



# The Dark Labyrinth (The Immortals of Atlantis World #4)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Penelope should know that any holiday with the Magicians isn't going to be normal...

Penelope wants to stay on a boat, diving for whatever is calling to her in the buried remnants of Atlantis. Unfortunately, no matter how much you hate Christmas, breaking a promise to a group of immortals is a bad idea. It's been months since the battle with Thevetat, and the magicians are still reeling from the losses they suffered. It's time to come together and celebrate the Winter Solstice in a way only the magicians can.

Alexis decides what they need to heal their hurts is to revive the Atlantean solstice tradition of the Dark Labyrinth, a way to shed the shadows of the year and bring in light for the spring. But magical labyrinths have minds of their own, and when gods get involved, all bets are off.

Please note that this novella contains adult themes, violence, and sex scenes.

**Total Pages (Source):** 12

## CHAPTER ONE

" I hate Christmas," Penelope said, gazing out at the dark indigo sea. Stars blazed overhead, looking down on them as they lay on the deck of the boat, a soft blanket underneath them.

Alexis tangled his long fingers with hers. "We promised Zo," he replied softly.

"I know." Penelope glared at the night and then sighed. "Maybe this year, with you all, I won't hate it."

Alexis knew when there was something she needed to get off her chest. He settled in, ready to wait until she needed to open up.

After a few long moments, Penelope rolled onto her side to face him. Some days, just looking at the sprinkle of freckles across her nose and the gleam in her bright hazel eyes knocked the breath from his body.

Not only had they survived the fight against their ancient enemy, but he had somehow gotten to keep her too. His smart, beautiful, passionate Penelope. So full of new power from the gifts she had been given that she all but hummed with magic.

Reflecting on the blessing Poseidon had gifted her across time was enough to make her one of the most extraordinary magicians Alexis had ever encountered. Sometimes he worried what other secrets the Living Language and Poseidon's blessing would bring out from inside her.

But first, the secret at hand.

"Tell me, cara, " Alexis cajoled, lifting their hands so he could brush her fingers to his lips.

Penelope huffed out a tight breath of frustration. "You're going to think it's dumb."

"Nothing upsetting you this much could ever be considered merely dumb." His light kiss on her fingers turned into a playful nibble. "You know you will feel better once you talk about it."

Penelope closed her eyes. "In short? My parents are dicks, but they get worse at holiday time. To the point that I actually envied the Catholic kids who had all the special days of singing and ritual and midnight masses. My parents wouldn't even let me believe in Santa for a little while. They were both too logical for any make-believe."

Alexis frowned. "So what did you get at the solstice instead?"

"Insufferable work holiday parties with academics or my parents' literary friends. Dad especially used it as a time to network and suck up to rich old people for donations to fund his studies or whatever department he was working in."

Penelope's hands clenched, and the waves around the boat gave a small shudder in reaction to her distress.

"I was paraded out like a trained poodle. I had to wear special party dresses I couldn't get a single mark on, and Dad would be all, 'Look at my Pen! Ten years old and is picking up Ancient Greek like a star. Show them, Pen!' And then, I would quote some passages from The Odyssey by heart, or as I got older, Plato's Timaeus just to piss Dad off about my Atlantis fixation."

Penelope chewed on her bottom lip before her eyes bruised with memories. "The worst part? He always paid the most attention to me at those dumb parties and would pretty much ignore me for the rest of the time. Christmas was never about fun or family. Whatever the fuck 'family' means. Carolyn and I used to have a BBQ together as we got older, and she would do her solstice rituals. It's weird to think about that now because she proved she never believed in the magic she was doing anyway."

Carolyn and the loss of her friendship were still a sore spot for Penelope. She had given her friend the chance to be a part of their world of real magic and secret histories, and Carolyn couldn't handle it.

Alexis had taken Carolyn's memories, and Penelope had all but lost her. He knew intimately the pain she was feeling. It had happened to him more than once in his long, long life. It had made him cautious and closed off for centuries, hiding who he really was because so few could handle the truth and reality of him and the other magician's life or history.

Alexis put an arm around Penelope and drew her close to his chest.

"I think it is time we both made some new memories. We will go home to Venice, where Zo will fuss over you, and we will eat too much of his baking, and that's all the solstice needs to be, cara ," he said against her dark curls.

"I've never had a real winter Christmas before," Penelope said and kissed the curve of his collarbone.

"I have no doubt the Archives will be missing you too," Alexis replied, in case she needed extra incentive. It earned him a sharp nip of her teeth.

"That's cheating."

"That's the truth. You are their Archivist, and we have been on this boat in Greece for months."

Penelope lifted her head. "Sick of me already?"

Logically, Alexis knew that she wasn't able to fully understand the depth of his loneliness before she stormed into his life. He had spent lifetimes wishing he could connect with anyone the way he was now connected to her. She was such an incredible blessing, and he didn't know how to convince her of that except by loving her as much as he could.

Alexis moved to kiss her full lips. "I'll never be sick of you. I just think we all need a celebration because we never really marked our victory over Thevetat. We all scattered like we had been before. I don't want us to fall back into that habit again. We need each other." He kissed the tip of her nose. "You brought us all back together, Penelope Bryne, so you have no one to blame but yourself."

Penelope traced his cheekbones with her fingers, her expression turning thoughtful once more. "I still haven't found what's been calling to me down under the waves."

"It won't go anywhere, cara . It hasn't in over ten thousand years," Alexis replied. He wasn't sure if he liked that an artifact was sentient enough to be calling out to her at all. Atlantis had many magical objects that had been drowned by the waves, and he didn't know if finding them again was a good idea.

Alexis had been thinking a lot about Atlantis and the times after it fell since the battle with Thevetat. Revisiting those memories didn't hurt as much when he faced Penelope's enthusiasm and joy whenever he mentioned them to her. Those memories sparked the idea to work on his special present for Penelope for the solstice. Now, his memories were giving him another excellent idea.

Penelope kissed him, drawing him out of the past and back to the present.

"Okay, let's go back to Venice," she said, laying her head against his chest. Her clever fingers slipped under his shirt, and she pressed her palm over his heart, making the moira desmos that bound them sing. "And I have the best part of Atlantis right here."

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### CHAPTER TWO

Alexis was up to something, and Penelope knew it. He had been thoughtful since they started to sail back from Greece to Venice, and she would occasionally catch the scent of cinnamon and firecrackers on his clothes, which told her he was testing some kind of magic.

Penelope had tried getting it out of him a few times, but he had only smiled enigmatically and said, "You'll see. Let it be a mystery."

When she had tried to point out yet again that he already had enough mysteries, he had kissed her so thoroughly, it had convinced her to drop the argument in favor of getting him out of his clothes. Even now, Penelope's gaze lingered on the shape of his ringed hands on the wheel of the ship.

Obsession, the waves crashing against the boat whispered to her. They weren't wrong.

But then, obsession had always shaped her life. She had been obsessed with finding Atlantis, obsessed with stopping Thevetat, and obsessed with the magicians and their secrets. She was obsessed with the unknown magic that was now in her veins.

And Alexis. Through it all, she was still obsessed with knowing him and having the chance to love him and be loved by him.

She regretted none of it. When Penelope followed her urges and obsessions, when she blocked out all the naysayers in her world, they always led her to greater, deeper

truths.

Now, she was untethered from all the restrictions placed on her by her family, her career, and her bank account. She was free.

Some nights, she woke with anxiety squeezing her body tight with the thought that it would all be taken away from her. She would wake up and find herself in a cramped corner cubicle at a university, buried in mindless grant paperwork. The tedium of bureaucracy would slowly add weights to her ankles when all she wanted to do was run and dig until the world spilled out all its mysteries to her.

The part of her that was linked to the Archives throbbed with longing the closer they got to Venice. Yes, it was past time to go back to them. If nothing else, it was becoming too cold and miserable to live every day, with winter closing in on them.

Penelope's eyes drew back to Alexis, who had begun to glow, an aura of gold shimmering around his broad shoulders and dark hair. The glamor he was whispering settled over the boat, and they sailed from the Gulf of Venice and into the lagoon. Sailboats as big as theirs weren't allowed to come into the city, but those kinds of rules didn't apply to the magician who had called the islands home since it was a cluster of huts on poles.

The dome of Santa Maria della Salute rose in front of them, and the gray-blue waves lapped against the hull— home, home, home.

Penelope never thought she would see the day that she felt a true sense of 'home' anywhere. She was wrong. Venice was a different feeling of home than the remnants of Atlantis that called to her, but both enfolded her in a sense of deep belonging.

Penelope moved from the side of the boat to slip her arms around Alexis.



"Home," she whispered.

Alexis drew her closer into his warmth and kissed her forehead before fixing his brilliant indigo eyes on her.

"Home," he repeated, and she knew he was talking about her just as much as the city.

Penelope's feeling of serenity lasted right up until the moment the boat docked, and Aelia appeared in a bright purple sweater dress and leather leggings.

"It's about time you got home!" she declared, hands on her hips. "You waited right until Christmas Eve? Talk about last minute."

"Why? What's wrong?" Penelope said, stepping onto the docks and into her rose scented embrace.

"There's too many men in the house, that's what's wrong," Aelia huffed.

"Where's Lyca?"

Aelia made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "We both know she hardly counts. Every time I go near her in the forge, she just growls at me. Zo has become worse than a nonna with solstice cooking. Con and Elazar are doing some kind of research in the library with Galenos, and Phaidros is being cagey with some kind of project."

Alexis stepped ashore and kissed Aelia's cheeks. "So nothing is wrong. You are just bored."

"No need for your sass, Defender. I just missed you, that's all," Aelia said with a smile. "You look positively feral. When did you last trim your beard?"

"We missed you too," Penelope replied. She turned to Alexis. "And I like your beard. Are you sure you don't want to get back on the boat?"

Alexis's eyes sparked with humor as he kissed her and led her to the entrance way into the villa. The doors opened to the Archives.

"What in the world?" Aelia said. She shut the door and opened it again, and it was still the Archives.

"It would seem the villa missed Penelope, too," Alexis replied.

Aelia rapped her knuckles on the door frame. "Really? You can't let her even take her shoes off and have coffee?"

Alexis nudged Penelope through the door. "Go, cara mia . I'll bring the coffee to you."

"And some of whatever Zo is baking?" she asked.

"Of course."

The door closed behind Penelope, leaving her in the warm, calm silence of thousands of books. She touched her hand on the column with the symbol of history at the top of it.

"I missed you too," she said, and the stone heated under her hand.

If you had told her a year ago that she would be living in a sentient, magical villa and in charge of an even more sentient Archive that housed the rarest books to have ever been produced in the known world, Penelope would have laughed herself sick. But here she was, and she wouldn't change a thing about it. She walked through the

stacks, letting her fingers trail over the spines of the books and the labels hanging from the scrolls.

The office that the Archives had constructed for her already had its doors open for her by the time she reached it. On her desk sat a large sandalwood box. She opened it and smiled at the robe that was folded neatly inside of it. Just because she didn't like Christmas didn't mean she hadn't considered a present for Alexis.

Penelope had discovered the design of the robe in one of the books about the Citadel on Atlantis. It was a traditional robe that only the leader of the magicians could wear. Since Nereus's death, he was the one that all the others looked to for guidance. He was a natural leader and the most powerful of them all.

Besides, he loved his entari robes, and this was the only design that Penelope doubted he had. It was a gorgeous blue that matched his eyes and was embroidered with the golden design of the book and trident of the magicians on the back of it, as well as blessings written in the Living Language on the cuffs.

"I picked it up yesterday for you," a deep voice said from the doorway of her office. "The timing of your arrival is impeccable, Archivist."

