

Ascend

Children of Lilith Series Book One

L.M. Gose

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Children of Lilith Series

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Dedicated to:

my brother and sisters by blood and those by love

Prologue

Before there was anything, there were two Deities; a God and a Goddess. They existed in the universe together, yet alone, creating planets and stars, building entire galaxies; within time, they became bored of their larger creations and began to create life. First the creatures were created, on this planet and that planet; animals, insects, birds, dinosaurs, anything they could think of that amused their magnificent minds. Scattering life across the galaxies they had made, the two Deities came together to bring something new, something different, something more evolved into existence... and so they designed humanity.

Together, the God and Goddess shaped a new star system, with new planets, just for their new creation. They spent time filling it with the best of their works from across their universe, producing a tapestry of planets and moons. Together, the God and the Goddess chose their finest animal species to inhabit the third world in their new system. The Goddess formed the fauna that lived on the land and under the sea. The God built the mountains and the rivers. The Goddess and the God smiled as they looked upon their world and, feeling it was ready, picked the most beautiful part of the planet, a lovely clearing filled with fruit-bearing trees, flowers and a gentle flowing river in the deepest heart of the thickest forest for their new project. Then, together, they created mankind.

The God spawned the First Man, a strong, tall, dark-skinned being he called Adam. As he imagined Adam, so he willed Adam into reality. The Goddess thought it was delightful for a first of the species, but she thought her creation should be special and so she created the First Woman, with fiery red hair, brilliant green eyes, flawless fair skin and rosy lips. As she imagined her, she willed her into being and called her Lilith. Unbeknownst to God, the Goddess had whispered into her creation the ability to manipulate the world around her, thereby creating not only the first woman, but the First Witch.

For a time, Lilith and Adam lived in peace and love. Exploring the world made just for them, they found joy and happiness. To understand their new species,

The God composed rules for Adam, insisting that he not kill the other creatures and not eat from one fruit-bearing tree, but the Goddess had given Lilith no such restriction. The Goddess had given the First Woman the ability to produce magic and enjoyed watching Lilith learn to cast simple spells when she was in private. The Goddess smiled upon her and felt the love of a mother for her daughter. The God felt no such attachment.

Instead, the God saw potential in his construct, and with a need to control, The God commanded Adam to do his bidding. Adam served his God, praying and worshipping his God. Adam tried to command Lilith to worship his Creator too, but, like most independent young women, she refused to submit. Instead she focused on the other creatures around her, befriending the animals in the world that flourished around her. The First Man became angry at her, for ignoring him, for refusing to submit and he complained to the God that made him. The God began to watch the First Woman and, when He saw her using magic, the God grew angry with the Goddess for keeping secrets from him, casting Lilith from the magnificent garden the deities had created together.

The Goddess, in an effort to protect Lilith from the God's wrath, hid her far from Adam and the God. She wrapped her creation in a protective cloaking spell and whispered the secret to magic into Lilith's mind as she slept. Not long after she was ejected from the Garden that would later become known as Eden, Lilith found she was with child. The Goddess, seeking to protect her, blessed her pregnancy with the same gifts she'd bestowed unto the mother, whispering magic into their souls. Some time later, Lilith gave birth to Aya and Baan, the First Daughter and the First Son. The Goddess created other beings but withheld her gifts of magic from them, reserving that for the bloodline of the First Woman.

During this time, the God had created Eve from Adam's Rib, shaping her like the First Woman and willing her to life. She would submit to Adam and worship the God. In time, the Goddess and her humans were forgotten, ignored by the God and erased from the history of Men. Later, religions would be created, wars waged and millions slaughtered to appease the God's need to be worshiped.

For many centuries, Lilith, her children, their children and all the other children of the Goddess lived in relative peace, on the other side of what seemed so long ago to be a very large world. The Goddess watched happily as her children lived naturally, in tune with the earth magic around them, finding love with her other creations and creating more children, then more and more. Thousands of years passed, during which time some of the Goddess's Children had created civilizations of wonder and awe, while others lived simply, happily, two large landmasses filled with the Goddess's creations and She was happy too.

Sadly, all things do not last forever and the Children of God came to the beautiful, undisturbed, peaceful lands of Lilith's descendants. First in small groups,

some from the west and some from the east. The Goddess's Children fought off these incursions for a time. Eventually, there came a man claiming to have discovered a rich bounty for their taking and he brought others with him. The Children of God slaughtered and enslaved the Goddess's people, destroying their homes and stealing their lands. The Goddess tried to save Her people but the God stopped her, having grown powerful through the worship of His followers. She was no match as She had never demanded to be revered. Helplessly, the Goddess watched as her lands were pillaged, raped and destroyed by the Children of God. Lilith, the First Witch and an immortal being, hid away, escaping towards the isolated mountains where no man dare go.

Lilith's children, however, had long ago altered their fate. Aya had realized her mortality and became a creature of darkness. Having cursed herself while attempting to prolong her life, she was now forced to live off the blood of others to survive. She sought to find her children and give them her resistance to aging, turning only those who consented into the first Vampires, birthing a new species. Baan, a natural immortal, had many children with many women, although he did not parent them, feeling that they were beneath his immortality. One day, one of those sons, long angry with Baan for the abandonment, sought him out and, accompanied by a coven of powerful witches descended from his line, came with large wolves and attacked him on a Full Moon, hoping to strip him of his immortality. In desperation, Baan took on wolf form to fight the attackers, becoming stronger and larger than the natural wolves. He won the night but later learned that any male descendants who came after were cursed by the bloodline, forced to turn into wolves every full moon. Only his daughters retained access to their hereditary magic. The remaining witches and warlocks, having realized the danger the Children of God brought to their lands, hid themselves under protective spells, secreting their magic away and hiding in plain sight as one of the Children of God.

Wars raged on the Goddess's lands, the Creatures of Night were hunted by the Children of God, killed or worse and so eventually, when the Creatures of Night vanished from their known world, the Children of God felt they'd won. The truth of it was, however, that the Children of the Goddess, the witches and warlocks, the vampires and werewolves, still existed in the shadows and in the night. Hiding, biding their time, until it would be safe to return to the light of day.

Chapter One

“Friday mornings are the worst to find motivation,” Xavier complained to his twin sister, Arya, “I just don’t understand why we can’t have a four day week. All I have on Fridays are PE and study hall.”

She rolled her emerald eyes at her twin, tucking a wild strand of fiery red hair behind her ear. “And English and Science.”

Although they were twins, neither looked remotely like the other. Xavier had dark hair, dark eyes, a strong nose and jawline covered in bronzed olive skin. He was taller than her too, by over a foot, standing tall at six foot four.

“Yea, but why do those matter?” he laughed, glancing at his phone. As he stood up, a car honked their horn and Xavier groaned. “He just texted. He’s gotta give me a second. Gotta go, Sis.” Grabbing his bag, Xavier ran out the door, leaving Arya at the table alone with her bowl of fruit.

“Clean up your plate,” she called to no one, since he was already gone. Shaking her head, she scrolled through her phone as she ate her breakfast. It was the usual Twitter and Facebook scandals, which she pretty much ignored. Instead she loved looking at photos of horses on Instagram, which she dreamed she’d one day have. The twins had both had riding lessons when they were younger, and she’d fallen in love with all things equine.

“Good morning, Sweetie,” Arya’s mom said walking into the kitchen. Arya looked much like her mother, with the same bright red hair and brilliant green eyes, fair skin. In fact, if you asked most people, they were identical, only separated by the years on their faces. It was almost like Arya’s mom had cloned her. Apparently their grandmother and great-grandmother also all had strong resemblances to Arya, but those photos had been lost in a fire long ago, much to Arya’s disappointment and her mother’s sadness.

Arya smiled. Her mother was her best friend and they didn’t get to spend that much time together. “Morning, Mom! How was surgery last night?”

