

OTHERSIDE SERIES BOOK 3

THE
BALANCE
OF
GODS



JAY MICHAEL NIGHT

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CHAPTER I

Mikey's jaw set as he imagined the Devouring unleashed upon the world—on his family, the people he loved sitting beside him, the innocent. Their only hope was for all of Otherside to band together and fight. Mikey pressed his lips in determination and looked up at his friends. They were exhausted and afraid, just as he was. But in their eyes, he saw the same resolve.

"We have to warn everyone," Mikey said.

They nodded, a contemplative silence overtaking the group after what they'd just survived. The misty air and roaring whoosh of water from the large falls beside them filled it. Mikey sat, his head resting against the ancient dwarven door, Marcus unconscious beside him. Laken was sitting on his shoulder. Sabrina, Viki, and Thomas sat across from him.

Within the walls behind them was a horde of creatures made of void and darkness, whose only desire was to consume Source, the energy of creation. Mikey and his friends had managed to seal them back inside the lost dwarven city, barely escaping with their lives. Inside the mountain was a shard of Avalon, the goddess of life.

It was a crystal of pure Source, which powered the barrier currently separating the Devourers from the rest of the world. A shield, born from the shard itself, kept the energy from their clutches. But it was cracking. And Mikey knew that if the void creatures got ahold of

it, that would be the end. Source made the void monsters bigger and more powerful. With a piece of a goddess, they'd be unstoppable.

The mountain rumbled, making the group collectively wince. He looked down at the rune-carved relics covering his hands. The power he'd wielded had been amazing. With some practice, Mikey knew he'd be able to do more. Much more.

But it won't be enough, he thought, curling his left hand into a fist.

Mikey was grateful for the metal glove sealing the Edax—a name Mikey had given the same darkness inside the left part of his body that let him drain the nearby Source. Viki had told him the word was what the vampires called their hunger. It literally meant devourer. Unfortunately, his Edax had been the only thing capable of killing one.

Along with everything else, he sighed.

The memory of it taking control made him shudder. Mikey's heart raced as he pondered their next move. He knew they couldn't sit around and wait for the Devouring to breach Avalon's shard. He didn't think Earth had a chance as it was.

And if those creatures got a hold of that energy... no one will.

The ground rumbled again, and Mikey sat up. They needed to act fast. He looked at his friends, the only people he had left in this world, save for the few he'd made during his journey and those on the other side of the country in New York.

His eyes met Viki's, and the vampire pursed her lips. The expression on her face was how he felt, too.

"We're screwed," it said.

"Can we get away from this mountain?" Thomas asked. The Mover turned his head toward the volcano, leaning away like it was the plague, and its touch would spell his doom.

"Yeah. Let's get somewhere safe and figure out what to do next," Mikey agreed. "I can carry Marcus."

A sudden crunch of rocks near the cave entrance drew his attention. He glanced back at the others to see that only Viki had noticed from her stiffened posture. Though not to the level of the Verdaat, Mikey's senses were still heightened beyond human means, allowing him to hear through the roar of the falls. Laken was looking in the direction of the sound too.

Several people that Mikey didn't recognize stepped into view. He counted six people, men and women of various ages dressed in Jaecar battle gear. The one in front had a gold stripe on his armor, marking him as an Elder. The rest were blue.

He was a large man with finger-length, dirty blonde hair that was slicked back with gel. The man froze when he saw them. Then his eyes narrowed, and he drew a sword covered in runes. Mikey had never seen him before, but something about the man's face made him want to punch it.

"It's the vampire mutt and the traitors!" The elder called out over his shoulder. "What did you do to the other Jaecar?!"

"It's not what you think," Sabrina stepped forward.

Deep red Source burst forth from the Elder's sword, covering the blade like a second skin.

Damn. That's pretty awesome. Though wider, It reminded Mikey of another energy sword from a particular galaxy, far, far away.

But he didn't have time to admire it, despite the appropriate red color given their situation.

"Do not move another step," the man said. The Source around his blade flared in warning. He tilted his head toward a Jaecar on his left. "Tell the others to prepare to transport five prisoners."

The Jaecar nodded, disappearing as they dashed back along the narrow cliff path along the falls.

"Everyone else," the man said, "Be on your guard. If they move, then you are free to attack."

Mikey tapped into his vampiric powers and started bringing energy to his right hand. A white-blue spike of ice rose from his palm, hovering over it, ready to be shot.