Constantine strode in like he owned the place. Penelope didn't take offense to that because Constantine went everywhere the same way. He couldn't help the air of authority he had acquired through thirty plus years of being a general and an emperor and had never shaken it. People naturally deferred to him, and their eyes followed him wherever he went. Penelope would have found it intimidating, except Alexis was the same way.

"I appreciate that, Con," Penelope said, and he drew her into his broad chest for a bear hug. "I can't believe you're still hanging about here with us."

Constantine rubbed his bearded chin. "I'm not bored enough to move on yet. It's been good to be able to see everyone after so long, and we almost lost Elazar in the fight."

"He is okay, Con. Alexis got him out of the fire," Penelope said softly.

"It's not only about the fire. I enjoy his company, so I wanted to stay." Constantine's blue-gray eyes softened. "He's getting old, Penelope."

She suddenly understood his apprehension. Elazar was Zo's mortal and elderly son, and his loss would be inevitable. None of them knew if Poseidon's magic that Penelope had inherited had changed her own lifespan like the magic explosion that had contributed to the destruction of Atlantis had made the survivors so long-lived. Only time would tell. But Elazar was different. They all knew without doubt he had a mortal lifespan.

"I'm glad he decided to stay with us, too, and I can't wait to go through the library he brought with him," Penelope said.

Constantine chuckled. "You think our Zo was about to let his baby go back to Israel to live alone again? Elazar knows his father well enough to accept the inevitable without a fight."

"Dare I ask how the new kitchen turned out?"

"Perfect as usual. Zo has always had excellent taste in all things," Constantine said with a soft smile.

Penelope bit her tongue so she wouldn't ask him if he included himself in that sentiment. It was hard to tell whether or not Constantine noticed Zo's centuries-old crush, and Penelope sure as hell wasn't going to be the one to try and point it out to him.

Constantine turned to look over his shoulder. "You had better hide that box, darling. Alexis is coming."

Penelope shut the box and casually slid it under her desk. Constantine moved into Alexis's path through the doorway to strategically block her from view. "I hope you brought me coffee, Alecto."

"I didn't know you were down here, harassing my beloved," Alexis replied.

"I wasn't harassing her. I was merely enquiring if she had enough of you yet and was ready to upgrade to an emperor."

Alexis only grinned at his obvious goading. "You do know that Zo is the only one who is susceptible to your charm anymore. Even Aelia has moved on from you."

"Aelia is where she's always belonged, with the one she was meant to be with," Constantine replied without a drop of jealousy towards Phaidros. There was no denying the truth that Aelia and Phaidros belonged together. He cocked a brow at Alexis. "And you wouldn't know whether or not my charm works on you because I've never tried to charm you, Alecto."

Alexis said something to him in Latin that was too quick for Penelope to catch, but she knew it was insulting because Constantine threw his head back and laughed. He moved out of the way, and Alexis placed a pretty silver pot of coffee down on Penelope's desk with a cup and saucer and an arrangement of Buranelli cookies, nougat, and Turkish delight. She had learned not to ask how old the dishware was, fearing the answer might make her too scared to use it.

"Zo really is in festive cooking mode," Penelope said and dunked a pistachio and almond crescent in her coffee. She groaned with happiness with the first mouthful.

"He's made me all my favorites, including pomegranate baklava. I'm surprised he remembered," Constantine said.

Penelope hid her smile. "I'm not."

Everyone had a soft spot for Constantine whether they liked it or not. Even Alexis, who he'd had an argument with for literally hundreds of years, was glad to have him back in the fold of the family.

"The kitchen is out of control. There's no way we are going to eat that much food," Alexis said, sitting in the chair on the opposite side of Penelope's desk.

"Don't worry. I'm taking him out tonight," Constantine said, heading for the door. "The basilica is doing Christmas Eve carols, and he promised to come with me. Do you two want to come as well?"

"Absolutely not," Penelope said around a mouthful of nougat. "I promised Aelia I would help her do that thing with the stuff." Constantine looked questioningly at Alexis.

"She hates Christmas," Alexis filled him in.

Constantine's brows shot up, the spark of challenge in his eyes. "Well, we will have to change her mind about that, won't we?"

Penelope only rolled her eyes at the pair of them and went back to her treats, the only thing that had ever been good about the holidays.

### CHAPTER THREE

A ll was not right in the kitchen. Zo knew he needed to stop, but every time he did, fear and anxiety would come crashing down around him.

"Bread. We need more bread," Zo whispered under his breath and poured a mound of flour onto his pristine counter.

He had been baking for days, making sure everyone had their favorite food for the holiday. The smell of wood smoke and burnt paper filled his nostrils again, and he quickly found the yeast and eggs he needed.

He couldn't stop now, or the memory of Elazar almost being burned alive would overwhelm him. It didn't matter how much he told himself that he was safe, that he was upstairs with his precious books and alive, alive, alive. The fear would rise in his chest, squeezing the air from him until his vision darkened.

No . He had to keep busy. He had to make the bread. Penelope and Alexis were back. They would need more of everything.

"Zotikos, we have an engagement," a deep voice said from the other side of the kitchen.

Zo ignored it, the voice barely filtering through his rising emotions. He buried his brown hands into the flour, making a well for his eggs and water.

Larger hands came over and circled his wrists. They were covered in small scars from

centuries of fighting, his callouses stained with ink from books. Zo knew those hands because they were the other great obsession of his life.

"Zo, look at me," Constantine said, his tone carrying a touch of imperial authority.

Zo dragged his gaze from the hands on his skin to Constantine's blue-gray eyes. "We need bread."

"No, we don't. You promised to come with me to the carols at the Basilica. Wash your hands. We are leaving," Con said, a smile lifting his lips. "We have a date, Zo. Don't stand me up for bread."

Heat rushed up Zo's spine, and he quickly untangled his hands from Constantine's. Nearly seventeen hundred years had passed since they had first met, and the old fox could still make him blush like a fool.

And he was a fool. He had a never-dying crush on the bastard, and Zo had thought he was at peace with it. He scorned the heat that flooded him.

Zo went to the sink, scrubbed his hands a little too vigorously, and untied his apron. Constantine looked him over and brushed a stray spot of flour that had gotten on Zo's shoulder.

"You'll do. Come on. You need to get out of this kitchen," Constantine said and turned his shoulders towards the door. There really was no arguing with Constantine, so Zo followed, helpless to deny his old friend anything.

Zo took his favorite leather jacket from the wardrobe by the front door and wrapped a gray scarf around his neck. Like the rest of the villa, the wardrobe tended to provide you with what you needed when you needed it.



Constantine was used to the magic and took out a double-breasted black overcoat that somehow made him look even more like a general. It didn't really matter what he wore; there was no hiding that Constantine was the boss.

Zo might have had a weak moment and admired how the cut of the coat made his shoulders look so big, too, but there had to be some perks for leaving his kitchen.

"Are you with me?" Constantine asked, his brows drawing together.

"I am. Just...distracted. I haven't been writing," Zo admitted.

"We need to fix that." Constantine opened the door of the villa and stepped into the damp, cold night. The sun set early at that time of year, and it was barely 5 p.m. It was good that it was dark because Zo was disorientated enough by being outside.

Before Zo could protest, Constantine wrapped his arm around his, and they headed down the Calle dei Cercheiri. Constantine was naturally affectionate, and Zo knew just to enjoy the warm sun of it while it lasted.

"I feel mentally blocked. My words have dried up, and I don't know how to move through it," Zo admitted as they crossed over a small bridge. "The magic isn't flowing."

"You don't think it could be affected by what happened with the demon?" Constantine asked. "He was an ancient enemy. Kreios was another, and then you found out that Abaddon and Thevetat controlled all his actions. Aelia spared the bastard. Our beloved Nereus died. A lot has happened, old friend. Trauma from the past never goes away for good. It just sleeps."

They walked in silence over the Accademia Bridge, which was still busy with Christmas Eve crowds. A pretty, smiling woman plucked some holly leaves with red

berries from her hair and gave it to Constantine with a grin and a breathy " Buon Natale " before she rushed off to rejoin her friends.

Zo grunted out a laugh. "You're unbelievable. You don't even have to try. I should push you into a canal."

"Don't be jealous, Zotikos. It's not like I can help what other people do," Constantine replied, slipping the holly sprig into the buttonhole of Zo's jacket.

"I feel like I need to bring back the old ways and have someone walk behind you, chanting ' memento mori ' to remind you to be humble," Zo teased.

Constantine's smile was quick as lightning and just as devastating. "I tried dying and being humble. Neither stuck for long."

Zo shook his head and still laughed because the bastard could always cheer him up no matter how grumpy he was.

Gods save him. Why was this the man the Fates had cursed him to moon over for centuries? He was just as impossible now as he had been when ruling an empire. If he weren't so damn irresistible at the same time, Zo would have killed him hundreds of years ago.

Saint Mark's Square was lit with fairy lights, a giant decorated tree towering in the center. The crowds were lining up to get into the Basilica.

"You sure you want to tackle all this for carols? It's like the Colosseum on free bread day. We won't get a seat," Zo said, a last feeble attempt to return to the warm heat of his kitchen.

"A good thing you don't need to sit to use your ears," Constantine replied.

Zo surrendered to his fate, and they moved into the line.

Zo had never been drawn to the new Christian faith, but he enjoyed their churches. Constantine, on the other hand, had never met a mystery cult he didn't want to join. San Marco should have been gaudy with so much gold, and yet all it did was fill him with an awe that had never diminished with time. He had seen every iteration of the structure, and he still loved it.

They moved through the crowds, and as soon as they drew near to some seats, a couple decided to get up and leave. Zo knew he should always expect this kind of nonsense when he was with Constantine, but it always surprised him. It was as if the universe knew exactly what the emperor wanted, and it, too, was inclined to give it to him. It was a good thing that Constantine no longer had any aspirations for world domination. Well, none that he knew of anyway.

Zo let the beautiful voices of the choir wash over him and drown out all the noise in his head. He stared up at the mosaics with their sad, knowing Byzantine faces and felt like maybe they knew how he was feeling.

Nereus had died at Abaddon's hand. His son had almost died because of his old enemies. His kind, loving son who had never harmed another being in his entire life. Who took in every stray animal and cared for them. His son, who was growing older every day and who he would one day lose to time.

Tears of fear and worry and heartache that Zo had been trying to hold in for months burned behind his eyes, and he couldn't hold them in anymore. They streamed in hot rivulets down his cheek and neck through 'Silent Night' and into 'Ave Maria.'

Constantine linked his fingers around Zo's in silent comfort and that just made him cry more. He was getting used to Constantine being around and it just meant that it would hurt twice as bad when he left again.

Love always hurts eventually . This was a truth Zo had learned over the long, long, span of his life. Time had taken so many people from him, and on the bad days, it was like he was drowning in ghosts and heartache.

He was glad Alexis was back in Venice. He understood better than any of them when the melancholy of immortality struck.

Like Zo, Alexis always went further inside of himself. Alexis usually kept the others at bay while Zo worked his way through it. Constantine was determined not to let him wallow. Zo would have fought back if it had been anyone else.

"You are going to be okay, Zo. I'll make sure of it," Constantine whispered to him, and Zo broke a little more.

### CHAPTER FOUR

By the time the carols were done, Zo was out of tears and hollowed out. Constantine took a clean handkerchief from his pocket and wiped Zo's cheeks like he was a child. Zo let him. He didn't have any fight left in him.

"Come, amico . We need wine," Constantine said, rising to his feet. They paused briefly for Constantine to light candles for his long-dead children, and then they returned to the square.