“Oh, you know, I put someone back together and he lived.” Arya’s mother was a General surgeon at Peak Memorial Hospital and she was one of the best. People often sought her out because her survival rates were some of the highest in the nation, something Arya admired so much about her mother. “Where’s Xavy?”

“I think Brian picked him up. Or Luke. One of them,” she replied. Brian Cho and Luke Matthews were Xavier’s best friends. Both boys had their licenses and were about a year older than the twins, who were only turning sixteen on the weekend. “Whichever one honks before they send a text.”

“Oh, drat. I was hoping to talk to him before he left... Well, tell him I’ll pick you both up this afternoon. There’s something we have to talk about and I need you together.” Her mom carefully avoided eye contact while pouring herself a cup of coffee. Arya studied her mother’s tight expression and instantly, a wave of anxiety washed over her. Something was up.

“What’s going on, Mom?” Her mother just shook her head.

“It’s not bad, I promise, but I need to talk to you both. Together.” She sighed heavily, glancing at the clock. “I’ll get dressed and then we’ll leave. I’ll drop you off at the corner by the school on my way.”

Arya nodded, watching her mother’s retreating back as she left the room.

After an unusual, uncomfortably silent car ride, Arya waved bye to her mother and began a brisk walk to school. As she neared the building, she saw her own best friend, Latoya, the smartest girl in school. They ran to each other and hugged. Latoya’s umber skin was nearly black as midnight and her eyes were deep pools of obsidian, which made Arya think of her friend as a living breathing representation of an African Queen. Today she was wearing a bright lavender sweater and jeans, which somehow made her skin look more radiant. Her tightly coiled curls cascaded naturally, falling, somehow, in a perfect mess that made her seem like she wasn’t trying too hard but was still stunning. Her full lips were painted with lavender lipstick and her shimmering eyeshadow brightened the pink undertones in her skin. The sunlight hit her hair, highlighting her crown with undertones of red and blonde, enhancing her features, her smile becoming brighter.

“Oh my gosh, your birthday is tomorrow!!! Are you excited?” Latoya hooked Arya’s arm in hers as they walked into the high school, passing boys who turned to stare at Latoya. She was easily the prettiest girl in school and everyone knew it.

“I mean, yea, I guess.”

They walked together down the hall where their lockers stood side by side. Latoya Hernandez and Arya Herstory had been cubby mates long before they were old enough for lockers, thanks to their names, but the truth is they’d been friends since Latoya’s mother and Arya’s mother had been in medical school, pregnant

together. They'd helped each other build their lives as best friends, which resulted in their daughters forming a lifelong bond.

Arya sighed. "But it kind of just reminds me that my father is still not in my life. And, after sixteen years, I still don't know who he is."

Latoya's dark brown eyes filled with sympathy and she made a soothing sound rather than reply. They'd been friends long enough that words weren't needed. Unlike Latoya, whose parents were still married, Arya had grown up with a single mom and a twin brother, but no father. Not even Latoya's mother knew who their father was. Arya knew this because Latoya had asked one night, after her mother had a few too many drinks. They'd had a heart to heart when Latoya's mom drank and became her typical sappy, lovely self.

"I guess I just want to know. That's all I want for my sixteenth birthday, It's my birthday wish," Arya continued, closing her locker. "But anyways, your birthday is two weeks away... what do you want?"

Her friend laughed as Arya's usual optimism took over. "I'm thinking a car, got the cash for one?" Latoya closed her locker and followed Arya to homeroom.

"No but I'm sure your Dad will get his princess anything she wants," Arya said, hiding the jealousy from her voice. Latoya had a strong bond with her father, Tyrone Hernandez, a world renowned cardiothoracic surgeon at Peak Memorial. Tyrone had always been very welcoming to the twins, treating them as extensions of his own family. Arya just smiled and shook her head. "I know what Xavier wants..." she said, teasingly.

Latoya rolled her eyes, laughing. "Girl, you know that boy ain't got nothing I want."

The teacher side-eyed them as they took their seats, giggling. As their teacher took attendance, Arya and Latoya whispered back and forth about their upcoming birthdays and what imaginary silly thing they wanted. By the end of homeroom, they'd decided they wanted magic powers and unicorns for pets.

Xavier, who'd been listening, laughed at them. "You're so friggin weird, Yas," as he referred to Arya and Latoya when they were together. Latoya rolled her eyes at him again.

"Oh, Xavy, Mom says she's picking us up at 3. Don't forget..." Arya paused before adding, "apparently, she has some news."

Xavier's eyes clouded with worry. The last time their mother had news, she'd been about to marry Glenn, a fellow doctor at Peak Memorial, also known as the worst person on the planet. Xavier had nearly gone to Juvy defending Arya from him, seriously hurting Glenn and putting him into the hospital for months. Arya shuddered at the memory. It was just lucky their mother was a respected doctor and that she'd been able to afford a good attorney.

“I don’t think it’s like that, Xavy...” she whispered to her twin.

His face remained neutral, but his eyes were still filled with worry. “Yea, okay, whatever,” he said in a cold voice. He walked out the door, calling over his shoulder, “I’ll see you at 3.”

Arya stared after him for a moment before Latoya grabbed her arm, pulling her towards their first class, which, like most things, the girls shared.

The rest of the day passed normally. Xavier was nowhere to be seen, which wasn’t unusual on Fridays, but Arya, who was trying to graduate early, had all of her AP classes on Fridays. In every class her teachers and classmates wished her a happy sixteenth birthday, asking her what her weekend plans were. Although the twins had planned nothing, Latoya had overridden their requests and was holding a party for twins at the local diner the next night. Everyone had agreed to come, which overwhelmed the redheaded wallflower, but she looked forward to it secretly.

At the end of the day, Xavier emerged from wherever he’d been hiding and met Arya at the same corner she’d been dropped that morning. He still seemed very worried about whatever it was their mother had to talk to him about and merely grunted hello at his sister. She tried not to worry about her twin or her mother’s news, choosing to read a book about Odin and the other Norse Gods. Arya was always interested in mythology and had read nearly every religious text, studied nearly every form of paganism and wondered at the magic the stories told, wishing they were real. Lost in her pages, she didn’t notice her brother shifting impatiently or the time passing quickly from when their mother agreed to pick them up.

“Where is she, Ya?” Xavier broke her focus, looking angrily at his phone. “I texted her three times and she hasn’t responded. She won’t pick up. She said she had to talk to us...”

“I don’t know, Xavy,” Arya replied softly. “Maybe she got pulled into an emergency surgery and forgot to let us know before she scrubbed in.... you know how trauma is.” This placated her brother momentarily. His muscles relaxed, and his face lost its angry expression. “I’m sure she’s fine. Let’s meet her at home. I’m hungry anyways...” Her voice trailed off as he started walking.

“No, I texted her that we’re going to Uncle Chewy’s,” Xavier called back to her. Picking up her bag, she ran after him.



Chewy’s was a hole-in-the-wall diner with those really old vinyl booths where the vinyl had cracked and covered with duct tape. Most of the furniture was old and had been fixed several times over, but, according to the Herstorys, the food was the best in town. Uncle Chewy, as the twins called the owner, was an older man in his

sixties with dark mahogany skin, white hair and friendly brown eyes surrounded by laugh lines that made his face seem friendlier. The twins' mother had been taking them to Chewy's Diner since she'd first had a craving for chili fries and wandered in. They almost never went anywhere else.

The bell at the door rang as Xavier held the door for Arya and walked in behind her. Chewy was standing at the counter, pouring a coffee for a stranger, which was absolutely typical for a Friday afternoon. They lived in a town just off the interstate and people were always passing through.

Chewy smiled when he saw the kids, beckoning them to their usual spots at the counter, just a few seats from the stranger. "How're my kiddos today?"

His voice was deep and rhythmic, no matter what he said. Their mother once told them he'd been a mildly successful Blues singer from Beale Street in Memphis when he decided that wasn't his life anymore. He came to Peak's Village and opened his diner, using the money he'd made from his first and only record.

