

4-29-2015

# No Absolutes: A Fantasy Collection

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## Recommended Citation

Hughes, Tiffany M., "No Absolutes: A Fantasy Collection" (2015). *Honors College Capstone Experience/Thesis Projects*. Paper 535.  
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NO ABSOLUTES: A FANTASY COLLECTION

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

Tiffany M. Hughes

\*\*\*\*\*

Western Kentucky University  
2015

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2015

## ABSTRACT

Genre fiction, particularly fantasy and science fiction writing, has a mixed reception in academia across the world. The notion that make-believe characters and worlds could not be intellectually fulfilling is an old stereotype that reduces some of the most profound fiction of our era down to children's tales. This fantasy collection serves as an example of how genre fiction can contain impactful stories that challenge our understanding of traditional values. As the title suggests, life, from relationships to self-identity, offers no absolutes for the future. Humanity faces uncertainty of the past, present, and future every day. These stories reflect the same doubts and struggles with the combined complexities of strict societies or crumbling worlds. Character and setting are driving forces behind each different tale while they remain connected through their focus on familial themes.

Keywords: fantasy, stories, absolutes, creative, fiction, family

Dedicated to my father, a man who let me choose both fairy wings and dragon kings.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foremost, I would like to thank my thesis director, Professor David Bell, for guiding me to think critically about all my short fiction no matter what genre it was. My thesis would not exist if his courses had not inspired me to pursue this project. Special thanks goes to my second reader, Professor Walker Rutledge, for his keen editing skills and ever-present encouragement. I would also like to thank Professor Dale Rigby for showing interest in my fantasy work and expanding my identity as a writer through his nonfiction instruction.

This work largely relied on the emotional support from my family and friends. To my mother and father, thank you for encouraging me to reach higher than I thought I could. To Hannah Bertram and Mary Spraggs, the wackiest, loveliest best friends I could ask for, thank you for all the laughs, memories, and ideas. Lastly, to the love of my life, Jeff Wittenback, thank you for being there for me every time I needed you. Also, grudgingly, thank you for being my most honest critic of all.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

As readers, when we think of absolutes, we may consider the objects around us or a math equation with a defined answer. In a more subjective light, we may think of relationships or faith as absolutes in our lives. The closer we get to our emotions, our idea of stability and security becomes less certain. Exploring the mind, body, and soul can then lead to no absolutes, to a world that is ever-changing and unpredictable.

The idea that nothing is an absolute in our human lives was the driving force behind the following stories. Furthering this concept was my choice to write fantasy stories, which allowed me to develop complex layers of uncertainty through conventional fantastical elements. The story “Fae Daughter” explores the moral and capital conflicts in a futuristic Earth that is enslaving humanoid creatures of unknown intelligence and power. Likewise, the stories “Aunt Patty” and “Sacrificed” draw upon the age-old predicament of understanding what actions are best for ‘the greater good’ when ordinary people are given extraordinary power. “The Land Beyond” and “Prince of Chaos” confront the inevitable questions of faith and identity, which is different for every person, in even more uncertain settings.

In these worlds, Earth-like or not, the characters are challenged into introspective situations as if they came upon a hypothetical road that diverges into two paths. While many venture down the proverbial road less taken, the protagonist of “Fae Daughter” is

caught in a situation that has no happy or easy way out. Even in fantasy, happy endings are not absolute.

In fact, a key element to all of my stories is the open-ended nature as each story comes to a close. Though these stories may capture the work of a day or the passage of years, the end result is that my characters advance into an uncertain, even volatile and hostile, future. I wanted to truly mimic real life in that our futures are never set in stone despite the best-laid plans of parents, jobs, or societies. So each tale begins a new story even as it ends, keeping inside the belief that no world offers absolutes, and the reader is left to imagine how the characters' lives will progress.

Although I had no intention of writing a themed collection of stories beyond the label of fantasy, I unconsciously gravitated to the family dynamic. As an only child, I didn't realize I was curious about the connections between familial roles until the fall of 2014 when I took a nonfiction writing course. My strongest pieces were my reflections on family and community, and this newly-discovered interest found its way into my fiction. Families, I have come to realize, are complex units of love and loss. "Fae Daughter," "Sacrificed," and "Prince of Chaos" question parental roles while "The Land Beyond" expresses the bond of siblings. "Aunt Patty" is slightly different; the protagonist experiences a day with extended family.

Stylistically, I wrote all of my stories but one in first person point of view. Character should always come first in any story, and this collection relies on character to ground readers in each fantasy setting. Dealing with existential and emotional conflicts also often requires a close connection to the protagonist's mindset and personality. "Fae Daughter" is the exception because I wanted to balance both character and world-

building equally. That is, the society and its consequent values were vital to the protagonist's character, so I wrote the story in third person to develop two layers of intrigue.

Overall, my interest in fantasy has been influenced by authors such as Terry Pratchett, JK Rowling, Tamora Pierce, and Kate Constable. I have tried to adapt the sharp, poignant dialogue of Ernest Hemingway in my stories such as "The Land Beyond" and "Prince of Chaos." "Aunt Patty" is my attempt to emulate the whimsy of C.S Lewis. However this collection contains a darker side of fantasy writing, one that I hope captures the complexity of life as we know it.

## CHAPTER 2

### AUNT PATTY

No matter how spry an old person is, just please, for God's sake, take away their car keys by the time they reach seventy. I'm sure activists would start Facebook riots about personal freedom and elderly abuse, but in my current situation, I couldn't care less.

On her errand day, I was charged with the task of accompanying my eighty-four-year-old great aunt, who was in need of a bathroom and some laser eye surgery.

"Hey, they have their brakes on. Slow down...Aunt Patty, stop!"

We went from going forty-five to zero in a few seconds, a tight seatbelt the only thing keeping me from flying headfirst through the windshield. Minutes ticked by as I rubbed my chest and did a mental check to see if any brain cells had been knocked loose from my head bouncing off the headrest.

"Pox take them. Traffic, all the traffic! If everyone is in such a hurry, why don't they get a move on," Patty said shrilly. She tapped an impatient thumb on the steering wheel at a perfect ten and two position like she'd just gotten out of her driver's test. As soon as the light turned green, she slammed a wrinkled hand on her horn, which erupted into a higher pitch than her voice.

I slipped down in the seat, feeling a flush of red creeping into my cheeks, until the top of my head barely showed in the window. It would be just my luck to be seen by every guy at my school, axing any chance I had to get a prom date because of a mad old lady. We started moving again and I peeked over the dashboard. The multitude of Ford trucks, Priuses, and Pontiacs were going down the road as if they had never been jammed into tight rows of bumper-to-bumper traffic for five minutes. We zipped past solid green lights heading towards a Speedway. When I looked up at light number eighteen, I watched its yellow bulb flicker on for a second, beams of sunlight filtering down past the black signal box into the eyes of half-aware drivers, then switch back to green. To everyone else, they would have thought it was a trick of the light or perhaps they were tired and had only thought it had turned yellow.

I thought neither. That was my Aunt Patty for you.

I turned my head to look at her, my eyes narrowed in the most disapproving glare I could muster. Her eyes remained firmly planted on the Speedway growing larger with each push of the gas pedal.

“Don’t give me that look, Marsibeth. When I have to go, I have to go.”

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I might as well be frank. My great aunt Patty is a spirited old woman with a bite in her words, which she gained from traveling most of the world on a Navy warship with her husband. A nurse had to learn how to match wit with a platoon of burly men. They’d visited ‘Nam, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, the Philippines, parts of Europe, and every state in the U.S. of A. She’s about the only old person I know who speaks fondly of Hawaii and California, and when she does, I can see the ghost of Uncle Gordon in her dark green

eyes. She still has the same spunk, the same vitality that carried her through adventures as if they were rolling on a film. Only, her legs can't carry her nearly as far, her eyes have lost most of their sharpness, and her fingers are kept busy by a quilting needle.

She missed it...all of it....

She is also, as it happens, a witch.

I can remember playing around a little dollhouse with Aunt Patty when I was about five or six, which is funny because all my other memories only go as far back as middle school. We were playing house, placing tiny plates the size of my thumb on a flimsy plastic rack built above the sticker-covered stove. I was a mean little girl back then, but weren't we all? Patty would gently place a plate in the rack with steady hands (a lifetime of handling various needles helps with that, I hear), and I would poke it off, giggling. She pretended to get upset, piping up in that high-pitched voice left over from her younger years, "How *could* you, Mars? Why are you so mean?"

I've always had a fragile heart behind my tough face, bursting into tears if someone so much as raises a voice at me. She said that, and I immediately thought it was true. Running out the front screen door to cry on her front step, I was followed by Patty, who crouched down on her knees, which popped like broken twigs. It must have been around Easter because her pants were robin egg blue, but she didn't mind the dirt smudges on her knees afterwards.

"Why are you crying, Marsibeth? I thought we were playing," she said, putting a cool hand on my cheek.

I couldn't articulate the feeling of shame at the time, but she seemed to look into me and found what she was looking for.

“I didn’t mean to...,” I said in short gasps.

Patty smiled, pulling me into a hug.

“I know. We never really mean to, sweetheart,” she whispered in my ear.

At the time, I simply sniffled into silence and gave her a quivering grin. Just as we stood up to go back inside, a rusty, blue Chevy pick-up roared past the house and a brown sack was flung out of its window, landing beside her mailbox. This really wasn’t anything new. Aunt Patty lived in the backwoods of London, Kentucky, twenty minutes up the highest hill in the town where her house was nestled back into a fringe of trees at the crest. It was a popular dumping ground for garbage and stray dogs.

She left me standing there to check it out and pulled something from the sack, head jerking around to stare at where the truck had disappeared down the road. Eventually, she came back with a wide-eyed, squirming, orange ball of fuzz. I screamed, delighted at the sight of the disgruntled kitten, holding out my hands to take him. He sunk his claws into my shoulder, climbed up and over until he was clinging to my lower back while I bent double to make sure he didn’t fall. Patty plucked him from my shirt.

Thirteen years later, Tiger is still galloping through our hallway at three in the morning, though when he runs into chairs or falls off a tight ledge, I always wonder if Patty worked her magic on him that day. I’m not sure how a kitten would turn out after being flung from a moving vehicle in a sack.

Later in the afternoon, traveling back towards our house, Mom and I passed that Chevy truck, fender rusted through, pulled off on the side of the road. Somehow, a large splinter of wood had punctured his front tire.

“I’ll tell you what, I don’t ever want to be on Aunt Patty’s bad side,” my mom said, grimacing at the man as he braced his foot against his truck, pulling at the wood lodged into the rubber. We passed him by—I turned around to watch and he still hadn’t managed to free it when we lost him over a hill.

“Marsibeth, you’re old enough to understand this now. Lesson number one about Aunt Patty is that if you act out around her, she will turn you into a frog. You better be good when you’re over there. She’s a witch.”

She had done a good job hiding it for many, many years. The only rumors that got around about her was that she was touched in the head from losing her husband. Quilting circles loved her and half-bent old men complimented her garden plots. My child mind was too focused on the kitten staring out from an old pet carrier beside me to really hear my mom, but I remember thinking, *Maybe she will say a spell to make more kittens for me.* It would take another year or two to convince me.

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I bought a Redbull inside the gas station and filled up the car while she was in the bathroom. Sipping on the sickly sweet liquid, I thought about the end of school and start of summer. Patty had asked if I would spend my days off at her house, which I didn’t mind considering she was practically a kid at heart. There had been no explanation other than she wanted to see me more. I leaned against her car, watching her through the propped-open doorway of the gas station as she fumbled with her PIN number for her debit card. Still she chatted with the cashier, laughing off her old age like it was something that could be dismissed if she had enough charm, and toted a plastic bag of candy bars as if it were in an old brown paper bag from the “way-back-when” drugstores.

This was apparently the first time she'd been out in weeks, according to my mom. She was certainly quieter than normal with the lack of weekly gossip to tell me. Besides her magic, bursting out with whatever was on her mind was her trademark. The woman didn't have a filter. As I watched her approach, I focused on her face—her wrinkled brow furrowed even more as she took in the eco-friendly cars and the automated gas pumps with a quiet, almost imperceptible disdain. If I hadn't known her, I would have thought she was squinting against the sunlight.

When she returned and we started driving towards Walmart, I confronted her about it.

“Aunt Patty, how are you feeling?”

She looked at me in surprise.

“As fine as an old woman can be, I suppose. Why?”

“Well...” I hesitated.

“Spit it out, Mars. You know me.”

“It's just...you seem...off.” I struggled to put my thoughts into coherent sentences, afraid of saying the wrong thing.

“What a bunch of bologna,” she said, though whether to me or the car in front of her, I wasn't sure. She frowned at the Honda that had zoomed around and cut us off, apparently finding her driving to be too slow.

“What I meant was I'm just fine,” Patty told me while we pulled into the parking lot and started searching for a spot.

The very first open place was handicap. Patty gave the concrete a sharp glare and the blue-painted man in a wheelchair sunk away into the ground. It was like the spot had

never been for disabled use. She slid into it without a second thought. My mouth hung open at her blatant defiance of parking regulations.

“Aunt Patty!”

“Oh, don’t be such a party pooper, Mars. I can’t just conjure a handicap sticker for my car.”

“Why not? I mean, the metal sign is still there. People are bound to notice.” I said, gesturing to the tall sign that could be seen through the windshield. Patty tapped a long finger to her lip, staring at it.

“Good point. Here, this’ll fix it,” she said.

I realized that I hadn’t ever seen her actually conjure her magic. I stared at her hard, waiting for some murmured word or twitch of a finger. If she wiggled her nose, I would have probably fallen out of the car laughing.

“Alrighty then, let’s go,” Patty stated abruptly.

I blinked then looked at the sign. Dark green vines wrapped around the rectangular piece of metal, cloaking every inch of it in glossy leaves.

“How did you do that?” I asked.

“You know better than to ask that, Mars.”

“Yeah, but I wanted to see this time.”

Patty grinned and I wondered if that was the look she used to give her children when she’d known they’d done something but was going to keep it to herself as future blackmail.

“Sorry about that. I’ve gotten pretty good at hiding it through the years. Old habits die hard,” she stated, then changed the subject. “All this witchery has worn me out. You

think one of those energy drinks would do me good?” She gestured at my Redbull and I nearly choked on the sip I took.

“No,” I nearly shouted. She laughed through her grin, a laugh that shook her whole body and scrunched her face together into innumerable lines. I joined her—I couldn’t help it; it was infectious.

“I bet you I could make a quilt in a day with one of those shiny cans. I could use the energy.”

“Probably,” I said, still laughing. “They taste like horse piss though.”

“Had a lot of experience with that?” she asked, her emerald eyes gleaming with mischief.

“You’ve probably snuck it into some of the dinners you’ve made, so yeah,” I shot back at her just as fast. “And the handicap sign is still there, you’re not fooling anyone. You’re going to get a ticket.”

“Perhaps, but I’ve lived here long enough to know where the sheriff gets his breakfast every morning. Would hate to slip some horse piss in his Hardees coffee over a silly little ticket.”

We cackled all the way into Walmart over that one.

To me, Walmart was a cesspool of overly-priced brand names and unhappy employees scanning groceries just as robotically as the beeps that emitted from their cash registers. If you asked them where to find an item, they would tell you that this wasn’t their department or they were on break. I always thanked them even though their blatant pricing and stocking countered their words. My employment experiences were less than satisfactory—I sympathized.

Aunt Patty shared my feelings. We were a couple of cynical gals, that's for sure.

I helped stock her up on organic vegetables, beans, and milk. She piled cans of peaches into her cart. They were by far her favorite fruit. The more we put in it, the heavier the cart became to push, so I took over when we added weighty bags of flour and sugar to the mix. She couldn't remember if the fabric section was still around, so we made a wide circle around the store, looking for the crafts. I spotted it first: endless rows of polka-dot pink, chevron blue stripes, dark flannels, green dinosaurs, lavender kittens with bows, techno-unicorns, and too many other ridiculous patterns to name.

Patty eyed what she wanted from afar—white-on-white flat-fold fabric. She quickened her pace as if someone were going to beat her to it, passing me by entirely. When I glanced around, though, not a single person was in the fabric section except for an employee who looked even older than my great aunt. I caught up while she tugged the roll from its tight nest in between a black paisley and a sand-colored cotton. It was wrapped thick around the cardboard spindle.

She toted it over to the cutting table where the Walmart lady stood looking at her with a vague expression, one crossed between confusion and amusement.

“I want it all,” Aunt Patty announced, setting it down by the cash register.

The woman looked startled to hear such a girlish voice come from her. She picked up one end of the roll, glancing at the price sticker.

“It's seven dollars a yard,” she replied, eyebrows raised.

“That's fine. I'll take it,” Patty said.

“Wait...” I cut in. “How many yards are on that roll?”

“'Bout a hundred,” the Walmart employee said.

“Aunt Patty, that’s seven hundred dollars. No way,” I pulled the roll back off the table.

“But why? It’s white on white! You can never find that anywhere. You always have to special order it and that takes weeks to get here. I’ve got quilts to finish,” she said, her eyes flashing in the fluorescent lights.

I bent over to whisper.

“I know you don’t have that kind of money.”

“Well that’s easily fixed now, isn’t it?” Her mouth pulled to one side in a crooked, snarky smile. I followed her eyes to a potted fern sitting beside the register, discarded by some unhappy shopper, and I detected a slight shimmer around the leaves—if I wasn’t mistaken, the face of Benjamin Franklin was starting to form on one of the fronds. One hundred dollar bills were growing out of the plant, and the leaves were expanding into flat, rectangular shapes, black ink racing across in squiggly details. It was rather mesmerizing, perhaps too much. The cashier followed my gaze and her mouth dropped open, mouthing “Oh my God,” her hand clutching her own throat, as a thick wad of bills pushed its way out of the soil towards her.

I caught her reaching out a hand to touch the money and my heart seemed to stop. Lunging over the counter, I shoved the pot off; it slung dirt across several feet of tile when it hit the ground, snapping the main stem in half. The money shriveled back into leaves, turned a dull brown, and fell to the floor in a neat pile. Patty crossed her arms.

“I’m not paying for that,” she said.

“Seven yards. Cut her seven yards. That should be plenty,” I told the cashier, who blinked at the spot where the plant had been. When she didn’t show us any notice, I grabbed the fabric role and waved it in front of her face.

“Ma’am? Are you okay?” I asked, feigning concern. Her eyes snapped back to us.

I heard her mumble “I’m losing my mind,” and she got to work measuring out the yards.

“The last time I checked, I was the adult here, Marsibeth,” Patty threatened me, making the hairs on my arm stand on end.

