

## Chapter One

### *The Burden*

He had failed her, but what had she expected? What she had asked of them was impossible. They had already wasted months scouring Albeth's college library in search of anything that may even hint towards their mission. Time passed, filled with nothing more than stacks of dust ridden books, whilst the world was thrust into chaos by the threat of the Severaine. Already cities had been laid to waste. Its insatiable lust to purge offending life feeding its hunger, and replenishing the depleted energies its break into freedom had consumed. It was ravenous, and like any living being, all it devoured gave it strength. A strength which was turned to one purpose, to erase all life, normally allowing a new God to sculpt the world as they desired. Zeus, however, still sat upon the Throne of Eternity, keeping vigil, but not interfering in the fate of man. After all, it was by their hand this force had been unleashed, it was their responsibility to find a way to tame it.

How could she release this terror and then abandon them? How could she have asked this of him? To seal the Severaine, to undo what she did, there was no way he could do what she had requested.

Daniel stared unseeing through the tavern window, out

into the softly lit streets of Collateral that descended in their gentle gradients. The light from the torches, which lit the winding streets, began to fade with the promise of a new day. Soon it would be morning, and once again he would fail to fulfil her final request. Once more their search would result in failure and another fragment of his hope would fade. He had long since exhausted the depths of his reserves. On days like these he just wanted to leave the world and its problems behind, just like she had.

When they had first returned, this bustling metropolis had heaved with life, the trade districts had been busier than they had ever seen, the tavern was filled to capacity as people sought a means to forget their troubles. Collateral was one of the only safe places that remained, and access was a luxury scarce few discovered, and those who had already scrambled to fill its borders.

Today he had been hopeful, their research seemed to have yielded so many possibilities. But as they worked their way through the countless tales of lore, his hope once more drained as all amounted to nothing. How did she expect them to find answers when the question asked predated their cycle, and was perhaps even primordial in nature?

Now, Daniel and the barkeep seemed to be the only people awake at this hour. The metal shutters secured the bar and the rhythmic sweeping of the brush across the wooden floor whispered a gentle lullaby. But even this soothing noise could not force the sleep he so desperately rejected. So long had it been, even memories of a peaceful night now eluded him. He passed his hands through his ear length brown hair before cradling his head. It had been so long, so many months and still they were no closer than when they had first set out on this fool's errand. What had possessed him to think that he could make a difference?

He sat alone with his questions, alone with his worries, as the world inside Collateral enjoyed their restful slumber unaware of the burdens he shouldered.

He feared the night more than his death. Death was an

end, a release, and through it he would find peace. But to sleep was to invite dreams. Nightmares he scarcely survived as memories of the past and visions of the future plagued his every sense, repeating on a continuous loop from which there was no escape; at least, not until someone showed the mercy of releasing him.

But the true terror was worse than those moments that danced before him. The real terror, the real reason he feared sleep so much, was because *she* was there; hunting him through the darkness, relentless in her murderous pursuit. They had escaped her, but in his dreams she came for him, and every time, true to life, she won.

The passing months had become nothing more than a blur, a constant battle to wade through the seemingly endless library in search of something. Perhaps even something as seemingly insignificant as a footnote, or yet another outlandish theory. All the time he fought the approaching sleep and, although it always won eventually, he never slept for long. How could he with the images he saw?

His most successful method of forcing back the fatigue was to busy his mind. Tonight he focused on trying to discover the secret of Collateral.

When they had first arrived here and walked this bustling metropolis Zo had revealed just part of its secret lore. She had told him this place was not one of their world. The outside imagery, which led them to assume otherwise, was nothing more than an illusion. One so perfectly crafted and sustained that even the shadows of the town obeyed the passing hours of the virtual light. But even the air was created only by the need of those who lived within.

It was a remarkable place. So now when he grew tired he tried to think on this; to imagine where this place could be, how such a perfect illusion was possible, and the power which had been needed to create something of this magnitude.

Tonight however, his thoughts would not stay focused on the mysteries of Collateral. Even had sleep been easy, he would not have found himself within its comforting embrace. The

thought of events brought by the rising sun filled him with such morbid dread, such shame, had he seen his reflection he would avoid its accusing stare. There was no choice, he had put off this inevitable journey for too long. His shoulders grew taut with the burden he was forced to carry. Tomorrow would see an end, tomorrow he would venture to Drevera, Zo's hometown, and finally say goodbye.

