teenage world, first impressions meant everything, and no *way* was I about to be labeled as gross for going to school with oily, knotted hair simply because I overslept. Kids were mean in middle school; had to be ten times worse in high school, especially one where I only knew a handful of people.

I quickly threw on my straight-legged jeans, a simple black shirt with a scooped neckline, and red Vans—brand new that Mom found on sale for the start of the new year. After adding the palest face powder to the purple rings under my eyes, I took a good look at myself in the bathroom mirror. Not a scar to be seen, though there were plenty there—all concealed with the Eternling bracelet Inna gave me last year. Never had to worry about Mom or my friends seeing all my obscure marks from surviving death. Each night, I slept with the dainty string around my wrist; made being a normal girl on Earth a whole lot easier.

I bolted downstairs and grabbed a pre-packaged pastry from the pantry right when Mom honked on the car horn. My hair was still soaking wet, faint

drops soaking the passenger's seat as I jumped into the car, so I had to improvise. I rolled down the window as we started driving off, letting the draft of the car dry my hair—the caramel ringlets forming quite easily. *Thank you, warm summer breeze.* Mom laughed at me, only because she would do the same thing when she was late to work.

Anxiety and excitement blended together in my throbbing heart at the sight of the foreign trio of double-door entrances. I'd fought monsters and ghouls, but nothing was as scary as walking into a new school with kids my age who looked like grown adults. You'd think being around Hunters for a year would've helped my self-consciousness, constantly smelling like dirt and sweat in front of warriors and the Prince. Nope. No magic in the world could help my sheepish heart, and I really, *really* needed Confident Lisa to stop snoozing and wake up.

"Bye, sweetie! Have a great first day!" Mom said as I started walking toward the entrance. *Please, please, please let this be a good day.*



It was now Fourth Period, the last class of the day... and I didn't have a *single* class with Lily or Jenny Kim—all except for lunch, which only lasted twenty-five minutes. I knew a couple of kids in Honors English but not well enough to sit with them and start talking comfortably. Pretty sure I only said three sentences during Geometry and only two during Personal Finance. I hated my shy nature, the pathetic emotion branded on my soul. *Hopefully, P.E. will be better.*

The moment I stepped foot in the gymnasium, it was nothing but sophomores and a couple of juniors. To make things worse, all the girls looked to be on the cheerleading team, and I only knew that because Lily made Junior Varsity over the summer and couldn't stop talking about *everyone* on the team. That wouldn't have been a big deal—Lily said they were all friendly—but they were popular and looked like models; I, on the other hand, was the palest kid in every class, the only brunette covered in freckles, and the only one who didn't have the curves to earn a single glance from any boy.

Sure, in middle school, I hung around the so-called popular kids... but our middle school was a puddle of water compared to the ocean I was in now. Talking with the glitzy, perfect bodies and faces was impossible without Lily being there with me. *I thought this was an all-grades class, so where are the freshmen?*

Mr. Gutts—the beefy soccer coach who had a shirt too small for his muscles—had us all file into the P.E. classroom, saying we would spend half the time in class learning with him and the other half doing physical exercise. As he began to put us in assigned seats, I sat next to the first familiar face I had seen outside of Jenny Kim and Lily. She had glasses with a messy braid in her ashy brown hair, and wore similar clothing to mine, making her the most approachable girl in the room. She wasn’t perfectly put together and didn’t stand out like the cheerleaders, but neither was I. Her last name had to begin with an “r” or “s,” but that was all I knew of her.

Right when I plopped my backpack down next to my desk, the girl smiled at me and said, “Hi, I’m Mary. We’re in the same homeroom, right?” She had more confidence than I would ever have—starting the conversation first before Mr. Gutts even finished calling roll.

I whispered back with the same friendly grin, “Yeah, I sat near the window when Ms. Jamieson made us all stand up and sit in our assigned seats. I’m Lisa, by the way.”

“Glad to see I’m not the only freshman here,” she said, taking out her notebook and mechanical pencils. Her voice was soft and sounded very northern, not local or the typical Jersey accent. *Maybe she’s new to the city or just moved to the state...*

“I know, right? I thought I walked into the wrong class, even though there is only one P.E. class.”

“Me, too!” Mary quietly chuckled.

