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## Fallen Kingdom

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Murray State University Honors College

HONORS THESIS

Certificate of Approval

Fallen Kingdom

Sarah Black  
December 2022

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requirements of HON 437

Approved to fulfill the  
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# Fallen Kingdom

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for the Murray State University Honors Diploma

Sarah Black  
December 2022

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## Introduction

My relationship with reading has always, in my memory, been built off survival. My friends and I joke about this frequently, how our writing began because of trauma or abuse--coping mechanisms formed out of the need for a voice that couldn't be smothered. However, my parents have spun me a different tale and, while they are blind to a lot, I am inclined to believe they were on to something.

They describe a little girl, no older than three, perfectly incapable of comprehending words unless spoken to, seeking out the *dictionary*. Yes, you in fact did read that right. Of all things to be fascinated by, my tiny hands apparently avoided every picture book at my disposal. My mother would stumble across me, under the dining room table, in the kitchen, by my bed, flipping the yellowed pages filled with scribbles I had no hopes of understanding. She would drag this book away from me, much to my displeasure, only to find me an hour later tracing over the shape of "gargantuan" or "photosynthesis."

This was the beginning of my stubbornness. All the novels I've ever started I've been unwilling to put down, even if I didn't particularly like them. In my younger years, this was a problem. My teachers would frequently have to fight for my attention as my focus would get caught in worlds far beyond our own. There were even moments when I couldn't hear them if they called for me, vividly stuck in the noise of rushing water and the clamor of swords meeting in an otherwise silent clearing. However, no matter the punishments that followed, nothing kept me away from the adventures held within the spines of my chosen novels.

I will be the first to admit, though, that I was not reading these stories for the literary benefit at the time, even when I began to turn my fascination into a need to put pen to paper. Erin Hunter's *Warriors* gave me a peek into the life of my favorite animal, personified; my first introduction to the fantasy genre as well as a crash course in the difficulties and beauty of friendship, something I didn't have much experience with as an isolated child. *Pride and Prejudice* exposed me to well-rounded characters and how to build a strong scene; not my first glimpse into romance, but it never hurts to learn not to make assumptions about those around you. Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* dug deep into the idea of conflict and character relationships; I found this novel during one of the darker periods of my life and discovering the idea of a 'found family' lifted a ten-pound weight off my shoulders. Television series, movies, and video games have also played a significant role in certain areas of my writing, especially when it comes to description, world-building, and dialogue.

When it comes to the specific, original inspiration for *Fallen Kingdom*, however, it was actually an anime that gave birth to the first rendition of this novella, which wasn't actually a novella when the design took shape in 2013. I stumbled across *Sailor Moon* at a friend's house. This show "chronicles protagonist Sailor Moon's quest for a powerful stone known as the Legendary Silver Crystal. Together with the Sailor Soldiers, who each represent a different celestial body, Sailor Moon defeats a gauntlet of villains to stop the collapse of the Solar System" ("Sailor Moon Summary"). At first glance, my novella shares a few basic similarities with the television series: the use of power stones, a world beyond Earth, and an outer space princess. However, while I loved the idea of the magic system from the show, as an angst-filled teenager, I couldn't pass up the opportunity to explore darker themes within the scope of my

capabilities. If I could draw (and trust me, I can't), you might've seen this novella as a comic but, while I did finish a manuscript for a novel, *Fallen Kingdom* never reached its full potential.

That is, until now. Since coming to Murray State University, I have had the pleasure and challenge of studying writing in a way I never have before. In high school, I had very little engagement with creative writing--only our literary magazine--and I depended heavily on a local writing group for feedback and growth. While I had always tried to pull from my own personal experiences, my stories were heavily guarded behind descriptions that swallowed scenes whole, making navigation impossible (I would discuss the number of trees for two or three pages, just to give you an idea of how convoluted I could be). I was terrified of getting too close to the meat behind my ideas, the actual theme, and what it would say about me as a person. I had no clue as to what I would discover if I started peeling back these layers. Now, I've realized that I should've done it when I had the chance as I do not remember the feeling most of these pieces were trying to convey.

This is what drove me to return to *Fallen Kingdom* and why the main themes revolve around PTSD and loss of self. Scarlett exemplifies both of these well, from her amnesia in the first half of the novella, to her constant flashbacks, to her need to find meaning within the places she's been forced into. I wanted to use my novella not only as a means to convey the cyclical nature of mental health, but the constant struggle to fight back against the toxic traits it causes in one's own behavior and interpersonal relationships. Despite the ending, I want *Fallen Kingdom* to exhibit Scarlett's growth, her coming of age from the meek and submissive child to the one who finally overcomes her own insecurities to protect the one she loves.



As such, my novella was as much an exploration of my chosen themes as it was my need to document my own familiarity with these matters. I could have approached these goals through a non-fiction collection, as retreating from the veil of fiction has been one of the most significant perspectives Murray has given me. However, I wanted to return to my preferred genre as I have always leaned on stories that dealt with serious topics through the lens of a world similar to our own but never the same. It allows for a degree of safety and distance, but it also gives room for a new perspective.

There are many subgenres of fantasy, so to start I'll look at a rather broad definition of fantasy where "the setting of the story will occur in an imaginary place or a medieval, specifically Arthurian, place. The characters in this work are often made up of magical people, beasts, or other creatures such as faeries" ("What is Fantasy in Literature?"). *Fallen Kingdom* is a modern take on some of these expectations. All events, besides the prologue, occur in Logan, West Virginia, a city I passed through frequently in my childhood in order to visit my grandparents who live deep in the mountains. All the major actors within the plot have powers of some sort--both for protection, offensive maneuvers, and to highlight their mental state as the story progresses.

To fit it within an actual subgenre, though, *Fallen Kingdom* would best fall under the scope of urban fantasy, "[a] subgenre of fantasy that sees supernatural elements blended with contemporary, urban environments" (Gaiman et al. 16). *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* is both a great and very popular example, one that played a substantial role in my childhood growing up. My reason behind choosing this setting was rather simple and, again, personal. I wanted to blend together a sense of realism and fantastical elements--my writing style has always been rather abstract, with long, flowing descriptions. It was an extremely useful tool to be able to actually

look up pictures of Logan when I forgot certain details; it kept me grounded in the more action-packed scenes when I'd usually get lost in what I was trying to narrate.

Urban fantasy also has an extremely close relationship to paranormal romance which plays a sizable part in this novella. Originally, while I did want to focus on the effects of trauma on sexuality, specifically regarding demisexuality, this was not meant to take up a large portion of the plot. In fact, the sexuality of my characters is never mentioned. However, interpersonal relationships become a driving force for Scarlett, whose scattered memories revolve around the people who had the greatest impact on her life--the most apparent being Rein.

Rein and Scarlett have a tumultuous and, at times, highly destructive relationship built off of codependence and their shared trauma. They were brought together out of Scarlett's desperate need for friendship, causing years of resentment that eventually turned into a twisted sense of love. To fully expand on what their relationship held, time was needed, whereas the present only holds struggle for Scarlett--she is alone and on the run for the entirety of the novella, whether she is aware of it or not. Because of this, I made an effort to make a distinct difference between the speed at which the plot was progressing in the past compared to the present, "Urban fantasy usually has a more acerbic voice; the style is often more severe to match the fast-paced action. It often contains more graphic, grittier violence, while paranormal romance usually has a lower level" (Moore). Scarlett is beaten, bruised, and bloodied until the very end, whereas the past holds very little, if any, physical violence. Rein is intentionally designed to be her balancing factor and as such the past, which Scarlett cannot escape, also takes on this role--it gives her purpose.

Nevertheless, while the aim was to provide a blending of the two genres, *Fallen Kingdom* is primarily urban fantasy. It is in first person in order to entrench the readers in the (often confusing and terrifying) experience of PTSD, whereas paranormal romance is typically written in the third person. When writing, flashbacks become a central part of all my pieces, and *Fallen Kingdom* is the epitome of this statement. Characters are the production of the environments we expose them to, as people are in reality, and I find flashbacks the most intimate way to reveal backstories. In my novella, I experimented with several different modes of flashbacks to match the current status of Scarlett's amnesia and mental state: in the beginning, they vary between highly lyrical and dream-like states or violent, sudden episodes; as the plot goes on they become clearer, more grounded in scene, and she can remember people, places, and the full context of conversations. Flashbacks associated with PTSD have to meet very specific criteria:

Flashbacks are one of the most important identifiers of post-traumatic stress disorder. The common characteristic of the flashback is that it is intrusive and involuntary. It is like a memory that comes out of nowhere. There are certain cues that trigger a flashback. One sound, one twitch of an eye, one movement, one smell might be all it takes to bring you back to the traumatizing moment. ("PTSD Flashbacks Explained")

With this in mind, one of the hardest parts about writing *Fallen Kingdom* was making a clear distinction between a normal flashback and one caused by her condition, especially at the start of my writing process. No matter the scenario, I wanted them all to have a basis in sensory experience as her triggers often have to do with what is happening in her current environment, whether it be a conversation, tripping over a dead body (as in Chapter 7), or the scent of antiseptic (as seen in Chapter 2). However, memory, in general, is also extremely dependent on these same stimuli so there isn't much to distinguish on that front.

This is where I was lucky to come into contact with Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, a post-apocalyptic zombie novel that is less focused on the typical rush of undead madness associated with such narratives, and more geared towards the protagonist's PASD (the book's version of PTSD). Memory is a huge aspect of this novel; Mark Spitz determines what parts of his past should be shared with those he encounters based on the depth of his relationship with them. Most of this novel, therefore, revolves around the varied versions of his "Last Night" story, where he lost his parents and the world, both metaphorically and literally, fell apart around him. There are sections of this novel that, because of his mental health, allow the past and present to blend together. This creates a conflicting and confusing account, not only for the readers but for Mark as well. *Fallen Kingdom*, on the other hand, is much clearer about what is and when a flashback is occurring; no matter the cause, every instance is marked by italics. However, there is a surface-level correlation between my novella and Whitehead's novel--the invasiveness of certain PTSD-related flashbacks and the ambiguity of their triggers. There are some moments where even the person experiencing the flashback won't know what's causing the attack, which can amplify the uncertainty and fear of both your character and the situation at hand. Many of the flashbacks that occur in the hospital section of *Fallen Kingdom* are like this, whether it is when Scarlett is in the midst of a panic attack or when the Queen arrives for her final confrontation with her daughter. PTSD is a frustrating condition (as I know from personal experience) and reading Whitehead helped me learn that creating this ambiguity helps portray the reality of the disorder.

A more clear and fundamental inspiration happens to come from yet another novel dealing with PTSD, Naomi Alderman's *The Power*. The plot of this book follows several characters as women develop an ability to control lightning through bodily adaptation--I will be

looking particularly at Allie Montgomery-Taylor. In the beginning, this woman starts off as a traumatized and sexually abused teenager who, after gaining the ability, is revealed to be particularly powerful compared to the girls around her. She will go on to become a religious figurehead and powerful leader who will convert thousands of people to her new religious doctrine.

Scarlett and Allie, on a baseline level, share many similarities that vary in small ways. Scarlett was also abused by her parents, but it was heavily geared toward physical, mental, and emotional abuse; she lacks the sexual abuse that Allie suffered. Scarlett is also extremely powerful compared to the others around her but she cannot control her Shadows to the fine degree that Allie can. Despite all these near misses, there is one aspect that both these novels share, one that, while reading *The Power*, would go on to greatly influence my writing of *Fallen Kingdom*. Scarlett and Allie both experience hearing voices within their minds which act as guiding figures when they are lost or in need of companionship. When the semester began, I had a lot of trouble deciding how I was going to go about writing Scarlett's personal thoughts, the voice of the Shadows within her mind, and the flashbacks (as they would all have to appear in italics). In the old novel version of *Fallen Kingdom*, there were moments where blending took place and it could become exceptionally confusing. *The Power* was of great help when it came to giving me ideas on making the voice its own specific character while keeping it (almost) totally internal.

It also assisted when helping me find a purpose for this voice. For Allie, the voice she hears starts off as a motherly figure and goes on to become almost godly. For Scarlett, I had two different goals for this voice; on a very basic level, I wanted it to come across as her magic being sentient, offering her a companion so she is never truly alone. From the experience of PTSD, I

wanted it to represent the concept of intrusive thoughts, though I do think this is something I could do better when revisiting *Fallen Kingdom* in the future. As this voice is frequently paired with the manifestation of Scarlett's Shadows, they typically offer positive encouragement or a warning--in most cases, intrusive thoughts are the exact opposite of this: negative and catastrophizing, or something that could lead to bodily harm. In this case, they ended up taking on a different role: that of Scarlett's inner child, her own inner monologue that she uses to keep her hopes up after years of being tossed aside by all the adults in her life. Her Shadows give her the ability to speak up, voice her more adventurous side, and even act on it on occasion.

However, all this being said, the formatting of the voice seen within *The Power* also helped me to craft an ability never before seen in the villain of my story (original to the novella). In the Chapter "One Year Before the Fall", we see Scarlett's first interactions with Disperitus, her discovery of his powers, and her insistence to learn from him. However, there is more danger lurking within the italics that make up her thoughts: more than once, there are moments where the font changes, a tone shift that is just different enough to stand apart from Scarlett's normal speaking patterns. These act as commands, lining up with Disperitus' body language to create a controlling environment that goes on to influence Scarlett's decision-making, both in this chapter and later on. His manipulation acts as the fourth use of italics which, as many of the speaking lines in this section lay back to back, seemed to require a separate distinction--thus the new font. Upon further discussion and revision, I can see how confusing this can be, especially when readers are experiencing *Fallen Kingdom* for the first time. In the future, when I work on expanding this project further, I would like to develop a method of making this voice stand out as Disperitus without needing the extra font through more context clues relating to dialogue tags or more direct body language attached to the speaking lines.

So, to conclude, I can truly say that I am proud of what *Fallen Kingdom* has become. With the sheer number of hours (and tears) put into every chapter, the effort and stylistic choices I've made in this novella have led me to believe that I've reached a turning point since I started dreaming of this project in 2013. To come back to this piece, the one that has been with me since the very beginning, was not only humbling but proof that I could complete whatever I set my mind to. *Fallen Kingdom* is a setting built around struggle and desperation, around love and friendship, around growing up and letting go--I could think of no better way to culminate my final semester on campus than to give this story, my old friend, the final push it needed to become a well-rounded piece of literature. In the future, I would love to come back and convert it into a novel--as my little self once intended.

This novella, all the frustrations, all the planning, and all the long nights--they came together as a symbol, of a sort. When I started writing all those years ago, I wanted to make people *feel*. I wanted to take them on an adventure, away from their troubles, as previous writers had done for me. That is still what I want for my writing today. My humble beginnings as a reader, as innocent or as troubled as they were, saved me. So, while I do think that I have achieved all the thematic and literary targets I so eagerly planned out, I also hope *Fallen Kingdom* brought you even the smallest moments of peace during times of great stress.

## Prologue

When the end of the world comes, people always expect poetry. They expect a rousing speech as the sky burns, and the moon crumbles, and the sun blinks out. It's as if saying something brave or clever will push back against the tide of fate and stop time in its place, when the truth is just the opposite. Screams lay curses on the gods while monsters loom in the distance, leveling buildings that have stood for centuries, their wails carrying on the wind and growing in number. The eerie chorus vibrates as dark masses make their way down every street, the shepherds of fire and brimstone, and we all know there's nothing that can stop them.

We're the only ones left, and all we can do is watch on in silence as our people die.

The chaos makes it easy for me to slip in mostly unnoticed, gritting my teeth with the effort it takes to haul myself up the ladder leading out of the catacombs, but it's hard to disguise the drag of my leg or the trapdoor slamming shut behind me. It doesn't matter either way. Rein always could spot me, whether it was across an empty courtyard at the end of the world or a crowded ballroom, swarming with aristocrats. She lunges across the distance, narrowed eyes taking in the growing pool of blood beneath my feet and my goofy attempt at a smile as I wave.

"Is it too late to say 'ow'?"

"You're lucky I'm not carrying you." She says it like it's a threat. I'm one hundred percent sure it is one as she bends down, fingers making quick work of the makeshift bandage that had done absolutely nothing to stop the flow of blood. But don't let anyone say I didn't try.

There's no use telling her that, though, so I hobble back to give her space to work. It's as bad of an idea as it looks. Rein's grip is iron tight and she has to catch my hand to keep me stable



when my balance fails. “Careful! Just- give me a second. This looks pretty bad; I know it must hurt.”

“Love, I’m fine.” Smoothing a hand through her hair, I proudly gesture to the wiggle of my toes, how I can roll my ankle, promptly biting back the cry that follows after. “See? It’s just a little swollen.”

“Says the girl with shrapnel in her foot.” She isn’t having it, and I can’t tell if her voice breaks due to her hiss or the sight of my heel turned to mush. She’s so careful in trying to remove the tiny pieces of metal that it’s nearly impossible to spot the tremble in her hands, but I’ve known her for too long. Just like she’s known me for too long and I’m not even sure why I try to lie to her anymore.

Shrinking in on myself, I whisper an apology. She nods. A fucked up ritual for when *I’ve* fucked up and she’s already forgiven me. Her grip on my ankle tightens. “I don’t care who’s throwing around the orders next time,” a pointed look directly behind us, to the walls that hold back hordes of the damned, hunting us out, the mice caught in their trap, “I’m going with you. No one needs to be out there on their own.”

The ground shudders beneath our feet, heaving with the collapse of another building, another life completely extinguished. A life we don’t know the name of and can’t carry forward--a name that will forever be lost to dust.

I have to clear my throat. “There was nobody out there.” Five simple words, but it leaves Rein pausing. The flame flickering between her fingers is only an inch away from cauterizing the wound. I want to ask her what she’s thinking about--her parents, her home, perhaps the little trinkets we hadn’t been able to bring with us--but she’s already wiping away the little beads of

sweat off her brow. Moving just to *do* something, I assume, but then she peers up through the strands of hair stuck to her cheeks, violet eyes pinning me in place with their soft wall of tears, and I can't breathe past the heart in my throat.

Her next inhale is closer to a rattle, "Why didn't you call me? I would've met you halfway."

"Rein, that's not-" She does her best to protest as I bend down, but screw my heel, there will always be later to finish off the bleeding for good. Cupping her cheeks, I bump our foreheads together. "You know I'm not going anywhere. I would've called you, but I didn't have a choice." A small gesture to the shattered remains of my radio, the top half still strapped to my belt, and that's all the answer she needs. How it's there is a miracle, how skin hadn't been gorged away with it was even luckier. I could dip, dive, and dance around buried mines all day, we were trained by the best, but that stuff is easy compared to what's outside now. There was little reason as to why I wasn't laying under piles of rubble like the rest of the royal guard.

She snuffles, but leans forward to hide away in my hair. Her breath tickles the side of my neck. "You promised."

"Hey, you may be a *tiny* bit stronger than me, but I'll have you know I sent that monster packing! There's no way I'm breaking *any* promises." Scooting back, it's only so I have enough room to tilt her chin up, "We're in this together. Like always."

"A very heartwarming performance, but are you going to keep standing there? There's no time for your theatrics; get over here."

*What is a Queen without her Kingdom?* My mind whispers back, and I want to laugh, yell, or throw the scattered remains of my bloodied rag at her face. *Nothing but a figurehead waiting for checkmate.* But the fight rolls out of me with Rein's burn.

Her growl is a practiced whisper underneath the sound of searing flesh. "Queenie can't do anything on her own, can she?"

I can't argue with her, not when people lay slaughtered on every street, not when they slink toward us, disjointed and hazy reminders of her *royal highness'* past failures. She does earn a chuckle, though, and I shrug, offering a dingy piece of fabric for my new bandage, "If we take much longer she's going to blow a fuse."

Rein eyes it before pushing it away, fishing out a spotless rag from the pouch on her hip. "Yeah, and if I don't treat this right, it'll get infected. She can wait. They aren't getting in anytime soon."

Touche.

I glance at the walls of the courtyard, undulating starlight that's turned crystalline in the fading rays of a dying sun. The grass closest to the barrier, already yellowed by the harsh throes of winter, has been reduced to scorched earth. Orange trees, which for years have stood guard over every walkway and every pedestrian, are now shriveled into dehydrated stumps. Their fruit, once the most prized possession of traders from beyond the galaxy's limits, lay blackened and rotting, the acid scent drifting on the breeze. Even at a distance, my skin crawls, the air humid, heavy, too unyielding for mid-December. Sweat glides along the curve of my spine. If a living soul couldn't withstand the heat, then neither could the dead; they'd dissipate, vanish back into a squealing mist before getting within thirty feet of this safe zone.

Even so, I find the Queen among a smattering of smushed fruit and hesitate. Her fingers hold a dazzling display of the same light, her eyes a shimmering gold through the storm of ash that twists at her feet, cutting a ridge into the earth, deeper and deeper. She's shaking, pale. Her regal appearance diminished to that of the commoners she once resented; long, flowing gown replaced by slacks stained with blood and streaks of mud. She looks up, sensing my stare, and her face pulls into a familiar sneer, but for once she doesn't have time to berate.

