

Praise for

# THE BOOK OF HEARTBREAK

*'The Book of Heartbreak is a true delight – vivid, fresh, and gripping from its curse to its unique voice to its quirky angelic emails. I was transported by Ova Ceren's debut novel, and would like to be transported to Istanbul, please, to visit the book's sites and eat Turkish sweets while scanning the streets for cats and wayward ethereals.'*

Laini Taylor, *New York Times* and *Sunday Times*  
bestselling author of *Daughter of Smoke and Bone*

*'The Book of Heartbreak is a beautiful, folkloric exploration of generational trauma, love, and ultimately forgiveness. An evocative tale of star- and curse-crossed love seamlessly blending Ottoman history and fantasy.'*

Brigitte Knightley, author of *The Irresistible  
Urge to Fall For Your Enemy*

*'Vibrant and romantic, this tale of angels and curses will transport you to Istanbul and weave its own magic on your heart.'*

M. A. Kuzniar, author of *Midnight in Everwood*

*'The Book of Heartbreak is a richly told story of love lost and found, shot through with Turkish folklore. An utterly unique and life affirming debut.'*

Holly Race, author of *Six Wild Crowns*

'I fell in love from the first page! Ceren has woven a tale that speaks to the heart with a stunning blend of humour, haunting beauty and cultural richness. *The Book of Heartbreak* is a must read! Make a cup of tea, grab your favourite sweet and get ready to fall in love with this stunning debut!'

Breanne Randall, *New York Times* bestselling author of  
*The Unfortunate Side Effects of Heartbreak and Magic*

'An enchanting tale of self-discovery, loss and love. I adored this beautiful and wise novel. Ova Ceren is a brilliant writer and her voice is infused with lyricism, wit and unique imagination. I cannot wait to read more from her.'

Veronika Dapunt, author of *Death and Other  
Occupational Hazards*

'Lyrical and full of charming wit, Ceren's debut is a tale for the dreamers. Every page is dusted with delicate, bitter sweet magic.'

Rachel Greenlaw, bestselling author of  
*The Woodsmoke Women's Book of Spells*

'Heartbreakingly beautiful. A stunning debut that swept me away on a tale of angels, curses and romance.'

Bex Hogan, author of *Nettle*

'A tour de force of lyrical angst and magic.'

L. J. Shen, *New York Times* bestselling  
author of *Sinners of Saint*



THE  
BOOK  
OF  
HEARTBREAK



Ova Ceren

HOT  
KEY  
BOOKS

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*To K & Menna, for the finest books and cake,  
and Memo, who has the kind mischief that inspires stories*