It was a relief in my heart to know I didn’t end the day on a bad note and, instead, left it with a new friend.

When the final bell rang, I waited outside in the pool of students who were too young to drive to school. Lily stayed after for cheerleading along with Jenny Kim who had basketball conditioning. She made Junior Varsity for the girls’ basketball team; I wasn’t surprised, though. In middle school, even the teachers bragged about her skill in their gossip circles.

Lily, on the other hand... “shocked” wouldn’t be a decent enough word to describe my reaction when she said she was one out of the *three* freshmen who made the cut. Her bubbly personality must have played a big part because her back handspring, which she showed me more than I ever wanted to see, was a

little weak. I was just glad they both were happy... and that Mom did *not* force me to do any school sports.

Mary came out and joined me as we both waited for our moms. We exchanged phone numbers when I saw Mom's white Corolla pull up blasting Aerosmith with the windows rolled down. Stares from other students pelted her car; my lips pursed so tight. Her vehicle was the *only* one jamming in the car riders line. Always the only one, even after one teacher asked her to stop (obviously, that didn't work).

I immediately jumped in and waved bye to Mary before we drove away.

"Aw—you already made a new friend?" Mom squeaked, way more excited about Mary than I seemed to be. "I am so happy, and you were freaking out over nothing this morning."

"Her name's Mary—wait, did you think I wouldn't make friends or something?" I retorted.

"Can't a mom be excited about her daughter's first day of high school?"

I laughed. "If I was starting kindergarten, then yes, but back to the question—"

"*Okay*—I'm just glad you have other friends outside of your 'Lily and Jenny Kim' group, that is all. Branching out, not being super shy. Makes a mother happy seeing her daughter happy, especially one as great as you—oh, I need to run to the store before we get home. Can you make sure I have my wallet in my purse?"

I reached in the back for her tan bulky bag, scoffing. "How can you go the whole day at work and not remember if you brought your wallet—"

"The same way you can go to school and forget homework."

True, true. "Okay—I guess that makes sense." I pulled out her pink wallet and saw no credit cards, just forty dollars in cash. "You have forty bucks."

Mom, like a kid, said, "Sweet—we are eating *good* tonight!"

She then turned up the music, cranking up "Livin' On the Edge" before driving toward the city and suburbs.



Later that night, after eating fried chicken and waffles—Mom's new splurge meal obsession—and doing the dishes, I made my way to the laundry room to collect my clothes. It wasn't a clear night, but the stars could still be seen peeking behind

the blue clouds. Cicadas sang in the trees while lightning bugs danced on our lawn through the view of the window.

Every time I went into the laundry room, chills swam up and down my arms from excitement. Here, in this exact spot, was the night I saw the Wishing Star fall, the Agapé Magic slam into my backyard. My whole life changed that day, which was a little over a year ago, proving that magic *did* exist along with a whole other universe of people and creatures.

Even then, as I took my clothes out of the dryer, reminiscing, I swear I saw another light flying right toward me... *wait...*

I blinked—blinked twice—

I thought I was having a Deja Vu moment—spotting another glowing orb pass by the window—but it was real! A small blue light the size of a tennis ball came zooming down like a firework, but it didn't land in my backyard. No celestial plumes trailed it, and it stayed small. But, it kept soaring and soaring until—

It *hit* the window with a chiming *ding* like a pebble being tossed against thin glass.

My shoulders jerked, and I dropped a T-shirt onto the floor. This light wasn't a magical animal, star, or stone, and it kept tapping against the window—knocking, demanding entry.

I leaned over the washing machine. *What in the world...?*

A small glowing origami in the shape of a blue star fluttered against the window like a cosmic June bug. I had never seen magic like that before and couldn't help but gaze at it.

Well, it kept tapping, and that's when I realized the paper star was trying to get inside—get to *me!*

My eyes widened as my jaw dropped. *This has to be it! This has to be from the Guardians or Gaius!*

It kept dinging and dinging against the pane, its paper edges as hard as ice. The thing was going to burst right through the glass if I didn't get to it. That could not happen—not with Mom in or out of the house. Would be impossible to explain the reason for a crackled hole.