"Have you seen our Mom?" Xavier asked, ignoring the question, sitting down and turning over his coffee cup. Although their mother frowned upon it, Xavier insisted he drink coffee 'like a real man.' Chewy shook his head. "She was supposed to pick us up but she didn't. Now she won't answer my texts."

"She could be in surgery. You know she's a busy lady," he said, pouring the coffee into Xavier's cup. "Milkshake for you, my dear?" Chewy asked Arya, who answered with a smile.

"I'm calling Nancy," Xavier said, getting up and going outside to use his phone. Chewy's had a No Cell Phones sign since they'd been invented and he had thrown customers out for violating it, but if Xavier or Arya broke the rules, it was dish duty for them. Clearly, Xavier wasn't interested in that outcome.

"Well, how was your day, Sweetie Pie?"

Arya smiled at Chewy's nicknames, ever changing but ever endearing. "It was alright," she replied. "Just the normal high school experience, I guess."

Chewy nodded and glanced towards Xavier. "Brother is clearly in a bit of a mood. He doin alright?" Arya shrugged and pulled the menu out as if to study it. "Hungry, Buttercup?"

Arya paused, reading the menu briefly before giving him her order. "Large fries, gravy on the side."

"You are consistent." After giving her order to the line cook, Maurice, Chewy turned to the stranger, drawing Arya's attention to him for the first time. "Anything else?"

The stranger could have been a replica of her brother, older, more weathered but still the same face, same eyes, same dark olive skin, although his was covered in tattoos, strange symbols. Arya couldn't help but stare. He was reading the paper in front of him, completely ignoring Chewy and Arya. Chewy walked into the back

to make Arya's milkshake but Arya was frozen. She was used to the resemblance to her own mother while her brother had always seemed the odd duck, so to speak, but this man, the resemblance... He felt dangerous, unsafe to her, no matter how he looked. As fear filled her, she let go of rational thought. She didn't notice herself start to shake, her breathing become ragged or feel herself get up and back away to the door until she bumped into it. She barely recalled turning and opening the door to run out it. She didn't see Xavier on the phone with Nancy and she didn't remember how she got home. The stranger's face, her brother's face, older and scarred, never left her mind.



The door to their house slammed and her brother's voice called out her name. By the time he was off the phone with Nancy, who confirmed their mother was in a surgery that could last a few more hours, he returned the diner to discover his sister gone. Chewy told Xavier that she'd just run out and he didn't know why. She hadn't said anything. Xavier didn't notice the stranger, still reading the papers in front of him, before grabbing their food to go, and paying. Then he rushed home to find his sister.

"ARYA!!!!" He called again, opening the door of her room, where she was on the floor with her knees tucked to her chest. This wasn't the first time, she'd gotten this way, panicked and afraid, but usually there was a reason, however unusual. After all, Arya saw things Xavier couldn't explain, things he was unable to see. Sitting down next to her, his voice in a whisper, he asked "What happened? Why'd you run out of Chewy's?" Arya looked into the warmth of brother's dark eyes and placed her hand on his young, handsome face. Finally, she was calmed, though not entirely, enough to steady her breathing. She just shook her head, leaning into his body. There were some things she couldn't explain.

"I'm okay, I just had a panic attack. It's fine..." she said as normally as she could. "Did you find Mom?" She asked changing the subject, stretching her legs out in front of her to show she was okay.

Xavier swallowed his annoyance at her lie but allowed the change. "Yea, you were right. She's in surgery. Nancy said a couple hours, maybe more. Apparently she forgot to text one of us because she wasn't supposed to be on-call and I guess it was one of the other doctors that got hurt," Xavier explained, rocking his body side to side, causing his sister's to do the same.

"Do you know which one?" Arya asked.

"Nancy wouldn't say. She just asked if we were good for dinner," he answered. "I told her we were eating ice cream and sugar straight." His eyes sparkled with mischief. "She told me to stop being naughty."

Nancy was the oldest nurse in Colorado, possibly the country, at 87 years old. She was in charge of knowing the whereabouts of every doctor and nurse at all times, and her mind, sharp as ever, never failed. Xavier enjoyed teasing her, because, like most of their makeshift village, Nancy loved them as family and always bought them something special for their birthday, a small token like a grandmother would. Nancy didn't have any children, as she'd devoted her entire life to her community, from her profession as a nurse to her volunteer work with the church and local animal shelters. Everyone who knew Nancy loved her and she loved everyone too.

"I wonder if she's coming tomorrow," Arya said softly, pulling herself into a standing position. She'd decided not to tell her brother about the stranger, completely sure he'd think her crazy like he usually did when she said she saw things, even if he didn't say so. There was a reason she was the quiet one; she had secrets.

"I invited her. She said she'd stop by but wouldn't stay. You know her," he replied, his voice nearing a grunt as he stood.

"That's nice. I really miss seeing her."

Before their 13th birthday, their mother had insisted they either spend every day after school at Latoya's or the hospital, if both of Latoya's parents were working. Nancy had spent a lot of time with them, from helping with homework to working out problems with bullies and friends. Arya loved Nancy and called her 'Nana' at Nancy's insistence, but Xavier never had such an affinity for Nancy, though he did like her a lot and trusted her with his own childhood secrets. Xavier nodded and lead the way downstairs, past the bookshelves overflowing with books that lined the hallway on both sides. "I'm sorry I ran out," Arya finally said. She didn't meet his eyes but her brother didn't ask her to explain or even acknowledge her apology.

"So I grabbed your fries and gravy, also Chewy threw in our usual chicken burgers with bacon and cheese. And your milkshake is in the freezer," Xavier dug through the brown paper bag for his food. "Want to watch something? I'm currently marathoning Game of Thrones."

"Again?" Arya raised her eyebrow at her brother in amusement. "You are constantly watching that show."

The two laughed and talked as they ate their dinner. When they finished, they cleared the table and went to the loft upstairs and put on a Marvel movie instead. After all, Arya reasoned, there's only so many times she can watch her namesake murder everyone. Xavier had rolled his eyes and agreed to the compromise as long as they started with Iron Man.



Hours later, the door to the Herstory house opened and closed, without a sound. After a long surgery, Dr. Lily Herstory was finally done. She'd managed to save her coworker after he'd been hit by an Ambulance in the ER bay. It had been a long, draining day and she still hadn't had the important talk with her kids and they needed to know by midnight of their sixteenth birthday. She still had time, but just barely.

Hearing the television upstairs, the exhausted woman put her bag down by the door and headed up. Walking into the loft, she saw her children sleeping peacefully. Her son was on the couch, his long legs hanging off the end as he was far too tall, while her daughter curled in a ball on the overstuffed chair. The TV was playing the introduction to something involving Iron Man, the volume turned down low enough to not bother them but loud enough to cover their mother's homecoming. Turning the television off, darkness filled the room, with only the glow of a nightlight from the hallway for illumination.

"Mom?" Xavier yawned, waking up as the tv turned off. "How was work? Did that doctor live?"

"He did," she whispered. "It was touch and go for a while, but he pulled through." She paused, glancing at her daughter's sleeping form and her regular breathing. "Chewy texted me about Arya. Said she just ran out, without a word. What happened?"

"No idea, she wouldn't tell me. We had dinner and watched movies after. She was acting normal... for her."

Lily took a deep breath, willing herself to fulfill her task. "We need to wake her. There's something we need to talk about. Now."

She was filled with dread but time had long since passed to tell her children the horrible truth she'd protected them from for sixteen years, giving them a normal childhood they could treasure in their memories before everything changed. And everything was about to change, Lily knew for certain.

"Alright, let me go pee and I'll be right back," Xavier stretched and stood up. His mother shook her head and told him to meet her in the kitchen.

