

# *Luminary*

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## ***Chapter 1: Between Reality and the Tangible***

"This couldn't be happening!" Wicus all but roared with agitation as he raced down the corridor between reality and the tangible. He shook his head as if physically trying to dislodge the thought. Unplanned obstacles! he fumed, wishing they would go away, knowing full well, they would not.

"*THE SAFEGUARDS...*" his voice rose sharply before breaking off, as he tried to control his tone, only to nearly scream seconds later with frustration, "They're supposed to PREVENT THIS! Oh the council is not... NOT going to happy, NOT HAPPY AT ALL," he wailed.

Waxine glided effortlessly in midair beside him. Her three-foot-long power cord whipping along in front of them, its enchanted three-pronged plug pointing the way as the corridor ahead responded to her unspoken commands, shimmering and shifting, turning form into nothingness and back into form again, sending the scurrying pair right, left, even diagonally without revealing any obvious corners, leading them where they needed to go: the Council of Nine.

It was light enough in the structure she created. The air clear and dry in the corridor immediately surrounding them. Their approach viewed by none. No other living entity moved inside or out of the passageway.

Caught up in his own mental ramblings, Wicus didn't stop to ponder the noiseless nature of the corridor or the reasons behind its existence. It offered protection enough for their destination that there were no challenges to their progress. No sentries posted at odd intervals monitoring or reporting on their approach.

Over the centuries Waxine had grown accustomed to Wicus and his occasional outbursts. He was normally very quiet, insightful, often charming and always consistent unless he was agitated and angry like he was now. Then her powerfully built friend seemed to lose track of himself in his ire, he was like a bull in a china shop.

He could be very passionate when it came to protecting the rights of a soul, any soul, even the ones she thought wouldn't amount to much in the human world -- with or without a designated mate.

She had been listening silently to his latest tirade for about an hour while guiding them through the secret passages which provided security around the chamber housing the Paragons' ruling body.

Wicus had yet to run out of steam.

Finally she spoke, "They will intercede."

He blinked.

To the perturbed Paragon, her voice seemed to come out of nowhere, shocking him that he'd forgotten her presence. He had been so absorbed in this pressing dilemma.

"They have to!" he exclaimed, "without it the alternative is too bleak."

Wicus eyed the corridor with a hint of dubious incredulity, cutting his yellow flamed eyes sideways confirming that she was indeed at his side. His instincts kept him from revealing just how surprised he was. After the initial shock traipsed

across his features, they once again settled into an inscrutable mask.

For a fraction of a moment he ceased to recall why he was in an agitated state, such as the calming effect of Waxine's voice as it echoed in the chambers of the metal shafts which made up her body, like the tinkling of chimes.

What had she said? he mused. Remembering, his distress quickly returned. He looked around the shifting passageway once again, saw nothing save the solid floor under his feet and the walls on either side of his party. The super immortal had the oddest feeling.

Glancing briefly over his shoulder, there was nothing behind but the shapeless black where the previous bit of corridor had evaporated. A growing surreal sensation troubled him. Hounded him.

Was he forgetting something else? Impossible, he thought with great arrogance. He was too good at his job. Dutiful to all under his care. And yet, a *primary and secondary* soul mate for one girl were both dead. His expression instantly sobered.

"What is happening in the world that both candidates had to die like that?" he muttered, beginning to feel anxious again. "What if the council didn't agree with his plans? I can't have the girl go mateless."

Peering forward, his yellow flamed eyes squinting -- trying to make out what was ahead in the inky darkness. There was nothing to see in the nebulous blur. He was clearly eager to get to his destination

The corridor silent save for his footsteps and the faint swishing noise as Waxine's power cord danced back and forth doing its work. Neither sound loud enough to drown out any other should someone come after them. None did.

He wanted to get to the council quickly. They needed to know that strange and violent things were afoot. Something was amiss in the human realm, something that should not be happening, he thought.

Little did Wicus know that the council was already alarmingly aware of the mysterious events that were unfolding. Aware and gathering more information than even he had access to and that was saying something. He increased his pace as a growing sense of dread urged him forward. It couldn't be much farther, he thought.

"This is unprecedented in the history of time, no one... never has anyone lost both... this simply has to--" he stopped mid-sentence as the true ramifications hit him. The shocked expression resurfacing.

Now consciously understanding where the dread which felt like a brick in his stomach heralded. That realization accompanied by a shot of terror in his gut.

They would have to change an existing soul, already in human form. That was the only option. A human who had lost his designated mate.

"It is a nasty business, a nasty, painful business indeed... retrofitting a soul... but maybe, yes maybe...."

Wicus fell silent, maintaining his frenzied stride, a distracted look filled his yellow flamed eyes. He did not trust his judgment about what the council would do. He was weighing his options.

There were millions of humans under his protection. For many he had already fulfilled his pledge and introduced them to their soul mates. That was his job,

making sure that the assigned souls met, to ensure that their union could bring magic into the world. What happened after they met was out of his control, such was the limit of the Paragons' power and duty.