“You sure aren’t acting like one. What happened to all that ‘I’m the best at hiding it’ stuff?” I whispered while the lady measured out seven yards. I was expecting Patty to zap me into one of those birds that were sometimes seen flying in the roof at Walmart.

“I am. I’ve not been burned at the stake, have I? I survived McCarthy, clearly,” she said, paying for the fabric. The clerk appeared to be done with us; she gave her the receipt and walked away into the craft aisle without so much as a “have a nice day,” shaking her head.

“No, but she saw. She thinks she’s crazy now. You can’t mess with people like that.”

I scooped as much of the dirt back into the plastic pot as I could and hid it at the bottom of a clothes rack behind a circle of khaki pants. Some employee was going to hate me later.

“And how is my type of crazy any different from the rest of the world? Tell me that,” she snapped at me.

Wasn't it obvious? People thought magic was for Disney and nerds. I didn't say anything though.

We walked along in an uncomfortable silence towards the gardening section. Patty didn't speak or look at me. I regretted fighting with her, but what could I do? Let her magically make seven hundred dollars of counterfeit money? Surely she realized...but then, Patty wasn't a bad person. I highly doubted the woman had even had a parking ticket in her lifetime.

"Aunt Patty...I'm sorry. But I can't just let you do that, you know?" I asked.

"Of course I do. I was only joking though. You take everything so *seriously*," Patty said, immediately going back to normal and winking at me.

I knew she was lying, but God knows what was going on in that briar patch of a mind. As we walked, it occurred to me that I was taking a witch to the gardening section. What the heck could she want that she didn't already have or couldn't whip up herself? She stopped by the seed packets for several minutes, pulling pumpkins, iceberg lettuce, and eggplants from the rack. I picked up one of the pumpkin packets and held it up.

"What's with the seeds?"

"Oh, just a little starter pack for an experiment I have in mind," she said, not meeting my gaze.

"Which is?"

"Well, I was thinking I could make them into little helpers. For around the house. Just a bit of small-scale witchery, and I won't let them out for people to see."

I noticed the excitement in her eyes. She was smiling at me, hoping I would go along with her idea. It was insane, no doubt about it, and unpredictable like many of her

past “experiments.” When I was little, I went along with it all the time and nothing bad ever happened—flowers would sing to me and I would draw with rainbows. Looking down at the package in my hands, I chewed on my bottom lip. Her words rang loud in my head. When *had* I gotten so serious?

“Cool. Just try not to make them angry or evil. We don’t need a giant pumpkin creature shooting laser beams down Main Street,” I said, throwing the seeds back into the cart.

“Laser beams? I wouldn’t do that.”

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As I suspected, there was a ticket on her windshield when we got back to the car. I’d never seen her so furious.

“What is the *deal*?” she said, ripping the ticket out from under the windshield wiper. Her hands were shaking too badly to put the key in the ignition. I reached over, took it from her, and placed it in my lap.

“But really though, what is the deal, Aunt Patty?” I asked. Perhaps it was the wrong moment to question her, but I had a feeling I wouldn’t get another opportunity.

Patty leaned her head back against the headrest. The shadows on her face made her look small and evil, giving her nose a cruel hook and chin a severe point. I’d watched too many bad witch movies because I knew that couldn’t be who she was.

“You are becoming a perceptive young woman, Marsibeth. You’ve got your soccer, your choir concerts, all sorts of I-don’t-know-whats. You don’t hardly visit anymore,” she said with her eyes closed.

She was right. I'd hit junior high and had jumped head first into every activity I could. I'd stopped making time to go over to her house, and my mom stopped pressing me about it when I'd started getting awards in school—sports trophies, president's list, that sort of thing. But that was too shallow of an answer for me to accept from her.

“I know; I'm sorry. That's my fault. Why do you think I'm here? I'm going off to college soon, so we will have plenty of girls' days this coming summer.”

She smiled and said, “That sounds nice. I hope I get to see you graduate from college.”

It was a morbid thought, but I hoped so too. I wanted her to see that, but considering she'd already had several surgeries on various body parts, I tried not to think about it.

“C'mon, you've been avoiding the question all day. Why are you doing magic out in plain sight of everyone? It's unnatural, it's wrong.”

“How wrong is it, really?” she replied sharply. “What's in your pocket?”

“My cellphone.”

“How many of your friends have cell phones?”

“All of them.”

I thought I knew where this was going.

“Do I have one, Mars?”

“I don't know. Do you?”

She finally opened her eyes and looked at me without turning her head.

“Don't act dumb. You know the answer to that as much as I do. You got some sort of video game system at home?”

“Yeah.”

“What about a computer?”

“Yes,” I said, growing smaller and smaller with each question.

“You’re a smart girl, Mars. I’m the only witch you know. I still have ribbons from county fairs, and I used to be the top seller at the farmer’s market. There ain’t hardly a soul left alive from those days that I know. I can make beautiful and terrible things out in the world, but no one but you knows. And your mom, of course, but I had this talk with her a long time ago.”

She held out a fist to me, palm up, and slowly unclenched her fingers below the dashboard so no one could see if they passed by. A yellow rose unfolded out of the air, the pale petals brushing her fingers softly. Patty let it slip into my lap; it started to brown and curl up as soon as it left her skin.

“Look at that, Mars. What a waste, but that’s just how it is these days. I’m old and out of place. I’m the wrong kind of person in this era already. Do you understand now?”

I couldn’t speak for a while; I thought I might cry if I did. We sat there in a stuffy silence. At last, I said, “I do. Still, I think you should use it for good.”

Patty plucked the keys from my lap, started the car, and pulled out of the parking spot.

“Yes, I know. But I feel like I need to go out with a bang,” she said, finally relaxing into our typical banter. “And I don’t like to admit that I’m wrong.”

Almost as soon as we drove out onto one-ninety-two, the main road that went through the heart of London, we were caught in crawling traffic. An SUV had plowed into one of those little bug cars—I never liked those vehicles anyway, but I tensed when I

saw the stretcher moving away from the driver's side. There were too many EMT's around it to see what was happening. It probably wasn't going to turn out well—the compact car was crushed into a horizontal line of metal.

“You can help them, can't you? Here's a chance to do something good with your magic,” I told Patty, pointing at the stretcher that was being loaded into an ambulance.

“It doesn't work that way, Mars. I wish it did,” she said, shaking her head sadly. “I can manipulate a lot in nature. I can do many things, but I can't change humanity. And it is human nature to become sick or hurt...even die.”

We drove past the wreck. The last glimpse I had before the doors of the ambulance slammed shut was of them performing CPR. I turned my head and squeezed my eyes shut, a vague sickness coursing through my body.

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I spent the evening with her trying to calm down from seeing the wreck. I knew I would have nightmares of it for weeks to come, but I temporarily drowned out the images with a series of bad country songs from my phone. I didn't care what Aunt Patty said...thank God for earphones.

The sun dove below her lonely hill while she crocheted sitting in a floral claw-foot chair. From the window, I watched a storm rumble towards us from the west, heralding the night with its dark clouds outlined in pink and orange blazes, their wispy arms extending from the veins of sunset, over-eager. A strong wind shook the petals and blooms from her cherry trees, showering the clover-covered yard in bright spots of white. By morning, their branches would be bare once more with winter's last cheap shot against the land. Her home wasn't the elaborate labyrinth of vegetation expected of a

witch. Red and yellow roses climbed sturdy trellises under her windows while mint formed a carpet for her flower beds. Aunt Patty never cared much for topiaries or greenery. She thought they were the Chinese factory toy to the hand-carved Pinewood Derby racecar. It made her flower beds look vacant most of the year, but when her tulips pushed up in the spring, they sang out for weeks in choral rows of gold and fuchsia. I could see the sprouts spiking through the cold, dry earth.

“You’re awfully quiet, Marsibeth,” Aunt Patty spoke over the clicking of her knitting needles. “You alright?”

“Yeah, sorry. I was looking at the garden beds. Your tulips will be up soon.”

“Sure will. You know, I was thinking about fiddling around with the weeping willow in the backyard.” Her voice escalated up as she grew excited. “What if I tinkered with the vines a bit? A twist here and a tug there. I could make a playground for kids. Swings, slides, monkey bars, all made out of a tree. Do you think you’d bring your children out here to play?”

“Aunt Patty, I’m not even out of high school yet,” I exclaimed, then immediately regretted raising my voice. Her eyes dimmed when I shattered her bulb of inspiration. She picked her threads back up, crocheting with increased intensity as if trying to settle back down into reality. I mentally face-palmed. After all, I was the one who told her to use her magic for good.

I took in the tan walls, the grandfather clock in the corner, the quilts folded and thrown across every piece of furniture, and the dusty television that I doubted she turned on once a week. A sepia picture of Uncle Gordon, dressed in his navy uniform, sat on the

mantel piece. All around me were the little pieces of her life. I sighed but thought I shouldn't open my mouth anymore. Something stupid might come out.

"Mars, wouldn't you build a playground out of a tree if you could?" Aunt Patty asked.

"Yes," I said instantly.

"Oh really?" She raised an eyebrow at me.

"Ignore what I said earlier. I overreacted. Thinking about having kids freaks me out. A willow tree playground sounds awesome," I said, and I meant it.

"Why would you do it?"

I took a minute to think and said, "Because it would be good and wonderful for this world."

For the first time today, Aunt Patty looked joyful.

"Come here, Marsibeth. Your mom will be here soon, and I have one last thing to tell you."

I stood and walked over, careful not to get tangled in the yarn at her feet. She grabbed my hand—if she wasn't talking and breathing in front of me, her icy hands would have declared her dead. I looked closely but despite the cold seeping from her skin, I couldn't see a blue tinge.

"When you're born, you're full of life. You got to get up and go do things, find thrills and love. One day, you'll wake up and find that your feet can't carry you as far. You'll get out of bed and see your hair turned white even though you thought you'd plucked that first gray hair a long time ago. Or that the Avon wrinkle cream *wasn't* working after all."

I tried to tug my hand free, but she clung to me. It all spilled from her mouth as if she'd been biding her entire life to tell me this.

“And you're warm. Hot, even. But as soon as your feet hit the pavement, you'll start getting colder, degree by degree. Sure, you'll be on fire for a good while, but the world catches up to you. Everyone's different. “

I almost didn't catch it, but when she paused for breath, I thought the fever in her words surged to her fingertips. It was brief, like a spot of sunlight through a window right before it was covered by a cloud.

“But fires go out, one way or another,” she said, releasing my hand. I put it in my pocket to try to warm it again. She stared up at me, waiting for some sort of reply.

“I'm...um, sorry.” I struggled for words the way I did when asked a math question. What did you say to something like that? My wisdom extended to figuring out boys, not life catastrophes.

She nodded as if it was the most sensible answer she'd ever heard.

“You'll do good, I know you will. Your mom is out in the driveway.”

The beams from the headlights were streaming through the window. Patty stood and gave me a long hug.

“I'll see you soon,” she said with a wide smile.

It would be a few days before I showed back up on her doorstep, yelling, crying, and saying, “You sneaky, crazy, old woman, how *could* you?” Only, I had a raincloud soaking me to the bone, so she didn't take me seriously at all.

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I don't think she ever got around to that willow playground. She did make a few pumpkin puppies that were absolutely adorable. But god, the messes they would leave on the carpet.

Aunt Patty must've known that all an awkward teenager could be was awkward no matter how eloquent she wanted to sound. It would be a couple more years before I'd get out of that bumbling stage, and by that time, I had a pretty good grasp on what I could do. We didn't ever talk about that day again, but she knew I had it all in my head. She probably thought I could do better than her, and though I disagree, it was enough for her to know I could do some good.

Six years later, her roses were still thriving, pale yellow blossoms that eased the eyes away from a dark-stained earth. The cemetery gardeners tried to tear them out every spring saying they didn't match the rest of the landscape, but I put them back the day after they did their landscaping. I let the last bloom trail from my hand and scratched my palm. The leaves always tickled when I conjured them. I reached down and arranged the stems around the writing.

*Patricia Fields*

*Born: April 6, 1924*

*Died: April 14, 2014*

## CHAPTER 3

### SACRIFICED

“They are coming.”

The wooden plank door slammed shut on Rio’s heels and he snapped the latch across the frame. Miyaun got to her feet, striding away from the rough bed of wide leaves and hay.

“But did you get them?” she asked him. He turned a coin purse upside down, causing two silver coins to fall into his palm.

“Just like you said, Miya. Two coins from the coffer. He cut himself on a razor today; I have that too.”

“Throw the coins in the water,” Miyaun said, pointing to the iron kettle nestled in hot coals. “Then scrape his blood into it. I’ll get the incantation.”

Rio hurriedly dumped the coins into the roiling water, watching them sink to the bottom. He took a small, sharp razor carefully out of the same purse, unwrapping a dirty cloth from around it. A dried smear of blood ran down the edge. Using his fingernail, he scraped it clean over the kettle, letting the flakes disappear into the water.

Miyaun took a skinning knife and ripped through the pallet they slept on at night. From the leaves and wool, she pulled a sheaf of parchment, folded carefully to conceal the writing.

“Hurry! What does it say?”

Miyaun stared at the letters on the page, chewing her lip, wide eyes scanning side to side.

“I have to say something over it.”

“Well, do it quick. The guards will find our house soon. We need to get out.”

Miyaun ignored his urgency, still staring at the page.

“Rio...I don’t know how to say these things...what happens if it goes wrong?”

They stiffened. A faint shout echoed down the valley towards the hut.

“They’ve seen the smoke from our fire. It doesn’t matter, just do your best,” Rio said, pushing her to stand over the boiling kettle.

Miyaun took a deep breath then began to whisper.

“Vienas iš kraujo ir godumas bus patenkinti jų tamsiausią valandą. Vienas iš Kuklus veislės gauna visą valdžią.”

The coins caught flame inside the water, flickering and turning red underneath the bubbling. Rio and Miyaun bent over the kettle, oblivious to the steam on their faces, watching the coins go from silver to scarlet to a blinding white, forcing them to look away. Light emitted from the pot, filling the room with a silver glow. They heard the shouts of guards, closer this time, and the pounding hooves of horses thudded towards them.

“We can’t wait, they are almost upon us!” Rio cried.

“I don’t think the ritual is over yet. We can’t mess this up,” Miyaun replied, running to gather up the bundle lying on top of the leaf pallet. Their daughter, Layla, was fast asleep and did not stir at her mother’s touch. Scalding his hands on the bright kettle, Rio seized hold of it and tipped it over, sloshing the bloody water across their dirt floor.

The light went out instantly, plunging them into blackness. The coals of their fire blinked out of existence with only small tendrils of smoke snaking up to their roof.

“Where are you, Miya?”

“The coins, find the coins. They have to be placed on her eyes. I wish you hadn’t done that,” Miyaun said, holding Layla close.

Rio dug around blindly in hot mud, cursing the heat, the light, and the whole plot. “Hot metal on her eyes? Miya, they will blind her!” His burnt fingers fumbled for the coins, but when he found them, they were cool to the touch.

Placing them on top of Layla’s closed eyes, they waited in the darkness for something to happen—a glimmer of light or fire, something to show the ritual was complete. All the while, the horses came closer. They were at the bottom of the valley, running in the direction of the hut—invisible now but not for long. Heavy clouds obscured the moon and stars that normally shone through the trees.

Miyaun reached out to touch her daughter’s eyes. Her fingers found only a sticky dampness over them chilled by the night air.

“The coins are gone, Rio,” she said, looking frantically down at her feet.

“Gone? Where gone? Did they fall off? I didn’t hear them,” he scrambled around on the floor again only to find cold dirt.

Looking out the single pane that formed their window, Miyaun saw a flicker of fire on the edge of the forest sheltering their hut.

“There’s no time,” she said, placing Layla in a sling against her and picking up a flour sack filled with small possessions. Rio followed her gaze, and for a moment, stared at the approaching guards with dread.

Then he strapped a dagger to his waist and took up his hunting spear beside the door.

“This way then.”

The family left the hut through a small gate in the back, running past growing saplings and low bushes until they entered an older part of the jungle. Miyaun’s arms strained against the sack, trying to keep the contents from banging together as they moved through a thick tangle of vines, roots, and trees. Thundering hooves sounded far behind them, but they stopped abruptly. Indistinguishable shouting and the faint crunch of splintered wood reached their ears.

“Wait,” Rio spoke, and he scrambled up a koa tree, which offered firm handholds and wide, fuzzy leaves as large as a small child. He perched on the top branches that were as thick as a man’s leg, staring around him.

“We’ve got a ways to go before we reach the heart of the Horeej jungle. We haven’t even reached the slopes yet....” He faded off into silence as he turned towards their abandoned hut.

“What do you see?” Miyaun called, shifting Layla to lie across her other shoulder.

Rio watched the smoke billow into the night sky, blotting out what little light could be seen through the clouds. Instead, a hateful orange flicker caught his eye in the distance, like a tear in the sky revealing a hidden sun upon the rugged landscape that grew slowly larger. He gave her no reply; he did not want to speak the words out loud that their home they’d carved carefully out of the jungle was gone.

If she saw the flames or smelled the smoke, she gave no attention to it. Miyaun looked down at her babe in the sling, who had woken at the change in pace. Layla stared up at her with bright silver eyes.