Kneeling next to Arya's resting body, her peaceful face, she was hesitant to wake her daughter. Lily felt fierce love for her daughter and remorse for what was to be said. Steadying herself again, inhaling deeply, she reached out for her daughter, shaking her shoulder gently, whispering her name. As Arya opened her dazzling green eyes, her face filled with joy, recognizing her mother, the same way she'd always smiled at her mother when she opened her eyes as a baby.

"Wake up, Baby... I need to talk to you and Xavy," Lily stood as Arya untangled her limbs and stood, stretching her arms behind her head.

“What’s wrong, Mom?” Arya whispered, anxiety filling her once more. “I can tell it’s something.”

“I’ll tell you downstairs. Freshen up and meet me in the kitchen,” her mother replied, giving her daughter a last glance before walking back down the hall to the stairs.

Arya stood up, feeling tired and nervous, which made her stomach off. Rushing to the bathroom, she relieved herself and stared into the mirror at her face as she washed her hands. “It’s okay, Arya,” she whispered to herself, repeating it over and over, to calm herself. It wasn’t working, but her mother called her again and she had to go. “Everything will be fine, Arya,” she whispered, making her way to the kitchen.



The room was too quiet for the number of people in it, Arya thought to herself as she walked towards the door. The clock on her phone read 2:23am, making this family meeting ripe with peculiarities even before it began. Her mother had never woken them in the middle of the night to have a talk in their lives. This worried Arya and dread filled her. Her heart sped up and her blood ran cold but she took a few calming breaths and pushed the door to the kitchen open.

At the small circular table in the kitchen, her mother sat with a cup of coffee and a pink bakers box, unopened. Xavier was at the counter, making himself a cup of coffee and filling the kettle with water for Arya’s tea. He was truly the best brother anyone could ask for, she thought to herself. She’d forgotten the stranger from earlier, forgotten her panic, too consumed with the current mystery their mother was about to explain.

Her brother was unusually gentle with his actions, as if he sensed her apprehension, which he probably did. They did have that Twintuition thing going for them. Her mother was oddly still, simply sipping her coffee, black with one sugar, waiting. Arya sat at the table and opened the pink baker’s box reveal half a dozen donuts from Xavier’s favorite donut shop, The Smiley Nut. Arya grabbed a napkin from the squirrel napkin holder her mother bought at a dollar store and selected one of the two powdered raspberry jam filled donuts. Her mother mimicked her actions, selecting a glazed strawberry jelly instead. Finally the tea kettle’s whistle broke the silence.

“Tea’s up, Ya...” Xavier’s words seemed strangely out of place given the atmosphere of the room, filled with so much tension it was palpable in the air. She got up from the table and fixed her tea, a hibiscus dominant raspberry blend with honey and a little cream. Xavier was on his second cup of coffee, stirring the creamer in before taking a satisfying gulp. “Ah, that’s better.”

Arya rolled her eyes as they both joined their mother at the table. Her mother fiddled with the napkin under the untouched donut. Taking a deep breath, she met their gaze, looking deeply into Arya's eyes then Xavier's.

"I have been hiding something from you since you were old enough to ask me who your father was. When you started asking questions, I didn't know how to tell you and I pushed it off for as long as I could." Her voice was just barely above a whisper, the silent room around them seemed nearly able to drown her out. "I love you, more than words can ever say. You are my life, both of you, the most valuable people in the world to me... but soon you will come of age and time does not forgive my feelings..."

"Mom," Xavier interrupted. "What are you talking about? Hid from us? Time? You aren't making any sense..." His voice trailed off as Arya laid her hand on his forearm.

"Let her talk, Xavy."

Xavier looked into his sister's fear filled eyes. "Sorry," he muttered, sitting back and crossing his arms over his chest. "Go on."

Lilith stood, obviously struggling with her emotions. Her eyes filled with tears. "There's no easy way to say this... I'm not who you think I am..." she began. "I am your mother and I am a doctor, but I'm something else... we are something else..." Her voice weakened.

Arya felt a surge of sympathy for her mother. Whatever it was their mother was about to tell them, Arya thought, it must be awful. "Mom?"

"Arya, Xavier... I am not mortal and I haven't been since the time of Eden..." She took a breath, "Arya, what do you know of Lilith?"

"What the fuh?" Xavier began.

"XAVIER, language!" Her mother admonished. "I know it sounds crazy but I am not a mortal and, my loves, my dear sweet children, neither are you..." she paused, pushing back her chair, standing. "Arya, you love your mythology... Do you know of Lilith?" Her mother asked again, waited patiently.

A moment passed before Arya took an unsteady breath and answered. "Well, she's the mother of all demons, the first wife of Adam and a Succubus... according to lore, anyways," Arya responded, surprised her voice worked at all. "She's supposed to be the wife of Lucifer Morningstar... the devil."

Xavier wore expression of strained calm, his dark eyes pooled with anger and confusion. He stayed seated, leaning back as if he didn't have a care in the world, his arms crossed on his chest, his donut remaining uneaten.

"Well, the Children of God always did have their own version of events and they wrote the history books..." Their mother sounded bitter as she trailed off, before continuing in a calmer voice, "Lilith is the Mother of Demons and Witches,

it's true. Long story, too long for now, and really unimportant. It's also true that I am Lucifer's wife, the Queen of Hell..."

Xavier started to shake, still leaning back, acting as if he didn't care. Arya was staring at her mother like she was a stranger.

"But we went our own ways a great many years ago, agreeing to come together only once every century..."

Xavier wasn't the smartest boy in school but he wasn't slow. Leaning forward, his chair landed with a loud thud, causing Arya to wince. "Are you saying the Devil is our father?"

"No, that's not possible," Arya whispered. "You said you didn't know who he was... That you'd been stressed and hadn't been safe. You always say that's why I need to..." Arya's voice tapered off, tears brimming in her eyes.

Their mother took a moment, looking at the crushed defeat in her son's eyes and the agony on her daughter's face. "Yes, I lied to you." Her voice was almost inaudible. "Yes. Lucifer is your father," she repeated.

"Why are you even telling us this? Obviously it didn't matter for sixteen friggin years?" Xavier stood. His anger caused him to pace the kitchen while he glared at their mother.

"I'm telling you this because tonight, at midnight, after you ascend, he is coming to collect you."

"Ascend?" Xavier said as Arya cried out, "What? We're leaving?"

"What the hell does that mean? Collect us? Like property? To go where?" His voice was loud, seething with venom. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Mom?" Arya whispered, too afraid to be angry. She was still sitting at the table, although she'd brought her knees to her chest, resting her feet on the seat of the small dining chair. "Mommy?" Arya sounded like a little girl; her voice a mousy squeak.

A tear fell from Lilith's eyes as she saw the devastation she'd just caused her children. She'd never before been the reason for their suffering and in this moment, she knew she was to be blamed for all of it.

"I'm so sorry, my loves..." She wrapped her arms around her daughter's hunched form and continued. "This deal was made. the bargain struck before you were ever a dream..." She sounded serenely reasonable as she explained, "Hundreds of years ago, eons after being flung from Eden, years after Lucifer had fallen from his God's Grace, we found each other... Two lonely immortal beings wandering the earth, isolated from all other creatures in our own hells..."

Xavier sat down again, leaning forward, putting his elbow on the table, resting his head against his hand. Lilith released her as Arya shifted, unbending her knees and sitting up straight. Their eyes met for a moment before Lilith looked away, sipping her coffee.

“He was divinely handsome, like you Xavy. His darkened skin, not quite brown but golden, like yours, his eyes were deep and dark like yours. Only his were filled with mystery and secrets I wanted to know from the moment I looked into them... I was such a fool... you see, he was absolutely the most magnificent thing I’d ever seen in all my days on earth.”

“What?” Xavier muttered, annoyed but no longer visibly angry, calmed by his mother’s story. Arya said nothing, sipping her now cold tea.

