



~Chapter 1~

The Others

There was no way I could have seen it coming.

I sat at my table, my face blank, as thirteen unfriendly looking kids filed into the lunchroom. A piece of red hair fell into my blue eyes and I brushed it aside. I watched as one of the kids -a burly-looking 13-year-old with black hair and light brown eyes- took a deep breath in through the nose and snapped his head around, his eyes landing on me. I froze in place. All my other popular friends looked at me.

"What's wrong, Samera?" Avery asked, turning to look at what was bothering me. The black-haired boy turned and said something to one of the blonde, green-eyed girls. She looked at me, as did the rest of their group. I read one word forming on the boy's lips: "Sagittarius."

My mind spiraled out. Sagittarius was a constellation that you could see on November 22 through December 21. A fire symbol. A zodiac sign. I was born on December 17, meaning that I was a Sagittarius. I felt the tingling start in my arms, a reaction to stress. *No!* I thought. *Keep control!* If I lost control, heaven knows, that I'd end up strapped to a table in a laboratory. But still, the sparks started jumping from my fingertips, and I quickly hid my hands under the table. The black-haired boy zeroed in on where my hands had previously been. A warm gust of wind blew softly across my face. What the... that didn't happen when you were sitting inside a *building*. I felt my eyes widen and he shot me a sly smile, placing his hands on his hips. It looked like a challenge. What was he?

"I'll be right back, guys." I said as I got up from the table.

"Sam! Where are you going?" Avery looked alarmed. I didn't answer, heading straight for the strange newcomers. The boy stepped forward and held out a hand, which I eyed with distrust for a moment, before stepping back out of reach.

"Not very trusting, are you? So much for first introductions." His voice was deep and rough and had a sort of roguish quality about it. His hair was short and fuzzy, in a buzz cut around the sides and back of his head except for the top, which was long and flopped over his left eye and the side of his head. His clothes were ripped and torn and almost entirely black, punk-goth style. He had on weird looking black chokers with buckles and both his ears were pierced several times. Ear phones hung around his neck. I narrowed my eyes.

"Who are you?"

"Who are *you*?" he asked in return, grinning wickedly.
Not amused. "I'm Samera Chambers."

"Alex Smithson. Nice to meet you Samera." He shoved his hands into his pockets and the girl I'd seen earlier came forward.

"What are you?" she asked bluntly. Wait, hadn't I just thought that exact same question about them?

"Huh?" I asked.

"Scorpio, Leo, Gemini... maybe even a Sagittarius?" The last part was a bitter whisper from her. Her green eyes searched mine.

"Sagittarius." I said.

"I knew it!" a blonde boy who looked almost identical to the girl came forward and bounced on the balls of his feet. "Payton Camoah, Pisces, pleased to make your acquaintance!" He grinned and the girl rolled her eyes. "Ignore my over enthusiastic twin brother." Well, that explained why they looked identical. "I'm Pearl, Pisces." She gave a half grin. Straight to the point. I was liking her already.

"What's your power?" the punk boy -Alex- asked.

"Um... you mean other than my killer sense of style?" I tried to joke.

He rolled his eyes and opened his hand, where what looked like a mini tornado spun in his palm. Almost as quickly as it appeared, it was gone.

"I'm an Aquarius, an air symbol. I can create violent storms, similar to Colin over there. As a Capricorn, he can cause violent earthquakes, because he is an earth symbol. Our powers go hand-in-hand." Alex said.

A tall boy with tan skin, brown hair and eyes, and a boyish look about him nodded to me. He must have been Colin.

"So, Sag, what's your power?" Alex asked.

"Sag?" I asked.

"Short for Sagittarius."

"Oh, um..." I held out my hand and felt the tingling sensation run up my arm. The sparks jumped from my palm, white and blue and purple.

Pearl hissed and her eyes widened. The whole group stumbled backward. I quickly shut the lightning off and stared at them.

"No fire sign has ever been able to do that." The Capricorn, Colin, quickly muttered to himself.

"She needs to learn the histories." Alex murmured.

"Can you take a number?" Pearl asked.



"Uh, yeah."

She quickly started rattling off numbers and I punched them into my phone. Looks like I had some things to learn.