I ran out of the laundry room and straight through the kitchen when my feet came to a brisk walk. Mom sat at the dining table, paying bills on her computer. Rhythms of anxiety started adding a faster beat to my heart. I knew I couldn't

open the backdoor. She would see the strange origami star and discover magic—not the way I would ever want her to find out.

Being as inconspicuous as possible, I strolled along our fake-tiled kitchen floor, barefoot, until I paused behind her. When I glanced at the window of our backdoor, there was the paper star. It was following me, still bumping against the door and creating a quiet tapping.

A tapping that was *sure* to grab *her* attention.

Before Mom looked up to see the ruckus, I ran upstairs—darting for my bedroom, assuming the dainty origami would follow. My hand swung the door open and slammed it shut, and my eyes went straight for the window above my nightstand.

The paper origami was fluttering right outside.

I beamed with a glimmer in my eyes as my heart soared at its first sight of magic in three months. I fumbled over my backpack and tossed pajamas before reaching the glass pane.

Tuff came out of hiding to join me unlatching the locks on the window rail.

With a click and a clack, I jolted the window open. The origami glowing star bulleted inside my room—breaking a hole in the screen panel of my window. *Well, a busted screen is easier to explain than shattered glass.*

The magic paper star flew straight into my hands, sparkling blue and icy cold. Tuff perched on my head as I pinched the sides of the glowing paper—the thrumming of my heart rushing like ocean waves—causing it to start unfolding all by itself. As the last magical crease unfurled before me, the paper stopped glowing and became nothing but a thick piece of parchment, slightly torn on the right side. It was no bigger than a notecard with two short sentences written in handwriting I had eagerly missed:

Tomorrow at SUNRISE, meet in the forest of your backyard.

See you soon.

- G

Blood cascaded through me as a starry galaxy of wonder and awe swelled my chest. My life was starting again—the life that gave me passion, friends, and the most beautiful gift of all: magic. I kept rereading Gaius' handwriting and started

flying with Tuff in my room—spinning and dancing in the air from all the joy of knowing my magic life was beginning in less than twelve hours. *Yes, yes, yes, yes, YES!*

I rushed past my door and stood at the top of the stairway, almost crashing into the banister. “Mom—is it okay if I ride with Lily to school tomorrow?”

Mom, still sitting at her computer in the dining room, leaned back and casually answered, “Um, is there a particular reason why you—”

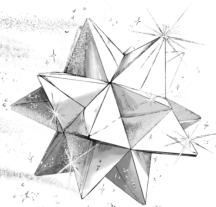
“I have her textbook—her mom offered—can I, *please?*” I lied in haste, knowing good and well I had zero classes with Lily and *zero* intentions of going to school tomorrow. Magic was on the line so a little white lie to Mom did not matter at that moment.

She turned her attention back to her computer, answering with just as much enthusiasm as the first time, “Sure, that is fine.”

I’m glad she didn’t turn to look at me a second time; no way would she have believed my overly joyful smile was due to the fact I was giving Lily a book.

I dove into my bed like a dolphin crashing through sea billows, cuddling Tuff and pressing his little warm tummy against my chest—pure, mystifying bliss painted all over my face and his.

My magical life is finally happening again!



2

SIBLING SQUABLES

I was up before the sun the next morning, running on four hours of sleep and the sparkling thrill of adventure. Gaius' note said to meet at sunrise, but I knew I would have to be a *little* late; I had to make sure Mom saw me go to "school" with Lily first, and that happened a bit after the sun was above the trees.

I made myself school-ready with sneakers and a loose t-shirt, including my backpack full of notebooks and pencils, and waited downstairs in the living room for Mom to head off to work.

My legs were restless, my smile giddy. Magic was just minutes away, and I couldn't contain my excitement any longer, barely hungry enough to finish off my slice of peanut butter toast.

Mom grabbed her keys, took her precious time to find her phone in the kitchen, and then went through the laundry room.

A couple more minutes...

I ran to the living room—watched as her white Corolla backed out of the garage and curved across the street.

Almost through the clear...

Warm headlights soon faded between the bushes and trees until all evidence of her watching eyes was gone.

It's time!