"I'm getting sick and tired of being a prisoner," he said in an icy tone. "Don't make me hurt you."

The elder's mouth fell open slightly. Then he tightened his grip on the sword.

Whispers broke out amongst the remaining Jaecar. Mikey caught the words 'elemental' and 'two vampires.' He snorted. This was getting old. If they wouldn't listen to reason, he would make them. The fate of the world depended on it.

A dozen more Jaecar filled the space, and the sword-wielding Elder grinned wickedly and said, "Take them. Alive if possible."

I guess we're not talking this out.

The man lunged forward surprisingly fast for his size.

Mikey launched his readied icicle, but the Elder's sword sliced it in half, both pieces falling to either side of him.

In the next moment, a wire appeared at the man's throat, his eyes widening in surprise. A drop of blood slid down his neck from where it dug in.

"You move, your head goes flying," Viki whispered. Her fangs were inches from the man's throat.

Damn, she's good.

"STOP!" A voice boomed near the waterfall.

Surprisingly, everyone froze.

A woman came into view, a dozen more Jaecar trailing behind her. She had an intimidating air, and a stripe of gold adorned her armor.

Mikey's brow raised. There was something familiar about her. She was beautiful. Tall and lithe, with ebony skin. Her long black hair was tied up in a braided bun.

Viki gave Mikey a questioning look, and he nodded. The wire disappeared, and she retreated to stand in front of Marcus protectively.

"That's enough, Elder Dalton," the woman put a hand on the sword-wielding elder's arm.

Mikey saw a flash of purple near the woman's wrists and two golden bracelets engraved with Celtic symbols around them.

Dalton straightened, a vein bulging on the side of his head. He hesitated, clenching the pommel of his sword, but ultimately took a deep breath and said, "Forgive me, Sect Leader." The Source around his blade extinguished instantly.

"Who are you?" Mikey asked, trying to place her face and why it felt so familiar.

"You may call me Zuri," the woman said. "And you are Mikey Black." Her eyes, a rich hazel, darted to the fairy on my shoulder and then to Viki and the others.

"Hello, Sabrina. The last time I saw you, you were this high," Zuri said, bringing her hand to the middle of her stomach. She smiled.

The genuineness in it made Mikey relax a little.

Maybe they can be reasoned with after all?

"Hello, Elder." Sabrina walked to Mikey's side. "How is Omari?"

"He's well," Zuri answered. "And hopes to take the Tribunal next year."

Sabrina turned to Mikey and motioned toward the woman. "Elder Zuri is the Sect Leader for SHOP. She was in my mother's Omada. I used to spar with her son when they had meetings back in the day. Elder Ryan is her younger brother."

Zuri smirked as the realization hit Mikey. "Ryan has said good things about you."

Hope brewed in Mikey's chest.

With her help, maybe we can bring everyone together.

He thought back to what Neema had told him about SHOP. He felt a twinge of pain thinking of the old healer. That time in his life seemed so long ago. Neema had said the Sect Headquarters of Portum—the old name for Haven—was located on the other side of the country.

"He's waking up!" Viki's voice came from behind, and Mikey saw Marcus stir.

He blurred, appearing at his friend's side in the next second. Laken had flown beside him, eliciting more murmurs from the Jaecar.

Marcus was shaking his head back and forth, repeatedly muttering incomprehensible words.

Mikey gently laid a hand on his forearm.

"NO!" Marcus shouted. His body jerked, and his eyes flew open.

"It's okay. It's okay," Mikey cooed as the Shielder crawled backward until he was against the dwarven door. His breathing was panicked and irregular.

After a few seconds, Marcus' vision seemed to clear, and he took in his surroundings.

"We got out?" He asked, looking to Mikey.

"Thanks to you," Mikey gave a halfhearted chuckle.

Thomas walked over to his brother and reached out a hand. "Can you stand?"

"I—I think so." Marcus took it, and Thomas hauled him up, holding out an arm to help keep him steady.

Mikey watched as Marcus swayed on his feet, clearly still disoriented. He turned his attention back to Elder Zuri, who regarded him with a mixture of curiosity and something else he couldn't quite place.

"We're wasting our time here!" Dalton spat. "We have orders from the high council. Look at the trail of death that led us here! My cousin—"

"I lead the Sect and am on the council," Zuri interrupted. "Elder Tem has no say here."

