

Prologue



A bright, blinding flash of golden light. A roar like an avalanche.

A soft whisper through her mind.

"Thank you."

These were the last things she remembered before the crushing darkness consumed her, enveloped her until nothing remained but the void itself. Floating in that emptiness, she could recall nothing of what came before, nor who she was. She could not even remember her own name. There was only the black, endless, and meaningless void around her, empty of all but her floating form.

Yet despite the unending darkness around her, she could see her own figure, as clear as if in sunlight. Bare arms showed her pale, soft skin as she moved them in front of her eyes, and pure white hair flowed around her head as if she was submerged in water. A light green, sleeveless dress clung around her, with a split near her knees that revealed her bare legs and feet underneath, while the soft cloth flowed in a breeze that she could not feel.

As she studied herself for a moment, she felt something, a memory of sorts, trying to break through, as if it was just out of reach of remembrance. In the end, it slipped away again, and she just surrendered herself to float endlessly among the void.



While time seemed to stretch into oblivion, she felt a strange sort of comfort inside her, as if she had accomplished something important. But try as she might, she could not recall what. Every time she tried, she remembered only the blinding light, the deafening noise, and the soft voice. She was certain that they were meaningful, but countless attempts led to nothing in the end.

Floating in that void as time passed, slow and fast at the same time, she kept trying to remember who she was, until her bare feet suddenly touched something cold. With a start, she realised that she now stood in a body of ice-cold water, shallow enough that it did not even reach the top of her toes. In a way, she felt relieved. The water was a welcome break from the monotonous void, even though it, too, stretched all around her with no end in sight. But it was something else, at least.

Glancing down, she noticed her reflection in the shallow water, and saw a face she did not recognise with bright, violet eyes staring back in confusion. Frustrated as again no memories came, she glanced away and took a careful

step forward, shivering at the chill of the water. She had no idea how much time had passed by now, or if any had passed at all. And she still had no idea who she was, nor how she got here.

Still, it seemed to her that something solid underneath her feet was better than floating, so she started walking through the eerie body of water. She vaguely wondered what she would find, or if she would find anything at all, but walking made more sense to her than just standing around.

For a long time, the only sound that reached her ears was the soft splashing of her feet, and the hem of her dress brushed along the surface as she kept going ever forward. It was then that she became aware of a strange tugging in the back of her mind, as if the place she found herself in was a part of her, somehow, yet she could not quite pinpoint why. Instead of racking her brain this time, though, she simply walked and walked, alone in the strange, empty void.

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As time passed, what felt like hours turned into days, then weeks. Months. Years. Decades. The woman who could not remember her name had no more notion of time. She did not go hungry or thirsty, nor did she grow tired. She simply walked.

"There you are, at last..."

The voice behind her made her halt in shock. Strong and steady footsteps approached her now, and she slowly turned towards them, her dress curling around her like a green whirlwind. The source of the voice halted not five paces away from her, as clear as she could see herself, despite the darkness around them.

He was a tall, lean man, with a handsome face and smooth, pale skin. His long, black hair was pulled back behind his head and pointed ears, and he wore a finely made overcoat of black cloth with red trimmings around the cuffs and hem. Underneath, she saw similar breeches underneath a white shirt, along with black leather boots. The black of his clothes was as dark as the void around them, and if it was not for the red trimmings, it would have given the illusion of a detached head. But it was his eyes that drew her attention the most. Pitch black, like the darkest shadows, with not even a hint of light in them. So much like the void around her. Around them.

"Who are you?" she asked softly. She was surprised to find that she could speak at all. In all the time she had spent here, she had not even thought to check.

The man cocked his head and smiled at her, his thin lips curling upwards, though the smile never reached those cold, empty eyes. "You do not know me?"

She slowly shook her head, unsure of how to reply, and he threw back his

head as he let out a barking laugh. "Oh, this is rich!" Then his dark eyes narrowed towards her. Something about that look made her shiver, and at the same time, something itched in the back of her head again, another memory that just would not surface. He took a step closer, the water splashing softly around his black boots, and she instinctively stepped back while the tugging in her mind became increasingly impossible to ignore. "You do not remember me... Or who *you* are, I take it? What it is that you have done?"

She shook her head once more as she gripped the hem of her dress to stop her hands from shaking. Her mouth worked soundlessly as she tried to think of what to say, and he grinned, mirthlessly and empty. A grin that, like his earlier smile, never touched his eyes.

"You banished me here, woman," he hissed softly. "Banished me here using the power that my sister gave you. You destroyed the very land beneath your feet, reshaped it, and sent us both to this forsaken desolation that *you* created!" He grew angrier with every word, all the while stepping closer, and his smooth voice practically quivered with rage by the end.

She nearly stumbled over her dress as she backed away from him, trembling with fear, and her heart pounded in her chest while her mind scrambled to take hold of her memories. "I... I don't...", she began, but he cut her off with a sharp growl in the back of his throat.

"Know this, Avatar of Telariel. I will break free of this place, even if it takes centuries! You will crack, and I. Will. Break. FREE!"

Something clicked in the back of her mind, and suddenly, like a torrenting waterfall, the memories came back. Staggering, she lifted her hand and stared at the pale mark that adorned the palm. An upside-down teardrop stood white against her already pale skin. The man before her laughed again as He noticed her reaction, and she stared at Him with wide, fearful eyes as she whispered His name.

"Grôth..."

The laughter turned to a menacing grin as the Lord of the Dark reached for her, and the woman who now remembered everything once more screamed.