Tragedy had hit some -- as often happens in the human world. Through sickness, accident, fickle behavior, or completely, utterly, bad luck -- they had lost their soul mates. Their names and faces began to flow through Wicus' mind like a flash flood, he reviewed the torrent of painful images with patience, knowing the intimate details of each life.

A Paragon could only retrofit a soul that had been introduced to his or her mate, prior to that moment there were locks in place, locks which protected the person's dreams and his or her soul from magical interference.

Waxine shifted closer to him. Metallic gaze assessing his flushed countenance.

"Does that seem like the only prospect?" she asked a trifle cynically. She had disagreed with the council on more than one occasion. *Sanctimonious lawmakers*, she mentally huffed.

Wicus' grimly nodded.

"I see no other possibility."

"What about creating a new one from scratch?"

"Considering that one hasn't even been started, she'd be decades older than her soul mate. Not the best formula for a cohesive relationship," he said bluntly.

"So it's retrofitting or nothing."

"Yes," he agreed, frowning.

Despite an epoch in this world between reality and the tangible, watching the Paragons as they fulfilled their responsibilities... guaranteeing that each human met the one person they should spend their life with...she had yet to observe what Wicus now seemed to clearly dread.

She herself had been retrofitted once and it hadn't been painful at all.

Responding to her thoughts, Plug abandoned its duty as guide and turned toward Waxine, its three-prongs transforming into a face, grinning at her before nodding in agreement. *No, their union had not been painful at all.*

Without the attachment's magical direction, the corridor began to settle into a cohesive form and Wicus slammed into a wall that suddenly appeared right in front of him, face first. Flawless features flattened, taking on the one-dimensional look of the surface. His shiny, black, close-cropped curls tumbled forward by the impact. The elegant, charcoal gray cloak that covered his 6-foot-3-inch frame swayed noiselessly around his strong legs.

He wore the cloak on formal occasions and when he was visiting the council. It matched his tunic and trousers perfectly. The garment was snug across his muscular arms and torso, secured in place both at mid-chest and at the waist by black leather straps and buckles. Black boots clung to his muscular calves. The same non-embellished attire was favored by most soul minders.

Wicus stepped back and true to Paragon fashion, his features and hair snapped back into place like a rubber doll, the crease smoothed on his high intelligent forehead while his square jaw jutted forward in a surprised grimace.

The race of super immortals were aptly named, they were simply perfection.

Perhaps Wicus more than others, Waxine thought. While his body reacted to solid objects like rubber, he appeared for all intents and purposes like a human man, albeit, a beautiful one.

Perhaps sensing her appraisal, Wicus patted the buckle over his chest, glancing down to make sure it was unharmed. His large hand smoothing the fabric of the tunic. Evaluating it with his touch. His attire was simple but elegant. Always concerned with quality, the soul minder took special care in his appearance. Everything in place, his scrutiny returned to his companion.

Although the accident was an unintentional slight, Waxine now had his full attention. Noting the pesky Plug's misplaced gaze was the cause of the mishap, Wicus raised an eyebrow, an involuntary smirk on his full lips.

The closer he got, the calmer he felt. His initial anxiety began to recede, replaced by his natural resourcefulness. If retrofitting were approved, he'd need to come up with a list of new candidates.

Waxine grinned in return, then flicked the power cord and the corridor once again shimmered. Wicus made a point of looking where he was going before resuming the hectic pace, seeming to read her thoughts with uncanny accuracy as he did so.

"It's not the same, Waxine. You were never... human. At least... you have never mentioned that you were... am I missing something?"

He glanced at her with evident curiosity.

"Humph," his companion huffed disdainfully.

"Elusive as ever I see."

Wicus had never delved much into his enchanted companion's past. She wouldn't let him. That said, he accepted her for who she was without trying to change her.

It was believed that Waxine was crafted by the finest chandler in Denmark into a beautiful eight-socketed candelabra in the tenth century, during the time when immortals hid among the Vikings, causing mischief utterly for sport. When a wizard was grievously injured in a battle with one of them, some of his power was accidentally deposited onto Waxine. That's how she actually came into '*being status*.' Her past prior to that is murky. If she had any memories of her non-enchanted self, she never spoke of them.

"Still unwilling to share how you came to be in the hands of that immortal oaf, Marsden, in Iceland?"

Waxine ignored his question. A small line formed between her delicate metallic brows. Her stubborn nature freezing her tongue when she didn't want to reveal something about herself while not her face.

She continued whipping around her appendage. Plug maintained its focus on the magical passageway so that there were no more unfortunate delays or corridor crashes.

It was known that she had passed from the possession of one immortal to another until she was placed on a spot on the edge of reality. She was there only for an instant. Then faster than a spring breeze can blow away a falling eyelash, Wicus had reached through the veil into the visible world and taken custody. Her hulking owner, recognized only as *Marsden* never saw what happened.