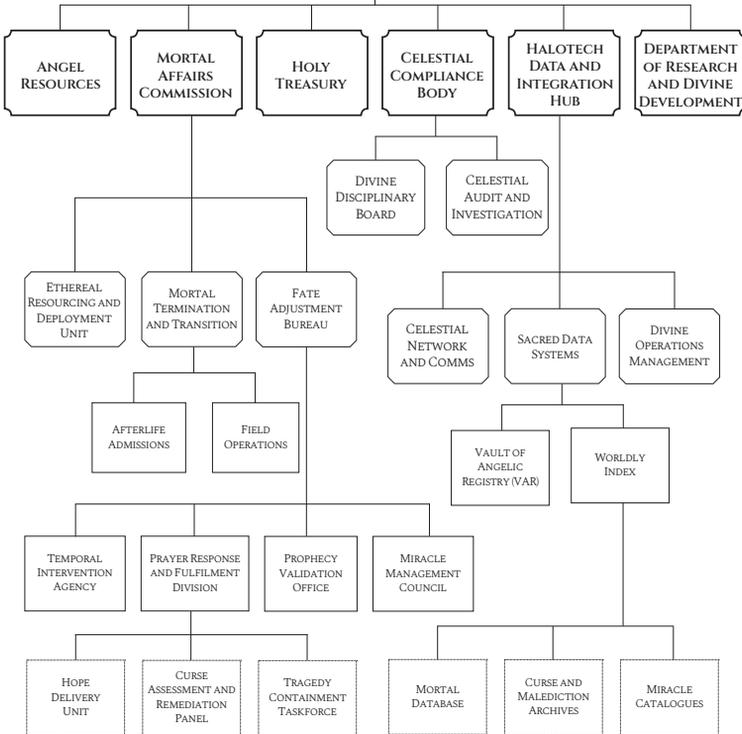


# THE HOLY ORGANISATION OF THE OTHERSIDE

**BOSS ALMIGHTY**  
(THEY WHOM SHOULD NOT BE CONCERNED)

**HEAVENLY GOVERNANCE**

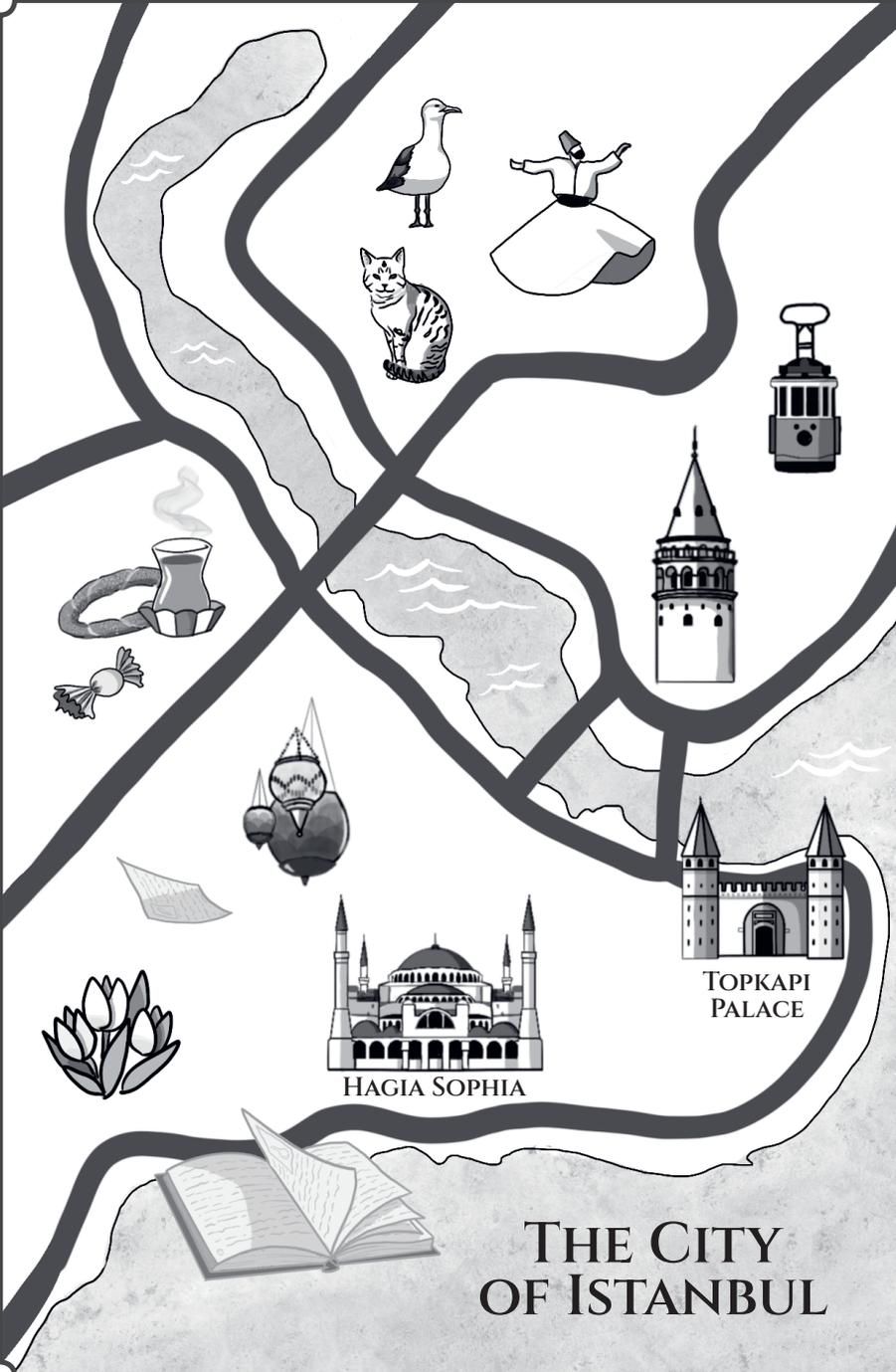
CHIEF EXECUTIVE CELESTIALS AKA ARCHANGELS  
(MIKHAEL, GABRIEL, RAPHAEL, URIEL)



**INFERNAL DOMINION**

(SEPARATE HIERARCHY)