~Chapter 2~

The Histories

When I saw the setup, my eyes widened. Alex strolled over casually, Pearl and Colin trailing behind him. He'd traded his black ensemble for a one-piece dark blue jumpsuit. His black hair was brushed back out of his face. The other twelve were dressed similarly, except their jumpsuits were all different colors and had different designs on them. I looked around again. It was a training building, and each room was either a different terrain or had weaponry or targets along the walls. Well, this wing of the building anyway. I swallowed, nervous.

"Come on, Newbie." A girl with dark brown hair and bright green eyes walked up, grinning, and grabbed my arm.

"I'm Salina. Scorpio. Let's get you a suit." She said.

"Uh..." I looked over my shoulder at Alex, and it looked like he was trying not to laugh as she dragged me away. I looked down to see the colors of her suit: white with yellow accents. It was a stark contrast with her dark, heavy hair and tan skin. She dragged me into a room full of different fabrics. Faster than I thought possible, she took my measurements and grabbed a suit off a rack in the far corner. All of the suits on that rack were the same colors, but different patterns. I was instantly in love with the one she had chosen; the whole thing was cobalt blue with neon green running down the front in elegant strands.

"These are the colors of Sagittarius." She said when she handed it to me.

She left as I dressed. The fabric was soft like silk and clung to my body. As I pulled it on, I realized it became a part of me, of my skin. I was starting to panic when Salina came back in. she laughed at my terrified face.

"It's not permanent, and it hides all your goodies. It'll come off if you want it to. We just use them to train. Their virtually indestructible." She was still grinning. "Take a look in the mirror, Sam."

My eyebrows pushed together. "You called me Sam."

Her eyes widened, alarmed. "Do you prefer Samera?"

"No, Sam is fine." I smiled and turned to look in the mirror.

When I saw myself, it took everything I had not to gasp. The suit clung to every curve of my body, and the colors made my ice-blue eyes and red hair pop. I looked like a... superhero.

"Common', Sam. Time to hear our story." Salina tugged on my arm.

I went with her without a fight, still in shock. As I came out of the room, Pearl walked up, a ghost of a smirk on her lips. They led me to a table with fourteen chairs. They sat me in the green and blue one, right in between Colin, who was in dark orange and dark green, and Alex. Now that I was close to him, I could see hints of black in his suit.

"Let's just get right into it." Alex started. That's when they spilled everything.

"Millions of years ago, the first Zodiac was born. She was a Sagittarius, and was able to control the flames; the first fire sign. She wasn't a violent person, and didn't want to be a leader. A vision came to her one night in a dream that said there was thirteen others like her. They were to be the Guardians. They were born every thousand years, and once the new ones were ready to take over and guard the four main realms, the old ones died. The Guardians were the only beings that knew that there was life in more than one realm. They were to guard the four main realms from the realms of Darkness and Beyond. She was told of the thirteen other Zodiacs, their genders, and the powers they each possessed. When two or more Zodiacs were within a mile of each other, they'd be able to smell each other. It didn't take her long to find the others. They were all almost the same age. She was the oldest and the female Scorpio was the youngest."

Alex paused and I looked at Salina. She grinned at me. That's when Colin picked up the story. His voice was deeper and more masculine than Alex's as he continued the story.

"They trained together, and became like brothers and sisters. Sometimes they ended up in relationships with each other, although some signs are forbidden to be together, like a Sagittarius with an Aquarius or Capricorn." I swallowed. So, I was forbidden to be with Alex and Colin, huh? That stung.

Colin continued. "It was said that when the Guardians gave themselves to their powers, flames that burned in the colors of their sign would appear around their eyes. The Capricorn was the first to discover this." Colin's voice took on a certain pride. "The first Zodiacs were said to be the most powerful... until now. Some of us sitting at this table have powers that have never been seen before, including your lightning. A strange power for a fire sign."



The silence that followed was deafening. My hands curled into fists beneath the table.

"So, who's the leader?" I asked through my teeth.

Pearl shrugged. "Whoever's best fit for the job. Usually a Leo or Sagittarius."

I looked around until a girl with brown eyes and blonde hair spoke up. "I'm the Leo. My name's Leah." She looked like one of those California Girl stereotypes. Long blonde hair, piercing eyes, tall, tan, great figure, and very athletic. Her colors were yellow and pink, naturally. She raised her hands and chuckled at my expression. "I'm not the leader."

All eyes turned to Alex. Wait... what?

"But you're an Aquarius!" I blurted without thinking.

"I said it depended." Pearl pointed out. "The leader is the one best fit for the job."

I blew out a breath and fell back into my chair.