Wicus wasn't jealous by nature, none of the Paragons were. Something about her had captivated him completely, he felt an instant, deep connection and knew she belonged here in his world. After all, the super immortals used magic in their daily duties, it was fitting that Wicus had an enchanted being at his side. He wasn't the only Paragon with a Luminary companion.

Waxine had helped with his more difficult cases.

He wasn't surprised by her refusal to answer his question, over the centuries he had learned to ignore her stubborn ways. It was part of her charm.

"I thought you were worried about more pressing matters at the moment," she interjected, effectively turning the conversation away from her past.

Wicus gaped at her for a moment then closed his mouth and nodded. His thoughts immediately returned to Emily Wren, the 23-year-old college student in Georgia, who had no soul mate. Talk about difficult, this case was going to be a doozy. Yet he was determined that she would get her chance at happiness.

She deserved a soul mate as every human did. The *Yoke Accords of Tusome* guaranteed it. And he wasn't going to be sidetracked by anything, especially another human war.

"I should have been watching them both like a hawk... maybe I could have prevented all of this," Wicus groaned. If he'd been more diligent perhaps they wouldn't be dead.

A vision of their fallen bodies haunted him. Blood seeping through the fabric of each one's uniform as the soldier lay immobile on the ground. The breeze took no notice of either passing, blowing dirt and other earthly sediment over each prostrate man.

She sighed, then paused as if choosing her words carefully, something Waxine rarely worried about -- when the conversation wasn't focused on her.

"Do you really think you could do that? With all the souls under your care....there aren't enough hours in the day. You have millions of people in your region alone. How can you keep track of two of them when they go off to war on the other side of the world?" asked Waxine logically.

"I feel like I should have been more prepared or something."

"You cannot interfere with the lives of humans."

"Interfering in the lives of people is what I do...all of the time...IT'S MY JOB," he added emphatically, eyebrows pulled upward.

"You know that's not what I mean... You cannot change their fates... if someone is destined to die on a battlefield, you cannot stop it. You're a Paragon... not God," she eyed him, countenance slightly sardonic. Work was the only thing really important to Wicus.

The wars of man, and there had been many, had caused every alteration that existed in the Paragons' laws. The original pairing of soul mates had always culminated in a wedding, resulting in the perfect kind of love...releasing magic into the world. That edict ended centuries ago. Nowadays soul minders like Wicus were only responsible for bringing souls, in their human forms, together.

The chance meeting, the unexpected turn of events, the remarkable concurrence of circumstances -- all of which were actually carefully planned to set two souls on the path to lasting happiness. Although modern rules meant

Paragons were no longer allowed to hang around for the courtship.

To advance mankind, magic was constantly needed, as a result souls were mated on a regular basis. The global population had grown exponentially and the great wars had changed so much, killed so many, that time and time again amendments to the Accords were made.

Now there existed a very intricate plan, every soul mate had a backup, who in turn had two soul mates as well. Every person except Emily Wren, at least not anymore. Great things were expected from the girl, leastwise according to the mystical report passed to him from a seer who claimed, "*the girl's unusual magic would be quite beneficial.*"

As they drew closer to the council chamber, Wicus felt a change in the atmosphere as if some other kind of desperation lingered in the air. Was that the cause of the nagging feeling? he pondered.

"It doesn't make sense that both of her soul mates were killed... at the same time... in the same battle. It shouldn't be possible. It shouldn't be allowed."

"Quite a coincidence, don't you think...that both died today," she observed, a pensive expression on her metallic features.

Waxine knew how Wicus would answer. *Coincidences*, he would say with a charismatic air, 'are the province of the Paragons, they don't merely happen.'

Her words stopped him short.

"It can't be a coincidence," he breathed, an alarmed look crossed his beautiful face. "Was there something else going on? Something I have not seen?"

Wicus searched his memory... He was very dedicated to his duty. It had taken him 500 years to get into the soul minder brotherhood and it was a job he took seriously.

Waxine stopped, her attachment ceased its undulations. Noting Wicus' distracted expression, she hesitated several seconds before speaking, staring at him straight on -- her metallic eyes earnest, "We're here."

The corridor vanished as quickly as the vapor it was constructed from, the lingering amorphous blackness in front of them quickly retreated, easing into a cohesive shape that towered overhead and down to the newly formed floor revealing a pair of intricately carved, eternal, redwood doors that stretched 15-feet-high.

Standing perfectly still he took a couple of deep breaths, not that he was winded from the journey. Being a perfect specimen of a Paragon, he wasn't bothered by the exertion. The breaths were a way to steady himself for the discussion to come. The council had to see things his way. They simply had to.

Soothed by the breathing and his brief lull in movement, he took the time to straighten his tunic and cloak, he ran a hand through his dark curls, patting them down -- assuring that they were in place. He paused, passing his hand across his chin and the corners of his lips in thought. Or was he merely erasing the abiding doubt from his mind? Would the council approve the retrofitting?