*Good riddance.*

Tugging on Rein's sleeve, I gesture in her direction. "How long has she been holding that up?"

"A little over an hour?" She sighs, "She's not keen to let me forget it either, because then she'd have to admit she's tired." Rolling her eyes, she finishes the last knot with a flourish, leaning back on her heels. "Perfection. Now. Stay right there."

She starts climbing to her feet, but I'm already side-stepping. "Hey, wait-! No, I know what you're doing!" Pouting at the way she chuckles, I'm tempted to take off running if I didn't know my leg would collapse under my own weight. "We can't!".

Her hum is low as she watches me stumble, but never would she let me fall. "Too slow, doveling." I don't even have time to register the ground getting closer before she's sweeping me into the air, the motion so smooth, so practiced, that it's easy for her to nestle me into the crook of her body. "Doctor's orders. No walking for you, doveling."

It's difficult not to smile under the assault of that bravado, her smug, childish glee. There are no worry lines when she's distracted, when she's teasing, and nibbling at my bottom lip does

little when it comes to controlling the rebellious little urge to lean up and keep us both from speaking any longer. So, I bury my face in her shoulder instead. “You’re a worrywart. I’m perfectly capable of walking on my own.”

“But then I wouldn’t get the absolute pleasure of carrying you, would I?”

“...flirt.”

Her laughter is so foreign in this wasteland of shattered glass and empty doorsteps. A cackle, energetic, and far better than any birdsong or fine-tuned instrument--my heart jumps into overtime and I feel the heat all the way to my ears, but I can’t bring myself to hide. It’s the first real smile she’s made in weeks. I want to bask in it.

Rein guides us through what remains of mangled cobblestone paths and marble arches, but we have to stop about five yards away from the Queen. It’s just far enough that our skin withers instead of burns, but the Queen’s voice is a wisp of what it used to be. A speck compared to the boom that once commanded the attention of the army, the nobles, the peasants, the researchers. Everyone. There wasn’t a soul who didn’t listen when she spoke and now we have to inch closer to catch every word.

“It’s nice of you to finally join me.” She throws a hand out. We pretend not to notice the skin that’s peeling away from the bone, bleached a vivid white in the glare of her own magic. “Start the machine. *Now.*”

"Your highness-" I can at least say I tried, that I put the offer out there instead of completely turning my back on her as she deserves, as every cell in my body demands that I do.

"Don't argue with me." As expected as it can be. She has never been one to openly admit she needs help and I am not so foolish to believe that this comes out of some protective nature she's been hiding all this time. "You have your mission. Survive. Rebuild. Do *not* come back."

Like we had any choice in the matter.

The muscle in Rein's jaw jumps as she bows her head, giving thanks for her generosity--what could be better than the gift of living another day?--but when she turns she mutters a curse just loud enough for me to hear.

*Not much longer*, I ache to tell her, instead nuzzling into her chin to earn another small grin. Where we'll be going... maybe this sacrifice will be worth it. We'll at least be free. All the death, all the destruction. We could put it behind us, just the two of us.

The teleporter whirs to life, a vortex of color that descends and stretches out into oblivion. The machine rattles, growls, coughs out a bit of smoke, but it stays in one piece despite the seared edges and wires poking out of the panel on the side. I recognize Rein's handiwork there; the ends have been melded together so the power inside has a proper path to flow. Knowing her, she's handled all the technical wizardry, checking that the engine purrs under her fingers while she types in our coordinates at least thrice. This will probably be its last journey, but none of us would like to end up in the middle of an asteroid or floating in the emptiness of space, left to drift while our organs implode. That meant precision and the more precise, the less chance we have of someone trying to follow us.

"Go." The Queen gets the word out from between clenched teeth. We stare at each other for a long moment, her eyes lingering on Rein's arms, the way they cradle me that much closer under her watchful glare. Our history is laid out at our feet, in the scars that decorate my skin like

a patchwork quilt. It's a gaping wound and there are no goodbyes strong enough to mend the gap. I'm not sure either of us wants to.

She puts her attention back toward the wall while I face what can only be forward, the unknown, the future.

"Are you ready?" Rein's lips barely brush against the crown of my forehead, as if she can sense the thoughts beginning their tailspin, her attempt to stop them before they carry me away. She's always been a natural at wrangling them and they rear back as I seek out the endless expanse of her eyes.

"I think so. Are you?"

She starts to purr, that low sultry sound that never failed to set butterflies bouncing off my ribcage, "Always. I'm rather fond of our adventures~"

The giggle bursts free before I can stop it--the last people of a dead race, acting as normal. Absolutely ridiculous. "Well then, I think we better get to jumping."

Rein has enough time to look affronted before she, too, is laughing. "How rude, laughing at me! I've been a perfect lady."

Standing on the precipice, it is unstoppable, our little manic amusements. The Queen refuses to look our way. My face turns red--Rein's grows wet. Perhaps it is easier this way. Perhaps it would be better to sit down and cry. When we look at each other, I can swear I see the same questions in her eyes: why are we doing this, why did it come to this, why couldn't we stop it, why us?

If we actually stopped, though, if we put those words into the air, there would be no taking them back. So, we laugh, wondering what's waiting on the other side. Will it be ruins? Or maybe, just maybe, a speck of life that's held on through the torrent.

We link hands, still wiping away tears, and I make sure to hold on tight. I'd always been told intergalactic time travel was a bumpy ride, but no one's ever really come back to explain in real detail. How different can it be from normal space travel?

I think someone said once that the first step is always the worst. They were right.

An explosion from behind pushes us forward. I recognize the Queen's scream in the second it takes for the colors to draw us in, a pull that consumes us whole, yanking us forward, pulling us apart, and ripping our atoms into a thousand different pieces before we're put back together again. Rein calls my name, desperate. Her grip is rigid until it isn't, thin wires prying her away finger by finger, and then she's gone. Leaving me spinning, hurtling onward with her blood hot on my tongue-

My back hits the boundary of space and time and I go crashing through.



## Chapter 1

There are images, too fast to process, and my lungs are burning. My heart's beating too fast. I can hear it in my ears, a high-pitched wail over the chorus of our feet smashing through the underbrush. It begs me to stop as I weave around one tree. Then another. Each bleeding out of the darkness, with twisted roots and clawed branches. I'm sure I scream, but the wind snatches it away, and all I can do is push my legs faster, harder. Trying not to picture the man that's breathing down my neck, his wires finding their way around my ankles, dragging me down, through the trees--*so many wires*--and he doesn't have to hunt me anymore. A knife will find its way into my chest, my blood the same shade as his eyes, red, red, *red, red-*

The path vanishes beneath my feet and, for a single moment, I'm airborne. Trapped, engulfed in nothing, I'm returned to the womb of space, to the same hopeless gateway that had tipped us both over into a land of thorns, branches, and deep valleys. Only the sting of the breeze is enough to know I'm falling and I barely have the sense to remember to bend my knees.

I hit the ground hard and roll, ankle failing on the way up. A snap that blends with a pathetic shriek, one I try to muffle. Praying that he didn't see, that he might not know- But a glance through the treetops reveals the grey hair, the pallid face, the smile that reaches far past his ears.

My brain screeches at me to run, to find my balance, but my legs are useless. It would only take him a moment to drop down, to finish this demented chase, but all he does is whisper. Soundless words are crickets purring, and wind rushing, and animals prowling. Time slows to the sigh of ice bubbling underneath my skin, liquefying before it breeches the tip of my fingers--magic that won't compute. The man hovers a little further over the edge, the cliff

melting under his touch, rocks cracking and rolling into the road. Over his shoulder, the darkness breathes, heaving into a gaping maw, the glint of vermillion. A flash of light morphs his face into monstrous shapes, shadows pulling at cheeks and jaw, nose and hair, and I know I've missed my chance. The air is glistening around his head and the monster over his shoulder is a hulking manifestation. But the roar that follows is unfamiliar, from behind. I twist and squint into twin spotlights bearing down with too much speed, swerving and squealing.

Ice solidifies too late. Up is down, down is up, and the last thing I remember is that I'm only glad I won't be writhing for eternity.

## Chapter 2

Voices drift into awareness, hazy and distant. Floating in on the wisps of darkness that weigh down my limbs, my arms and legs are nothing but white noise connected to an engine that's forgotten how to run. Thoughts fire at half the speed they're supposed to, dragged through blocked circuits filled with cotton. It takes too long for the haze to be natural, but fear is too far away to be a concern.

I just want to go back to sleep. But the longer I float in the gloom, the more sounds begin to trickle in from above: doors that open and close a little too hard, feet that scuffle to and fro, and a woman's voice that won't stop shouting. The worst part is the consistent beeping, the shrill tone that acts as lightning, setting my skull aflame from the inside out. It brings it all into startling clarity, solidifying gibberish into familiar shapes, sounds, and words--someone's whispering.

"...your voice down. That's impossible, just look at her. You expect me to believe that insane story? She can barely move."

"Look, I'm as skeptical as you are. But I got called to an 11-83, and that was the report! She ran into the road and then," A sharp clap leaves my ears ringing, only letting me catch the tail end of the next sentence, "...something dangerous out there."

"Well, that's your department. I can't explain everything to you. I'll call you when she wakes up."

There comes a long, drawn-out sigh before heavy footsteps fade away, leaving only the beeping. Heavy, cold, mechanical, every pulse sends a new chill curling down my spine. But

even as I try to recall why, there's nothing, not a face, or a place, just the sound. Bouncing off the walls of my brain and leaving indents in its wake, the tone picking up in pace to match my breathing--

*My fingers are a dark silhouette against the light above. They dip and sway, in constant motion, letting in too much light. Light and the smallest glimpse of a droplet that hangs suspended in the air, falling, falling, until it's not. Hot against my cheek and, before I can stop it, in my mouth; the metallic tang of blood; bittersweet.*

I choke. Slammed back into my body, into the smell of blood, antiseptic, and drugs; I fight to sit up. A mass of nerves that don't seem to listen to reason; it's a miracle that I'm even able to realize there's an IV in my elbow, let alone rip it free. Tears are clawing at the back of my eyes as I'm already crying, *they found me, they found me and they're going to hurt me and I have to get out--*

I don't even hear the man get close, but a hand presses me to the bed, firm yet gentle at the same time. A scream presses at the back of my throat, eager to be free as I thrash.

His voice doesn't waver. "Calm down, everything's fine. You're safe. But you'll hurt yourself if you keep this up."

My gaze darts to the left, the right. White. There's so much white. A machine, the source of the beeping, has my heartbeat displayed as it flashes across the screen.

*Needles and scalpels flash in the low light, always followed by screams or wails. Faces hidden in darkness loom high above, voices morphed into hideous trills, endless just like their probing--*

“Can you hear me? I’m a doctor. You’re okay. I promise. Just breathe.”

*Blood drips onto a pristine white floor. Polished shoes stepping over the growing puddles to get closer to the metal table where I lay.*

My weak flailing comes to an abrupt halt. Half on my side and half curled in on myself as I use the angle to push his hand away. *If I behaved, he wouldn’t hurt me.*

*“You know it’s a lie.”*

The voice is so quiet, but it’s right and I have no reason not to listen to it. I’m at his mercy, and the only thing I can do is obey and wait. Wait as the face above me begins to clear, peering up between wild strands of hair plastered against fevered cheeks. There’s no blood. There are no shadows. Just bright, concerned eyes and a frown that doesn’t seem to suit his laugh lines.

“That’s it... you’re safe, okay? Can you tell me where you are?” He shines a much smaller, much brighter light into my eyes, one that leaves me wishing I could sink through my pillows and disappear. His stare is expectant, the vivid blue a fist around my throat that keeps my voice from uttering so much as a peep. I shake my head instead.

His frown gets deeper and it takes all of my willpower not to flinch. “I expected as much... You’re at the hospital in Logan County. You were about seven miles out, up in the mountains. You ran out onto a road in a panic and almost got hit by a car.”

It comes back in fragmented pieces. The woods and their murmuring trees. The darkness. The chase. The metal beast bearing down on me.

“A... car?” My voice is too scratchy, too weak.

“Yes... a car.” His brows draw together, the hand that once rested over my heart retreating to run through his hair. “Can you tell me your name, Miss?”

“*Come on! We have to go!*” The voices crash into frame, impatient despite the way I recoil. So real my mind falters over every syllable, but no amount of searching reveals the source. Every corner is empty. The promises they whisper come up short. Answers may rest, right there on the ghost of a memory, but there is no saving them from the fringes of the abyss. The longer I run forward, the quicker everything spins away. It leaves me grasping at nothing but the twisted remains of torn-down foundations.

“I don’t know.” Swallowing, I wait for the rebuke, already turning my head down, away from any incoming strikes.

They never come.

Instead, he straightens and slides his hands into his pockets. There’s no mistaking the look in his gaze now: pity. “Do you remember anything? Like how you got out into the woods or how you got so hurt?”

Hurt-? Gaze flying down, everything suddenly makes sense. Why I can’t move my arms very well and why my head screams with the slightest of movements. Bandages decorate my skin, the edges traced with hints of burns, some already scabbed over, some not. The damage is

extensive, starting at the top of my abdomen and going beneath the blanket, which has bunched around my waist in my panic.

The doctor, again, sighs. Nodding to himself, “Alright, I’ll take that as a no... Well, I’ll be in later to check on you, so try and get some rest, okay? You need it.”

Part of me wants to argue and say that I don’t want to be alone. The smell of what can only be disinfectant is starting to make my stomach churn, and I swear the white walls are beginning to close in on every side. But a much larger part of me, the one still fighting back the images of blooded lab coats and cruel smiles, refuses to have him in the room any longer.

I manage a nod. He smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes, gesturing to a box I haven’t noticed before, on a chair that’s been pushed up close to the side of the bed.

“Just so you know, everything we found on you is in that. Like your clothes and whatnot.”

And, just like that, he left. There’s no begging, no ultimatum needed, yet his departure still takes away every bit of stress creeping into my bones. I heave a sigh of relief before settling back into the pillows. The images seem to fade away too, for a little while, flickers here and there. It’s almost like a game, seeing how many I can pull from my mind without being able to place them, fragments that have no place in the empty chasm behind my eyelids.

There’s one that sticks out the most, a cocky croon, one that many might find irritating, but not me. Never me.

*“But still, still, there’s something, missing,*

*And I can’t quite tell what it is.”*

It's easing, almost embarrassing, how quickly the low tone sets me at ease. She--I'm not sure, at first, how I know this--is singing, a lullaby of all things. As if she could see me now, but I know it's just my brain seeking out the comfort of that far-off beauty.

*"But this I say,*

*As I fall to sleep."*

I can only catch the slightest hint of words in the distance, but it's innate. Her name may be lost, but if she walked in right now, I know I'd recognize her. Always there to offer any encouragement, to chase away any harm, to act as a soothing balm to any ache.

I file her away, pulling the blankets up to my chin, startled by the faint scent of vanilla and honey stuck to the sheets.

*"Goodnight sweet stranger. Until we meet again."*

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*White dress, bare feet, wild hair. A big contrast to the pretty woman's pretty dress and her pearly skin. My hand feels tiny, even in her dainty, doll-like fingers, and she's too warm. My palm keeps getting sweaty. I want to wipe it off, but when I try to pull away she swats my arm.*

*"You can't just run off like that. You don't want to hurt anybody, do you?" She's got a really big frown on her face--maybe I shouldn't have left, but in the distance there are other kids, laughing and clapping. I watched them for a long time before I got pulled from my hiding spot. They were playing a game, with a rope that two held while a third jumped in the middle.*

*"I want to play, please? Just for a little bit?" I ask, already knowing the answer.*



*The Queen shakes her head at once, “Absolutely not! You could lose control! Do you want that?”*

*Biting my lip, I do my best not to cry. She always hates it when I do-- blubbering, she calls it. Big girls don't blubber. “But I want a friend. They always get to go outside and-”*

*She stops so suddenly that I nearly trip, but she's grabbed me by the shoulders, bending down so we're face to face. She looks a lot older up close. “If I get you a friend, will you stop running away?”*

*We're frozen there. I don't know what to say, what to do, until she sighs and starts to pull away- “Yes!” Taking her hand, I start to jump. I can't promise enough that I'll be good, shouting and spinning while not caring about the way she smirks.*

*This couldn't be a better day!*

*Yet, the girl is just as tiny as me, if not more so, and she won't stop crying for her parents. Not until the doctors come and make her. They tell me to play with her. I try to show her a silly face; maybe she'll feel better? She won't look at me. When we're alone, I try to give her the toys I've hidden under my cot. She won't touch them. When we have to go upstairs for the tests, I try to tell her it'll all be okay. She won't listen to me.*

*I'm scared. I try, but I don't know how to be friends. I don't know how to do this right.*

*One day, they put us in a room together and tell us to fight. She burns me so badly I sleep for a long time after. When I wake up, she's sitting next to me, holding my hand. This time, when I try, she smiles and I wonder what changed her mind. I wonder if it matters.*

## Chapter 3

Turns out all hospitals are the same. Too cold, too quiet, though now and then a nurse and her cart rattle by my door, snapping me back from the edge of a dream dyed red. The first time, I wanted to thank her, but it's surprising how irritating it becomes around the fifth or sixth rotation. It's still too bright; the wall lamp above my head is sickly translucent, dim but not dim enough to quell the pounding throb behind my eyelids, which is only making the sweet call of the nightmares ever more appealing.

I try to roll onto my side, an escape attempt already bound to fail when it feels like someone's reached in and rearranged my ribcage. But I give a good jerk anyway, just to be sure momentum isn't what I'm missing. The IV stuck in my arm gives a sharp little yank, *fucking piece of-*

"Excuse me, Ma'am?" The knock sends me scrambling, but thankfully I don't fall face-first into the floor.

"Yet," my mind warns, but I shush it before turning to face what, I assume, will be another doctor's visit.

I couldn't be more wrong. Going still under the hard gaze of a guardsman--the uniform is undeniable--*I stand in line. There are shoes shuffling in my periphery; a line of innumerable others. I pull at the lapels of my own uniform and hope no one notices it's too big on me.* His is green, though, a vast difference from the navy-clad profile under my fingers. We didn't wear hats, either, helmets on occasion, but his might as well be a boomerang with how far the brim sticks out from his forehead. It's a weapon all its own.

Still, it's exceptionally difficult not to force myself up and stand at attention. While a rather large-set man, he's straight-backed and buzzed-cut. He keeps his hands behind his back, at least until he seems to realize I'm leaning half over the side of my bed, away from him, away from the uncertainty, focus glued on what he might be hiding.

"Woah now, everything's alright." He has the decency, at least, to show me he's not armed besides the strange-looking device at his hip--I'm not sure the lack of a sword makes me feel any better or his offer of a wave, "The name's Officer Johnson. I just wanted to come by now that you're awake and ask you a couple of questions, if that's alright with you?"

*Questions?* I blink, as if the concept is foreign, as if my entire reality isn't consumed by ideas I don't know or understand. "Uh- sure?" What else can I say? Guardsmen mean that they're looking for answers; which I can't exactly do on my own at the moment.

Ignoring the shaky little exhale that comes with torn skin stretching too far in the wrong direction, I press the heel of my palms to my eyes before struggling to get comfortable. Who needs sleep? It could wait another hour, especially if he could give me any hints about the man in the woods or, even better, the girl I've been dreaming about.

"Okay then. Now, I've been informed about your condition, so I'll be sure to keep that in mind." He comes forward, looking vaguely amused at my rather valiant fight against the threadbare blanket, so the urge to bark at him swells, but it's not worth it--not right now. It probably *is* pretty funny to look at. I offer him a chair, but he chooses to stay standing, removing a notepad from his breast pocket. "Let's start simple. In your own words, can you tell me about what happened in the accident?"

“You mean when the, um,” I have to snap for a minute; the word is still alien, despite the fact the item it belongs to nearly killed me, “the car? Hit me?”

“Yes. The car.” He raises a brow but says nothing else.

Shrinking back a little bit, I remind myself it must be normal to forget these simple things; that it’s okay to forget right now, as frustrating as it may seem. “I don’t remember what happened after, other than waking up here.”

“And before?”

“It’s a little foggy but,” trailing off, I suddenly don’t know what to tell him--if I want to describe the chase; it seems like one of my dreams and how likely is it, really, that he’ll believe me?

“But?” He prompts, pen hovering close to the paper.

“I-I don’t know,” unable to meet his eyes, I turn to the window, to the sun that’s quickly dipping below the treeline in the distance, to the mountain that stands proud over this hospital. I had to know, didn’t I? If I didn’t say anything, then the man who hurt me could get in, could finish the job. I’m not crazy. I don’t feel crazy. I can’t be crazy. But, even if I’ve lost everything else, there’s no forgetting the wires, the monster that rose out of nothing.

There’s a pause; his eyes boring straight through my skull as if he can see the memory without me having to describe it. “What’s the very last thing you remember, then?”

My stomach flips so violently that I nearly ask him to go find my nurse. It comes out as a murmur, “I was being chased.”