Oooh, Mikey began piecing the puzzle together. *That's why his face is so punchable.*

Dalton is Tem's cousin.

The man's jaw clenched, and his nostrils flared. "For now," he muttered. It was just loud enough for Mikey to hear him. But he was sure no one else save for Viki could have.

A tremor shook the ground beneath them, and everyone tensed until it passed.

The high councilor held up a hand to the members of her Sect. They began putting their weapons away.

"Now," the woman looked at the massive door behind them, then motioned toward the path leading out of the cave. "Let's go somewhere more private. It seems you have a story to tell."

CHAPTER 2

"Preposterous!" Dalton exclaimed after Mikey had given the Cliff Notes version of events. "No one has been able to get into the dwarven mountain for hundreds of years. You expect us to believe such nonsense?"

They were outside, near the base of the falls. Mikey omitted certain details from his explanation: the prophecy, the key to getting into the mountain, Nevra, Laken, and Avalon—in the wrong hands, that information would do more harm than good.

"It's true," Sabrina said. "How else do you think we were able to acquire these relics?" The Mover pointed to her legs and Mikey's hands.

"Then give us the key," Dalton stepped forward, hand outstretched.

"What key?" Mikey jerked his head back, feigning ignorance.

Dalton rolled his eyes. "There is a keyhole in the door. How else would you have gotten in? Now, hand it over." The man took a step toward Sabrina.

Mikey flared his Source claws, eyes flashing a mystical blue. "Not a chance. You'll kill us all." The earth shook as if in response.

Zuri put an arm out in front of Dalton, shooting him a warning look.

"What?" He said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Surely you don't believe them. They obviously found the key by some chance, took out our warriors, looted what treasure they could, and spun a tale to keep us from acquiring it. Mostly likely to give it to the enemy. With that kind of power and wealth, the Verdaat won't stand a chance against us."

"I hate Magnus more than you, trust me," Mikey said with a snort. "But this is bigger than that. The Clara and Tenefae, Haven, and the rest of Otherside need to come together if we have any chance to stop the Devouring before they reach the shard of Source inside. Because once they do, I don't think anyone will be able to."

"Right, these creatures of pure darkness inside the mountain that there is no proof of. Which you have the key for but we can't open." Dalton gave an incredulous look and then turned to Elder Zuri. "It's obvious he's lying, and the others are covering for him. We've been informed of his powers. He can drain the Source with his left hand. What other evidence do we need?"

The Sect Leader stayed silent, seeming to mull over what Mikey and Sabrina had told them. Her chin was in her palm, index finger tapping on her cheek. Mikey had to hope the woman would believe them. The idea that they had attacked and killed fellow Jaecar sent to investigate strange occurrences and disappearances around the mountain was absurd.

She looked at Laken, who had perched again on Mikey's shoulder.

"You," Zuri said to the tiny fairy. "I've never seen a fae like you before. Who are you?"

"She's just a friend—" Mikey started, ready to defend Laken's secrets.

But the tiny fairy tapped on his nose, shaking her head.

"What?" he asked.

She nodded, pointing to Zuri before patting his cheek.

"You want me to tell her the truth?"

Laken nodded.

Well, she is an angel and older than time...

"This is The Treasurer. You may have heard of her."

It took everything in Mikey not to smirk at the stunned expression on Dalton's face.

Zuri's eyes widened in recognition. "The Treasurer? I thought you were just a myth."

Laken gave a small curtsy.

"Apparently not," Mikey said, relieved that the fairy was willing to divulge her identity. Maybe Zuri would be more likely to believe them now.

The Sect Leader took a deep breath. "It appears we need to hold a Conventus."

"Yes... I believe that's a good idea," Dalton nodded, not taking his eyes off the fairy.

Mikey searched through his picture-perfect memory until he came upon the word Conventus. The passage was from one of the texts he had to study for the Tribunal called *Portum Politics and Procedures*.

It read:

Should a situation arise that has the potential to endanger the world, a Conventus shall be held.

That was it? Haven't sure keeps everyone in the dark.

Clearly, it was some sort of meeting, which was exactly what they wanted.

"Mikey, would you please come with us? If what you all are saying is true. Then the Clarafae and high council need to know about it. Maybe we can stop this war before it goes too far."

Mikey nodded, grateful that at least one person would listen to them. He glanced over at Sabrina and the others, who nodded in agreement. It was a relief to have some support, even if it was just a small group of Jaecar.