This evening he had spoken to Acha of his intentions, yet by giving voice to them they became forefront in his mind. His every thought consumed by those of his best friend, Acha's half-sister.

It was strange to think that they had been born nearly 1300 years apart, and yet, both shared the same father. It had been something neither of them had realised until it had been too late.

By visiting Drevera he hoped to finally move forward, only then could he once more continue with his life. For so long he had fought to keep this day at bay, but he could deny it no longer. What she had asked was selfish, how could he be expected to do what no one else could? It was time to set aside these foolish aspirations and focus on what he could do. He could not seal the Severaine, but maybe he could help those plagued by the disaster her actions had wrought. Perhaps another would succeed where he failed, someone worthy of wearing the shroud of hero.

Zo herself was not buried in Drevera, in fact her body wasn't buried at all, despite his wishes to the contrary given the circumstances. It had been a surreal situation, one which would have perhaps been more common had Hectarian magic still existed. No mortal token of her passing remained, her form still walked the planet with Marise Shi as its owner. Marise Shi, the darkness to Zoella's light. There was not a moment, waking or otherwise, in which he didn't wish Hades had taken her instead.

Zo had been unique, not only was she Hectarian, despite the fact none should have been born after the Hoi Hepta Sophoi extinguished the source of this power at its core, but

she had been a walker on the path of light. Most Hectarians, by need alone, ensured their lives and magic remained neutral, thus retaining balance of the light and darkness which formed the magic within them. But should someone choose to follow a path and fail to keep the intrinsic balance there were dire consequences. Those who walked the path of darkness destroyed the purity within them, and those who traversed the path of light would battle constantly to restrain its counterpart.

It was ironic, the Hectarians who walked the path of light were more dangerous than those who embraced the darkness. The reason was simple, given enough time the darkness being suppressed could, given the right situation, create its own identity. It would become a being in its own right which drew strength from the inner turmoil; an identity born of pure darkness who possessed more power than any who had simply embraced the darker aspects of their nature; and when it eventually overpowered the light, which they were told would always occur, it became a force to fear. Marise Shi was such a force.

A figure to his right cleared their throat, for a moment he thought the barkeep had finally worked up the courage to request him to retire. Not that it really mattered, at night he securely locked the bar area behind beaten metal shutters, it wasn't as if he could cause any mischief if left unsupervised. He turned to acknowledge him, surprised he hadn't heard his approach. As his eyes rested on the figure he realised why, it wasn't the barkeep, it was Seiken.

Daniel looked to him hatefully, his vision taking in every minute detail of the figure that now perched on the edge of the table. The figure wore his clothes like a second skin. The dark leather trousers accentuated his slender form, whilst the tight shirt showed the definition of every well-sculpted muscle. His red auburn hair was, as always, fastened back into a ponytail, although altered slightly since they last met. The front, shorter layers, now formed a thin, middle-parted fringe which fell each side of his rich brown eyes. He possessed a beauty which could make any woman blush by simply casting a glance in their

direction. But he had only ever really looked at one woman, and it was because of him she was gone.

Seiken pulled a chair from the table, moving it to sit beside him as Daniel looked at him in disdain. This was all his fault. He would not be here, in this situation, or mourning the loss of his friend, if it hadn't been for him. He was the cause of everything.

When Zo was still alive, Night had imprisoned a race known as the Oneirois, a race to which Seiken belonged. They hadn't realised it at the time but even this was simply bait to control her actions. Night had required her in order to achieve his desires. She was the only person who could do what was needed, and he had ensured that she was given no choice but to fulfil his every desire. He cared only about retrieving the powers that had been stolen by the Hoi Hepta Sophoi, and since he was already in possession of six of the seven Grimoire, the magical tomes that had been used to seal them, all he had needed was to create the means to obtain the last.

It was rumoured this final text could only be removed from its resting place by someone with a pure heart who also shared his blood. At first they believed Acha was the key to obtaining this power, but they had been gravely mistaken.