A swift, neat scribble. “Alright, we’re gettin’ somewhere.” I do my best not to notice how he leans back on his heels, how he smiles when he thinks I’m not looking, how he turns his gaze toward the ceiling before asking the next question. “Do you know who was chasing you?”

“No.” Simple enough. Even as it runs through my mind over, and over, and over again, the only thing that I can find is the man’s eyes--wine-red, glowing in the blackest night. I tell Officer Johnson as much, watch his brows pull together, but he writes it down.

“So you can’t give me any idea as to what this man looked like?” He drags out the last syllable, staring at something he’s written with a half-smirk that he can’t seem to hide despite the twitching muscle in his jaw. “*Other* than the glowing eyes?”

“I’m pretty sure he was older?” I shrug but realize my mistake when the pen doesn’t move this time. Mouth running dry, “No, he was definitely older. Older than you with- with grey hair. And he’s tall.” I know it’s right. I also know, even as Officer Johnson nods to himself, returning to his notebook, that my description could fit thousands of individuals in any given city.

“I’m assuming you can’t give me a name?” He sighs when I shake my head, going to tuck his arms away while leveling me with yet another look that says I’m not going to like what I’m about to hear, but I best keep my mouth shut and listen. “Well, I’m sorry to tell ya, but we didn’t see any evidence of anyone else bein’ out there. There weren’t any footprints, no cigarettes, no nothing to say you weren’t runnin’ from yourself. You’re making quite the accusation.” He stops, lets that hang as if it might pry out some truth or secret my broken memory has yet to deliver.

If there was a way to make my bottom lip stop quivering, I beg the gods to grant me the information, to tell me all the ways to keep my hands from tearing each other apart as they hold on with white-knuckled grips. “I know, sir, and I’m not lying. There really is someone out there.”

The staring contest continues until he pinches the bridge of his nose. “Do you remember why he was chasin’ you? Did you take something of his?”

I’m already shaking my head before he has the chance to finish. “No! No, I didn’t, but I don’t-”

“Well, you didn’t have anything on you except the clothes on your back, according to your doc, so you’re good to go there.” He flips to another page, eyes skimming over something he must’ve written before coming here. “You have injuries that don’t match up with the accident; do you happen to remember where you got those from?”

*The ground explodes underneath my feet. Someone’s screaming, the world is spinning, flames licking at my legs as I leap away--it’s more of a stumble, but at least I make it. There’s a red spray alongside the brick chunks that are flying into the air, the dirt raining down, and while I don’t know who it was, I know I was the lucky one in this exchange.*

I’m not even sure if I should answer Officer Johnson’s question at this point. His mouth is half-open like he’s ready to start speaking at any second even though he’s watching me over the top of his notepad. My thoughts are racing, faster than my pulse, faster than the ringing in my ears, faster than the air that can’t seem to fill my lungs. The gaping hole in my brain demands my attention, stretching out for miles, useless--every corner is filled with snapped branches and the smell of smoke drifting in from the distance.

I pull my knees to my chest. “I was somewhere else and the man was going to--he *did* hurt me, but I got away.”

Johnson holds up a hand and all the proper explanations promptly dry up. I’m not sure I could’ve kept going anyway; there wasn’t much left to say. He’s already writing as he begins to speak. “Okay, so this man held you somewhere, tortured you, and somehow you got away?”

The only thing I offer is a nod, which seems to satisfy him more than my voice at this point, face losing some of its pinch. It sounds ridiculous. I’m aware of how small I am; the bruises took what already *looked* brittle and made it true. How I got away is just as much a mystery to him as it is to me, and I remember the bare details of the man’s face--though, I suppose this *isn’t* a mystery to him. These words are nothing more than the ramblings of a mad woman, one that is driving him so far up a wall that he’s begun tapping his foot, to some weird tune I don’t recognize (go figure).

I don't recognize much of anything. Not the device on the wall or the funny moving pictures it plays; not the symbols on Officer Johnson's uniform or the name West Virginia, nor whatever it could pertain to; not the little booklets, the "magazines", I was given hours ago, with all the random gossip that makes no sense. None of it is the slightest bit familiar. Not like the images of the sleek, bustling halls; not like the doctors and nurses, professionals equipped with daggers and rapiers instead of scalpels and stethoscopes; not like the rolling hills that come in bursts of terror, ushered in by the growl of monsters shifting in the periphery.

By the time he asks, “No idea where you were held?” my fragile nervous system is ready to shut down. This question is far too elaborate. For me to even start piecing together where in

the mountains I began my journey, I would need to know my name, need to know why I'm being chased, who is chasing me. Cause and effect abounded.

He clicks his tongue and writes something else down, "Okay, then. I've got one last question for you before I head out, and it's a routine question I have to ask everyone I interview, so please don't think I'm being insensitive."

When I don't so much as move, he continues, "Do you take any medications or illegal substances?"

It's one thing to know someone doesn't believe you; it's another thing to have them directly question you. It's as if the wires I've been running from, the ones I thought I escaped, have finally wrapped around my ankle and dragged me down. I choke on bile or fury; I can't tell which. "No. I've never done either. Anything."

"You're sure? The hospital's gonna run a blood test so it's best you're truthful with me." It's as patronizing as it is sympathetic; he's trying to loom over me, trying to make himself seem the bigger threat than the man I've "made up" in my head.

I should be shaking, like a small dog about to be kicked to the four winds, can still feel tears building on the horizon, yet I'm surprised to find the stronger urge to lunge, to head-butt him right in the nose. "I'm sure." I've dug my nails into the ground and I won't let go even as he chuckles and starts to turn, ready to return to his life and leave me grasping at straws, at snippets that leave empty hopes and promise nothing but more doubt.

"Then I'll leave you for now and get back to you with any updates, huh? I'll send by some officers if we find anything."



*If.*

I saw what I saw. I know I did.

Johnson has tipped his hand, just enough for me to make out what he's written in that tiny black notebook, and maybe I shouldn't be so certain.

In neat, spaced letters, he's circled the word "fantasy" followed by a single, dark question mark.

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*The ceremony is as grand as all the others in history. A grand celebration. A grand farce.*

*No one will ever know the difference--no one except for her and me, and the Queen of course; exactly how it was planned.*

*Cheers ring out as we're granted our titles, as the festivities take off, but as I circle the room I realize she's gone. We were supposed to approach the Queen together. We were supposed to ask for answers together. Neither of us--I thought--wanted to do it alone.*

*The hallway is empty as I slip out large, ornate golden doors. They seal out the sound trapped inside, drenching me in blissful silence. No one will know I've gone. No one will know I'm slipping through the shadows, that I'm climbing the stairs two at a time, that I'm standing outside the Queen's chambers.*

*No one will know I'm there when I hear her ask for her parents, when I hear her ask for the permission that will finally grant her the leeway to see them after all this time.*

*No one will know I hear the Queen laugh, “No mother would give her child away for eighteen years. You really thought they abandoned you here?”*

## Chapter 4

I should be dead.

My room, all hundred square feet of it, has been a podium for doctors and guardsmen--or officers, whatever the differences may be--alike, and their shared incompetence. It's always the same questions, as if Johnson had conveniently left out my story, searching for something better, something bigger, something more believable. Eventually, while I never varied in what I said, I couldn't take the reactions anymore. Most were shocked. Some outright laughed--the youngest officers that lack the hard lines, stubble, and the haunted glaze behind polite smiles. I stop paying attention, just letting the narrative repeat while staring at my hands.

Real. But when I curl my fingers, the rough callouses, as scratchy and hard as they may be, feel as if they're far away. The world dances on the periphery, ghosts passing one after the other with no real value except to whisper how they'd never seen anything like it before.

I don't care one way or another. All I want is the chance to sleep. Not to hear about how the car had hit me going over fifty miles per hour. I may not fully understand what a car is or how it runs, not fully, but it sounds bad. Sounds painful. Sounds perfect for fracturing a few ribs and sending me flying in the process.

But dead?

I'm most certainly not dead. Though, delusional is apparently not only on the table but a strong contender. They won't even let me go to the bathroom without a nurse present anymore. The last one refused to do it on her own--too scared, going by the way she flinched at any sudden movement. Before I ever had a chance to explain, the decision was made--I was to be meek and

quiet. I don't speak unless spoken to, I'm only earnest and passionate when I think I'm being written off, which happens in every conversation and always ends with the person backtracking both from our discussion and from the room. It's safer that way; if you're too earnest then people would think you were lying on principle.

It solves none of the issues, though, and they still aren't looking; there are still no answers, only vacant explanations and excuses. They hadn't found anything else on the mountain; the sheer number of miles they would've had to cover kept them at the mouth of the woods and that's it. There were too many nooks and crannies they would've had to investigate and the person who insisted they were in danger was already "safe and sound" in their custody. They couldn't find the spot I'd woken up in. They couldn't find any sign of a struggle. They couldn't find the man with wires attached to his fingers.

Could they do *anything*? Could *I*?

Even with whatever medication they've given me--which is enough to make my tongue feel suspiciously like a slug--I flick the blankets back and throw my legs over the side of the bed. I need up, to walk, to pace, to see what lies beyond these four forsaken walls; I need anything that will stop my mind from running in every direction possible. The ground is firm beneath my feet, the tile freezing and smooth. The first step leaves the room spinning, the second my knees are buckling, and there is no third. I'm left on the floor, panting and coughing, fire ripping through my spine, and how am I supposed to prove anything when I can't even stand on my own two feet?

The machine that reads my heartbeat is going frantic, squealing and loud. I can't take it; it won't be long until someone else decides to come barging in, until someone else decides they

know what's best for me. I start yanking off the many cords and wires that have kept me still, too afraid to mess up my healing process, but now it's too much; this distant concept of physical health while my mind is left to rot. Why should I be something to gossip over?

I'm finally free with a wet plop, a sticky, square pad swinging in the air as I scoot away. My airy gown is draped off a shoulder and was nearly torn in my rush--but the noise has stopped. I wait, for approaching feet, for hushed murmurs, for shouts, anything that might give away that I've alerted the nurses. There should've been some sort of alarm? Instead, there's the soft, far-off yowl of a baby in the midst of its nightly tantrum.

Closing my eyes, I thank the stars and the moon for granting me this small respite.

*Through a door that's hanging on by a single hinge, there's a tunnel, intact except for the rocks and filth that rain down with every shuddering heave of the ground.*

The image comes unbidden, though I'm used to it by now, sad that it's not the girl and her comfort. Why my brain has decided to give me places instead of people, I don't know, but my best guess is it has grown tired of the social aspect of the last few hours. What is less threatening? A face you can't recall? Or rubble with no name left?

Rubbing at the ache in my chest, I shake my head to send the illusion back where it came from, hoping I hadn't pulled out any of my stitches. I have too many pieces of an unfinished puzzle, but there's just enough to assure me that I'm sane *enough*. Majestic and magical as it is, rubble is rubble, pain is pain, and death is death. Can the brain really create something so vivid if it's never experienced it? But how can I even hope to guess what's missing? How do I know if it's true?

My focus drifts to the box the doctor left behind earlier, still sitting in the chair no one had ever bothered to claim. It'd gone forgotten, but now I couldn't hate myself more for it. They were *my* possessions, whatever they were, and while they didn't explain anything to the people who found me... That didn't mean they couldn't jog a memory loose, a face, or name, or *something*.

Pulling my thumb away from my lips, I pick away at the rest of the nail I'd already bitten to the quick, shifting to properly reach and pull the cardboard into my lap.

My stomach rolls. There's so much blood. The clothes inside are black, but it's stained on every surface visible. The shirt looks so small crumpled up next to the baggy pair of cargo pants. I try not to picture myself in its place: curled up, knees to my heart as my life pours into the grass one vital ounce at a time. Was that how the doctors had found me? Or had it been the nurses? Or the one in the car?

*A horn is blaring, all around me, and people are shouting--or screaming I can't tell which. Can't tell if it's me or not. I'm cold. Opening my eyes has never been so hard, but when I do I'm blinded and have to close them again.*

*"Did we hit her!?"*

*"What the fuck is **that**?!"*

*"Run- **Run**!!"*

I push the clothes to the side, shoving the memory along with them, putting in enough force to almost punch a hole in the cardboard. Shaky fingers ghost over the bottom, bumpy with dirt, dust, and unknown grime, and I bite back the urge to chuckle. *Of course, there's nothing.*

The clothes are nothing special, nothing that could point one way or another. I had shitty taste, what many would label depressing--fitting, I suppose, for the situation I found myself in. No brand labels, no fancy colors or patterns. All the pockets were empty, no ID, which was expected but how would I ever leave this place without a name or some sort of personality?

I'm about to pull free of my box of growing uncertainties when there's the slightest caress of something cold. It might as well amount to a ten-ton magnet from the force it exerts, keeping my hand in place, will turned to putty in the face of all sudden possibilities.

*"Don't get your hopes up,"* stupid advice from a mind that doesn't even have the capability of listening to itself, but I know I'm expecting a coin, or maybe even a watch like the one my doctor wears. I never envision the little black teardrop on a thin piece of string.

It's heavier than it looks and polished to the point I can see my face staring back at me, like the surface of a lake gone still. There are no stars out tonight, only the moon, which shimmers over its face and it's an entertaining game, turning the little crystal this way and that to see how the light changes shapes over its curves. There's no name carved into the pendant, no reason I shouldn't throw the useless piece of jewelry out the window and into the parking lot far below. None whatsoever.

Except that it's easing. The gem is different from the shirt, the pants, my skin that's too itchy and pulled tight across my bones. I run my thumb across its surface and meet a chilly brush back in greeting, one that soothes the burn that's been eating away at my veins since I first woke up in bandages. It's the first secret I have no desire to unravel as the pain in my ribs disappears and the drill in my skull stops its persistent squeal. This is normal, natural, and so familiar it

brings tears to my eyes--how could I ever have forgotten this, this little crystal, and how nice it feels to have such shivers racing down my spine.

As I bring the string over my head, letting the little crystal fall into place, I notice it's raining. The ambient noise of the hospital has faded. I try to remember if it was ever there, try to remember when the baby stopped crying, try to remember if I noticed the AC cutting out. The room lights up with a flash of lightning; raindrops are streaking down the glass and the trees across the way are trembling as what can only be thunder shakes the building. It travels through my skin, a sensation I know to be sound yet isn't, the static of a limb that you've neglected for far too long.

That probably means I should go to sleep. It's later than I remember it being, but I've grown comfortable with my spot on the floor with my blanket. The storm rattles on, muting my thoughts. It's enough for now. I am warm, I am out of harm's way, hidden between the floor-length windows and the bed, tucked against the wall. If anyone walked in, it would be as if no one was here, as if it were an empty room, as if I never existed besides the box of clothes and the indent in my pillow.

The next burst of lightning lasts longer, a ripple that lights up the world beyond the asphalt and trees: the mountain that looms in the distance, angry, vengeful, a reminder that it might yet find a way to reach me. The cars down below were no longer the roaring beast from the road in the forest; these were silent shells waiting for their owners to return. My face, reflected back at me, is bruised and slack-jawed, ignorant of the figure standing in the shadows off to her left.



*A mass of bodies lines the cobblestone streets, blood flowing between the bricks like crimson mortar, leaving the road tacky in weather that's given way to ashy snow. In utter silence, each step is a sudden blast that rocks even the bravest to their core, but I don't bother a glance at the dead alleys on either side. There's just the woman waiting at the end of the debris, with her sweet smile and long nails that never fail to remind me of claws.*

I jerk forward, but there's nowhere to go. I'm trapped. I know it's not a nurse, know that even with my hearing being on the fritz, once they saw I was awake they would've approached, probably gotten angry about the mess of blankets or at least made an effort to give me more morphine, more anything to finally knock me out.

Whether I have the strength or not, I'm ready to force myself to stand, to launch myself eight stories to the ground if it meant getting away. I'm already about to scream, to dodge around whoever it might be--who am I kidding, who else would have snuck in here in the middle of the night if not the man who put me here in the first place?--and make for the door, but my legs are tangled in the sheets I'd brought with me and cold fingers are tight around my shoulder. *Too fast*, and how are they behind me?--but then they squeeze, ghosting my neck and I choke back any sound that wants to burst free.

*Red eyes glimmer around every corner, belonging to the harbinger of death, to the minions he's created to kill us off. They tell us to be ready, to stand tall and fight to our last breath.*

*What they don't see is me, cowering in the back. Already watching the closest of allies vanish into history.*

*None of us will be surviving this war. They don't know what we're up against.*

But ghostly wails never come. The pain never comes. Voices fade away to leave only a whisper, surprisingly gentle, surprisingly *real*. “There you are... I’ve been looking everywhere for you.” Her touch leaks into my veins, my lungs, my heart, where it takes root and smothers the constant rhythm.

“*Who are you?*” I hate that my voice breaks at the end, that my arms won’t move to shake her off, and that the most I can do is lean away when she drags her nail along my cheek. It’s getting harder to breathe--the air is filled with a perfume that’s gone stale. Rose? Or Jasmine? I can’t tell.

She stops, pulling away as if I’ve burned her. “You don’t remember?”

It’s enough of a leash that I can finally put that final bit of distance between us, stumbling around-

*Sharp golden eyes are set between even sharper cheekbones, stained with soot. They glow, pulsing in the night, a beacon to any lost souls wandering in the rubble. The skirt of her ball gown lays cut and discarded over the body of one so unfortunate.*

Her gaze is just as bright as it was then, pinning me in place, but if she cares for my shock it doesn’t show. It’s blinding, the only light with the storm blotting out the moon (but when did the lamp over the bed go out?). The room is now comprised of hulking shapes and shadows that look like furniture but could be anything else. I can just make out my bed towering over her head, intimidating and distorted. The chair presses into my spine, sharp and uncomfortable, but it reminds me that I have room to move, shoving it between me and her, a barricade designed to fail but a barricade nonetheless.

“I... I have bits and pieces, but that’s it. I don’t remember anything really--not this, you, I mean.”

A frown joins the smoke that still stains her skin. She was beautiful, once upon a time, but now her eyes carry a white sheen, her dress is torn, and her teeth cracked. She won’t stop staring, probably thinking about all the ways she could piece together my mind herself if she only could pry it open and see what’s inside. I fight the urge to bow my head-- for what reason, I don’t know, instinct, fear, or respect? All three? She still holds herself tall in the face of misery and the unknown, while all I’ve ever done is fall to it.

For just a second, her attention drops to the little gem, nestled safely atop the swaths of bandages. “We don’t have time for this.”

My hair stands on end, a hand drifting to tuck the necklace away,

*“What are you waiting for? Run the tests.” It’s too hot. Lights blur overhead; they said they’d go slow this time. My throat stings with the acid tang of vomit. Someone’s crying.*

*I keep whispering the same thing, as if it’ll make them stop. It’s supposed to make them stop. “I’m sorry...”*

*From above, someone leans over, her face swimming into focus.*

“Listen, I’m sorry I don’t remember, but stumbling around isn’t nearly as fun as you seem to think it is, I didn’t do this--”

She doesn’t let me finish. She reaches across the gap and her outline shimmers, setting off a chain reaction. Her legs refract first, a blur of color separated from her body, leading to more breadcrumbs left behind in her wake, an arm here, a torso there, only reconnecting once

she's stopped, one hand still piecing itself back together on my cheek, the other around my wrist. Her body is dissected by the majority of the chair, not that she seems to care, a smug smile stretching across her face, folding the beauty into something ugly, wrinkles tearing at her eyes and lips.

"I wouldn't do that. You'll hurt yourself." She squeezes my wrist, digging her nails into the skin and humming when I shout. There's a dim hope, even as I look down and take in the sea of dark veins spreading underneath my skin, that someone outside this little corner of the hospital will hear, come running; there's no way they wouldn't have heard. But things are already so much more complicated than I ever thought. It's of no surprise that the world keeps its silence, a barrier between normality, glowing eyes, and shadows that lick at your fingers.

"What the *hell* are you talking about?" It's a stammer, but this time I don't hesitate to try and yank myself away. It's of no use, her arms, while thin and wiry, are stronger than they look.

"Now, now. That's no way to thank somebody, is it?" She clicks her tongue. Up close, her breath smells of rot and I have to swallow down a gag.

At the center of it all, the crystal sits, gleaming. The light casts long silhouettes along my torso, the ghosts of twisting strands that break from its surface, reaching greedily for anything within its gravitational pull. I'm only an inch away, can feel the ice itching to dive, to latch on and spread... Part of me aches to let it. I'm held back by some silly sense of self-preservation (the gem is right there, sitting on my chest. If it was going to hurt me, wouldn't it have done so by now?) and by the woman's hand, still clamped tight.

"There, see? I wouldn't want anything bad to happen to you." Her thumb makes light circles over my cheek, guiding me into her bosom.

*“Close your eyes and concentrate.”*

*Nerve endings sizzle, chilled past any means of survival, while darkness moans to life in the corners. Creatures that lumber with heavy steps and wispy tendrils that fly through the air, leaving paths of frost in their wake.*

“What’s going on?” I should be more concerned about how slurred my words are, how her eyes seem brighter than before, how they sear through my flesh, thoughts, and soul.