Alex chuckled. "Come on, Sag. I'll train you myself."

~Chapter 3~

Training Officially Sucks

"Left! Right! You need more firepower!"

Within the first thirty minutes, Alex had me worn out. I swore I saw the others chuckling more than once, and that irked me a bit, but mostly I was focused on the task before me. But hand-to-hand combat with powers just wasn't my thing. Every time I would try to bust out my lighting, or swing an arm out and hope to land a lucky punch, he would blast wind in my face, and end up kicking my butt. Currently, I was lying on the ground, chest heaving, covered in sweat. That's it. Training officially sucks. It was pretty obvious that everyone else here had been training a lot longer than I had. For the first time, I wondered who rounded all of them up together in the first place. Was it Alex, the fearless leader, Colin, next oldest to me, or maybe the twins, Pearl and Payton? I didn't know, but I wanted to. I turned my head slightly to see all the others looking at me and snickering. What a sight this was to see; the lightning wielding Sagittarius beat to death by the wind controlling- Aquarius. This would probably be in the Zodiac history books.

"What's the matter, Sag?" Alex bent over me. I glared up at him. As if he didn't know.



"You've been training longer than I have! You can't expect me to get it all in one day!" I snapped at him, making his grin stretch wider across his tan face. Then quieter, under my breath, "Cut me some slack, man."

He laughed, gripping my hand and pulling me back to my feet.

"You're a feisty one, aren't you?" he asked. I still hadn't eased my glare.

Pearl came up and clasped my shoulder. "Yeah, I think we're going to be good friends."

I looked back and forth between the two of them. "Are you two?..."

They were both cracking up now.

"No, no," Alex said as soon as he could catch his breath.

"We're like brother and sister." Pearl finished. "Can I take it from here?" she asked Alex.

Still chuckling, he agreed. As he walked past me, he leaned down and whispered in my ear, "I'm single, if that's what you're wondering."

My eyes widened. Was he showing interest? Our signs, Sagittarius and Aquarius, were forbidden to be together.

"Looks like someone, or maybe *two* someone's, have a crush." Salina came up and wiggled her eyebrows at me.

I rolled my eyes. "Let's get back to training."

Pearl grabbed a wicked looking green hilted sword off the side wall. I noticed that it was the same color as her green and purple suit. She nodded to the other wall and I saw it. The sword was huge, with a gracefully curved hilt and a piercingly sharp blade. The colors were a blend of neon green and cobalt blue, like my suit.

"It was the original Sagittarius's. it's the only original left." Pearl said.

The moment I touched it, a tingle shot up my arm and I jerked my hand away with a gasp. Everyone froze and stared at me. I reached for it again more cautious, and the same thing happened, only this time I fought back my urge to yank my hand away. I turned to Pearl, sword in hand, and she gaped.

"Uh, Samera?" she choked. "Your flames have appeared."

~Chapter 4~

Unexpected

I started training with the others for months on end.

I lost my interest in being popular, and started sitting with them at lunch and during classes when I could, determined to learn more about what I was,

what we were. They talked very little about the guardians that came before us, and I assumed it was because they didn't really know much about them. Avery and my other friends checked in every once in a while, but mostly they just pretended I didn't exist anymore. My parents knew what I was and let me go to live with the others, and for that, I was grateful. They always kept me on my toes in training, and while I picked up on sword and dagger fighting pretty quickly, I was rotten at hand-to-hand combat.

Alex and Pearl had taken it upon themselves to train me personally, so they became my closest friends, although I was very fond of Salina and Colin as well.

I finally got everyone's name and sign down. Most of them were surprisingly friendly, although there were a few snots in the group. My powers were strong, although I knew better to train with wind signs or water signs, because they would have the advantage, with me being a fire sign. Of course, it didn't help that both my trainers were wind and water signs. Lucky me.

One day I was sitting outside the sword fighting arena after sparing with Ahren, the Aries, when Pearl came up and sat next to me.

"I think it's time you see the other realms."

I looked over at her, eyes wide.

She led me out of the arena and into a room with four small stone arches. There was a wall behind them, but the surface inside each structure was shimmery, disoriented, and an unnatural color. She pointed at the first one, which was made of amethyst colored stone, and a matching glittery surface.

"Realm of Magic portal." She said.

The second one was polished gold with a slick and smooth looking surface. "Realm of Light."

The third was smooth emerald and a blinding surface like light reflecting off of water, except green. "Realm of all pure and good mythical creatures."