As they travelled Darrienia, they unknowingly released the seals to the Severaine. Seals which not only held back this terrifying power, but helped to shield the location of the final Grimoire. Everything had been carefully planned to the last detail and, in the end, Night had obtained everything he desired, the Grimoire, and the release of the Severaine. They had thought they were saving the world, but instead they had been exploited.

Had they known Night's true intention of releasing the Severaine their actions would, perhaps, have been more guarded. The Severaine was once feared as an enforcer of the Gods, a threat on the lips of all. But in this time it had been all but forgotten as the cycle of this world evolved. There was little mention of it in texts, and great debates held between elder scholars as to its true nature. But even then, not one truly

believed it anything more than a frightening fable. That was, until it broke free of its restraints, plunging the world into a bout of natural disasters as its release changed the very nature of the world.

It hunted at random or so it seemed. One day it could target a town on Albeth, the next day its sights could be on Therascia, with seemingly little method to its madness. The force was weak, yet with each passing day it grew in strength. Resting and sleeping after its latest meal before striking once more. It would only be a matter of time until it could truly complete the task intended, until it possessed enough strength to purge all life from the planet.

Even knowing Night's ambitions would have provided little aid, so perfect was his scheme that the only impossible course was inaction. By imprisoning the Oneirois, who protected the barrier between dream and reality, he had ensured regardless of their path the world would suffer the consequences of their actions. Had they not freed the Oneirois, then nightmares and horrors would have crossed the boundaries, taking corporeal form, and those suffering in their dreams, would find the same ailments inflicted on waking. Darrienia, the world of dreams, would have become as deadly as the waking world, if not more so, and from fear, more nightmares would be born and more terror would plague the lands.

That was the beauty of Night's plan, there was no choice but to aid the Oneirois. Whatever their path it would be a Pyrrhic victory.

He hadn't seen Seiken since their imprisonment in Night's tower. He had hoped never to lay eyes upon him again. The very sight of him filled Daniel with a primal rage for vengeance, his hatred towards Seiken had evolved into something far deeper, more potent than anything he had ever experienced, save for once. If he hadn't asked for her aid, asked her to be their salvation, none of this would have happened. The Oneirois were meant to be the guardians, so why couldn't they have protected themselves? It was everything he could do not

to embrace these primitive feelings, to strike out in an attempt to deal a physical pain equal to his own.

One thing was for certain, whatever he came here seeking, be it aid or forgiveness, he would find nought but hatred remained. Daniel took a few deep breaths as he finally decided to speak.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” he forced the words, it seemed the only way to rid himself of this figure was to listen to whatever it was he had come to say. The anger in his voice was unmistakable, and only deepened by Seiken’s apparent apathy regarding the result of his actions. He showed no signs of remorse or grief. Seeing this, Daniel felt the burn of pain as his nails sunk further into his palms. The delicate restraint, allowing him to remain near to this traitor, faltered.

“I’m just waiting.” Seiken answered softly, shifting uncomfortably in the chair. He wore the mask of indifference well. It was a necessity. Seiken hadn’t known what to expect when their paths crossed once more, but one thing was for certain, he hadn’t expected him to look so tired and broken. It was a feeling easy to empathise with, he knew all too well the pain of the loss suffered. Despite what Daniel might think, he was not alone in his grief, but unlike him, Seiken could not wear his for any to see. None of his people knew the true cost of their freedom, at least not the one paid by him.

“For what?” Daniel frowned, his voice coating the words with venom as they left his lips.

Turning to speak Seiken opened his mouth, closing it again as his words failed him. The turmoil of emotions from Daniel was unmistakable, anything he could say would offer little comfort. It was clear where Daniel placed his blame. Seiken betrayed them, he had gently guided Zo to her death. But even without his intervention the end result would still have been the fulfilment of an ancient prophecy. Sensing the wordless questions Daniel spoke again, filling the bitter silence in hope to hasten Seiken’s departure.

“I watched Hades rip my best friend from this world to leave Marise in her stead, I watched her die, sacrifice herself



for us, for you,” he spat angrily, closing his eyes to prevent the raw tears from emerging. The all too familiar scene of her final moments repeated through the darkness of his vision. Seiken knew well the visions which clouded his mind despite not bearing witness to her final moments. He himself had wanted to prevent her from taking that final journey to Night. He had tried to warn her the cost of the confrontation, but it was a price she had known, and one she was willing to pay.