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*I remember when they found us. Mom and I were picking sweet starberries that turned our mouths purple—they were always my favorite. If I close my eyes and concentrate enough, I can still feel their cool juice coat my tongue like spring water, perfect for the endless heat and humidity of Horeej. We lived on the slopes where the matted networks of roots and vines would start angling slowly upward and continue to rise until you were climbing more than you were walking.*

*That is how this place was named. Horeej and our only city, Maulia, were settled in a place called the Rim—a great bowl sunken into the earth, one side surrounded by high, cracking stone cliff-walls, eroded smooth by wind, and the other by jungle so thick, the trees grew horizontally out of the steepest part of the slopes, gently curving toward the noon sun. I never saw rock or dust until they pulled our family from the heart of Horeej.*

*Since my imprisonment, I've discovered that Horeej was a rather special place. I always suspected it was. They told me that an enormous river runs under the Rim, wearing away at the dirt beneath our feet, and it caused the Rim to sink below the rest of the land. But the water was the best; it grew the Horeej forest and gave such strength to the trees and undergrowth that when the ground fell away into the rapids, the tangle of forest held up in the air. The plants continued to weave together, taut as the drum skins*

*they beat during Procession, their enormously long roots trailing down to dip into the river.*

*I can't dispute their claims. The floor had a certain spring to it, as if nothing but living plants were underfoot, and when trees came to the end of their life, they would sink into the ground, leaving a gaping hole. Mom never let me get near the holes; she was afraid I would fall in. I never heard the roar of the river though. People don't go into the forest if they don't have to. They call it dangerous, full of big cats and snakes, but my brother and I were always taught the basics: Don't step where it's not green, don't eat it if it's black, and keep a sharp stick handy to poke along anything that's in your way. Big things only came out at night and our hut was well lit with fire. The worst bite I ever had was from a cobblesnake, and it just stung for a few days.*

*From what I heard my guards say, Horeej put up a good fight against the chief's men who came after us. See, if you respect the forest, it will be kind to you—that's what they didn't understand. Of course Horeej protected us. We never fouled the trees or cut new saplings for wood. The bounty hunters and militia he sent into Horeej would tear it apart in their search and it would swallow them whole.*

*Chief Lazarus is a crafty man, however. His men grew wiser and eventually snatched us from our home, our woven baskets left spilling over with berries and our spears buried in the tree trunks. I had readily accepted our life in the wilderness, as outcasts in the Rim, and we grew up happy. I never knew the city and I never wanted to know. My family failed to mention to me, when I grew old enough to understand, that we were traitors and wanted people. My family, Miyaun and Rio, myself and my little brother, Roon, were thrown into these crumbling, dusty cells of Maulia. Sixteen years, it*

*took them to find us. One year, I have been a slave. In three hours, my chief will come for me. It is Procession Day.*

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I pulled my thin wool blanket tighter around my body as the desert winds pushed through the bars of my cell. I had grown used to the incessant howling in my ears, but this high up, it was always too cold. The seasons were changing and lately I had felt more pain than normal—whether from the coming of fall or the curse, I couldn't decide. Burrowing down into the straw on the floor, I shifted to sit under the window, raising my head to stare at the striped patch of blue. My family and I, locked in one of the high towers of the palace, were subjected to driving wind and rain. Cells were scattered along similar precipices, which felt as though they swayed during hard storms and threatened to crumble into dust at any moment. One did once about six months ago. I've had nightmares of the prisoner's screams and of dropping out of the sky ever since.

A sharp tapping sound started to the right of me, and I knew it was my father trying to chip a hole through the stone so that we could see each other. He got ahold of a long nail two weeks ago. The rough wall between my cell and theirs was crumbling at its foundation anyway. He would be through any day now, but I really wished he wouldn't. It only heightened my fear of falling, as if he could somehow be weakening the structure of the tower by creating a hole only big enough for a hand to fit through.

The gate at the end of the hallway screeched open and my father quickly stopped his digging. My heart sped up when I heard the tap of hard leather soles, the militia boots of the chief's guard. They were early—day had hardly risen and the sun hadn't passed my small window. Two of them came to my cell and beckoned me forward.

“It is Procession Day; the chief wants you down in the baths.”

“Why so soon?” I asked. Most prisoners wouldn’t dare to question someone from the chief’s army, or else face a swift kick to the ribs. But I was special to the chief. Lucky me. They usually had orders not to harm me. The worst they could do was yank a handful of my hair, but Chief Lazarus became furious when they messed up my “pretty face.”

“He is planning for a different route today, one that will take you through nearly every street.”

One of the guards took hold of my arm and pulled me roughly to my feet, the tattered blanket slipping off into a wad to reveal my thin frame covered only by a brown, sleeveless shift. I looked like a flour sack with twigs poking out. A sharp turn out of the cell brought me directly in view of the rest of my family. I halted briefly when a calloused hand shot out of the bars, latching on to my wrist.

“Wait, Layla,” my father whispered. His hand was scuffed and bleeding from working on the wall.

My guards tried to shove me along, but I wrapped my bony fingers around the bars of their cell, holding on.

“Your brother...” he trailed off, looking behind him. I stared past his shoulders, frowning at the scene. My mother had Roon’s head in her lap, dripping water from a dirty cloth into his open, unconscious mouth. A rattle emitted from his chest every time he took a breath. She looked up briefly, just to meet my eyes, and wordlessly begged me to help them. I nodded, trying to thread my hand past their cell bars to hold onto my father before the guards ripped me away from their door and thrust me out into a different part of the palace.

Down long flights of steps, across open parapets, and through gated doorways, they took me to the courtyard baths. This was the one of the rare kindnesses I was given during my imprisonment, although I'd rather not have had it. I was shoved towards four deep pools of hot spring water, bubbling over with lavender and mint scrubs, where piles of wool robes and rows of scented oils were stacked on tables. The guards hastily made their way back up the winding paths towards the cells; the many wives of Chief Lazarus were in charge of making me presentable for the procession, and no one was to look upon their bodies except the chief. Even if I were stuck in a sand-caked, leaking cell for most of my days, I always found their primping less than pleasurable.

However, as I stepped down into the steaming water, my dirty shift discarded somewhere in the grass, I let out a soft moan. If I ever had to choose between freezing to death or dying in the hot Rim desert, I felt certain I would choose the latter. My time in the cold, drafty towers with the biting wind a constant pressure against my body came close to driving me mad.

I pushed off the final step, rushing through the water head first, enjoying the few minutes I would get alone before the wives came. Floating lazily on my back, I watched the air above me quiver with the heat of the day, the steam of the baths making waves above my head. My thoughts turned to my twelve-year-old brother gasping for life, and all of a sudden, I was aware of a dull ache behind my eyes, just a twinging pulse that hit harder as I focused on it. I sank underwater, knowing it wouldn't help, but hoping the warmth would make me forget about the pain. Had citizens come to the palace to request an audience with the chief? I was used to the tiresome aches caused by the palace staff, but this new flare of pain startled me.

As I broke the surface again, a voice made me freeze in my antics as if I were back in my gusty cell.

“Would you like some company, my dear, sweet Layla?”

I kept my back turned away from him while I listened to the soft thump of his garments hitting the ground and felt the ripples wash against my bare skin when he entered the water.

“Sir?” I murmured, looking down at my reflection. My long black hair could not hide my chapped, bleeding lips or the dry, flaking patches across my face...or even my eyes, silver as the rings the wives would later put on my fingers.

“I thought I would come and personally make my flower blossom for the parade today.”

I felt his rough fingers come down on my shoulder, heavy and strong. Forced to turn around, I gazed down at the reflection of my chief, little waves obscuring the hook of his nose and the mocking raised corner of his mouth. He drifted away to grab a bar of soap fashioned of goat’s milk and honey. I stood stock-still when he returned, as if in tight chains, and Chief Lazarus began to soap my hair.

“There, doesn’t that feel better? You really should try to keep better care in the cells, Layla,” he spoke while the suds ran down into my eyes and ears. “I need to talk to you, my dear. The people...they are more restless than usual lately. I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

The twinging inside my head confirmed, but I wouldn’t admit to it. I kept my head down, face clenched shut to avoid him.

“Do you know why, Layla?”

“No, sir.”

“I’ll give you a history lesson then. While you were playing house in Horeej, I had a rebellion problem. They wanted better conditions. They would have taken the food from the mouths of my servants, stormed the palace, and lounged in our beds had I not put a stop to it thirteen years ago.”

My breath caught in my throat. I knew that lusty growl in his voice; I’d heard it many times before. He massacred them, I just knew it. Probably an unfathomable number.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“Seventeen,” I whispered, not trusting my voice to hold steady.

“You were just a little girl then,” he bent to speak into my ear. “You wouldn’t know. Today is the anniversary of my triumph. And the people...many of them still remember.”

His hands were tightening on my head, pushing against my skull as if he were going to break it open. It became unbearable, and with a shout, I slipped from his grasp and dived into the water.

Lazarus grabbed hold of my ankle. I couldn’t fight back, not without facing death, and my family would surely die with me. He dragged me through the water, tossing me with a splash into the corner of the pool. I scrambled for a hold on the rock or grass, trying to climb out of the pool, but his hands again forced me to turn around and roughly pushed my hair out of my up-turned face.

Gazing into his eyes, I saw a haze of drunkenness.

“Sir, please...” I coughed. My hair would be plucked out by his fingers if he did not let go soon.

“You brat of a bastard,” he spat, releasing his grip on my hair. “Stand up straight!”

I raised partly out of the water, drops showering down off my supple, thin body. My breasts had grown since I had come to Maulia, and he greedily looked at my profile as I straightened.

“You must’ve thought you would live in that damned forest forever, didn’t you?” he said with a faint slur, dropping his composure. “Here’s something you need to learn. Remembering leads to emotions. Emotions become rebellion. I won’t have it!”

“Yes, sir,” I stuttered.

He took hold of my shoulders and shook me.

“You’re hiding it from me. There is more to you. There has to be! I had it all before. You are not enough any longer. Those swines that raised you broke it somehow. Something is missing. Something...” he drifted off into his ravings.

“Sir?” I said, frowning. He had only ever used me to parade about the city. Maulia was under his firm control with me in his hand. I couldn’t figure out what he was getting at.

“You bitch. You’re going to take over my city, aren’t you? Start a rebellion? It’s already happening. You can feel it, I know you can.” His voice escalated into a shout, and I was aware of my headache expanding outward, down into my face. I wanted to speak, but the ache in my jaw had nearly sealed it shut.

“Sir...no...” I spoke through gritted teeth, then buried my head in my hands. His rage drove into my body like a pick axe. With my eyes squeezed shut, I stumbled forward, running into his solid frame. His arms locked me against him and there was an instant change. The pain slowly ebbed away as his drunken mind switched from anger to a different kind of passion. I let him run his hands over my body for several minutes just so that I could escape the piercing aches.

“You truly have no idea, do you? Ignorant whore. You never deserved my powers anyway,” Chief Lazarus said, pushing me aside so he could climb out of the pool.

“Wait! My Chief, I have a request to make for my family,” I spoke, my head lowered again as demanded by his servants. It worked to my advantage anyway to hide how ruffled I was by his outburst. I heard him pause, hands on the wall to lift himself out.

“Yes?” He sounded like his old self now; the alcohol was wearing off, just as it had all the other times.

“My brother is ill...maybe close to death. Will you send a healer and medicine?”

I raised my eyes only a fraction, but it was enough. His cruel pink mouth spread into a grin that told me everything.

“Of course, my princess. You know our deal.”

He was gone then, wrapping one of the robes around his waist as he entered the hallways of his palace. I sunk back into the hot water until only my nose and eyes were sticking out. My sobs bubbled under the ripples until the wives came for me.

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“What about those good old days, Zula?” one of the wives said, a chubby woman that stood barely to my shoulders. Her squat fingers somehow held steady while she

stroked white paint over my fingernails, taking her own stubby nail to wipe away any spots on my newly-cleaned skin.

“Yes, those were the glory days. We lived on the outside of the merchant district, me and my husband. We had to move our children closer into the city after the war, though. Not enough water,” Zula answered her, pulling a rose-scented oil through my hair. “Where did you live before, Bree?”

Bree snorted, causing a fleck of white paint to fall on my middle knuckle. She wiped it away and said, “I’ve always lived in the castle. He picked me long before your skinny behind came through the gates.”

“If your manners say anything, you probably came from a pit in Horeej, you cow,” Zula retorted. I raised my eyes to see that the women were glaring at each other over my head. I feared the painting wife was going to slap me from my chair to get to Bree, so I piped up.

“Don’t worry, you wouldn’t have survived in any of the pits in Horeej. They’re bottomless.”

Both women turned their glares into opened mouths of astonishment. Very few of the wives had ever heard me speak. They probably didn’t know that the other was new to the palace; at least, I’d never had them work on me before, and I knew all the others by name.

“You lived in Horeej?” Zula asked.

I nodded, accidentally pulling my hair out of her grasp, which she was trying to weave into a braid. My slick black hair unraveled, and she huffed as she picked the sections apart again.

“Oh, dear, you’re probably too young to even know about the war,” Bree sighed, scrutinizing one of my pinkies. “You don’t remember the time when there was plenty. Maulia used to sprawl all across the desert with sweeping balustrades and topiaries lining the streets.”

“You don’t even know what those things are,” Zula shrieked, then leaned around my chair to look at me. “But she is right, in a way. Used to, we didn’t have to come to the palace to beg support for our families. Sure, we were always a little less happy walking back home, away from the heart of the city. It had a certain charm, you know? Me and Bree got lucky; we’re chosen as wives. Can’t say Jack was too glad about it, but it gets a little flour in our bellies.”

“You know...dear...” The two women shared a hesitant glance, then Zula continued on. “The Chief was raving a few nights ago.”

Bree nodded, sitting back in her chair, which creaked threateningly under her girth, and said, “Mhm. Drunk as a roly-poly weevil tumbling around in the desert. We like to never got him back in bed.”

“But the whole time, even between lovemaking, he kept saying “Layla has the power, Layla has the power,” Zula said, moving around to crouch in the grass beside Bree. “You *must* tell us. How did you get to be his favorite?”

I stared at them. The favorite? My eyebrows knit together, and I looked from one to the other to see if I heard them right. They watched me expectantly, eager almost, as if I were going to tell them a well-kept piece of gossip.

“Don’t you know why I’m kept around?” I asked, and they shook their heads. “No one does?”

I got nothing but blank looks of confusion.

“Well you’re the favorite, aren’t you? The one the Chief fell madly in love with? It’s a love story told throughout the land. The Chief found a girl whose beauty and charm were so favorable that he deemed her the ultimate bride. She was dressed in the finest clothes and given equal seating at court beside the Chief,” Bree exclaimed.

“Surely you know I’m locked in a cell, don’t you?”

“Of course! You were caught stealing food from the storehouses to distribute to the poor in Maulia. Such a noble cause, yet the law is the law. The Chief was forced to charge you with treason. The penalty is usually death, but he was so in love with you that he kept you in the towers instead. Couldn’t bear to see you die, poor broken soul,” Zula said.

I was so taken aback that I burst out saying “You stupid old crones, I’m a prisoner. He uses me to control the city!”

The wives gave each other another surprised glance. Bree reached forward with a fat hand and patted my cheek. I reared back away from her.

“Her time in the cells have wasted her mind, the poor dear. It’s all so tragic,” Bree told the other wife, who gave me a pitiful look.

“It has not. I do have powers, but it’s a terrible curse. I take away people’s pain. I pull in their bad emotions...leave them numb. Why do you think he takes me on Procession Day?” I stated. My hands shook with anger knowing he spread those kinds of lies around while I wasted away in my own dirt and urine.

“Oh, you have power, do you?” Zula scoffed at me. “If you can take away all the bad, then why are my children starving still? Why is everyone sick?”

“Emotions, I take in emotions,” I said, throwing my hands up in frustration. “You know, sadness, hurt, fear.”

“Then why aren’t we all dancing in the streets having a good old time?” Bree pointed at me. “Why don’t you make us feel happy?”

My shoulders slumped over, and I let my hands fall back down to my knees.

“I can’t.”

“What do you mean you can’t?”

“I just can’t. That’s not how it works.”

“Well, missy, I don’t see any proof. I certainly don’t feel any different,” Bree stated. Zula was nodding behind her.

I groaned, slumping farther over until my forehead rested on my knees.

“You wouldn’t. He’s controlling you, don’t you see? Through me.”

“Sit up straight and quit telling lies. It’s time to paint your face,” Zula stated, pulling me up by my shoulders.

I made one last effort.

“I’m telling you, he’s manipulating all of us. He is a cruel—“

Bree’s hand shot out faster than I could have thought possible. She struck me, leaving my face stinging with a bright red bloom flowering across my cheek. I bit back a stream of curses and sat still.

“Don’t speak about the Chief that way. I’ve had enough of your lies. You don’t have powers, and apparently, you aren’t his love either.”

“Bree, you better hope that doesn’t bruise. He’ll kill you if she’s marked up for the parade,” Zula said, fanning my face with her hand.

I watched Bree's flabby face turn pale; she looked like an albino toad that was about to be squished under someone's heel. Suddenly, she noticed my smirk.

"A bit of cold water will make it alright," she said. She took hold of my hair, pulled me over to a deep basin, and thrust my face straight into the waiting water.

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There were no roads in the Rim; there were only lines of houses that outlined the streets of Maulia, hard-packed dirt and swirling sand stamped down into worn paths. I looked back as we crossed the expanse. His palace sat like a sandcastle, bits of it crumbling away despite the wealth and prosperity he hid in its vaults. The tan walls blurred against the desert, and soon, the palace lost any distinguishable features in the heat. Jongleurs, dancers, exotic women painted over in the likeness of goddesses, caged tigers, and riders on stallions and elephants paraded towards Maulia. A long line of soldiers marched abreast of the procession, watching the women warm up for their routines and eyeing the great stamping feet of the elephants.

A couple of miles lay between the city and place, but I could already feel my headache returning behind my eyes, sharp and pounding. The closer we got, the more it expanded across my head to reach my temples, crown, and nape of my neck. I placed my fingers against my forehead, rubbing the skin that was now crusted in bronze oils. Chief Lazarus reached over, taking hold of my wrists, and brought them down to bind them at my side. The shackles built into the carriage were almost too big for my underfed wrists. He did the same to my ankles, covering the bright steel with the folds of my scarlet gown. As if I didn't have enough weighing me down before...I could barely stand with all the silks and jewels placed upon my person for the parade. Shifts, rings, bracelets, necklaces,

and a corset to give me deeper curves; scarves threaded through my hair, and the dress, though one of the lightest from the wardrobe, still exposed just the right amount of shoulder and chest even if it piled about my feet in length. I sat sweating in the heat.

The people of Maulia did not care that I was a prisoner disguised as a chief's wife. Once I passed the gates, they would line the streets so that I could take away all of their cares. It was my curse, something I was born with and had lived with perfectly well in the jungle. But Maulia was far away back then. I didn't care, and still don't sometimes, about the affairs of these people. If I could escape back to Horeej...

Past the gates of the city, I tensed as the pain flowed over and down my body like molten metal, slowly inching its way to my fingertips and toes. The pain immobilized me, sealing my mouth shut from screams or moans, my wrists and ankles cutting into my bindings as I sat rigid. Their emotions—the people of Maulia—rushed under my skin like a thousand little rivers. I took it in, unable to stop the tide of misery sweeping over me, and I had nowhere to put it. Their pain was more powerful than ever—the ache of lost loved ones. I wondered if I siphoned the wounds of the dead aching for vengeance under the dirt. We rode along and the carriage bumps threw me forward, but I was too immersed in their grief to move. Chief Lazarus watched my face lock into a smirk that was my attempt at neutrality but was more from my clenched teeth. I would not let him see it. After the first few days of being locked away, my body adapted and I had learned to prepare my features to lessen his satisfaction.