The last was Silver, with a sparkly grey surface that rippled. "This realm, the mortal realm's, portal."

Then she turned, pointing at something along the far wall, furthest away from the four portals. It was made of rough black onyx, and had a slick, oily black surface. "The realm of Darkness and Beyond. What's on the other side is what we fight and protect the other realms from. Sometimes we go in just to test our strength. In order to become a true guardian, you must survive three days without weapons or food, with only your power to help you."



I only had time to think, *Uh, oh*. Before she shoved me forward into the portal. When I turned to look at her, she was hugging herself, calling out, "I'm sorry!"

Now I had only my wits to survive what was coming.

~Chapter 5~

Darkness and Beyond

I shrieked when I fell forward, unprepared, onto a rock-hard surface. The air was hot and sticky and, seconds after I fell, I was covered in a sheen of sweat. When I breathed it in, it smelled like sulfur, making me choke and cough, trying to dispel the awful oxygen. It was dark, but light enough to see my surroundings. When I looked around, I saw nothing but dead and rotting forest, stretched out for miles. The sky was black, red, and purple. There was no sun or moon in sight. Mist covered the dead forest floor. Shrieks that belonged to no animal I'd ever heard before, sounded in the distance, slowly getting closer. Ghostly figures flickered in the trees.

What was this place? But, of course, I already knew the answer; the realms of Darkness and Beyond. And the very thought of it scared me to death. Who knew the kind of creatures I'd encounter here. It would have been *nice* if Pearl would have warned me, the little traitor. I wished one of the other guardians were here with me, namely Alex. Then I remembered; the others had already gone through this, probably more than once. I was the outsider. I had to prove I could do this in order to truly be excepted by my fellow Zodiacs.

I took one step forward and heard a noise. It sounded like, "Guardian, guardian, guardian. Bad, bad, bad."

The ghostly whisper. The misty figures flickered faster, as if irritated. I let my sparks flicker from my palms and dance around my fingertips. Something about this place wasn't right, wasn't natural. A shiver ran down my spine and I fought the urge to run as fast as I could, no matter how much noise I made. Of course, that would probably get me killed, so I held my ground, gritting my teeth.

The terrifying shrieks got louder, almost on top of me now. I spotted a dark figure running through the trees, fast, but I saw it; humanoid figure, but unnaturally long limbs, hands that almost brushed the ground, flat face, black skin, and blood red eyes with no pupils or whites.



My heart pounded. I turned and came face-to-face with the huge black monster. Its long black claws reached out, and a chilling shriek came from its fanged mouth. Its long red-forked tongue lolled out of the side of its mouth.

Lightning zipped down my arm as my fist shot out, hitting the thing in its horrifying face. Its whole body spasmed, as lightning shocked the life out of it. Its claws tore down my arm just before it fell to the ground, lifeless. My teeth snapped together as pain racked my body.

"Who are you?" a small feminine voice came from my left.

Gripping my arm, I turned to see the little girl crouched at the edge of the tree line. Her hair was chocolate brown, her eyes a shocking violet purple. She was covered in wounds, her clothes torn and ragged.

"What..." I started. "Your human!"

Tears ran down her dirt-stained face. She couldn't have been more than eight!

"Take me home!" her breathing was ragged, her voice choked.

I crouched down in front of her, my arm hanging uselessly by my side. Dull pain pulsed through my body, but I tried to ignore it.

"What's your name?" I asked gently.

"Celsley. What's yours?" she looked up at me.

I rested my good hand on her shoulder. "I'm Samera, and I'm going to get you home."

~Chapter 6~

Denarien

Three days felt like forever in the realms of Darkness and Beyond. I could literally feel the place leaching the life from me. I didn't know how anything could survive in a place like this, but so many things kept making appearances. My lightning was my first line of defense and offence, since I literally had nothing else to fight with except my fists, which I felt pretty rotten about. Dehydration and Starvation started to make their appearance toward the end of the second day. I felt weaker than I ever had in my entire life. Fear made me more vulnerable, which was the last thing I needed. My suit was in shreds, which wasn't good. It was supposed to be indestructible. Celsley, the little angel, never left my side, even when I fought the most horrifying things you could think of. By the end of the third day, I was bruised, exhausted, and had several fatal wounds.