I became lightning, bolting to my bedroom, changing out of school clothing like a maniac, and putting on my EverWake garments. They still fit pretty loosely,

not surprising though; the feminine gene was taking its time warming up to my kid-like body. Most freshmen girls seemed to hit a mighty growth spurt over the summer, actually fitting into women's clothing. I didn't mind too much, though. I liked what I saw in the mirror for the most part—magic scars and all.

I grabbed my Echo Ring from the nightstand drawer and adorned my left index finger with it. I wasn't planning on using the magic ring that morning... because I *couldn't*. The ring—the Time Keeper's precious magic inside of it—had stopped working. I tried back in June, but it spun around like a normal fidget ring, making a cute dinging sound and nothing more. I never dropped it or banged the green and white crystals on its metal face against any piece of furniture, which meant someone had to have turned off its doppelganger properties.

The Guardians were *really* making sure I rested during my summer vacation.

Scratchy, dry grass skidded across my ankles as I ran toward our backyard forest. The summer breeze brushed through my hair, tangling up my brunette waves and making me less presentable, and I didn't care one bit about running into spider webs or hordes of gnats. I knew someone magical was waiting for me in the midst.

Will it be Gaius? Maybe Kamari? Wouldn't be surprised if it were—

The moment the last green tree branch veered away from my view, I saw the strawberry-haired Keeper standing six feet before me. Aqua blues and ocean emeralds glistened off her leotard, all underneath silk and sheer fabric that decorated her hips and shoulders. No scissors had touched her three-foot-long hair, perfectly sculpted in a wavy intricate braid, and her smile was more radiant than her ocean home.

“Inna!” I shouted as I ran up to her, giving her the biggest hug.

She returned the long-awaited embrace with just as much enthusiasm, scents of sea salt and citrus wafting around her body. “Lisa—my goodness it has been far too long! You still look as beautiful as ever—growing into a fine young lady, I see.”

Tuff came out of hiding and cuddled up to Inna's face. He missed seeing my mentor just as much as I did.

“Glad to see you as well, Tuff.” Inna smiled as my sprite tinted her cheeks with glainie dust.

“With Gaius’ handwriting,” I began, “I figured he was the one coming here.”

“He did send the blynk—the folded, enchanted letter—but got caught up with the Guardians. Asked me this morning to come and get you.”

“Asked?” I chuckled, knowing that wasn’t the case.

She playfully rolled her ocean eyes. “Ah—‘*told*,’ is more like it. Seems he still does not know the true definition of what a ‘favor’ is even after 700 years of being a Keeper. Now, come. He and the Guardians are waiting for us in Haim Gana.”

I happily took her escorting arm as her other hand produced cobalt rivers of flowing magic. Fist clenched and mind focused on the ethereal realm, Inna gripped the blue magic, and it began to glow even brighter. With a punch to the air, the evanesce power burst, and we began to teleport to the home of the Guardians.

Chimes and claps of thunder lasted only for a second, soon replaced with the echoes of gentle humming winds. My eyes opened to view one of the lands I missed. We were standing at the entrance of the Elysium—Ariela’s sacred domain and home of the family of Guardians. Peace and serenity were the aromas, charming my senses as Inna guided me down the marbled doors and through the white-arched gateways of the celestial manor. We walked by the statue of the man defeating the shadowing darkness and turned left, going over the viaduct and straight toward the golden meeting room. Nerves tightened around my bones, but in a good way—a way that made my heart race with anticipation.

As we neared the golden door, nagging voices penetrated through the stone walls, unfamiliar and quite loud. It definitely wasn’t Gaius or the Guardians; the noise sounded old and without much care for kindness or elegance.

“Ah...” Inna muttered, “seems Sera and Idan are here.”

“Who are they?” I asked. The names sparked a sand grain-sized memory, but I couldn’t put my finger on where I had heard them before...

Suddenly, the squeakier, feminine nag sniped through the crack of the door, “*A wee child, Dayasheel—aye, there be not enough words in all time to describe how I feel toward your ignorant behavior. Our magic, taken for granted, that is! You pure bloke of a Guardian!*”

Inna crinkled her face. “Um, I’ll have them be the ones to tell you that, though you will be in for an earful.”

“Why—what did I do?” I said to her, doe-eyed.

“Honestly, nothing more than what you were asked of, but to them...” A shrug. “Well... you’ll see.”

