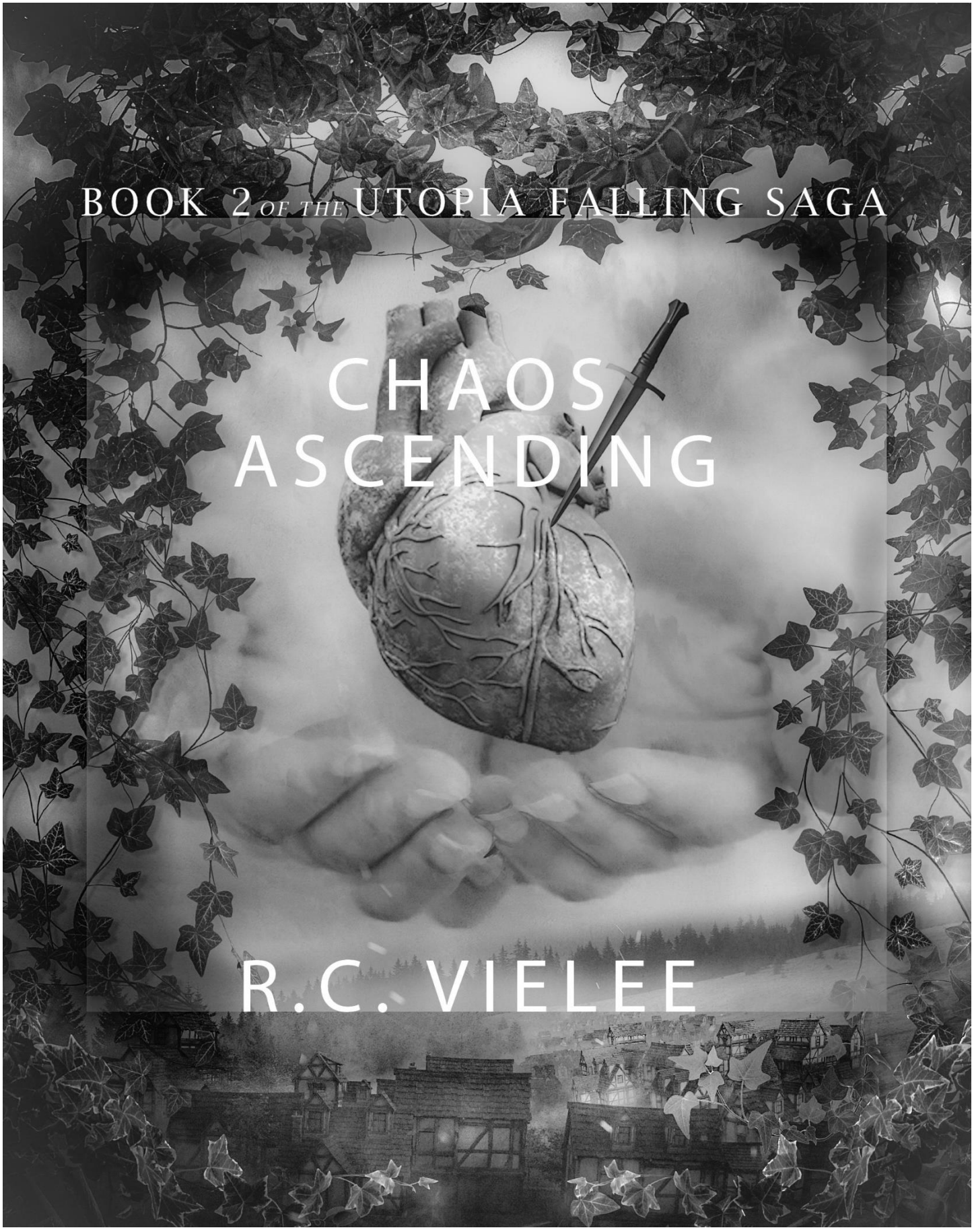
BOOK 2 *OF THE* UTOPIA FALLING SAGA



CHAOS ASCENDING

R.C. VIELEE

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Content Warning

Chaos Ascending journeys through the fantasy worlds of Tartica and Evidar. It explores dark themes that can be disturbing: such as fantasy violence, torture, blood, references to childhood emotional and physical abuse, and contains sexual content that includes sexual violence. It is intended for mature readers.