When I stumbled across the silver portal, I muttered, "Thank God," grabbed Celsley's hand, and made a run for it. I had just gotten my head and hand through the portal to see Alex and the others, when Celsley shrieked and I was yanked back by my neck. I yelped and saw the others start running for the portal on the other side, Alex looking murderous.

When I turned I came face-to face with... a human boy. He looked to be about thirteen, my age. Except he wasn't human; black and blue flames framed his dark green eyes.

"Going somewhere, Guardian?" he struck me with his hand.

"I don't think so." He grabbed me by the throat, lifting me off my feet.

I zapped his hand with my lighting and he hissed, tightening his hold on me. I gagged, choking.

"Which one are you?" he growled.

I glared, and then with a forceful shove, shocked him with all my might. He gave a high-pitched snarl and dropped me, backing up. The others had come through the portal at that point.

I was on my knees, panting, and I ground out, "I'm the Sagittarius."

Leah had grabbed Celsley and slung her across her back, ready to go. The boy slinked backward, looking ready to pee himself, and glared at the whole lot of us.

Alex growled, "You shouldn't have come, Denarien."

The boy snarled, "This isn't over, Sag."

And then took off into the deadened forest, disappearing in seconds.

~Chapter 7~

The first Guardians

As Salina placed another part of the bandage to my torn-up side, I grimaced. I also had gauze wrapped around my chest and neck, along with certain parts of my legs and arms, along with my lower abdomen. That place really took it out of me. The food and water they brought me was gone in about two minutes from me snarfing it down, starving. I seriously did not know how Pearl and Salina knew so much about medical, but they did an amazing job patching me up. The boys and other girls had left the room to give me some privacy so Salina and Pearl could take care of me. I'd lost a lot of blood, so Leah had decided to give a donation. She was one of the more selfless ones of the group. While I respected all the others, there were some of them that I just could not stand, like the Taurus



and the Cancer, Tyler and Cameron. I didn't much care for the Virgo either, Veanna. I was pretty sure they felt the same way about me, 'cause while Veanna mainly just acted like I didn't exist, Tyler and Cameron shot glares at me every chance they got. Once all my goodies were safely hidden, the others started to trickle in one by one. Celsley watched us all with her big, violet eyes. Pearl felt my ribs and I hissed.

She looked up at me and asked, "Tender?"

Keeping my jaw clamped shut to keep from voicing my pain, I nodded. And nodded, then removed her hands and stepped away. I let out a slow breath, my side throbbing.

"Who was that boy?" I asked.

Alex dragged over a chair and sat in front of me, the others following suit.

"That was Denarien," he started. "The original Aquarius; the one guardian who lost his way."

My eyebrows creased. How did that happen? Alex nodded to Colin, who picked up telling the story.

"Denarien fell in love with the Sagittarius, which, at the time, was not forbidden. But she did not return his feelings. Instead, she was in love with the Aries, and he with her. When Denarien found out, he turned bitter and angry and lost sight of what really mattered; protecting the realms. He started allying himself with all things Dark and Evil. When Elara, the Sagittarius, found out, she tried to reason with and help Denarien. They all did. He ended up killing Casmer, the Aries. After that, it was too late. He'd lost too much of himself to the Darkness. The remaining twelve guardians were forced to drive Denarien into the realms of Darkness and Beyond, where he still waits, never aging, to take his revenge out on the current guardians, even if they weren't the ones who banished him in the first place." There was a heartbeat of silence. Alex and I stared at each other. Elara and Denarien... that's why we couldn't be together. Selina patted my shoulder and I looked at her.

"Let's get you to your room. Some of us have got a quest tomorrow."

~Chapter 8~

Here we go Again

Being roommates with Salina and Pearl was one of the best things you could have. Salina's enthusiasm balanced out Pearl's seriousness, and Pearl's maturity

was refreshing compared to Salina's free spirit. Throw me into the mix with my hot temper, wittiness, and sarcasm, and you had the *perfect* team! Alex and Colin had stopped by to talk and Alex spilled the beans.

"You're the leader of the quest, Sam. We need to find Denarien. You can choose four acquaintances to go with you."

They all looked at me expectantly and I had shrugged, saying, "No brainer. You four would be my only choices."

Now I lie awake in my bed, my mind circling, trying to picture Denarien. I remembered he had green eyes, and the more I thought about it, it seemed like he had black hair and tan skin as well. I might have thought he was handsome if I didn't know how evil he was. I sat up in bed, rubbing my eyes. I stared down at my neon green comforter, thinking of how a few months ago, I thought I was normal, and now I was, well, a guardian, and much more, the Sagittarius.

