

“The astral plane has rules. One of them is that after an ascension you are never the same.”

~Scriptor Amynta of Anatolia
(Dictates of the Multiverse)

CHAPTER 1



The Sword

Astral Divergence, Time Unknown

Senseless. Or nearly so. She felt paralyzed. In the moments of semi-wakefulness, only her thoughts could stir. And suddenly...

The lady awakened in the dark and stood up too quickly. Dizzy and stiff, she stumbled forward on a graveled surface and tried to get her bearings. The stone boundaries of a courtyard were just visible by starlight. Mist crawled the ground. Her hands were moist with it. With a groggy sense of wonder, she strained to hear the sounds of the night and found only silence. A silence so painfully complete it was as if her hearing were in shock.

She'd heard of such an occurrence from the survivor of an experiment in Chinese fire medicine gone wrong: an explosion so overwhelming that it took sound away with it. She shivered. Maybe, in her case, the explosion had happened close by and her condition was permanent.

She felt the edges and folds of her ears. They were small, delicate. She traced her face. Stroked her hair. Nothing burned or blasted away. Her body seemed to be in one piece, albeit uncoordinated and weak as she shambled along. All good. Even though her last memory was... of being systematically torn apart. No, that couldn't be right.

She stumbled on the moist gravel and fell. She must have cried out, but if so, she did it soundlessly. With a hand to her throat, she purposely hummed. Not loud and conspicuous, though, just in case something was out there in the dark. A faint tremor disturbed her soft skin, but she heard nothing. Given her complete state of confusion, she had the good sense to be afraid for herself—scared enough to pant, and again she couldn't even hear the air escaping her mouth. Yet the stimulus triggered something, for her ears began vibrating as though a silent gong stood by her head, making her ears burn around their rims.

The numbness from the blast must have gone straight through to her brain for she had no idea how she had gotten wherever she was. Another flash of being torn apart. Right down to her atoms. Was she dead? Did that explain this location?

She rose on stiff limbs and kept walking through the gloom, past dark, indistinct shapes. An explosion from which she was reconstituted could mean only one thing: the afterlife—the lands of Elysium, Tartarus, and Hades—where bright fields, dark pits, or gray bleakness awaited, depending on who you were and how you were remembered by the living. And here it was dark.

Her chest tightened with fear. But, no, was it really possible that she was wicked enough to have her departed soul sent to a place barely visible? To a mist-damp land of spirits where sound is no longer needed? Or where

the last sensations of life, such as going deaf, were doomed to repeat themselves?

Just who was she? Some name with a “K...”

Was her name Kreindia? No, that would be an absurd name. Who ever heard of that? Not a name at all. The only real name that resembled it would be Kreindel. *Descendent of the crown*. How did she know things like that? There seemed to be fragments of recollection floating on the mist if only she could gather them in. So frustrating. She was sure that it could not be normal to be forced to take an inventory of self-knowledge.

A soft wind rose and pulled at her sleeves, and K let her mind relax. The breeze raked her skin as though she were tender and new. At least the air didn’t pass right through her. Calmed, she realized that of course this wasn’t the afterlife. If it were, there would be millions of souls there to greet her.

She could discern the bounds of the courtyard more clearly now, and its structure stirred her intellectual curiosity. If nothing else she felt sure that her knowledge of history had saved her life more than once. One wall of the enclosure loomed close enough to reveal its main features. But the wall’s construction was unlike anything built by the Greeks, Franks, Persians, or Romans. It consisted of enormous blocks of stone without mortar, irregular shapes, precision fitted, like the oldest of Mycenae ruins, but with timber mixed in. Which civilization used that?

The mist churned, putting her on alert. As she searched for the source of the disturbance in the dark and fog, the sound of crickets tickled her ears back to life. Their cadence was slow as though the whole day had been a cool one. She reveled in relief from her deafness, but not for long. The next sound was the rough gasp of a torch set ablaze. She felt its heat slightly behind, on her left. The courtyard walls were bathed in a warm light and now she saw something that took her breath away.

In front of the torch was an irregular crystal, two hands tall, slowly turning, sorting the light and dashing it against an altar. Upon that altar stood a gargantuan pair of statues, terrifying distortions of a bull and a lion, each beast hunched in tight and triangular repose, studies in wretched power. There were people in the courtyard with her, but these statues sent a thrill coursing through her veins.

The broad-shouldered bull emanated irresistible strength and vitality from its enormous hooves and haunches and from a painfully compact face that stared down any challenge.

The lion was built with gigantic paws, legs like columns rising to its flowing mane, and a neckless, upturned face with bulging eyes that alternately seemed to gaze remorselessly down its nose and commune with the Heavens for added strength.

The crystal in the center of the firelight added a full spectrum of colors and the illusion of restless movement to the stone beasts. But no tricks with light could disguise these figures. Intimidating as they might be to others, they were a welcome sight to her with every aspect of their contours intimately mingled with her soul. Their lines steadied and sharpened her. She remembered quite vividly how the lion’s peculiar set of shapes would make her tongue feel like cold, bitter steel; a synesthetic reaction owing to the mystery of her crossed senses. These statues stood guard on the walls of the Boucoleon Palace in Constantinople, where she had once lived. Since she wasn’t home, that suggested the statues had been stolen.