“I’m doing what I do best!” her voice rings. “If you don’t remember, I’ll just have to show you!” Fingers tangle their way into my hair, a stroke turned yank halfway through. “I didn’t send you here so you could sit on your ass.”

The void fills itself, as if the pain was the kick starter it needed, the means to dust off the neural pathway connecting one message to another, and another, and another, all leading right back to her. “Your highness?” a squeak of shame, accompanied by heat that sinks deep and holds fast.

“Good to know we’re making progress...” She searches my expression, looking for something only she knew and, when she doesn’t find it, shrugs. “And that I’ll be missed.”

“Your highness, I’m so sorry-! I didn’t mean-!” I can’t stumble over myself enough, but then again, without her grasp, I wouldn’t be standing straight at all. Murder in the streets, women who roamed looking for children who’d never come home, the demented laughter of a man less than a man--a leviathan in human skin. Reality warps, a faint step back that leaves me tumbling head over heels as the images bombard one after the other. A replay that doesn’t stop even as my

lungs beg for the oxygen that's gone missing, my lies falling one after the other, apologies I'll never mean fighting for the forefront, for a woman I feel no fellowship toward.

Because she *is* dead. She stinks of it, of mildew, dust, and worms that bury their way into your flesh, making homes in your organs while what remains melts away. She'd cropped her hair when the fighting went from bad to worse, from a small skirmish to full-scale war, but now there are bald spots, a showcase to time's constant march. How long has it been? How long have I been gone?

I backpedal and she laughs, a croak that rattles in a partially disintegrated ribcage, "I know; I don't exactly look my best. But what do you expect?" She cocks her head to the side, that same smile growing longer, eating its way through her nose, ears, cheeks, eyes, until it's the totality of her face and smothers the last of her light, sending the room back to darkness.

"You did this to me, Scarlett. And now you want to forget?"

I'm all lanky arms and twisted legs. I trip over nothing as my knees finally register what it means to run, or I smash into the bed, or my feet are caught by the blankets still strewn across the floor. It's too dark to tell; the shadows have grown thick, to the point I have to claw through them, so when my hands come up for the next desperate pass I see the stains left behind under my nails. The darkness in my veins that is spreading; up my arms and into my palms, my fingers.

The Queen starts to laugh, a heaving cough that comes from above and below. One that fills her diseased lungs and erupts in a puff of smoke and dust. "You're still running. You know what you have to do."

I squeeze my eyes shut, lunging in the direction of the door. Or where I hoped the door is. I could've sworn it was this way. The Queen hacks harder. *You did this. You did this to me.*

“Leave me alone!” I swing around, shoving at nothing, tears ready to fall as my knees give out. *I didn't mean to. I never meant to hurt anyone- please!*

But my body doesn't sink into the gloom gnawing at my heels. Instead, there's warmth, soft arms, and the distinct smell of lavender.

“Honey--honey! There's no one here!”

## Chapter 5

My lungs suck in air as if they've never tasted it before.

“That’s it. Deep breaths.” I don’t know who to listen to, the stream of high-pitched sirens that make up what’s left of my reasoning, or the woman rubbing circles into my back. The woman who doesn’t have glowing eyes, or does she? The woman with a strong heartbeat that’s telling mine not to implode, no matter how much it may want to. The woman with lethargy in her touch, who guides me back to equilibrium as if there aren’t holes in my overworked muscles, waiting to be numbed from the gouging memory of what I’d done. Who I’d left behind.

*“Wrong, always wrong. She can always hurt you. You have to-”* I should push her away. Distance meant freedom, safety. She can’t touch you, she can’t hurt you--but who am I to do such a thing? I deserve my punishment, yet I hold tight anyway. On my hands and knees, I bury my face in her chest and wait, like somehow this one act will shake her, keep her from dragging me away, under the dirt where my skin will turn gray, will fill with holes for worms to feed and roots to fill. I want to beg, scream, or cry; I don’t want to go with her. But my throat is sealed.

Her hands find my cheeks and I *burn*. Flinching away, but she keeps me still and turns my face to the light.

Light?

“Look at me. You’re not there anymore. They can’t hurt you. You’re safe.” She’s small, round face, a thin nose. Glasses. The Queen doesn’t have glasses.

Wilting, I sink into her shoulder, eyes still darting from one corner to the other. The only shadows are the ones cast by the overhead light, small and unassuming as they sit and gather. But



there's no blood, no bone, and the smell of decay is slowly melting away into the harsh tang of antiseptic.

“What's your name?” It's a croak, pathetic, a weak attempt to gain some ground against the ever-increasing gulf opening up beneath my feet--but I can speak again. I'm not blubbering, I'm not cowering in fear, and I'm not a child. I'm a big girl--an adult. If my entire body didn't feel like the flavorless jello they brought me for dinner, I'd be embarrassed; I'm curled up on this woman's lap like she's my mother. As it is, she's a stranger and the remnants of my tears are hot on my cheeks, hotter than any blush.

All she does is smile, slowly tucking what I can only assume is a wild piece of hair behind my ear. “I'm Danice Branson. I'm a night nurse.” She gestures to the door, the one that's still half open from her entry. The one that's on the opposite side of the room from where I ended up, the one that teases me with the empty, bright hallway on the other side. Sound filters in; the same crying baby from before; even angrier this time, shoes that squeak on marble flooring, and running water. “I heard you callin' out and making a huge fuss. When I came in you were backed up against the wall. I don't have much trainin' in calming people down, but you were gonna hurt yourself if I didn't step in.”

“No-! Uh. Thank you.” I at least have the dignity to bow my head, finally scooting up and off of her as carefully as I can without shoving a foot into her abdomen. It proves more difficult than expected when my limbs are connected with nerves made of fuzz, but I succeed. With flying colors too, I might add--I catch myself the one time I lose my balance.

Only when she sees that I'm sitting, crooked and in a half-lean against the wall, does she move to stand, every motion measured. I'm as grateful as I can be that she's being so gentle. The

world is in high definition--I blink and the edges blur, then refocus, then blur again. A sea of saturated colors made worse by the overwhelming concentration of white. Branson looms, an offer outstretched to help me to my feet, but when I meet her eyes they're glowing.

“Come now, let's get you back to bed and I'll get you some water. That'll help.”

A blink and it's gone, but the image remains. Picks away at the back of my mind, the paranoia festering, pooling, ready to pounce.

*“No matter what, if they ask you something, if they tell you to do something, you have to say yes, understand?”*

I nod, even though I'm perfectly content to stay on the tile, which is so cold it might be searing snowflakes into my ass. But she grins, so it's the right response, and she hauls me up without any more pretense. My feet nearly leave the floor; she's a lot stronger than she looks, which makes the shamle toward the bed that much easier since she practically carries me there.

“There we go. Now, you make yourself comfortable and I'll be right back. We'll get you some water and somethin' to help ya sleep. Dr. Shipley will be back to check you over in the morning, so we can't have you exhausted, now can we?”

I shake my head, though the idea of being poked and prodded sounds like the ninth ring of Hell no one ever bothers to discuss. She pats my arm and heads for the door, only hesitating right before she flicks off the lights.

Glancing up, then back at me, she winks. “I'll leave those on, hm? Just till I get back.”

*Why? I'm not scared of the dark,* I want to insist. In fact, my eyes are throbbing and the ache is starting to spread--a sharp pain pressing at my temples. But thunder rumbles, rattling the

window in its frame, and I squeak out an, “Okay,” instead. A few more minutes wouldn’t hurt anything.

But really, how long does it take to get water? One minute turns to five, then fifteen, and I’m not patient enough to endure the constant drumming against my skull, to sit still while fluorescents carve patterns into my retinas. I shuffle, stand, and start to pace. Not once does my path align with the light switch.

*“If you’re not careful, she’ll find us. We have to be extra, **extra** quiet, okay?”*

I murmur an agreement to a voice that belongs to no one, the voice that likes to sing, the voice with small hands and violet eyes.

*What do we do if she does find us? I want to ask.*

*But we’re both too small to have any answers, and as the oldest maybe I should be the one who knows.*

The Queen was here when she should be dead. Dead where? Dead how? The man with red eyes, surely. Had to be. But on the mountain? She was filthy, half decomposed--

*“We’ve searched high and low. It’s like you dropped outta the sky. We didn’t see any sign of anyone else, Ma’am.”*

I never thought the officers’ excuses would hold any value, but there’s a possibility now, isn’t there? I came from somewhere, *sometime* before all this. *Stars blur and combust; time condensed into the smallest of fragments necessary to fling **us** across the gap between two planets light years apart.* It wasn’t just me; my sweet alyssum and I, hounded by the boogieman. There’s the smallest chance, then, that the Queen got pulled in with us, that he killed her before

she could run. Maybe an animal got to her after? A scavenger doesn't know the difference between murder and its next meal. All it would've had to do was drag the body into some underbrush, into a cave, away from prying eyes, away from the search teams.

*"On the count of three, we run. You know what to do. Just like we practiced."*

Except I don't know, and how do I explain it to someone whose name I can't even remember? But she starts her countdown and I pause, holding my breath because each second is a second lost and with one wrong move I may forget this, forget her, forever. I'd rather let her lead me astray, drag me along through this endless expanse--she was the one kept at bay, after all, and I trust her to find the blockage, to find her own way out, to poke and prod until the memories came flowing back, free at last from any stagnation.

*We're still so small but it won't be till later, much later, that I realize just how long this hallway truly is. "One. Two... Three!" Our little feet slap against the floor. She doesn't hesitate, she never does, flames bright between her fingers as she rushes the men clad in black--faceless, empty voids in a world only lit up by the red emergency lights. Another one of their training sessions, another failure bound to happen.*

*But even so, it shouldn't be this dark, there shouldn't be this many of them, and they shouldn't have their weapons out. Not this soon. The doctors always wait, they like their electric floors or the ugly creatures they keep below ground specifically for these occasions. Now, they're chuckling up above, in the rafters where I can barely see them, whips and knives clenched tight.*

*I can barely make out the door we need to get through. It's too far, we can't make it.*

*The girl screams, an explosion following in her wake. I bite my tongue and lunge around one of many whips aimed at my waist. We can do it. Together. If we can get that far, can get out, and we win. We'll have beaten their game. No more tests. No more punishments. We can go up top and do normal training. We can go home. **She** can go home.*

I find myself at the window, staring out into a world where the sun only stains the horizon in theory. The rain has lessened and the wind isn't howling anymore, but storm clouds continue to roll through the sky, promising violence, but never telling when.

Is there even a point in going home, in asking these questions when I only have my name, a first name, and nothing else? Would anyone welcome me? Would I cry, would I have a revelation, would it all come flooding back? Or would we simply stare at one another, nothing more than strangers, me and this girl who smells sparkling and sweet, who rushes in head first and lets me bring up the rear because she doesn't want me to get hurt?

Putting a hand on the glass, I rest my forehead against it. The cold seeps into my skin, into the racing thoughts, and slows them--

*She's too far ahead. Her legs have always been stronger, but I don't have the heart to tell her to wait. She's been planning this for weeks, months, and I know that's the reason she's not by my side, grasping my hand, yanking me along like always. She wants out, can nearly taste it even though it's been so long, and she'll burn down anything or anyone who stands in her path this time.*

It makes perfect sense that I would be the thing holding her back. My fingers are thin to match my arms despite my injuries, weak and sickly. There's some defined musculature if you

look close enough, but you really have to look and look *hard*. The ache of my ribs ground me here even as smoke taints the air.

The Queen said I was running and she was right. I was running. I'm still running. I don't know how to stop, how to fight, how to protect.

*I tell myself she's too scared for me to get caught in the crossfire when I trip and she just keeps going. When she's prying at the door and yelling at me to get up, to hurry, and then she's racing back with that look on her face and I can't be the reason she's hurt.*

*Not again.*

*I roll on my back and summon all the energy I have, feeling the neurons elongate, misfire, shatter.*

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There's a knock at the window. It's so quiet, so out of place on the eighth floor, I do nothing but blink, still stuck somewhere else.

It's two feet long, lithe, almost a snake but not (seeing as snakes don't fly, and they most certainly don't knock on windows). It has no eyes, but it does have a mouth. One that's filled with mist, that drips from its fangs like potent venom, the same foggy haze that drips off its body and coats the air around it.

We stare at one another. I contemplate backing away, shutting the curtain, but it seems to realize what I'm thinking, floating forward to tap against the glass once more, a soft request if there ever was one.

“O...kay?” Considering the pleasant chat I just had with a dead Queen, how bad could a Shadow be? It waits patiently as I work the latch, doing little flips whenever I start to slow, whenever I stare for too long. It earns a giggle, at least, even if I might be losing my mind--it’s kinda cute.

But the moment it’s free to do so, it darts inside and it’s not the only one. They swarm over the lip of the window seal, twisting up and around my body, stealing close to my face. I yelp and start to stumble backward, but they form a wall to catch me, setting me upright and rubbing against my cheeks as if to say, *“It’s alright. We won’t hurt you. We’re here to help.”*

*“Scarlett stop!” She’s screaming, but I can barely hear her. In one hand, my gem shines, brighter and brighter, so hot it’s cold. In the other a ball of mist swirls. Once again, my veins have turned black, spiraling under my skin. Blood seeps out from underneath my nails and drips from my nose.*

*The men have scattered like ants. Some are limping, some are sprinting, and some lay still. There are still too many able to move, still too many close to her, still too many that could maim and hurt and kill--*

*But with a roar, a monster hoists itself into existence, little wisps blazing after it. **Feeding it.** Until it towers over them, me, her, its head brushing the ceiling, and when it steps the entire building shakes. The entire world.*

“You... You’re *mine*?” While a question, I already have the answer when I look down, when I see the start of darkened veins blooming at my wrists. They answer anyway, in a slew of elaborate twists and spins.

One nuzzles its way under my chin, then bolts out the window. It turns, swims back and forth, up and down, further out above the cars. *Come. Follow.* The others swell in agreement.

I only hesitate to think. Nurse Branson will come back to find me gone, but what's the point in staying? A few bruised ribs? A few burns? A check-up with Dr. Shipley or another interview with the police so I can tell them what?

Hey, I can summon Shadows and control them. No biggie.

Something tells me they'd think it was a huge biggie, and I really don't feel like getting carted away to wherever it is they drag the craziest parts of their population.

At the end of the day, it's a rather simple decision. Even from an amnesiac's point of view, there's nothing they can do except treat the external wounds. If the man with red eyes is out there (and he is, but it's not like I actively have to find him), then chances are the girl with violet eyes is too. Or maybe others.

So no more running and no more hiding. I'm taking the lead this time.

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*"We're all born with supernovas for atoms. You... you hold a single galaxy in the palm of your hand, and you don't even know it."*



## Chapter 6

It's an easy descent. The little ones cradle me close, from the window to the ground, so gently it's like drifting through a dream. I'm cradled from the wind and the rain, from the leaves that dance their wild swing, and from the bursts of newborn sunlight that find the tiniest holes to pierce through the veil of cloud cover. Even if someone were to look out their window, I'm not afraid of being seen, of hearing their cries touch the air as they point, as they begin to cower. The only thing they'll see is a shape drifting through the corner of their vision, one second there, the next not, and they'll think, *it must've been a bird. Yes, a bird.* Then, rolling over, they'll return to sleep.

Or, you know, whatever people in hospitals do this early in the morning.

I snicker, leaning forward at the very moment the Shadows start to tilt. The little ones, still worried, send a few of their brothers to slip under my arms, to brace my weight as my feet finally touch pavement. They needn't have worried--for the first time since I woke, I don't ache, my muscles don't pull the wrong way, and my brain doesn't rock against the confines of my skull. My body is in alignment, despite the hole in my memories. I've found my start, the reason to start searching. Though, now that I'm down here, I'm starting to realize I probably should've grabbed my clothes.

The breeze cuts through the hospital gown like a newly-sharpened blade rends flesh, peeling it back from the bone and leaving it exposed. My arms are poor protection, gooseflesh following after shivers that wrack my body down to my toes. The Shadows twist, faster and faster, possibly angry, but I'd be more inclined to say worried by the one that refuses to leave my shoulders, curled around my neck like it might offer the smallest amount of warmth. It must not

know that it's colder than the mist drifting through the trees or a river that's been frozen for so long, no one remembers what lies underneath. Still, I stroke its head, a small thanks, while shooting a glance up at my opened window.

From here, the hospital is much dingier than I would've given it credit for. It's tall, square, old, too old probably--like I could knock it over with one carefully placed bump. The bricks are brown, similar to a stain you'd find on the underside of a rug after a spill has dried, molded, and solidified into something more. My room is one of seven still lit, besides the entrance a little ways down the lot. There's really no point in going back (I don't want to go back), since Branson could at last return from her water excursion and the fact that the clothes were filthy anyway. Dirt was one thing. My own dried blood? A whole other ordeal I didn't even want to consider. But still, walking around like this would only draw attention, would scream escapee. Getting locked away the first time was an accident, out of my control. No one could hold it against me. The second would mean intent. There would be punishments, sirens, rough hands. I couldn't let that happen. Not again.

My gaze slides to the nearest car, hulking now that I'm up close, but significantly less terrifying without the growl and squeal of its tires. A little bit of charity never hurt anyone, right? There had to be something useful inside; the doctors in the lab always carried extras. Extra pens, extra paper, extra shoes, extra coats. There was never an end to the things needing to be replaced. Besides, *if* I found anything, I could always return it and there'd be no problem.

I wave off a tug at my sleeve, flashing a smile at my own genius, "Wait a minute. Let me look for something, alright?" There's the need to speak slowly, to make sure they understand, but some immediately perk up while others continue to swirl. *Good enough.*

But the first step is blocked by a heaving mass, a quiet hiss filling the air. *No. They'll know. They always know.*

*How?* I answer back. *Why does it matter? They won't find me.* I give them my best glare, put my hands on my hips to really let the demand sink in. "Now, be good and let me-!"

They stream across the ground, a relentless tide that rolls in with no concern for my frantic tip-toeing that never seems to reach dry land. "H-hey! Stop it!"

They foam at my feet, slither up my legs, submerge my torso, *No. They'll know. We help.*

"Know what?!" A near shriek I barely have the mind to muffle. It *tickles*. Soft feathers brushing, everywhere, under my skin--I reach down to grab, to start pulling them off, and my hand comes away dark, dripping.

*We fix.*

*How about you don't?* A tiny plea, even though I know they won't hurt me. I know this, but I keep trying to remove them, to save myself from the itching, but they slip through my fingers, dart away at the last second. I'd be scared if it hurt--it doesn't--but there's so many of them, squirming, writhing. More than I remember.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I take a deep breath. I hold it. They're at my collarbone now but they've stopped rising. I tell myself they're sinking, even if I can't really tell. *Not much longer.*

*Not much longer,* they parrot right back.

“Why won’t you tell me what you’re doing?” It’s a gasp. I’ve tilted my head back--a person drowning, kicking away from the deep they can’t quite find the strength to continue fighting.

*Surprise. Helping.* They sound so excited. I can’t share their enthusiasm, not when it’s a tad bit overwhelming, whatever this gift is.

But then it stops. The crawling melts away, first a whisper, then back to nothing. The first thing to cross my mind; *Oh, thank the stars.* The second is an acute worry that I’ve offended them.

*You’re welcome!*

If they can’t understand context clues, then I’m certainly not going to help them. But with the next gust of wind, I realize what they’ve done. My gaze snaps down to take in the jeans, the shirt, the jacket. They have a shimmery quality--the same as the light playing off the shadow’s scales--but the longer I watch the quicker it fades until it’s completely gone.

I level them with a glare that only seems to make them giddy. “You’re amazing.” The sarcasm is there, but it doesn’t take away from the layer of truth on top. They don’t notice anyway, a whirlpool of motion as I shake like a dog, wanting to be rid of the fuzz they’ve left behind that still lingers in my nerves. It doesn’t take much, but still. We’re gonna have to work on our communication skills before this happens again. I don’t have to worry about freezing to death, though. Or making a scene. Progress! Can’t argue with progress!

I pat down my hair, just in case, before jerking my head in the general direction of the trees. “Come on; if you guys are coming then we can’t exactly walk in the middle of the street.”

I'm in no hurry to return to the wilderness, but the few steps it would take to conceal us in the underbrush is the perfect middle ground between the road and the incline that would take us into the mountain above. I didn't quite feel like climbing yet, anyway.

They don't answer, speeding ahead when I start moving in a way that I take to mean; *race you there*. I let them have this one, giving my legs time to stretch. I do have to try a *small* jog. Just to see if I can handle it after the accident and being confined to a bed for the larger part of 48 hours.

It feels... great. Again, I'm surprised at the lack of pain in my ribs, but even when I poke there's nothing. A knot in my heart loosens, lightens, and I laugh.