Florian's was packed, and neither of them wanted the noise. They found a quieter cafe and a spot at the bar on the Campo Santo Stefano and ordered two large glasses of red wine.

"You know, I love this city. I'm glad we are all talking again so I can come back to it," Constantine commented, looking about the looming buildings of the square and the groups of people huddled together to talk and smoke.

"You were always welcome, either way. Alexis was gone more often than not," Zo replied. He had a large mouthful of wine and the hollowed out feeling inside of him heated. "Try not to start another fight, and you can come back whenever you want. When are you leaving anyway?"

Constantine tilted his head. "You trying to get rid of me already, Zo?"

"No, but I know you. You always leave eventually. Better to be prepared for it," Zo replied flippantly like he wasn't knifing himself in the guts for fun.

"I'm enjoying my time here, and I have no intention of leaving any time soon." Constantine drained his wine. "I'm not leaving you to spiral and sulk on your own, Zo, so stop trying to make me. You forget I know you as well."

Zo breathed heavily through his nose and tried to push down his annoyance. "You're the worst."

"Yes, I'm a complete monster. How dare I care about one of my dearest friends when they are going through a time of grief," Constantine said drolly.

"I'm fine." Zo drained his wine and refused to look at him.

Constantine reached out and lifted his chin. "Lie to yourself, but not to me."

"I'll get over it. I always do." Zo moved back. He couldn't handle what that soft touch on his face did to him. He was emotional enough. It made him want to throw himself off the nearest bridge. "We need to go. It's almost dinner time."

The Accademia bridge had fewer people on it on the way back, and when Zo stopped to stare at the water, Constantine didn't object.

"Why aren't you writing?" he asked because he was like a dog with a bone when he wanted to be.

"I feel blocked. The crying helped, but I'm just...empty," Zo admitted. Writing was always something they could find a middle ground on. Constantine was almost as prolific as he was, and they had always shared their struggles with it. "Maybe I need to go and spend some time screaming in the desert."

Constantine grinned. "Would that help? Because I still have a place in Siwa."

"Were you hunting the oracles like Alexander?" Zo scoffed.

"The oracles are still there if you know where to look. You should know that. Aelia was one for long enough. Why? Do you need an oracle?" Constantine replied. His expression clouded with worry. "Dear god, you aren't suicidal, are you?"

Zo shook his head. "No. I'm tired, but not at that point. Everything feels like a kind of death. Like we have finished a very long cycle that ended with Thevetat. I can't imagine what happens next. We are all off-kilter and grieving for Nereus."

"The grief will always be there, but change might be a good thing. We all could do with some new beginnings." Constantine's grin turned into a smirk. "And happy endings."

Zo failed to smother his laughter. "You made that dirty on purpose."

"Made you smile, didn't it?" Constantine said with a shrug. "I stand by my statement. We have all been stagnant for too long. Our Doctor Bryne has stirred us all up out of our lethargy. There's bound to be growing pains, my dear. We just need to get through it together."

"If I could get through this mental block that's keeping me from writing, I think everything else would fall into place," Zo sighed and stared out at the dark canal.

"Does that mean you haven't written me anything for Christmas?" Constantine asked, nudging him with his shoulder.

Zo had written lots of things for Constantine over the centuries that he had yet to give him. The feud with Alexis had prevented him from sharing the bulk of it, but he had still written it.

"I didn't say that. It just won't have been written in the past few months," he said. "Do you want prose or poetry?"

"Surprise me. I love all of your writing. You know that."

Zo's heart fluttered in a way that only compliments from Constantine could make it. Damn him. He was going to make Zo pick up the pen again just to get a dose of that feeling. He had never been susceptible to praise from anyone else, and that annoyed him.

"Have you been working on anything?" Zo asked as they began walking again. "Apart from all the time you are spending in the gym."

"You know it helps me think." Constantine looped his arm around Zo's once more. "Besides, if you stopped feeding me like I was a calf getting ready for slaughter, maybe I wouldn't have to spend so much time in the gym."

"Are you saying you don't like my cooking?" Zo asked. "Because I can stop feeding you."

"I like your everything, Zo. That's never been up for debate. And I would never want you to stop cooking, but I do worry about how much time you spend in that kitchen."

"I just got it the way I want it," Zo said stubbornly.

"Ah, huh. It looks like delicious procrastination to me. I need you to get writing again so I don't run to fat," Constantine replied.

"You have always been built like a tank. I doubt some extra biscotti is going to change that."



"It won't be an issue if you start writing again. It's your magic, Zo. You can't just turn it off and expect yourself to be fine."

Zo huffed. "Maybe now that Alexis is back, I can talk to him about the magic. It's still on a high tide, and gods know how long it will maintain now that Thevetat and his worshippers are gone."

"Well, if anyone has been overthinking it, it's Alexis. Doesn't give you an excuse not to write me things," Constantine replied as they made their way back down the Calle dei Cercheiri.

"You aren't going to let this go, are you?" Zo sighed.

"No." Constantine's arm moved to his shoulders and gave him a hard squeeze. "And we know it's always better to give me what I want, amico ."

"I have been thinking of a story for a while, but I don't know if it's ready," Zo admitted.

"There you go. It's ready for a start, at least."

Zo didn't push the heavy arm from his shoulder, and Constantine didn't move it. They walked the rest of the way in companionable silence, Zo thinking of a good place to start his new work if he was to start it.

The blue door with its shimmering flower-of-life pattern appeared, and when Zo reached for the handle, a bundle of mistletoe bloomed above them.

"Someone is feeling the Christmas spirit," Zo said, trying the handle. It didn't open. "What the hell? Let us in!"

"I think it wants us to take advantage of the mistletoe," Constantine replied.

Before Zo could understand what was happening, big hands rested on his face, and lips pressed to his. His unmanly squeak of surprise was smothered by a drowning heat that stretched from his lips to his toes.

He was clearly in the mood for self-harm because Zo found himself leaning into the embrace. His overcrowded mind went blissfully blank, and all he could do was twist his fingers into Constantine's soft curls and let himself burn.

The door to the villa swung open of its own accord, and someone cleared their throat. Zo stumbled down the step inside, almost crashing into Alexis.

"Well," was all Alexis said, his brows high. "I was wondering when you two would be back."

"We were busy," Constantine replied, sailing inside and removing his coat like he didn't just break Zo's brain.

Alexis crossed his arms. "I can see that."

"Don't be a mother hen now that you are home, Alecto," Constantine chided.

Alexis's brows lowered into a frown. "Don't give me a reason to. Zo, get out of the way so the door can shut at least."

Zo was still standing frozen in place, his whole equilibrium still shattered. Constantine kissed me .

"But...you're straight!" he stammered, the beginnings of a panic attack starting to grip him.

"Since when?" Constantine put his hands on his hips. "I've never put my spirituality in a box, so why would you expect me to do the same to my sexuality? Really, Zo, I thought you, of all people, should know me better."

"But..."

"Consider it inspiration for that book you are going to start writing for me," Constantine replied with a devilish grin. "And don't just stand there gawping. You have dinner about to burn, and I'm starving."

Zo hurried past them, his face flaming so hot, he could have melted into the floor.

"You cause trouble in my house, and we will be seeing if the True Cross will bring you back a second time." Zo heard Alexis murmur.

"Keep your large nose out of my business," Constantine replied.

Zo walked faster, needing somewhere to die of embarrassment in peace. His hand itched for a pen so it wouldn't feel the ghost of thick curls between them.

He made it into the kitchen, shut the door behind him, and rested his head against it. He was embarrassed and angry and turned on and he didn't know what to do about any of it.

His brain was lighting up like fireworks, his magic thrumming in his fingertips to write, write, write. Whatever was blocking him was gone. The magic and the words were back.

Fucking Constantine . Zo was never going to hear the end of it.

### CHAPTER FIVE

Penelope was in the kitchen with her hand in the cookie jar when Zo came in, flustered and red-faced, putting his head against the door for some inextricable reason.

"I swear I'll have room for dinner, but these are just so good," Penelope said quickly.

Instead of scolding her, Zo turned and gathered her up in a tight hug. He smelled of rosemary and coffee and a little like church incense.

"I'm so glad you're here." He leaned back and kissed both of her cheeks.

"Are you feeling okay?" Penelope asked and rubbed his back. "You seem distressed. What happened?"

Zo's mouth opened and closed a few times. He was literally speechless. That told her everything she needed to know. Only one person could do that to Zo.

"Has Constantine upset you? I thought you guys were going out to Christmas carols."

Alexis came into the kitchen behind them. "Constantine just kissed him under the mistletoe and outed himself finally," he said, a wry smile twisting up his lips. "Honestly, I'm surprised you hadn't figured it out already, Zo. Do you even remember what the Roman Empire was like? There was barely a straight one amongst them."

Zo glared at him. "He's never said anything, and I have never presumed. Besides, he

was only doing it because he knew it would get me worked up, and I would start writing again, which is what he actually wants. Stupid mistletoe. Can't you make the villa stop putting up unnecessary decorations?"

He began moving randomly, opening and closing cupboards as if looking for something before checking the fridge.

Penelope shot Alexis a worried look. As if reading her concern, Alexis gave her a short nod. Yes, he had already warned Constantine not to hurt their Zo. He might look big and strong, but he had the softest heart of all of them. He didn't need Constantine's flirting to upset him.

Penelope was never good at matters of the heart, so she went a different route. "Can I help you with anything? Everything smells so good, I can't wait to bury my face in all of it. It was only the thought of your cooking that convinced me to leave Greece at all."

Zo shook his head. "Phaidros is going to help me. You can go and have a shower and meet us in the atrium in thirty minutes."

Penelope wanted to point out that what she was wearing was fine, but then she saw the heated look that Alexis was giving her and decided against it. She definitely needed a shower if he was going to join her.

As if saying his name had summoned him, Phaidros came into the kitchen, his golden curls wild and shining.

"Zo! What's this I hear about Constantine sticking his tongue in your mouth. Was it consensual? Because if it wasn't?—"

Zo covered his red face with his hands. "Can you all just drop it? I just want us to

have a nice dinner. Is that too much to ask?"

Penelope took Alexis's hand, and they went back out into the villa. "See? This is why I don't like Christmas. There's always someone upset and hiding in the kitchen." Usually, it was her.

"He's not upset, cara . He's just having to deal with all the hundreds of years he never dared to ask Con out. Convincing himself that he was straight was Zo's way to avoid it. This will be a good thing. Those two have danced around each other almost as much as Aelia and Phaidros but without all the toxic anger," Alexis replied, slipping an arm around her shoulders. "Don't worry, my love. They are big boys and will figure it out on their own, even if it takes another 1500 years."

Penelope could only hope he was right.

Penelope had only ever seen the atrium decorated as water gardens. Now, the area was decorated like a winter wonderland. It wasn't cold, and yet snow was falling in pretty drifts. Decorations made of ice hung from the trees, and the lounges and tables sat under a red and gold tent. Pretty black and copper braziers were positioned around the tent and were filled with burning wood that didn't smoke but emitted a soft heat. Everything smelled of cinnamon and spice.

"Did you help with the decorations?" she asked Alexis. She usually associated that kind of spice smell with his magic.

"I may have helped here and there. Mostly, it was Aelia. She's the one that insisted on decorating," he replied and kissed her cheek. "The surprise I put together with my magic is yet to come."

Penelope raised an eyebrow at him, but he only grinned. There was no way to get a surprise out of Alexis until he was ready to give it to you.