No, it was the other way around. Her people had found the statues long abandoned and taken them in. She would have traced the idea more fully but thoughts of the palace and its figures were bringing more of her memories back in a flood.

I was military aristocracy. Not Kreindel but Kreindia. Of Amorium, which is part of the Byzantine Empire. General Michael’s niece. Historian in the palace in Constantinople. Kreindia the Strange because of my crossed senses and oracular powers.

Powers that helped draw Wade Linwood to her from the 21st century. Partnered with Wade to protect Time itself. *Until Faron Richter killed me.*

Killed me?

Her evolving thoughts in this odd courtyard with its misshapen arches rekindled a leaden sense of dread.

The familiar taste of steel that should have been inseparable from the sight before her was a mere memory.

Wade said that we were both "synesthetes." Not every sight a synesthete encountered triggered a reaction from their crossed senses, but this one did. Used to. Or should have! Depending on how you reckoned time. Kreindia sensed nothing here save for the shiver that creased her spine: a warning that these statues sat in their original place and time at the southern edge of Hittite-controlled Anatolia. Thousands of years in her past. They had not yet been transported to her capital, though that did not explain why they bore no synesthetic association for her, provided no sign-posts to guide her way.

The implications were staggering. Her hands shook. The entirety of her past came back to her now and began to clarify the situation. In the ninth century, she and Wade of Aquitaine had stopped Raginpert the Insolent from sparking a war that was never meant to be: an all-out conflict between east and west that would have destroyed Byzantium and torn the fabric of Time.

But Raginpert turned out to be nothing but a tool of a vastly powerful synesthete named Faron Richter. He despised those he considered competing synesthetes such as Kreindia and Wade, and tried to eliminate them. She and Wade had gone up against Faron and failed completely. In the process, Faron destroyed the timeline and tore Kreindia apart. *That was the "explosion."*

Somehow she must have survived and fled back thousands of years to a time she thought was safe.

With a sharp pang, she realized she had no idea what had happened to Wade. She mustn't assume the worst. If her being here represented one mysterious survival, why not another for someone so closely linked to her? Wherever he was now, though, she had to accept that everything depended on her actions. Including restoring the timeline so that Wade could be found.

She couldn't rebuild the timeline, though, if she didn't start by fixing the discrepancy with the statues. Her past-self needed her help: her knowledge of these statues and their qualities was how her uncle Michael verified her identity when she visited him in the dungeon to forestall his pending execution. If no trust could be established between them, then history would have no Emperor Michael in Byzantium, and the implications of that would be another rift in the unstable multiverse.

She remained dimly aware of the people around her. Angry voices shouting at her in a foreign tongue which got louder when she stepped towards the bull and lion. She could not stop for them. This one small detail in the statues was crucial. *I may never get another chance.*

By sheer instinct, she advanced on the nearer figure, the lion. Not knowing what she would do next, she pressed her damp right hand to the cold stone of one of the lion's great claws, closed her eyes, and imagined iron melting in a blast furnace—alloyed and tempered, infused with the arcane secrets of the blacksmith. The hot odor was so strong she could taste it.

Somehow, wielding this imagining, she imprinted the metallic taste on the curves of the statue and strained to push the synesthetic tag deep inside the rock so that it would remain for eternity. The imprint settled and held. When Kreindia inevitably encountered the lion in her past—this timeline's future—she would feel a connection to the shape associated with the marker.

She removed her hand from the statue and examined it in wonder. She had never imprinted a synesthetic tag before. Never knew such a thing could be done. Now she knew she wasn't simply a survivor but better than new.

Certainly, there were other synesthetes where she came from. They spoke in a sort of magical poetry, observing such things as "air that's green with sound," but minor synesthetes only mixed the five senses, and major synesthetes only had vision flashes. These represented differing degrees of freedom from human boundaries and the beginnings of a living connection to the multiverse. Kreindia was one of maybe a half dozen in the entire world so connected to time and space that she had never even known normal perceptions and still didn't know the limits of what she could do. This concept didn't scare her; it was the very definition of her life

so far.

Meanwhile the shouting had gotten much louder when she touched the stone. The only thing that saved her was the gatherers' apparent fear of coming as close to the statues as she did. Lost in wonder, she did not heed them.

I've acquired a new ability I could never have imagined, and possibly lost some, which means I've somehow traveled on the astral plane, where bodies are shaped anew. Maybe I really can rescue Wade. Maybe I can accomplish all that I need to do.

In the next moment, the world flashed white and everyone was in a different position. Now she stood far from the bull and lion, with two bearded men in flashy patterned gowns planted in front of her and two soldiers gripping her arms. Her mouth went dry with fear. It was as though Time had slipped, badly destabilized even though she had altered the statues as they needed to be.

The man with the longer beard said, "I hope that one touch of the stone was worth it, stranger. Now you will die.