"Can't sleep?" I started and turned to see Pearl staring at me.

I sighed. "Not really. I keep thinking of Denarien and Elara's situation, and then me and-"

"Alex? I know." She cut me off with a grin.

I gave a light snicker. "Am I that obvious?"

"Are you kidding?! You're an open book!" Salina sat up and grinned at me.

I groaned and fell backward into my pillow and both girls laughed at me.

Once Pearl stopped giggling, she said, "He likes you too, you know."

I pushed up on my elbows and looked at her.

"Yeah, I've never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you." Salina seconded.

I lay back down. "Maybe he does, maybe he doesn't. Let's get some sleep."

We all honestly tried, but the moment our heads hit the pillows, Salina started making kissing noises and we all lost it.

I took a deep breath.

I wasn't ready to go back into the realms of Darkness and Beyond again yet, but now was the time.

We left Leah in charge, which wasn't a surprise, considering she was a Leo and all. The others came to see the five of us off, and the boys did a weird half-hug-slap-each-other-on-the-back thing, while the girls made a more emotional exit.

"Don't do anything stupid, Sam." Leah pointed at my face, and then crushed me in a hug. I laughed in despite the serious atmosphere. The twin Gemini, Gracie and Gem, were next, hugging us and wishing us luck. Payton was



especial emotional telling his sister good-bye. Everyone said good-bye like it might be the last time they'd ever see us, and I could understand why; why knew the dangers we'd be facing? When the others looked to me, I knew it was time to go. I had to take the first step. And so, I took a deep breath, and lunged forward, throwing myself into the unknown future.

~Chapter 9~

Useless Powers

I landed on my feet, but when the sulfuric stench hit me, all my efforts went up in smoke. I fell to my knees, coughing and gagging.

Pearl placed her hand on my shoulder. "Come on, Sam. We can't stay in one place."

With maximum effort, because I was still aching from the wounds I'd gotten here last time, I got to my feet, taking comfort in knowing that this time, I wasn't alone; I had four strong, well trained guardians backing me up. I couldn't say that I wasn't worried though. What if Pearl didn't come back? What if Alex didn't? If I lost any of these four, I didn't think I'd be able to bear it, and that was just a taste of what Elara felt when she lost both Casmer and Denarien.

We had all the supplies we needed strapped to our backs, so when the time came, we would be prepared for anything. I shook my head to clear it and looked around. The place was as I remembered it; darkened sky, deadened forest, ghostly figures, except this time, in the far distance, I could see volcanic mountains. So that was where the small was coming from. I heard the familiar shrieks of the faceless black monsters and we all tensed, alert.

"Let's head for the mountains." Alex suggested. No one argued.

We started that way, always watching each other's backs. The shrieks grew fainter until they disappeared completely. I guessed that the creatures must have figured that five guardians were a little *too* much for them. Black and red winged figures flew across the sky.

"Fire dragons. The only untrustworthy breed." Alex answered my unspoken question when he saw me watching them up in the sky.

"It's going to be hard for me and Salina to use our powers here. She controls storms, and I control ice and snow. It might have been better if you'd have brought Cameron and Payton instead. At least they control regular water." Pearl said.



"Your one to talk." Colin grumbled. "The Earth here is poisoned. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth."

Then Alex piped up. "Yeah, well, the air here is polluted. It would be hard for me to eve get a good twister going, and that's really saying something."

I kept my mouth shut. Any witty comment about how nothing here affected my power would probably put me on everyone's kill list. The walk was quiet from then on, and all I could think of was that no matter how hard I tried to push the thought away, one of us was not going to make it back alive.

~Chapter 10~

Doing the Wrong Thing

We pitched the tent for the night, and honestly, it was more like a cabin. The walls were invisible steel, hiding everything inside, so nothing would be able to tell we were here. We had pillows, food, appliances, and everything. Even an air conditioner to rid us of the miserable heat. We left one torch burning and as Colin, Salina, and Pearl fell asleep, Alex and I stayed up, me watching the door and him watching them. Forgive me for being paranoid, but I swore than any second something was going to bust it down.

"You can go to sleep, Sam." Alex said quietly, careful not to wake the others.

"Uh, no thanks." I rubbed my back against the wall and yawned. Even if I was exhausted, there was no way I was going to sleep yet. This place gave me the creeps. Alex got up and came to sit down next to me. Scratch that *sleepy* feeling.