“I am truly sorry.” Seiken placed his hand gently on Daniel’s shoulder, who knocked it to one side angrily. His thoughts clearly reflected in his eyes as he questioned how this Oneiroi dared to touch him, how he dared approach him. He did not know what place this figure had played in his friend’s past, and neither did he care. All that mattered was she had been important to *him*. Zo had been his salvation, saving him from an isolated existence with her friendship. After he had lost both his brother Adam, then his best friend Stephen, Daniel had retreated into his own world. A world filled with emptiness and study. Yet when their paths had crossed his solitude was forgotten. She had made him care, love even, and Seiken had taken her away.

“You’re sorry!” he snarled. “That’s it? She loved you and you’re sorry? If you hadn’t come along she’d still be alive, and you’re sorry? Did you even care, or did you too want to ensure she played the role expected of her?” His tone was filled with such outrage and hostility, an anger which lined his voice so thickly it was on the verge of breaking. How could he be so dismissive? She had given everything she had for them, everything. Did he really think those few words would make everything all right? Did they possess the power to bring the dead back to life? No they did not. They were empty, meaningless words which could in no way improve things.

“You have to understand we were from two different worlds, such an involvement is forbidden.” Seiken gave a sigh, he glanced around quickly as if to ensure they remained alone. Leaning forwards he lowered his tones. “Despite this—” But before he could finish the walls trembled, the wood from the

door splintering as fire erupted inward. The sound was almost deafening as the heat roared through the bar shattering glass and bottles. Daniel heard the screams and panic which came from the sleeping quarters as the inn's was bathed in flames. A shadow stepped through into the tavern, her feminine curves accentuated by the clothes she wore. Her hair, as red as the fire's blaze, sprayed wildly in the rising heat. It was a figure who needed no introduction.

"Found you." She smiled menacingly running her tongue over her lips in anticipation of what was to follow. For a moment her appearance, the weight of her stare, immobilised him. But his anger broke through the paralysis giving him the strength to move. He reached down to secure his staff, but instead of finding it within his possession his hand seized the hilt of Eiji's dagger. There was no time to question how, and when, this had come into his possession. His only instinct was to seize it, to protect himself against her. One hand fastened over the other in an attempt to steady the weapon as he pointed it in her direction. All the time he dared not stray his vision from the fearful presence of Marise Shi.

Despite the distance between them when her sea green eyes locked with his he could see the reflection of his own fear within them. Was this what was meant when they said people could see the image of their own death when they looked upon her? Her movements were almost predatory as she slowly advanced towards him, the small heels of her knee-high boots echoed with every step.

Just one thought circled his mind in that instance, why couldn't Hades have made a mistake and taken her instead? She paused her advance, watching him intently as if trying to determine his next action. Would he really face her in a battle he knew he could not win?

Daniel could see the escape route clearly in his mind. The distance between them should give him enough time to retreat. He dared not break her gaze. He was certain he could make it, if he could he would live. But did he want to? More powerful than the will to live was the desire for revenge. He wanted to

kill her. It was this thought which delayed his movements, a thought which meant he found himself once more ready to face her in battle. He would kill her here and now, or die trying. His life had no meaning anyway. He had lost everything he held dear, why would he even want to continue living? By the time he had the answer it was too late to run, too late to save that which he now deemed important.

Everything that followed seemed almost surreal, time distorted. He blinked, breaking eye contact for that brief part of a second as he realised it was too late. As his eyes opened she was before him. At first he could not understand her actions, her hands had gripped his own. It was only when the dull throbbing pain began to radiate through him, as she twisted his weapon deeper, he realised what had happened. In that fleeting moment, during that single blink, everything had ended.

He sank to his knees as an overwhelming heat began to wash over him, his body shaking uncontrollably. Marise's presence was now long forgotten, his only focus was on the rapidly spreading darkness staining his linen shirt. Shock immobilised him as the weakness took hold, and every beat of his heart turned him colder. The once bright lights of the tavern began to dim. A sudden movement before him brought his attention to the unfocused image of her soft leather boots as she stopped to stand over him. Her hands seized his, tearing the weapon from the wound, releasing a powerful gush of blood as he fell to lie upon the floor. His gaze fixed on the knife she had discarded, the sound of her footsteps unheard as she left him to his fate.