Aelia herself glided through the snowy gardens, dressed in a long red dress adorned with gold, her golden hair pinned up with red holly. She looked like some kind of Christmas faerie queen. Penelope could only smile because Aelia could wear a paper bag and still look like a queen. At moments like this, Penelope could see the Atlantean princess she had always been.

In contrast, Penelope was wearing a dark purple cashmere dress that had appeared mysteriously on her bed while she had been showering. She still wore her orichalcum bracelet with a trident and book design that had belonged to Nereus, her lapis lazuli ring from Alexis, and her Phaistos disc ring. She still looked at it and thought about all the unsolved mysteries of the world. Maybe she would have time to find the answers to a few.

"Where is my little bird? I thought he was right behind me," Aelia said, looking about.

"I am here, Aunty. I was waylaid in the kitchen," Elazar replied. He was carrying a steaming jug of spiced wine and a plate of thin ginger cookies. Penelope waited until he placed them on the table before gathering him in a hug.

"It is good to see you looking so well, Elazar," Penelope said, squeezing him harder. She had great affection for the older man and worried about his health like everyone else. It was ridiculous because he was in excellent shape for a man in his sixties, but his brush with Thevetat's priests was still too fresh in everyone's minds.

"I am better than well. I swear, between Abba and Uncle Constantine, I'm in better health now than I was in my forties," Elazar replied and accepted a kiss on the top of the head from Alexis. "I'm starting to think they are slipping Atlantean potions in my food."

"Seems like a lot of trouble when we can just do some magic on you while you're

sleeping," Aelia commented and started pouring out the steaming wine.

Galenos and Lyca came in next and added their welcome homes to Penelope and Alexis. Lyca was still a little stiff when giving hugs, but that wasn't enough to stop.

"Marco sends his greetings. I tried to get him to come tonight, but his sisters have dragged him off to some family thing on the mainland," Lyca said and studied Penelope's face. "You still haven't found whatever is calling to you?"

"No, not yet. Why? Do you think you might know what it is?" Penelope asked.

Lyca shrugged. "It could be anything. The magicians and artificers made all kinds of crap. There were some objects Nereus had destroyed or locked up, but that was only what she could contain within the citadel. That doesn't mean people weren't creating things in their own houses."

"I'm sure whatever it is, it won't be malicious," Galenos said, but he didn't sound sure. He added, "It will be better if you find it before anyone else does. The world is changing quickly again. Satellites and other new technology find more of what is buried daily. History will have to be rewritten, and all of the academic ideas held up as sacred idols by the white men who have tried to use the past as a vehicle of oppression will be pulled down."

"And not a moment too soon," Penelope said. She had suffered under the aforementioned white men during her academic career.

Alexis raised his cup. "I welcome it. Maybe they will get some of it right this time."

"This from the man who worked so hard to stop Atlantis from being found," Penelope couldn't resist mentioning.



" Amore mio , Atlantis is a very different matter from the most basic history," Alexis said, kissing her cheek.

"I see Alecto is starting his 'origins of man' debate, and I'm arriving just in time to save you all," Constantine announced. He was carrying heavy-looking platters of food and was followed closely by Phaidros and Zo.

As usual, Zo had cooked like he was feeding double the number of people, and Penelope knew she would be in a food coma by the end of the night.

Soon, everyone was relaxing around the table, drinking and eating, and catching up on news that they had missed out on during their time apart.

Slowly, the nervous lump of anxiety that had been in Penelope's stomach about 'doing Christmas' unraveled.

Of course, things would be different with the magicians. They always were. She and Alexis had gotten into a comfortable routine while they had been away, and she had forgotten just how dazzling they all were when they were together. How they talked and argued and reminisced about things that had happened a thousand years (or more) like it was yesterday because, to them, it was. They knew each other deeply, and it reflected the most when they started giving presents.

"I have been saving this to give to you one day. It was one of the ones that Antonio made out of gondola oars," Aelia said, presenting Phaidros with a red leather case. He opened it, and his eyes lit up. Inside was a beautiful violin. He ran his fingers along the wood. It had a unique pattern of the original wood in it.

"Antonio always did such lovely work," Phaidros said and plucked a string. "You tuned it already?"

Aelia's smiled at him. It was a soft, affectionate smile that Penelope had only seen her grace Phaidros with. "I thought you could play me something."

"Who was Antonio?" Penelope asked curiously.

"Oh, Antonio Stradivari was a luthier friend of Aelia's," Alexis said like it wasn't groundbreaking.

"You're talking about Stradivarius?" she squeaked.

Elazar, the only other half-normal one amongst them, reached across the table and patted her hand. "It's okay, Penelope. You know what they are like. Have another drink."

Penelope did because it was the only sensible course of action to take when she encountered items in the villa that should belong in a museum somewhere.

"The most perfect of gifts," Phaidros said and presented Aelia with a scroll tied in a red ribbon.

Aelia untied it and unraveled the pages of sheet music. She scanned it, reading the notes. Her cheeks flushed and eyes filled.

"Oh, Phaidros," she whispered.

"I've been writing versions of it for you since Atlantis when I first saw you at the temple of Poseidon," he admitted, uncharacteristically bashful.

"Play it!" Constantine called from the other end of the table.

"I agree, but I only ask you to delay it until I've shared my present," Alexis said over

the shouts of agreement. "We will need some music afterward."

"Well, that's cryptic," Aelia said and sniffed. "But I agree. If Phaidros plays now, I will make a complete mess of my makeup."

Next, Galenos presented Lyca with a wooden crate. She grinned widely as she opened it with a crowbar and stared at the lumps of dirty rock in it.

"What are they?" Penelope asked with a frown, not understanding why Lyca looked so happy.

"Ores," Lyca replied and, in a rare act of public affection, kissed Galenos firmly on the mouth.

"You did say you wanted to start forging orichalcum again," he said.

Lyca's present to him made him kiss her right back. Penelope didn't need help understanding what his gift was. It was a box full of replacement remotes for all his vintage video game consoles.

Constantine and Zo exchanged hand-bound books and writing supplies.

"I hope this has dirty bits," Constantine said, thumbing the pages of his new book and grinning.

Zo's ears turned red. "You'll have to read it to find out."

"My dirty bits begin at page 103," Constantine replied, and Zo nudged him with his shoulder.

"Don't ruin the surprise."

"I wouldn't dream of it. Now, Elazar's present," Constantine declared and handed Elazar an envelope.

Penelope leaned in to see what was inside of it. Elazar pulled a card free with a list of on it.

"Coordinates. And where does this lead, uncle?" Elazar asked curiously.

"Egypt. I have it on good authority that documents were buried in pithoi there in the early second century. I thought we could do with a treasure hunt," Constantine replied, and Elazar's face lit up in excitement.

"What kind of documents?" he asked.

"You'll have to find them in order to find out," Constantine replied.

Zo twisted the napkin in his hands. "I don't know if Elazar going off to dig in the desert is a good idea..."

"Abba," Elazar groaned. "I'm not dying, so stop acting like I am."

"I'm not. It's just... I'm your father, and I worry that the heat..." Zo stammered.

"Keep talking, and I'll kiss you again," Constantine said, and Zo's mouth promptly shut. "Exactly, now we are going to Egypt, and that's final. Keep complaining, and I won't invite you."

"Penelope's turn! Quickly, before the men keep arguing about dumb things," Lyca said.

Alexis placed a box down in front of Penelope. "We all helped make this for you,

cara mia ."

Penelope took off the lid and pulled out the thick book. It was bound in indigo leather, and the golden title read: The Lost Tales of the Magicians.

"With everything that has happened this year, it got all of us thinking about Atlantis and the past. We thought we would write some of our stories for you," Alexis explained. "It's what I have spent most of my time collating while you have been in the sea."

Overwhelmed by the treasure, Penelope hugged it close to her chest. "Thank you all so much. I know it's not always easy to talk about the past. We have made something for you too, Alexis."

Penelope pulled out the wooden box and handed it to him. With a curious smile, Alexis opened it. The smile faltered.

"This... This is..." he said, eyes wide as he looked around the table. "You can't give me this. I'm not qualified."

"Alexis, you are Nereus's heir as head of the magicians and always have been, whether you wanted to recognize it or not," Phaidros said bluntly. "You are also the head of this family, and you deserve to wear the robe of your office."

Alexis took it out of the box and ran his fingers over the golden Living Language. "I never thought I would see one of these again."

"I found mention of it in the book and got it recreated for you," Penelope replied, resting a hand on his knee. "I think it's the only type of robe you don't own."

Alexis kissed her quickly before putting it on. "If that is how you all feel, none of you

can complain about what happens next."

"Oh no. I know that look. What have you done now?" Aelia asked.

Alexis's grin was a wild thing, magic crackling about him. He clapped his hands.  
"Everyone up and follow me. We are taking Penelope for an adventure in history."

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*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:04 am*

### CHAPTER SIX

A lexis led them through the atrium and into the wider gardens, the Grand Canal glittering with the reflection of the lights from the buildings. It was a view Penelope had missed, and Poseidon's magic hummed in her veins as it reached out to connect to the water. Penelope slipped her hand into Alexis's larger, warm one, her heart as full as her stomach.

Torches mounted on tall iron poles sparkled through the trees. Penelope's breath caught as they came into a glade that she was sure hadn't been there before. A large black mouth of an entrance was between two tall carved pillars.

"Oh, Alexis, you didn't..." Aelia said from behind them.

"Absolutely fucking not," Zo added. "Not that. Not now."

"Yes, now," Alexis replied, turning to them. "I wanted to give Penelope a winter tradition from Atlantis, and a Dark Labyrinth was the answer."

The yawning darkness called out to Penelope, whispering against her skin, daring her to enter.

"Is there a minotaur in the center for me to fight?" Constantine asked, sounding far too excited by the prospect.

"That will depend entirely on you," Phaidros said. He was the only one who didn't look curious or frightened. He was eerily calm. "I used to do the Dark Labyrinth

every year to honor her. I still remember the sound of the priestesses coming through the streets of the village where I grew up. They would sing hymns to her, and everyone would know the labyrinth was ready for the year."

Penelope looked at Alexis. "Hymns to whom? Who is her?"

"The goddess. We called her Asasame, but she has been remembered in many iterations. She is the great goddess who was in charge of all life and death," Alexis explained.

"But... I thought Atlanteans worshipped Poseidon?" Penelope asked, trying to catch up.

"Poseidon worship was only popular in the capital and amongst the aristocrats and magicians. Most of the Atlanteans, those who worked within nature, honored Asasame. If they didn't, she wouldn't bring the spring for the crops," Galenos explained. "I suppose you could compare it to the much later Eleusinian mysteries with Persephone and Demeter, Penelope."

Penelope suddenly remembered where she had read the name Asasame before. She had delved deep into Minoan culture, and the name was one they used for their goddess too. "She was the Lady, or Potnia, from Minoan Crete and Thera?"

"Yes, that was what the Keftiu called her. Same goddess, same energy, different face, as usual. They built their labyrinths of stone instead of magic, but the idea of it was the same. We did trade with them, so the ideas traveled too," Aelia explained with a wave of her hand. "I was a priestess of Poseidon, but many of us still went to do the old rites at the solstices. The Dark Labyrinth in the winter brought the spring. The Gold Labyrinth in the summer to prepare to go to the underworld for winter. Are you sure you want to do this, Alexis?"



"Why are you all so worried about it?" Penelope interrupted before Alexis could answer Aelia.

"Because the Dark Labyrinth forces you to confront all the shadows of your year, your own personal minotaurs, so you don't take them into the new year with you. Think of it as ancient therapy," Zo said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"It's well overdue, is what it is," Lyca said and crossed her arms making her biceps flex. "This is an excellent idea, Alexis. Nereus would approve. We all need to deal with our shit from the year and walk into something new."