The little ones circle back, egg me on. *Faster. You can go faster.*

I'm tempted to obey, but I'm not sure I want to know where this energy ends. So, keeping to my steady pace, I let them enjoy themselves instead, watching their twirls and dives. We have a long night ahead; no destination, no food, no water. The red-eyed man haunts these woods somewhere, so I need to find shelter, somewhere no one will ask questions. Safe and quiet. A map would be nice, but I'm not even sure where to start looking for that.

*One step at a time*, I tell myself. Where there's a hospital, there are people, and where there are people, there's a town. A village. Maybe even a city. All roads lead back to civilization, so it only makes sense that... *Route 10?*--I eye the sign, squinting through the darkness--has to go somewhere as well.

But what I don't expect is to turn the corner and see lights in the distance. My room in Logan Regional faces the mountain, faces what I can only assume to be the front side of the

building considering the name hangs above a pair of double doors, huge and glowing. The back side is a straight drop into murky waters--a river that runs parallel to the length of the foundation, supported by long pillars, some of which hit the bank and others that plunge right through to the river bed. I thought there'd be a steep mountain road to traverse, one with trees that close in on every side, where anything could be waiting above to pounce down and snatch you away--this is not the road from that night.

*Safe?* The little ones gather, peering over the edge, then swimming back to my side.

"I suppose." Stepping up, I peer as they did. The roar of crickets and frogs is deafening, lightning bugs drifting back and forth among long stalks that break from craggy cliffs. There's no way I could slide down on my butt; I'd end up in a roll, bash my skull in, and be lost to the currents hiding in the waves. Crossing here saves me time, though.

I eye what's left of Route 10. It looks like a good thirty-minute walk to the bridge, if I ran... well, I'm not sure. It's about a mile and a half out from a town that's small--tiny would be a better term for it. I'm sure it's one of those places where everybody knows their neighbors, which is even worse. Blending in is going to be impossible. I need to be out of sight once day breaks since I couldn't count on the storm anymore. It's finally passed, even if the sky is still streaked with the remains of clouds darkened with unshed rain. There's more sunlight branching out over the treetops, pink and yellow, yellow and orange.

*Bad.* The little ones hiss, curling in on themselves while their tails retract and their bodies thin. *Not much longer.*

My mouth runs dry. I hate how much sense that makes. I can control Shadows, sure, but what *else* controls Shadows? The fucking sun. *Good going, Scarlett. Shoulda figured that out sooner.* We really don't have time to be standing around then.

"Can you help me over there?" The point is firm; it's not really a question. The little ones don't mind the order, though. In fact, it seems to energize them, and they fly into action--they swarm, lift, and carry with no hesitation. Without drifting too close to the water below, we stay relatively even with the bank on the other side. They can't seem to go much faster than the slow descent from the window before, but there's a touch of speed to their drifting now, a push that gets us to the other side in half the time. We have a simple touch-down in the weeds, on the edge of blacktop that's cracked and filled with potholes.

"Okay." I give a sharp clap, but all the confidence I'd felt has waned as I shoot a glance up and down the street. Entering Logan feels as if I've taken a step into an old photograph; there isn't much to take in. A two-lane road with a stretch of tightly packed buildings, there are offshoots with little alleyways that probably lead to the back doors of broken-down corner stores. Little pockets of trash skitter along the sidewalks, followed closely by a thin layer of dust that somehow survived the deluge from above. Everything might as well be deserted, but further down, where yellowed grass pops into existence behind dirty chain-link fences, there are houses with the lights on. Where faint voices echo from within, tinged with the undeniable spark of radio static. It smells like exhaust, like rain, like dirt and mud.

I will admit, I never said it had to be a *prospering* town. I'm not exactly in the position to judge, either.

Eyeing a crack in the pavement that's, quite possibly, larger than my foot, I clear my throat and try to ignore how the dust works its way inside, "Any ideas gang?"

The little ones shift, press close. *Away*.

"Very helpful." Left it is, away from the people in their homes, starting to stir, and deeper into the sleeping town. Main Street, according to a thin, green sign. There has to be something useful, something we can pick up or someplace we can settle down until tomorrow night. Preferably someplace dark—I don't want the Shadows to disappear completely. There's too much to figure out, too much that could go wrong if I'm left on my own.

We pass a Hotel Pioneer, a Nixon Furniture Company, and a body shop. The hotel brings pause despite being boarded up, but when I peer through a grime-covered window I realize the furniture's been removed. That there's nothing but cans and cigarettes, tarps and paint brushes, shattered glass and smashed dreams. It's an option for sure, though I'd need the little ones to help me pry my way inside. Now for supplies... my focus shifts to the body shop. I don't know what I'm expecting to see behind the glass; legs proudly on display, arms hung from the ceiling, or a full-fledged human, stuck floating in a tube, but there are only tires and gleaming pieces of metal.

*So far, so useless*, I think, muttering a curse under my breath. I shouldn't have left the hospital without more to go off of, more information at least. This was unknown territory--what was I *doing*?

*Away*. The little ones have begun to shove, their attempts at herding despite their shrinking size. A rush of wind tears through the street, kicking up stray papers and sending them careening through the air, along with the few straggling Shadows that have split from the



majority. They never make it back. Cartwheeling, they sail right into open patches of sunlight, dissipating in a pop of black smoke.

“Hey, everyone gather in. We have to stick together now.” There’s a door down the street that’s blown open, slamming back and forth--someone’s sure to show up any second to check on it. I could almost swear the lights, which flash between red and green for some inane reason, are going to go flying off. They’re banging together, the discord creating a symphony with the high-pitched whine that bounces underneath. A child’s whistle, but it’s distorted. Far too low.

I pause even as my heart worms its way into my throat. Scanning the street in front of me, then slowly spinning to do the same with what lies behind. The Shadows are wild, yanking, pushing, pulling--but they’ve grown too weak. I stand tall, even though the sound only gets closer, taking on a staticky quality, becoming a growl. The hair on my arms stands on end, hands curling into fists and it’s only then that I realize they’re shaking. There’s the intense urge to vomit, *it’s not possible*, and I want to have time to ask myself what’s not possible but there isn’t any left.

The noise stops.

The crickets start to chirp once more, the frogs picking up their song. Heat beats its way into my skin, my lungs, trying to warm away the panic.

*Please. You have to leave.* It’s the first solid sentence I think I’ve heard them say, but I’m more eager to listen to them than make comment. There will be time for supplies later; we need to get inside the hotel, to get off the street-

It slams into me before I can even register what *it* is. My face slams into the ground and I feel my lip split, taste the hot, sweet tang of blood. My ribs creak under the weight. Something sharp is pressing at the base of my skull, so close to the rushing beat of my pulse, too close. I try to kick, but the thing contorts. I shove and its body gives under my touch. Its hand comes down on my head, pressing me deeper into the dirt, and it wails, crying out in agony even as it pins me in place.

I can't breathe. It's too heavy, my chest is compressed, and my throat is too tight. There's no path for air to travel. Working my hands underneath me, I try to shove myself upwards--it shoves back and what little oxygen I had left gets kicked out. Black spots dance in the corner of my vision, then in the center. Nerves flicker like brief supernovas, then smoldering embers, then empty ashes.

*I really shouldn't have left that hospital.* A silly thought, but I can't feel my legs. I know the Shadows must be ramming the side of the beast--my head is twisted at an angle so if I peel an eye open I can see them swarming--but all it takes is a single swipe for them to burst. They disappear, one by one, and I know. There's no getting out of here.

Tears prick, ready to fall even as my struggles die. Really, what was I expecting? To wander off, wounded, after being hunted down. I should've given it more time; the police would've found the others; would've found the man with the red eyes. Everything would have been over then.

How was I supposed to compete against this?

*"We won't always be there to help you." Why we decided to climb to the top of the tallest orange tree in the orchard was a mystery. We'd raced up the hill, taunting each other, challenges*

*thrown back and forth even though we knew we were supposed to be on guard duty tonight. She sandwiched me between her and the trunk. "Because I'd lost", she said--it was really because I was the shortest, the smallest.*

The weakest too, apparently. But it's the ghost of her warmth that finally sends me over the edge. It's the close press of her body, the ghost of her fingers entwined with mine, that brings comfort, that steals the tension from my shoulders despite my best attempts to get it to stay. I want to apologize, tell her I was coming, but I failed. I always failed--*I'm so sorry.*

*"You have nothing to be sorry for." She ruffles my hair, the girl with purple eyes, that easy, teasing smile on her face. I'd slipped, nearly fallen, and she caught me before I could slam my head on a branch. I could've saved myself, but I'd known that with her there I didn't have to worry.*

Hope is a blissfully ignorant emotion. It crops up like a disease, a weed that you can tug on all you want, but it'll always have its roots. It's a childish desire compared to adult logic. I have no Shadows, no strength, no nothing. Yet, a new bloom is already trying its best to sprout.

*"You know better than anyone, Scarlett. You're a powerhouse--they just don't want you to know it. We were given these powers for a reason. **You** were given your powers for a reason. Trust them, listen to them, and you'll always be okay."*

"Okay" has to be a synonym for suffocating, but I had promised no more running. If I died here, I would never remember her name, remember how we met, remember how we were separated, remember who she *was*. Important. She was important. And something tells me that she would be angry if she saw me giving up.

We couldn't have that. I'd hate for her to find out.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I use what strength I have left to shove an arm underneath my body, working it up to my neck. It's scalding, so cold it's impossible to touch but I do, and there's a pulse, a spasm that runs up my arm and down the length of my spine. The creature on my back shifts, leaning down. Something warm and wet drips onto the back of my neck, splattering through my hair.

I choke on a whimper. *Okay, little ones. Now's the time for you to help out. We can't die yet. Not like this.*

*Like I'd let you die. It's about time.*

They flock to the scene in waves, surging over the rooftops and crawling over the ground. The sun beats down, its pressure immense and constant, pulling sweat down my brow. It isn't enough to stop the constant volley, though. The little ones ram into the monster and throw it off kilter, setting me free with a gasp of beautiful, delicious air. I suck it down in great gulps as if I've never been granted the privilege, coughing up a cloud of dust as I scramble to my feet.

The beast is trapped, twisting and clawing in a cyclone of Shadows. It cuts down five and ten more take their place. I can barely see the thing through the cloud of darkness, but the little breaks reveal a mass, vaguely humanoid if not for the fact that it's see-through. There's the smallest hint of a gaping mouth in the towering form, of elongated hands that end in curved claws, of *red eyes*.

*He causing this?* It's the same shade as the one in my memories, the same eerie glow. I glance over my shoulder, somehow afraid I'd see him waiting at the end of the street, but it's just me and the beast, me and the Shadows. Shouldn't there be someone else out by now?

*Pay attention.* It's firm, chastizing, and I snap back to attention.

"Right, sorry." I wasn't sure to who I was apologizing, but I had the sense to bow my head and look rightfully ashamed. The monster wails, thrashing out at the wall that keeps it at bay, and I find myself planting my feet.

A shadow breaks off from the group, larger than the rest. Swimming over, its skin bubbling in the direct sunlight, it bumps against my cheek.

*Do what feels right,* it says, and vanishes into a wisp of black mist.

My gaze drops to my hands, to the calloused fingertips and the palms covered in tiny scars. The hands of a worker, a caretaker... a fighter. Except I don't remember the girl they belong to. They're my hands, but they're not. What feels right? What doesn't feel right?

*"Trust yourself."* The purple-eyed girl whispers. But it's not helpful. The old me knew what to do, she must've. She had these powers, she must've mastered them, used them to her advantage. Who knows what she accomplished?

The monster lashes out and this time it breaks through, stealing a step before it's once again consumed. The little ones don't miss a second--not like me. They blow out, then converge, blocking, taking the onslaught with ease. The next roar shakes the ground, a thin wail that pierces my eardrums and sends a spike of pain through my abdomen.

*"Trust your powers, then."*

“Oh, to hell with it.” It’s a low growl. I don’t know what feels right. I may never know what feels right. Right now, I wasn’t the Scarlett of the past. The only thing I was going to trust was the fact that I wasn’t letting that thing hurt me again.

My hand shoots out at the same moment I start running forward, hand outstretched and reaching. Empty until it wasn’t, grip falling right into place on the hilt of a blade, but I don’t stop to contemplate. The Shadows have split, making way for me, letting the beast come lumbering through, but even as it rears back it’s too late. I’ve leaped by the time it should’ve slashed, plunging the blade down into the center of its chest, where the fog is the most condensed.

The creature buckles, collapsing in on itself in an agglomeration of limbs turned tendrils, which wriggle along the ground before dissipating. My knife is buried in the center of the street, still pinning a lump of the floundering mass in place. I swallow, heave a shuddering breath, and twist. There’s a pop, followed by a flash of white and a squeal that reverberates right down to the base of my skull. I watch what remains of the beast burn away, watch it smoke and writhe until it’s nothing more than a scorch mark on the pavement. Then, and only then, do I let go.

“Fucking bitch,” I wheeze, tipping my head back to stare at the open sky, so pale and blue. So peaceful compared to the heat in my veins, the dizziness that’s spinning the ground beneath my hands.

But I can’t help a smile when a shadow closes the distance, nuzzles at my cheek and wipes away the river of blood escaping from my nose. “Thank you, little one.”

*You did good*, it’s a soft murmur, easing. For two seconds I allow my mind to disguise it as my friend’s voice, despite being a touch too low. My body feels two seconds away from collapsing, but I feel like jumping, like tossing my head back and letting out a cry of my own.

I'm my own person, this me, right here. I want to tell her, the person I used to be, that I've lived up to whatever image she left behind--to the scars and the pain and the powers. I picture her, the scrawny girl with little hands in a bandage-wrapped body, and I take her by the shoulders. I've won, you see? We can do this. *I can do this.*

But the wailing I hear isn't my own. It's in the distance, a cacophony of the damned that grows, multiplies, and sings until it's everywhere. The Shadows are frantic, *Run*, they say, like I'm not already trying to shove myself to my feet, but my body is unwieldy. It lurches forward and they have to catch me, support my legs until they can find their balance.

The first monster lumbers around the corner, followed by another, and then another, a sea of darkness that washes in aimlessly. The roars of the original echo in the back of my mind. The damn thing had called for *backup*.

## One Year Before The Fall

“Your highness.”

It's late when Queen Halianna summons us, so my voice carries up the high-chambered walls thanks to the distinct lack of servants and aristocrats within the corners of the room. The only other sound is the crunch of my knee joint grinding in its socket, a harsh twang to my bow, and I make a mental note to stretch the moment this meeting is over--or at least visit the palace healers. Rein reaches forward to steady me, a hand ghosting the small of my back, a disciplinary waiting to happen, but the Queen says nothing. She doesn't even look up. She's too busy gawking at the man who's center stage, the entrance hall filled to the brim with his chuckle; the embers of a dying fire, the last drags of wind over a calm plain.

Rein pulls away only when she's certain I'm not going to tumble over into the floor--which was never a concern--but by the glare she's leveling the training field is officially off-limits for the evening. Fair enough, considering it's already difficult to beat her in a swordfight without a leg that doesn't want to work properly. Then again, we may have to retreat to the arena for a little while, if only to avoid an infraction. Halianna would have to look our way eventually and here we were, covered in filth. We'd be lucky if we didn't get a night in the stocks. She's the image of perfection, as usual: her skin shimmers like the marble beneath our feet, hours of scrubbing in both accounts, surely. Her hair is tied back, half up, half down and the golden locks flow past her shoulders and into her lap. She's wearing the dress she only dons when she specifically wishes to garner male attention, but despite her attempts to push her bust out the man doesn't so much as offer a glance downward--which earns him a little more respect



in my book. She's like the fancy parrots she keeps in her gardens, the ones that fluff up to twice their size and prance around.

Ah yes, the strongest woman in the universe, everyone.

By Rein's giggle, I know I'm not the only one making the same connections, but unfortunately, I don't think either of us have mastered the techniques required to keep laughter below a whisper. Halianna's gaze snaps to where we stand frozen in a half-bow. Her mouth pulls into thin white lines as she sits back, ramrod straight, clearing her throat and leaving the two of us to wince as we wait for the strike. A raised hand or the blast of her magic--either would mean buffing the floors, but the real question is whether or not we'll be the stain that's getting erased.

"Ah, girls! There you are," but her voice is kind, honey-sweet, and she gestures us forward. Rein and I only hesitate because this must be a trap; no one is allowed to approach the throne except for the royal family, not even the guards. She only waves again, more insistent. "Come now, I won't bite. We have a visitor!" There's no arguing, not when the eggshells under our feet are shattered and broken already. Anything more and we'd be risking far too much.

We climb the first two steps before calling it quits, finding it safer within the middle ground. Too close and she might change her mind, too far away and she might think we're disobeying. She sighs, but it seems to meet her expectations, plus it keeps the mud on our pants a good six feet away from her gown. She never could stand the smell of the barn, of horse manure, or of hay that's been left out in the sun for too long. Any closer and she might start sneezing all over her fancy guest.

My eyes flick to our company. He has yet to turn around, but he's tall, taller than any Prismanian I've ever met at least, or any Earthling for that matter. He seems older, but I've never

been the best judge of age, so my best guess would be somewhere in his fifties. I guess solely based on his hair, thick and gray, with patches that are lighter toward the top. Rein, who has made her way to the spot next to me, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, elbows me in the way that means: stop staring.

I oblige, if only because I don't want her teasing me for being overly curious again.

The Queen is all smiles, all business... for the most part. Standing, she sweeps the unnecessarily long train of her gown to the other side of her seat and holds out her hand. "Thank you for being so patient."

I feel Rein's fake gagging, fighting down a grin as he takes Halianna's offer, stooping down to leave a brushing kiss on her fingers. "Of course, I don't mind at all. We had a very... enlightening conversation." His voice is low, but not so low that it verges on a growl. It's almost nasally, a little unpleasant, and highly forgettable if I wasn't watching the Queen of the known Universe swoon like a story-book schoolgirl.

Touching his shoulder, she motions in our direction. "These girls will be your guides for your time here. Girls, this is Disperitus. He's a noble from the Outskirts; be sure to make him feel welcomed."

Rein and I glance at each other--she **has** gone mad.

"Your highness, your generosity has been welcoming enough." What generosity, I want to ask. The tariffs and trade bans on your people? Do those count as generosity where you come from? But he's already turning on the glossy tip of his wing-tipped shoes, "I thank you for the guard detail, but I assure you it isn't needed."

Red flares under the light of the chandelier, wine that swishes back and forth within the glass cage of his gaze. It pours down, over my arms, my chest, my waist, my legs. The corners of his lips pull up into a tiny smirk. “I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

The gem, once resting so comfortably against my collarbone, flares to life.

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We haven't said a word to each other since then, and the atmosphere in his room has grown from tense to unbearable. He said he wanted to retreat for the evening, drop off his luggage. We complied, despite the fact that all he has is a tiny carry-on, barely large enough to fit one day's worth of clothes. Rein refuses to leave my side, so close I'm positive I can feel her flames threatening to weld us together. There isn't much I can do to soothe her, not when my magic is already in my veins, so cold it's molten lava, crawling from one organ to the next and leaving only shards of frost in its wake. Not when I'd already had to slip my gloves on to prevent this stranger from seeing the black spider webbing out across my skin. It's already beginning to itch, which means it's cracking. Which means-

I dab away a drop of blood before it has the chance to escape.

It's a practiced motion, one I've had to do for as long as I can remember. Bring your hands together, give a small swipe of your pinkie, and go still... but I'm not paying attention--not like I should be.

Disperitus hasn't looked away since the gloves went on, even as he sorts through the bag, even as he sits down on the edge of the bed to lay out a stack of papers on the side table (the top labeled 'confidential'). I've had nobles ask questions in the past; oddities are the lifeblood of

humanity and incongruities make up the kindling for the fire in their brains. Curiosity can't thrive without the unknown. But there's a difference between interest and hunger, between the staring and pointing and the sunny grins paired with lingering touches.

Acceptance is only a fine line away from what will surely kill you.

The summer heat meanders throughout the room, sweat making the palms of my hands slick, and still, I shiver. It's hard not to breathe, but I'm afraid that if I do a cloud of fog would bellow out, giving away the icicles coating the back of my throat, Shadows coagulating on my tongue. Rein is inching, scooting, crossing the distance to press our arms together in an attempt to spread her fire into my ice, to melt the panic.

*Control it. Just a little while longer.* The voice echoes in between my own racing thoughts, so quiet. I nod anyway. It was always the calmest between the two of us--it hasn't led me wrong yet.

But it's hard to focus when Disperitus is watching, is waiting—for a slip-up, for loose lips to spill secrets untold for the decades I'd been alive.

“You.” Neither of us were expecting him to speak. Rein jumps, so focused on easing my racing heart, she doesn't notice him standing, doesn't notice the way he's eyeing her fingers, the way they brush against mine.

I step in front of her, blocking the electricity in his gaze from finding its intended target.  
“Me, Sir?”

“No, not you.” He softens, vermillion eyes pulsing, glowing, a heart with no capillaries or arteries.

That's not possible, the voice hisses, soft and low as it draws out every syllable. It's a caress this time, a fog that smothers other thoughts and I have to beat it back, shaking my head. It makes sense, though. It has to be just a trick of the light.