He tried to hold on, to call for help. He could not die, not here, not like this. As he heard the steps of Hermes approaching his thoughts once more returned to Zo. It would not be long now. He grew tired, sleepy, the wound didn't hurt any more. Perhaps in death he could find peace. He could let go of all the responsibilities, he could release the pressure of trying to find a way to seal the Severaine. He could just sleep.

He saw the figure of Hermes crouch before him. It took

a moment for his tired mind to realise it wasn't his guide to the underworld who had approached, it was Seiken. He looked upon him with such sympathy, then, still wearing the expression of regret, he clicked his fingers.

Daniel awoke with a start, his hand, by reflex, finding his stomach, feeling the area nervously before releasing a sigh of relief. He had been dreaming. Lately his dreams were so vivid, so real, that he had lost the ability to distinguish between the two. He was unsure when he had fallen asleep, when he had lay his head upon the table. The barkeep was no longer keeping vigil on him, perhaps he had thought it an act of kindness to leave him there to his dreams.

The torches burnt low, from the subtle change in the skyline he knew the sun would soon be rising. He could almost feel the waking of the city. The militia would soon be changing over as those who had patrolled the tiered residential areas retired to their main quarters in the middle eastern section of the city. This tavern was located in the middle trade zone, a place filled with layered shops and cafés. Already the smell of fresh bread filtered through the air. He knew the merchants on the furthest reaches of the town, those too poor to trade within this area, would be spreading their blankets ready for their day of trade.

He rose groggily to his feet, nausea passing over him in waves as he cast his vision downward. He lifted his shirt to ensure the wound had not returned with him. But even seeing the untouched skin, which bore just the three familiar scars, did little to calm his mind. As he turned his chair over to place it on the table he noticed another one sat with it. He was certain Acha had tidied hers away after their conversation. Did this mean Seiken, for some reason, had sat with him in both worlds?

Could it be that they had been too late, that dreams and reality were still beginning to merge? He reached out to take it. His hand hesitating just moments before he made contact with its coarse surface, his mind questioning if it really did stand before him, or if the act of touching it would send him

spiralling into another nightmare. He studied it a moment longer before walking away. It would not be the first time he had seen things that were not there, nor would it be the first time he thought he had woken only to find himself plunged into a deeper horror.

He slowly made his way to the sleeping area, for a moment, as he passed the shuttered bar, he saw the shattered bottles and fire damage.

It had all too quickly arrived at this point again. It didn't seem too long ago when he had last resorted to medicine to force his body to rest. It was a drastic measure he used only when the line between his realities thinned, and he could not afford to be anything but vigilant. Last time he had taken something he had found himself trapped within his nightmares. The appearance of an Oneiroi to wake him had simply resulted in him being passed from one horror to another until finally the medicine's effect subsided. Perhaps tonight things would be different, just yesterday he had discovered, and mixed, a potion said to stop dreaming. Or at least he thought he had.

Entering the sleeping area he made his way to the only empty bed. It had been a busy night in Collateral, people seemed to flock here to avoid the disaster which lay in the wake of the Severaine. He was glad they had thought to pay for their bed and breakfast weeks in advance, otherwise they could very easily have found themselves with nowhere to stay.

Dragging his weary body to bed, he lay quietly fingering through the contents of his satchel, relieved when his still-trembling hands did indeed find the medicine he thought should be there. Goose pimples chased across his flesh as he removed the small cork stopper, his mouth growing dry as he stared at it. Many deep breaths passed before its cool glass touched his lips. He hesitated only briefly before pouring its bitter contents into his mouth.

He pushed himself deeper under the covers, his eyes wide with fear, gazing at the blanket which protected him so completely as he clutched the satchel close. After the last time,

he had sworn never to resort to these measures, but with the challenges looming on the horizon there had been little choice. Just tonight, just once more he would let a tincture aid him. After all, seeing both Marise and Seiken in one night was too much for him to bear.