"Viki, can you report what happened to the Verdaat? We need to convince the Tenefae as well. Though I'm sure after my talk with Helena, her people won't be a problem."

"I can try?" the vampire shrugged. "You know how my dad is."

"Unfortunately, I do," Mikey nodded. "But we need to get both sides on this. You saw what we are up against."

Viki pursed her lips and gave a solemn nod. "Alright. I'll see you soon." She stepped forward, her beautiful yellow eyes locked with Mikey's, an unsure expression on her flawless face.

Viki reached out, and he took her hand.

"Be careful," she said, glancing toward Sabrina and then letting go.

"You too," Mikey said. There was a pit in his stomach at the thought of her leaving. Its presence was as horrible as it was confusing.

"Wait," Sabrina called out, and the vampire turned.

"Yeah?" Viki asked.

"Here." Sabrina reached into her pack and pulled out the dwarven king's letter. "Use this to help convince Magnus. Maybe he'll be able to translate it, too."

"Thanks," Viki took it, appearing slightly stunned by the gesture.

They stood there awkwardly until Viki inclined her head and left.

"You're just gonna let a vampire go?" Dalton scoffed. "That's probably a letter telling the vampires about all the treasure they've found."

The Sect leader gave the elder a deadpan stare before her mouth fell open, and she turned to Mikey.

"You've spoken with Helena?"

"Yes. She doesn't want this war either; she and Izildora know about the Devouring," Mikey said. Something in his gut said that Zuri was someone he could trust. Elder Ryan had a certain code of honor. It was clear to Mikey that his older sister did as well.

Zuri nodded, a determined glint in her eye. "Then we must act quickly. We'll make arrangements for the Conventus as soon as possible. In the meantime, you and your companions can stay with us. We can portal to our Sect."

Mikey felt a weight lift off his shoulders. It was a relief to have a safe place to stay in a world that was becoming increasingly dangerous. "Thank you, Elder Zuri. We appreciate it."

As they began their trek to the portal zone, Mikey couldn't help but feel a sense of unease. He knew they were still in danger despite the Sect Leader's assurance. The Devouring was getting stronger, and with each passing day, they were getting closer to the shard of Source inside the mountain. He couldn't shake off the feeling that they were running out of time.

Dalton's suspicious gaze lingered on Mikey, and he knew that the elder still didn't trust him. But Mikey had bigger things to worry about than Dalton's mistrust. He looked over at Sabrina, who gave him a small smile, her emerald green eyes filled with determination. They were in this together, no matter what.

A few minutes later, they reached a clearing. Zuri pressed a button on her porter watch, and a shimmering, swirling vortex appeared before her.

"After you," the woman offered, stepping to the side.

Mikey took a deep breath and entered the Sect's headquarters.

When they arrived, Mikey couldn't help but be taken aback. He had heard a few stories about SHOP, but he was still in awe of the grandeur of it all. The portal room was much larger and more lux-

urious than the one in Buffalo, with triple the number of platforms. It was made of white marble, with tall golden pillars that seemed to reach for the sky. Mikey and his group followed the Jaecar down brightly lit hallways lined with intricate paintings and sculptures crisscrossed through the center of the building. Mikey also noticed a few tech upgrades; there were video screens embedded in walls, along with various other forms of technology he hadn't seen before.

"Welcome to the SHOP," Zuri smiled.

The Sect Headquarters of Portum, Mikey, recalled the acronym. Portum was the old name for Haven.

Zuri led them through a giant training center with what looked like digital 3D training simulators.

Sabrina leaned in to whisper, "Mom has been trying to get them to approve funds to upgrade our Sect. But Elder Tem, who runs the budget, has been thwarting her at every turn with other more pressing expenses."

It was just another reason for Mikey to despise the man.

As they continued down the hall, he couldn't help but notice the strange looks they were getting from the Jaecar passing by. They all seemed to be staring at Laken, and Mikey wondered if they had ever seen a fairy before. Other than a brownie, he hadn't during his time training to become a Jaecar.

Finally, they arrived at a large door guarded by two burly men. Zuri nodded at them, and they stepped aside, allowing the group to enter.

Inside was a room with several doors. It looked like the living area Mikey and his Omada had been given at the Buffalo Sect, only bigger.