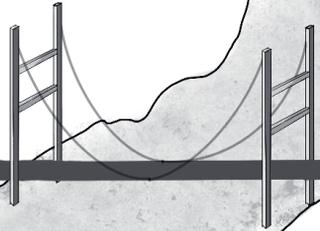
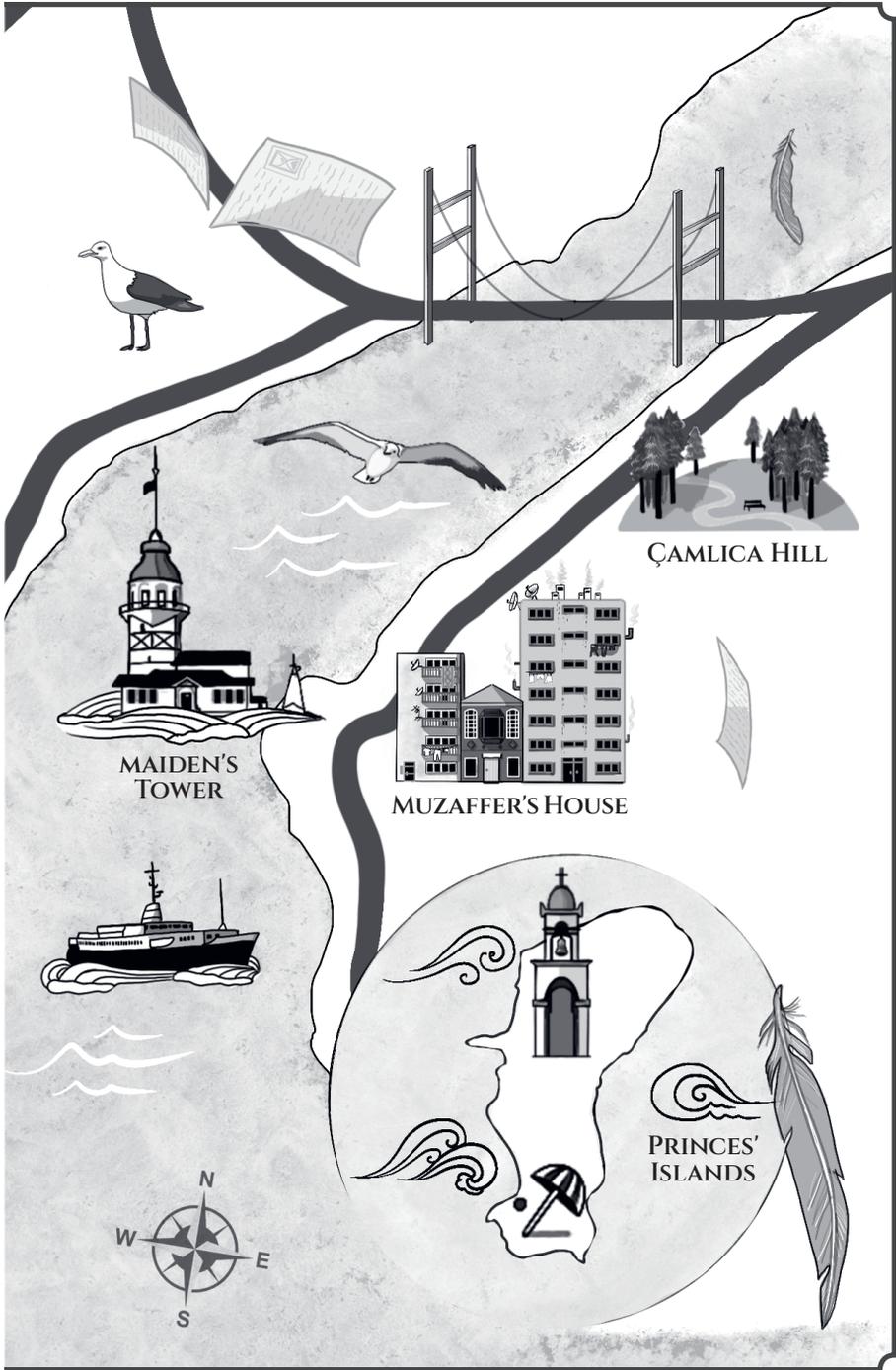




HAGIA SOPHIA

TOPKAPI  
PALACE

# THE CITY OF ISTANBUL



ÇAMLICA HILL



MAIDEN'S TOWER



MUZAFFER'S HOUSE



PRINCES' ISLANDS





***Communication is classified as Highly Confidential.  
Circulation strictly limited to beings of celestial origins.***

**Subject: Urgent Inquiry Regarding Discrepancy in Curse Records**

**Date:** 7 January 2025

**From:** Grey the Compassionate, Associate Cherub, Curse and Malediction Archives, Worldly Index, Sacred Data Systems, Halotech Data and Integration Hub

**To:** Fate Adjustment Bureau – ALL Angels

**CC:** Mortal Affairs Commission – ALL Angels

Dear and Most Respectable Angels of the Fate Adjustment Bureau,

I hope this message finds you in cherubic spirits. I am reaching out to address a most pressing matter in the Curse and Malediction Archives.

During a recent database upgrade, I discovered that the curse record CID-1010834556 had been deleted without the approval of my superior, the Divine Data Officer. While I can retrieve some of the data from backups, attempting to open the full report, including the related document (DTH-9000719), results in an Unauthorised Access error, even though I have the necessary permissions.

And there is more! On several occasions, the cursed mortal, ID: M939274856567048343, appears to have crossed into our domain, yet there is no record of their arrival on the Otherside. It is most perplexing that this soul has experienced death three times. Three times!

Further investigation led me to conclude that this is the work of an exceptionally strong curse, festering on years of unanswered prayers from another mortal. It's unfortunate that the Prayer Response and Fulfilment Division was too occupied to respond, and thus the curse spawned many tragedies. A quick examination reveals that a throng of mortals involved are already dead, and the curse, which should be dormant according to our sacred systems, is still very much active. It tickles my curiosity.

I would be delighted to volunteer my services in any plans to tackle this curse. I always had a fondness for Konstantiniyye – or Istanbul as it's called these days (a pity if you ask me, as I favour the old name) – and I'm particularly enthralled by enigmatic curses.