It was only here, where the hurt was strongest, that I lost control sometimes.

And it was easy to see why. Clay houses with windows busted out and doors barely hanging onto hinges exuded the great poverty of the city. Ragged clothes fluttered

on a network of lines stretching across the skyline. Gaunt men and women sat on rooftops, peeked from doors, and crowded the streets as we paraded by. These people were hungry and desperate. They caught lizards and fowl from the desert for dinner and were glad. Water wells were the hubs of Maulia—there was one in every market place and they were occupied during all hours of the day. Vendors flashed their glittering wares or sweet candies at the children, who stared with a mixture of dreaminess and contempt. Varying layers of dust turned the city into a rust-colored ruin, eroding what little happiness they still had.

I took in their anger, their hate, their hunger. I choked on the tears of crying babes and the disappointment of children. I engulfed their fear for tomorrow, their desperation for another day's meal, and their anxiety that another son or daughter would swell in the heat and die. What were tigers and elephants to them who struggled to keep a roof over their heads? I left them with emptiness instead, as if they had never known a terrible feeling in their lives, and they went about their business as we kept rolling down the alleys. Despite my reluctance, tears slipped from my eyes as a tribute to their now quiet souls.

“They used to cheer for me, Layla,” Chief Lazarus suddenly spoke. “I would venture down Maulia and the people adored me.”

I stared at him through the corner of my eye. He knew I was unable to speak through the pain.

“Now look at my subjects. They are void of life, my dear.”

I tried to turn my head through the pain. It twisted a fraction, inch by inch, until I could look upon the men and women surrounding our carriage. Dancers threw

shimmering dust, and every once in a while, candies into the crowds for the children to fight over. Their eyes changed from sad need to hollow blankness as we passed, hands loosely outstretched as if I could bestow a blessing on them. I could only do so much though.

“You take in all the bad, but why can you not give them good emotions? Don’t you care about others, Layla?”

*No, I thought stubbornly, and even if I had that kind of power, it would be wrong on many levels.* A little girl cried in her mother’s arms, her wilted brown hair ribbon fluttering loosely in the wind. Her red face was grubby and I could tell see her spindly legs. As I gazed at her, her tears subsided into quiet panting. Despite my bondage, I tried to will a smile on her face. The girl remained blank until a dancer dressed in emerald and glittering beads of gold somersaulted over to her, giving the child a piece of sugared pineapple to suck on. She cast a quick glance at our carriage and bounded away at the sight of my face.

“Do you see their faces, my sweet? You are flawed. You leave them to their fates here. This lifelessness is your fault. Do you enjoy feeding on their pain?” he said, gripping my chin and turning my head to face him. “We might have made fine conquerors had you not stolen from me.”

Through the foggy ache in my head, I became confused. I’d never had the opportunity to steal from him in all my life. His sober eyes told me he was no longer drunk. His crooked grin bared his sharpened incisors, and my gut twisted into a sickening knot. He knew something and was holding it ransom from me.

We rumbled onward, down every lane of Maulia, while the pain stabbed at my body with every emotion I sucked in, and the dust clouded the air behind us. Lazarus laughed occasionally, staring at me with hate in his eyes. And even though I had left Maulia numb, I still felt the weight of their anger pulling me back, cinching a permanent hook around my waist.

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*Rest up, my sweet; you're in for a long night* were the last words he spoke to me. Back inside my towering cell, I lay crumpled underneath the window. My body had endured a longer procession than usual thanks to the anniversary. I had been given a clean shift upon returning, the wives hurriedly pulling it over my limp body—I was too weak to stand on my own. Now, with my face down in the musty straw, I let the harsh wind blow sand over my back and eased my cramping muscles one by one, barely conscious.

The cell clanged open; I didn't bother to look up. The smells of roasted lamb, purple potatoes in auji gravy, thick slabs of honey cakes and goat cheese, and imported snap beans reached my nose. My stomach clenched with a hunger I had not noticed. Peeking over my outstretched arm, I saw green-currried arga wraps full of chickpeas, peppers, and mushrooms beside the other items. A bowl of starberries and a tall pitcher of water finished off the feast they had left for me.

Why torture me with pain and hints of things I knew nothing about, then provide me with a feast of kings? I suspected he couldn't afford to let me die. Today's spread was more lavish than usual although he had raged at me constantly. Staring at the food, the ravenous citizens of Maulia flashed through my mind, one by one. I remembered them all

despite their empty expressions. How much of this was in the palace? Enough to feed Maulia for a week? A month? Year? Enough to have a celebration stretching across the entire expanse of the Rim? The people would be happy for a little flour alone. I couldn't resist the smells, but I felt ashamed at the same time.

Pushing myself to my knees, I started to crawl towards the platters. Suddenly, a hand came through the wall, seizing my arm for the second time that day.

“Layla, are you okay?”

I eased myself down again, peering through the small hole my father had finally cut out of the wall. Miyaun, my mother, must have been waiting for me to pass by. Her arm, thin as new saplings, blocked any sight into their cell.

“Yes. It was longer today. He took us down the side streets...the ones the elephants could fit through.”

Mother pulled her hand back through the hole, and I finally gazed at her robin egg eyes. Tears made them flash a brighter blue, but she changed the subject. She knew no words could console my weariness.

“Roon is already getting better. A healer came a little while after you left, before noon. We were given medicines to keep here. He was a nice man,” she said, starting to ramble. “It must be a hot one out there today...the wind isn't as cold. What did they give you this time, Layla? It smells wonderful. Same old, same old over here. Oats, water, and a slab of brie.”

“Lamb today, Mama. And snap beans and arga wraps stuffed with peppers. Here,” I stated, and pulled the platters over to the hole. There were three wraps; I slowly inched each one through the hole, careful not to spill any of the precious filling. A yellow pepper

drenched in sweet sauce was left on the plate. Placing it in my mouth, my jaw almost seized up from the taste of food.

“We don’t want to take your food, Layla. You need it to get your strength back,” Miyaun replied, but I heard her pass the arga wraps to my family. Roon, who was now awake, started noisily devouring it. Mother shushed him, not wanting to attract guards, and the only sound for a while was the crunch of arga leaves being torn apart. I started digging into what was left: first the lamb, so tender it fell apart in my hands, then the potatoes with flecks of salt and dipped in auji. I ate it all, bit by bit, until my shrunken stomach grumbled in protest. All that was left were the starberries.

“That was some feast, Layla. Why so grand?” my mother spoke to me once I’d pushed away the platters.

“I’m not sure. He was drunk this morning and angry at me. He accused me of stealing...he said I was hiding something,” I spoke, my back against the wall. I imagined my voice sounded small among the whistling wind. “I think the processions are being held more often. It feels like it, at least. They’re hungry. And today was the anniversary of some big massacre. There is only so much I can do, Mama, and I don’t even want to. None of this is my fault, right?”

I waited for her to assure me. In Horeej, they taught me and Roon to fend for ourselves, our family. We helped those who helped themselves, but we always knew there was only so much that could be done. An explorer who helped gather wood was welcome to spend the night; a blundering man ravaged by sunspot fever would be avoided. It was not that we were cruel; the Rim is a harsh place full of hardened people.

The jungle was no place for mistakes or blame. People didn't make sacrifices in the harsh environment.

My throat caught as she remained silent, and I whispered, "Right?"

"We...have not been good to you, Layla," Miyaun finally said. I leaned my head back against the stone, my head starting to throb with the sadness in her voice. So she had hid things from me, just like Chief Lazarus.

"Tell me."

"You were not born with a curse. When you were just a babe, we lived outside of the city. It was just as poor and starved as before, but the people were unusually happy. They shouted and sang praises at the parades. Children still played and husbands kissed their wives."

"What changed?"

"Chief Lazarus is an old ruler. He may not look like it, but he is a powerful being. A story went around that he was dipped in the river under the Rim as a child by his mother, a last act of love before her death. It endowed him, supposedly, with youth and the power to control emotions. Some say the river was poisoned from his touch, but I don't believe it."

I kept silent, my own slow-burning anger beating back at the headache.

"He was corrupt, of course. Who wouldn't be with that power? He was Chief by the time he turned a man. He swayed everyone...his armies...his people...even his enemies. His power held the entire city. We were out of range, but every day your father would come home grinning. It wore off, like washing dirt from your hands. We have Wise women in our ancestry, Layla, and I felt the magic in the air. The only other

remnant I had from the Wise was a spell. We couldn't let our people die as slaves with smiles."

My fingers dipped into the bowl of starberries, pulled one out, and started shredding it.

"Rio stole into the palace at night. The haze of happiness was weaker when the chief was unconscious. We tried, Layla, to give you his power instead. We would have raised you as great leader for the good of the Rim. The spell would have worked, I think."

"But I can't do those things."

"We know. We ran out of time," Miyaun said, her voice thickening. She kept speaking through her tears. "Layla, we're sorry. They were coming. They found out somehow. We interrupted the ritual in the middle of it and it went terribly wrong."

My palms were dyed purple now. I had crushed the starberry in between them, letting the juice run down my finger tips to drip on the straw around me.

"You sacrificed me. I never had a choice. All the people in this forsaken place, and you cursed a babe," I said through gritted teeth.

Miyaun broke down into sobs and I listened as she shuffled away. My father replaced her at the hole.

"It was me, Layla. I broke the incantation. I was so scared of having us all run down. We lost everything but our lives that night. My daughter...you know how he is. He had to be stopped. Someone had to try, and we were the only ones, as far as I knew, that were not under his spell. The land was dying, Layla."

"It will die all the same now!" I shouted. "I do not have his powers; I cannot help these people. All those years in the jungle, teaching us to look after ourselves,

abandoning Maulia. What exactly did you think I could do? Ride in on a battle horse and make him bow to me? This city was built on the sacrifices of the dead. I never had a choice to live, did I?”

“We were just trying to help—“ Rio stuttered to a stop. There was no need for the wind high up in the palace; my anger howled in the room, enough to break down walls.

“You treated me as a strategy, as no more than a stranger. You...you...” I spat, unable to speak anymore. I shuddered against the knife-like stabs of their sorrow. My life was an unending consequence of deceit; my pain was the folly of would-be heroes of Maulia. The chains around my wrists and ankles each Procession Day were the result of a sacrifice I did not choose to make. After all this time, Maulia was still as dirty and doomed as it had always been.

The guards were finally roused by my shouts. They came to my cell and rattled the bars with their spears.

“Treasoner! Shut your mouth or we’ll bind it for you. We can take away that food just as easily as it was brought.”

I picked up the bowl of starberries, weighing it in my hand. With a jerk, I pitched it at the guards, splattering them with fruit. The ceramic bowl shattered against the metal bars.

“Tell your king he can have it back! He can have it all back!” I screamed at them, stepping over the shards even when they cut into my feet, leaving bloody prints behind. I clung to the bars with their spear points glinting in front of my wide eyes, daring them to pierce me. The guards, first full of fury, suddenly glazed over with fear and ran down the passage way into the inner palace halls. I watched them go, panting from the sudden

exertion that left my body screaming. I ignored the stabbing in my feet, crossing back over to my pallet of straw where I sank down, head clutched in my hands.

“My daughter...” Rio’s voice resonated from the hole to my right. His hand was held out to me.

“I will cut it off if you don’t pull it back to your side. If you loved me like a daughter, you would not have sacrificed my life...or Roon’s. He’s stuck in there with you too. What did you do to him? Healing powers that age him beyond his years?” I shot back, lifting a foot to pluck a sliver of bowl from my heel. My heart was heavy as I thought of my poor brother, a victim of all of this. The sliver ripped at my skin, twinging in pain, and I heard Roon begin to cry on the other side. It was odd...he had not truly cried since he was five. I kept pulling at the shard in my foot, listening to my parents try to ask him what was wrong with startled voices.

“I can’t, I can’t, it’s too sad,” he stammered through sobs.

The sliver finally came loose and the pain eased. Roon stopped suddenly, as if he’d never been upset. Methodically, I pulled slivers of ceramic from my toes and heels, trying to ignore the mounting pressure in my head and heart. Roon’s tears might as well have dropped salt into my wounds.

After picking at a particularly deep shard, the wails of my brother broke through the mental fog of my stupor. My foot, rubbed raw, throbbed in time with his crying. My father was shouting down the hallway.

“Hello there, anyone? Please, my son is hysterical. He’s gone mad!”

My heart pinched tight inside me at those words; the fighting must have sent him over the edge, and there was nothing I could do to help him. I poured the pitcher of water

over my bleeding foot. As the coolness smoothed over the ragged flesh, easing the pain, his sobs subsided once again. I barely kept from dropping and shattering another ceramic dish as the realization came over me. Placing my thumb against a cut, I pressed down until it seared across my foot, and thought of my father being happy, laughing at our antics in Horeej.

His laughter rang in both cells. I stopped pressing the wound, the pain ebbed, and his chuckling slowly faded into silence. It stretched on and on until I heard him speak, minutes later.

“Layla?”

The guards ran in fear when they should have killed me on the spot. Roon sobbed over the sadness I felt for him. My father...laughing for the first time in over a year. After all this time, I had the power...I just needed the right kind of pain.

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I was fetched after the sun went down and the day's feasts were over. I still owed my end of the bargain for Roon's treatment. My feet had scabbed over and the food gave me renewed strength for the next torture to come. This time, though, I was ready.

The wives dressed me in nothing but a light silk robe and pushed me into his bedroom. Lazarus was already waiting for me, glasses of mead abandoned around the room. His eyes danced in the firelight with a hungry glimmer, watching me walk over to him dutifully. I got into bed with him, which would have been heavenly had he not been next to me. His fingers traced down my body, rough skin catching on the robe in places. Lazarus pulled me on my side to look at him.

“Ready to uphold your part?” he asked, sneering.

“Yes, Chief,” I replied, forcing my body to go limp and closing my eyes. I was tossed on my back again and the robe was ripped open. He climbed on top of me with his hands on my arms so tight, he made them ache. I took advantage of his talon-like grip and thought of sleepiness, of him passing out beside me, trying not to furrow my brow in concentration.

Lazarus yawned unexpectedly—his hands came off my arms and supported himself on the bed. He shook his head, bald and shining in the firelight, squinting at the bottle of mead next to us on the floor, then lowered himself to start kissing my neck. His teeth nipped at my skin, sending rough shivers down my spine, but I turned my face away as he started to pleasure himself, using me as nothing more than another one of his wives. He was far too rough, leaving scratches and teeth marks on my skin; the pain that struck me while he lavished himself made me whimper, and he went harder as if he liked the sound.

After a minute, I started to think of pleasure—a mind-numbing passion that took over his mind. He began grunting, mumbling about my body and how good it felt as I fed the pleasure into his mind through my pain. I eased an arm over the bed, picking up the bottle of mead noiselessly while he worked. He didn’t notice the sweat rolling down my face from the effort. The glass crashed against his head, knocking him off me enough that I could slip from the bed.

I darted through the door, wrapping the robe around my nakedness. Passing through hallways that led into antechambers, through endless rows of bedrooms and dining halls that caused me to backtrack—all I needed was a door that led to the outside world. I would make a dash to Maulia and hide with someone, use my power to sway

them to take me to Horeej. I would climb out of the Rim from there and find a new way to live in peace.

My captivity was against me. I was lost in a matter of minutes inside the sandstone walls.

As I threw open a set of gold-inlaid double doors, I skidded across an enormous chamber: the throne room. An alarm must have been raised. The guards were waiting for me, encircling me until I was once again struggling for my freedom. I tried to will them to free me, to wander off in boredom, but they held me firmly, not painfully.

Lazarus followed them shortly, a cloth held to his bleeding skull. Whether his face was red from pain, drink, or fury, I couldn't tell. His eyes were oddly blank, watching me struggle in my captors' hands with an expression I didn't recognize.

"Romanov, take some men and bring me her family from the east wing," he spoke to one of the guards. "And leave me your spear. I'll have use for it later."

I stopped straining, staring him down with every bit of hatred I had in me.

"You can have it back. I'm done being a useful pet for you. I never stole it; I never wanted it. So take your powers and let me go," I told him, leaning out to him, my neck bared. "Here, take it. Take it!"

He stepped closer and pressed my head down with the butt of the spear, that ridiculous corner upturned on his mouth.

"It's not in your chest, my sweet, but your eyes. Those sickle eyes of yours that always hid the truth. I don't know how, but you kept it from me. A dangerous move, Layla."

“I didn’t hide it; it just happened all of a sudden. I didn’t even know about these powers until today. Just take this away from me. I don’t want them.”

He laughed in his chest, then out loud when my family was tossed through the doorway into the chamber, brought to their knees in front of the chief. They stared wildly about them, fixating on my loosely hanging robe and the blood-soaked cloth against his head.

“I don’t have the power to take it back...that, my sweet Layla, was ripped from me by your loving mama and pa who wanted to make you queen, I’m sure. I told you when I captured you, Layla, that if I found out you lied, I would rip everything thing you love from your life.” He flipped the spear and jabbed the point in the direction of my family.

I could feel the fear and hatred start to soak into my skin, the old pains of the broken incantation taking hold of my nerves with biting fire. For once, it was nothing like what I felt towards my own family—betrayed and terrified. My father turned to me, desperation written into the lines on his face. I knew, even after their deception, that they were just innocents too...

“He’s lying. We wanted you to save this land, Layla. It was never supposed to go wrong. It was a sacrifice for the entire Rim, not just a random bargain of your life.”

“Why didn’t you just leave things alone? We were fine before,” I cried, fighting the helplessness and the aching coursing through my limbs. I felt as though I didn’t have the strength to raise my head knowing what was coming. I’d worked so hard for them to be safe, selling my body in favor of their protection.

“He was growing stronger, choking us out. Once Maulia crumbled, he would’ve just moved to the next city. He’s a parasite,” he said, turning to glare at Lazarus.

“You cursed your daughter, peasant, and have led her down a road of pain,” Lazarus said smoothly, walking over to my father and dragging him to the center of the chamber.

“You have cursed this land,” Rio shouted back.

“You slaughtered your daughter for a greater good that never even existed,” Lazarus replied, taking careful aim with the spear. I began to thrash against the guards, yelling at the men.

“No, no, no! I will serve the rest of my life. Parade me around every day, have me work to the bone, please.” I began butting my head against the armored chests of the guards, causing blood to trickle down my ear, but I couldn’t focus the magic. It was as if I had no will at all, as if Lazarus had built a wall in my mind. My thoughts broke upon the wall, shattering, scattering, picked up by desert wind and cast away into the sky to be snatched by carrion birds—my father was going to die.

