

I landed on the ground and vomited right onto a tombstone while Bory screamed my name in the background.

Shivering, I pushed myself up, my breath coming in short bursts as I blocked out everything that had just happened. I blocked out that the Blood Queen had sent us to the Topworld with her damn book. I blocked out that Rio was gone, that he was asleep now, that he wasn't with me. Again. I blocked out that we were all thrown into the Topworld like vermin. I blocked out that I once loved it with all that I got.

I vomited again, and sweat streamed down my skin while my heart pounded relentlessly in my chest. This was it. This was my downfall.

"Lynne," Bory whispered and hopped in front of my face, searching for my gaze. And when he found it, he sucked in a deep breath. Hell, I knew what he saw. Me crying, full of dirt and shivering like an aspen leaf. I never felt this broken before. So hurt. So used. So betrayed. So sad. Looking away, I curled up and these scalding tears welled up in my eyes again. Why did they take Rio away from me every single time? Why? Why couldn't we just be two mundane people fighting over trifles? Why was this life so scalding hard?

"Aria," Bory sighed, hurt evident all over his face. Only now did I realize that Ebony was here too, and Any, Mal, and even... Ash. We were all catapulted into the Topworld to save the world, but we had no plan how to. A desperate laughter bubbled up in my throat as I kept on wiping away the tears. We were nothing against the mess we all were in. Nothing.

A sudden creaking noise made me startle. We jumped like deer in the woods surprised by a forester, but there was nothing to be found. All was dark and—gods. Only now, when I let my eyes wander over the cemetery, did I see it. Everything was destroyed. My beautiful Topworld was... gone.

The tombstones had been lifted from the earth, broken, their pieces scattered in ruins all over the cemetery. The branches of the giant willow hung lifelessly as if lightning had burst them into a thousand shards. No bush, no tree bore leaves anymore. The grass beneath me was black, just like in the Underworld, and there were cracks in it, bearing earth that was the color of pitch as well. I flinched. This couldn't be true. No, not my beautiful Topworld! They took everything from me! Everything!

"No!" I cried out. "No!"

"Aria," Any said, stretching out a hand for me. "Come on, we have to go..."

With shaky knees, I forced myself to stand up, without taking Any's hand, and pressed one hand against my collarbone. Sweat ran cold down my back. "What happened... who did this to my Topworld?" My throat constricted as my eyes still took in every piece of the cemetery that had been my safe haven over the last years.

"Look," Any said, touching my arm, his sudden closeness and the intensity of his touch making me jump. "We'll make it alright again, but we need to go, we need to do something against it, or the destruction will go on. We have to find the Omphalostone."

I looked at him, my lips trembling and said nothing. Absolutely nothing. I already knew we didn't have time to lose, but tell that to my nerves? It was impossible. I couldn't muster a step. I was paralyzed. This was a nightmare. My life was a nightmare.

"Aria," Any said again, his touch getting firmer on my cold skin. I glared at him, still not able to talk or walk.

"We seriously have to hurry," Any yanked at my arm.

"You know what? You can go back to the Underworld. I'll search for it with the Horsemen and Bory," I replied.

"Well, I'd rather go too," Ash muttered, but I ignored him and stomped ahead, not even knowing where I was going. I just knew I was fed up with being kept in the dark by everyone. Any was with the Blood Queen, and he made up a plan with her and Mal behind my back. I was just fed up with everything and wanted nothing more than to strangle all of them.

"Where are we going? Where do we start searching for it?" I heard Bory's voice as he trotted beside me.

I shrugged and wiped away a tear that rolled down my cheek again. Any was right about one thing—I had to hold myself together. Crying like a little girl wouldn't bring Rio back. Another tear fell, my fingers clenched.

"There's no reason for you to be angry at us, Aria," Any said, and I stopped dead in my tracks.

Turning around, I glared him down. Had he lost his mind?

"Lynne..." Bory warned, touching my knee.

"No reason?" I snapped and charged at him. "No reason? Are you scalding serious? You all made plans behind my back, kept me in the dark until the very end, and now you say there's no reason for me to be angry?" Another desperate laughter bubbled up in my throat. I was on the brink of getting crazy too. "Don't you dare take away my right to my own feelings! I can be angry as much as I want."

Any scoffed and shook his head, bitterness evident in his features. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ebony and Ash retreat, probably embarrassed by our confrontation, but at some point, it was just enough. I would fix this, but on my own. They had to earn back their trust.

"You are judging the wrong one, Aria," Any snapped. "You have no idea what happened. None. I..." Any drew out a long breath and stepped closer to me, invading my personal space again. "I live only to protect you! When will you understand that? If you can trust anyone, trust me!"

