

## SNEAK 1

### Compos Mentis

Priyam lifted her hand before talking. “Excuse me... Someone care to explain what are the Terrians talking about?”

“The Games,” Veter said, placing Gaia on steady ground.

“What games?” Gaia asked.

“You get this excited for games, so lame,” Synthia whined with her usual nasal pitch that grated on every single one of Priyam’s nerves.

“They’re not just games, you aggravating creature,” Donovan jumped in. “They are *the* games of Terra. We called them Compos Mentis.”

“They are more like a tournament,” Edan said, placing the wooden box on the table and passing the cotton bag to Donovan. “Donovan, rules.”

“Each warrior takes a Soul’s Pebble,” Donovan explained as he took a crystal pebble slightly smaller than a golf ball out of the cotton bag. The Soul’s Pebble shone bright on Donovan’s hand.

Once the pebble stopped shining, it wasn’t transparent anymore. It had an eagle’s feather painted in oil. “The Soul’s Pebbles show a part of the essence of the warrior who took it. Once the connection is complete, the warrior puts the pebble inside the choosing box.” Donovan put his pebble inside the wooden box and passed the cotton bag with the rest of the Soul’s Pebbles to Veter. “In Terra, two members of parliament are in charge of announcing the warriors that will fight against each other. In this case Priyam and Hunter, you’ll take a pebble each out of the choosing box.

Those two chosen warriors will fight using their elements or in Pink and Floyd's case, their weapons.”

Veter placed his Soul's Pebble in the choosing box. “The goal is to reach five-hundred points. From waist down each hit counts fifteen points, from the waist up it counts thirty, a major hit will count fifty, and if you are thrown out of the arena you lose automatically. The winner fights against a new warrior until he or she loses.”

Gaia lifted her eyebrow with confusion. “Sorry, what's a major hit?”

Shui took the bag from Willow. “You draw blood.” She walked closer towards Gaia and Edan. They were the last ones to pick a pebble.

“Blood? How common is that?” Gaia's hands got sweaty just thinking about it.

“Most of the hits.” Veter grinned holding his cigar between his molars.

“Don't stress.” Edan noticed Gaia's nerves. “You are ready.”

Shui offered the bag to Gaia. She slid her hand inside and took a Soul's Pebble. The crystal shone on her hand. It was warm and tingly, as if the light was traveling through her hand and chest. The crystal stopped shining. Gaia opened her hand. The Soul's Pebble had an oil painting of all the elements united by the same Five Fold symbol she bared under her right wrist.

Shui moved the bag closer to Edan. Edan stared at the bag the same way a space traveler would look at a black hole. Deep down, he was afraid of what the pebble might show. Tapping into his bravery, Edan shoved his hand inside and took out a pebble. He squeezed it hard as if he wanted to hide the result. The pebble stopped shining. Edan slowly opened his hand.

The pebble was the same color of his electric-blue fire with black spots and a white lotus flower. Edan relaxed and placed the pebble on the wooden box. “Willow, can you help us build the arena?”

Willow nodded and lifted her hands. Within a ‘safe’ distance away from them, a rectangular section of the ground raised until it turned into an eighty-foot-long stage.

“Priyam, would you do the honors?” said Donovan as he passed her the choosing box.

Happy, Priyam took out a pebble with a painting of a tornado that kept spinning. “Veter,” she said, and gave the box to Hunter.

The wild teen took out the next one, a green pebble with a yellow tulip. “*Willow.*”

“Yes!” Veter cheered. “This will be fun.” He put out his cigar and flew to the arena.

“No freaking way!” Priyam gasped in amazement. “He can fly?”

“Please.” Willow rolled her eyes. “he’s just wielding the air around him.”

“I would like to see if you can do something cooler?” Veter taunted her from the arena’s stage.

Willow tied her pale-blond hair into a high ponytail. She took a step and the earth lifted, taking her to the stage where it went back to normal once she stepped into the arena.

Veter stayed floating in the sky. “Ready?” Edan asked. Both Willow and Veter nodded.