Inna grabbed the golden handle of the meeting room door and pulled it open. The white round stone table was now gone, but the pink upside-down tree still shone brightly, dangling on the ceiling, its petals delicately falling onto the golden floor. All armchairs were missing, too, replaced with creamy couches and royal seating, spread around the room and occupied with familiar celestial beings.

Six of the seven Guardians were all casually sitting and watching the show in the middle: Dayasheel being scolded by two decrypted, uptight siblings in cloaks no taller than me. Never, *ever*, had I expected a scene quite like this.

Even with the gold-freckled court, my eyes couldn’t help but stare directly at the muscly gardener leaning against the wall. His arms were crossed, and he looked exceptionally happy watching a Guardian getting berated by an old woman and her brother. Out of everyone in the room, I missed spending my magic-filled days with him most of all; hoped he felt the same.

Haim Gana’s light lit up my and Inna’s silhouettes, and every stare turned toward us. I was going to run straight to Gaius, but the old man and lady started marching toward me—furrowed brows and wrinkly skin showing no signs of joy.

The horsey woman was short and skinny, the most terrifying grandma I had ever encountered. “Aye, you the new Agapéd Bearer, girl?”

The abrupt question threw me off, so I answered timidly, “Um, yes, ma’am. That’s me.”

She then magically summoned an odd leafy fan into her bony hand and gave me a good *whack* on the head—one that *hurt* and left a red nick on my forehead. I didn’t even know this woman!

I had no response; never before had I been whacked by an old lady.

“Sera, you can’t just be hittin’ the Agapéd like that!” the old man chimed in, snatching her fan and saving my head from another good beating. He looked right at me. “Forgive my dear sister—would you please clarify to us the purpose of our magic bein’ used on Earth in the form of a tiny ring?”

A light bulb flicked on inside my head. The two rambunctious siblings in front of me were *the* Sera and Idan—the Time Keepers. Ariela, Dayasheel, and Gaius mentioned their names only once; no surprise I didn’t remember them.

Seeing the situation more clearly knowing their true identities, it seemed the two wizened Keepers finally found out about Dayasheel's invention... and that it was given to a child from Earth.

No one else in the room bothered to interfere, so I answered, "Well, I had to finish my training here, and, uh, I needed a way to finish school as well... so Dayasheel made the rings with The Sublimity Charm in them for me so I could—"

Idan immediately turned around and charged at Dayasheel. The walking wrinkled man had *speed!* He gave some hardy whacks to the Guardian's golden shoulders with his sister's fan. "You blunderin' fool! You mean to tell me our magic was wasted so the Agapéd could attend somethin' as trivial as Earthian studies?"

Fair-skinned and black-haired Dayasheel, not bothering to counter the hit, tensed up his shoulders—evading the blows as much as possible. "Idan, please—Lady Ariela insisted as I've mentioned before. Lisa needed—"

Sera came roaring in to join her brother's scolding. "She be needin' better excuses besides the half-witted ones comin' out your mouth!"

Guardians are over the Keepers, right? So, how in the world are they letting two tiny, gray-haired siblings push them around and mock Ariela's methods?

"Time be but a gift, and you used it for childish things—makin' doubles and splittin' souls for a wee bit of frivolous school work!" Sera continued, grabbing her fan back from her brother and giving more burly whacks.

Emunah ascended out of his chair, gray hair tied back and black beard perfectly shaped, cloaked in a robe of gold and deep blues, and came toward the two grumpy Keepers. "Miss Sera, Mr. Idan, I can assure you that Lisa—"

Sera gritted her yellowing teeth at the Guardian, fan in hand, fraying frizzy strands of her hair whipping around. "I don't wanna hear it unless you be wantin' the same treatment!"

Emunah lifted his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay—it was all for the purpose of good, I can assure you." He jerked his chin in my direction. "That little lady you just greeted with your beatings followed the rules of The Sublimity Charm exactly, so no need to prolong this petty quarrel any longer."

"Oh, *I'll* be the one who says when this needs to start n' stop, you bloke!" Sera retorted.

With the crazy Keepers occupied with Emunah, Inna and I snuck around Dayasheel and over to Gaius. No one else in the room seemed to enjoy the feud as much as he did. His burly smile was wide, trying to hide underneath his short facial hair, but it was no use. When his green eyes finally met mine, I couldn't help but grin, too.