"No, not you. Your guardian. I wish to speak with you--in private, of course."

*There's no reason you should say no.*

*Of course not.*

Rein's holding onto the back of my shirt, where he can't see. She tugs like I used to on those late nights back in the facility thousands of miles beneath our feet. She wants to run. Something is wrong. It's not, though. I need to tell her, yet my lips are glued shut. I'm floating above us, and there we are, as children, as adults, side by side, on the verge of a cliff, dangling over frothing waves.

*But there's no reason to say no. He's not going to hurt us.*

"Rein, I'll be alright. Wait outside, will you?" My voice sounds strangely flat in my own ears. She tugs again, harder this time.

"Are you sure?"

"*Your princess* said to remove yourself. You should listen." It is in no way a suggestion. Disperitus has pulled himself to his full height--over six feet, going on seven--fingers tight on the head of his cane, a crystal skull, with craggy, empty sockets.

The world spins beneath my feet. "How did you know about--"

“Your genealogy?” He clicks his tongue, “Your mother is a fool. I’ve known her for a long while. Your existence is one of her worst-kept secrets.”

Poison piles thick on the tip of my tongue. I need to speak, to say: Rein is my guardian, you do not talk to her that way. Haliana is my mother--as much as neither of us acts like it--you do not speak to *me* this way.

*But you won't get answers if she doesn't leave.*

*How do you know who I am?*

*Rein needs to leave.*

*Nobody knows.*

*You know what you need to do.*

“Rein, go on. I’ll be fine.” I can’t look away, my body won’t move on its own. Everything is too distant. Rein gives a third, timid tug--something is wrong, please--before she lets go. She wouldn’t go far, I know. It’s enough to keep her from insisting, from risking the wrath of Halianna. A simple talk isn’t worth such a harsh punishment. He isn’t going to hurt me. There’s no reason to say no.

“I’ll be right outside.” Rein must slink out, her shoulders curled up and around her neck, hand resting on the hilt of her blade strapped securely at waist level. I can see it so clearly, yet I don’t turn to look. Content to stand and wait, watching his ruby eyes swim until the door makes a final thud throughout the room (I’ve never seen eyes that could change like that before). There was no reason to be afraid; one cry and she’d swoop in, setting everything ablaze.

*That won't be necessary, you'll see.*

My head tilts, suddenly too heavy to hold up, a pinch that starts at the base of my skull and expands outward. I manage to blink: once, twice, and finally, I'm able to find the will that disappeared, rubbing away the haze at the edge of my vision.

“What-” My throat is tight, words alien in my mouth. I have to start over again. “What did you want to talk about?” I meant for it to be more professional, but I sound like a child who's been woken up too early by a noisy servant.

“Nothing too serious, I'm afraid. But it does only pertain to the two of us.” He chuckles, all too amused at my confusion in a way that would normally make my blood boil.

To my own horror, I feel my cheeks start to warm.

He gestures to the balcony where sunlight is beginning to stream in, long arcs that stretch between us, chasms of light that seem impenetrable. “Will you accompany me outside or would you rather we speak in here?”

My power curls in on itself, hiding away even as it eagerly grasps for the onset of darkness. I have the sense to say, “Here, please,” even as the voice whispers,

*It wouldn't hurt.*

By his smile, it's the right answer; wide and strangely proud. The pressure in my ears, in the back of my brain, dissipates. I look around as if I've never seen a guest bedroom before, haven't cleaned them a thousand times before, haven't spent a night locked away in one--too

afraid of what might happen if I was found in my own room, my own bed. Who might decide to drag me away.

Disperitus taps his cane on the floor. “Then we can begin.”

“Begin?” I don’t know if I should be watching him or trying to follow the noise; it’s growing, bending, warping, a knock turned midway into a wail, almost human, that of a baby, but not. “What is that?”

“I can guess what Halianna has told you of worlds beyond this one. Of your power.” He’s ignoring my question, crossing the space between us, the light and the dark, the powers that be and shouldn’t be. This isn’t possible, yet the gem atop his cane smokes, a hazy glow at its center. He shouldn’t have that, *can’t* have that.

His smile goes a tad bit too wide as he holds out his hand, pointing to a corner of the room that’s heaving, moaning, eyes made of hell fire peering out of darkness made real. Frost snakes across the ground wherever a clawed hand smacks down.

“Remind you of anything?” Disperitus breathes, but he doesn’t have to speak. Whisps drift up to the ceiling, writhing, swirling, twisting. Familiar shapes that may lack the scales, the sentience, and the playful pushes, but they’re the same. The monster in the corner drags itself into the light, unbothered, and gasps a pitiful sound. Its body is translucent, a shadow that leaves the sun overcast as it makes its way in front of us, beginning to grow, to tower.

Disperitus puts a gentle hand on my shoulder, his voice softer now. “You and I aren’t so different, Scarlett. She’s lied to you. There are things I can teach you, things that they could never begin to understand.”



I look up. His eyes are pulsing again, matching the rhythm of the drum in my head--he's like me. There's somebody out there who's like me, who knows how to control this, *fix* this.

I pull my gloves off. "Show me."

## Chapter 7

I run with no destination in mind and pray to no god in particular; the devils have already joined the churning mass of greedy claws nipping at my heels. At first, there had been ten, twenty, but then from every side street, they'd poured out. Dark corners crawled to life, moaning and tearing, rippling with ecstasy at the mere thought of destruction. Houses, the ones filled with radio static, the ones silent with sleep, the ones with half-open doors, the ones with the lawn gnomes darkened with mold--their walls splinter as the beasts within escape. I glance back only once, when the road is still a straight shot into nothingness, into the deep wastes that belong to mountains and evergreens.

The monsters have faded together into a cancerous mass, dripping a viscous liquid that steams when it drips onto the asphalt. The imprint of faces, of hands, press against the steadily growing body from the inside, silent screams begging for escape from mashing, unhinged jaws. Soon, there isn't a single beast left, just the huge, shuddering, lump that's pulsating in the center of town. It can no longer move; at best, it seems to drag itself forward, but I keep running anyway. The whisper of my magic is a fierce whisper that bounces through the back of my mind, down my spine, and into my intricate system of nerves--which are currently melting away into a thin coating over each of my bones.

*This isn't over. Don't stop.*

I trust them enough not to look back when the ground buckles, when the pavement cracks and splits in half, when every step becomes a crude game of hopscotch. The roar that follows nearly bursts my eardrums, but even then I don't look. Not until I finally reach Logan's limits, the city falling behind, and then a single glance is all I need.

I am tempted to call it a pig, but this is no barnyard animal. This monstrosity has hooves and legs of pure muscle, made for running, made for grinding the asphalt into soot with each shuddering pass. It breathes embers, every snort a rage of blistering heat that peels the color from passing trees, trailers, and businesses. Cavernous jaws are replaced with twisted tusks that reach for the sky in a tangled disarray. It swings its head in a wide arc, sniffing, searching, before it squeals--a sound like metal shredded into bits.

It's all I can do to force my legs faster as it bows its head and charges--too fast. The space between us closes as if it had never been there in the first place. The gem at my collarbone glows brighter, the darkness slipping into my veins, ever higher, to my elbow now, but I still ask Shadows to infuse with the muscle, the bone, the blood, until the scenery is flashing by far too quickly. I can feel the blood flooding from every pore--there's the slow trickle of warmth along my jaw now, the sweet tang of iron down my cheeks and in my teeth, the soft agony of wrists slit and thighs lacerated.

The voices--or perhaps it is my own, I'm far past being able to distinguish now--cry that there is no choice. That this is the only way.

But magic has a habit of making you blind. I have no hope of seeing the first body until I've already tripped over it.

## Four Months Before The Fall

“Do you even know what you’re doing?!” Rein is angrier than I’ve ever seen her before, and that’s saying a lot. Her knuckles are white around the grip of her sword and she keeps her back turned, like somehow it’ll hide the fact that her shoulders are near to her ears--higher maybe. She refuses to look at me, refuses to acknowledge the little Shadows floating around my head, content creatures that nuzzle into my neck and flinch when she first smacked them away.

“Of course I do.”

“No, you see Scarlett. That’s just it. You don’t.” The harsh drag of the whetstone cuts between us. “You don’t even know who he *is*.”

“He’s like me-”

“*No, he’s not.*” She breathes the words, long and slow, as if it’s taking everything she has not to release her fire along with them. “Nobody is like you, least of all him.” A short glance over her shoulder and all the pretense falls away. She didn’t follow me down here to sharpen her sword. I wasn’t here to polish my shield. The glow at my breastbone shimmers over the ground, like the reflection of water at twilight, when the birdsong has died away in the momentary lull before the sun finally falls.

I tell myself not to cry, surprised when the tears are actually a gnarled root, dried and rotten in the back of my throat. “What will it take for you to realize he’s helped me, Rein? I’m better, more controlled, and I can finally use my magic like I want to.”

“You didn’t need your magic!” She whips around, still holding the sword, the tip pointed directly at my heart. The violet I love swirls into an indigo I’ve only ever seen directed at

enemies, at the Queen, at Disperitus. Never at me. “You know better than anyone! It hurts you, it always hurt you! How many times have I had to patch you back together after an experiment gone wrong? How many times, Scarlett?!”

“That hasn’t happened in months! Since we were children, Rein! I’m fine, look!” I yank a sleeve up, revealing wrists free of darkened veins or flaky skin. I’m not bleeding from under my nails and while she can’t tell, my heart doesn’t squeeze or skip that extra beat. Everything is normal. *I’m* normal. “Why can’t you just be happy for me?”

She doesn’t bother to answer. “We were teaching you control, Scarlett. You’re one of the best soldiers in the entire army. You’ve beaten the commander twice. You don’t need it.”

I freeze and she seems to catch on just a second too late. The way her voice bent upwards, higher-pitched, *a plea*.

“Are you scared of me?” One by one, Shadows blink out, drifting to the ceiling in little clouds of smoke. It’s difficult to see, but she flinches with every disappearance, and suddenly I’m all the more aware of the sword, the single lunge it would take for her to sever me through.

“I’ve never been afraid of you.”

“You’re *lying* to me?” Asked like a question--it’s not one. Incredulous. “Rein--”

“Scarlett, don’t you understand what you’ve done?” Her voice finally breaks. She squeezes her eyes shut, whether because the words pain her or because she can’t bare to look at me, I don’t know. I’m not sure it matters. “You’ve *killed* people.”

I stumble back, right into the wall of assorted armor that clamors and echoes, my thoughts a match to the discordance. My hand drifts to the gem, where warmth is giving way to

the familiar chill of my younger years. Didn't she understand anything? "They were hurting us. We were kids. I didn't-" Didn't know any better? When I knew the outcome of those experiments and the Queen's curiosities could end in death if I didn't prevail. If Rein didn't meet every expectation. If the bond that tied us together, princess and guardian, didn't hold up to every trial and test and inane evaluation.

"But you still killed people. You couldn't control it, no matter how hard they pushed us, and even when I begged you to stop you wouldn't listen." Her lips curl into something that's like a smirk but isn't one as she steps forward, blade resting against my shirt, soft enough not to draw blood, but I can feel the strength of her arms waiting. One wrong move, the flicker of a shadow in the corner of her eye, and it would be over.

Now it's I who won't meet her gaze. I would've rather she stabbed me by now. "Did you, of all people, think that if I ignored this it would go away? Get better?" Years ago, we had insisted on saying that we had always been friends. That it had always been Rein and me vs. the world. It felt like that, after all this time. We'd held hands, played together, fought together. Truthfully, we'd had no choice in the matter. I was hers to protect, and she was mine in equal measure, but it was easier to forget that way. We loved each other (I thought we loved each other, but I can't tell any longer, not when she's looking at me that way). Our first kiss was a marker to the beginning of a very long and intensive rehearsal of forgetting, of burying secrets until the only ones who could possibly find them were ghosts long passed.

I thought she trusted me. She was right, I had killed. But never would I allow myself to harm her.

“I’ve done everything I can to *make* you better.” It’s a whisper, no matter how frustrated, no matter how much she wants to walk out and leave me here on my own.

Staring at her, I wonder how long she’s felt this way. If Disperitus and his appearance was the start, or if she’s harbored such feelings during every slip-up, every moment she discovered me in the dark, magic swirling in the palm of my hand. I can barely force myself to shake my head. “Not once have I asked you to do that.” All I wanted was a friend. My magic was my problem--did I want guidance? Of course. But wanting her to fix it? I’ve wanted encouragement, advice maybe. When had she misunderstood? Or had she--was this the mission she’d taken on when knighted? Was this what her honor hinged on?

Dammit, all.

Shoving the blade away, it cuts cotton but not flesh, and I see a brief flicker of the old Rein, the one I know would lay down her life before hurting me. “You know... you used to tell me to trust my magic. To trust myself.” Spitting the words feels good only because I can tell they hurt. Her body sags in on itself. Her sword swings uselessly down to her side. I tell myself it’s only fair; if this entire thing has been a lie, I can’t be the sole entity torn to pieces in the collapse.

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The retreat to the south tower is a relief. Rein doesn’t come after and I don’t bother to invite her--not this time. For so long, I’ve tried to convince her to, so she could watch my growth and see it with her own eyes. Angry tears slide down my cheeks, persistent even after an aggressive swipe of my arm. I thought she’d be proud of me.

Time passes in a haze, the climb easier than it's ever been before. I practically run up every flight of stairs till I reach the top, craving the gentle teaching Disperitus gave out. For once, I was grateful he had us train away all the way up here, where clouds hide all trespasses and the endless expanse of the sky fades into a blanket of stars and comets, into galaxies far beyond my comprehension. One day I'd leave this place. I'd get on a ship and fly away from all these rules. No more pressure. No more tests. I wouldn't be a disappointment then, not to anybody.

“Please tell me we're doing something new.” Practically kicking open the door, my brain doesn't register what's happening until he turns. The same smile on his face, so kind despite the grip he has around the servant's throat. She's still twitching, but she's withered, skin an ashy grey that leaves her bones protruding. From her slack lips, a haze of black smoke spills and condenses. A wriggling hand tipped with sharp claws, followed shortly by thin rivulets of blood.

Disperitus drops her, letting the beast inside finish what it started. “I've prepared an entire lesson, actually.”



## Chapter 8

The road has grown narrow. It's been a steady ascent and now the edge of the blacktop hangs precariously over the edge of oblivion, chunks that spill off into a river waiting far below. The mountain has been steadily growing until I find myself stuck, too high to jump, separated from any escape other than what might be waiting at the end of the line. The monster has no qualms about running until the last option that remains is to jump off the edge of this forsaken planet--I am lost. My chance to hide faded out with the last dregs of civilization.

At first, there had been a smattering of buildings, houses with unkempt yards and rusted over swing sets. If Logan was a town running on fumes, then this place was the broken-down fragments of a machine already rusted and left behind to rot. The wilderness waits with bated breath, eager to reclaim what rightfully belongs to it. Veins grasp at gutters and slither over rooftops. Paint peels in thick layers, littering the knee-high grass with lice-like chips. Several windows are covered in soot, old remnants of a fire that burned late into the night, long past the departure of any owners, all possessions left to smolder in search of bigger and better things. A tale of poverty as old as time--there was no need for monsters; they were already here.

But even that specter, the last few glimpses of human society, is dwindling now. It hovers, there on the opposite side of the river, a gap that continues to grow as the seconds pass. Shimmering in and out of focus, they're hollow and neglected reminders of a time best forgotten, a time that slips away between the leaves.

Somewhere in the distance, a dog barks--I'm not sure if it's a figment of my imagination, not when there's the deafening screech of a thousand souls ringing out over the hills.

Hiding meant giving up the chase, letting the magic die in my veins, and hoping the bleeding stops before the creature caught up. As it was, every step leaves a bright calling card in the center of the pavement, drag marks from my leg that demanded it is useless. Shadows lift it into the air after several minutes of desperate limping, a new burst of life that will last up till the next steep slope.

The ground convulses under my feet, the beat of the beast's hooves sending another section of the road plummeting into the river. It speeds around the corner I just took, its massive body nearly tumbling right over the side of the cliff. By some miracle, some curse set down long ago by creatures older than I, by some creatures who thought it funny to toy with people and their fate, it catches itself; it scrabbles and paws at the asphalt, nostrils flaring, until friction gives it the leeway it needs to charge again. So close now that the very mountain is alive with its squalling demands, its snorts, its chirps that say I have no other choice. It'll run me down if things keep up like this.

Turning to the sheer rock face to my left, I abandon the street and begin to climb. One foot over the other, using the deepest of crevices to launch myself upwards, praying the blood on my hands doesn't send me slipping. No time to stop, no time to wait, no time to wipe it off--the monster attacks, horns gouging into the wall but I'm high enough now that it misses. That it tears off the bottom of my shoe, the sole dangling in the breeze, but it *misses*.

But, it'll never matter how far I get. Rearing back, it snorts, more ready than ever to send me crashing.

## Six Weeks Before The Fall

The laboratory is beyond all repair. It had once housed a hive of scientists, all working toward different breakthroughs. On the topmost floor, there was fruit that would never go bad. Then teleporters that could cross space and time consecutively--there was a running joke that the time travel would never work, as why had no one ever come back to speak of it?

But it was the lowest floors that no one mentioned. The deepest, darkest recesses, where they poked and prodded, shocked and cut, bend and broke. Here, the powers of an unknown princess grew ever stronger. Stronger than any of the other children born that same year, or the decade before, or the century before that. There were whispers that she might even surpass the Queen herself, but these were quickly extinguished (and those with loose lips taken away).

Kicking an old paperweight, I watch it roll across the loose vinyl. There's not a soul in sight, which is a relief in more ways than one. You can't even hear the bombs this far underground, only a thick silence. The single challenger to such a feat is the amount of dust on every surface, a solid inch at least. Every step sends a cloud of grime whirling into the air; I should've brought a mask. *Stupid girl.*

But really, what's the harm? Death by suffocation at the hands of a few dust bunnies would be a treat compared to the throws of war. I'd be one of the lucky ones--my spirit intact, healthy.

Shoving my hands into the sleeves of my fatigues, then into my armpits, I beg my body to catch up with our surroundings. Why did the central heating also have to be dead? The electricity was bad enough; I thought I'd grown used to taking the stairs.

*Just a little further*, the voices in the back of my mind whisper, behind their cage, and the brick wall, and every other foundation I'd made to keep them at bay.

“Shut it.” I already know where I'm going. There's no need for them to act like they're pulling any strings.

Shuffling past open doors, I offer a cursory glance inside each one despite knowing what I'd see. The scattered papers, the broken beakers, and the shriveled bodies with fingers grasping at something only they could see with their gaping eye sockets. The beam of my flashlight lances through the gloom, highlighting a single spiderweb clinging to the inside of a mouth forever frozen in mid-scream. I run the light over the corpse's face. She had brown hair once, but now there are just wispy strands of musty yarn. Her name tag is gone, ripped free along with most of the skin along her collarbone. If she's here, I used to know her. Was she the lab technician with the pretty smile or the doctor that thought electro-shock treatments would suppress my magic for good?

It doesn't matter either way. They both ended up in the same place.

Pushing forward, I take two lefts and a right, ignoring the sign that says 'Do Not Enter Unless Otherwise Permitted' besides a quick salute of my middle finger. I can go where I damn well please, now.

Halianna's office is just as pretentious as she is, even though the entire place looks like it's been through six hurricanes. Gold trims line the floors, but somehow the gleam is significantly lessened when you start to notice the mold. It grows in dense lumps, covering the faces of ancestors in intricate artwork, women and men I remember from the history lessons my tutors used to force on me after the experiments had concluded for the day. There are statues with

their limbs properly severed at each joint, some of the cuts clean, others jagged. One side of the room is completely lost to a ceiling that fell in weeks ago, when the sprinklers first went off, when members of the staff remained, when the war was, *as The Queen claimed*, nothing more than a plague.

The carpet still holds most of the water, my shoes sinking into the wet fabric as I maneuver my way over to her old desk. Whatever I'm looking for, it's going to be in there--it has to be. This place was her vault, the only people who could breach this facility (before Disperitus and his monsters, at least) were those with her official seal. It makes sense that I wasn't the only thing she kept locked away down here.

I have to jiggle the first drawer to get it to open. Turns out there was little point--all the papers are soaked through, ink a translucent mess that ran down each and every page in long streaks. Moving to the second, I'm greeted by a similar sight.

"*Fuck-*" I've spent my life scrounging for answers while knowing that every single person in my life wants to hide them from me. It's not fair, but life isn't fair--but why can't I scream it anyway? Moving against the current is basically a promise that, once you look up, your goal will have vanished. Then, too tired to make your way back to shore, you'll be stranded till the next riptide carries you away.

I yank the third drawer straight off its hinges. There, resting in the very back, is a small, felt box.

I won't be dragged along. If I have to, I'll walk on water to finally figure out where I belong.

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My Husband,

Have you found what we've been searching for? Our people--and I-- grow weary for the return of our king.