His voice rose to a shout, and I tried to hold my ground, my eyes watering. When I saw the hurt in his eyes, I was on the verge of crying again, but I stood firm. He had no right to yell at me, even though I noticed my feelings toward him had changed so much over the last days. It was hard to hate him. Hell, I didn't hate him, but this made his betrayal even worse.

As we locked eyes, I noticed the yellow in his green irises, and I saw myself in his face. I saw us as children, memories I never wanted but kept replaying like a movie on Earth. I wanted to switch them off, but I couldn't. They just came. If I wanted them or not. Taking advantage of my hesitation, Any grabbed me by the shoulders, and it happened. It was as if I had been thrown into cold water. A force pushed me back, deeper into my inner self, and in a split second, it was all happening right before my eyes, like I was living it all over again.

As if my mind was yelling at me, screaming out everything I had forgotten during my reincarnation. The memories hit me like a powerful wave, breaking through the walls I didn't even know I had put up, flooding my senses with the damn echoes of my past. I was yanked right back to Olympia, the world where Any and I were born. The world of the Titans. Later, when they stumbled upon Earth, humans started calling them gods. But truth be told, anyone who could wield magic from within was a Titan. Even the demigods with one human parent or the divine who were born as humans but could harness mana and turn it into magic, all had some Titan blood running through their veins. But life was toughest for the divines. They were seen as mere humans—deemed worthless. And that's where my mother, Nyx, fell into the mix. She was a divine, and although our father was Erebus and my mother a powerful and enigmatic divine, controlling the night and darkness, our family wasn't the most respected.

That's why we lived on the edge of Olympia, in a stone-carved house on a cliff, far away from the hustle and bustle of the Titans. Any and I meant everything to our mother, which was why we stayed far from other Titans. She always tried to keep us away from the Pantheon, but since our father missed the old days, it was rather difficult. And that's exactly where I was drawn to. Home. And I saw as Any... how he pulled me away from Mother as nightfall descended, when she conversed with the stars. I witnessed Any's comforting embrace when I was hurt and no one else was there. I saw him staunch my bleeding. I watched myself weep uncontrollably when my sister Hecate had to leave for the Olympus Academy to hone her abilities. I saw Any take our father's blows when I sneaked outside against his orders. It was Any who slept beside me, stroking my head when I couldn't sleep. I took a deep breath as I returned to reality.

Any's grip on my shoulders tightened, and I gazed into his eyes once more, tears glistening in them now too. When I let another tear fall down my cheeks, I saw that he was crying too. Hell, we've been more than just siblings. We've been best friends and now we were... not. And it was all my fault. He fought so hard for me to remember, to remember what we used to be.

"I love you, Aria," he whispered, his voice barely above a whisper. "I would never work against you. Never. You are everything to me. It has always been us against the world... everything I did, I did for you. All I wanted over the last decades was to bring you back... and yes, we worked with the Blood Queen, but we never did it to work against you. We worked with her for you. To bring you back. To end the curse. To save the world."

I breathed in and out deeply, and just stared at him. His love for me was so visible. It truly had always been the two of us, twins united against all odds, until we weren't. Until I fell hopelessly in love with the Shadow King, and everyone tried to tear us apart.

I clung to his hands with a fierce grip, as if they were the lifeline keeping me tethered to reality. Deep down, I sensed the ember of his affection for me, and in the secret corners of my heart, I knew I loved him too. I always did. But that sentiment remained elusive, slipping through my fingers like sand. Maybe it was too much history that couldn't just be swapped out. Trusting anyone, even him, felt like a leap I wasn't ready to take. I did trust too lightly in the past, and I always paid the price for it. Those scars from being let down before? They weren't fading anytime soon.

Maybe time held the answers. Maybe it could sift through the mess and bring clarity, or maybe it would just show that some things, no matter how perfect they once were, couldn't be patched up again.

"Why can you show me memories from the past?" I asked, breaking the heavy silence between us.

He swallowed back the tears, visibly glad that I was keen to change the subject. "We all can. Anyone you share memories with can draw them forth when the time is right."

"With just a touch?"

Any nodded. "With closeness, with words, with whatever triggers the memories within you. It's your mind that chooses to set your memories free."

"But when will it end? These memories... it's draining." I didn't want to keep remembering. I hated that everyone knew more about me than I did.

He pulled the corner of his lips up into a crooked smile. "When you have all your memories back. Only then it will end."

"Any, I--" Before I could finish my sentence, a deep growl cut through the night.

"Shit," I heard Mal say, and I turned to follow his gaze, and there they were. Deathwalkers.

A dozen of them, coming straight for us.