As much as the audacity of advising my superiors crushes me, I am obliged to remind you that if this matter falls onto the radar of the archangels or – Heavens forbid – They Whom Should Not Be Concerned, the consequences may be drastic. So we must act, dear comrade superiors!

Your prompt attentions to this matter will be greatly appreciated.

Yours divinely,

Grey the Compassionate

Doctorate of Angelic Scholarship (Hons)

Thrice longlisted for the Heavenly Achievement Prize



*It may not be evident to the untrained eye, but Death is ever-present, woven through our world like the wind, rain or storm. Those blessed with the pure eye understand that Death is not a lone entity but a legion, its acolytes walking amongst us to fulfil their duties. These emissaries may occasionally falter, their missteps – though trivial to them – bearing dire consequences for mortals. What is a human life to the Hidden, if not too numerous and dispensable to be accounted for with meticulous care?*

**Excerpt from *The Book of Heartbreak, Münecimbaşı Sufi Chelebi's Journals of Mystical Phenomena***

My life turns upside down on a Tuesday evening in June.

I get home from school as usual, eager to shut out the world behind the front door. But the minute I see our neighbour Fiona tucked into the hallway, I know something is wrong.

The evening is too balmy for shivering, the hour too late for visitors. Not that we usually have any. It's just Mum and me – if you don't count the succession of men who make fleeting appearances at random hours. Mum's regrettable taste in the other sex must be beginning to drag down the property values in our morbidly expensive street.

'Sare.' Fiona looks everywhere but into my eyes, balancing her toddler Dotty on her hip. 'Darling.'

At the word *darling* my hands go clammy. Mum's friends mostly ignore her asocial, weird seventeen-year-old daughter. But now Fiona extends her arm towards me, her shirt buttons askew, her hair a mess. I recoil from the touch. Whatever has caused her to wash up here wearing slippers and no make-up is bad news, and I want none of it.

'What's going on?' I shrug off my backpack.

'Will you come inside for a minute?'

'Where's Mum?' I'm determined to pinpoint my mother's whereabouts before delving into whatever trouble has transpired. If I can predict what's wrong, perhaps things won't be as catastrophic. 'Is she home?'

Now looming at the threshold of the reception room, Fiona shakes her head.

I go still, my gold pendant heavy around my neck, any remaining hope I had melting like ice cream in my hand. Grubby toddler fingers tug at Fiona's hair, but she doesn't flinch. *Shit*, I think as my feet follow them inside the room. *Shit, shit, shit*. The thuds of my footsteps sound hollow – as if I'm made of fear and not flesh. Something must have happened. I begin to plot tolerable scenarios that wouldn't

be the worst. Perhaps Mum's in hospital, unwell but unharmed. Or she could have driven to Ferit's place again, the ex she can't forget. Has she made a scene at his? Perhaps the police have arrested her.

Inside, Dotty starts to cry as soon as Fiona sinks onto the worn-out sofa. 'Please sit.'

'Why?'

'Please,' she repeats. Her gaze still evades me. She doesn't want to be here, I realise. She doesn't want to deliver this speech or meet my eyes. I feel a twinge of pity for her, that she has to bear whatever turbulence my mother has caused. My heart flutters inside my ribs like a caged bird. The fluttering is a gentle prelude before a burning pain that mustn't come – a warning that I can't think about others. I have to focus on myself. She isn't here, but Munu's words chime in my ears as I sink onto the sofa, perching on its edge. *You have a responsibility to protect yourself. You must care about yourself and no one else.*

If only it were that easy.

Fiona sets Dotty on the floor before easing herself beside me. The toddler immediately uses the edge of the coffee table to pull herself upright. Three empty wine bottles wobble in front of her, the dappled reflection of the Japanese maple in the front garden imprinted on their necks.

I clasp my hands between my knees and face Fiona, ready to absorb the damage.

'Your mother—' Her knee jabs into mine as she snatches a tarnished coaster from Dotty's mouth. I shift to avoid her squirming. 'Your mother was involved in an

accident, and unfortunately, she didn't make it.' Fiona swallows a dry sob.

'Accident?' I look away from her and glance around the room as if it owes me an explanation. Last night's half-finished meal is sat on a plate in the corner, rotting. Mismatched cushions lie on the sofa, the TV remote wedged between them; wine glasses, an array of empty mugs, boxes of painkillers on top of a pile of magazines.

'She was driving down the M11, and it appears that she'd been drinking—' Fiona shakes her head in disbelief, as if it makes no sense, like Mum was the sanest person on the face of the earth and would never drink-drive. She pauses as if it's my turn to talk, but I don't have any words.

'The police called me an hour ago,' Fiona says eventually, with a sigh.

The fact that this woman was Mum's emergency contact fills me with sorrow. Mum lost her own mother when she was born, and her father died when she was pregnant with me. She has a few friends, sure, but no other family. We have no one who truly cares. No one to call when she dies. No one but a neighbour, who clearly wishes she wasn't involved.