“You enslaved an entire kingdom—men, women, children, the old, the you—“

The spear went through Rio’s chest and was yanked back out, blood bursting from the wound. My father toppled over, hands bound behind his back, coughing blood and twitching. For a brief moment, I convulsed with him, pain tearing me apart as if I were a marionette being pulled in all directions. My mouth stretched open in a silent scream, eyes bulging while Rio gasped for air. I had never been so near the emotions of a dying man. His life slipped from him and my scream gained voice; I threw myself toward my family only to be caught by the hair and yanked to my knees.

Lazarus snapped the spear in half and threw it away, moving to sit on his throne.

“This is what happens when you take what is mine. You will make me a god in this land and beyond, or watch your family die in the slowest way possible.”

The bloody weapon skidded to a stop inches from my hand. When I fell, I shut my eyes to erase the image of my fallen father, but the scene seared my memory, the burning on my scalp a permanent brand where my hair had been pulled out. I could see starberries, rotten on the ground where I had dropped them on the day we were taken from the bushes by armored men, and the people of Maulia, not realizing their gut-wrenching hunger for real life, living in the washed-down dirt from the palace. All because of one man. They beat at the wall in my head, and the berries burrowed in the dirt, thrusting long vines up and over, tearing at the stones. My mind was freed to do as I wished, all the fear and fury settling into one purpose. I knew it would work this time.

I raised my eyes to look at Roon. His face had changed into a permanent look of horror, hardened and scarred by the death of his hero. He would never be the same. My mother was not looking at any one but me. Our eyes met—understanding passed between us for the first time since we had been stolen from Horeej.

“You told me you had Wise woman blood in you. Better make it count this time,” I said, my voice coming out hard and grizzled. I made a snatch at the discarded spear, picking it up and driving it into my forearm. With a cry gurgling in my throat, I turned my mind to the guards and sent them scrambling away in fear.

Lazarus could only stare at me as I rose and stepped towards him, trailing blood along his marble floor with the spear shaft sticking out of my arm like a new limb. He looked as though he wanted to run for one of the exits, but before he could even take the

first step, I grabbed hold of his mind with my own. There was fear there, far behind his pomp and pride. I pulled it forward and stretched it out, blanketing his thoughts with the blackness of his own soul. He stood trembling with his fear that I increased until it was all he could see.

“Layla...stop...stop this!” he stammered.

I didn't know what he saw in his mind, but I ripped the spear from my arm and dug in again, pushing his terror higher and higher. My vision hazed over and my mind flickered in and out of tune to his pleading.

“I...chief...powers...STOP.”

I ignored the random words that filtered in past my concentration. As my blood rolled off my fingertips, I conjured unspeakable fear in his mind—perhaps death clawed towards him, rattling knives across his bedchamber, or rain made of fire consumed and boiled his flesh. His hands began flapping about, swatting at some unknown evil, and his pleas turned into incoherent yelling. With each mounting infliction on my arm, I drove him steadily into madness. I left no pocket of his mind sane. I took each emotion and raked claws over them until Lazarus fell to the floor, convulsing and foaming at the mouth, his shouts turning into throat-tearing screams.

I staggered over to my mother, cutting her hands free. She took the spear from me while I struggled to stop the bleeding in my arm, stepped over to the Chief, and pierced him through the heart.

The room fell silent except for the slow drip of blood.

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*It is Procession Day.*

I carried a deep fishing basket with a leather strap attached to the handles, slung across my chest with my left arm wrapped loosely around the woven reeds. Star-like scars peppered my tan skin like freckles stretched white across the bone. Each twist of my wrist or fingers made my scars erupt in searing pain, the price of old sorcery, but I thank the gods I didn't lose my arm completely...or worse. The ever-present Maulian wind caught the scalloped folds of my dress, which was a simple yellow garment belted at my waist, and whipped the hem around my ankles. The only adornment I chose to carry was a spear head fashioned into a necklace that hung between my breasts, hidden from prying eyes.

Two parallel lines of servants stretched out before me, dressed as simply as I was, holding similar baskets. We walked slowly across the sand and stone; there were no elephants, stallions, or tigers roaring to announce our coming. If there were dancers, they were dressed as commoners and carrying loaves of bread instead of sugared sweets. Our procession stretched across the miles of desert between the city and palace—my mother and brother were at the lead, having already passed through the city gates. I stood nestled between people I had never met before although I'm sure I'd seen their faces in the palace halls. Except the medic, of course, who carried sacks of meal behind me. He liked to keep an eye on my condition.

It was several minutes before I heard them. The people of Maulia were crying out—laughter, praises, shouts of joy at the gifts we brought. By the time I reached the gates, the largest procession crowd I'd ever seen clogged the streets with make-shift sacks, even using aprons and shirts, accepting our offers of bread, packages of preserved meats, bundles of vegetables, salt, healing herbs, and blankets for the coming winter.

A boy, no older than ten, met my gaze. I immediately stepped out of line to approach him, his pale green eyes hardly trusting the food he saw around him. I had no fear of anyone recognizing me; they'd only seen my face painted with colors and had never been close enough to see my silver eyes. He stared at my basket, trying his best not to give into his curiosity to peek over the side.

“Come here. I have something you will like,” I called to him.

The boy was shoved forward by his mother, who beamed at me with an ignorant smile. They did not know who gave them this bounty; they did not know who I was or why I was the only one not carrying her basket with the strength of her arms. No one did and they wouldn't. The spells of the past were finally broken, and people only wanted to move forward from the past ordeals.

My scars were the only parts of me that seared with their hidden sorrows. Somehow, I had redirected and confined the pain to the part of me that helped drive Lazarus mad. Miyaun told me it was old magic and that it works in ways we don't always expect. At least this time it worked in my favor; an arm was far better than my entire being. I did not want to be a goddess or queen to the people. If they asked about the scars, I would tell them I was in a mining accident. My life would now be my own. I toyed with the thought of returning to Horeej but part of me wanted to see the city flourish again.

I crouched into the dust to give the boy a better look.

“Berries,” he shouted, running back into the crowd. A moment later a cloud of children, gaunt faces hungry for fruit they'd never had in their lives, engulfed me while

handfuls of starberries poured from my fingers like the water from their wells. Every little face was soon stained purple.

I gave them all I could, and when my basket ran dry, I shouldered another from the wagons being pulled at the very end of the line and gave them more.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE LAND BEYOND

My brother stood out front in the water, legs anchored by a rock he kept between his calves. The river gushed through the weathered hole in the wall, one of two places where the outside world touched our lives. He had plunged in only minutes before, and his hair was plastered to his forehead and shoulders.

“Another log,” he shouted at me. “Looks like a big one. I’ll need your help.”

His words passed over me. I squatted in the dirt, back braced against the sled, craning my neck up to where lines of black and bright blue converged. My imagination toyed with what could be on the other side. Nothing peeked over the high lip of the obsidian stone, not even a tree branch.

“Ommen?” Kendu called as the log burst through the hole.

It was five feet long and much thicker than his head. Kendu caught its tail end, digging his fingers into the bark. I didn’t hear him calling me, didn’t see him try to swing the massive log in my direction. My eyes were still upturned to the sky, throwing a hook into the clouds and swinging over. Rushing water was blowing wind.

Only his yelp as he was dragged off his anchor caught my attention. The other boys splashed aside as he and the log shot down the river, Kendu still clinging to the end of it. Scrabbling in the dirt, their laughter turned my stomach when I went after him.

I caught up quickly, my long legs carrying me half a mile downstream. He had snagged on some rocks and was fighting up the muddy bank with the log in tow.

“Sorry,” I panted, splashing into the water myself to take the other end. After a few pulls, the wood squelched free.

“You’ve got to focus,” he said, heaving his end onto his shoulder when I cleared the water. His voice had taken on a gravelly tone—he was upset.

“I know, I know.”

He didn’t speak to me again until we set out for home with the sled.

“Let me take a strap today, Kendu,” I said. He shook his head.

“I’ve got it.”

“But I want to make it up to you.”

Finally, Kendu peered over at me with hardness in his eyes.

“Make it up to me by being a champion, Ommen,” he told me. I ground my teeth and walked a little more quickly. That was easier said than done.

“I’ve got two more years.”

“That’s not what I mean. Let’s stop a moment. I need to dry off. The ladies will be all over me if I go into the village looking like this,” he motioned to his green shirt, which had melded over his abs and biceps from the water. We smirked and lay down in a sunny patch of long grass with our arms thrown over our eyes, the brown stalks crunching under our backs.

“Seriously, Ommen. It’s hard enough to live here with the current champions spread so thin. Families depend on us to help survive. We have to reach the top.”

“You do,” I told him. I didn’t have to look back to know that the Tower hovered from behind us, watching every person in the village with a black, stony stare.

“Everyone needs you just as much as they need me.”

“No, they don’t, Kendu. Quit being so righteous,” I said, whacking him with a long-stemmed weed. “The whole village knows you’ll reach the top and be given passage. Even if I did, what could I give this place in return that they can’t get from you?”

“Muscles don’t mean everything. I can throw stones and wield an axe with the best of them, but the gods know who we really are. They know our hearts. Maybe they have a surprise waiting for you. You could surprise everyone.”

“Even you?” I asked, but he stayed silent. That was enough of an answer for me.

I started digging my thumb into the dry dirt at the mention of the gods. The idea that I would be a champion was doubtful at best, stupid at worst. Kendu was so gullible, lapping up the old stories the elders swapped around the evening fires. The gods *this*, the gods *that*, and oh, ‘come hear the word of the gods, Ommen.’ It was easy for him to praise the ever-quiet deities of our ancestors.

“They’ve given you everything Kendu, except freedom. Maybe the rest of us need to be here, but you? The gods should just open the wall up for you.”

“Shut it. You know they listen. What are you trying to do, get us killed before we even get to the trials?”

“Stop,” I told him, raising up on one arm to look at him. “Just stop with the good-boy act. Look at us.”

He remained still, arm still cast over his eyes. I grabbed hold and yanked it away, forcing him to turn his head. Kendu's face softened—I guess I had a wild, wide-eyed look about me.

“Look at us! They don't even call us brothers,” I urged him.

He was shorter than I was but stout, his face seemingly chiseled from the very stone plateau we lived on. His eyes were as dark as his hair. Women watched him pass every day. Men hailed and welcomed him as a friend even though he wasn't of age. My frame was too thin, my fingers clumsy. I had none of his physical prowess and even less interest in the state of our village. Our parents counseled with Kendu but sent me away.

“Ommen, we are brothers. No one else matters. If I cared for them, do you think I'd still be saving that skinny butt of yours every time you got in trouble?”

He laughed when I punched his arm, a weak attempt to fit in with the other boys. They had wrestling matches almost daily, which Kendu usually had to rescue me from. But I sat up and slumped over my bony knees, muffling my voice.

“I'm going to be stuck here forever, scratching pictures on the wall. I'm going mad. No one gets it, not even you. Everyone is just so... numb.”

“We've been here for decades. What else can we be, if not entirely happy?”  
Kendu asked.

I shrugged and made a noncommittal sound. I never could come up with an answer. There was just something about me, a restlessness, borderline aggressive, which kept me in a constant state of misery. The lot I drew at birth was not favorable, and the village struggled more every day to live.

“Just stop including me in this, Kendu. I’m Windbag, remember? Always looking up. Always dreaming.”

“Windbag just means you’ll float up the Tower rather than climb it. All brains, no sweat. The gods may have judged us harshly, but they at least gave us a fighting chance. We’ll get outside this place,” he told me.

“And if I don’t make it?” I asked, getting to my feet and seizing the straps. The sled grated against a patch of stone slowly as if to laugh at my circumstance.

“Don’t worry. You will. If not, I’ll tell you all about it,” Kendu said, standing and giving the sled a quick shove forward.

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*One Year Later*

“Ommen.”

I lay with my back to the open room, eyes closed and forehead leaned against the wall. The chink of a pickaxe echoed every few seconds through a pinprick hole at the bottom seam.

“Ommen, wake up.”

Mother mistook me—sleep was hard to come by now. Rather, I settled into black quietness where my mind rested, not my body. I could feel the heat behind me that turned my neck and shoulders red from our cooking fire. My hands shook a little at the thought of the day’s work.

The pickaxe stopped. Moments later, my blanket was ripped off my body.

“Get up.”

I was turned over forcibly, my father's dark hands already coated in a gray powder. He frowned down at me, the axe held slightly aloft as if ready to dig it into my chest, but his eyes stayed vacant of his usual fiery stare. Mother was standing behind him, her hands kneading rough dough for our noonday meal.

Mother quickly stepped to me and held out a loose, light-green shirt rather than my usual tan wrap that had become so threadbare that the elbows had holes.

“Wear this one now. I've finished patching it the best I could,” she said.

Pulling it on, I looked down at myself. The cloth hung in large folds around me as well as giving my arms the appearance of wings. Strings dangled from my waist and wrists. Cinching up each hem, the shirt still looked like a sack. It was an airy fabric, offering little protection from the wind or bright sun. I wouldn't be able to fill the shirt out even if I hauled stones for years, but I knew exactly who could've. It was unnerving knowing he'd worn this shirt.

“This isn't mine. I shouldn't be wearing his clothes,” I spoke, the crackling of the fire almost drowning out my voice.

“You don't have a choice. Go to the river mouth. We need to replenish our wood, then go to the village center. See if you can't barter for food. Beans, roots, flour, anything,” said Father without looking at me.

“What do I barter with?”

“Your time.” He took a deep breath, casting one last glance behind him to make sure my feet hit the floor, then resumed loud, frenzied tapping at a stone from behind the hut.

There were strips of cured meat in an earthen bowl beside my pallet, the last of what had been some sort of bird one of the champions returned with. My parents had always given their meat to Kendu to make him strong. They wasted little on me before—I was born too scrawny and too wild. Now we all worked long hours, and I had to complete my trial within the year. Leaving the food where it lay, I exited the hut, my stomach turning from the thought.

Father didn't look at me while I gathered the straps of our crude sled, a set of rough boards bound together with a few nails and animal hide. Snatching the axe out of the corner of our lean-to, I passed him wordlessly, the pickaxe still beating at a chunk of stone that he intended to make repairs with. Several of the surrounding huts were crumbling. Even if I could rebuild the entire village in a day, I wouldn't gain his love.

The sled scraped along the rocky plateau mingling with the other village noises. Neighbors hailed each other tiredly as they passed on their daily business. The women gossiped as they gathered up their wash and made their way to the gentlest section of the river west of our camp. Above it all rang the continuous sound of rock, clanging, clanking, ringing in the air, a callous hollow noise that intensified as several other boys pulled their wood sleds along to the eastern end of the river mouth. And off to the north, the pinnacle of our community, stood the Tower. Not that long ago, I had studied the structure in every way I could without going near it. Black and smooth, practically a giant sundial at the center of our village, it was stacked so that anyone who reached the top could look out over the wall. Its cylindrical surface was dotted by thick, long pegs, as if someone had driven spears into it with both ends sticking out. The pegs could be moved in and out—a handhold existed one moment and vanished the next. Some were closely

grouped. Others were just out of arm's reach. I was convinced, no matter what history said, that it was not made of rock. No rock moved that way. No human could have built it.

I entered the shadow of the wall, cooling the sweat that was already forming on my forehead from the morning sun. The wall hung over us as well, an unmeasurable height by our means, as solidly black and gleaming as the Tower. Night liked to cling along its winding path, and we worked in semi-darkness for much of the morning.

As I approached, the other boys were lining up their sleds in a row. I pulled up last in line, my hands already reddening from the texture of the leather. Younger boys and some girls stayed back with the sleds watching their brothers at work and learning the routine. I had not spent much time with Kendu here. I never really had to.

With my brother, I rarely needed to pull the sled. He would pull me from the bed in the mornings, ready for the day's chores, and drag me to the back of the hut often before our parents were even awake. Kendu insisted I sleep in the sled on the way there. He called it a warm up. Neither of us complained.

He never mentioned how icy the water felt waist-deep. A couple boys sent smirks my way when they heard me gasp, and I gritted my teeth from making any more noise. Sunk in the river behind the rest of the group, I was determined not to embarrass myself any further. But we all turned our focus to the river mouth. Hard summer months were forcing us to abandon any childish rivalries.

I dug my toes into the silt below to anchor myself against the tugging current. Our champions, the few that were left, wouldn't tell us where the wood came from. It was forbidden for them to talk about the outside lands. So we waited for the first branches to

approach, fishing them out and filling our sleds one by one. My legs grew numb waiting for my chance at the wood. The others didn't often miss any, but when they did, I stretched out my long arms and caught it by the bark, tossing it in front of my sled to be loaded later.

The sun had hit my shoulders when I could finally pull myself from the river. I was last again, the other boys specks in the distance. The wood was slim today. I had only gotten three good logs before my body couldn't take it anymore, the sled otherwise loaded down with wet twigs that looked like some spiny creature. Just imagining my father's reaction made my hair stand on end. He'd scowl at the pickings and make some remark about how Kendu had been the best son. How he'd do anything to get him back.

As I walked by a section of the wall, one of our champions passed by, sent on another emergency hunting trip probably. He stared straight ahead paying no more attention to me than if I were a stalk of grass. About a quarter of the way to the village, my strength was failing. The leather bit down to the bone on my shoulder, and my skinny legs dragged clumsily from their dip in the river. Knowing I'd never catch up to the others, I stopped to watch him.

His name escaped me—Tarot...Tair...something like that. I didn't need his name to know that he wrestled with Kendu in the evenings. My fingers bit into my palms while he reached out to the wall, placing both palms against the surface until the rock melted in front of him, forming a hole large enough to pass through. He didn't linger long enough for me to see outside, and as the rock sealed shut again, I took hold of a branch of wood, throwing it against the wall where it broke in two. If I had just one chance to leave, I would run as far as possible from this forsaken hole. Often, they left in groups with sleds

loaded with goods, returning from another village with different ones. They took vows of silence about their experiences forced upon them by the gods, but we didn't need them to tell us anything. They came back empty-handed enough for us to feel the squeeze of a higher power forcing the life out of us.

A figure emerged out of the grass several paces in front of me. The village hermit, a slightly hunched man that wore animal skins during every season and kept his gray hair slicked back from his forehead, approached me. I jerked the sled into motion to meet him.

"You didn't show up for your lessons today," he said, crossing his arms.

"I haven't been to my lessons in months," I reminded him. He fell in step beside me.

"The other boys have already returned for noonday meal."

My teeth clicked together so fast that I bit the tip of my tongue, cutting off my reply before I made the old man angry.

"What do you think they'll do after they eat?" asked Maroon.

