CHAPTER 1

Southern Bay, Vale City

It was eleven o'clock on Friday night and the sprawling neighbourhood of Anderson Court was quiet. The night sky stretched atop the houses, dotted with dozens of twinkling diamond stars. Leaves gave the occasional rustle as the wind breezed lazily through the trees. There was the sudden bark of an awoken dog as an insect raced by its nose. For most residents, it was a perfectly normal night in Southern Bay.

The stars began to dwindle in brightness, disappearing one by one. A crisp swirl of wind lifted, chilling enough to prickle fear in someone's spine. A faint electrical buzz hovered in the air as the streetlights flickered erratically, each one fading out, one at a time. The moon darkened, its pale glow flooded by a fiery red, burning fiercely in the inky black sky. It slowly shrivelled, growing smaller and smaller until it vanished from sight, leaving the street engulfed in total darkness.

A white flash of light zigzagged to the ground and pierced the soft earth, creating a crack that slowly widened. Three figures rose, cloaked in black with brilliant blue eyes gleaming from beneath their hoods. The crack fused itself together as they began their walk, blending effortlessly into the night. They moved with an eerie grace, their presence unsettling against the backdrop of quiet houses and neatly trimmed lawns.

The three had come from Etharia, and served a dark force of evil known as the Mejii. It had been one hundred years since anybody from their land had stepped foot on Earth after their banishment into Silheed.

"We must move quickly," Everard hissed as they glided silently towards the house. "It won't take the Order long to realise that we have penetrated the seal." He was tall, with pale skin and shimmering silver hair that hung past his shoulders. Everard was one of the oldest members of the Mejii, highly regarded by the High Court. He served as one of the Leaders, reporting directly to the Jewel of Darkness herself.

The Mejii were bestowed with eternal beauty and youth. Conversely, those who incurred curses or punishments had their youth extracted, becoming known as the Damned, aging rapidly and eventually meeting a painful demise. A distinctive trait among the Mejii was their piercing crystal blue eyes, their inheritance from the Axinite, a closely guarded rock in the depths of Silheed that sustained their very existence.

"I want to *feel* her die," Chalice declared, an evil laugh escaping from her lips. "Her death will be the talk for many years." Her blue eyes glimmered in the darkness. She was petite yet had proved numerous times that her size was the least of anyone's concerns. Chalice was known as a Swift – her movements were lightning-quick and any action she undertook was executed with lethal precision. Cascading curls of silky black hair framed her face, reaching down to her waist, with dimples embedded into her flawless skin. On the left side of her face, crimson markings were tattooed into her flesh, a distinctive mark shared by every Swift.

"Easy," Franz warned. "We must be careful. This is to be a clean kill without getting any others involved." Franz possessed an arrogant, hot-tempered disposition and his very gaze held deadly power. A mere few seconds of unbroken eye contact from him could induce a fatal seizure in his victim, earning his kind the feared name 'Slayer' across Etharia. He stood as tall as Everard but with a more muscular physique. His jet-black hair framed a prominent jawline, and he rarely smiled, nor did he often engage in conversation unprompted.

They reached 55 Anderson Court and stopped outside the two-storey house. Asleep inside was a powerful being who hadn't yet realised her full potential. She was an innocent soul, but an important piece to the prophecy that had been spoken to the entire magical community a century ago. The three were here to make sure that she never reached her full magical peak. They were here to kill.

They disappeared in a blend of white smoke, blue jagged light and green flames, reappearing inside the house at the bottom of the staircase. Their footsteps were silent as they began to ascend the carpeted steps.

"She's here," Chalice murmured, breathing in deeply. "That scent is unmistakable."

"Be still." Everard grabbed Chalice by the arm. As the newest member of the Mejii, Chalice had proved to be reckless and ignorant to her superiors. "We must be sure that we eliminate the right one. There are three sleeping in this house."

"I know what I sense," she argued.

"Your arrogance is uncalled for," Everard snapped. "You are *not* in charge of this mission. Your orders come from Franz or me."

As they reached the landing at the top of the staircase, footsteps sounded around the corner. Unlike Everard and Franz, who vanished seamlessly into the shadows, Chalice moved at lightning speed towards the source of the noise, a splintering *crack* following shortly thereafter. A gurgled gasp, then a resounding thud pierced the air.

"You idiot!" Franz said through clenched teeth when he reappeared. "Are you out of your mind?"

The Swift's eyes were ravaged with victory. She stood her ground as Franz and Everard shoved past her to inspect the motionless body.

Everard sucked in a sharp breath. "It isn't her."

"Are you certain?" Franz demanded.

"Very." Everard nodded. "The wrong girl has been killed." His glare slid to Chalice. "You *fool*. You reacted too quickly."

"Why do you care?" she retorted. "She was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

A snarl escaped from Franz's lips and he raised his arm, moving forward to strike her but another sound made him halt in his tracks. A door opened and a woman emerged. Upon seeing the three of them in the hallway, she froze, her voice stifled as if struggling to contain a panicked scream.

"We are not here for you." Everard held up his hand.

Chalice and Franz shifted to block the body from the woman's sight, but they didn't move quickly enough. She saw what they were trying to hide.

"Oh my God." The woman pushed past them, kneeling next to the girl. "*Emily!* EMILY!"

"She's seen too much, Everard," Franz sighed. "She must be destroyed."

"Is it necessary to take *another* life tonight?" Everard's tone was cold. "Jaius will not be pleased."

"What have you done to her?" the woman cried, rising to her feet.

"You'll be joining her," Chalice threatened, laughing maliciously as she palmed up a white ball of energy.

"HOLD YOUR FIRE!" Franz roared, his disdain for the Swift growing by the minute.