“He’d been looking for me, he later told me.” She paused. “He’d disagreed with his Father, the God, and been cast out of Heaven, he said... At the time, I was so alone... mine and Adam’s first children, Aya and Baan, had long ago left me, in search of their Father, in themselves, in search of their futures...” Another tear dripped down her face. “I didn’t begrudge them. They had their reasons...”

“So we have other siblings...” Arya said curiously.

“You do. A few.” Lilith nodded solemnly. “Although, most of my children were from mortal men and were mortal beings and have long ago died. Only my first children are still alive.” She sighed. “They were Children of Adam, Aya and Baan, but I have not seen them in centuries.”

“Wait, Aya? Like Aya the vampire queen in the legends?” Arya laughed. “You’re kidding! This has to be some joke.” The whole thing was completely preposterous. “You almost had me.”

“What? A vampire? Mom? What the hell?” Xavier stood and paced the kitchen, without looking at his mother or sister. He wasn’t convinced his mother was kidding.

“I’m not lying, Arya,” Lilith said sadly. “It’s true. I know it sounds crazy... you’ve grown up in the mortal world, living in peace and you’ve been allowed a normal life... it was the bargain I made with Lucifer, that you be allowed a normal, mortal life. You see, we didn’t fall in love right away, Lucifer and I. It was more of a strict arrangement than a marriage.”

Arya stood up, putting the kettle back on the burner for another cup. She didn’t look at her mother, still not sure her mother wasn’t pranking them. Xavier moved to the seat she vacated and leaned back, his arms once again folded across his chest.

“I was with a mortal man at the time. A distant grandson of Adam and his second wife... He was a brave warrior, a handsome man with yellow hair and eyes of sea blue. He didn’t know what I was but loved me, despite my secrets. We had twins, a boy and a girl, just like you two and just like my first two.” Tears dripped down Lilith’s cheeks as her eyes glazed at the memory. “When they turned sixteen, the magic inside them manifested and they were able to tap into their gifts.” She fell silent as tears now flowed like a stream from her eyes.

“Mommy,” Arya said, wrapping her arms around their mother. Arya felt broken

She choked back tears and scoffed. “And that’s when their father stopped loving me. He called them abominations... He murdered them as they slept and tried to kill me.” The bitterness emanated from Lilith as she recalled one of her darkest hours. “But I cannot die and so I was forced to live with the loss of my children.”

“Wait so he killed them? For being witches?” Xavier said, finally breaking his silence.

“Yes. He was terrified of their power and he felt it was... unnatural. He said it was evil and so was I.” Moments passed in silence before she continued, taking a sip of her cold coffee to wet her lips. “That’s when Lucifer found me, consoled me for the loss he knew to be awful and asked me to be his Queen, his equal. You see, not even Adam, my first husband, wanted me to be his equal. His God demanded to be worshipped and I would not so Adam tried beating me into submission, and when I refused, his creator threw me from Eden like trash, nearly dead.”

“That’s awful,” Arya whispered.

The tea kettle had barely whistled when she turned off the burner, pouring the water into a cup and sitting next to her mother again. She no longer thought her mother was playing a game.

A faint smile crossed Lilith’s lips as she continued to weave the history of her life into a story for her children. “The Goddess, she was my Creator and she was once a powerful being in her own right. The God of Abraham’s equal when this world began,” Lilith said with conviction. “She saved me from Adam and his God and all their hatred... granting me safe haven in a magnificent land far from Eden.”

“Eden?” Xavier muttered, not realizing he’d even spoken aloud.

Ignoring him, Lilith continued, “she created other humans, like Adam, without my... special gifts, so I wouldn’t be alone. Men and women, who had children and who lived alongside my own children. We were the Children of the Goddess.”

As his mother drifted into a sort of haze, Xavier got up to put the kettle back on and fixed another pot of coffee. It was now 4:30 in the morning. What a way to start his sixteenth birthday, he thought. If his mother was to be believed, in less than twenty hours, he would meet his father, the Devil. A few minutes later they were all seated around the table, eating their donuts and drinking in silence, a slight reprieve from the tension. Finally, after finishing her glazed jelly, she wiped her hands on a napkin and took a deep breath, sighing.

“As you can imagine, Lucifer’s offer was nothing short of everything I’d dreamed, to be treated like an equal, with respect and dignity. I’d already been cast

away from two loves of my life, despite how much I loved them. I'd already been a mother and had my children stolen away. Lucifer's offer gave me the chance to protect any others I might one day have." She smiled at her children, touching both of her children's hands softly. "He knew who I was, of course, and he wanted to rebel against his God by making me his partner, the way God had refused to allow me to be with Adam. It was the perfect match. So it seemed."

Another deep breath and heavy sigh interrupted her soliloquy but Lilith continued right away. "I didn't have children with Lucifer for the first five hundred years of our marriage. We'd spent the entire time in hell and I refused to allow a child to be born amongst Lucifer's perverse creations... his Demons. While I am Grandmother of Vampires, I am not nor have I ever been the Mother of Demons. Those were Lucifer's unique companions, dark creatures who did his bidding." She shuddered. "He was so obsessed with creating something better than his God, but nothing he made could survive in the mortal world of mankind. Although he could cause chaos with his disgusting creations, infecting the Children of Adam, while my own descendants are immune to possessions."

"Mom, you're losing us here," Xavier blurted out, glancing at his sister's puzzled expression. "We get it. Lucifer was awful and you clearly aren't in hell anymore so what gives?" Xavier didn't mince his words, interrupting her thoughts to focus her.

"Right. Sorry," she mumbled, taking another deep breath. "Anyways, Lucifer saw my unhappiness and my loneliness and in an attempt to win my favor, he granted me a gift. I could live with the mortals, walk amongst them, so long as I provided him with a child, once every five hundred years on their sixteenth birthday," Her anguish was clear when she dared to look at her children.

"What?" The twins said in shocked unison.

"You see, tonight at the midnight hour, your father is coming to decide which of you will be his Heir to the Kingdom of Hell..." Lilith whispered.

"Why? Why sixteen? Why at midnight?" Xavier demanded, leaning forward in anticipation, his leg shaking under the table. Arya stayed quiet as she had no idea what she should say.

"Because that's when you'll get your gifts from the Goddess," she replied almost happily. "That's when you'll Ascend into your true self, receiving your birthright."

"Gifts?" Arya asked as Xavier questioned, "Ascend?"

Lilith couldn't help but smile. "Tonight, at midnight on your sixteenth birthday, my loves, I will perform the ritual to call the Goddess to imbue in you the magic you are destined for. Lucifer will come tonight and he will decide which of you will be declared Heir to the Throne, Prince or Princess of Hell, and which of you will be allowed to live your life as you choose, as a witch or warlock."

“Witch?” Arya whispered. “You mean like spells and burnings?”

“Warlock?” Xavier was furious. “What the fu!”

“Language, Xavier! I am still your mother!” Lily admonished, momentarily bewildering the twins with the normalcy of her mothering. “I know this has been a lot of information and you must be very tired. I am so sorry for keeping this from you... I should have told you sooner, I just didn’t see how to do it without stealing the remaining innocence you had... and shattering your world.” She kissed both of her children on the forehead. “Go get some sleep, we’ll talk later.”

Lilith walked out of the kitchen, with a last glance at her children, who hadn’t moved. Still sitting dazed, Arya thought back to earlier when she and Latoya had wished for magical powers. Be careful what you wish for, she thought to herself.

Chapter Two

Arya went to her room after the night's illuminating talk with their mother and she wasn't quite sure what to do. She was tired but couldn't imagine sleeping. Instead, she decided to do some research and spent the next few hours reading every legend she could find about her mother.

Lilith was to be feared, if the stories were right, but that didn't match the idea she had of her own mother; the renowned trauma surgeon who saved nearly every patient she touched from certain death. Arya's mother was kind and loving, but these stories called her a baby killer and demon. The research on her father's legacy hadn't yielded results that were any better and based on her mother's own words, he was not the loving parent she'd dreamed of one day finding. In fact, his story was terrifying. She shouldn't have been surprised, since the King of Hell was notoriously evil.