Chapter 12: Death Unmasked

Teth: 3rd day of the Harvest Moon

Reyne

Well after dusk, Reyne and Mera finally arrived at the forsaken home of the biological family Reyne never knew: Edruk, his father, Silia his mother, and a little sister named Baide, the couple's three-year-old daughter.

The pair stood before Edruk's abandoned home, where Mera would pry the past held within the grips of the surrounding and seemingly inanimate objects to reveal the events surrounding Reyne's birth. Reyne had been witness to the impossible once before, when Mera conjured specters from the past, as though standing before him in real time, for Reyne to behold. If all proceeded according to plan, Reyne would be an eyewitness to the moment his mother gave him life. Edruk, Silia, and Baide, according to Mera, had been murdered the night of his birth in the very building Reyne now stood before transfixed.

Mera assured Reyne he'd find out how his life had been upended, how Evidar assassins discovered his existence as the progeny of Edruk. According to Mera, Reyne's self-proclaimed protector, the answer lay in the deserted homestead—twenty-two years in the past.

Reyne's father by birth, two decades gone from the world, Edruk had been a thorn in the side of the Devil's Blacksmith, killing Evidarians crucial for the dark-worlder's plan to succeed. Edruk, a Tweener capable of moving between Earth's two known dimensions, sired another who likely possessed similar talents, or so Evidar feared. Hidden from their clutches since birth, somehow Reyne's existence and his location as a Hensdale alphen nut purveyor came to Evidar's attention, marking him for death. Mera told him that figuring out how Evidar came to have that knowledge meant life or death.

Excited, anxious, apprehensive, angry, and confused, Reyne didn't know what to think. Yet, he denied them a link to his heartstrings. *I know one thing. These people ain't my real family*. Gwerther and Pachelle, they were his parents, and Daedyn his brother. He didn't need any other family, no matter how hard Mera tried to force Edruk, Silia, or Baide on him. Reyne told himself they were only names. But despite his efforts to tamp down any sense of connection, a spark of "something lost" flared in his heart as he stared at the empty building: the place Silia, his biological mother according to Mera, gave him life—a place he might have called home.

He pushed it down before it germinated into affection. Daedyn and Mithany weighed heavily on his thoughts. He afforded no others room in his heart. It belonged to Mithany; it belonged to Daedyn.

Physically tired and emotionally drained, he'd face Silia's death and his own birth with weakened mental defenses. And he thought of Mera: *Is he trying to manipulate me? To make me care about these people so I'll be a good little soldier in his war?* And he wondered, *Does it really matter how Evidar found out about me?* Reyne considered why Mera even brought him to this place. *Maybe Mera needs to see this. I can buy that. But why do I have to witness it… he's trying to get to me. I know it. What a sneaky bastard.*

His eyes roamed over the one-story structure of rammed earth holding up a dilapidated thatched roof. Reyne gathered the building hadn't been in use for years. The earthen walls held up fine, but the hole-ridden, scraggly roof gave notice of its uselessness to protect anyone beneath it. Other similarly constructed nearby homes fared better, and all had candlelight pouring out closed windows.

Mera approached the one home—Edruk's—depleted of any inside lights. "Reyne, it doesn't look like it's occupied. Wait here, I'm going to make sure."

Distrustful of Mera's intentions, Reyne asked, "Are we safe here?"

"If Mithany and Arek did their job back in Hensdale, Evidar still thinks you're dead. We'll be alright for the night."

Reyne offered nothing in response and didn't follow.

Mera scampered to the front door and knocked on it several times. Pushing the door open, with the handle still in his hand, it broke from its hinges.

Before the murder, Reyne would have found the sight amusing. His sense of humor also died that night.