'She's . . . dead?' I finally stutter. The idea that someone's life can be flicked off like a light switch – that your mum can vanish on a motorway in an instant – doesn't seem real.

'She's gone, Sare.' Fiona reaches for Dotty's shoulder as the child loses her balance and lets out a wail. 'I can't believe it. I saw her only this morning.'

*Dead*, my mind registers, like an ink stain expanding on a white napkin. My mother is dead. The fluttering in my

chest sharpens into a searing, inescapable throb. My hands twitch on my lap, the scars inside my left palm tingling.

Fuck. I shouldn't have ignored the fluttering.

A dated photograph of my mother and me in a wooden frame grows larger above the fireplace. I must be five or six, Mum is sober, and her smile is timid. Her hand clutches my arm as if to ensure that I'm real, that I'm really hers. She used to love me back then, when I was a child and she still had a light in her eyes. Then I grew up, and she changed. *Why do you make everything a big deal?* Her voice wavers in my ears. *Why do you always have to worry so much, Sare?*

The walls begin to shrink and I exhale all the hope that was left in me. My lungs deflate. My heart begins to sizzle and I look down to my open palm, where three faint scars are carved as reminders for me not to mess up again.

'She's gone,' Fiona repeats, her voice stilted like a robot on the brink of shutting down. That's when I spot the fissures appearing on the wall behind her.

No. It can't be happening again. I have to stop it. I have to prevent it.

*Rule number three, I recite in vain. Death is not an option.*

For a brief moment I consider grasping my pendant to summon Munu. Is it too late? Maybe she can help, do something to prevent my failure, but before I can do anything, the walls crumble and the room closes around me like the grip of an old regret.

*She's gone.* The words echo, circling me like vultures. *She's gone. She's gone. She's gone.*

'No!' I scream. 'Stop!'

*Sare, you fool. Did you really think you could win against the curse?*

What have I done? How did I trick myself into believing that I didn't love Mum? I never stopped caring about her. She is all I have.

The floor quivers, creaking and groaning in response to my panic, and the house bows down, succumbing to the relentless force of the earthquake. The pain I yearned to forget these past four years pierces me like lightning, proving once more that it's stronger than I've ever been. I should fight back, recite the rules, breathe, count – distract myself. Isn't that what I'm supposed to do?

There are hundreds of ways to fill your life, and they say you should make the most of it. I never dare follow this advice. In the past, I was naive enough to chase happiness, but each heartbreak has taught me a lesson. I wasn't like the other kids. I had to master my emotions. And I thought I had – I haven't cried since I was thirteen. I shut myself away so no affection could worm itself into my chest. I refused every sliver of hope and happiness. I didn't have a drop of love left in me. I can't be screwing all that up now.

But the earthquake rages on, breaking glass, splintering wood – telling me what I truly am. An orphan. A no one. The loneliest girl who ever walked the earth. It's too late to fight back or resist; too late to call for help. I hear the crack of my heart and fall to the floor like a ragdoll.

This time, it only takes nine seconds to die.



*A curse is a fault within the divine order – intentionally or, at times, unwittingly. Many who bear curses traverse their lives without the faintest inkling of their burden, while others may never forget such a realisation until they're in the arms of Death.*

**Excerpt from *The Book of Heartbreak, Münecimbaşı Sufi Chelebi's Journals of Mystical Phenomena***

Family is fate. It seeks to expand and endure, defying time in a rebellion against individual mortality. It wants to live forever, leaving marks on the earth, begging not to be forgotten.

So people invent surnames to enclose themselves in families; everyone is born into a lineage branded by your ancestors.

But a surname isn't the only thing you receive without consent. You inherit genes. Moles. Dimples. Birthmarks.

Illnesses. You inherit your mother's smile or temper. The tremble in her hands when she's nervous, the way she brushes off compliments about her beauty. You inherit a cage of loneliness and the ache of not belonging.

And sometimes, if you're as unfortunate as I am, you inherit poor luck – passed down like a family heirloom, coursing through your blood like poison.

Not that Mum is – was – cursed like I am. She and I were always opposites, as if our roles had been reversed. As if I was the parent and she was the child. I won't take a step without calculating the risks and she never considered the consequences of her actions. I live in a voluntary isolation, barring affection and avoiding any meaningful connections, while Mum dived head first into relationships, desperate to be loved. Yet the men who adored her were the ones she couldn't stand; she always fell for those who had no mercy for her.

Perhaps I'm luckier than she was. Perhaps I should be grateful that I can't ever let a boy into my heart. I can't lower my guard, not even for a second. I can't afford to feel love.

Because love is a four-letter death sentence for someone like me, cursed to die of heartbreak.



I was four when I almost died for the first time, and this near miss gave me Munu – the only soul who is ever allowed close to me.

Our first encounter is etched vividly in my mind. Later, when I understood how dangerous it is for me to open my

heart to others, I used that memory as a shield, a way to ward off the hazards of potential friendships. But in that moment, I was blissfully unaware of the perils people could present.