Zuri opened one of the doors to show a bedroom with a queen-sized bed, desk, and dresser.

"These five are bedrooms," Zuri pointed. "The two in the middle are bathrooms, and the one on the right is a training area."

"So we're prisoners," Thomas said. The Sante brothers had been silent most of their discussion, which was especially unusual for Marcus. But when Mikey glanced back at his friend, the utter exhaustion on his face was evident. The Shielder had saved their lives numerous times in the mountain, using much of his Source.

Marcus met his eyes, and Mikey gave a small nod, smiling.

"You are free to go about the building," Zuri said, her voice kind but firm. "But you will have to be accompanied by a guard at all times. You cannot leave until the Conventus has convened."

Mikey's heart sank slightly at the reminder that he and his friends were prisoners of sorts. However, Zuri seemed to sense his distress and added kindly, "I'm sure you understand why this is necessary for everyone's safety. It will take a few days for everyone to gather. I promise we will make your stay here as comfortable as possible."

Mikey nodded in understanding, appreciating her efforts to make them feel welcome despite their situation. He glanced around at his Omada before turning back to Zuri with a smile and a nod of gratitude. It was a better alternative than bloodshed.

But time was of the essence. Every second they wasted was another opportunity for the Devouring to get to the shard.

Mikey knew they needed to act fast. As much as he appreciated the Sect's hospitality, he couldn't afford to waste time. He turned to Zuri, "Is there any way we can contact Elder Cassandra or my foster father, Arthur Cafferty?"

"Please. I want to let our parents know we're safe," Marcus seconded.

Zuri nodded. "I will arrange for a communication device to be brought to you that works within the Sect. You may contact them,

but please remember that we cannot risk word of your presence here getting out to the wrong people."

They all nodded in agreement, understanding the importance of secrecy in their situation.

"Great. If you need anything, ask the guards outside," she said. "For now, get some rest. From your story, it sounds like you all need it."

The four of them each picked a room, agreeing to talk once they rested. Laken had transformed into a brownie and disappeared to do who knows what. She was an angel with the secrets of the Universe. He couldn't even comprehend her mind.

Shortly after, he'd realized the Daughter of Avalon had taken the key to the Dwarven Kingdom with her. There was an initial panic, but Laken had been the one to give it to him in the first place.

It's probably better off with her anyway.

Mikey sat on the edge of his bed, feeling the exhaustion of the past few days finally catching up. He couldn't shake the feeling that they were running out of time, that the Devouring was getting closer to the shard with each passing moment. It was doing a number of his anxiety. But for now, they were safe, which was something to be grateful for.

As he closed his eyes, he couldn't help but think of Viki. He wondered if she was safe and on her way back to New York. The thought of her leaving had left a strange ache in his chest, a feeling he couldn't quite place. Sabrina came to mind, and Mikey felt equally lost on that front. Something had changed between them.

Mikey sighed and rolled onto his back, trying to make sense of his feelings. As much as he wanted to talk to her about it, he wasn't sure how she would react. He wondered if she still felt the same way about him or if he really had become so different that her feelings had, too.

Mikey's mind was filled with uncertainty as he drifted off to sleep. He dreamt of Viki, Sabrina, and the Devouring, all swirling around in a chaotic mess. But then, amid the chaos, a dark, inhuman voice whispered to him.

"Let me out...LET ME OUT!"

He woke up with a start, his heart pounding in his chest. Mikey's eyes darted to his left hand, and he sighed in relief. The Edax was still trapped. Fearing it would try to come out when he least expected it, Mikey always wore the relic gloves.

He shook his head, trying to clear his mind. The situation with the Devouring was already complicated enough without adding his own to the equation.

Mikey got up from his bed with a sigh, his exhaustion weighing heavily on him as he made his way to the door. When he opened it, he met a guard who nodded at him. "Elder Zuri arranged for a communication device to be brought to you. Here."

The man put a small black cell phone into Mikey's palm.

"Thank you," Mikey said, taking the device and closing the door behind him.

He immediately started dialing numbers, growing more excited after each digit at the prospect of talking with Arthur. He'd missed his foster father deeply.

"Hello?" the man answered.

"Hey," Mikey said. Relief and a slew of other emotions flooded him.

"Mikey?! Is that you? Oh, thank god."

He heard the old man audibly sigh.

"What happened?" Arthur asked.

"Boy, do I have a lot to tell you. Speaking of God..."