"Seems you got your wish," I whispered toward the muscular gardener, remembering what he asked for a year ago on top of Boolavogue's mountain the day I received the rings—the day I met the Sonons and lost my first spar against the Prince.

Gaius chuckled under his breath in a quiet, deep voice. "Seems so. Good to see you again, bright and well, though maybe not so well after that gimpish slag from the old git." That brogue accent of his peeked through the latter of his sentence. His voice was nothing but memories before today. I had missed it.

"I've been slagged harder by you and Ekron during spars, so I'm perfectly fine." I slipped a laugh. "Is this why you sent Inna to come and get me?"

He leaned in, freshly cut wood scenting his trench coat like always. "I couldn't afford to miss this squabble."

"How long have they been going at it?"

"Let's just say they already took a good beating on Vilmad before Dayasheel showed his guilty self."

Off to the darkest corner of the room sat a solemn shadow of Vilmad, mouth shut and voice silenced. Never in my wildest dreams would I have expected someone to be in control of his actions, all except for—

As delicate as dropped rose petals—through the same golden door—an angelic lady with yellow silk wings came swooping. All forms of arguing stopped. Even my thoughts couldn't freely wander. She was dressed in an exquisite gold gown made from the threaded fabric of the sun, pure, regal radiance. Glass heels hugged her delicate toes, and starlit diamonds were on every piece of jewelry, complimenting her coppery skin. Her hair was poofy, tight with ringlets, and her eyes shimmered beneath the circlet nestled on her forehead.

Beauty wished to glisten as brightly as she did, for Lady Ariela was a star in Elysian form.

In her commanding yet gentle voice, Lady Ariela said to the two siblings, "Dear Sera and Idan, I apologize for my tardiness and any misunderstanding that

may have followed.” She then looked right toward me. “Miss Lisa, would you mind joining me for a moment? It is an honor to see you once again.”

I walked over to Ariela as the Time Keepers backed away from Dayasheel and Emunah. They didn’t bolt out in rants or start nagging the Elysian; they were shy, like a couple of toddlers being called downstairs for a good scolding. Strangest couple of siblings I had ever seen.

Ariela looked at the Time Keepers and continued, “Now, I called you both here for good reasons with no intentions of malice toward my Guardians. Dayasheel was under my orders—which you both wholeheartedly agreed to as well—to make Miss Lisa the Echo Ring infused with The Sublimity Charm. He crafted it with her magic pulse in mind, and Lisa did not think twice about breaking any of your rules of soul duplication. So, why the bickering?”

The two siblings were prideful and did not want to admit their actions were wrong. Idan stepped in first with a casual excuse. “Aye... well... he didn’t tell us she was a child—”

Sera continued to finish his sentences. “And children of Earth no nuttin’ about our magic—”

“So perhaps...”

“... we got a little too...”

“... carried away.”

Ariela fixated on them, her amber eyes telling the siblings to look in my direction.

Idan nudged Sera’s arm, and she tried her best to make eye contact with me. “Look... we are sorry for actin’ out...” she mumbled.

Sera then hit her brother in the stomach, and he apologized in haste. “Yes, we are terribly sorry...”

Even though it was the most bizarre apology I had ever heard, I accepted it.

“That’s okay,” I said smiling. “Thanks for letting me use your magic. If it weren’t for you, I don’t think I would have been prepared enough to stop Saraqiel’s magic without it—”

It was as if I said a magic word because the two siblings came right up under my nose; they smelled like lilies and worn leather. *Do they not know what all I’ve done? Are they really that scary to talk to that even giving news about Darkness from the Guardians was too much of a task?*

“You bested the Fallen?” Sera spoke with awe in her voice.

“All by yourself?” Idan added.

“I mean, I did have some help—”

Ariela stepped in, interrupting my claim. “Lisa destroyed my fallen brother’s magic in less than a year’s time—heart in all.”

Sera put her hand on my forehead, right where she whacked me. “Dayasheel!” she yelled in a raspy voice. “Why you lettin’ me whack our Agapéd like that? You want me to look like a wee fool in front of Lady Ariela—do ya?” Her eyes glared at me again, and her hand started to glow green.