"Thank you, Lyca. I'm glad someone else thinks it's a good idea," Alexis said before turning to the others.

The golden light of the torches flickered off the stitching of the Living Language on his new robe as if reminding everyone that they had just willingly put him in charge.

"We have all had a challenging series of years, and much has happened. We need to begin again without all the hurt feelings and shadows of the past clawing at us. The world is changing again, and the magical tide is high. According to the Earth's astronomical procession, we are almost in Aquarius, and none of us can predict what is going to happen next, what paradigms will shift. It's better we return to the old ways because they were always the best." Alexis's frown softened. "I know it will be hard to do this, but we will all feel better for it. I just know it. It's necessary medicine."

Constantine put his hands on his hips. "Well, I'm ready. How do we do this thing, Alexis?"

Alexis turned back to Aelia. "You are our only high priestess here. Would you lead?"

"I hope I remember the steps," she said, kicking off the satin ballet flats she had been wearing.

Penelope swallowed the growing ball of panic in her throat. "This isn't going to give me a psychological break or anything, is it?"

"No. It might hurt, but it is about healing, not harm," Alexis reassured her. "You will never be in any physical danger, Penelope. You know I would never risk any of us in such a way."

Penelope nodded and tried to look braver than she felt. She wanted to learn more about Atlantean culture, but now the words 'careful what you wish for' were ringing through her head like an annoying bell.

Aelia walked barefoot and took down two torches. "Do you remember the words to the hymn to start it, Phaidros?"

"Yes, my love. I will play too if you wish it," he said.

Aelia smiled. "I always want you to play for me."

Phaidros took out his beautiful new violin and rested it in position. "Where you go, I follow."

"Flirt on your own time," Lyca complained. "Let's start, or this will drag on until dawn when it's meant to be over."

Aelia took up a position near the opening of the labyrinth and raised her torches. She held them squared at shoulder height, reminiscent of the goddess pose in yoga.

All the hair on Penelope's body lifted as Aelia's expression turned serious. This was a

pose she had seen on Crete with the goddess holding snakes. She had seen it on images with Hekate and her torches leading into the underworld. She had seen it in folk dances from around the world. It was ancient and powerful and always a symbol of the divine feminine.

A different sort of magic filled the glade, making Penelope's own go disturbingly silent as if it was also holding some kind of reverence for a more significant power.

When Aelia sang, the world stopped to listen. When she sang Atlantean, it made Penelope's chest ache with a longing she didn't understand. As Aelia began to sing the hymn to the Goddess of the Dark Labyrinth, Penelope's whole chest felt like it was cracking wide open.

Phaidros picked up the tune, singing and playing with her, and Aelia began to dance, her torches held high as she spun and twisted. She was a blur of red and gold as she circled Phaidros and entered the dark opening.

Phaidros followed her, still playing until they were swallowed up from view. The music called out to them, and the power of the labyrinth drew them in, whether they wanted to face their darkness or not. Lyca went next, followed by Galenos, Constantine, Elazar, and a pale-faced Zo.

"I will follow you, Penelope. Wait for me when you come out again," Alexis said, pressing his forehead to hers.

"Always," she replied, kissing him once before letting him go. She turned to face the labyrinth and let the power of the ritual pull her into the darkness.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

Penelope jolted awake, the computer screen bright in front of her eyes. The glare of the fluorescent lights above her made her head hurt. There were class timetables, project deadlines, and an awkward family photo on her cubicle's gray felt walls. The air smelled of stationary, stale Nescafe, and someone's lunch that they were reheating in the staff room microwave.

Penelope rubbed at her neck. What was she doing again? Had anyone noticed her micro-nap? No one seemed to have looked up from their own pods.

Outside, the rain was falling and turning Melbourne's streets dark. She had been having the strangest dream...something about Venice...

"You okay, Bryne? You look like someone just knocked you in the back of the head," Phil asked. He taught Ancient Roman history and spilled something on his shirt every day without fail.

"Yeah, just got a bit of a headache," she admitted.

"End of term will do that to you," he replied before wandering away.

"End of term," Penelope murmured.

Her screen had online class formatting pages open with a picture of a fresco found at the Akrotiri site on Thera. It was of Potnia, the Minoan goddess of fertility, holding the leash of a griffin with a blue monkey offering her a bowl.

Keep looking, the goddess whispered, and Penelope jolted back from the desk.

Penelope's eyes drifted to the background on her screen, and she closed the program. There was a picture of her standing in the waters of Crete, holding a lump of rock.

"The tablet." The dream came back to her in a rush. She had been in Venice with Atlanteans, including the love of her life. Cold fingers of dread crept over her. "How did I get here? I don't..." She didn't belong there. Not anymore.

How was she back? Penelope leaped out of her chair, hurrying through the cubicle maze. She made it to the bathroom before she wretched up coffee and biscuits.

"No, no, no. I can't be back here. I was never going back." She washed her hands and bare arms. She grabbed more soap and scrubbed at her forearms harder and harder. Faint lines of tattoos seemed to float like shadows under her skin. Penelope remembered pain, Aelia singing, and the marks that had remained. She remembered Poseidon kissing the back of her wrist and leaving the tattooed mark of the book and trident.

"Give them back. This is not my life!" she snarled, scrubbing harder. This was a nightmare. She froze, her pulse in her throat. "I'm in the labyrinth."

Penelope looked around her at the prints of flowers on the bathroom walls and the line of stalls. She stepped back out into the halls of the university.

The labyrinth will make you confront your shadows, a deep masculine voice whispered through her mind.

"Alexis," Penelope whispered, her hand resting over her thrumming heart. She saw a silvery string of light in her mind's eye and almost wept. It was still there. Alexis wasn't a figment of her imagination.

Penelope walked down the hall of the university department, the nausea clawing up her throat again. This was the labyrinth fucking with her. She had to hold onto that to keep the panic attack at bay.

Penelope had faced real demons and murderers in the past year, and yet she stood in her greatest fear—that she would wake up and Alexis and her magicians would have all been some kind of dream.

"And what makes you think you haven't completely lost your mind?" Stuart Bryne appeared before her. His brogue was light most of the time but when he was in a yelling sort of mood, the Irish came out in him. "I always said your hunt for Atlantis was a complete waste of time and talent. My daughter, labeled as some kind of pseudo-archaeologist! You're a disgrace."

Penelope cringed back. "No, I'm not. I found evidence. Real evidence. No one believed me. I know it's real. I've met survivors."

"Survivors! Listen to yourself, Penelope. No one can survive for thousands of years."

"Now, love, don't shout," Kiri said, appearing at Stuart's side. "We talked about this. Penelope has been very stressed and just needs a nice break to get her head right. I've been told that the facility is very upmarket and peaceful."

"What are you talking about, Mom? I'm not going into any facility." Penelope's hands clenched at her side. "You two should have believed me. Should have supported me. I am your daughter, and yet you chose to think I was crazy. Atlantis was real. The survivors are real. Magic is real."

Penelope's fingers ached, and the rain outside the window started to circle around in patterns. Poseidon's magic flowed in her veins. The Storm Bringer. Overhead, thunder boomed, and the glass rattled.

"I don't belong here," she said, her voice rising as she looked at her old office and disapproving parents. "This is not my life anymore. It was only a stop on the path to where I was truly headed."

Her father started saying something, but his voice was drowned out by more thunder.

"Let me out," Penelope commanded.

The glass of the windows shattered, and saltwater rushed in, washing away her parents and colleagues, the desks and bookshelves toppling in a wave. Penelope no longer feared the sea. The sea was freedom. She dived under the waves and swam through a broken window.

Light shone above her through the water, and she kicked hard. She breached the surface with a deep gasp.

Carolyn was sitting on the edge of the pool, a glass of white wine with ice cubes in one hand. "Jesus, Pen, you were under there so long, I thought I was going to have to jump in and rescue you."

Penelope swam to the pool's edge and hauled herself onto the hot terracotta tiles. She wiped the salty water from her face. Salt. She had been in the ocean a moment ago.

"Sorry, what were we talking about?" Pen said, reaching for her bottle of Peroni.

"Why I'm stupid enough to agree to give Tim another chance," Carolyn replied, and she looked behind them to where he stood at the BBQ.

"Tim..." Penelope swallowed the hard lump in her throat. "You're giving him another chance because it's Tim, and you love him."

"You're right there. If only I could get him to stay away from Qumran," Carolyn said with a dramatic sigh. "Why do I have such a weak spot for archaeologists?"

"Because our attention to detail makes us the best lovers. You really should go with him next time," Penelope pointed out. She got to her feet. "I'm going to make sure he's not burning the sausages."

She was halfway across the backyard when she remembered the last time she saw Tim. He had been nothing but pulped flesh. Murdered by Abaddon.

"Tim," Penelope said and threw her arms around him.

"Hey! Don't get me all wet, you menace. I don't care how hot it is!" he squealed, trying to get away. Penelope held onto him, and he finally relented. "What's wrong, Hawkes?"

"Nothing, Carter," she said, swallowing down her tears at the pet names. "You know Christmas just gets to me."

Tim squeezed her hard. "Your dad is a dick, but you're with us this year and don't have to worry about his disapproval or your mom's constant fussing to appease him."

"I know. I just... I'm sorry for everything, Carter."

"Sorry for what? You haven't done anything wrong," Tim reassured her and took her by the shoulders. "What is this really about?"

"I couldn't save you from yourself or from Abaddon. I'm so sorry, Tim," Penelope said, tears streaming down her face.

The concern in his eyes shifted to something darker. "I thought we would always



have each other's backs, no matter how wild our theories got. You found the biggest prize of them all, and you were going to keep it to yourself. You always were so selfish about your precious Atlantis."

Penelope held her ground. "They aren't a prize. They are people, and their secrets are worth protecting. They are my family."

"And we weren't? All you did was upgrade us when you found fancier people to hang out with!" Carolyn demanded, the wine in her glass sloshing over the side.

Penelope took a deep breath. Labyrinth. She was in the labyrinth. She opened her eyes. "I gave you both the opportunity to come with me on the adventure. To be a part of their secret and to have access to real magic and archaeology. You broke my trust, Tim. And Carolyn...you never believed in magic. You got to see the truth of the greatest of mysteries, and you made Alexis take it away. You both walked away and left me because you couldn't handle that I was becoming the person I was meant to be. It was fine when I was just a struggling archaeologist and the convenient shoulder to cry on. You both bailed as soon as I found what I was looking for. I'm sorry you died, Tim, but I won't feel guilty for it. I tried to protect you, and you attacked me. I'm sorry you couldn't love who I was becoming, Carolyn."

"You always loved the idea of Atlantis more than anyone else, Penelope. That's why I couldn't love you anymore. I was always going to be second," Carolyn snapped back.

Penelope flinched, the blow finding its mark. "I'm sorry you felt that way, but I can't change who I am," she said, straightening her shoulders. "Atlantis is a part of me. The song that I've always heard calling in my heart. You never had to compete, but I won't change who I am to suit anyone anymore. I'm tired of making myself small and silent. Atlantis has always been my future, a part of who I am. I'm never going to give it up. Not for anyone."

Penelope walked away from them as they shouted accusations, and she dived back into the pool. The salty water drowned them out, and she kept going, trying to escape their anger. She swam down and found the bottom of the pool was covered in sand. Penelope kicked off it, making for the crashing waves above her.

This time, she surfaced in front of an island. Penelope swam in on the waves, making out a temple structure through the trees. And she wasn't alone.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

The woman on the beach had curly black hair and wore a red flounced skirt paired with a low-cut blouse. Her hair was bound with pearls and crocus flowers.