While Arya had been researching, Xavier went to his room, turned on Game of Thrones and fell asleep to the scene where Ned Stark's head was removed. His dreams were filled with nightmarish scenarios, first with him being selected as the Prince of Hell and then Arya instead. Each had their own horrors. He woke with a shudder and fear in his heart when his sister knocked on his door.

"Xavy?" he heard her call quietly. "Are you awake?"

Groaning softly to himself, he got up and let her in. He had made a habit of locking his door since he'd been twelve and his mother had the misfortune of walking in during a private moment that had left them both embarrassed for weeks.

"What's up, Ya?" Xavier was surprised at how normal his voice sounded, as if nothing was different. "Happy birthday, Little Sister," he smiled. Her eyes sparkled, and she hugged him tightly. Wrapping his arms around her smaller, almost frail body, he held her close to him. "It'll be okay, Ya. You and me, together, we can conquer anything."

Arya pulled away with a look of masked pain beneath a smile, nodding. She glanced at the television to see her namesake. Her mother had admitted years ago

to naming her after the small but mighty character. “Happy birthday, Big Brother,” she said at last.

“So what’s up?” Xavier crashed back onto his bed as Arya sat in a chair covered with what she hoped was clean laundry.

“I’ve been doing some research,” she began. Xavier tisked with his teeth but said nothing. He knew her well enough to know that research made her feel comfortable in distressing situations. “I am afraid of tonight.”

“It’s just a party, Ya. Nothing to be afraid of,” Xavier replied, purposely ignoring the real reason she was scared. “I know you don’t like socializing, but damn!” He laughed, his eyes filled with forced amusement. Arya didn’t even crack a smile.

“Xavy, be serious. You know this isn’t about that... Didn’t you hear mom? She said he would take one of us away. Tonight!” Arya’s voice was filled with resentment and anger, something unusual to her. Xavier sighed, knowing nothing he could say would make her feel better about their impending doom. “I can’t lose you, Xavy!”

Xavier pulled himself off his bed again and crouched in front of his sister. Pushing the red curls out of her face, he made her look him in the eye. “I am not going to leave you, do you understand? I am never going to let that happen. We aren’t going anywhere... I’ll fight him if I have to, I promise. I’ll protect us.” His voice filled with conviction and determination. Arya shook her head. “I’ll protect you.”

“You’ll never win,” she whispered.

“I can’t lose if you’re by my side,” Xavier smiled at her. She gave a weak chuckle but said nothing. “We’re the Dynamic Duo, Ya... Remember that time in third grade? When Brian and Luke tried to jump me but you kicked them both in the balls and they never tried again?” Arya blushed, fighting a smile. “We’re the One-Two-Knockout, Ya.”

They touched their foreheads together, closing their eyes and sat in a strange, hunched embrace. “I’ll always protect you, Ya, even from Satan himself.”

Xavier had always been there for Arya and she really couldn’t imagine a life without him. They were twins, together since before memory. They had plans. Plans to graduate high school, plans to go to college, to get jobs and maybe move west, where the ocean was. They’d always wanted to see the ocean, having grown up landlocked. So many dreams yet unfulfilled. The ring of Xavier’s cell phone interrupted their sibling bonding.

“Speak of the devil, metaphorically!” Xavier joked as he answered. “What’s up, Luke?”

Arya stood up, offering her brother another faux smile and left his room. This was their last day of normal, whatever normal was, and they did have a birthday party to get ready for.



Around two in the afternoon, Lily Herstory was waking up from her fit-filled sleep, dreading the moment of Lucifer's return. Her mind was reeling from her confession to her children. She'd spent the last sixteen years doing everything she could to prepare her children for whatever hell, for lack of a better word, he could inflict on them, without letting them know.

From therapy to work through and control their emotions, something absolutely vital when tapping into magic, to various martial arts classes to learn fighting skills she knew they'd need. If only they had known she meant against demons and monsters, not the bully at the local high school, maybe they would have tried harder.

Lucifer would probably pick Xavier, due to his obvious skills, strength and masculinity. Lucifer was a classic misogynist, even if he'd recognized Lilith as his equal. Making Lilith his queen was simply a tactic to anger his Creator and it had worked. Lilith shuddered as she remembered how the God had punished her descendants with witch hunts and burnings. Lilith had a great many fears when it came to Lucifer and her children. The fact that Xavier looked nearly exactly like his father had concerned her when the twins were small. She worried he would be like his father in other ways, but he had always been gentle, tempered by the presence of his sister, a small replica of Lilith herself.

They were the first children Lilith had with Lucifer and the deal she'd made allowed her to raise her children as mortal beings. Lilith had wanted to have two children raised like any other child, as innocent as possible. She raised them without religion, without fear of Children of God or Creatures of Night, without Heaven or Hell and suffering. She raised them with love, hope and acceptance. She raised them with optimism and understanding. All the things children needed and all the things she knew Lucifer was incapable of.

With determination, Lilith slowly began to dress and prepare for her babies' sweet sixteen, such a strangely mundane event to mark the end of their innocent lives. She had two presents wrapped in silver paper on her dresser, ready to give her children. The last gift she would give them before they inherited their powers from the Goddess. Once they were imbued with their magic, Lucifer would decide which of her children he was going to claim, which she would lose forever because of the terrible deal she'd made to escape Hell herself.

She gazed at her reflection in the mirror and shook her hair out, the lines magically vanishing from her face. Lilith stared at Arya's face and sighed before shaking her hair out, the lines reappearing, aging herself once more. Putting on a neutral expression, she tore her eyes away from the mirror and picked up the small silver packages. She flipped the light off as she left the sanctuary of her room to face her, rightfully, angry children.



The doorbell rang as Arya changed into the party dress she'd picked out with her best friend, Latoya. Eyeing herself in the mirror, her mind wandered. She couldn't help wondering whether she'd still know Latoya tomorrow, if she'd return to school on Monday. Would she be alone, she worried. Could she tell her best friend any of this? Did the Hernandezes, who'd been friends with her mother her whole life, know? Were they witches? Or maybe werewolves? Vampires? Her mind raced with a thousand different possibilities running into each other, occupying her to the point that she didn't see Latoya walk in and flop on her bed.

"Earth to Arya!" A voice broke through her clouded consciousness. Blinking, Arya became aware of her friend's presence. "Girl, you were gone for a minute there. Thought maybe you were having a vision." Latoya laughed, "Amazing dress! Twirl that thing, Girl!"

The girls laughed and Arya was suddenly filled with ease. She spun around several times before falling lazily onto her bed next to her friend.

"I love it. Thank you for making me buy it," she giggled. "Even if it did cost me three weeks worth of wages and we're only wearing it to a diner."

Latoya rolled her eyes and got off Arya's bed. "Girl, you're missing the big picture here: You only turn sixteen once, it should be special. Even if you have to share your day with a boy." Latoya made a face to Arya in the mirror that caused them both to giggle. "Now sit down and let me do your makeup. You can go ahead and get lost in your head again. I need you to stay still."

Arya studied her friend's face as Latoya masterfully contoured Arya's pale, plain face into modelesque. Latoya was stunningly beautiful in a way that Arya envied. Wearing gold, sparkly eyeshadow and gold tinted lip gloss, Latoya's skin looked richer with deep bronze undertones. She wore a gold and black sequined flapper dress that made Latoya seem like she was glowing. Her naturally tightly coiled curls were parted in the middle, held in place by a gold-tinted feathered rhinestone headband that made her look like she'd stepped out of a Gatsby film. As Latoya painted Arya's face, Arya's mind filled with memories of her best friend.

Latoya was the most popular girl in their grade and easily the prettiest, most confident and outgoing. When the girls were younger, maybe four or five, some

boys were picking on Arya, pushing her down into the mud and making her cry. Out of nowhere, Latoya threw rocks at them and told them to get away. They called her a racist name and Arya had never seen someone stand so proud and defiant as Latoya did that day. She just threw more rocks at the boys until they ran away.