Edan raised his hand and sent a fireball towards the sky. Once the ball of fire reached a distance higher than where Veter was flying, it exploded like a firecracker.

Smiling, Veter taunted Willow with a hand wave. Willow dropped a seed on the floor and pointed her palm towards the dirt. A tall pine tree grew at a fast pace. Willow jumped on one of the branches and as it grew as she went up towards Veter. Willow, standing on a branch, pointed at Veter and one of the branches of the pine tree grew directly towards him.

With great reflexes, Veter dodged the branch and flew higher but the branch managed to twirl around his foot and pull him down. Veter swung his hand and a fast, contained wind current cut the branch, releasing his foot. Veter shook off the debris when a second branch jabbed and cut him on the arm.

“Fifty points for Willow!” cheered Donovan as he moved the marker.

Veter turned to face his rival. He saw her smiling victoriously. “Oops, did that hurt?”

“You tell me.” Veter lifted his arms with a slow strong motion. An intense wave of air flew from the bottom of the pine tree towards the sky, ripping off all of its needles and cutting Willow a few times.

“Two hundred points for Veter!” Donovan changed the marker.

“Is she OK?” Gaia asked Hunter with concern.

“*She is,*” Hunter reassured her. “*She’s probably furious though.*”

With her face red and a thin cut on her cheek, Willow wielded a dozen branches towards Veter. He flew in quick motions trying to get away from

their range but the thick branches managed to reach him. Three of the branches twirled around both of his feet leaving him trapped.

Willow swung her arms to the arena and the branches followed her wield, slamming Veter against the stage floor.

“Nice counter-attack! Sixty-five points for Willow.” Donovan added the numbers to Willow’s marker.

Lying on the floor, Veter made a bubble of constantly moving air around Willow and lowered her from the pine tree. She spun around, making her dizzy.

“Thirty points for Veter.” Donovan cheered from the safe zone.

Still trapped inside the air bubble, Willow reached the arena’s floor and knelt down. She placed both of her hands on the ground. Two huge pieces of the arena detached from the stage and smashed against Veter. The stage got covered by a wave of dust and debris making it impossible for everyone to see the damage. The air bubble vanished, releasing Willow.

“Is this what the Romans felt in the Coliseum?” asked Priyam. “I feel like I should be wearing a crown of leaves or something.”

Edan laughed. “These are games. We don’t kill.”

“Are you sure?” Gaia coughed. She wiggled her hand in front of her nose trying to disperse the dust that managed to reach the safe zone.

“No drama, Bluey,” chuckled Floyd from his comfy chair. He was using a meat cleaver as a hand fan. “That will leave some bruises, nothing more.”

“Plus a lifetime of bragging,” said Pink as she played with her black cassette tape. “And don’t call Gaia a Bluey, you knob.”

The dust finally settled down, showing Veter with cuts around his chest and arms.

“Sweet!” Donovan clapped. His muscular arms moved, making the eagle tattoo look like it was flying. “Three-hundred and fifty points for Willow!” Donovan changed the score. Willow four-hundred and sixty-five, Veter two-hundred and thirty.”

Gaia gasped. “Willow won.”

“Not yet,” said Edan from his seat next to Hunter.

Veter stood up and moved his arms in circles. The sky turned a light gray. Strong currents of wind crashed from different directions.

“Ugh, my hair! Watch it, stupid freak,” Synthia cried as her tangled extensions whipped around her face and head.

Excited, Pink stood up from her seat. “Bloody hell. Is that...?”

“A tornado.” Floyd finished his sister’s sentence, only this time it wasn’t a question, it was a fact.

An F2 tornado finished forming on the corner of the arena. Veter wielded the tornado across the arena, making all the debris and rocks that were lying on the stage fly directly towards Willow. Willow ducked and dodged the multiple hits.

Veter wielded the tornado back in Willow’s direction. Without wasting any time, Willow pointed towards the floor and a bunch of thick roots crawled, holding her waist and legs steady against the arena. The tornado positioned itself on top of Willow. Her pale-blonde hair untied and lifted up towards the sky.