"What everyone else in this village does I suppose. Repair stone. Chop wood. Haul water. Train for the trials."

"Only speculation, right? But at the rate you're going, you won't be back before sundown," he said, laughing. "A lesson in time, perhaps?"

"Father and Mother handle it alright. I'll do better," I said, trying to shut him up.

"Sure, sure. They can handle the chores, but your training is," Maroon said, nodding towards the enormous, limp shirt hanging around my hips, "disproportionate."

I closed my eyes and continued to walk while he spoke, letting his voice fade out. The air smelled sharp from the scorched grass, a hint of smokiness that lingered on my

tongue. Heat had driven all creatures into hiding, and the silence pressed at my mouth and ears, trying to suffocate me from the inside out.

“Well, you’ve obviously not heard anything,” Maroon told me, slapping me on the back. I jumped, seeing I was in the middle of the village square. How I’d spaced out that much, I didn’t know. A couple of people had stopped their work to stare at me. Others were laughing while they went about mending their homes, but it rang hollow.

“You passed your house up, son.” Maroon jerked his thumb behind him and then bent over laughing. “That’s what happens when you don’t show up for lessons.”

My whole body went hot and sweat pricked my palms. I jerked the sled around, dragged it home, and began unloading the wood beside the lean-to. The hermit went towards the plain again, nodding at me as if he had a secret. I would have to meet him eventually today.

Father watched me stack branches on the ground. “This is all you could get?”

“The other boys came before me. It got late.”

“There can be no excuses in this family, Ommen,” he said, kicking the small stack of wood. Bark chipped off and flew into the air. “You have a role to fill now. Step it up or we won’t survive the summer. Kendu knew how it was.”

I sagged with tiredness and closed my eyes again to block out his reddening face. It was the same old talk he gave me every week. Perhaps I was worse off than anyone here. I searched my memory for what I’d done the past few days and came up with huge gaps of emptiness. Kendu’s face hovered on the edge of memory as well. He came to me in nightmares when I collapsed at night, face streaked in blood and eyes blacked out, a perfect mirror to the Tower.

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A rare storm had slid over the high steely wall of the village's horizons during the trials that year. The families of the competing children were given seats on the flat stones nearest to the Tower while the rest of the villagers crowded together in a circle. We waited in the rain, feet sinking into the mud and hair dripping in our upturned eyes that stared at the foreboding structure. I could hardly sit still for all the tension. The favored son...no, the favored man of the entire village was finally about to reach the pinnacle of his success.

The elders had burned herbs and blood outside our home to bless Kendu's trial, blundering through murmured rites that were supposed to strengthen him. Their memories were growing thin, eroding away into flakes and carried off by the wind. They prophesied about the gods and watched over our growing warriors, waiting to see what fate came over the village. As was custom, every seventeen-year-old gathered to attempt the climb when the grass turned golden brown in the fall.

Kendu stepped from side to side, keeping his feet from sinking into the ground. Another boy, Yame, waited beside him so close to the Tower his nose almost touched. We all knew the drill by now. Zurro, the youngest of the elders, his graying hair plastered over his shoulders, stood watch over the trials. Lightning arced across the sky, sending tendrils dancing around our heads, and the moan of a horn signaled the beginning.

Both boys began scrambling up the pegs, swinging across, pulling themselves up despite the downpour. No matter what, the Tower commanded our entire purpose. We worshipped around it and gave thanks for its watchful eye. We trained, nearly from birth, to climb it and prove we were worthy of the gods. It was said that those who reached the

top were granted visions. They had permission to leave the village, some searching out lands they had witnessed beyond the wall and others acting as traders and hunters for us. Most failed and remained here. Too many died. Every boy, crippled or strong, had to make the climb at the peak of his life.

Yame was ahead of Kendu, his lighter frame making him more flexible. Kendu had trained endlessly though. He was one of the strongest boys in the entire village, muscles large enough to lift tree trunks. My brother would catch up. He would win, and his strength would take him far, beyond the river and plains.

That's what my father had told Kendu every day while he chopped wood and made our house stronger with millet stalks from the field, stones from around the wall, and timbers from the river. While I played in the high grass and snuck away from chores, Kendu rose in my family's affections as the one who would finally get over the wall. He went around to our neighbors to offer help, even to Maroon, who only spoke to me about his ridiculous fancies of the outside world. While we talked freely of imagined land, the rest of the village remained hushed with the shame of their past failures.

Through the rain, I saw Kendu pause on a long rod, both feet planted firmly. Bending his knees, he surged upward, taking a leap to an awaiting peg that made him level with Yame. We all tensed watching him swing by his hands on the rain-drenched pole. The force of his jump caused the peg to move inward, shoving its length out on Yame's side of the Tower. It drove into Yame's stomach, causing him to jerk backward and lose his grip. He fell a few short feet before he managed to tangle his limbs into a network of pegs, then lay stunned.

Kendu didn't seem to know what he'd done. He clawed up the Tower faster than before, the wind screaming at his heels. I wondered if the Tower swayed despite its thick, fortified surface. The higher he went, the harder it became to see him. Mist was heavy around us with only patches of the Tower clear, and its black surface melded with the darkened sky perfectly. At times, it was as if Kendu were swimming in the clouds, racing them to their next destination.

Moments went without his being seen. Lightning sliced through the air again, and there he was, standing aloft us all at the top, fist raised high in salute. I jumped to my feet only to be yanked down again by my father, who shook his head, a mixture of pride and anger in his eyes. I felt more eyes on me, turning to see Yame's family, particularly his siblings, glaring at my celebration. I'd broken custom, but it was worth it to see my brother's triumph. Even the gods of the storms heralded his ascent on the Tower, crackling the air with bright yellow sparks.

Kendu turned away from us to gaze beyond the wall. The mist swallowed him again as he moved across the top, and seconds ticked by in which we all sat wondering what he saw, if anything. This certainly wasn't the best weather to look out over the wall. The air grew sticky and sharp, making my hair stand on end. I could feel something stirring in the atmosphere. Probing the Tower top for any hint of my brother, my nerves got the best of me and I stood. No one had remained so long up there.

White lightning shot down into the Tower, illuminating ghastly shapes that resembled nothing more than misshapen clouds and one small figure standing among the greatness of the storm. A gust of wind caught his swaying body. My brother fell far more quickly than he had risen, splashing face down and eagle-spread in the ankle-deep mud.

His braided black hair was singed away, the top of his head broken open and blood thinning into puddles, but his face was caught in a permanent expression of awe. Peals of thunder drowned out my screams.

Yame had just gotten off the Tower before the lightning struck. The force had knocked him over. Raising his eyes out of the mud, he stared directly into Kendu's shattered face and immediately turned away, retching at the sight.

No one moved among the families. I looked around to see if anyone were going to help them, but they stared at their feet, including my own parents. Mother wept silently while Father held his clenched fists against his breast. It was custom not to interfere with the trials, but it wasn't good enough for me. He deserved more honor than any of them combined.

So I stood, jumping aside to avoid my father's swift hand, and went to him. It wasn't supposed to be this way. He was the champion of the town, hero of my family, warrior of my own heart. What did the gods find displeasing? My own body felt as if I had taken in the lightning that had hit him, stored it in my limbs, and left it vibrating through my skin.

I heaved his torso into my lap and set about wiping the mud off his cracked face, blackened even more than the sun had ever done. My family came forward to try to pull me away.

"You do not honor him this way, Ommen," my mother choked out, hands on my shoulders.

I stood, lifting Kendu's upper half, and dragged his massive frame a foot from his resting place before his weight left my feet sliding in the mud.

“Help me move him. If you loved him, help me,” I said, barely standing with him in my arms. The wind tore at my lips while his blood fell in great drops down my hands.

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“Are you listening, boy?” My father’s voice rattled me enough for me to open my eyes again.

“If you were talking about how much I suck compared to my brother, then no. I’ve heard that enough to have it memorized,” I said, aggravated. He was coarse and unrelenting about my faults and failures. Father blamed me—he didn’t have to say it out loud. Everyone knew he blamed me.

“You’d better pray to the gods you get up that Tower,” he spat at me. “You fail, you are out of this house. You won’t waste our time and food again. Get out of here and finish your chores.”

I didn’t have the will anymore to lash back out at him. Part of me felt like a waste of space. The other half? It had seemingly shriveled and died with Kendu. I no longer thought about what sat outside our reach. The gods were distant beings whose final judgement-call on my life I could already guess.

Walking away from my house, my steps took me outside our chief’s hut. Several elders had gathered inside.

“Wen has not returned for a week now. We have to assume he’s dead,” someone said in a voice thick with sorrow.

“That brings us down to...three champions,” said Zurro. I could recognize his booming voice in any crowd.

“Not a lot to go on until the fall.”

“Double your prayers. Spread the word across the village.” A fist pounded into something. “We must produce more champions this season. Watch the boys and make sure they are well fed.”

I stood to the side while men filed out. Most of them gave me an odd sort of glare—a knowing look that I would be another failure on top of many for the village to tend to.

“Did you need something, Ommen?” Zurro asked. He had followed the elders to the door and was now waiting with a semblance of patience.

“I came to ask the same, sir. Can I help you in any way? In exchange for food?”

He shook his head, mumbled something under his breath that sounded like ‘knock down that wall,’ and took a seat beside his fire.

“I can’t spare any. I’m sorry. My own sons need to eat.”

I didn’t say anything but stayed by the door. My mind turned over once, twice, and I was left wondering why we were in this predicament.

“Has anyone just climbed the Tower at any point in life?” I asked him.

Zurro flinched and said, “That’s blasphemy, Ommen. Haven’t you reaped enough curses upon your family?”

“It was a simple question,” I said, my anger flaming back up quickly. Did no one think outside this small realm we were stuck in?

“Your kind of help is not needed,” Zurro said, and I took his cold tone as a cue to leave.

Instead of advancing to other neighbors and offering services that, clearly, no one would take, I walked out to the plains. As if sensing my approach, Maroon popped up

from the grass in his furs and met me on the outskirts of the village. We sat on two slabs of sheet rock, bits of it crumbling under our toes. The long shadow of the Tower arced over us.

“Looks like you’ll be needing these ‘lessons’ more than ever with your trial coming up.”

“None of them are fooled, you know,” I said. “They know you aren’t training me. Just whisking me away to pick my brain and get me out of their hair. They are ashamed.”

“Kendu knew that getting you away from this,” Maroon waved towards the village, “would help clear your mind. He knew this life didn’t suit you.”

“He was a good man,” he continued. “A good man but not a great one.”

I turned my head so fast my neck cracked.

“He treated you with respect and aided you when you needed it. My brother was the best of men here,” I said, growling at the hermit.

“Your brother was kind beyond any I’ve seen, yes. He might have made a good chief. But the gods obviously didn’t approve, did they?” he asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Do not talk about the gods! Kendu was the strongest, and they just—” I stopped.

“Strong in body but not in mind, Ommen. I have a hunch about the gods. I have come to believe that they seek many things in their champions,” Maroon said. “Strength, yes. What kind, I cannot be sure, but I suspect it is what’s in your head that counts.”

“Kendu was loyal to our village, our life, and the gods,” I pointed out. “That explains nothing.”

“He followed. Kendu was many things. Independent was not one of them, I think. Followers do not make champions.”

I stood up, scraping my legs on the stone, and began to walk away.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m not going to listen anymore. I don’t care what you think about my brother or the gods. He wasn’t a mindless person. He was just as smart as me.”

“He was not like you. Quit fooling yourself. You may have been brothers, close ones at that, but you two were very different,” Maroon said, catching up beside me.

Memories that had been half-hidden in my brain now passed over me. Kendu wrestling me to the ground, racing around the wall, powering through our daily lives with complete cheerfulness. He came to me to discuss our family, how to talk to the girls in the village, the best way to climb the Tower.

The hermit’s hand took hold of my arm. I jerked away and seized him by his fur vest.

“Why did he have to die?” I yelled, more at the air than Maroon.

“Why don’t you ask the gods yourself?” said Maroon, nodding his head to the Tower behind me. I had accidently led us to the clearing, but I kept my eyes off the ground. The rain might have washed his blood away, but it wasn’t enough to keep me from feeling sick.

“You’re nuts. The whole village says so. It’s forbidden until my trial.”

“By who?”

“The gods.”

“You’ve already questioned the gods a hundred times over, and you’re still standing.” Maroon gave me a shove towards the Tower. “No one is around.”

Peering up at the Tower, I felt the electricity under my skin, drawing me into the blackness of its surface. Kendu called to me, begged me in my bones to find out the mysteries of his death. After all this time, I needed to know why, and then maybe I'd feel whole again. The poles jutted out as knives claiming too many lives of good people. Too much blood sat just beneath the soil for no reason than to please deities we commoners had never seen nor heard. It all had to be a mistake. But the gods weren't supposed to make mistakes.

“Remember, strength is not the issue. From the way you grabbed me back there, I'd say you'll do fine,” Maroon spoke.

Villagers avoided the Tower clearing like an unwanted child, only approaching when the trials began. I was free to climb whether they approved or not. The first poles were at knee height, the hand holds easily within my reach. I touched a peg hesitantly, running a hand over the rough surface, and gave it a push. The long peg ground against the stone and barely moved. I expected that. My face was reflected back at me as I began ascending the Tower—sharp cheekbones, lined forehead from all the frowning, and wide, terrified eyes. I turned my face to the sky. I'd had enough of fear. This was for my brother.

Wind began to batter me the higher I climbed with the poles spacing erratically. But Maroon was right; I had watched dozens of trials and knew the best route. With my body pulled close to the surface, I crawled along, resting for periods before stretching out my hands to pull up another foot. Perhaps in the heat of the moment, the competitors didn't feel the length of the Tower, but it went on forever until my body shook from exhaustion. It was a mistake to come here after hauling wood. Had the weather been

anything but perfect, I would have fallen to my death, and even with my path unhindered, I slipped near the top. The sun was setting by the time I pushed myself on top of the peak, my hands and feet bleeding from the rough poles.

Our elders were right. The Tower was just high enough to peek over the wall. I spotted the river and followed its path from where we gathered wood, over a plain, and into a huge expanse of trees. Beyond, something glittered in the sun, a blinding white line that stretched from one end of the land to the other. Turning around, I watched the river dip down over waterfalls that my ancestors supposedly walked past to get here. Another golden plain filled the landscape with black dots that might have been villages.

“You’ve finally come to us.”

No one was with me. Voices thrummed through the air, male and female. My vision blurred so that I could no longer make out the lands over the wall.

“We’ve waited for one like you. A champion that would lead our people.”

“I didn’t come here to be a champion. Why did you kill my brother?” I shouted over the wind.

The stone under my feet shifted, throwing me to my knees.

“You are so young, Ommen, but you are brave. Intelligent,” a feminine voice whispered in my ear. Something light brushed over my cheek.

“Kendu was remarkable in many ways. We do not need more warriors though. We need leaders, thinkers. Your people have bred complacency.”

“He didn’t have to die,” I said, pounding my fists into the stone. “Do you hear me?”

“We know your pain, child,” the voices continued. “We offer you peace instead. Kendu is very proud of you. He will smile down on you forever.”

I caught a sob in my throat as my eyes grew hot with tears. I would not let them fall.

“You didn’t give him a chance,” I said with my head down.

There was a pause when the voices fell into whispers, mingling with the whistling of the wind.

“We will give you both a chance for one last reunion,” the voices spoke.

Tendrils of the clouds above began to spiral down over the Tower. Soon, I could not see the ground below, the sky, or even my own feet. Before me, the fog thickened into a figure, sharpening until my brother stood bright and strong as if we were on the ground in broad daylight. He was grinning and reached out a hand to lift me up. My fingers passed through the fog that had brought him to me.

“I’m sorry,” I choked out. “You of all people had a chance. I didn’t know, but I should have. I was supposed to have your back.”

Kendu still smiled and shook his head. The gods had left his voice above.

My mind felt as if it were being shredded by claws, and before I knew what I was doing, I asked, “Are you happy?”

He nodded, held his fist in the air, and disappeared. The voices returned; I could feel their presence.

“Why won’t you free our people?” I asked them.

“Your friend down there is very observant. We’d like to see him. Many of these people are content within the safety of the wall. Their views of us are skewed, but only

our champions can make them see differently without calling on us for aid. People must have change in their hearts and minds, not in rituals.”

“They will never listen to me,” I yelled.

“Perhaps not. Perhaps they are not ready for change, but someday they will be. You, however, are free to leave. We cannot ask you to stay, oppressed. The choice is yours, of course. The outer lands go much farther than you can see, Ommen. There you may lead in better peace.”

The winds gusted under my arms, lifting me up. The anger and pain I’d felt was drawn from my body. For a second, I caught a glimpse of someone, a glinting face carved from stone and purple eyes. It passed a slender hand over my forehead. Whatever the gods did, my mind felt more whole and free than I’d ever felt on the ground, and I knew they were right.

“Remember and go,” they said. The fog lifted slowly as the wind died down into soft breezes. I blinked sun spots out of my eyes, resting for a while at the top of the Tower. Quieting my thoughts, I was drawn to the white line of the western horizon where the sky blazed orange and red above from the setting sun. Very suddenly, I had the sensation of gently falling into the kind of slumber only divinity can give—soft and all at once.

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When I woke to find Maroon’s bearded face rearing over me, I yelped and rolled off his lap into the mud.

“Dear gods, you’re alive!”

“Well, yeah,” I said, hesitating. My last memories *were* at the top of the Tower. My tongue fumbled for other words, too parched to speak fully. Maroon offered me a water skin.

“You fell just like your brother. I thought your family was cursed for sure,” he said, looking a little more distant than usual.

“I didn’t have the strength to climb down anyway, so I guess I should be thankful they kept me from harm,” I said after gulping down all of his water.

“So...”

“So I think I’m going to leave.”

“Right now?” Maroon looked even more startled than he did when I woke.

I nodded.

“All my questions lie outside the wall now. Nothing is left here for me.”

“Will you come back like the other champions?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. At any rate, it won’t be for a while. Take care and don’t go near my father.”

I left him standing at the base.

The villagers didn’t know what I’d done. They sat around their campfires eating bread and soup, swapping stories of their ancestors. Children scuffled in the dirt. Someone, one of the boys from the river probably, shouted Windbag at me. They were truly blind if they could not see the fog swathing around the top of the Tower while I was up there, and I felt nothing for them, not even pity.

Entering our hut, my father rose and went to backhand me across the face. I dodged him and grabbed a threadbare cloak out of a basket.

“You useless child! Nothing, nothing got done today. We will die within the week if you keep this up,” Father spat at me.