Waxine interrupted his conjectures with her own eerie precision.

"You will persuade them. You'll see. They'll agree with you about what needs to be done... Or we'll go rogue and do it behind their backs."

Wicus looked scandalized. His companion was proposing something close to

treason right outside the chamber doors.

"No I won't...nor will you."

"You always do right by the souls under your care."

"Not against council orders."

"Then they'd better agree," she scoffed, "...or you'll have to turn me in."

Wicus flinched slightly. His lips pursed together. Waxine knew he was too loyal to do anything like that.

She didn't bother to press her case.

He eyed the entrance, imposing as it was.

Images of the Paragons' ancestors, the Beings of Light, as they were called--- with their red, yellow and blue eyes of flame, gazed back at the pair. Etched panels illustrating other images were interlaced through the carvings; one depicting a hand holding an archer's bow, while a second hand drew across it with an arrow; another showing a hand reaching up from the earth pointing to a glowing orb that was shining bright like the sun, a golden circular mark surrounded the wrist; while a third image showed a glowing triangle that seemed to melt into the earth.

Some Paragons theorized that the symbol of the archer and his bow could be the basis of the Cupid myth in the human world. While the hand reaching for the sun symbolized Paragons reaching through the veil into the human realm to perform their duty. Each of the super immortals bore a mark, a golden scar around at least one wrist. The image of the glowing triangle sinking into the earth was believed to symbolize the release of magic.

Plug, its duty over, wrapped quietly and snugly around Waxine's base as Wicus glanced at the Latin inscription above the doors:

"Deferens animam, et concepit, venenatis in mundo," he spoke the words aloud, reverence in his tone.

"Bringing soul mates together and magic into the world," she translated.

From where he was standing, Wicus pondered less than a second, then closed his eyes, the light from their yellow flames still faint behind his eyelids.

He focused his thoughts. Rummaging through his brain for the suitable enchantment.

The temperature at the entrance slightly cooler than it had been in the corridor. Again he felt that nagging sense of urgency. The air fairly crackled with it, like misplaced static electricity after sliding over a carpet in one's socks.

Wicus wiggled his toes in his boots, grounding himself.

Opening his eyes, the yellow flames danced as he mentally reached out with his mind and watched as an invisible hand materialized in the space in front of the massive double doors, made a fist, and magically knocked.



## **Chapter 2: The Council of Nine**

"What the hell?"

The Paragon stood without moving, legs slightly apart, shoulders squared at the scene in front of him. Wicus was astonished at the noise level that echoed across the normally tranquil Great Hall. It wasn't simply the volume, more so the obvious rancor and tension that accompanied it.

Stunned into silence by the pandemonium, he knew that he'd been right about the nagging sensation. There was something else going on. The question was, *What?*

The chamber's vaulted, arched ceiling was some four stories high, resembling the interior ribbing of a giant walnut shell, carved out of some unknown stone that looked as smooth as highly polished granite but was warm and soft -- almost spongy -- to the touch. Each arch was so true it supported its own weight.

Golden animated chandeliers floated elegantly a foot below the ceiling where each arch curved into the next. Their warm glow illuminating the chamber in a glorious light that seemed to have its own texture. The natural acoustics amplified the tiniest sound which meant that even the meekest voice -- Paragon or Luminary was easily heard across the room.

The impressive architecture was now forcing the clamor of its current occupants upward and downward, a wall of sound ricocheting around them, creating a din so loud, that a Paragon might describe it as, '*ten humans shy of a riot.*'

Despite the unsettling uproar, now that they had arrived at their destination, Wicus was calmer and more in control of himself. He was one of those Paragons who seemed to handle the problems of others better than his own.

Beside him, Waxine hissed.

The magical flames on all eight of her invisible candles beginning to rise. Plug partially uncoiled from her base, hovering ten inches in front of her, its face forward like some bobbing electric cobra, poised to strike. Plug was insanely protective.

"Hold on there girl... don't flame out, no reason to burn down the place...ease up... I need to speak to the council...not charbroil it," Wicus urged, his generous mouth quirked slightly.

Even though his cautionary tone was teasing, the Paragon was concerned that she might do exactly that. He admired Waxine's spunk, he didn't feel the same way about her temper. When she got pissed off she could be unpredictable, not to mention extremely flammable.

She ignored his attempt at sarcasm.

Already the rows of uneven flames that circled Waxine's face soared five inches higher than normal, burning brighter, hotter and higher on the unseen wicks over each socket. Diamonds, crystals and pearls that dangled off the edges of each bobèche swayed with the intense heat, twinkling shards of light beautifully around her. The temperature of the surrounding air was rising by the second.

On more than one occasion Wicus had been forced to jump into action, preventing her from igniting their surroundings. He wondered briefly if there was any kind of built-in fire suppression system at their current venue. Talk about making a dramatic entrance, he thought.