"I'm serious, Samera. You look like death." We laughed quietly, which was just wrong in a place like this.

"I don't know that I'm doing, Alex." I said after a while.

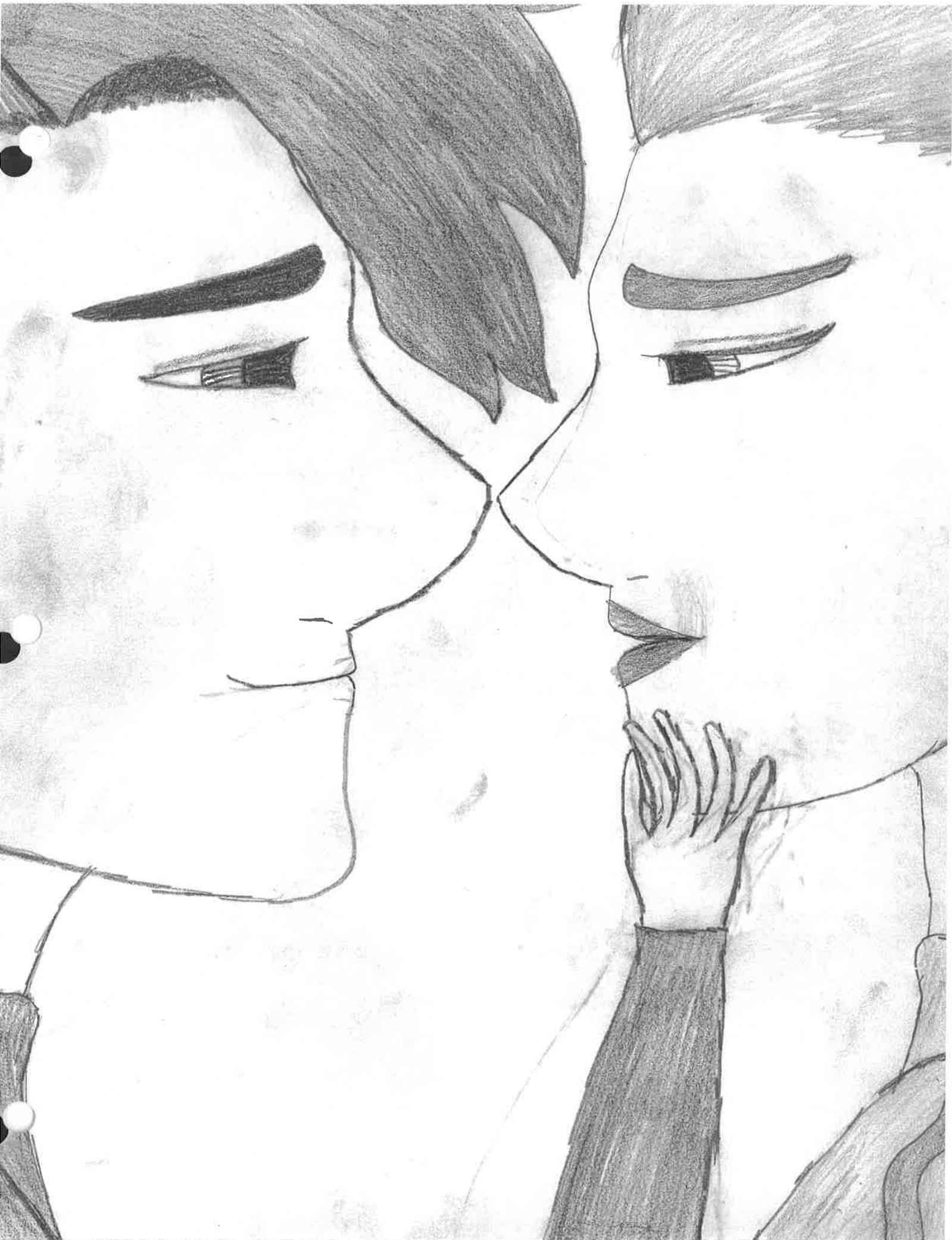
He turned his head to look at me, brown eyes soft.

I stared at the ground. "I want to do the right thing, and keep everybody safe, but I'm kinda at odds with myself." I couldn't look at him.

"Sam..." I felt his hand on my chin and I turned to look at him, my heard thundering like a steam engine.

"Maybe, just for tonight," he stared into my eyes, "Let's do the wrong thing."