"Whoever it is that you're looking for isn't here." The woman's voice wavered slightly. "There's nothing here for you."

A purr sounded from Chalice's lips as she glided closer to the human. She loved a fight. "You lie," she said in a silky soft voice. "You're hiding something from us."

The woman's eyes darted frantically, hinting at her regret for speaking out. That slight movement only confirmed Chalice's suspicions.

"Hmm..." Chalice's mouth twisted into an evil smile. In the blink of an eye, she grabbed the woman by the throat and slammed her against the wall, causing a deep crack to fracture the surface and spread rapidly towards the ceiling. The woman struggled as Chalice's fingers tightened painfully around the skin.

Everard and Franz stood back, allowing Chalice to have her fun.

"Let's not play dumb. You know why we're here. *Where* is the Trinity child?"

"Mum?" a voice sounded behind them. Everard and Franz turned to see another girl who'd emerged from a room opposite the staircase, a look of horror on her face.

"This is the one." Franz's voice was tinged with excitement.

"Get back, Aleissa," the woman groaned. "*Run!*"

"What's going on?!"

"You won't be remembering any of this." Everard advanced towards her; his hand reached into his robes, extracting a long silver dagger with an emerald jewelled handle.

Aleissa's eyes widened.

"No, please don't hurt her!" the woman begged. Chalice's fingers dug deeper into her neck and her cry was cut off by a strangled gasp.

"Who…who *are* you?" Aleissa gasped. She made a move in her mother's direction and her eyes fell to the body of her cousin. "Emily!"

"And you're next," Franz growled, disappearing and reappearing behind her. His arms wrapped around Aleissa's body like powerful vines, holding her still as Everard approached, dagger in hand.

"Stop!" Aleissa begged, her eyes locked on her mother. "Please! *Let me go!*"

"*Now* can I kill this one?" the Swift drawled in a bored tone, raising a querying brow at her Leader. Everard gave a slight nod and Aleissa screamed.

"*No!*" She watched as Chalice threw back her head with laughter and plunged her hand deep into her mother's chest. A vivid white glow emanated from Chalice's hand, prompting a guttural moan from Aleissa's mother as blood trickled from her mouth. Her gaze locked directly with her daughter, and Aleissa saw the light leave them before she became limp.

A hysterical scream escaped Aleissa's throat again.

"Do it. Now," Franz ordered to Everard.

"*NO!*" An electric blue light began to sizzle around Aleissa, soft at first and then shining brighter with intensity.

"Argh!" Franz yanked his arms away from her. "That light – it's *burning* me!"

"Don't be weak!" Chalice sneered, pulling her hand from her victim's chest and throwing the body to the side. She stormed towards them but stopped suddenly as Aleissa's eyes began to blaze with a white radiance. "What's she doing?"

"This doesn't look good," Everard said, his expression filled with uncertainty. He'd never witnessed anything like this before. A strained groan escaped Aleissa's throat as the light magnified around her. The walls began to crack and a mild tremor shook the ground.

"How is she doing this?" Franz bellowed, scrambling back to join Chalice and Everard.

Aleissa stood before them, enveloped in a blazing canopy of power. The tremor escalated into a violent quake, hurling the three warriors to the floor. The wind howled through the house, tearing the roof from its trusses and launching it into the sky.

"Oh, God! It's tearing into me!" Everard screamed suddenly as an invisible force racked his body with pain. Aleissa's white eyes stared directly at him, filling him with some kind of unseen torture. Before Franz and Chalice could react, Everard exploded in front of them in a shower of white dust.

Chalice screeched and scrambled to move out of the way.

The wind only grew stronger.

"Franz! We need to get out of here!" Chalice shouted, fear laced in her voice. The atmosphere in the house crackled with rage as Aleissa directed her white gaze to where Chalice and Franz lay. Chalice immediately clawed at the ground, trying to get away, but Franz's hand closed around her ankle.

"Wait!"

"Get off me!" Chalice kicked out her leg, hitting Franz squarely in the face. His grip on her ankle loosened and he let out an anguished cry before exploding into dust, showering Chalice with the fine grains. She stared at the powerful being in front of her, her entire body shivering with terror.

"This was not meant to happen."

Chalice watched the Trinity child's eyes meet hers but before Aleissa could inflict any pain, the Swift summoned all of her strength and disappeared in a burst of jagged blue light.

Aleissa was completely out of control, engulfed by intense emotions surging through her body. Her skin blazed like fire, while an overwhelming rush of adrenaline coursed through her. Through the haze of wind swirling around her, she could see the still bodies of her mother and Emily.

Please…please be alive.

As she took a step forward, she felt the ground beneath her shake furiously again. Her body went limp as the blackness closed in around her. A deafening explosion sounded as the house buckled and collapsed, taking the three bodies down with it.

The silence lasted a mere couple of seconds before the moon emerged once again in the vast expanse of the night sky, accompanied by the twinkling of stars.

Soon after, the air was filled with the wail of sirens.

Deep in the mountains of Etharia lay an underground passage protected by an invisible barrier. Entrance was only granted to the Guardian – a creature whose body consisted of white clouds of smoke, silently wisping through the air. It could infiltrate any opening, no matter how small, expanding to fill a room and suffocate its occupants or becoming a protective fog to shield others from harm. The Guardian's sole mission was to protect, and it fulfilled this duty at any cost.

At the end of the passage stood a small room, containing only a single wooden table. Suspended in mid-air atop the table was an orb which had been dormant for a long time. The Guardian hovered over it protectively, awaiting any sign of life.

Suddenly, it happened. From the heart of the orb, a faint flickering glow emerged, swiftly blossoming into a radiant light that illuminated the entire room. After a few moments, the brilliance receded, leaving behind a gentle golden flame.

The Guardian breathed, "Trinity."