Penelope almost tripped on the sand as a wave of warm power hit her. It was like when she met Poseidon, but it was so much more potent.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"You are in the heart of the labyrinth. A place outside of time where we can meet," the woman replied. She waved a hand at the temple through the trees. "Do you not know where this is?"

Penelope wiped the water from her eyes. It was then she realized she was wearing a red chiton that came to her knees. A silver snake bracelet circled her wrist.

"Home. I'm...on Atlantis," she said, knowing she had spoken true. "Why do I feel this way about a place I've never been? Why do I yearn for it so much?"

The woman raised a delicate black brow. "You've never been here before? Are you sure about that, Penelope?"

Penelope stared at the woman, her whole body singing with recognition. "You are Asasame."

"And you were one of my priestesses. A mistress of the labyrinth. Long ago."

Penelope bit her lip. "I don't know if I believe in past lives."

The goddess laughed. "They believe in you. Have you never wondered why you have always felt the call to Atlantis? The ache for it? This place is a part of you. It's why Poseidon and Nereus chose you specifically for your tasks. Do you remember what they used to call you?"

"The Heir of Gods," Penelope replied, a ripple of unease passing through her.

"That's right. The Heir of Gods . Plural. As in including me, priestess," Asasame pointed out. "It's why you and Alexis feel so right to each other. His fate could be bound to no other."

Penelope pushed her hands through her wet curls and tried to steady her breathing.

"I'm in the labyrinth. It's about fear, right? So, why am I here and not afraid?"

"As I said, you are in the heart. This is my place as the goddess of the labyrinth. This is where you will always be able to find me," Asasame explained, taking Penelope's arm in hers. "Walk with me, priestess. We don't have much time. Your Alexis knows something is wrong and will try to dismantle the labyrinth if you are gone much longer."

Penelope laughed despite the weirdness of the situation. "That sounds like him." Everything felt so real. The sand under her feet, the warm skin of the goddess's arm. "What is this about?"

"Buried secrets. There were things on Atlantis that even the magicians had no idea existed. They grew up with magic at their fingertips and never wondered why that was."

"Please tell me it's not another demon. We only just got rid of the last one," Penelope

said.

"It is no demon. My priestesses helped protect the vaults. The labyrinths were to help the people, but they also renewed protection spells every year. Some things cannot be released into the world again. Mankind couldn't control them, couldn't destroy them, so they were locked up with the help of the gods," Asasame explained. She took Penelope's hands. "The locks are weakening, and the high tide is making it worse. You know this already. You can hear them calling out to you."

Penelope had been diving and diving, trying to find the source of the call. It was so loud, and she still hadn't found anything. "What are they?"

"The simple term would be...relics? But they are so much more than that. They can be used for creation or destruction. Weapons to wound or to heal. Pure power and potential that after they were made, the gods regretted it, and yet, they couldn't destroy them. Atlantis was the only place where they could be kept safe. They feed on magic. They are the source of magic."

Penelope shook her head. "You are speaking in riddles."

"They defy explanation because they are different to those who view them." Asasame placed her hands on Penelope's cheeks. "Be careful of what they promise you. You are the last mistress of the labyrinth, and you must find a way to keep them contained."

"I don't know how," Penelope said, panic rising inside her. "Why me?"

"Because you loved Atlantis. Lifetimes have passed, and yet you love it still. That's how powerful it was." Asasame looked deep into her eyes, and Penelope fought not to glance away at their intensity. "Your Defender will protect you. Your magicians will support you. There was a reason that they were so long-lived. It's about time they

found out why, don't you think?"

"But it was to defeat Thevetat..." Penelope began and then stopped because the goddess was smiling.

"Child, the demon was a loose end. They are so much more than that." Asasaramé kissed Penelope on the third eye. "I'll be watching."

Darkness swept Penelope away like she was caught in a rip tide of shadows. Light was growing in the distance, and she was suddenly spat out into the air. Strong arms caught her before she landed in a garden bed.

"Penelope! I have you. I have you," Alexis said, holding her close. "Gods, what are you wearing... Why are you all wet?"

Penelope clung to him, her whole body shaking in cold and shock. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

His indigo eyes flashed with magic. "Try me."

The sun began to rise over the water, and Penelope turned her face toward it. "In a moment, I need..."

Alexis wrapped her in his new robe to help with the shivering. The others were watching the sun too, and all looked shaken and relieved to see the light.

Alexis said, "Sing the hymn, Aelia."

For once, Aelia didn't have a sassy comeback. She looked as wrung out as the rest of them. Her voice rose with the sun, and the hymn to Asasaramé brought the warmth of spring back inside them. Tears fell down Penelope's cheeks, the song's familiarity

twisting around her heart. Had she really had a past life as a priestess? Every part of her pulsed in confirmation as the song and the sun worked their healing magic.

Alexis wasn't looking at the sun. He was still looking at Penelope with worry in his eyes. "You didn't come out before me. I didn't know where... You were just gone . Again."

"Take me to Nereus's old apartments?" Penelope asked.

It was the only place none of the other magicians could get to unless Penelope wanted them to. It was the only place that she felt was truly private in the whole world.

Alexis picked her up and summoned a portal. "We are going to bed."

"A good idea," Lyca yawned.

They didn't wait for anyone else's reply, only stepped through the glittering portal, Penelope hanging onto Alexis like he was the only anchor she had in the world.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:04 am*

A lexis didn't let Penelope go until they stood in the bathroom and the sunken tiled pool was steaming.

"The labyrinth shouldn't have taken you anywhere physical. That's not how the magic works," he said, staring at her wet chiton .

"It does if the goddess of the labyrinth summons you," Penelope replied.

Alexis's eyes flared with magic. "I'm going to need you to explain."

Penelope struggled out of the wet chiton , Alexis helping her get it over her shoulders. "Get in the bath with me. I need to get my mind straight and body warm."

Truth be told, Penelope's brain felt like it had been through a meat grinder, and she was left to sift through the pieces.

They settled in the warm water, and Penelope nestled safely in Alexis's arms. He was worried. She could feel it radiating through their bond, and he kept in physical contact with her like he feared she would disappear on him again.

"I don't know where to start," she admitted.

Alexis rested his hands on her shoulders and gave them a gentle massage. "How about from when you entered the labyrinth? I know it might be uncomfortable to share what you saw because they are your fears, but it might help to understand where the magic went wrong."



Penelope reached up to touch his cheek. "It's not your fault. It wasn't your magic. It was... I think it was mine." She took a deep breath. "I woke up in my old university cubicle."

The story tumbled out, and she told Alexis about her parents, when she called the storms, the encounter with Tim and Carolyn, and finally, the beach on Atlantis.

Alexis was squeezing her so tightly by the end of it that she had to wriggle to get him to loosen his grip. She turned in his lap so she could face him.

"I don't know what to do," Penelope admitted. "Did you ever hear of a vault full of objects of power?"

"There were rumors of a great treasure buried somewhere but they were fairytales to entertain children with," Alexis said thoughtfully. "I'll look through the Archives and see if I can find anything about it. If Nereus knew, she didn't mention it. That's not saying much considering all the secrets she kept about time magic...and you."

There was still a touch of hurt in his voice when he talked about Nereus, and Penelope didn't blame him.

"She wasn't exactly specific when she called me Heir of Gods either. Fuck, do you think this past life stuff could actually be real?" she asked.

Alexis's head tilted a little as he considered the question. "It would explain a lot about you. Even the Living Language saw you as a viable host for it when you touched it."

"You aren't freaked out by this?" Penelope asked, her fingers tightening on his wet biceps. "Because I don't know if I should be."

"Magic is strange. This we know for certain." Alexis pulled her closer, and she

wrapped her legs around him. "What I was worried about was that you had gone somewhere I couldn't reach. Do you want to know what I saw in the labyrinth?"

Penelope nodded, her fingers toying with the ends of his hair.

Alexis said, "I saw what I would have turned into without you in my life. I saw you never finding the tablet in the sea. I saw you dead on the floor instead of Nereus. Not having you is my biggest fear."

"And then you came out of the labyrinth, and I was gone," Penelope said, realization hitting her. "Oh, Alexis. Not even a goddess can keep me from you." She kissed him hard, her hands burying into his thick curls. His fingers stroked down her spine to her hips and pulled her closer up against him. Hot desire bloomed through her, just like it always did. Only Alexis had ever made her melt with barely a few touches.

"Take me to bed," she said against his lips.

Alexis's grip tightened, and he lifted her out of the water. He didn't stop kissing her as they walked through the apartments that Penelope had made her own. His magic caressed her, drying them both before he laid her back on the soft green of the bed sheets.

"My Penelope," he murmured as he kissed his way down her neck. He reached her breasts, making her back arch up to meet his wandering mouth. "I don't like gods thinking they can steal you away from me whenever they choose. You are my Penelope, not theirs." His hand dropped between her thighs, making her breath stutter.

"Always yours," she stammered, struggling to form words as his longer fingers teased her. Alexis kissed her, and his magic pulse through his fingertips and into her. Penelope groaned, her own magic rising to meet his like it always did.

"Oh, gods, get inside of me," she begged, needing to be as close as she could to him.

They had both had a scare that night, and she needed him to make her feel grounded and safe once more. Alexis must have needed it too because he lifted her hips and guided himself inside of her. Penelope wrapped her legs around him, pulling his perfect weight down on top of her.

"More."

Alexis grinned, wild and beautiful. "You always know exactly the right words to say to me," he said. She let out a yelp of surprise as he slung her legs over his brown, broad shoulders and thrust harder into her. His fingers found her clit again, and she shattered, unable to hold out under the intensity of everything she was feeling.

Alexis wasn't about to let her go. He moved backward, taking her with him so she was straddling him. The music sang through their connection, and love burned through Penelope's veins.

Demons, serial killers, and disapproving friends and family couldn't separate her from her beloved. She would face them all again and whatever new challenges the goddess threw her way too. The beautiful man between her thighs, who was looking at her with such love and devotion, would always be worth the cost.

Alexis drew her into a kiss that had them both breaking, the song so loud in Penelope's ears that the fear and terror of the night finally burned away.

"We will figure out where this vault is and how to keep it closed," Alexis said a short time later. They were sprawled across each other in a lazy bundle of limbs, his fingers slowly combing through her mess of curls.

"At least now I have some kind of answer for the call I've been hearing under the

water," Penelope replied drowsily. "Although I have no idea how to keep the vaults locked or what they contain."

Alexis hummed. "The goddess wouldn't have told you about it if she didn't think we could work it out together."

Penelope was still thinking about it when her phone buzzed on the nightstand. "How did that thing get in here?" she muttered. "Surely the villa knows I don't want to be anywhere near it." Penelope reached for it to turn it off when she saw the message that had come through.

Buon Natale, Penelope.

I hope the magicians are treating you well, K.

Kreios . He was checking in and had done sporadically since the fight with Thevetat.

And to you, Kreios. They made me walk the Dark Labyrinth.

Dear gods, and they say I am a monster.

Penelope huffed out a laugh. The dread of the labyrinth seemed to be universal. She typed back. You wouldn't know anything about a vault of powerful treasures or relics that was on Atlantis?

Maybe as a king, Kreios would have been told the truth of what lay at Atlantis's heart.

I know it should never be found.

Penelope showed Alexis the messages. "He clearly knows about it."

"I don't know how to trust anything he says," Alexis replied. To say the magicians had a complicated history with Kreios was a vast understatement.