The tornado was strong. So strong that it started to rip apart the pine tree. Within seconds, before it fell on top of Willow, Gaia wielded the tree's roots to grow back replanting it without anyone noticing her help. And no one noticed, except Willow.

The arena's floor began to slowly disintegrate. After reaching their limit, the roots crumbled sending Willow flying out of the stage.

Gaia covered her eyes but before she knew it, Veter had already stopped the tornado. He flew and caught Willow mid-air before she could hit the floor.

"Willow is off the stage! Veter wins!" Donovan whistled while everyone clapped and cheered.

Veter flew Willow back to the safe area where everyone was cheering. "Great game, blondie. You almost beat me."

To Gaia's surprise, Willow hopped down from the Viking's massive arms and grinned. "I liked the tornado, it was... OK."

"OK? It was awesome!" said Veter as he lit his cigar.

"It was." Floyd clapped hands with Veter and congratulated him.

"That was insane, Veter!" Pink couldn't hold down her enthusiasm.

"Giant warrior said what?!" Priyam congratulated him. "That was brutal."

"Great game, Willow." Edan helped Willow hop to a seat near Shui before coming back to Gaia's side.

After taking a moment to breathe, Willow flipped her wrist and the arena's stage turned back to new.

"Parliament, Snowflake." Floyd passed Priyam the wooden box.

Priyam took out a blue pebble with a koi painted in oil. “Shui!”  
Veter grinned, making dimples on his cheeks. With one swing, he carried Shui like a princess and flew away to the arena. “I promise I’ll be very gentle my Blueberry.”

Shui’s face turned bright red at the cheesy nickname. “Don’t be.”

As Veter and Shui landed in the arena, Hunter took out a bunch of rolled-up bills. “*Two-hundred on Shui.*”

“Ha!” Priyam placed her bet. “After what I saw, I bet on the gentle giant.”

“Same,” joined Floyd.

“Please.” Donovan slammed a bunch of bills on the money pile. “Shui will crush him.”

## **SNEAK 2**

### Snow Cave

In the cave, Gaia moved her head against a hard surface. She recalled making the tree grow and how she lost consciousness slamming her head on the floor. She slid her hand across Edan’s chest. *Super! At least the floor is warm...* she thought as she unknowingly traced his torso.

Her fingers reached the curve of his neck. Edan shivered. *OK...Weird. Definitely not the floor.* Gaia slowly opened her eyes afraid of what she might find. She then realized she was leaning on top of Edan as he hugged her.

Shocked, Gaia jumped back, falling towards the floor.

“Don’t move.” Edan caught her before her back hit the cold dirt. “I’ve got you.”

“Your shoulder, you shouldn’t move it.” Unnerved finding herself on top of Edan, Gaia wiggled until she was sitting next to him. “Or add any pressure to it.”

“It’s fine.” Edan rotated his entire arm to prove his point to Gaia. “You did a great job.” Edan noticed Gaia was calmer after he moved his shoulder without much pain. He closed his shirt, covering his shoulder. “Did you… remove all of it?”

“Your shirt?” Gaia stared at his green eyes. “Just the shoulder, I know how strict you are about having your shirt on.”

“Thank you.”

“How long since you woke up?”

“About forty minutes ago,” he said.

*Forty freaking minutes?!* Gaia’s hands turned sweaty from nerves. She’d slept for forty minutes on top of Edan. *Oh crap!* She placed her palm against one of the rough roots. “Are they still out there?” she asked, trying to concentrate on anything other than having Edan watching over her for forty minutes.

“The beasts? Yes. I’ve been hearing them growling from time to time.” He touched the same root Gaia was touching. Her fingertips tingled at the closeness. Gaia felt lighter. *Well, not so bad. Besides sweaty palms and slight nerves, I felt nothing else. I can handle it. Totally over this.*

“Good idea with the tree. I noticed your seed pouch ripped. I guess we are lucky you had one seed left.”