Setting aside the door, Mera turned to Reyne. "I'm pretty sure the place is empty." And he stepped inside.

Reyne's feet took over and mindlessly directed him to join Mera.

"Your parents' home," Mera said, sweeping an open arm over the scene. "You would have—"

Reyne cut him off, "Don't make me ask again. Stop calling them that. This ain't no stroll down memory lane. I don't know these people, and I don't give a shit about them. People die

every day. We have a place to sleep and do whatever you brought me here for. Then we meet up with this Gina so you can get me trained to do what I got to do on this fantasy world of Evidar as soon as possible."

"My apologies. You did say that before. I forgot."

Reyne didn't believe Mera forgot. Clear to Reyne, Mera had his own agenda.

The furniture was gone, and spiderwebs along with garbage were strewn about by the nameless, untold number of probable indigent occupants that called it home over its many empty years. The wood floors were burned to charcoal in several places from the fires the unknown squatters likely set to stay warm. The roof looked better from the outside. From the inside, it provided a clear view of the stars above.

Mera dropped his backpack to the floor. After a quick search through it, Mera extracted two six-inch, fat sausages. "Reyne, I think you have most of the alphens in your pack. Would you mind pulling us out a few?"

The two men shared the beef sticks and calorie-rich nuts between them. Every bite of the shell-less ovules flooded his memories with thoughts of his brother Daedyn. Reyne stared down at the fragmented pieces in his palm and reflected on how they mirrored his own life—broken. In his imagination he saw the faces of Mithany, Pachelle, Gwerther, and Daedyn in the bits of broken alphens.

Reyne looked longingly into the fragments and tossed the bounty aside.

Neither man spoke through the sparse meal. When they were done, Mera got up and reset the once-useful front door across the opening it left behind.

"I need to prepare you for what I hope to show us."

Reyne's ever-present anger towards Mera rose to the surface as he spat out, "I remember." The words came out harsh. "We did this before."

"I'm going to remind you anyway. Like I said last time, life exists everywhere. It's in those tiny little quantum particles that make up everything in the universe. I'm going to open your Eye of Heaven so you can see what they have to show us. The Eye of Heaven connects us to all of creation, which means access to what the quantum world remembers, where information can never be destroyed. Your Eye of Heaven lies dormant in the frontal lobe of your brain. I'm going to wake it up." For emphasis, Mera tapped his own forehead.

“And then I’m going to reach out to the life residing in Baide’s room because that’s the place where Silia gave birth to you. I’m going to ask the quantum world to show me the night you were born. Since knowledge is never lost, whatever all those tiny quantum particles bore witness to that night, we’re going to see. The slivers of data they hold, well, it’s just random. I will try to find it and organize it in a way we can see it.”

“I’m ready,” Reyne told him, uncertain if he believed any of Mera’s explanation.

“You’re going to have to be on the lookout for any sign of someone other than Edruk, Silia, or Baide. That’s what we’re looking for. Who else witnessed your birth? You’re going to see me as I was in the past as well. And you’re going to see some horrific things. Can you handle it?”

Reyne girded himself and said, “If I can handle what you showed me last time, I can handle this.”

“Then we’ll need to do this in your sister’s, excuse me, Baide’s room. Follow me. It’s down the hall. The one on the right at the end, facing the street.”

Reyne approached the room, its door long since removed, lying flat on the bedroom floor. The tiny bed’s shredded mattress served as the foreground to a faded painting of kittens that hung askew above it. Jagged, broken glass outlined the frame of the window. A toy box, or what once had been, stood smashed in recognizable pieces with weathered, worn, and tattered children’s playthings spilling out. A filthy, ripped stuffed animal caught Reyne’s attention. The one missing button-eye gave it a morose look that meshed well with its overall tattered appearance. Reyne entered the chamber expecting to be unmoved. He was wrong. Death called to him from everywhere in the little girl’s room. A sadness sank into his chest. His hands and jaw clenched tight.

Mera pulled him from his reverie with a tight grip on his shoulder. Shaken, Reyne said, “Let’s just get this done.”