And then, so lightly I could have imagined it, he kissed me.



~Chapter 11~

Let the Battle Begin

Alex and I didn't talk the next morning, except for a small grin between us. I felt like there was a delicious secret hanging between the two of us. We started for the dark mountains again, weapons in hand. It was going down today, and I wasn't the only one who could tell. We had a device that could contact the others and make the portal appear when we needed it, and Alex had his hand hovering over the button at all times, in case we needed the others to get here quickly.

Our footsteps were quick and sure as we raised through the trees, sharp and alert. I felt numb, emotionless. It felt like I was being watched, but there was nothing in sight except for the ghost figures. The other four were ill at ease. Itching to use their powers, even if they did say that they'd be pretty much useless in a battle. My own lightning ran beneath the surface of my skin, ready to appear at a moment's notice. I wondered what the others in the mortal realm were up to right now. I knew that Payton would be waiting for his twin to come home, and Leah would be leading the others as well as caring for Celsley if they haven't found her parents.

That's when it happened. He moved so fast I didn't see it coming.

One minute, my feet were firmly planted on the ground, and the next I was flying through the air. I slammed into the ground, and my lightning went berserk, making my attacker howl in pain. Then the ground shook and a sharp gust of wind blew him off me. I thanked goodness that I'd brought Colin and Alex with me. I jumped to my feet just as the dark creatures poured from the trees and I yelled, "Alex! NOW!"

He pressed the button and the trees exploded. Red-hot tongues of fire licked through the trees and Lead burst onto the scene, looking murderous. The others came shortly after, elemental powers flaring. No way the dark creatures could take all fourteen of us. They never stood a chance. I drew my sword and another crashed into it. "*Denarien*," I thought, and roared with fury. He lunged, but I saw the move coming, and touched his blade, sending a shock up the metal. He hissed and dropped it, shaking his hand out. I took the moment of disadvantage and pressed my blade to his neck.

"Sagittarians are weak. You won't do it." He taunted.

"Stop under-estimating me." I said.

Then I sunk my blade, hilt deep, into his gut.



~Chapter 12~

Now

We all sat at the table, laughing and talking about our victory.

Salina was laughing hysterically at a joke Payton told. Leah and Colin were talking animatedly waving their hands around and grinning. Ahren, Veanna, and Pearl had gotten up and were now playing tag with Tyler, Gen and Gracie. Cameron and Luke were having a staring contest. Alex and I were avoiding eye contact and drinking our sparkling cider in silence. I cleared my throat.

"I could get us into the popular group with the help of my friend Avery if you want." I said.

"Isn't that the friend you were with the day we met you?" Alex asked.

"Yeah." I answered.

He pondered this for a second, then hollered to get everyone's attention.

"I think Samera has proven herself more than worthy of the guardianship." Alex started once everyone had settled down. "And, I think that she proven herself worthy of being the leader of the Guardians." Salina looked at me and grinned.

"All in favor of having her as leader, raise your hand." Every hand in the room went up.

I blinked back tears. First, I looked to Colin, who grinned, then to Pearl, Regal and proud, then Salina, beautiful and optimistic.

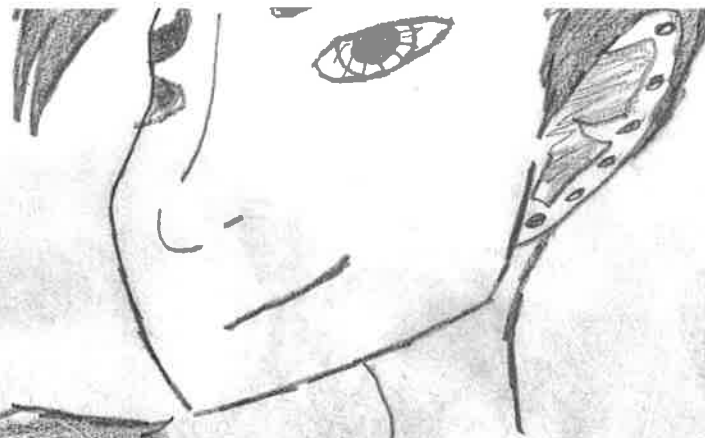
Then I looked at Alex, who nodded to me encouragingly, the boy who stole my heart. I stood and he sat. Finally, I'd found my family, my home.

I took a deep breath and said, "Let a new era begin."





Colin



Alex



Samvera



Pearl



Salika