A group of kids decided to disown me in the playground with that innocent, headstrong cruelty that belongs only to children. If I close my eyes now, I can still see them running. I can hear the flute of their laughter, the chorus of their words: *you're not playing with us*. I can feel the hot tears on my cheeks, the frantic fluttering in my chest, the scrape of rough bark against my skin as I fell to the ground. Then the fluttering twisted, morphing into a sharp, searing burn. I gasped for air, flailing like a fish out of water.

'Don't cry, canim,' a voice soothed me. 'Crying only makes it worse.'

I lifted my head to see a tiny woman, no taller than the length of my arm, hovering in mid-air. Her scruffy grey pigeon wings were barely noticeable against the puffy sugar-pink princess gown she wore. I thought she must be a fairy godmother here to save me.

She circled me and, distracted by the flapping of her wings, I forgot the sting in my chest.

I opened my hand and she landed on my palm with a sigh.

'Your lifeline isn't particularly long,' she murmured, tiptoeing across my skin, each step a faint tickle. 'But bolder than the others I've seen. My other assignments, I mean. They did fine.' She cleared her throat. 'Mostly fine. But never mind that. You're not just any old job. You're quite special.'

I remained quiet, wondering if I'd fallen asleep. Maybe this was just a dream.

'You're too young, aren't you?' she asked suddenly. 'How old are you now?'

'Four,' I answered, absent-minded.

'Boss in Heavens!' she gasped, covering her mouth with a tiny hand. 'Just a baby, and ready to shatter like glass. Tell me now, sweet girl, do you feel funny around here?' She poked a finger to her chest.

'Not any more,' I said, and her smile widened.

'Well, that is good. I've successfully saved you.' She beamed. 'Sare Sila Silverbirch, my name is Munu, and I'm your guardian.'

'Like a fairy godmother?' I ventured, hopeful.

'Ah . . . wouldn't it be lovely if I had a magic wand?' She chuckled. 'I'd flick it and – *poof* – everything would be fixed! But no, I have no wands to wave or stardust to sprinkle, I'm afraid. Perhaps I'm a godmother of sorts, but my powers are . . . limited. Very limited. I work for my boss, who answers to some very important bosses on the Otherside. They're called the Hidden. It's complicated, but what matters is this: the organisation serves mortals like you.'

I blinked, unable to process her words. My confusion must have shown; Munu's eyes softened.

'If it helps,' she said gently, 'a long time ago, I was a living, breathing soul – just like you. Trust me, I understand how much it hurts. I had a heart before I died.' She pauses to frown. 'I still have one, I guess.'

‘You’re dead?’ I blurted, gaping at her.

‘In theory.’ Munu cleared her throat again. ‘Or practice. Doesn’t matter.’

‘Where’s my mummy?’ I scanned the park anxiously. The tiny woman didn’t seem malicious but her admission of being dead made my stomach tighten.

‘There,’ Munu said, pointing behind the fences.

Mum stood laughing with a man, perhaps another parent or a stranger, but turned to wave at me. She had a striking beauty that drew men to her like wasps to a honey pot.

‘You did very well today, canim. Remarkable!’ Munu chimed without batting another glance in my mother’s direction. ‘Now I’m not sure how much sense this will make to you, but you almost died today. A near miss for this little heart of yours, but I made it in time.’

‘W-what do you mean?’ I rose to my feet, Munu still in my palm.

‘Listen closely – there’s no easy way to tell you this, so I will be direct,’ Munu said, taking a deep breath. ‘You’re cursed, Sare. If your heart breaks five times before the age of eighteen, your mortal life will finish. Can you even count to five? Boss in Heavens, we must use those heartbreaks wisely, if we use them at all.’

I stared at her with a furrowed brow.

‘Four years old, and already so delicate.’ Munu took off, leaving my bare palm behind. ‘We’re treading on thin ice – this is a dangerous task.’

‘What do you mean, dangerous?’ I dropped my hand.

‘Don’t you worry about it,’ Munu huffed. ‘I’ll protect you from the horrors of mankind. Just promise me this: don’t you ever cry, alright? It’s the first and foremost rule.’

I nodded, unsettled by the gravity of her warning. It would take me a few more years to fully grasp what it meant to bear a curse – how, beneath my ribcage, tucked behind bones curving like praying fingers, lay a heart so flawed that it would kill me with each heartbreak.

‘I mean it. It’s the first rule of survival against the curse, Sare. *No tears shall fall*. You won’t cry, alright?’

‘But why me?’ I whispered, curiosity bubbling in my chest. ‘Why do I have a curse?’

‘Why, why, why? That’s all anyone ever asks!’ Munu’s wings stilled, her gaze hardened. ‘You have these stubborn curls and brown eyes, and a cursed heart. It all happens because it does. There is no why. You should be grateful to have my invaluable assistance – many aren’t so fortunate.’

‘Okay.’ I nodded again, the weight of her words pressing heavier this time.

‘Aren’t you a sweetheart, canim?’ Munu’s wings shifted with a soft, feathery sweep, like a sparrow’s. ‘Too kind and gentle for your own good.’