“I can do this without you if you’re not up to it.”

“No. You’re right… I was wrong. I gotta see this as much as you.”

“I’ve got to find one moment in time amongst millions of slivers of memory the life in this room holds in all its little nooks and crannies. It’ll look like a jumbled and disorienting mess until I can pull it together. You remember the way this goes?”

“Yes.”

“Then kneel here with me and we’ll get started.”

The men took up their spots, with each folding one knee to the hard floor. Mera raised his hand, placing two fingers on Reyne’s forehead.

“Ah, the eyeballs of heaven.”

Pulling back his fingers from Reyne, Mera said, “The Eye of Heaven, yes. I need to access and open your Third Eye. We’ve done this before. No talking.” Mera returned his fingers to Reyne and placed the palm of his other hand on the floor.

Mera’s palm on the floor moved in slow, small circles at first. One arm anchored to Reyne’s Eye of Heaven and the other to the floor, Mera’s hand moved faster and faster, but his arm never moved. It stayed planted in place. As Reyne watched, a single finger rose from the back of Mera’s blur of a hand, impossibly and firmly unnaturally pointed up, while the rest of his hand vibrated beyond Reyne’s ability to make out its constantly shifting shape. Another stationary finger rose to join the other as the hand attached to it zipped along incredibly rapidly. The solid floor, without moving, undulated in wave after wave and rolled outward from Mera’s palm like a stone dropped into still waters. The hand, only a blur of flesh with two protruding stationary digits, sent pulses of rippling reality wafting through the room.

The walls, the floor, the missing roof above swirled into a tornado of stretched, drawn-out elasticity. Wisps of images dripped from the whirlwind that was the bedroom to seep down the sides of the rapidly spinning funnel. Tiny little packets of images, each smaller than a pinhead, held pieces of scenes inside. Thousands, if not millions, of scenes from Baide’s room within each of the slices whipped around him at impossible speeds. People struggled to take shape only as partially formed specters, unable to hold on long enough to coalesce. Or maybe Mera let them go as he slapped away one speck of reality after another.

A woman in her late twenties appeared over and over, hundreds of her, then thousands. Reyne could picture them all, scattered over every inch of the room. They rose and fell in fractions of a second, but somehow his mind had time with each. Her form pulled apart, swept away by the winds, over and over: forming, dissolving, reforming, dissolving.

Other people emerged, popping up in an instant before being whooshed away like a flag battling a storm. Reyne watched Mera brush aside hundreds in the blink of an eye.

In an instant, everything stopped spinning. Wave after wave pulsed out entire room-sized scenes, one after another. Ghostly bodies, translucent, then solid, disappearing, then reappearing

as nonstop realities changed and shifted as they undulated out from Mera's palm flowing over the two men. Colors from the little girl's dress pulled on her like dripping lava. She existed everywhere in the room at once as the embodiment of a thousand of the same girl, in different outfits but with the same face. Reyne's mind jolted at the one view of her hugging tight to the stuffed animal he'd seen only minutes ago in the real bedroom. Both button-eyes joined the toddler's to look back at Reyne, haunting him. And like a person caught in a whiteout, dust-sized slices of reality pelted the three-year-old and her stuff animal until, piece by piece, as each blizzard-driven snowflake struck their apparitions, they frayed and were swept away. Reyne reeled, shaken in the half a heartbeat it took to transpire.

A man that looked a lot like him flowed through the bedroom doorway. His form appeared only partly whole as the force of pulsing waves blew back much of his body, stretching its cohesion as the front-facing surface of his form moved into the room and the back half of the man remained at the opening. In defiance of the forces stripping one reality into the next, the man moved forward with arms reaching out towards the little girl hugging the stuffed toy. In a massive gust of energy, the man's image peeled apart, bit by bit, before he could reach her.