My Wife,

I apologize for the late response. It has been difficult to find a courier this far into the Outskirts willing to travel so far.

Do not fret. I have found exactly what we need to progress with our plan. Come to the coordinates I list below. Please, do not forget your crystal. We wouldn't want to postpone this ceremony any longer than necessary, now would we? I did swear that our highness would have all the power she's ever desired.

I, too, have missed you dearly and cannot wait to have you in my presence again.

████████████████████

My Husband,

I do hope this letter reaches you in time, though I do not see why you decided to return to that backward planet. Have we not completed our business there many moons ago? But that is beside the point.

You must return to me. I have seen several doctors, but none can help me as you can. This condition is taking its toll and they all have their suggestions, but each is as nonsensical as

the last. What we accomplished on that planet is protecting me from the worst of it, these powers we took, but it's affecting this thing inside me as well. It's different. It's *wrong*.

I will send a ship to you. Come back to me before it's too late.

This letter remains in its envelope, unlike the others. It was never sent.

My Husband,

I know what you must think of me. Truth be told, if I had seen another way, I would have taken it. You were uncontrollable. You're magic--no. The magic *we* stole had consumed you. The man I married, the righteous king, vanished before my very eyes. We were once simple people with simple powers, but no more. We have new responsibilities and you couldn't handle yours. *I* had to keep the peace, *I* had to restore the balance you had destroyed.

I had no other choice.

The girl is following the same path as you. The magic she wields, I've only seen it once before--in your hands. It is different, in a way. Deadly, but she cannot create the same beasts as you. The truth remains the same, though. She doesn't know how to control it, and I'm beginning to wonder if these abilities were ever meant to be controlled. They break her apart the same way yours threatened to consume you. She bleeds, she bends, and she breaks at the simplest manifestation. The doctors cannot help. It is all I can do not to end this as we started it--perhaps she would find peace surrounded in the darkness? It would be a mercy, would it not?

I don't know what to do. She holds a single galaxy in the palm of her hand, and she doesn't even know it. Or, if she does, she is so terrified she refuses to even contemplate what she is capable of. She is not like you, with your grandiose ideas. She is not like me and my ability to

distinguish right and wrong. I am afraid of the day she discovers the extent of her abilities. When she does... I cannot imagine the catastrophe that will follow.

My Wife,

Though, I suppose I have no right to call you by such a title any longer. You have all the reason to throw this letter away without ever opening it but, in case you have kept your merciful heart after all these years, I wish to give my most heartfelt apologies.

The man you last saw was not I. I do not know what overcame me, the same as I could not stop the transformations that have afflicted my body. The choices we make indeed haunt us, mine most of all. Finding that community and the knowledge they possessed was supposed to be our salvation, the key to all the eminence we could ever wish to obtain. But having lost you, our daughter, my throne. I have fought to regain my senses, Halianna.

Does this letter not speak for itself? The last time you saw me, I could not connect two thoughts, let alone recognize my love for you. Please, allow me an audience. I wish to return and set things right--I promise, I won't disappoint.



## Chapter 9

It feels as if I've been climbing for hours. The beast below is as desperate as it is determined; it continues to ram its horns into the rock face again, and again, and again--more frequent as I grow further out of reach. Every impact threatens to send me flying, feet sliding even in the smallest of cracks, my hands going numb under the constant assault of persistent vibrations and sharp rocks. Gnarled roots burst from between jagged stone and loosely packed dirt, my only savior when my weight shifts--half my body dangling over the vacuum of space, the other clinging to the cliff face.

I kick, a sob fluttering its way up my throat as I fight for friction, for some crevice to wedge my toes in. Dirt rains down, working its way into the corners of my eyes till they burn, crusty, and I can't see. It's filling my mouth, coating my hair--a burial process where the corpse can't quite decide if it wants to live or die.

*Hold on!* The Shadows, the ones that remain, so few, swarm around my feet. They're pushing, nudging, taking the abuse of my thrashing so well, but it's hard to compete when the factors are stacking up. The knot of ice in my chest is nearly melted, my nerves are shot and my legs are numb. Colors are bleeding together overhead, racing the darkness in my blood, the silhouette of my veins as they fill with gloom.

I tell myself not to look down, hear the little ones whisper it back to me. The end is close--it has to be. I try to see it through the grime, the black spots building in the corner of my vision. There are trees, leaves dancing above, reds and yellows, yellows and oranges, oranges and browns. More rocks, more roots, more dirt--any more blood and I might as well let go. It stretches between the monster and me, a grotesque waterfall. The world spins out of reach, but I

claw my way back, ignoring the sense that I've made no progress--that everything has kept rolling forward while I've been left a crumpled heap in the dust. It would be so easy to stop. To let go--the drop would kill me first. I wouldn't even have to worry about Disperitus. This struggle would be over--finally over.

*“Promise me, Scarlett.” She cradles me close, her tears soaking in until they settle in my bones. I'd had no choice but to promise, none whatsoever, yet I know this is one oath I'll never be able to break. Not when it's been sworn to **her**.*

“Dammit, Rein!” Heaving air into crystallized lungs, I start to pull, giving up on finding a hole for my feet. I'm not sure how much longer the root is going to hold--it's bouncing under my weight, under the ceaseless battery, sending me swinging like a fish on the end of a quickly fraying line. I wriggle up an inch only to come slipping back down, an entire nail yanked from its core and left behind, but it's working, if slowly. The ground, the creature, is getting steadily smaller, the rocks are thinning out, and then there's grass--the sweet smell nearly overwhelmed by the stench of iron but I've never come across a sight so beautiful. I take a great handful, using the momentum to throw myself over the ledge, dragging my useless lower half after me.

Below, the beast wails and the ground shudders with another impact, harder than the rest. I tell myself not to look, that there's no point, but find myself doing it anyway. The beast stares up, still and quiet as if I cut it off mid-roar. Fangs glint catching the sunlight as it stands on its hind legs, tusks shoved into the rock face as if it were ready to rip it away. It is surrounded by debris--the road might as well be no more. I can no longer see the river or the buildings on the other side. It is just me and the monster, alone and in tandem, running forever. There is no way back and no way forward--only up. How long until the demented thing found its way up here?

Its head tilts, eyes glowing brighter. It opens its mouth,

Don't worry, my dear. It doesn't have to reach you quite yet. Our game isn't over, after all.

I shove myself away from the edge, away from the voice I haven't heard since those nights before the war. When he was nothing more than my teacher, than the man with the answers, the man who wanted to help. His words bounce around my skull, setting the insides aflame.

I think you'll find more company in these woods than just my little pet~

Blind, I scramble to my feet--but then I'm face first in a firm chest, shoving us both down into a bed of pine needles and broken twigs. There should've been the pressure of a blade finding flesh, the sound of a cackle as fingers work their way into my hair, holding tight while the rest of my life vanishes into the ground as fertilizer for the worms and the bugs.

But I find the scent of vanilla instead, honey drifting warm and faint underneath. She's coughing; I've knocked the air from her lungs, but I know that sound. Just like I suddenly know this chest I'm laying on, every curve that fits perfectly to my own, the hours we've spent in each other's arms a puzzle that falls right back into place despite the frantic rush of my heart--*she's here*. Her eyes peer down at me, dazed, confused, but so full of the endless expanse of space tinged with wildfires, hazel flakes that speckle the universe within like stars.

"Rein?" Her name falls as a prayer from my lips because that is what she is, what she has always been--a blessing upon my life, a guiding light, a miracle. I can't stop staring at her. It's been far too long; she's squirming, brows squinched tight, but all I want to do is smooth away the

tension with a soft pass of my thumb. The only time she's enjoyed being the center of attention is when we were in private, but what's more private than the middle of nowhere, so high up the clouds feel only a few feet away? The trees breathe around us, a sigh to match my own, the flutter of their leaves the same as my heart in her presence.

I scurry backward, off of her to land with a quiet thud into the grass. My body feels out of sorts, ready to pop. I can't begin to tell her how much I've missed her, how I've dreamt of her, how my mind has been filled with her even when I couldn't remember her name--there's too much. Language is unsuitable to explain what's happened since we were separated. How has so much happened in so little time? It seems impossible, improbable. But isn't that how war goes? I hope she's been safe, scan my eyes over her body to make sure it is so. There are no wounds to be seen, no blood besides my own, which I ache to wipe away despite knowing that I'd only make it worse.

I have enough sense to notice that the ground isn't shaking--the beast has moved on, has gone to find its own way up the mountain. We need to hurry, *I* need to hurry, figure out what to do. She hasn't said anything since I knocked her over; gods forbid I've made her uncomfortable, or angry, or-

*Stop.* Now's not the time to overthink. I hold out my hand to help her sit up, too pleased when she takes the offer. The rush of relief through my system would've been enough to knock me off my feet, had I been standing. As it is, my arm tenses with a want to pull her in, feel her close. "Rein, I'm so- I've been looking for you. Are you alright?"

She blinks a couple of times, eyes dancing from place to place while she rocks, tossed back and forth in the breeze. “I’m fine,” she watches our hands for a while before she peers over my shoulder, “Are you? That was a long climb.”

More staring. It’s such a simple question that I can’t take her seriously, despite the familiar upturn to her lips. I can tell she’s trying to make a joke, but her voice is off. Distant, almost, as if she’s contemplating a dream she had the night before that she’s unable to remember despite her best attempts. She *giggles*--now, of all times, like I wasn’t just running for my life, like I wasn’t covered in my own blood, like we hadn’t been torn apart by a psychopath with a need to destroy everything in his path.

“Rein?” Reaching out, I lay a gentle hand on her knee. There’s a feeling in the air, settling into the pit of my stomach, heavy and sour.

She flinches, gaze drifting to the touch, curious. “Who?”

## 4 Weeks Before the Fall

“Scarlett, watch out!”

The scream echoes across the wasteland, across the decimated houses and ash-covered streets that now make up our kingdom, the only home we’ve ever known, the home I’m beginning to think will become my grave. It was supposed to be a simple patrol, a simple scan of the layout that now holds more dead than the living, but is there ever any simplicity in war? It’s late and the road is nearly pitch black, despite the last rays of sunlight streaking out across the sky and the fires burning in the distance. We’re alone, we *should* be alone, but with the massive towers of rubble lining our way, there’s no step we take that isn’t ruled by unseen threats. It was only a matter of time before one caught up, before one snaked its way out of the darkness.

Rein’s shrill voice rings in my ears, a key shoved into a lock that gets my blood pumping, my heart racing, and I don’t wait to see what’s coming for me; whether it’s Disperitus, whether it’s a monster, whether it’s something else we’ve never seen before. Over the last few months, we’ve communicated solely in hums, grunts, and side-eyes, but that doesn’t matter--everything falls back into place. Our trust was never broken, our relationship was never shattered and put on display. It is just us, right here, right now, and I just dig my feet into the ground and twist back.

It’s a narrow escape as claws cut through the air in front of my face. Peeling itself out of the shadows, the monster rears, vermillion eyes catching the light first--swirling pools of light and dark, an eternal battle with no natural conclusion, the remnants of faces peering out from their depths. *I’m too close*, the singular thought bouncing around my skull as I feel the magic spark at my fingertips and push it back down. I can’t release the magic without hurting Rein, without losing control, and now I can’t catch myself. I’m stumbling, tripping over the debris and

the remains of those crushed underneath, hands, legs, arms, all grasping for freedom as their lives were unceremoniously cut short.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I brace for impact, bringing my arms up like they'll stop those talons from spearing me through. The beast lunges again, no hesitation, and I find myself foolishly wondering if it'll hurt, if I'll be lucky enough to fade away with the first blow, when I can still hear the screams. When they've become the background noise of our once prosperous kingdom, always present, a reminder that once you're caught, you're life isn't over. It'll never be over.

But I've always been a fool, so what's the harm in hoping?

The explosion knocks me on my ass but, if it hadn't, the monster's dying roar would've. It shrivels into the ball of fire at its center, misty tendrils smoldering into cinders, body crackling under the heat of the flames. Its eyes spit violence until the very last second, until the inferno climbs up, and up, and up, and the body of the beast gets ever smaller, and finally, they're no more. Its gaze engulfed, the trapped spirit popped out of existence to join the myriad of ghosts lost to the in-between--this world lost to brimstone and embers.

It's last, dead cry fills the air, the final reminder. It hovers there, lingers in all the spaces it possibly can, between the howls and the wind that threatens to carry it away--it sounds like a woman. She's begging, but they all beg at the end, and there's nothing I can do for her now. I want to cover my ears, but I don't; I can at least give her this much peace. Her voice grows weak, rushing around me in the dark, a mash-up of utter nonsense that means the same exact thing.

“*Why didn’t you save me?*” Final words I manage to catch before they fade under the collapse of a far-off building.

The only thing I can offer back is the same thing I’ve told them all; the ones I’ve failed. The ones I’ve fought when I was too weak. The ones that were lost long before I figured out what my magic was good for. *I’ll remember you*, I promise. Because somebody has to and chances are her family is already gone. Because once I join her in that in-between, chances are we’ll only have each other to remember what happened here.

Tucking my face into my knees, I ignore the approach of running feet as long as I can. Letting the exhaustion fuse itself into my bones, coalesce into a cancerous mass that leaks the thoughts I couldn’t exactly tell Rein. Not even when her hands have found my shoulders, shaking them lightly, then more frantic when I don’t immediately look up.

“Are you alright? Did it hurt you?” She’s talking too low, that same rushed undertone she used after a particularly...*rough* training session in the lab, where my skin had been torn to shreds, by my own magic or the whips and chains of those who were supposed to ‘protect’ us. She shouldn’t be touching me, shouldn’t be talking to me, not after what she admitted. I scare her, after all. I’m nothing more than a fix-it project for her.

*But you’ve missed her*, that little rebellious voice whispers in the back of my mind. I’ve missed her closeness, her hold. Cursing myself and the water building behind my eyes, I mutter a no, refusing to look at her straight on, which is a mistake. The only sight waiting over her shoulders are the blackened bodies littered across the ground, mummified past the point of recognition. I’m pretty sure I can spot the ones that were gripping at me, distorted shapes with half their fingers and facial expressions forever contorted in pain, lips charred and flaking.



She sighs, a long, hollow sound before she lets go. I nearly protest before I realize that would make it seem like I was pouting or longing. Both are very bad in this case. I tell myself it's enough that she doesn't get up and walk away, still crouched there only a few inches away. "How long are we going to keep doing this, Scarlett?"

Oh no. Biting the inside of my cheek, I pull my legs closer. "I said I was sorry. What more do you want me to say?" The pain does nothing to stop the bitterness from leaking into my tone, but I'm not sure what else I can do. The only thing left is to hand deliver myself to Disperitus and she clearly won't let that happen. The longer I try to imagine what she wants from me, the longer I see that first body hit the floor, my eagerness to learn from the man currently killing everything in sight, my inability to stop any of this from happening. It was all my fault.

"That's not what I mean and you know it." Plopping down, dust and dried blood create a cloud around her waist. Reaching for my hand, she hesitates, waits to see if I'll pull away; I don't. We stare at one another as she links our fingers together. "This isn't your fault. None of this is your fault."

It feels as if she's shoved her way down my throat, digging around for the truth and coaxing it back up. Miserably, I speak without quite intending to. "I could've healed it, Rein. I could've healed *her*. I just needed more time." I know it's a lie; there was no way I could've done anything of the sort, but saying it out loud almost makes me feel better. My lungs are tight, a cage around the words, but why is it that she, without fail, always has the key she needs to get inside the places I'm trying to keep secret?

"Scarlett-"

“I could’ve saved them all. At least then they wouldn’t have died in vain. They could rest and Disperitus wouldn’t be getting more powerful and this wouldn’t be happening if it weren’t for me. You were right, I never should’ve-” I’m spiraling and I’m not quite sure how to stop now that the plug has been removed. Everything just keeps pouring out, the weeks of guilt, the shame, the hate. “I’ve hurt everyone, I’ve hurt *you*. I shouldn’t be here--”

Catching my cheek, Rein shushes me. “Don’t say that.” Her eyes are glowing, ever so softly, her magic sparking under her skin, a subtle heat threatening to tip over into a burn. “Never say that, do you understand? The things that I said, I was wrong.” I find myself being pulled in, buried in her armor while air kicks from her lungs in what sounds like a restrained sob. “I should’ve apologized sooner. Gods, I’m so sorry, Scarlett. I was supposed to protect you, it’s my job, but none of it, of this,” she nuzzles the side of my head with hers, her hand resting over my heart, “was a lie. You’ve done you’re best. You didn’t know what that man was--that *thing*. How were you supposed to prevent any of this?”

My skin aches beneath her, demands I throw her off if only to prevent poisoning her in some way; I’m filthy compared to her, how gentle she is, the passion she shows even when she’s faced with such turmoil. My limbs won’t listen to me; they crave her when they shouldn’t, pushing me to hide deeper in the wild mane of her hair. “I could’ve listened to you, I could’ve stopped and waited, I could’ve saved that woman!”

“There was nothing you could’ve done. You said so yourself; you wanted to get better. You wanted to get stronger.”

The laugh that escapes is wry, hoarse. “Look at all the good that did.”

“There are always going to be casualties in war. Saving everyone is impossible, and if we’re assigning blame then this death is on me.”

Yanking away from her, I feel the red flooding my face, “What?” but she’s already putting a finger to my lips.

“It would’ve killed you before you ever got the chance to purify it, Scarlett. You needed time, you’re right, but you didn’t have time. You didn’t have the energy either, did you?” She asks, but I know she already knows the answer. We’ve been out all night, the singular scouting party that’s been able to survive attacks unscathed... so far, the only scouting party to come back at all. We haven’t slept, have barely stopped to eat, and I’m not even sure that when we finish our route Halianna will give us the mercy of a break. My magic has been melting away for quite some time now; a puddle instead of a lake and gradually getting smaller the more miles we put between us and the courtyard where the hideout is located.

But still. “It would’ve been worth it,” because then I finally would’ve done something good with the evil flowing through my veins. The years locked away, the torture, it all would’ve meant something.

She shudders. “Not to me.”

I want to scream, not at her necessarily, but it wouldn’t be that far off the mark either. She’s always been there to remind me of my limitations, how far I can and can’t go, and for once I just want to keep shoving, till my skin bleeds and the ground is yanked out from under my feet, laid back over to hide me away for good. It’s hard not to believe that, given one more minute, I could’ve saved a life. That I could’ve been better, different, less of a *monster* than I already am.

At this point, I'm not even sure what I'm grieving--the woman, Rein, or myself. It's too much and I'm drowning--the water has already closed over my head, the surface miles out of reach. Even if I could kick, even if I wanted to, I'm not sure I would make it before the last of my air ran out.

"Please, doveling. That's enough." She's crying. I haven't said anything, but she's crying. Why is she-? The ball of emotions fighting for dominance turns instantly to panic. I can't wipe them away fast enough. Every tear is lightning against my skin before she finally puts a stop to my trembling attempts. Kissing one palm, then another. "You can't keep fighting all on your own. You'll die, Scarlett. It'll *kill* you. You're the only person I have left; I can't help you if I don't- If I can't-" the words get stuck halfway out and then she's pressed against my collarbone, her fingers so tight in my arms I'm actively afraid we may fuse together, "Please, let me fight with you. Don't leave me here on my own. Promise me."

My hand floats above her hair. She's left me floundering, my mouth opening and closing in an attempt to say something, anything really, but I can't bring myself to. My voice is going to crack, is going to give away the war she's reignited without, I'm sure, even meaning to. I'm so tired, my soul cracked and sown back together more times than I could possibly count, and it's taking everything in me to open my eyes in the morning, to make my feet move forward when all I want is to lay down and wait for the next passing beast to have its way with me.

But, I couldn't stand to see her fall apart. Her tears become my own as I nod, then choke, desperately trying to pry the words free. "Rein, don't cry. I'm not going anywhere." It's the best comfort I can give, even though it feels like a lie. I shouldn't make promises. Disperitus is stronger than I am, he taught me almost everything I know about how to control my magic; I

showed him the rest. He's examined every card I have hidden in my deck and up my sleeve. But I still hold her close, letting the warmth of her sinking into my hold calm the typhoon raging through my body. If it meant she never had to cry again, then I'd do it. I could make this vow and then some. "I'm yours, Rein. I've been yours for a long time now, you know that. I wouldn't leave you behind; I promise."

I owe her this much. Lie or not.

## Chapter 10

We walk together, hand in hand. It's only because I'm afraid Rein will wander off if I don't, because I'm afraid the strongest breeze might simply carry her away when I'm not looking. I can't look at her, no matter how she tugs at my hand, giggling and smiling, stroking and poking. Her touch might as well leave a visible mark upon my skin; every caress is *agony*. With every quick glance, I spot another leaf caught in the untamed frizz of her hair. The moments when she catches me--I have always been the shorter one, but here she refuses to stand tall, slouched and cowering--I feel my stomach shift. Her eyes are empty. Shells of infinite beauty, as they've been forever, but there is no spark, none of her fire, her intelligence, her sarcastic jaunts. Just a thick glaze of indifference that coats the vivid iridescence of her eyes in a white film.