"We can think about vaults and forgotten fairytales tomorrow." Penelope turned the phone off and snuggled back into Alexis's side. "Now that was a Christmas I'm not going to forget.

Alexis chuckled as he pulled her close and pressed his lips to her forehead. "Ah, my darling, Penelope. Haven't you learned that life with me is never going to be normal?"

"I have," she said, resting her cheek over his heart. "And I wouldn't change it for the world."

Thank you so much for coming for this trip back into the world of the magicians with me! If you enjoyed it, please don't forget to give it a rating or a little review on [lokepub](#).

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:04 am*

"Occultists, magicians, alchemists, dream-diviners, interpreters of the voices of statues, bird-seers, geomancers, demonologists, masters of the apocryphal: a modern day commentator could be forgiven for presuming that Byzantium was a hotbed of the dark arts."

Istanbul—a Tale of Three Cities—Bettany Hughes

Zoe knew it was her birthday by the cold dread that crawled along her half-asleep body. She opened her eyes slowly, her stare fixed on the cream ceiling above her, and willed her sleep paralysis to release her. It was these moments that were the worst—her consciousness awake and her body frozen as she convinced her limbs to work after a nightmare. She focused on naming what she could see to make her brain react again. Lamp, books, glass of water, reading glasses...

Her town house in Fulham was silent except for the cars zooming with the usual London commuters outside. The sounds her mother usually made in the bottom half of the house in the morning were painfully absent, reminding her starkly of what day it was.

Her mother, Anita, always took off on some fabulous holiday every year on Zoe's birthday. She always made a point of celebrating Zoe's birthday in the days before she went away; she just never hung about for the actual date. Zoe didn't blame her. After all, it was also the day her father had died.

For Zoe, her grief was a well-worn party dress that she dusted off once a year to wear when no one was around to see it.

She breathed in and out, trying to push away the memories and nightmares of her blood-stained dress, her father's office piled high with books, and his murderer still crouched over his body. She would never forget the heart he had tattooed on one hand, a feather on the other, and everything stained in scarlet. She remembered the tattoos in detail but could never recall his face. Her paralysis let her go, and she inhaled a sharp breath.

"Not today, Satan," Zoe murmured. She dragged herself into the shower, focusing on her breathing and not on the memories of that warm Istanbul night twenty-three years ago.

She'd had a long time to get over it—as her ex-boyfriend had pointed out many times. She just never had. Her mother dealt with the anniversary by being on a beach on the other side of the world. Zoe was more pragmatic. She worked so she wouldn't think.

She had a private commission to finish, a binding restoration of a gorgeous first edition of *History of the World* by Sir Walter Raleigh, and that was all she needed to focus on that day. Not her father's unsolved murder. Not ruined birthdays and absent mothers who taught her to be self-sufficient too early in life. Books—her eternal refuge.

Zoe was an expert in the rare and the damaged. In a way, it helped her feel closer to her good memories of her father, who had been a rare book dealer, but also because books made her feel safe. For a few hours, her world was contained between two covers. It was a place that was controlled. Nothing else mattered.

Downstairs, Zoe made coffee and tied her bronze hair up into a high bun. She ate a croissant for breakfast and stared at the wisteria in the tiny back garden that was turning the outside world lavender.

Food always helped the grogginess of the sleep paralysis go away, and slowly the

nightmares relented. She needed to get on with her day, not stare at the garden and imagine what life would be like if Oman had lived.

Coffee, emails, invoicing, more coffee. Zoe kept moving from task to task, not stopping long enough to think. Thinking was the enemy.

She was wrapping the Raleigh in tissue paper late that afternoon when the doorbell buzzed loudly, jolting her out of her working zone.

Zoe hurried downstairs, expecting a bunch of 'I'm sorry' birthday flowers from her mother, but what she got was a tall, dark-haired man in a suit. Zoe kept the chain on the door as she opened it a crack.

"Can I help you?" she asked cautiously.

"Good afternoon. Are you Zoe Kartal?" he replied, his English perfect but with a slight accent.

"Yeah? Who's asking?"

"My name is Kerem Polat. I am here on behalf of your father's estate." He offered her a card through the crack in the door, and she took it. He was a lawyer from a firm in Istanbul. Zoe's stomach flipped, and she removed the chain from the door.

"I don't understand what this could be about. My father has been dead for twenty-three years. His estate was cleared up long ago," Zoe replied, her brows drawing together.

Kerem smiled politely. "This was a special request that could only be delivered today on your thirty-third birthday. May I come in? Or if you would feel more comfortable, we can go to the cafe at the end of the street?"



"Cafe would be good. I could use the break." Zoe's fingers tightened on the card. "Let me just get some things."

She shut the door on him and stared at the card again. It was heavy white stock, the firm name printed in clean black lines. On the back was the imprint of a set of scales.

Anyone could print a card, so Zoe pulled out her phone and quickly Googled the firm. They were legitimate, based in the Karakoy district of Istanbul.

What could have her father possibly left her? Zoe's fingers hovered over her mother's phone number, and then she decided against calling her. Anita always said that talking about Oman was too painful, and Zoe was annoyed with her enough to say something that would piss her off. Going off with a strange lawyer to talk about her father would definitely annoy Anita to no end.

Her father had left something for Zoe alone—it didn't concern her mother—and there was only one way to find out what it was.

Outside, Kerem was waiting patiently on the footpath, a black leather folio tucked under one arm. He had a sprinkling of gray in his black hair and a touch of amusement in his eyes as he smiled at her. If it wasn't for the card burning in her pocket, Zoe wouldn't have picked him for a lawyer. He seemed far too jovial and his eyes too kind. He also seemed familiar in a way that she couldn't quite put her finger on. She decided it was probably the Turkish accent, reminding her of childhood.

"Should I ask what this is about, or would it be better to wait until I have an espresso in me?" Zoe asked as she fell into step beside him.

"Coffee is always best when discussing business," Kerem replied. "Miss Kartal, I understand that this might seem strange, but I want to assure you that we handle these kinds of requests often."

"Requests from fathers to their daughters after being dead for decades? God, I feel crazy just saying it out loud." Zoe gripped the leather strap of her bag to keep her hands busy. "You know there is still family in Istanbul that could have taken care of any estate matters."

"We are aware, but this isn't for the family. It's for you, specifically, to take care of." Kerem opened the door to the cafe for her.

"Hey, Zoe, hot date?" Lily asked from behind the cash register. She was the owner and was always trying to set Zoe up with her sons.

"Very funny, but no. Business as always," Zoe replied, her neck going hot. She ordered her usual double espresso and was surprised when Kerem ordered the same.

"English coffee isn't robust enough. It needs to be double, don't you think?" he said and tipped Lily.

They found a table at the back of the cafe, out of the way of other customers. Kerem's eyes flickered to the people around them, as if scanning for something.

"Are you okay?" Zoe asked, uneasiness settling under her ribs.

"Yes, of course," he replied, placing the leather portfolio in front of him. "Shall we begin?"

Zoe swallowed hard and nodded. "Okay. I'm ready." She really, really wasn't, but she refused to be a chicken shit about it.

Kerem opened the folio and passed her a pale blue envelope. Her throat closed at the swirling letters stamped in the left corner—Kartal Rare Books. It was her father's stationary.

Zoe ran her thumb over it, and her name that was written on the front in a barely legible handwriting. She looked up at Kerem, feeling like she didn't inhabit her body properly.

"It's okay, Zoe. Take your time," he said kindly.

Zoe opened the letter and took out the single page.

Happy Birthday, my dearest love.

I'm sorry I can't be with you on this day, but know wherever I am, I'm thinking of you and the amazing woman you have become.

For your present, I wish to give you the family legacy that was passed onto me on my thirty-third birthday. The bookstore and everything in it are now yours to care for. I know your shoulders and clever mind are both strong enough to bear its burdens with grace and wisdom.

Should you need help of any kind, the Order is there for you. You can trust them with your life.

With all my love,

Your father.

P.S. Please don't be mad at Kerem for this surprise. You might not remember him, but he's not bad. For a lawyer x.

Zoe read the letter twice more before folding it carefully with shaking fingers. "You knew my father well?"

"Very well," Kerem confirmed with a nod.

Zoe's eyes narrowed. "You don't look old enough to have been friends with him."

"I'm older than I look. I've been blessed with excellent genes. The deed and keys to the bookstore are waiting in Istanbul for you to collect," he said and pushed the leather folio towards her. "These are your flight details. A car will be waiting to pick you up from the airport..."

"Wait, wait. I can't go to Istanbul!" she said, leaning back in her chair.

Kerem lifted a brow. "From my understanding, you run your own business?"

"So? That doesn't mean I can just drop everything and run off to Turkey." Zoe drank her espresso to stop herself from talking. Technically, running her own business and finishing her latest commission that day meant she could leave whenever she wanted. She just hated feeling like she had no choice.

Kerem frowned and placed his cup back on its saucer. "You don't understand yet, but your family's legacy is an important one. You need to come home, Zoe."

Home . Tears pricked her eyes at the word. She hadn't been back to Istanbul since Anita had moved them to her family home in London after her father died. She should have gone back but had known it would hurt her mother if she did. Her mother could be difficult, but Zoe had always tried to avoid causing her more pain.

"The bookstore has just...sat there all this time?" she asked, her fingers tapping on the table.

"Yes. As someone who has restored antique books her whole life, I thought you would jump at the chance. It would be worth going to take a look at least, don't you

think? Who knows what treasures Oman had hidden in there that are just waiting for you to find."

Zoe laughed despite herself. "That's playing dirty, Kerem."

"Is it?" Kerem asked, smiling over the brim of his cup. "You have nothing to lose by taking a look at what he left you, do you? He always did have such an eclectic collection."

Zoe wasn't a coward, not by a long shot, but she wasn't feeling particularly brave to open the doors to her past. She summoned her stubborn streak that usually worked better than bravery anyway.

Fuck it. Just go.

It wasn't like Zoe had plans for her birthday anyway. Maybe a few days in Istanbul to clear up the legalities of her father's estate would be a good thing for her. It would get her out of London and into some warmer weather.

Hopefully, going back would finally lay her father's ghost to rest and she would be able to let his death go once and for all. She opened the leather folio in front of her.

"What time was the flight for?" she asked, straightening her shoulders.

Kerem smiled brightly. "Whenever you are ready."

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:04 am*

Zoe was packing clothes into a suitcase when her phone started ringing loudly with her mother's ringtone. She hesitated before picking it up. She really didn't want to deal with her. Gritting her teeth, Zoe tapped the screen anyway.

"Hey, Mom," she answered, tucking the phone between her neck and shoulder while she zipped up her bags.

"Happy birthday, muffin!" Anita cooed from a beach in Mykonos. Zoe could see her in her mind's eye—tall, tanned, dressed in a white kaftan and with her bronze hair loose and wild in the sea breeze. No doubt there was also a cocktail in her hand.

"Thanks, Mom. How's Greece?" she asked.

"Fabulous as always. Please tell me you're going to do something with some friends tonight? You need to get out of the house more, Zoe. Flat sharing with your mom is bad enough at your age," Anita babbled on, telling Zoe she was definitely a few margaritas in already.

Zoe didn't bother trying to correct her mother that she was only staying in the upstairs half of the house because Anita had thrown a tantrum when she had tried to move out. Her mother liked to forget those facts when she was drinking.

"Actually, Mom, I'm going to get away for a few days." Zoe took a deep breath and added in a rush, "I'm going to Istanbul because I inherited the bookstore."

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. Zoe braced herself mentally for the storm that was about to hit. She picked up her suitcase and started carrying it

downstairs, determined not to change her mind.

"Is Kerem there?" Anita asked finally, her voice colder than Zoe had ever heard it.