She moved her hand away. “I didn’t have any seeds left.”

“You created it?” Edan seemed excited. “Impressive. I’m proud of you,” he said and Gaia’s eyes opened wide. “What?” he asked over her shocked expression.

“This is the first time you’re proud of me.”

“No,” he smiled. A big gorgeous smile. “It’s just the first time I’ve told you.”

*Scratch that... I'm not over this. Damn him. Damn that smile.* Gaia bit her lower lip trying to seem calm. Useless move, Edan knew her too well. Her stomach fluttered and her eyes couldn’t stop looking at his. *Too bad you're just his job.* She wanted to change the mood before they ended up the same way they did back at the first camp. Fighting and putting a whole town in danger. Fortunately, his stomach growled.

“I guess you’re hungry.” Gaia laughed out loud. She placed her palms on the dirt and smiled. “What do you want?”

“Save it,” Edan stopped her. “You don’t have enough energy to create another tree.” He took out a small bag of seeds from his left pocket. “Use this.”

Gaia took the bag. “Where did you get this?”

“Willow always gives them to me,” he smirked.

“Perfect.” Gaia took a seed and placed it on the dirt. She lifted her hand and wielded the plant to grow. Juicy grapes grew from the vines around it. “Grapes!” she cheered at the surprise.

“You like them?”

“I love them.”

She took a few bunches and sat next to Edan to eat. A smile crept on her lips. “You really like them,” said Edan. “You are even smiling.”

Gaia shook her head. “I’m not smiling because I like grapes. You called me Red in your sleep.”

To Gaia’s surprise he blushed. “Did I?”

“Yep,” she giggled at how cute he looked. “It’s the third time you called me that.”

“Sorry, that was—”

“My nickname when I was little,” she jumped in and ate another grape.

“You remembered?” he asked with surprise in his eyes.

“Since long ago,” she rested on her elbows against the floor. “What I don’t remember is, why Red?”

Edan laughed, a genuine rich laugh that gave Gaia the sensation of butterflies in her stomach. “You used to get so angry every time I called you Lady Gaia.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “Everyone was allowed to call you that except for me. If I said that name you used to pout and glare at me. It was adorable.” He said, friendly. Same friendliness he had in her memories. “One day we went out to the plaza and you climbed Bobby. Your hair tie got tangled in a branch. Without knowing, you let go and fell in my arms. Your tie snapped and your hair floated all over the air.” He made a hand gesture to show Gaia how the hair had flowed around her face. “I remember all I could see was red.” Edan grinned. “Unaware that I was speaking my mind, I whispered, ‘red’. Since then you officially proclaimed that I would call you Red.”

“Why’d you stop calling me like that?”

Edan curled his leg, a gesture that made him look comfortable with the conversation. “At first, I was afraid you would recognize the name and wake before the time was right.”

“You called me Red the first time we talked,” she said, remembering that day, a day that somehow felt like ages ago.

“You caught me off-guard.” He froze just thinking about it. “I was terrified the minute I said it. Luckily, it did nothing.”

“Well then.” Gaia lifted her hand. “I officially proclaim you call me Red.”

Edan touched Gaia’s palm with his. “Red it is.”

After lingering for a moment, she let go of his hand and placed hers on his shoulders. Concentrating, she turned her hand warm enough to stop him from freezing.

“What are you doing?”

“Warming you up,” she said, trying to seem unaffected by touching his body. “Your hand was really cold.”

“Don’t. You need your strength.” He opened his arms. “Here.”

“What?”

“Come over here.” He gestured her to get closer.

Gaia did what she was told. She snuck between Edan’s legs and rested her back against his torso. She leaned her head against his chest. It was warm; she could hear his heartbeat, almost as fast as hers.

“Odd,” he murmured.

“What now?”

“Nothing, I just expected a bit more fight from you.” He curled his arms around her waist. “You usually ask ten times ‘why’ before you actually listen to me.”

*True...* “I was cold.” And she was, a little bit. *But he doesn’t need to know that.*

“Are you warmer?” he asked in a voice so soft, Gaia almost couldn’t recognize it as his.