It hadn't been safe to stay, not where I fell into her, not where Disperitus might be waiting. The trees crowd in around us, the midday sun beating down and turning the canopy above into an inferno of color. Twigs give away our position, despite my best attempts at keeping her quiet; Rein's steps are clumsy and heavy. She trips over every rock, no matter how small. She trips over her own two feet. She trips over nothing. I have to stop myself from barking at her, but it's not hard when she laughs at her own mistakes. A hollow sound. There's no light, no joy.

Gritting my teeth, I push through a bramble bush and hold them aside so she can pass through. Waiting as patiently as I can bare while she studies the thorns, pricking her finger to squeal at the sight of her own blood--this is not the woman I knew. *I know*, I correct myself, but really... what's the point? The more I search for something, *someone*, that might very well no longer exist. Was her soul still intact, locked away inside her mind, scattered and weak? Was she

still fighting? Or was she part of the beast that had chased me? Had that bastard fed off her fears, her anger, her death, and made her into something she could never escape from?

It's so easy to see. Too easy, actually. Disperitus chasing Rein through the trees, after the car accident, after I had been carted away to the hospital, after I had been temporarily snatched from his claws. I had found a cliff, fallen out of his grasp. I doubt he had felt anything but frustration. Had he found her quickly then? Did he draw it out, torture her as he sent his wires to wrap around her ankles, leaving Rein to trip over the wrong root, to miss the right bend? She hadn't made it. He'd stood over her. He'd let his wires slither down her throat, find each piece of her will, and stain it with hate as he killed her. So she came back, so she'd hunt me down, so she'd-

I work past a surge of spit, a warning of vomit currently working its way up my throat; I should've checked her over more thoroughly. It says something, though, that her strength is still intact. She bounces around in a small circle, still refusing to let go of my hand, holding on so tightly I'd even say it hurt if I wasn't used to it. When I was falling, her steady grip pulled me back from the depths--a constant reminder that I could lose pieces, could crumble, and still be myself in the end.

*I think you'll find more company in these woods than just my little pet.*

I bring her to my chest, away from the only thing near that could harm her, the damn thorns; I should've stopped her. What was I doing? My magic bubbles beneath the surface, hesitant, but I force some of the reserves up and out, watching the hole in her skin disappear. Instantly, the sheen of water in her eyes fades and her giggles return. She flexes her fingers, turning them this way and that--her humanity is a joke, is as foreign as the world is to a newborn,

and she's eager to explore--and this is exactly what keeps me walking. She isn't just a shell, she's almost a child, so much younger than anything I've ever known. Victims do not turn into...*this*. They always die. It never takes more than a minute before the body shrivels and the monster crawls free. Even if torture is involved, the pain is more natural--Disperitus is fond of knives, after all. We've been walking for more than an hour and with how much mud is caked on her pant legs, Rein's been walking much longer than that on her own. He couldn't have changed her, killed her. Not completely at least. Not yet.

It's a one-in-a-million shot, but she just as easily could've hit her head when I slammed into her. Coincidences happen, and there are plenty of rocks around that one wrong angle would make for a terrible mistake. I wouldn't have noticed, especially since she's not bleeding (you don't have to bleed for the damage to be done, do you?).

She doesn't want to stop, pointing ahead like there's anything to see but the growing multitude of maples, birch, and cherry trees. Our path, well-trodden by deer according to the little black pellets littering the forest floor, is so congested I have no hope of possibly seeing our exit--if there is one. The only solace comes with the knowledge that we may be hidden if Disperitus is nearby, but I'd rather not be long. Ignoring the flare of voices and the waver of panic in their warnings, a small shadow darts out from underneath the bramble bush to circle her head. The single manifestation should bring me to my knees--the well is running dry. I close my eyes instead of focusing on the veins, the long black lines that must be up to my shoulders by now. I can feel the shaking setting in--man, I miss my gloves.

Healing her was the one thing my magic was good for, once upon a time, so I know what to look for. Tracing the outline of her body, feeling for the smallest of indents, waiting for the



catch of her breath to tell me I'd found a sore spot. Anything to show that her mind was not only intact but that it was simply injured, not poisoned, not slipping away into subtle madness bit by bit.

“What are you doing?” she stammers, but I'm too busy to answer, fighting away a rush of vertigo that spins the ground under my feet. Her neck is pristine, her jaw, her cheeks, her nose, her skull, her spine, her ribcage. The more I check, the less there is that can be wrong, but I double-check just in case. Then triple. Heaving when I realize I've been holding my breath, nearly choking when blood pours into my mouth. I swipe at my nose and tilt my head downward.

There's one more place I can check.

“Don't,” she says, “You don't want to do this. Please don't.”

Any other time I would listen. She's right, I don't. I don't want her to beg. I want us to go home. I want us to hold hands and laugh. I want to do all the silly couple things we never got the chance to do, the things we use to tease others about while making plans for the future. I want to hide in the library as she buries herself in her drawings, letting my mind drift away into the books I loved so dearly. I want to listen to her rants as she spills her heart out, as she describes the anatomy of her newest fascination. I want to hold her on the nights she can't sleep, the nights she can, and everything in between.

This is my fault--I need to tell her. *It's all my fault Rein--we never got to do any of these things. It's my fault that you're like this.*

The shadow lays the end of its small tendril against her temple.

Where there should be vibrance, there is gray matter and there are thick, dark clouds. We've been here before, in a forgotten battlefield, her head nestled in my lap and her brow cracked open. It was only a few weeks ago now--or was it longer?--and yet there is only a hint of her left. The dancing array of violets and ambers that make up her personality have been condensed, into a pinprick of light I can barely spot in the gloom.

Before I can even think to reach for it, for her, her hands find my chest. A firm shove has me on my ass as she stands above me, panting for air. "I told you not to." The words are slightly slurred, her body hunched over as she quakes.

"Rein." There's no doubt now, but she shakes her head anyway, stumbling back and into the trunk of a tree. Its roots are spilling out of the ground, leaving it tilted and at the whim of gravity. On the verge of collapse, all it would take is one firm push to send it crashing, yet still, it persists, and why?

"I told you not to look!" Her voice is rising. Something speeds away nearby, maybe one of the deer whose path we've been using, maybe something bigger, maybe something smaller. It doesn't matter. She's getting too loud.

But does that matter either?

"How did you find me?"

A single glance over my shoulder proves we're still alone, but everything is deathly still, so quiet that leaves crunch under the weight of nothing at all. My body aches to shoot up, to dart away before anything has the chance to think about giving chase. He's close. Disperitus wouldn't leave her on her own. He didn't try to kill her. That's not what this is.

But I'm not quite sure she hears me; not because her hands are clamped over her ears, but because she's chanting the same thing. Over and over and over again, "You shouldn't have come here..."

"Rein." *Stay firm.* "Is he coming? Do we need to go?" It's quiet; I'm doing my best to avoid scaring her any more than she already is as I get to my feet--slow, so slow the dirt raining from my clothes seems to hang in the air for seconds at a time, dragging me back down with it. Reaching for her is foolish, will put me in the direct line of fire if she decides to lash out, but she doesn't see me. Not really. She stares through me, as if she can see every thought, every particle stretched out in the space between my hand and her arm, every event that will transpire from now until the moment the universe ceases to be.

When she goes still, I can't help but follow her example. If she would only look up--I know she's in there. With her brilliant strategies that, more than once, have yanked us both away from the pits of hell. There's no way I can do this on my own; the light of my gem is sputtering, the faintest of glows now. Disperitus is practically breathing down my neck; he's watching from somewhere. If only she'd snap out of it-

Peering up at me through long lashes, her head cocks, "Go? Go where?" The fear is gone, as is the pain of a mind under siege. Her smile, even though I am absolutely certain I'm going to be overwhelmed, envelops the world in colors. We're only an inch apart; she's all I can see, all I can smell, and even in the most dangerous situation I tilt on my axis in her very presence.

It is my turn to beg. “Don’t do this, Rein. Come back to me.” Tears press for freedom, but, there’s already the softest ring of red around her pupil, expanding and growing, smothering what’s left of the women I loved.

Her face goes slack at the exact moment I catch wind of a soft whistle. It’s nearly imperceptible, but there’s no mistaking their approach. Not now, when I’ve realized his trick.

I shove Rein back and leap into the air at the exact moment the ground shatters beneath my feet, beneath the fury of thousands of honed wires turned missiles. She lands sprawled a few feet away, but the force of the impact sends me through the air, nothing more than a ragdoll. Everything rushes past, a pirouette of shapes until I make contact with hard rock and my shoulder cracks.

It’s stupid to think I don’t cry out, but my blood is pounding in my ears and I’m trying my best to grit my teeth, anyway. The bastard won’t know it hurts, he won’t know I’m scared; I won’t give him the satisfaction.

But, all he has to do is hum to set my skin crawling. “Oh~” His steps appear from nowhere; one second there’s nothing, and the next, they are only a few paces away. I picture him, hovering in the sky, enjoying a laugh at my own expense. He always joked about how people had a habit of never looking up, a joke that played itself out perfectly during the war; innocent women, men, and children cut down with the ease of a harvester’s sickle. They never saw him coming.

*I never saw him coming.*

“I see you found me out rather quickly? You were my best student.” He chuckles, a laid-back sound for someone who’s destroyed one kingdom, who’s set on destroying another. Who, for all intents and purposes, has a straight shot at victory?

I tell myself that it isn’t worth dying faster to piss him off. Rolling over, staring into the vermilion eyes that have haunted me from day one, I decide not to listen. “I’m your only student, and clearly you’re a shitty teacher.”

His silver hair gleams--since I last saw him it is now near white instead of a steady gray. Black lines criss-cross his cheeks and pour down his throat, veins stained with magic gone haywire. His laugh, while detached, carries only the professionalism he brought to our training sessions; there’s none of the warm guidance, none of the approval. “Really? Because I think you learned quite a bit from me... don’t you?”

He raises his hand into the air. Between the branches of the trees, there’s a shimmer, oh so faint, but it’s enough to have the hairs on my arms standing on end. I roll--don’t stop rolling even as his wires punch another hole in the ground right where I’d been laying the moment before.

“See? You know exactly what to expect!”

Except I don’t. My body is numb and buzzing simultaneously. My magic won’t spark to life--there are Shadows foaming under bushes, frothing in the underside of boulders, but I can’t pull them free. There’s only a small layer of my powers left within my reservoir, enough for one attack, maybe two, *maybe* three if I’m lucky. I’m never lucky.

Throwing my hand out, I heave as Shadows dart across the grass, two-dozen sharpened points with a single target. Disperitus bats them away, but it gives me enough time to struggle to my feet, to brace my weight against a tree and thank it for its service--chances are it won't make it through the next few minutes.

"No warm welcome? This isn't nearly the reunion I was anticipating." His grin pulls at his face, creating vast wrinkles that threaten to swallow the entirety of his cheeks. For some reason, I'm caught on his teeth, their uncanny perfection. There are too many, too few, an extra row. I can't tell at this distance, but when he speaks he's *all* teeth, no gum, no tongue.

"What did you do to Rein?" I don't grace him with any other response. Swallowing what can only be part of my lungs turned to mush, I spit out the rest, looking away from the bloody lump tucked away in the leaves. Two attacks left--gotta make them count.

"Oh, her?" He doesn't so much as toss a spare peep over his shoulder. "Nothing too damaging. I needed her out of the way, so I... pulled a few strings, if you will." A simple wave of his fingers reveals the cables attached to each digit, twisting, floating, a massive clump above his head, waiting for the next command.

"You made her forget?" Rein has yet to pick herself up, still curled in on herself where she fell. I can't tell if she's watching, if she can hear, or if she even knows where she is anymore. Her lips are sealed tight and if she wasn't rocking--back and forth, back and forth--I would think he'd killed her.

"Oh darling, I can make her do a lot of things." He lunges; I bring my hands up in front of me, feeling the Shadows coalesce--sparks fly as he rams into the wall face first. His wires are prying, gripping, trying to find the weak point, but with only so much left to give I'm letting my

body fall apart, tapping into reserves I don't have. I'll let myself go if it means we get off this mountain alive. If Rein survives I can lose any limb. I can bounce back after any sacrifice.

The magic falls over him and sticks, like a thin layer of spandex designed specifically for him. It fills the gaps between cells, expanding till capillaries blow, crushing till his bones splinter. I clench my fists and hear him grunt, clench them tighter till my nails break skin. He fights but falls to one knee under the pressure. Tying his arteries into knots will not be enough, making his organs into soup will only give him ideas. Choking--on agony, on rage, on revenge, on the combination of gore and bile working its way up my throat--I turn my aim toward oblivion. There can be nothing left.

With a scream, I hurl him into every surface in sight, the thud of his body matching the beat of my heart; *frantic*. He can't make it. This has to be it. If I had any, my batteries would be at zero. They've ruptured. My face feels as if it's dripping, sweat or liquid skin I can't tell. My tongue is swollen, my eye has sealed shut. When I let Disperitus go, the lump soaring and smacking through the underbrush, the concept of standing belongs to a stranger. I sink through my knees, coughing and spitting, breathing hellfire...but the world has gone silent.

I have the audacity to believe I've actually done it.

My next croak is almost a laugh, if you ignore the red-tinted spittle and the rattle of human pieces shifting to where they shouldn't be. "Rein?" I still call to her--to the honey-scented hair, to the songs she sang when we were children, to her easing touch, to her insistence that everything would be alright. I'm not sure if this will fix her, if defeating him will free her mind or demolish it completely, but she is my glue. My body crumbles and she comes; she always comes.

Hands find me as my vision blots out, a familiar touch with the same callouses I know by heart; the largest under her right index, from swinging her sword one too many times out of frustration. I breathe her name, a prayer at this point. She's too blurry to make out, but her hair tickles my face as she pulls me near, as she whispers my name--I have never heard anything quite as beautiful, I think.

I'm starting to list, the exhaustion and trauma kicking in. I'd need time to heal-- but she doesn't help me down, doesn't let me find the cushion of her lap. Patting her arm is all I can do to let her know I'm going to be alright, that rest is the best way to let my magic refill. I understand being afraid; if we had switched places I would be in hysterics already, but I'm not going anywhere. She has my soul, my body, and my word. I couldn't leave her if I wanted to, and I don't. I really, really don't.

But still, she doesn't let go.

Grunting at her receives no response, so I'm stuck trying to figure out words, syllables far too large and clumsy between my lips. I'm sure I sound as if I'm babbling, but she shushes me. At her mercy, it is both irritating and soothing to hear such a thing, especially as she lifts me straighter. Even unable to see, I can feel her gaze, the way it traces every limb. I can't possibly be as injured as I feel. I am not dead yet and I'll tell her so if it is the last thing I do. My chosen method is rather simple: another slurred groan paired with a perfectly inelegant wriggle.

I wait for her to chastise me, to tell me to hold still before she ties me down--I am notoriously bad for walking around mortally wounded.

It is Disperitus that answers. "Temper tantrums aren't fit for a daughter of mine."



The pain is sudden. It is an explosion in my abdomen, an eruption that billows outward, intense and heavy, till I have no choice but to sob, to howl, to beg Rein to make it stop. She doesn't so much as move--it's the only thing stopping me from wondering if she's been hit as well.

His wires pulse against my ribs, against the soft flesh of my stomach as he yanks my head back, "Didn't I teach you to always check your surroundings? I knew you'd let your guard down." The question is idiotic but he sounds pretty rough as if his throat is mangled and closed. I must have done some damage, but I'll never truly know.

His breath is hot against the nape of my neck as he leans in, pushing the living blade deeper into my guts in the process. The noise I make is more fit for an animal than a human, wild and weak--it makes him laugh. "Does that hurt? Don't worry, I'm sure shock will kick in momentarily."

He's wrong, though. It's already kicked in. I feel sluggish, but I try to shove him away, to no avail; my limbs are too lopsided. Clinging to Rein is the only safety I have left, the calm before the final storm, but even she's not enough to stop the force of the echo chamber inside my own skull. *Daughter? I'm his-*

"You've failed in your *great* quest. Soon, I'll take what I gave you and make it my own. As it always should have been." His rant is short-lived; I do not care to wonder why when all the pieces of the puzzle are falling into place.

It makes too much sense: our powers, his knowledge, his control. No one ever knew what he did; thousands of researchers fell short--had I really been so blind? Why didn't Halianna tell me? The letters I read, so long ago, flash through my mind. He was her husband, my *father*, and

she said nothing! She knew how he was, she'd seen it once before! How many had he killed before she tossed him into the Outskirts? She could've stopped this if she told me. I could've stopped him when my powers were at their strongest, when I started to see the signs, when servants began to go missing, when Rein told me there was something wrong, when he wanted to teach me how to kill, how to maim, how to "protect".

*I could've stopped all of this.* I could've saved them, our kingdom, our home. And now? Now there's only one outcome left.

Disperitus strokes my hair and it must be the delusions setting in, the ones that come as death sinks in--I see us, in a universe so similar to this but so different, where we are happy, a family, and instead of my blood on his hands, he cradles me close as a father should. "Oh, don't be so glum. It's not as bad as you think. In fact, I think once I start, you'll find it *enlightening*."

I know it's coming, can feel a chill clutching at my heels. Are his cables inching closer? Are they already at my lips? What will it feel like to have my soul ripped free? What will that anger do to me? Will I be the same? Will I know what I'm doing? Will he have me rampage through city after city, until I can't recognize who I once was?

My mind spins faster; blood loss, fear. It's not supposed to hurt this badly; it's supposed to go numb, isn't it? Burying my face in Rein's shoulder, I ignore the way he sighs, at first. I cannot care for his backward ways or his lack of remorse--whatever it might mean. We are long past crumbling; if I am to leave this existence, I at least want to go in her arms and not his.

"She'll be going with you, dear. There is no need for the goodbyes." Clicking his tongue, he must not see how I stiffen. The curses I sling at myself know no bounds; the only ones that match are those saved for him. To think this would end with me, that he would let her go--he has

eaten planets for the sheer joy of doing so. My life is nothing more than the powers it'd grant him. Rein is no different; a spark instead of darkness, perhaps, but no different in the long run. Another soul, another monster, another being to conquer and drive into nihilism.

I have known anger. Rein has been beaten and whipped, slashed and mutilated, tortured and shocked because of me--but her death has never been a concern. Even during the war, I somehow knew she would live. Was it because of her strength? Her perseverance? Her tenacity? Or was it because I was naive? Ask me now and I'd say all of the above. The fury I'd felt in those moments was real, but it had been softened by the reassurance that help would arrive; doctors, researchers, even Halianna.

This wrath is new--parallel to a comet's trail, bright in the empty vastness of space. My body should not be able to move, yet my strength is white-hot in nerves that have already shut down. Muscles move with the ease of a risen corpse, but I find zero difficulty in shoving Rein to the side. Disperitus gasps, but there is no happiness until my magic is around his throat, until I make a barrier between us--him with his blade still snugly secure in my insides, me holding him hostage, and Rein on the other side. It's thick and I know he won't be able to break it, that Rein won't either, though I can feel it draining the last few drops from the spring that, up until this point, has kept my clock ticking.

Last shot or not, I know how to reach oblivion all on my own.

Disperitus wants to yell, but my training is still good for one thing. The Shadows hold tight, squeezing until he's choking, and while they don't have eyes I can feel them watching. They hover, as they always have, but they let me be. There is no nagging, no soothing thought, no encouragement. They'll let me go on my own terms--finally.

Energy blossoms at my fingertips and swirls in my open palms. The veins cover every surface of my body when my focus ultimately shifts back to Rein, but there's no more pain. The wind may shake the last of my foundations away and the ground may crack under the force of what's coming, yet I am grateful that I have bypassed my own limits. *She* has given me the ultimate power, the only one I will ever need.

If she even realizes this, if she is even aware of what I'm about to do, she is fantastically impassive and I thank every god I know for it. Still, I speak, if only so she remembers my voice through the fire and the brimstone.

## Epilogue

She finds her tucked away in a patch of flowers not yet wilted.

*“It wasn’t your fault, but I know you’ll blame yourself.”*

Scarlett’s face is peaceful, in the end. The blast hadn’t left her charred, hadn’t left her broken any more than she already was.

Rein falls to her knees. There is no way to fix what has been done, but she tries anyway. Hovering and shaking, her hands everywhere at once--all her pleas fall on deaf ears.

*“We always said we’d get out, go across the galaxy, make a place that was only our own... But I haven’t given up.”*

She cries until her eyes are throbbing, until her chest is tight with loss. She cries as she lifts her doveling into her lap, she cries as she wills her soul to find hers through the gaping divide. She cries until there are no tears left to cry.

*“It may not be this time around, sure, but we’ll find each other again. In the next life, the one after that, or a thousand years down the road.” She grins, sweet and forgiving, while her magic collapses in on itself.*

Their foreheads touch as Rein breathes her name and touches her lips with her own. “I remember you.” At the end of the world, people always expect poetry. The truth is so much simpler.

*“I have a promise to keep, after all.”*

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