Zoe paused on the step. "Yeah, he is. How... How did you know that?"

Kerem was suddenly before her, taking the suitcase from her and carrying it the rest of the way down.

"Put him on the phone, Zoe," Anita demanded, ignoring her question.

Zoe offered the phone to Kerem. "Sorry, she wants to talk to you."

"Merhaba, Anita. It has been a long time," Kerem answered, his voice smooth as silk. He shot Zoe a reassuring wink. She couldn't hear anything her mother was saying except for loud squawking noises that said she was chewing him out.

"Ah. Hmm. Yes, I understand, but Zoe is a grown woman, and it is time she had her inheritance. Ah huh. Well, Zoe is capable of making her own decisions. She's not a little girl anymore. I will ensure she's well looked after. Hmmm. Yes, well you walked away from us first. Don't forget that." Kerem went silent as Anita blared over the top of him. "It is none of your business whether Kahil is involved either. Zoe will be fine. She has family in Istanbul that deserve to know her. Goodbye, Anita."

Kerem handed the phone back to Zoe, blowing out a frustrated breath.

"Yeah, she's like that," Zoe told him before lifting the phone back to her ear. "I don't know what's going on, Mom, but going back to Istanbul will be good for me. I need closure."

"You need to stay as far away from your father's messes as possible!" Anita shouted

at her. It wasn't in anger; it was fear. Her mother was worried about her and had never learned how to express it properly. Zoe really hated being the adult some days.

"Mom, stop yelling at me. I'm going to find out answers because clearly, you're not going to give them to me, are you?" Zoe said, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Go with Kerem then, but don't come crying to me when he and that fucking city ruin your life," her mother snapped and hung up on her. Zoe lowered the phone and took a long, deep breath in and then let it out.

"Are you okay?" Kerem asked, placing a warm hand on her shoulder.

"I'm fine. She's... She can be a lot of work sometimes," Zoe replied, embarrassed that he'd been dragged in their family drama.

Kerem laughed softly. "She always was high-spirited. Your hair color is the same as hers, but that's where the similarity ends."

"Thanks. Who's Kahil?" Zoe asked, pulling on her leather jacket. It wasn't the name of any of her cousins that she knew of.

"Oh, he's a friend of the family. I'm sure he'll be around at some point. Nothing to worry about. Shall we go?" Kerem said. He pulled out the handle on her suitcase and wheeled it to the door.

Zoe double-checked her locks and turned the lights out. "Let's get out of here."

It wasn't until she was in the air, somewhere over Europe, that Zoe's common sense finally caught up to her.

What the hell are you doing running away to Istanbul? She had pushed down her



yearning for the city and her father years ago. Now she was about to throw herself into a past she could barely remember. Would it help her get over her grief? Or ensure she would never recover?

Zoe tried to squash her unease, hiding it from Kerem, who sat beside her. They were in first class, so she signaled to the flight attendant and ordered another red wine.

"You're making the right decision, Zoe," Kerem said, not looking up from the newspaper he was reading on his iPad.

"Is my freakout that obvious?" she asked. She forced her leg to stop jumping and accepted her wine from the flight attendant. She would've loved a Valium to mix with it.

Kerem patted her arm, and the touch reassured her. "You're doing great with all of this. I actually thought you would be far more upset over it."

"That will happen later, when I'm alone," she replied. It wasn't a joke. She would get to Istanbul, find the nearest shower, and have a meltdown. "I should have returned to Turkey earlier. I really thought Mom had sold the bookstore after Dad's death. I didn't question it."

"You were a child who witnessed something terrible, Zoe. It's natural that you wanted to move on from it."

Zoe stared up at the air conditioner vent like it might have some answers for her. "Kerem, can you tell me something to distract me?"

"Like what?"

"Anything. I don't know. In his letter my dad mentioned something called the Order.

What's that about?" Zoe didn't remember her parents being a part of any orders or even religious groups.

"The Order of Saint Christóphoros. We were friends of your father when he was alive," Kerem said, pushing back a curl that had escaped from his swept back hairstyle.

"You are a part of the order too?"

"For many, many years now."

"Are they like the Freemasons? That kind of thing?"

Kerem laughed. "Something like that. They are good people, Zoe. If you wish to meet them while you are home, I can arrange it."

Zoe chewed on the inside of her cheek. "I don't get it. Dad wasn't religious. Why would he be in the order of an Orthodox saint?"

"His involvement wasn't about religion, but contacts and friendships. Don't let it concern you too much, Zoe. Focus on the bookstore first. Worry about everything else later," he replied and went back to his paper.

Zoe drank wine and read for the remaining two hours of their flight. Her mind was exploding with questions, but Kerem was right. She needed to focus on the bookstore and getting her scattered emotions under control.

That plan lasted right up until they were driving from the airport and into Istanbul itself. Zoe was excited, admiring how green the forest was on the drive in. Once they reached the city, her heart started to hurt as memories flooded her mind. She kept breathing, focusing on the craziness of the drivers and fighting back tears. This was

the city of her birth, and something tugged deep inside of her that said she was home.

The streets narrowed as they reached the Tarlabasi neighborhood, and Zoe got flashes of memories—walking the hills around Galata Tower with her father beside her, eating gelato at a cafe, going to shop at a tiny convenience store with Anita.

They pulled up in a side street with a cafe and restaurant directly across from them.

Zoe couldn't move from her seat. Her whole body locked up like she had sleep paralysis all over again. Kerem opened the car door for her and offered her a hand to help her out. She took it, her heart racing as she looked at the bookstore. The indigo blue paint had faded, but the bronze sign on the shop's door shone brightly—Kartal Rare Books. Someone had papered up the windows in the front, but other than that, everything appeared the same. Zoe was going to throw up.

"Here are the keys," Kerem said cheerily, pulling them from his pocket and passing them to her.

"I don't... I don't know what to do," Zoe admitted to him.

Kerem squeezed her shoulder. "Go and settle in, Zoe. I know that it was cleaned for your arrival and the apartment upstairs organized. Call me tomorrow, and we can settle the legal side of things."

Zoe nodded and offered him a tight smile. "Thank you, Kerem. Um, good night, I guess?"

"Happy birthday, Zoe." Kerem smiled warmly at her. "Welcome home."

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:04 am*

Across the street, Kahil sat in the cafe, drinking his second pot of strong black tea of the afternoon. He had been there for an hour, watching the store and waiting to catch his first glimpse of Oman's daughter. She had no idea what was about to land on her head, and Kahil was curious to see if she had the backbone to handle it.

A black Mercedes pulled up in front of the bookstore, and Kerem got out of the car. His dark eyes found Kahil, noting his presence straight away. Those in the Order could always sense each other when they were close by, their heightened senses tuning into each other's energy.

Behind his aviators, Kahil watched as Kerem opened the door of the car, and Zoe Kartal stepped out. Kahil had only met Oman's daughter once, the night of his murder. She still had the same bright bronze hair that shone golden in the afternoon sun. She looked strained and upset, but that didn't take away from how attractive she was. She had full lips and a curving figure to match. Damn, things just got a hell of a lot more interesting.

Kahil grinned into his tea, feeling sorry for Kerem, who would be forced to see the girl as his goddaughter. He and Oman had been such good friends that he would be feeling more than a little paternal towards Zoe, even if she didn't remember him.

Kahil's nose twitched as the breeze off the Bosphorus brought the scents of the sea and car exhaust. On top of that was Zoe's sweet perfume of bergamot and ylang ylang. Wine. Coffee. Sadness.

Kahil frowned. It was her birthday; it wasn't right for her to be so sad. It was an old grief, not a fresh one, he noted. Maybe it was a bad idea to push the shop onto her. He

lifted his cup to drink his tea and breathed in the tannin to clear his senses.

Once the girl had disappeared into the bookstore, Kerem crossed the street. His usual pristine clothes looked rumpled around the edges after a full day of travel.

"Why am I not surprised to find you here?" Kerem greeted him.

Kahil shrugged. "Duty is duty. How is she handling her inheritance?"

"She's upset. Pissed off. Hurt. She was so worked up on the plane, she was giving me heartburn," Kerem replied, rubbing at his chest. He helped himself to Kahil's pot of tea. "Anita wasn't there to cause a scene, but she still yelled at me over the phone like I was some asshole trying to kidnap her daughter."

"She wasn't there for Zoe's birthday?" Kahil asked and wondered why it annoyed him so much.

"Anita never is apparently. Zoe doesn't even know who her father really was. She has no clue about the Order either. This is going to be more complicated than we thought," Kerem complained. He looked up at the bookstore, dark eyes calculating and sad. "She didn't recognize me at all. Not even a glimmer of a smile for old Uncle Kerem."

"She was only a kid when she was here last, brother. She's going to be thrown into our world quick enough once word gets out that the bookstore is occupied again," Kahil replied. It was going to be a nightmare, which was why he was sitting outside the damn store to begin with. Arslan was worried for Zoe's safety and was going to ensure that they shadowed her.

Kerem hummed. "With any luck, Zoe won't remember you either. She is already asking questions about the Order. She's smart and knows there's something else going on. I have no doubt she will find out hard and fast."

"Smart and pretty, that's a dangerous combination for a woman," Kahil teased.

Kerem glared at him. "So you noticed she was pretty already?"

"I have eyes," he replied, running a hand through his dark hair to pull it back from his face. "See? Two of them that work perfectly fine."

"Eyes that I will cheerfully remove if you get lascivious thoughts about my goddaughter."

Kahil smiled sweetly just because he knew it would piss Kerem off more. "Now, now, old friend, save that overprotectiveness for when she's actually threatened."

"Arslan sent you to watch her for the night?" Kerem asked, shifting the subject.

Kahil nodded. "He thinks it will be best if we have eyes on her while she's in the city. The old man is more unsettled than usual."

"I should report in and tell him how it went." Kerem drained his tea and stood. "Don't fail in your duties to protect her, Kahil."

Kahil fought not to flinch. Kerem didn't have to add, ' Like you did her father.' It was still there unspoken. It had been a wedge between them for decades.

"I won't let anyone come near her. I'll protect her with my life. I promise," he answered solemnly.

Kerem looked towards the shop again. "She's upset. I can hear her crying, and it's killing me. Maybe I should?—"

"No. You shouldn't. It's natural for her to be grieving in a situation like this. Go and speak with Arslan. I'll call in the cavalry to look after her." Kahil pulled out his phone

and started texting.

"You're right. Belkis will know how to handle it, and Zoe needs her family." Kerem hesitated once more. "You will tell me if anything happens."

It wasn't a question. Kerem might be younger than Kahil, but he was certainly bossier.

"Of course, brother." Kahil waved him on, and Kerem finally got in the car. Kahil didn't have long to wait before Belkis messaged him back.

We will be there soon. Make sure she doesn't go anywhere.

Kahil finished his tea, his mismatched eyes focusing back on the bookstore. His supernatural abilities filtered out all the other sounds until he could hear the soft sobs from the woman inside. Guilt crashed over him in waves. He had been too late to save Oman; he wouldn't make the same mistake with his daughter.

There was only one person who could find the missing codex and retrieve it from wherever Oman had hidden it, and that person was Zoe.

No one had been able to get past the magical wards that had kept the shop locked down tight for the last two decades either. They had to believe that the magic had also kept the store and apartment in order. It had been sealed like a time capsule waiting for Zoe Kartal to return and claim it. Kahil hoped her father's wards and the Order were enough to keep her safe.

There were dangers in the city of Istanbul that Zoe had no idea were coming for her. Kahil grinned. Luckily, none of those dangers were worse than he was.