“Stop, I’m leaving,” I told him. Ripping a square out of one of my blankets, I went through the hut and took portions of bread, tying it up into a bundle.

“Where are you going? You can’t leave. We’ll starve without that food,” Father said, trying to grab the bundle away. Mother watched us in terror.

“You’ll get help from the others,” I said, ducking out the entrance and walking towards the river mouth.

“You won’t get far. We will find you, Ommen,” he said, standing at the front of the hut, but my mind was already on that white horizon.

With the river murmuring in my ears, I reached the wall and pressed my palms against the smooth stone unconsciously. Scraping from the inside, the wall split in two and formed a hole big enough for me to pass. Night had settled deeply with nothing but a sliver of moon to guide my steps, but I walked along the river listening to the world speak around me, eager for dawn.

## CHAPTER 5

### PRINCE OF CHAOS

The sky rained sparks upon our heads, streaks of scarlet, yellow, and blue trailing down the sky at the midnight hour. I leaned outside on a hotel balcony, an old historic place left standing in Paris, resting on the low rail watching bursts of color break chunks off the clouds. Even the crescent moon was framed by each explosion, eroding, weary.

Flakes of ash settled on my upturned face and hair. The streets snapped with firecracker-like explosions; small meteors with colored tails spun out of the residual ether until they shattered against the ground, lighting fires everywhere. The air was blurring with smoke, turning scarlet.

Something else fell from the sky, a small drop of liquid plopping onto the rail beside my hand. It continued its descent, sizzling through the metal and leaving a hole the size of a dime in the wrought iron.

I heard the noise again, this time looking down at my wrist. Red liquid drilled a hole into my flesh, except I wasn't the type of person to be bothered by it. My skin knit back together as boiling blood began to fall from the sky, eating through every surface. Scraping the blood off my hand, I took a couple of steps back into the hotel room. Things were about to get messy. Ending worlds was always that way, no matter which way you did it. Any screams, anyone out in the open, was quickly silenced, but it was all too clean for me.

My name is Beelzebub. Call me Bee. I have ended many worlds. Earth is next on the list.

Today, I am reborn.

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When I woke up this morning after my recent rise and fall on Nebula 26, I was hoping for a little lull in the dooms days. Getting cast out into flaming deserts, thrown into suns, frozen in burning ice, mauled by miscellaneous sharp objects, and blown to bits by magic isn't just another workday. It *hurts*, okay? A lot. Every single time. Whoever heard of evil incarnate being forgiven and sent to frolic in the daisies? Never, not in any of the prophecies, spells, stories, or books of old that people have followed for millennia.

The Nebula was particularly awful. I battled Orion on their sacred Mount Jar-Lu, the very top, which incidentally is covered in holy acid pools. He dipped his sword in the stuff and sent the blade through my chest of black spikes, and I disintegrated, scattering in the wind over that mountain. My form was rather unbecoming as well—all black and green, sickly-looking armor with those protruding spikes and heavy maces that made the planet shake but not their so-called hero. Nebula was a small planet, fairly insignificant in the Trinocule timeline. I'm the grunt for embodiments of evil like their Jar'kala.

My dad only makes appearances when there are greater entities at stake. He knows what it's like to constantly lose. That's our sole job: to lose to good. Since there are millions of different worlds out there, all with different timelines, I'm kept on my toes. I never know if I'm going to rematerialize at home or on another planet. When Dad isn't out battling gods, he goes to Hell, sits on his throne, and triple checks the timeline, ordering me to fulfill this prophecy or go destroy this realm. It's all rather...monotonous. At this point, I've seen it all.

I woke in Phlegyas' boat after Orient drove me from their lands to rebuild an empire.

"Been feeling angst-y against your father again?" he said without looking at me, shoving the boat along the river.

"No," I told him, rising up off the bottom to look out at the thrashing limbs of sinners. "It was that sod I just acted out on Nebula 26. His bitterness probably threw me in this circle."

"If you say so. He'll read you like a book."

"Drop it, Phlegyas, or I'll let a few of these people carry out their fights on your boat," I said, closing my eyes to change form.

I shrunk down from the eight foot, masculine muscle man I had been into a more petite 5'6" female. The armor dropped off into the river, spearing a few grumpy sinners to the bottom. A baggy pair of black jeans, ripped at the knees, and a grey t-shirt wrapped around me instead, and I settled with a sigh on the bench after the transformation.

"Don't get comfortable. We're almost there."

"Right. You got any idea what mood he's in?" I asked.

"Not a great one. You've got a big job coming up. He's been pouring over a book for the last couple days," Phlegyas stated before throwing a rope out to the approaching dock.

We were hauled in by a humanoid from another planet that had sold his soul to my father. I tipped Phlegyas a couple coins for the crossing. This was probably the sixth or seventh time in a row that I'd woken in his circle. It always varied by what entity I'd

just portrayed. Or at least that's what I told myself. I never liked to let an underling know they were right, not even good o' Phle.

Looking out at the stone path that led through the other circles, I stretched my arms and neck, trying to shake off the remnants of the battle. A walk through the remaining circles wasn't something I fancied after that fight on Nebula. Before starting off, I sprouted a set of tawny wings from my shoulder blades, ripping long gaps through my loose shirt, and I kicked off into the smog. It was rare that I got to spend some down time in the underworld. I coasted up the shore, letting the hot wind massage my muscles like a sauna.

There was a tug at my mind, an inclination to head to the ninth circle, but I pushed back against it. The nice thing about a female form was the hormones, a rush of emotions boiling over in my blood so that I could follow whatever whim I wanted. I was torn between taking Cerberus for a walk or settling down with a lover. The warm breezes between my thighs stirred up my lust, and I wheeled about towards a high mountain that held the perfect man for me.

Diving down into a deep gorge in the eighth circle, I saw little flickers of light dotting the darkness at odd intervals. The light was weak and small, crushed by the surrounding black until each seemed as though it would be snuffed out. It only took me a couple of minutes to find the right one—two pinpricks of yellow raised on a pedestal of granite, converging and splitting with the wind. My breasts ached in anticipation as I descended.

Of all the men trapped within the bowels of Hell, I found none to be as enticing as the main man of deceit, destroyer of Troy and conqueror of seas. I touched down lightly

in front of the pedestal and stared up into the flame. Inside, two men leaned against each other's backs, their heads drooping until their chins touched their chests. They only moaned occasionally and never moved from their positions for fear that their blackened, charred bodies would crumble into dust. Past the blue and yellow tinted flame, I could make out that one was larger than the other.

I held out my clenched fist and slowly snuffed out the left side of the flame, leaving one of them suspended in flame. The larger man swayed from his new freedom and then toppled off the pedestal like a broken puppet. I turned him over and ran my hands over his skin until the shriveled limbs filled back into thick arms and legs layered in muscle. His abs were sculpted again, dark brown hair grew thick until it reached his shoulders, and a deep tan set into his skin.

“Wake up, Odysseus,” I whispered in his ear. His eyes flicked open, as brown as grave dirt, and he gasped in the damp air. His tongue fumbled weakly for words but all that came out was a croak. I rolled my eyes and conjured a cup of water for him.

When he could speak, his voice rumbled deeply saying, “Thank you for the respite, Master Bee.”

“Don't thank me yet. I've got something more in store for you,” I told him, winking.

He eyed me up and down, still bold despite his suffering, and hid his distaste behind another gulp from the cup. Perhaps 21<sup>st</sup> century clothing wasn't my best choice to seduce an ancient Greek. I let my clothes disintegrate off my body in flakes; my milky white skin bared in his face briefly before a long Grecian dress swathed over my shoulder

and down my hips, the blue fabric pooling at my feet. My black hair grew out in long ringlets down to my waist with Odysseus staring slack-mouthed at my transformation.

“Better?” I asked. He nodded in small increments but turned his gaze back to the flame behind him.

“Your beauty holds little to me. I know what you truly are.”

“You mean a swirling celestial dark mass of particles with intentions of pure evil? Yeah, I can’t really do much about that,” I said, teasing him. “But a legend like you couldn’t turn away this, right?”

I grabbed hold of his chin and forced him to look at me. The silk hung low on my breasts, and a long slit in the fabric ran up to my hipbone. He was transfixed by what he couldn’t see just beyond the hems of my dress. It had been a *very* long time since he’d gazed upon the flesh of a woman.

“Nymphs and goddesses don’t have nothing on me. Let me show you how it’s really done,” I purred in his ear.

He rose at my bidding, staggering on his newly-knitted muscles, and I walked towards a tall pile of stones—a collapsed portion of a cliff. Odysseus stepped in time with me, wobbling like a toddler and constantly trying to pull away from my grip on him. Though I could have taken him right there, I desired a special intimacy, a type of finesse that was lacking in other worlds. So I hid us in a pocket of rocks, ran my hands over and over his muscles, and split my dress apart to drape over our rippling bodies.

When I’d had my fill of him long after he had gone raw, I put him to sleep to stop his groaning and dragged his body back to the pedestal. He screamed only once as I slid him back into his cocoon of flame, his flesh withering slowly back to a charred husk. A

strong yank at my mind made it twinge, and I transformed back into my casual wear to answer my father's call. Fanning my wings out, the ground rushed out from under me at my downstroke. Odysseus and Diomedes' flame stuttered as I turned myself towards the ninth circle.

Lucifer was on a glacial throne with a fan of stalagmites behind him. His black hair was mussed into points; his head propped up by the knuckles of one hand. The Word of God lay open on his lap.

"Everything go as planned on the Nebula, Beelzebub?" he asked as I landed in front of him.

"You know it did," I said, letting my wings fold against my back.

"You've been here for over an hour, but you did not report," Lucifer pointed out.

"I don't have to. We both know that *you* already know," I told him, leaning against a block of ice that encased Judas Iscariot and nodding at him. His pupils dilated slightly in reply.

"You reek of Greek filth," Lucifer said, frowning. "You know that's forbidden here."

"And yet," I said, cocking my head, "I still have access to every sinner and every circle. Why is that?"

Several cold shards of wind drove through my body like slivered spikes. I bent over, letting the ache ease before lifting my head to glare at him. Lucifer ran a tense hand through his hair, pulling the short locks into tighter points.

"Just be grateful I haven't replaced you yet."

At that, I laughed, my grim mirth echoing around the vaulted ceiling.

“Oh, I should be happy about that? News to me!”

He sat pensively, fingers laced into an arch hovering over the Bible.

“This next job is your last chance, Beelzebub. I have a stake in this one,” Lucifer said over his steepled hands. “Your work is sloppy at best. I’ve got demons prying your armor off some souls at the bottom of the river, and you missed two cues on Nebula.”

I shrugged and said, “The work got done with the same result. Didn’t it, Judy?”

A finger might have twitched inside the ice.

“It matters,” Lucifer shouted, rattling the stalactites on the ceiling. “You exist to end worlds. You have one job, and you can’t get it right.”

He continued in a lower voice, saying, “We’ve got a big job happening in little more than three hours.” Lucifer waved the Bible in front of me and arranged his robes to drape around his sallow face.

“It’s time for Earth to go?”

“The very.”

“Remind me again how that’s supposed to go down?”

My feathered wings tremored—he was projecting his annoyance into the air.

“Look, I’ve ended about four different realms this week alone. Earth has had a long run of it. How many different religions have constructed scenarios on that planet?” I asked. “Just a hint?”

“You’re a being with immense power and the capacity to memorize the whole history of the universe, the child of my brain. Yet you’re more trouble than you’re worth. Get to reading because whether you know what you’re doing or not, you will be on Earth in three hours.”

His eyes swirled with hellfire, but the gravel in his voice didn't scare me. He was right; I was a product of his mind, equally incarnated with evil, ability, and as it so happened, stubbornness. Lucifer stood and threw the book back down on his throne. His black robes swirled around his body in long strands, his own wings trailing on the floor, flightless. Over the years, he had developed other ways of flight, moving like a shadow across realms and the nine circles as he did now, leaving Judas and me alone in the throne room.

“Beasty there can't scare me with death,” I murmured to Judas. “We are all dead here anyway. At least if I didn't exist I wouldn't have to take orders.”

I felt a sharp prickling between my shoulder blades. It spread across my back and all over my wings, mounting pain every second over my nerves. Lucifer's parting gift to me—my wings burst into flame. Screeching, I sank to my knees, letting the hollow structures fall off my shoulders to smolder where the bones, glowing red, sunk slightly into the ice. My fists added two additional holes when they came down hard on the ground.

“I'm no Icarus,” I spat, reaching back to rub the new skin that grew over my shoulder blades.

I picked up the book while smoke still trailed off the ribbons of my shirt. Flipping through the pages, I rolled my eyes at the beings I would take on. A seven-headed feline beast? How absolutely unpleasant and insulting. And the methods of destruction? This was Earth we were talking about! They built fires for entertainment. They watched movies of plagues and crushed locusts with their boots. The Almighty could blow as many trumpets or break as many seals as he liked, but it would never be right, not to me.

He ought to stick to Creating. I was made for destruction. I understood it inside and out, and people of Earth needed something to truly fear, something to fit their modern age of desensitized media and technological advances. Meteorites and blacking out the sun were all good and well for the sixties. The twenty-first century needed a facelift though, and I had plenty of ideas on how to do it.

I let the book fall shut, the leather binding creaking with age. Part of the spine crumbled in my fingers, and I turned it to look at the black crumbs in my palm. Impressions on the spine caught my eye, a series of faded numbers that weren't visible to any ordinary hellion. It had a shelving number as if Lucifer had gone to a local Earth library and checked it out.

“Is this what I've come to, Judy? Hell's book shelve?” I turned to him and asked.

Poor guy couldn't even blink at me, so I walked to the back of the throne, which had a solid shell of spikes protecting a blacked hole at the base. My feminine form slowly lost its shape, dissolving into black smoke that curled down and around the hole into the hole. I descended quickly into a roughly hewed cavern lined with rows of decaying shelving bursting at the nails with books. Approaching the nearest stack of tomes, I stretched out a wispy hand to brush the dust off the scaly-skinned spine. It was the prophecy of the Io colonies, which marked the beginning of the End on the Trinocule. My first doomsday, wiping out the race with wild abandonment surging through my newly-created mind. The aftermath led to our current state of business with so-called rules and regulations.

It was all here in the cavern: from the Almighty's greatest civilizations to the smallest rock with a population of one, everyone's death was sealed in these volumes.

Still trailing smoke clouds, I flew down the passageways until I came to the 51,244<sup>th</sup> row, miles from the original throne room. There was a gaping hole on the top shelf that fit the Bible perfectly. My feet hit the ground after I'd returned the book, and I gazed around at the rows of dusty tomes.

There was Nebula with its neon green cover, holes eaten into the binding like it had been caught in acid rain. I turned around and caught sight of a grey book that looking as though it were covered in shale rock. That doomsday required that I be shut up in a rock sarcophagus for three weeks straight. It took me a day's worth of soaking in the Styx to ease the cramps. Next to it was Terran, a sort of parallel Earth where they were too busy killing each other to advance past the Middle Ages.

So many people with such meaningless lives filling up the crags and valleys of Hell and Heaven. Endless plots, assassinations, battles, and spells that I let the heroes throw at me. To the very last universe, I was only a ragged puppet to be bored and broken. If Lucifer's threat was real, everything about me was meaningless. The rows of shelving stretched endlessly on both sides, an eternity of slavery in return for nothing. Why exist anymore?

I raised my palms and thrust them towards the entrance of the library. Thousands of books flung themselves off their shelving, pages scattering from ancient texts and dust clouds clogging the air. Echoing thuds continued for several minutes as each bookcase dumped its contents to the floor. I repeated the ritual on the other side of me. The Bible was buried, its cover half-ripped from the binding in the wake of its fall. As the last civilization tipped from its perch miles down the room, I breathed deeply in the stale, archaic ruin.

It felt great to screw things up. Every time I missed a beat on a world, the surge of freedom made me want to miss more. Disobedience was my drug; chaos, my patron. Rummaging in a fallen pile, I pulled a book free—Pluto’s destruction along with its 2000 icelandic humanoids—and ripped the pages out. Did the planet blip out of existence or go careening into the nearest star? Or would it spin for the rest of eternity even when the race died off? Part of me wanted to check while the other part wanted to spend some time ripping out other histories.

Time was a funny thing in Hell. There were no stars or seasons, no sun to track the hours. Some days, if it could be called that, time walked at a leisurely pace, grew tired and fell to a creep, then took great leaps to stretch his legs. Sitting on a throne of deathly volumes, I waited for Lucifer to come and rage at me. Maybe he would be mad enough to replace me. I could have the ease of nonexistence and would never be trapped in archdemon limbo again. But I sat there long after the dust of my rampage had settled back on the shelves, shape-shifting my hands into perfect paws until I grew weary with boredom. Perhaps he had gone to Earth, and there, when he summoned me, I would get my chance to send his plans into havoc.

Yawning, I let my throne collapse on itself and picked my way to the back of the library playing I-Spy with the various methods of defeat printed on the covers of the tomes. There was purple, the symbol for magic, and oh, look—incineration! That was nothing new. Closing my eyes, the library caught fire beneath my lids and cleansed itself in my imagination. I could practically smell the burnt parchment and leather.

Upon a second whiff, I opened my eyes and saw the walnut shelf beside me crackling with flames around the numbered plaque. It glowed red and seared through the

wood until it dropped with a clang to a lower shelf. In its place, a thick black pocket book slid from an inner compartment, the word “Rahvel” lit up by flame.

It had never occurred to me before that Hell was its own little world, one that I belonged to. A thumb print was burnt into the cover; flipping it, the other four fingers had imprinted the book as well. I dove through my memories and the future desolations I would bring to the universe. Nothing, a great stretch of nothing at the end of the Trinocule. We were all doomed to bow out a final time, and then what? Bee, the tool, that’s what I was.

Another clatter of metal drew my eyes back to the trick plaque. 666,666 was molded into the brass. How stupid and typical, but I’d never had a reason to come this far back before. Returning to the book, the cover remained stubbornly closed against my prying. I tried magic, more flame, and good old fashioned grunting. My arms shifted from every strong persona I could think of, from hairy King-Kong hands to body-building biceps, but the cover didn’t even bend. There was, however, a red stain on the page edges right between the fingerprints, a perfectly circular drop of blood where a palm might have closed over the book.

It was too easy. This was why I wanted to change things around here. Everything was so predictable, so *orderly*, that I was baffled by what was so obvious to the others. I took a seat with my back against a wall, which seemed like a good spot to read. Gripping the book between my knees, a knife materialized in my left hand. The stroke against my right palm was long but clean, only a fraction of a twinge compared to my defeats. My blood was darker as it dripped onto the upturned pages, and the book eased open as the stains soaked in.