When they came back with the teacher, Arya remembered lying and telling the teacher that she hadn't seen anyone throw rocks, but she did hear those boys calling her a bad name. They always fought for each other but Latoya had never needed a savior. She was more than capable of standing up for herself. Arya, though, had gotten lucky to be best friends with Latoya, since she was nowhere near as confident or outgoing as Latoya or her brother.

If anyone was the definition of co-dependent, it was Arya. Meek, mild Arya. Everyone always noticed her for her hair so she was known of, but other than Latoya, Arya couldn't think of a single person at school that actually knew her. Everyone knew her brother. Mr. Popular, Mr. Varsity-Hockey-Freshman-Year, Mr. Homecoming-King Xavier. In fact, Arya was pretty convinced most of the people were coming to the party didn't even realize they were related. It's part of why she loved Latoya and why she was so glad her friend insisted Arya dress up like a princess. It made her feel special, even if it wouldn't last.

"So what did you get from your mom?" Latoya asked, carefully applying mascara to her friend's eyelashes. "Anything good?"

Arya tried not to physically wince. "Nothing yet."

"Well, she's bound to get you something awesome. Remember my last birthday? She got me diamond studs and I'm just her coworkers' kid."

"You're more than that and you know it. You're like her other, prettier, more amazing daughter," Arya insisted.

Latoya laughed her off. "Yea, yea yea... anyways, your gift will arrive in exactly one hour, so we'd better hurry. Don't want to be late!" she said mysteriously, putting on the final touches of makeup. "Now close your eyes so I can use the setting spray and that will stay put."

Obedying her friend, Arya sighed, calm and content. "You're my best friend, Latoya, and I love you," Arya said after she'd looked in the mirror at her strange and enhanced reflection, hugging her friend tightly. "Please never forget how much I love you."

Latoya squeezed her back and whispered, "Never, Girl. Friends for life."



Xavier woke again as Latoya arrived, hearing her voice in the hallway. Xavier had a serious crush on her since they were in middle school, but since she was his

sister's best friend, she was untouchable. Not that Latoya looked at him like that, ever. Her friendship with Arya had lifted a burden Xavier didn't realize he carried. He was always so worried about Arya but Latoya helped. When the girls had stayed friends after some horrible rumors were spread about them, he knew they would never betray each other, something he was grateful for. Still, her voice was like music to his ears and he listened as they talked in the room next to his.

It didn't matter to Xavier what he wore to the party but his mom had seen his sister's dress and insisted he dress up. Weird how that was only a week ago, he thought to himself. She'd taken him shopping and picked him up a shirt in a shade darker than Arya's dress. She picked him out nice pants and new shoes, since he'd outgrown his old dress shoes. They'd had such a good day, his mom and him. Eating lunch in the food court and talking about everything in Xavier's life. And nothing of her's, he thought bitterly, since nothing she said matters after tonight.

Xavier was angry and worried. No matter what, he knew he'd be fine. He could go far from his lying mother and he'd be fine, but leaving Arya didn't seem possible. They'd spent their whole lives together. He protected her from the monsters that didn't exist. Now that he knew there were real monsters, how would he protect her if he was gone? Despite all his worrying, it never occurred to him that Lucifer might take his sister and his mother had implied as much. He looked in the mirror, buttoning his shirt, trying to put his mask of calm back on, but the rage was there. His last night on earth and he was too angry to enjoy it.



With Latoya at the house, the Herstorys weren't able to continue talking about their impending ascension. Xavier, quieter than usual, looked so handsome despite his brooding and Arya, well Lilith decided she'd never seen her daughter more dazzling than she did in that moment. Latoya, of course, with her contrasting dark beauty and lovely sparkling dress, could be mistaken for a model any day.

"You girls look so beautiful and Xavy, what a handsome face," Lilith gushed over her children, taking photos with her phone. "I can't believe how quickly you've grown."

Lilith stared at both her children, struggling to keep their composure and hide their anger with her, unbeknownst to Latoya. Xavier forced a smile that appeared more of a grimace, Arya's seemed somewhat elated tinged with sadness, and Latoya's large white smile, outlined in golden lipstick, was the most genuinely, blissfully happy. Lilith felt a pang of utter sadness to know that was short lived as well. Still, her children were magnificently stunning, even next to their remarkably striking friend.

“Dr. Lily, I wanted to thank you for giving birth to my favorite person on the planet... and Xavy,” Latoya joked, hugging the matriarch. “Now, let’s go before we’re late. Uncle Chewy is expecting us!”

She ordered as she marched the twins out the door while their mother trailed, locking the door behind them. Outside, the twins were standing, staring at a large white limousine sitting in front of their house. Arya grasped Xavier’s hand.

Latoya shouted, “TA-DA!! It’s a gift from my parents who are working but totally love you guys.”

Arya breathed a sigh of relief, releasing Xavier’s hand, a gesture that had gone unnoticed by Latoya but not their mother. Her chest tightened with agony and she forced a smile. Tonight was their last normal night.

“That was so very nice of your parents, Latoya. Please tell Tyrone and Andrea thank you,” Lily hugged Latoya’s shoulder, to avoid smearing the work of art she’d created from makeup. “You look so lovely, sweet girl. You all do.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Xavier called as he crawled into the limo. Latoya clambered in after him followed by Arya. Lily felt her heart breaking, piece by piece, as she climbed in behind them.

“This is so cool,” Arya giggled to Latoya. “Our first limo!!”

“It was my idea, obv’s. I wanted to celebrate in style, but I was surprised when the doctors agreed,” Latoya explained.

“Your parents are some of the best people ever... I really love your mom and dad,” Xavier replied. “Will they be there?”

“My mom said she’d stop by but I don’t know about my Dad. You know him, work comes first.” Although Latoya kept the smile on her face, she sounded bittersweet. Lilith smiled. Her kids had the same complaints about her, but how could she not use her own Goddess-Given gifts to help save those who would otherwise perish? Life has always been and will always be precious to Lilith.

“Oh, I hope she comes,” whispered Arya. Her eyes stung from sadness as she stared at the town passing them. Within moments they pulled into the parking lot of Chewy’s Diner, which was surprisingly full. “There are so many people here!”

“Well, duh, Girl! It’s your BURFDAY!” Latoya shouted the last word, causing Arya to laugh at the way they’d pronounced it the year they’d both lost their front teeth. “Time! To! Part! A!” She yelled climbing out of the limo. “Come on, Birthday Twins. Get ready to have the time of your young lives!”

With those words, she ran into the diner, leaving the Herstory family alone.

“Go on, my loves, your friends are waiting.” Lily persuaded her children. “You’ll regret wasting a moment if you don’t hurry.” With a dirty look cast back at his mother, Xavier left without another word. Arya simply took a deep breath and

followed. “I love you both beyond words,” Lilith whispered to the empty open door.



The diner was covered in streamers and balloons. A “HAPPY BIRTHDAY” banner hung above their normal seats, and even Uncle Chewy was wearing a party hat. There were about thirty kids in the diner, taking up every possible seat, ordering food and laughing, talking amongst themselves. Each table was covered in a different colored table cloth, some glittery and some plaid or checkered.

Pausing at the door where they could feel the beat of the music, Xavier looked at his sister, who was more beautiful than he’d ever seen her. “No matter what happens later, let’s just pretend it won’t,” he said to her. “You look amazing, by the way, like a Princess.”

Arya blushed, her cheeks nearly matching the red of her hair. “You look great too, Xavy. Happy Birthday, Twinnifer.”

Xavier chortled and opened the door.

“SURPRISE!!!” shouted nearly everyone in the diner as the music stopped.

“But it wasn’t a surprise,” Xavier protested as Arya squealed with delight.