With that, Munu became a constant presence in my life, visiting daily, often more than once. Days elongated into weeks, and weeks into months, gradually expanding the dense veil of childhood, and it dawned on me that I was the only person capable of seeing or hearing Munu. I was surprisingly at peace with this realisation, for it made me feel special. I tried again to ask her at times, ‘Why am

I cursed?’ No one else around me seemed to tolerate such a burden. But Munu would always shut me down. The Hidden were called *Hidden* for a reason – questioning their ways was futile. ‘Curiosity never ends well, especially with a boss like mine,’ she’d warn, and eventually I stopped trying.

I never told Mum about Munu. Back then, my mother doted on me, but she wouldn’t have believed me if I said I had an invisible godmother. Besides, Munu insisted it would only upset her. Mum was already sad, and her sadness made everything harder.

Munu’s lively banter served as a beacon of light in those dim days of my childhood. She was faithful to her promise to look after me, dedicating every single second that she remained in the world to my well-being and troubles.

I was the one who failed to keep my end of the bargain.



They say that your life flashes before your eyes when you die, but mine never has. Perhaps it was because the pain is blinding, or perhaps it was the sad fact that nothing noteworthy happened in my life except for dying.

I wish I could cite grand reasons for each time I lost my precious life – like love, betrayal or adventure – but they’re all disappointingly mundane. My first heartbreak was marked by the departure of a childminder.

Munu had cautioned me against getting too attached to Carly, and I did my best. Mum had found her on a Facebook group and hired her despite the fact that she probably had no qualifications to look after children. Carly would

pick me up from school with sheer joy every time she saw me. She was firm but warm, and her house maintained a constant aroma of fish fingers and nail polish. Sometimes a word or a smell lands me back on her squeaky leather sofa – where we watched movies with ratings above my age while I snuggled against her like a kitten. Munu would perch on my shoulder to complain and, like the fool I was, I'd shoo her away.

'You're her job,' she'd protest. 'You'll end up heartbroken if you don't wise up now.'

I was eight when Carly left.

Her departure was my first true heartbreak. The earth quivered around me when I learned she was gone, the rumble foretelling my first death.

After three uneventful years, I ventured into friendship again at eleven, but it soon ended even more disastrously than my first attempt in the playground. Again, I hate to say that Munu had warned me. 'I do not trust this Aurelie,' she kept saying, but her advice fell on deaf ears. Aurelie was a lovely friend, until we both developed a crush on the same boy. I was willing to step aside, but before I could, Aurelie chose to discard our friendship to claim Thomas for herself. My heart was shattered once more. Twice heartbroken, twice dead. This time, the ground seemed to split beneath me, each crack resonating with my despair. I hoped it would be the last. Surely, no pain could surpass betrayal by my best friend.

Yet, only two years later, Ferit, Mum's most enduring flame, crumpled my heart like a ball of paper. I had

stupidly accepted him as a father figure despite Munu's pleas, and this unwise decision cost me dearly. When Ferit finally slammed the door and left for good, my mother and I both collapsed under the weight of our heartbreak. But of course, unlike me, Mum didn't die.

Not until today.



As my disobedient heart stops beating for the fourth time, the quivering of the earthquake diminishes, and the physical pain withdraws. My eyes adjust to the sticky darkness of the Inbetween, a realm of drifting shadows – caught between life and the Otherside. This is where I always end up when I die, stranded between fading and returning, until Munu pushes me back into the world of the living.

The Inbetween looks like a lighthouse, although I've never stayed long enough to scrutinise it properly. Time is scarce here.

I find myself on the terrace that wraps around the rotunda, separated from the starless night by wrought-iron bars. The lantern on the stone wall behind me emits a weak, silvery light that struggles against the engulfing darkness.

I grip the railing and lean over. There is no sound, no movement, yet there's a palpable sense of something churning beneath. For a moment, I consider diving in to uncover its secrets. It could be the space between the planets, or an ocean of dreams.

But before I can move, Munu's familiar chatter fills the silence like birdsong.

‘Why didn’t you fight the curse, canim?’ She’s struggling to hold back tears, I realise with shock. Munu never cries. She insists on setting a strong example for me.

‘It just happened,’ I whisper, and gaze into the void, where the impatient night ticks like a clock. Whatever unfolds here fits into a mere blink in the world I left behind.

‘*Rule number two: channel sorrow into rage,*’ Munu recites. ‘That might have spared you, had you applied it. Instead, you gave up, didn’t you?’

I don’t bother pointing out that there’s no use in repeating rules for survival when you’re already dead. Besides, how could I possibly convert the raw shock of my mother’s loss into fury? Mum wasn’t exactly Mother of the Year; most days, her eyes would slip over me, as if she couldn’t tolerate the sight of me. But things were different once – I would fall asleep in her embrace, lulled by tales of Istanbul and gentle strokes as she brushed my hair.

‘I-I don’t think anything could have saved me,’ I stutter. ‘M-Mum is dead.’

It was a battle destined to be lost.