“Much. And you?”

“Very,” he whispered.

“Then stop complaining.” She growled at him and he laughed. Yes, everything about the moment was perfection. Well, almost everything. There was a small part of her that kept her confused as hell. After all, she was his *job*... wasn’t she?

“Edan...” Gaia talked while playing with one of his shirt’s buttons.

“Yes?” he asked leaning his chin against her head.

“Aren’t you going to get in trouble for this?”

“For getting dragged like that?” He passed his free hand over his messy brown hair. “Only my pride,” he chuckled.

“No, for being like this with me.”

Edan took a moment too long to answer. “Probably.”

### **Sneak 3**

## Fire and Blood

Gaia took Priyam's hand as they walked through the barrier. As soon as they crossed the barrier, it was like they'd entered hell. The whole forest was in flames. Dark smoke grew thick inside the protective shield.

Shui was wielding the water, but the fire was so hot that most of the water evaporated before reaching the ground. Veter was trying to seal the sections where Shui had managed to put out the fire so it wouldn't spread back.

"No," Willow cried as she entered the camp. "We need to hurry, the trees are suffering."

Gaia turned and sensed it too. She felt how the trees screeched in pain. Like burning needles crawling down her skin.

"Gaia help me with the flames," Edan screamed from a few feet away from the fire. "Donovan, make sure the animals are gone. The rest take everything we need. Be careful, I don't want anyone hurt."

Following the orders of their leader, they all ran in different directions.

A few minutes later, Pink and Floyd arrived to the 'safe zone' area with a bunch of knives, bags full of guns, and different types of swords. "This is everything we could save from the armory," Pink and Floyd placed the weapons on the grass.

"I got this from the bungalows," Gaia left the things near the weapons and turned around.

Edan stopped Gaia by holding her arm. "Where are you going? We need to leave now."

"What about the fire?"

"The fire is almost gone. It's the smoke you should be worried about."

“I can’t leave. Priyam is still in the bungalows.”

“What the bloody hell is she doing there?”

“She went back for her computer.”

“Is she mad!?”

Floyd dropped an ax to the ground and ran towards the bungalow. “No worries mate. I’ll go get her.”

“Who’s missing apart from Floyd and Priyam?”

“Hunter is outside finding a safe route, Veter is containing the smoke.”

Willow looked around. “I don’t know where the Marked One is.”

“Edan,” Synthia screamed from the other side of the field. “I’m hurt, my hand.”

Edan ran to Synthia. “Let me see.” He turned her hand around and saw a big burn. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. It all happened so fast,” Synthia cried. “Everything is blurry after Gaia turned it on fire.”

“Gaia?”

“No, I didn’t do this.”

“Yes you did!” Synthia moved closer to Edan. “The freak was sleeping and burnt the tree she was leaning against.”

“Ok, I did do that,” she admitted. “But I put the fire out!”

“You didn’t,” Synthia cried while holding her hurt hand. “Gaia look at this place! I tried to get as much stuff as I could and got hurt.”

Edan could sense something was wrong. It wasn’t in Synthia’s nature to help and if he wanted to find out what was she planning, she would need to play along. Make her comfortable enough to slip. And nothing made her

more comfortable than having him along side her, rather than with Gaia. *Sorry Red...* Making up his mind, Edan glared at Gaia. She could see the disappointment in his eyes. “Edan, I put it out.”

“Ouch Edan.” Synthia hugged Edan as he carried her to a safer place. “It hurts so bad.”

“Come here Synthia, you were really brave.” he said taking her to the medicine cabinet.

A few feet before reaching the safe zone, Priyam emerged from the smoke that encased the bungalows.

“Help!” Priyam yelled. Her face was in total panic as tears full of ashes rolled down her cheeks.

“What now?” Synthia whined under her breath.

“Floyd!” Pink stood up and ran towards her brother and Priyam.

Edan lifted his head and noticed Priyam was dragging what looked like Floyd’s lifeless body.