“Happy Birthday, Arya! Happy Birthday, Xavier!” Uncle Chewy said, coming forward to hug them and snap party hats on their heads.

“And now you’re ready to party.” Latoya laughed. The chatter started again as Latoya restarted the music.

Occasionally, people would come up to Arya, complimenting her dress, wishing her a happy birthday, but the main event of the party, much like everywhere else, was Xavier. There was not a time when he wasn’t the most popular boy in the room. Everyone was always trying to befriend him, make him take them out on dates, but Xavier didn’t date. Sure, he flirted and had made out with a couple girls, but Xavier wasn’t ready for a serious relationship. Almost all the girls that pined after him gathered the courage to ask him to dance, insisting he’d love their gifts.

Latoya sat with Arya and together they quietly laughed at the faces of girls left disappointed because of his lack of interest. Occasionally, Xavier would look their way and they’d burst into giggles. Xavier’d cock his eyebrow and chuckle, talking to his friends, Luke and Brian. Arya didn’t know them very well, since they hardly spent any time at the Herstory house, but she knew enough. Luke was a preacher’s son, a typical attractive, six foot tall white guy with sandy brown hair, brown hazel eyes.

At seventeen, he was handsome in a rugged way, wearing flannel, jeans and boots most days. Brian, a nerdy Asian-American, was the cutest guy in school in

Arya's mind. He had long black hair he kept in a single braid down his back and a squared jaw with a goatee trimmed short. He wore t-shirts with math equations as jokes and shorts and flip-flops, even when it was snowing. He was taller than Luke by an inch or two but shorter than Xavier. Since they all worked out together three times a week for the hockey team, each of them was muscular. Latoya loved to joke they were the most ripped guys in all of Peak's Village.

"You know what would make my brother super happy on his birthday?"

Arya asked Latoya when they finally found a moment alone.

"What's that? Besides the awesome Hockey jersey I got him already,"

Latoya teased

"Dance with him?"

Latoya sighed. "Girl, you know I don't feel that way about him..." She glanced at Xavier surrounded by Brian and Luke. "I tell you what, I'll give him one dance if you ask that fine lookin Brian to dance too."

"Ugh, fine, deal." Arya pretended to be annoyed, but Latoya knew better.

The girls walked over to where the boys were standing and Latoya let out a dramatic sigh. "Xavier, would you please dance with me?" Winking at Arya, she gave Xavier her best smile, thrusting out her hand. Xavier's cheeks darkened as he blushed, taking it. Latoya elbowed Arya in the ribs. "Your turn."

Wincing, Arya forced a smile. "Brian, would you like to dance?"

Brian grinned and followed them to the space Chewy'd cleared to make a dance floor.

"Thank you for coming to my party," Arya said awkwardly. "Or I mean, thanks for coming for Xavy."

"I came for you too."

He pulled her in a little closer as the song played. Arya's heart skipped a beat as she forgot about everything else, lost in the moment. Here she was, dancing with the boy she liked and he was flirting with her too. She could have burst with joy.

"That's nice of you to say," she whispered. The latest Taylor Swift song began to play as she leaned into him.

"I'm not just saying it. Come with me," he said, holding her hand.

He guided her slowly through the diner. Latoya's eyes followed them and gave her a subtle thumbs up when Arya followed Brian out the diner door. The night had grown cold. The stars twinkled and the full moon's light cut through the darkness of the parking lot. Arya looked at Brian in the moonlight and tried to steady her breathing but she was nervous. Rubbing her arms to warm herself, she tried not to visibly shiver.

"So I got you something," he began, clearly feeling the tension. "I already talked to Xavy and he said it was cool so yea... I don't know, here."

He pulled a small box out of his pocket and thrust it into her hands. Arya smiled softly and mumbled thanks as she held it and turned it over and over in her fingers.

“Open it,” he demanded before softening his tone, “please.”

“Thank you,” Arya whispered.

She unwrapped the pale pink paper from a small blue box. Lifting the lid of the box, she gasped. Inside was a simple silver chain with a vintage style pendant of the sun and moon in orbit around the earth.

“It’s beautiful... Brian, thank you.” She awkwardly hugged her brother’s friend. She gently pulled the necklace from the box. “Wait, what do you mean you asked my brother?”

“Here, let me help you,” Brian said, taking the chain from her. As he opened the clasp, he moved behind her. “Move your hair?” He whistled when she turned to face him. “Wow, it’s perfect on you.”

“Thank you,” she said again. An awkward pause before she repeated her question. “What do you mean you asked my brother?”

Brian looked sheepish. “He’s my best friend. I figured if I was going to ask his sister out, I’d better make sure he was cool.”

Arya’s face broke into a huge grin. “You’re asking me out?”

“Yea,” he mumbled, avoiding eye contact. “I mean, if you’ll say yes, I definitely am, but if the answer is no, then no this was just a giant misunderstanding,”

Her smile grew. “I’d love to,” she replied in her sweetest, most confident voice she could muster. “But I don’t know when... things are changing in our family soon. I promise I’ll text you next week. We can pick a date then.”

“How about next weekend? A movie? I hear the new Marvel movie is pretty good,” he replied. The night air was cool on Arya’s bare shoulders, a wolf howled in the distance and she shivered. “You’re freezing...”

“Haven’t you seen that, like, four times with Luke and Xavy?” she jokingly asked, shivering again.

“Let’s go inside. We’ll figure something out.”

Brian led them back inside the diner, which was still loud, sounds of music, chatter and laughter filled the air. The bell at the door chimed, causing Latoya to catch Arya’s eye and wink before laughing loudly. Xavier shifted his gaze away when he met Arya’s, but she saw the trace of an amused smile on his lips. Uncle Chewy sat with Lilith and Andrea Hernandez, glancing occasionally at one Twin or the other, worried looks on their faces. Lily noticed Arya staring and forced a smile, rising up from the bar stool.

“Cake!” Lily called from across the room. Chewy went into the kitchen and brought out a huge three tiered cake with sixteen candles on the top tier. “Happy Birthday to my beautiful children. I have been so blessed to be your mother.”

Xavier and Arya were guided to the middle table of the diner, with a gold shimmering tablecloth, and seated across from each other. The room burst into song, singing the familiar happy birthday tune. Xavier and Arya laughed together and blew out the candles on their last normal birthday cake. They were happy in that moment. Latoya decided after the candles were out, she should make a speech.

“My Girl here is my best friend,” she began, dramatically fanning her face as if to stop herself from crying. “Since we were babies in the same playpen. Xavier was there too, for some reason,” she joked, the room rewarded her with a laugh. “I just want to say I love you, Girl, and my life wouldn’t be the same without you. Friends forever.” Arya had gotten up and hugged Latoya tightly, accidentally smashing some of her curls. “Girl, watch my hair!”

Letting her friend go, Arya grinned at Xavier who was actually enjoying himself. Their minds were briefly distracted from their worries and fears. They were living in the moment, loving their friends and family. For a few precious moments, while eating cake and opening presents, they were normal sixteen year old kids.

Around ten, the party began to clear out. Xavier had loaded the gifts into the limo, which had stayed in the parking lot for the duration of the party. Arya hugged Uncle Chewy and thanked him for their party.

“Any time, you sweet girl,” his voice choked up, “You’re my girl, never forget. Tell your brother too, he’s my boy.” Arya’s face flickered with confusion before he hugged her again and kissed the top of her head, filling her with calm.

“Time to go, Girl... I’m tired and I want to curl in my jammies and sleep!” Latoya called from the door.

Arya looked around the diner, decorated for the party, plates and cups everywhere, and sighed happily. “Thank you for this, Uncle Chewy,” she said again before following Latoya out to the limo where her brother and mother were waiting.

Xavier was staring at his phone, ignoring their mother, when the girls climbed in. Latoya leaned against Lilith and closed her eyes while Arya pulled her phone out and checked the time. Thirty-seven minutes to midnight.