In moments, my forehead felt better. *Is she healing me with her time magic?*

Idan grabbed my hand and bowed, his palm very wrinkly and cold. “Miss Lisa, it seems my sister and I have underestimated you and are most utterly ashamed. Our magic is in good hands—mighty good hands, at that. Whatever you need, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Flustered, I humbly responded, “It’s okay. You really don’t have to apologize. I was just doing my job—but thank you.”

Vilmad clicked his tongue and finally spoke up from the corner. “Oh, thank goodness that is over... *Finally*, we can continue the purpose as to why we called you up here.” His voice I didn’t miss one bit.

Idan turned to Vilmad, his smile thinning. “Aye, and what that be?”

“Well, for one, we asked you to *restrict* the magic on the Echo Ring so Lisa couldn’t access its power during her resting period, but you *failed* to return the charm. Lisa, did you happen to bring the ring with you?”

Vilmad was now out of his chair and walking swiftly toward me. His hair was still straight and long, waterfalling down his spine, touching the back of his long ivory robe. That same solemn glare was still plastered on his thin face.

I took off the Echo Ring and cradled it in my palm. *Glad I brought this—could have mentioned that in the blynk, though...*

Sera and Idan looked down inside my palm. “Aye, that be an easy fix,” Sera proclaimed. The little old Mage extended her wrinkly finger toward my ring, pointing her fingernail as if it were the end of a wand.

Shots of green magic burst from her fingertip, and the Echo Ring instantly chimed and jiggled, giving a quick flicker of invisibility. The magic was back inside instantly!

So cool!

“Wow... thank you, ma’am,” I said to her, sliding the ring back on my left index finger and down to the knuckle.

“Now, what be the second reason if that were the first?” Sera asked Vilmad.

Lady Ariela answered for him. “I would like you to gift the memory of this location to Lisa so that she may evanesce here freely.”

My eyes widened. I knew the Keepers were in charge of time, but I never considered memories to be a part of that.

“That be all?” Idan asked Ariela.

“All indeed,” she confirmed.

Idan nodded at his sister before staring at me underneath his unbrushed eyebrows. The Time Keeper held up his palm toward my forehead, and his eyes began to glow as white as the moon. His hand emitted a glow of misty blue, and I felt a cold chill inside my head as his magic penetrated my thoughts. I closed my eyes. Not even a second later, I knew the *exact* location of Haim Gana; truly, it was an odd place to put a magic realm.

“There,” Idan said, his eyes now back to a muted gray. “She be as bright as a glint with that memory now—won’t ever miss a landing when evanescin’ here, I can assure you.”

Ariela smiled at the two and said, “Thank you both. Your work is much appreciated, and I can assure you your magic is in good hands.”

“Aye,” the siblings said simultaneously. “Til next time.” They then both evanesced away.

Every Guardian in the room, including myself, released a deep breath.

Ariela took my hand as Gaius and Inna came over toward me. “Now, with my agenda completed, it is time I handed over the rest to Gaius,” she said. “Being that Saraqiel’s vessel was defeated and no other sightings of my other brethren have been unearthed, you are free to continue to study magic under his guidance—unless you prefer someone else.”

I hastily shook my head and answered, “I like the teachers I have now. They’re pretty great.”

“I am glad to hear. May The Light be with you as you continue your venture of becoming a powerful Mage, dear Lisa.”

The golden Elysian then dismissed herself from the room, the Guardians

trailing behind.

Emunah gave me a nudge on my shoulder before he left. “Now that you can evanesce here, I assume you won’t be needing any more Ingress-Egress Draughts?”

My glowing suitcase was great and all, but evanescing was much more convenient. I nodded my head, “Thank you, Emunah, but yeah, I don’t think I will need another one of those potions.”

He gave me a wink before he and Vilmad departed from the room—pleasantly surprised to see them getting along.

Inna left not too long after, leaving Gaius and me alone. Before he could get in a word, I happily expressed to my brawny teacher, “So, does this mean I will be getting a flying instructor next?”

He huffed. “Going up and down—I can teach you that much. Seemed to me, you already had a good grasp on the technique last I saw you. So, no.” Gaius smirked and held out his arm. “Grab on. We have an important meeting to get to before your training starts.”

I grasped his bicep. “*We?* With who?”