Wicus refocused on the crowd, trying to discern the reason for such a vehement reaction.

Only three council members were visible on the raised circular dais in the center of the hall. Two were surrounded by a knot of their acolytes. One elder was leaning over, talking to two of them who were standing on the floor of the massive chamber. He appeared to be calming them down. The intense blue flames of their eyes belying their youth.

The third council member was on the other side of the dais, hunched over in order to be face to face with the diminutive Dallus, Wicus' west coast counterpart. The fidgety Paragon and Wicus managed the meetings of all the soul mates in North America.

Dallus wore the traditional gray tunic and trousers, his cloak was a different story. It was spun of a magical fabric that seemed to have a life of its own. Large panels on the garment depicted different scenes; with flying dragons, knights and their squires battling in mystical glens. They were not static images embroidered like tapestries into the material -- quite the contrary, they seemed to be alive.

Whenever Dallus twitched or moved around, the images danced; the squire stumbled carrying his master's armor, the knight swung his sword in defiance at the winged beast and the dragon spat fire. There was more to the garment than moving figures. If Dallus was in an agitated state, any Paragon who stood too close to the cloak would swear that he could feel the heat of the dragon's breath.

Few were standing close to Dallus at the moment, a testament to his heated state; both in attitude and the cloak. He gave the elder a distracted look, clearly not happy with what the council member was telling him.

Between his animated mantle and his flaming red eyes and hair, Dallus cut a striking figure in a room filled with them.

Paragons didn't physically age, at least not in the way humans did. In fact, most looked to be between 23 and 30 years old. Their unusual eyes showed the passage of time by shifting color.

Light blue flames meant the super immortal was less than one thousand years old. The blue continued to darkened as a Paragon approached two thousand years, then the flames in his eyes began to change, turning from blue to green to yellow, like someone adjusting the pilot light on a furnace fueled by an unknown gas.

Green was strictly a transitional color, if it was a color at all. No one had it for long. Long being a relative term in the world of Paragons, meaning the transition could last for two to three hundred years. Some theorized that the green flame was merely the presence of blue and yellow flames lighting the eyes at the same time.

Wicus' eyes showed the steady yellow flame of his 2752 years, physically he didn't look a day over 29. Those same yellow eyes now scanned the denizens gathered in the Great Hall.

"Leetus!" Wicus beamed as he spotted his humble friend across the expanse and waved. "Ah yes, now I see what's got you in a tizzy, Lionel is there too."

Waxine hovered nearly motionless next to him. Her metallic eyes focused on some inner memory. A grimace on her face. It was several moments before she responded. When she did there was a sneer in her tone.

"I don't care how fond you are of him, or how humble or generous you think him to be, I'll never trust him or that loathsome lantern."

Wicus suppressed a chuckle. He couldn't understand why Waxine hated the pair with such intensity, not that she was ever forthcoming about her reasons. She would never even call Lionel by his name.

"Calm down Waxine. Best not forget we are guests in the Great Hall."

He felt a little uneasy at her unregulated combustible display. Privately, he pondered whether they might get kicked out before he had the chance to voice his concern. His yellow flamed eyes cut a sideways glance at the lengthening flames over his companion.

Hers were fixed on the lantern.

Across the chamber beside the young soul minder, an enchanted Moroccan style lamp was also hovering in mid-air. Shamefully, Wicus realized that he didn't know Lionel's history as well Waxine's.

The lantern was made during the time of the Berbers, forged out of hammered iron with intricate cutouts that created a network of starlight rays from the glow that radiated off the inner light.

"Wait here," Wicus instructed.

He began to move forward, paused and turned back to Waxine.

"Please lower your flames.... or I will ask Lionel to come over and keep you company."

"You wouldn't dare!" she fumed. Begrudgingly she complied by lowering the flame on each invisible candle, one by one so that a gradual halo of short blue flames surrounded her face.

"Good girl."

He approached his young friend, trying to focus his hearing on one conversation at a time. It was difficult to make sense out of what was happening in the hall. Only snippets filtered through to him.

"How has this happened?" wailed once voice.

"I need to protect my souls," cried another.

"Master what should we do?" asked a third, given the deference in the speaker's tone, Wicus assumed that it was one of the acolytes speaking to his assigned council member.

He couldn't pick out Leetus' soft-spoken voice above the noise. The young Paragon's head was leaning forward, his face turned away which allowed only his profile to be visible. He was engaged in what appeared to be a serious discussion with a council member.

Leetus' gray hair was streaked with the same jet black that covered Wicus' scalp. Worn in a buzz cut, well sort of, more like a buzz cut perpetually in need of a trim. Scarcely one thousand years old, his eyes had only started to change color. Not enough time had passed for them to burn a new shade permanently yet.

Enver seemed to be trying to reassure him. His acolytes flanked either side of Leetus, ready to do their master's bidding. Like all members of the council his red-orange flamed eyes were tinged with black... indicating he was more than five thousand years old. They glowed like charcoal briquettes as he spoke. A strange compliment to his blond hair and lashes. His glance shifted, settling on Wicus as he arrived at the edge of the dais.