Suddenly, a commanding wave radiated from Mera's palm and pushed aside everything in the room. An explosion of reality sent a shockwave out in every direction from the spot Mera's hand touched the floor. The force of it slammed into Reyne's mind. It struck nothing but his thoughts. His head snapped back, his knee buckled, and he was thrown back. His shoulder crashed into the floor. Pain screamed into his brain. He brought up his forearms to protect his face against the blast, but just then, everything blew apart and the scene cleared—like breaking through into the eye of a hurricane.

He understood: Mera had found that sliver in time, buried deep in the past, and coaxed or conjured the collected memories from the quantum realm for him to witness.

A young woman, not much older than him, with hair that whipped high in the air and danced around her face, came floating into the room from the window. Bits and pieces of her body ebbed and flowed, chopped and changed, all the while flittering about. He struggled to keep his mind on her fading in and out. Realization struck him: it wasn't the same woman who fired the arrow that murdered a loved one. Images of the killer were seared into his brain. No, this one was different.

In horror, Reyne saw the apparition draw a knife along the sleeping child's throat.

Her little eyes sprung open.

Terror filled her last gasps for life.

Helpless, seething anger flooded Reyne's soul.

Red spilled across the scene, flowed and floated about the chamber while the assassin slid along the wall. Fury washed over him. His jaw squeezed tight. His brain shrieked against his inability to save the little girl. From deep in his core, a monster inside him screamed to be released. Somehow, Reyne knew it craved vengeance. But just then, movement out of the corner of his eye stole his attention.

The bedroom door opened and closed. Like blowing sand atop a dune in a windstorm, forces stripped away the woman's hand on the knob. The woman he saw earlier opened her mouth to scream. Reyne heard the woman's cries—decades old. The agony of the sound ripped open his heart. He witnessed the horror written across her face. She raced to the little girl, her pillow soaked in a pool of blood. The three-year-old's confused, pitiful face gave way to empty, lifeless eyes that stared out in no direction.

She was dead.

A deafening roar spewed out of Reyne and reverberated throughout the little girl's bedroom. His fists squeezed tight seeing the assassin, her hair whipping about, her body there one instant, gone the next, only to reappear where her walk projected her to be.

He seethed in anger.

His blood curdled.

The beast within howled into his soul for its freedom. But there was nothing he could do. From behind, the executioner wrapped her ghostly arm around the grieving mother's head and swiftly drew the same bloody knife across the front of her neck.

The little girl's mother fell to the ground.

Reyne's eyes bulged.

Unfathomable fury hammered inside his skull.

Helpless to save her.

Helpless to strike at her attacker.

They were only images from the past.

Rage consumed him and fed the beast.

Nausea gripped him at the horrific sight; he retched. Vomit spewed out of him.

And then he saw the stomach of the dying woman—his mother. *Pregnant!* Why didn't he notice before?

Crash.

A twenty-two-year-old sound wave slammed into his ear. Baide's bedroom door flew off its hinges and smashed into the floor.

A naked man, one shoulder out in front, plowed through the open space, and rushed the room. The man's image amazed Reyne. The man, it had to be Edruk, looked like a slightly older version of himself. Reyne couldn't hold the image together; it slipped away. His thoughts fought against the specter from dissolving, and Reyne—or Mera—brought it back. The man had changed locations. Still half-formed, ghostly but there. The Reyne-like man, now lying against the wall, near the tiny bed with his dying wife and lifeless three-year-old, had a knife buried deep in his heart. The older-looking version of Reyne, the man who burst through the door, was dead.

As seconds ticked away, the murderous woman slipped out the window almost the instant before Mera's own quantum-revealed-apparition twenty-two years in the past appeared, rushing through the space of the broken-down door. The ghostly version of Mera scanned the room and jumped to the pregnant woman. To Reyne's astonishment, Mera hadn't aged at all. The specter of Mera put his ear to his dying mother's mouth. He listened. He ripped her hips free of clothing faster than Reyne thought possible. Slipping a knife from his belt, Mera drew his blade across her torso, cutting the pregnant woman open. The grimaced reaction on her face told Reyne she registered the pain but was too close to death for it to matter. With bloody hands Mera pulled a small baby from Reyne's dying mother and placed the crying newborn on her red-soaked chest. Her mouth moved once and stopped. Her head flopped forward. She was dead.

