

December 10, 2012
Las Vegas, Nevada
3:00 A.M.

“The feathers are forming in the heavens and the Cold Moon is almost upon us. Soon Father Snake will open his eyes, and with them, the seven gates.”

Ren tilted his head down as he heard Choo Co La Tah’s deep proper British accent disturbing the solemn darkness where he sat, listening to the silence around him. Those feathers were the crown on the head of the Snake constellation that ruled their ancient calendar. When the feathers were in full plumage and the winter solstice aligned, the gates between this world and others would open. And into this world would spill all the evil that had been driven out by not only his people, but those from the other six continents as well.

Eleven days.

12/21/12. 11:11 A.M. At that precise instant the heart of the universe would cross through the tree of life. The head, heart, and body would be aligned for the first time in centuries.

How perfect was that? If anyone had ever doubted the balance and cycles of the universe, that should be proof enough to convince them that while everything might seem random, it wasn’t. No one, except the Great Creator, could have timed this so perfectly.

Eleven days to the Reset.

Ren could hear the clock ticking. Every heartbeat brought them closer to the inevitable. Closer to all hell busting loose.

Be a good time to call in sick to work.

If only. But such luxuries belonged to humans, not to immortals such as he. For creatures like him, there was never a sick day or even a lazy one. Win, lose, or draw, they would fight to the bitterest end and take as many of their enemies with them as they could.

United we stand.

United we die.

And for an immortal, death was much scarier than it was for a human. When you died without a soul, it was utter agony for all eternity.

Hell had nothing on the existence that would become his should he fall.

Ren inclined his head respectfully to Choo Co La Tah. “I’ve been watching the signs.” During which he’d had a vision that still haunted him. Even with his eyes wide open, he saw her clearly. Felt her presence as if she were here, right now.

But he had no idea who *she* was. A mere slip of a woman with the courage of the cliff ogre, she’d come to him through the darkness. Dressed in yellow buckskin, she’d twisted up her dark brown hair and laced it with white feathers. Like the goddess who’d taken his soul, she’d knelt by his side while he lay wounded on the ground. Her sweet voice had soothed him as she sang in a language he hadn’t heard a woman speak in over two thousand years.

Death had held him tight until she’d laid her tiny hand to his bloody cheek. Leaning forward, she’d continued to sing, her breath falling against his skin. Her kind touch and soothing voice had driven away his pain until he felt nothing except the heat of her flesh against his. Her gaze had held his as she brushed a kiss to his lips. One so light, it felt like the wings of a hummingbird. “I’m here for you,” she’d whispered an instant before she stabbed him straight through his heart. As the pain seared him, she’d laughed, then left him there to die alone.

He’d barely finished that vision before Choo Co La Tah had appeared in his backyard. For the last half hour, he’d been in solemn observance of the sky above, watching for something to belie what he knew was coming for them.

No one can stop a train. The best they could do was bleed on the cattle scoop and tracks.

Ren stood up slowly in the middle of his backyard, then turned to face the ancient immortal.

Centuries ago, they had been in the same clan together. Choo Co La Tah had once been his brother's most trusted friend and advisor.

But things changed. And so did people. Too often you woke up to find that the person you were the closest to was the one you knew the least about. And as Ren had learned firsthand, the friend saturated with evil was the one thing to fear the most. While enemies could wound your body, an evil friend wounded the heart and mind—two things that could prove fatal.

“There's no sign of the Keeper.” Choo Co La Tah glanced up at the Pleiades above them to where the first gate lay. The same stars Ren had been focused on. And the ones that held a special place in his heart. “What if she's dead already?”

“A good friend once told me not to dread the future. One way or another, it would come. The trick was to meet it with open arms so that when it ran me over, it wouldn't break anything.”

Choo smiled. “I was much younger and far more flexible in those days.”

Ren laughed at the ancient who physically appeared to be a well-muscled man in his early thirties. Dressed in a tan buckskin coat and jeans, Choo wore his long black hair braided down his back—the same style as Ren's. And each of his eight fingers bore a silver ring that protected a sacred stone. Like him, Choo had once been the best of their clan's warriors. They had gone to war together and they had fought against each other. Ironically, Ren had been the only one to ever defeat Choo Co La Tah.

Something he'd cheated to do.

Luckily, Choo didn't hold a grudge.

Much.

Ren crossed his arms over his chest as he noticed how cool the night air had become. While he'd been meditating, he hadn't paid attention to the dropping temperature. Now, the cold desert wind made itself known. “Besides, it's not her death we should fear as much as the possibility that her stone is now in the hands of something it shouldn't be.”

Choo Co La Tah nodded in agreement. “And that is what I fear most. The ghighau should have contacted me by now. Since she hasn't...” His frustration was tangible. “I don't even know who she is in this life.”

Neither did Ren. In order to protect her from all the predators who would kill her if they could, the Spirits had never allowed the Guardians to know her identity until it was a necessity. Where the Guardians were immortal, the Keeper wasn't. A human child, she passed her sacred stone from mother to daughter, along with the story of their most sacred duty. Whenever the time came for the Reset, the Keeper always sent a dream to Choo Co La Tah to let him know who she was. With two of the four Guardians slain, Choo and Ren's brother Coyote, were the only ones left who could assist her in resetting their calendar and keeping the gates closed.

One Guardian who would protect her.

His brother who would kill her.

Ren, who had been a Guardian until his brother had stolen his position, now lay between the two. While he intended to stand and fight with Choo Co La Tah to the best of his abilities, he wasn't sure what he would do against his brother. A part of him still hated Coyote with a vengeance that left him bitter. But beneath that was a guilt so profound that he wasn't even angry that Coyote had tortured him last year when he had taken Ren captive.

How could he be when he'd done far more harm to Coyote?

Betrayals were never easy. When they came from a stranger, they were hateful. When they came from a friend, they were hurtful, and when they came from family ...

They were vitriolic.

He clapped Choo Co La Tah on the back. “Look on the bright side. At least no one's uncapped the Anikutani.”

“Yet, my dear boy. But remember, we still have eleven days to go. One 'oh shit' moment can undo all of our best efforts to protect this world, and there's nothing more dangerous in this existence

than a moron on a mission.”

Ren snorted at his optimism. “Sure there is, Choo.”

“And that would be?”

“One with an Internet connection and a six-pack of Red Bull.” But all joking aside, Choo Co La Tah was right. If anyone were to uncap the stone seal that kept Ren’s brethren imprisoned during the Time Untime ...

He really was going to call in sick to work.

And find a hole to hide in.

At the mere thought of their return, his stomach tightened and chills ran up his arms as if his unconscious was trying to warn him that it was already too late to contemplate running. It felt as if the seal had been broken.

Stop. It’s the wind.

That he had no doubt about. But the question was, did that wind come from the desert?

Or from the Anikutani being released?

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