"How are you my friend?" he called out amiably.

Leetus shifted his gaze as did Lionel to welcome the newcomer. Lionel eyed Wicus from beside his companion then glanced around the hall until he spotted Waxine hovering next to the entrance.

"She hates me," Lionel whined nervously.

The comment wasn't directed at Wicus.

"I suspect she still dislikes us both," Leetus said quietly to his lantern.

Wicus eyed Enver, "I am well. But I have serious news to report. A primary and secondary soul have been lost."

Pausing briefly, he again looked at the others in the chamber, "Is this a bad time? Why is there such commotion here today?"

"You are not the only one in distress my friend," Leetus answered, a bleak expression on his normally earnest face. "I have lost a primary and secondary too, without neither having met their mate."

"Same here," a ginger haired Paragon echoed as he strode across the room to join the group. His flaming red eyes alight with a mixture of concern and mischief.

Wicus wondered briefly if his friend, Stanus, ever took anything as seriously as the rest of them did. But his presence was reassuring.

"I see you haven't kicked the habit," Wicus smirked. He was up to a little mischief of his own. He couldn't resist teasing his hulking friend about his size... due in large part to his frequent trips to the human realm. "You really have to learn to stay away from those 'All you can eat' -- Chinese buffets."

Despite the hall's tension, Leetus and Enver grinned.

Stanus chuckled, ignoring the rebuff patting his ample middle. Like all Paragons he was not simply handsome, but beautiful, his face totally symmetrical. He was 7 feet 3 inches tall -- larger than any of his soul minder counterparts. Not obese nor even fat. *Thick* was the word, definitely thick. His aristocratic nose gave his flawless features a noble air which he used to his full advantage when addressing subordinates.

"After you've been here more than three thousand years, then you can give me advice about my eating habits."

"I don't mind WHAT you eat my friend, it's merely the AMOUNT."

"Perhaps it's not the meals that attracts his attention quite as much as it is the company he keeps," Enver interjected, raising his brows meaningfully.

Stanus had the good grace to look a little sheepish.

"A romance? How interesting, do tell. Who has captured his massive heart?"

"I believe her name is Myling, she is the tiny Asian witch who runs several restaurants in the human world."

Wicus looked at Enver incredulously. "An Asian witch, are you joking?" The

latter shook his head. All eyes turned to the hulking Paragon.

"We are simply friends, good friends," Stanus mumbled in his defense while his cheeks turned as red as his hair and eyes.

How did a council member know of his friendships on the other side of the veil? he wondered. He was a careful individual. He prided himself on not doing anything that would bring shame upon himself or the brotherhood. Not that he considered his relationship with Myling in any way shameful. It was not something he was ready to share at this moment. He deliberated for a second on how best to focus their curiosity elsewhere, spotting his salvation not far from where he stood.

"If you're looking for a hopeless romantic, you need not look any farther than our golden haired brother," he nodded conspiratorially to where Wellmus stood about five feet to their right.

The group fell silent as they refocused their collective gaze on the moody soul tender. Wicus closed the gap, moving beside Stanus to get a better view of the argument Wellmus was currently having with a council member and the super immortal in charge of Paragon security.

Leetus, who was shorter than Stanus and Wicus, leaned to the left to see around them while Lionel rose higher. He hovered at a vantage point high enough to observe the disagreement from between their heads.

Wicus was conscious of them both; the giant Paragon and the smaller one, being so quiet, so unruffled in their secret observation.

Enver, who was elfin by comparison, had a better view from the raised platform that he stood on and merely turned his head.

"My Teresa must have her mate. She's already suffered much.... lost her parents ... her brother....three cats. There's so much goodness in her. So much talent, charm. She has gifts the world needs. I won't have her go mateless," Wellmus' entreaty was passionately delivered. His expression troubled -- full of helpless anxiety.

There was general murmuring of agreement from others in the hall who were worried about their unmated souls as well. Echoing his sentiments.

"I wanna know how this happened," Wellmus added more heatedly. At 6-feet-tall, he was thin with a runner's build, thick brows and a mercurial, dramatic expression-- the emo of super immortals. His handsomely lean face looked fatigued at the moment, from within it yellow flamed eyes flashed with anger.

Wicus' mouth quirked again. He spoke in a low voice to Stanus, "I trust that he's not fallen for another one....otherwise he'll be saying that his candidate takes precedence."

Stanus ignored the cynicism.

"Sounds like he has," interjected Leetus.

"That's why he broods so much. If he didn't monitor some of them every second of the day for as long as time allows, he wouldn't keep falling," Stanus paused then added ruefully, "He's a possessive fool."

"How many does that make...sixteen, seventeen?" asked Wicus, racking his brain, trying to remember the number of times Wellmus had fallen for a person under his protection.