The Mera apparition from the past quickly cut the umbilical cord.

Tears flowed freely down Reyne's cheeks. *The newborn, it's me. The dead woman, my mother*. He knew it. His heart felt it. More than he wanted, his soul cried out from his mother's death. In those few seconds she held him, love filled the room. He sensed it. How, he didn't know. Maybe that's part of what the quantum world shared, he wondered. But how didn't matter.

He looked away. Reyne's head flopped forward, unable to bear the loss of the love from a mother he never knew. Her love overwhelmed him. Her love touched his heart. Her loss, her sacrifice, bore deep into his soul. He wept openly for Silia, his mother; for Baide, his sister; for Edruk, his father—and for himself.

With the heels of his palms, he wiped tears from his eyes. Furious at the ghostly assassin, he burned to strike at her. He added her to his list of the soon-to-be-dead. A plan formed in his mind: once he transfigured to Evidar, he'd immediately return to Tartica to extract his revenge. A plan he'd hide from Mera. Mera wouldn't approve, wouldn't let him. But he'd do it anyway. As the idea sparked in his thoughts, the caged beast inside his soul roared in laughter.

He shifted attention to Mera in the present whose palm whirled against the floor, refusing to release the specters back to their quantum hosts. But when Reyne looked away from current-day Mera into the past, the same death-dealing woman—pulsating in and out of focus, hair whipping wildly about her—looked in through the broken window. Shock gripped him. The face in the window was the woman who'd just murdered his family.

As quickly as she appeared, she slinked away. He understood. The woman who'd killed his biological family stayed around long enough to witness Mera pull him from his dying mother's womb. The apparition of Mera from the past, windswept, fading in and out, took newborn Reyne from his dead mother into his arms. Mera cradled him as a baby. It touched Reyne deeply. With Mera's caring for the newborn measured against the death all around him, his ever-present anger towards Mera drained from his soul.

At that exact moment, only seconds old, his life changed. Mera started him down a new path with Daedyn as his brother. Recognition of the monumental role Mera played in his life, delivering him as a babe—only days old—into the arms of Pachelle and Gwerther to raise as their own, touched his soul. Almost more than he could bear, Reyne now understood he owed Mera more than he could ever repay.

As Mera from the past took baby Reyne into his arms, their bodies began to flitter away like a thousand butterflies heading off in different directions. Before dissolving into nothing, the specter of Mera jerked his head up to look around, but the assassin's apparition, already gone, left Mera to gaze out an empty window. Mera never knew. Never saw her.

A mental shockwave of tremendous force blasted through the room, blowing away the altered reality. The power of it struck hard against Reyne's mind. From his kneeling position, he fell back. The door Mera opened into his Eye of Heaven slammed shut in his brain, as though driving hot spikes through his eyes, nailing it closed. And just as suddenly, the pain in his mind fled, but the torment gripping his soul burned even hotter.

Reyne brushed himself off, settled in on his knees with his butt resting on his heels, and let out a sigh. He looked about the dilapidated, weather-worn, missing roof of a bedroom and knew it for the present, not the past—a place in time where his family was taken from him. The experience Mera provided left him broken-hearted and affected him in ways he hadn't thought possible.

A beautiful, innocent baby sister he never knew—murdered.

A dying mother's love, gone almost twenty-two years, reached across time to caress his soul.

A father's love for his family was denied to him by an assassin's dagger to the heart.

Apparitions from the past, conjured by a man he no longer resented, scorched his heart in the flames of regret.

From his knees, Reyne looked to the heavens through the sparse, tattered thatch. Torment and anguish were beyond his ability to restrain. With fists clenched at his side, he gave voice to the monster lurking in his soul as it howled in pain. Misery poured out of him and emptied into a world different from the one he knew before entering his sister's room. And when too hoarse to utter another sound, the wailing of his heart kept on.