Munu’s eyes go wide for a second, then she shakes her head, lips pursed. ‘Well, she’d been gone a while now, hadn’t she? You could barely call that living. Let me guess. Alcohol poisoning, was it? Couldn’t she have drunk less, at least for a couple more months?!’

‘It was an accident,’ I say coldly. Sober or not, I loved Mum, and that was my fault. Not hers.

‘I’m sorry, canim.’ Munu flutters up to face me. Her red lipstick and pink dress emit a neon radiance, but the

shadows trailing behind her linger as a reminder that she belongs to a place beyond the railing, pulsing like a hungry mouth eager to swallow us both. 'But I warned you that things may come to this. Didn't I?'

Munu seems to hate everyone except me. She claims her life was mundane, though she admits she was quite naughty – perhaps the reason she ended up with assignments like me instead of eternal rest. The work she does has made her so intolerant of the living, it doesn't surprise me that she never liked Mum. *Let her cry!* Munu used to complain when I'd consume myself with worry about her. *Why do you care if she ate anything? She isn't your pet, for Heavens' sake, she's your parent.* To Munu, Mum was a threat to my survival, especially after what happened with Ferit. She never forgave Mum for letting him into our lives. But I know it was my own weak heart that's to blame, nothing else.

'Fine. I fucked up again, okay?' I whisper into the shadows, clinging to my anger, ready to rub it like a bulging blister until it bursts.

I brace myself, expecting a rebuke for exhausting my last resurrection, but Munu refrains from chastising me further.

'What's happened has happened.' Her eyes are full moons as she looks at me and calms her tone. 'You'll be fine. You'll move on.'

Is it possible to move on from the death of your own mother? And at what cost, if such a thing may be achieved? But I'll get no answers here. The dark obscures everything around us. I'd be naive to expect the Inbetween to offer any

insight. Had Munu's bosses – the Hidden, whoever they are – asked me for feedback, I would've told them it would be preferable to end up dead in a remote, exotic location, and not in an abandoned lighthouse. But they never seem to care, and it remains a mystery as to why they bothered assigning Munu to help me.

'We are so close to your eighteenth birthday – to eliminating the curse,' Munu goes on. 'You're better off without her for this final stretch.'

'Stop,' I snap. I sometimes forget how brutally honest my friend can be. I can barely muster the energy to explain to Munu that this loss is unlike anything else that killed me before. Losing my mother is a sudden, crushing blow. A bottomless well I'll tumble into for as long as I live.

'Only six more months, and you will survive,' Munu continues as if I haven't spoken. 'You'll be normal – nearly – and nothing and no one will be able to break your heart after that.'

'I don't think anything else *can* break my heart any more,' I mutter.

'Well, precisely!' Munu says, and she looks happy.

Munu makes it sound all pink and fluffy, but the truth is that in six months, on 10th December, I'll be eighteen, and the curse will be no more. Of course, freedom comes with a steep price, one I'll never feel ready to pay. But if I survive until then without another heartbreak, I will live.

'You can't afford another mistake, canim. You need to think about yourself, and no one else.' Munu rushes

through the words, without even waiting for a sign of acknowledgement. 'Once you're back with the living, no matter how tempting other people's efforts at comfort, you must ignore them. Don't let the grief cripple you. You can't be vulnerable. You must live, Sare. You're my most special assignment. You *must* survive.'

I wouldn't call it surviving. When I wake up on my eighteenth birthday, the curse will claim my heart and rob me of the ability to love. For Munu, a life devoid of affection is the ultimate victory. I should be relieved, happy even, for I'll never have to brace the pain of another heartbreak once the curse sees through its grim promise. Though no matter how hard I try, I can never throw off the pervasive sense of future loss.

'I'll be okay.' I hardly believe it myself, and I wouldn't be surprised if Munu has her doubts either.

'Shut yourself away. People can't be trusted. They bring nothing but misery, anyway.' She looks up to the dim lantern. 'Keep the flame of anger alight. Anger won't break your heart. Hold on to your grudges as if they're your shields. Try to channel all that grief into resentment.'

'Enough – please.' I'm in no state for lectures I've heard a thousand times already, nor for formulating a grand survival plan, or even pondering my next steps upon return. I certainly don't need to try to resent my own mother instead of grieving for her, especially since I did so much of that when she was alive.

'Just do what you need to do,' I implore in a voice heavy with desperation. 'Send me back.'

*For the last time*, I think. I should feel grateful. But right now, I'm just numb.

Munu nods softly. Despite her tough-love approach, I know she will never break my heart.

'Okay, canim. I'll count to five, in the name of the Hidden and their superiors.' Munu reaches for my left hand. I open it, gazing at the three scars in my palm, now joined by a fourth – the deepest, a perfect circle. A dot, as if it marks an end.

I look at it, and I remind myself that I have no other chance left. *I have no one.*

Munu blows on the scar and a cool wind sweeps through me as if I'm made of dust. 'I weave you back to life,' I hear her say, and I am pushed and pulled, drawn and erased, torn and mended as she counts. 'One, two, three—'