"Probably closer to eighty," Stanus chuckled, rubbing his large hand over his

mouth to cover the resulting smile.

The tall legislator was doing his best to reassure Wellmus that a solution would be found. "No one is suggesting that she go mateless Wellmus. Give the council a chance to deal with this... we will come up with a plan to address all these losses. And get to the bottom of this."

Wellmus didn't look the slightest bit reassured.

"I don't have time for your stonewalling," he said more quietly as though the lone Paragon present who possessed the absolute conviction that his work was the only kind that mattered.

"When the others arrive we'll figure out..."

Wicus didn't hear the rest of the council member's platitudes, his attention was diverted by a shimmer in the air a few feet away from the arguing trio.

The molecules seemed to visibly quiver before realigning themselves into a large rectangular shape more than 7-feet-high and 4-feet-wide, a portal was forming right in the Great Hall. There was a slight whoosh, like air escaping from a sealed door. A moment later the soul minder was not surprised when two more council members stepped through the magical doorway onto the dais; Malagic and Erdal.

Malagic had a full head of light brown hair and a majestic air despite his compact frame. He bore the build and mannerisms of a boxer... moving with a quick efficient grace. That was the only thing about him that resembled a pugilist. No fighter with any success in the ring would have been blessed with or kept that handsome a face.

Beside him, Erdal tucked a strand of his long ebony hair behind his ear. His dark skin made his Greek features all the more striking, looking like a statue of an ancient Olympic athlete carved by Michael-Angelo that had suddenly come to life.

The red-orange flames of both Paragons eyes flashed with comprehension revealing how quickly they read the uncertainty gripping many in the room.

Swiftly moving to where the third council member stood on the platform, the new arrivals spoke in hushed tones -- as their acolytes arrived on foot and sought to be near their masters in case their assistance was needed. Each lawmaker had at least two acolytes, while some had four or more.

"I wish I could do that," Stanus said wistfully, eyeing their movement. "I'd love to be able to portal anywhere."

"Perhaps one day," said Enver enigmatically.

Wicus wondered if that was a playful hint indicating that Stanus was destined for council duty. The two exchanged a curious look.

While all Paragons possessed varying levels of magical abilities and gifts, only members of the council had the power to portal into the Great Hall. That was one of the more intricate security precautions. The room was coded to the DNA, the genetic make-up of every single member of the council, all combined into the very stonework on which the hall was built. That allowed them to come and go as they pleased, handling the urgent business of the council immediately.

"Er, it's been a thousand years or so since the composition of the council changed," Stanus offered.

"You have a good memory," Enver replied.

Status looked around the room at the council members present then back again at Wicus and Enver before continuing. "I haven't heard that any current elder wants to retire from public service... Are you suggesting that one of these guys wants to live his eternity following other pursuits?"

"I'm not suggesting anything of the kind," Enver replied with a wink.

"What does that mean?" asked Wicus, echoing Status' unspoken question.

"You never know what the future holds."

Before either could ask him to explain, Enver walked over to join the new arrivals on the platform.

"Wow, can you imagine? The hall genetically coded to my *DNA*."

"Maybe it will be *MY DNA*."

Status chuckled, he knew Wicus had no desire to serve on the august body, "I'll keep that in mind."

"Perhaps you're interested in finding a quicker way to pop over and visit Myling," teased Wicus.

"Sometimes having friends with gifts in the human world can provide unexpected benefits. Especially given our current situation."

Wicus sobered at the thought. Was Status using the Asian witch to do his bidding? Before he could ask, he spotted additional soul minders joining the crowd, they were walking in from the main entrance as he had done.

Among them more of his friends-- including a pair of tall, thin, blond fellows who mated souls throughout most of Europe. They bickered constantly, for the most part it was a good natured rivalry. Like many of the other Paragons with blue flamed eyes, they were new to their duties and competed about everything.

And there was a Paragon with flaming red eyes, unruly dark hair, thick brows and goatee, his skin was deeply tanned as though he stayed out in the hot sun that baked the Arab sands where the mortals he served lived. The tan only enhanced his rugged, wild beauty.

Wicus smiled in greeting or waved at each upon catching the newcomer's eye.

Dutifully floating by the Arab soul minder's side at shoulder level was an enchanted brass oil lamp, made famous by the children's stories told about Aladdin and his magic torch. The Luminary had been a resident of the Paragon world for as long as Wicus could remember.

If humans only knew how many of their fairytales and childhood legends were based on real elements from the magical realm: witches, wizards, immortals, enchanted beings and other creatures in between -- well they probably wouldn't sleep easily at night or ever for that matter.

There were no stories about Paragons in the mortal world, no tales of their beauty or courage or valor in any of the human literature. And there was a good reason for that. Because Paragons were better at keeping their secrets while exercising their duties than any other supernatural beings that ever existed.

"I'm going to have a word with Caroline," Waxine informed him as she breezed past. She delivered the message as a statement of fact, not as one asking for permission. Waxine was loyal to Wicus, but she was one Luminary who never acted in a submissive manner, quite the contrary, she was one bold candelabra.

Wicus turned to speak to his companion, she was already floating away from him, up, up, up to the high vaulted ceiling. The Luminary gave Lionel a withering look in passing, her flames rising slightly for added emphasis should he dare speak.

Wicus' lips twitched at the nonverbal exchange, noting that Lionel was not foolish enough to open his mouth.

He wondered what Caroline might have to say about the present quest facing those assembled.

The enchanted chandelier was one of several that resided in the Great Hall. Her favored spot was at the other end of the chamber, opposite from the entrance.

Nice place for eavesdropping, she probably knows everything about what's going on, he mused.

"In it up to her eyebrows, no doubt," he said aloud to himself.

As was often the case, Waxine may again prove to be a valuable ally at ferreting out information that others were reluctant to share.

She's almost as good as me, he thought, smiling to himself.

More movement by the entrance door caught his eye and a wide grin split Wicus' ample lips as he spotted his former mentor, Ozel, walking in with a new acolyte, he rushed over to greet him with a one-armed embrace. The Paragon custom for those held in great esteem.

"Hello, my old friend."

"Ah Wicus, how wonderful to see you... well perhaps not in these circumstances," the elder hedged.

"So you have heard what's going on?"

"Yes, yes, it's a bad business I'm afraid... but we'll sort it out." Turning, Ozel motioned for his assistant, "Come Karl, meet one of the more interesting acolytes that I've ever had the opportunity to train."

"Oh, you are too kind Ozel. I remember making plenty of mistakes when I was working with you," Wicus beamed at the praise.

He had vivid memories of being in Ozel's employ, seeing his fair hair gleaming under the hidden lights that the elder Paragon favored for illumination as he'd worked at his desk. Always one to play matters close to the vest, Ozel wouldn't endure the scrutiny of a Luminary.

Light had also poured in through the open portals that the council member used as windows in his office overlooking the fjords of Iceland. Wicus had been young and eager to help with any project offered.

Of course Ozel was no longer a soul tender even though he'd been quite good at it.

The thought made Wicus wonder at how training with certain Paragons opened doors. He had not selected Ozel. Ozel had picked him. Were some born to be soul tenders or administrators or security agents and the like? Was it a voluntary calling or an involuntary one? Clearly such predispositions didn't apply across the board to all, he mused. Humans had scientists, inventors, artists and entertainers. In the realm between reality and the tangible none of those vocations existed. Was it because his society only focused on mating souls? he pondered.

Much like Wellmus, Wicus knew what he was meant to do. He never



questioned his duty to the souls under his care.

Wicus turned to Karl.

"I was fortunate enough to learn from this Paragon for 350 years.... It's because of his guidance that I was finally able to join the ranks of soul minders."

Karl, impressed, shook Wicus' hand with both of his.

"Very pleased to meet you sir."

"I remember you were uncertain about carrying out some of my orders, especially if they differed from the course of action you believed correct," recalled Ozel, "You were however always loyal."

Wicus' smile faltered a little at the veiled criticism, a moment later his expression became unreadable.

"You can count on me to carry out your wishes master," Karl said with great deference.

"Spoken like a true zealot," observed Wicus, he had a gift for detecting bull shit and false confidence, but he added, "Who knows, perhaps you'll follow in my footsteps... we could always add another to the brotherhood."

"Save the recruiting talk for another time Wicus, it's only his first day," admonished Ozel.

Karl grinned.

Ozel motioned for him to follow as he turned toward the dais.

"Duty first."

Wicus was about to join them when long arms reached around him, and spun him around before culminating in a friendly hug. It was Janus. One of the few soul minders that Wicus didn't call friend.

He'd never had a good reason why. Something about the long, lean, lanky, pale skinned Paragon with the equally pale blond hair worn barely long enough to cover his neck, that Wicus found unsettling. Janus' eyes had been flaming green as long as Wicus had known him. He couldn't recall a time when the soul minder's eyes had ever been blue.

"It is good to see you Wicus," said Janus stepping back and releasing him, realizing somewhat late that perhaps his impromptu hug had not been a good idea.

It was a question of Wicus' demeanor. Normally honest and blunt with everyone else, he'd always seemed too aloof in his regard and Janus wanted to change the dynamic. Upon reflection he realized that perhaps now had not been the best time.

"I am well," replied Wicus stiffly. The nerve of him! his thoughts bristled.

The two were saved from further interaction by Malagic, raising his voice above the din speaking from the platform. Wicus quickly moved away from Janus.

"Soul minders, friends, Luminaries, all Paragon residents, cease your worry and this turmoil. In the coming hours we will find a solution to this disturbance in our work...none of your souls will go mateless," he tried to assure the anxious crowd.

The gathering drew back in anticipation that an answer to their shared dilemma was about to be given.