The universe's final act was insultingly short to me like the instance of retreating air and space when a balloon pops from a needle point. But the final words...those were intriguing. *The dust of all the lands will settle between the powers of our Lord, Christ, who commands Order, and our Prince, Beelzebub, who commands Chaos.*

Prince of Chaos. It had a nice ring to it. And if I understood my scriptures, I'd just made my life a whole lot more fun.

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By the time I was summoned to Earth, the seventh seal had snapped in the heavens. Half the world was bathed in the red glow of the full moon, and the groaning of humans echoed in my ears. They all knew it was over, even those who would deny the Almighty until the day they froze in the lake. I had the Rahvel tucked under my arm and thirty minutes to reach Heaven before the trumpets sounded.

Closing my eyes, I imagined the feeling of travel, the spaces between spaces all pinpointed in my head. Rather than move around the universe myself, I shifted the universe around me, opening my eyes to see the gates that marked the entrance to Heaven.

It was as perfectly sculpted as any of the tales imagined. It glittered with a multitude of gems and jewels, both of Earth and other galaxies, pressed into the road, the walls, the gates. Every color on an infinite wheel pierced my eyes until I was squinting as I walked towards the throne. The place was giving me a headache with all its shine, the air clogged with ambrosia and lavender. To tell the truth, it reminded me of widowed old ladies who were losing their sense of smell and placed pots of potpourri in every room. The place was strangely vacant.

“You should be on Earth preparing as the beast, Beelzebub.”

The Son of the Almighty, Emmanuel, had come to greet me, blocking my path to the throne.

“I should. But I’m not,” I said. “I would like an audience with the Almighty.”

Emmanuel stared at me for a moment, his eyes slightly unfocused as if he were in a different place. He snapped back into reality and motioned for me to join him on a small grass path leading down a hill. His white robes swished around his ankles without any sort of breeze.

“This isn’t the right direction,” I pointed out.

“He already knows, Beelzebub. There’s no need to gloat.”

“Call me Bee,” I told him.

We crested another hill and I got a view of the distant throne. There were dozens of angels gathered: praying, bowing, singing softly. Seven hovered above the rest, trumpets posed at their chests.

“You could’ve at least humored me,” I complained. Emmanuel stopped his advance, and I swear I think he almost smiled.

“So, this...” I said, holding the Rahvel by the spine with the pages facing upwards, both bloodstains even brighter in the sun of Heaven. He didn’t flinch at the sight of the darker red next to his own mark. “Was I meant to do this?”

“Communing with me will not save you in anyway, Beezlebub. You’re asking for something I can’t give you. Lucifer would be more willing.”

“One, he is literally the king of lies,” I said, crossing my arms. “Two, he’s out of the rule-breaking business now. I had to at least give this talk a shot.”

“Did you feel led?” Emmanuel asked with an air of indifference. “Or did you feel free?”

I rolled my eyes and said, “Free is a loaded word with me, you know. Too arbitrary.”

“Lucifer is ready to call you back again.”

I took a step back from him and paused. When I ventured back to Earth, I didn’t know what I was going to do. Whatever it was, it definitely wasn’t going to be correct according to the Word of God. Even my father’s tug on my mind felt like a spiral phone cord that stretched for miles.

“I guess it doesn’t matter now,” I finally said, holding up the Rahvel with my fingers sunk into his own handprint. “I’ll see you at the finish line.”

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I leapt from rooftop to rooftop, city to city, watching Earth fall apart with each trumpet blast. I’d left Lucifer in America where he was kept busy with the antichrist. The fifth trumpet blasted from Heaven, rocking the entire planet. I hovered over the desert, waiting for the next plague. Inside my mind, I felt everything—the ground, the trees, the people—groan and shift as their reality was torn away. Living animals fled underground to cower together. Oceans and mountains retreated, sensing they would meet a painful end. Pure terror oozed from the particles in the air, and I drank it in.

But it wasn’t powerful enough yet. People could prepare for many of these things. An immense cloud came over the horizon accompanied by a low buzzing sound, stretching beyond my vision. It was foretold that these locusts covered the land, torturing everyone with scorpion stings. Close, yet it was too natural for my tastes. These people

feared other kinds of stings. Hypodermic needles. Blades. Bullets. Animated by themselves, scratching through dirt and doors, they wouldn't see it coming.

There had been order for way too long on this world and others. Now comes chaos. I was beyond religion and ritual, beyond Heaven and Hell. I was meant to keep one half of the universe from unraveling. Raising my hand, the red glow of evening light fell across a faint shade of a scar. Beyond, the horizon glinted and flashed.

## CHAPTER 6

### FAE DAUGHTER

Kane eased himself down against a pale white tree, the flaking bark crunching under his black industrial boots, and pulled a photograph from a zipper pocket on his suit. A small, faded face with dark eyes and a ponytail peered out at him, her smile missing a tooth on the right corner of her mouth. Past the border of the picture, he watched his two teammates draw lines in the sand plotting a course through the jungle behind him.

He couldn't bring himself to go over to them. His daughter's picture came back into focus and a sigh caught in his throat. She had wanted her hair in a braid for her first picture day in kindergarten, but his fingers couldn't get the pattern down. Ellie had been forgiving though.

"Put that sentiment up, K," said Marvin, the captain in charge. "You know what the air in these parts does to things."

Even as he spoke, the left corner of the picture began to brown and curl up. Kane shoved it back into his suit, zipping it tight with his hand pressed down on it. If a pocket of atmosphere was trapped inside, he wouldn't even have the small comfort of the photo anymore. It was all he had left, especially when he was away from her side for long weeks, sometimes months at a time.

They had been traveling up and down the coast of Chile in the South Pacific Ocean for four weeks straight, hopping from island to island in search of the world's

most important energy resource: Fae. Kane often sat on his bunk late at night, rubbing his hands over his forearms to scrape off caked salt and tar smears. It was an old cleaning habit from when he'd worked in white-washed laboratories before the accidents. Time taunted him daily as they came up empty-handed at every island. With no stops inland in South America, he had no way of knowing if Ellie were stable. The nurses were kind to Kane though. They took extra care with his daughter, knowing he'd come back with the funds to pay.

“We're moving out, tech,” the other team member, a female, said. “Let's hope for a better catch.”

Carmen raised up from her squat, her polyleather body suit hugging tightly over her figure as she stretched. Needle-pointed spikes protruded from the suit at her ankles, wrists, and shoulders. Her hands rested on the grips of her pistols, fingers trailing across the clear diacarbonate. She was always on the edge of a fight with anything she could find, human or beast.

They scattered the sand map before Kane could take a look at it and set off north between lines of thick ferns. Marvin took lead with Carmen close to his back, both with their hands hovering close to their weapons. Kane hung back enough that he could just see the tops of their heads in front of him. They relished the hunt far too much, shooting at small animals for sport on cleared islands and harvesting the plant matter to trade in underground markets for more weaponry. Get done and get paid kinds of people.

They hadn't taken to Kane, and quite frankly, he hadn't taken to them either. It was times like these when he felt himself slipping quietly into the filth the Black teams wallowed in. There were Black units across the world pretending they didn't exist,

bouncing between government contracts, corporate scandals, and black-market deals. None of them existed on records anywhere except with departments of defense. Traitors, that's what they really were, both able-bodied and expendable. But Kane had never meant to be Black. All he needed was the money. Just a year or two more, and he could get out. Just one final treatment for Ellie.

A pure blue sky disappeared the farther they went into the jungle. The island couldn't have been more than five miles across, yet an unnatural tangle of white trees, ferns, and sticky vines groped at them from all sides. Every leaf waved gently as if propelled by a breeze that they couldn't feel, either parting like waves of dancers as they passed or loosely wrapping around their limbs as if to beg them to stay. Carmen snapped free of the foliage when they did the latter, trailing dying leaf litter in her wake.

"Get low. We might be coming up on a nest." Marvin's voice over the headset jolted Kane to attention. Only then did he notice how sparse the vegetation was growing, how narrow dirt paths had been tamped down in some places. They crouched down and snuck to a line of thick ferns, staring through the holes in the greenery. There was just enough light filtering down to make out two slim-looking creatures leaning against each other beside a small pond.

"Full grown adults, perfect. They'll bring big bucks."

"Then let's take them out," said Carmen, now sliding her pistols out of their holsters. Thin purple veins spiderwebbed the entire surface of the gun, crisscrossing to a central black core at the tip of the muzzle. "I traded some vials of their blood for these babies in the market a couple weeks ago. Haven't had the chance to try them out yet.

Plasma disks set off with nano-radiation charges. I'd kiss them if it wasn't for this ridiculous helmet.”

Kane reached out and pushed one of her hands back down by her side. She jerked out of his reach, muttering in static over the comlink.

“You said we could do it my way this time,” he reminded them. “No shooting unless things go wrong.”

“Why mess with our groove? We get results, Marvin. Let's just get it done,” Carmen said.

Marvin looked between the Fae and me for a minute before he said, “Let's give it a go. If you screw this up, you're not getting a cut this time, K. Who knows though? Mint condition would bring more bucks.”

Abandoning his gun by his knee, Kane swung a pack off his shoulders and pulled out two blue cubes the size of tennis balls and a small case. Static blew into his ear again as Carmen huffed impatiently, but he ignored her. There were three grey lines etched on each side of the cubes. Using tiny picks to rotate glowing red dials hidden in the furrows of every face, Kane prepped the devices he'd requested from Marvin after their last payout. He had grown tired of cleaning blood off his suits.

Kane raised his head and squinted at the creatures in the clearing. They were tall, more than six feet, with black hair reaching to their shoulders. Their skin, white as milk, reflected the light so that it was nearly impossible to look at them straight on. Marvin had supplied Carmen, Kane, and himself with helmets that kept the glimmer to a minimum, and Kane could see their arms and legs elongated into long-fingered hands and feet, three inch claws retracted slightly to keep from catching on the dirt and shrubs. If it weren't for

their claws, they would have looked like runway models in New York with perfectly sculpted narrow faces, hollowed cheekbones, and bright green eyes. The Fae were clothed in woven grasses and leaves.

“Look at that male,” Marvin stated, pointing at the Fae whose chest was bared, wearing a short draping of purple lotus leaves around his waist. “With muscles like that, he’ll power half of Russia for another five years.”

“Kane, get your shit together,” Carmen said suddenly, staring at the pond. “Something’s in the water.” Bubbles were coming to the surface. The two Fae had gathered around the edge to watch.

“It’s not right yet. Where did you get these, Marvin?” Kane asked, twirling the picks around his forefinger. The lines were supposed to turn green when they were ready for deployment.

“Where I get all my gadgets from,” he replied, causing Kane to moan. They were black-market knock-offs.

The pond now frothed with bubbles, the creatures’ backs still turned. The opportunity ticked away while the cubes remained stubbornly red.

“Now, Kane, do it now,” Marvin said, raising his pistol to point at the male. Carmen was half standing, arms out to start firing.

“Fine!” Kane said, dropping his tools and tossing one cube to Marvin’s free hand. They reared back and pitched them into the clearing towards the Fae. Each one landed at their feet and immediately began to expand into cages big enough to hold adults twice their size. The bars on all six sides were pure electric energy, crackling as each lengthened into the proper shape.

The creatures both shrieked, a hint of a musical trill in their throats, as the bars latched on their heels and swallowed them into the energy field. Tendrils of electricity arced through the interior forcing their bodies rigid. Their eyes widened into large orbs, mouths stretched wide to reveal their dark-stained flesh though no sound came out.

“Shit,” Kane said suddenly, staring at the cages. Snatching his picks out of the dirt, he raced towards the incapacitated Fae.

“What is it?” Marvin called after him, following him into the open and eyeing the tree line for more creatures.

“Just look,” Kane said, running his hands over the crackling bars. Electricity snaked around his gloved hands. He felt a small flash of relief that they controlled the energy like they were designed to do. The same could not be said for the Fae. With their backs arched skyward and limbs eagle-spread, parts of them were disintegrating before their eyes, dissolving in the chaotic energy of the cell. There was no blood spilling inside the cages; bits of their body were simply disappearing into thin air as if they were no more than digital memories being erased.

“Fix it, damn it,” Carmen yelled, watching with a horrified expression. “That’s my paycheck you’re dismembering.”

“I don’t know how. The calibration is way off, and I did it by the books, I swear.” Kane twirled his tools in places that neither of his partners could see. Only he had the eye for Fae-era technology. “If anything, the shock is getting stronger.”

He leapt to the back side of the male’s cage, nearly falling into the pond in the process. His foot splashed down into the water, and abruptly, he was on one knee clinging to the dirt in front of him, one leg sunk down to his thigh.

By the time he regained his footing, the male Fae was gone. Only the head and one arm of the female remained. Somehow, she had turned to face him. His face was even with hers, and they stared at one another, bright green into brown. Intelligent eyes that knew it was dying. The remaining hand stretched out to him, moving in slow motion, finger tips sparking even as they passed outside the cage. Unbidden, he met her hand and with a cold burst inside his head, he could feel her power falling away, trickling into the unknown.

*Evalia.* It was an explosion inside his mind, a numbing influx of pain, fear, and sadness culminating around one word spoken in a tight, feminine shriek that rattled against his skull like loose change. He reared back, grasping his forehead in his hands.

The last of her disappeared, leaving him shivering and light-headed. He almost didn't comprehend what his teammates were saying as the cages shrunk down to their original size again, leaving no trace of the electric fields. Not even the grass around them was scorched.

"...it'll bring millions," Marvin stated behind him.

"I could trade that for anything. A nucleocannon, a plasma rifle...no, wait. We could finally get one of those military-grade carriers," Carmen spoke. "Kane, you're already wet. Go grab it."

Kane swallowed past the sense of loss and stared around him. In the quiet, the whole of Faelcron Island held its breath in time, silencing every living being on the land. He turned, right foot squelching in the mud, and saw what his teammates had been discussing.

Bobbing in the middle of the pond, an enormous silver egg glinted in the sunlight with the same glimmer effect as the Fae. Rays of light struck its surface and scattered across the field, showering the clearing in polka-dot pricks of sun. It looked big enough to encompass his daughter.

Kane's mouth had dropped open, a sick realization churning in his stomach, and he took a good look around the clearing for the first time. On the side farthest from them, a thick bed of feathers and palm leaves, destemmed, was arranged under a wide tree canopy. Soft berries were piled in a clay bowl beside it. He curled his hands into fists, letting his glare rest on Marvin and Carmen though they couldn't see past the tint of his helmet.

"We've killed her parents."

"The adults don't matter anymore. We've more than made up their selling price with the egg. We've probably got ten times their worth in that shiny bobber over there," Carmen stated, turning towards Marvin. "How many Fae eggs have ever been found, you think?"

"Less than a fifty, I'm sure. I'd have to look at—,"

"Don't you get what we've done," Kane said, throwing his hands up. "The egg came from underground. It's alive; this whole mass we're standing on. We've been destroying this island's entire ecological system over the course of a year. Wonder why we've gone empty-handed for weeks on this god-forsaken sea? Those Fae were the sole survivors in the South American system! They were going to rebuild."

"Look, we let you come because we needed a techie. But what we *don't* need is an eco-pro, Fae supporter on our team. The boys back at base told us you knew what you

were signing up for,” Carmen said, walking over to him and thrusting a finger into his chest.

“I thought I was signing up for a job, not a mercenary team that massacres whole species for profit and fun. Considering that species is used to generate power for entire cities, I would think you’d be smart enough not to cause an international energy crisis,” Kane countered, smacking her hand away. “This island won’t be here when we come back, I’ll bet you anything.”

“Do that again, and you’ll find these spikes up your throat,” Carmen spat.

“Fuck, you guys are children,” Marvin said, stepping between them. “Look, Kane...you got a family, right? A little girl? That’s why you’re here. Why we are all here. Money, not morals.”

Kane stared hard at the ground at his feet.

“Yeah, I know about your daughter, K,” Marvin continued, his helmet just inches from Kane’s. “What is she now, seven? Paralyzed from the neck down? They have cures for that these days...through Fae resources. But those treatments are for aristocrats in the high-lofts of Brooklyn, right? You’re not a scientist anymore; you’re Black now.”

“Like you know anything, rookie. Ten years, I’ve been Black, and Fae have never done anything but try to eat me whole. They deserve rounding up. Your kind were the ones who figured out they were supercharged generators anyway,” Carmen said, arms crossed.

“You’re both scum. I took this job for an honest paycheck. You both just want weapons. My *kind*,” Kane stated, jabbing his thumb at himself, “know about biology and ecology. This isn’t how Black operatives were supposed to do things.”

“Honest paycheck? As I remember, *you* killed the family with your new plan. Not us. And didn’t you hear? Fae islands are emerging across every ocean. Sounds like ecology is doing just fine, don’t you think?” Marvin asked. He didn’t wait for a response, grabbing hold of Kane’s shoulder and shoving him off the bank edge into the water. “Oh, and if I were you, I would hurry and grab that egg. Untelling what’s in that pond.”

Kane made the mistake of looking down as water seeped into the tops of his boots while he floated beside the bank, contemplating how hard it would be to drown either of them. A cavernous hole gaped underneath; the water was so pristine that he could see several feet down into it, but the hole kept going, a blackness that melded into the rock for what could be miles. A few bubbles trailed up from the darkness and popped at the surface in front of Kane. He pushed past his terror and struck out for the still-floating egg, grabbing it and pulling himself out of the water before the next set of bubbles reached the top.

“Record time. Our last techie died in one of those. He decided he wanted to take a look down there and never came back up,” Carmen said, smirking as Kane heaved the egg out of the water. It was radiating warmth despite the cold pond water, taking the chill out of his bones. His head throbbed when he touched the crystalline surface.

They took turns cradling the burden in their arms on the way back to the ship. Kane stopped to scoop up the two cages and placed them in a pouch.

“These are duds. You’ll need to invest in new cages. Maybe you shouldn’t get them off a sketch Anaheim vendor next time.”

“Maybe you should know how to work your tech,” Carmen shot back.

“My Ph.D. says I do. What have you got?”

“You’ve got some guts to talk to me like that when I can think up about twenty different ways to kill you in the next sixty seconds. Five of them include this egg.”

“But you won’t,” Kane stated simply, walking ahead of her.

Their ship was moored on the east side of Faelcron Island, roughly the same size as a crab boat. Its black-stained wood marked it as a trader ship, flying both the American and the Fae trade flags, which was pure white with a green circle at each corner. A hollowed steel mast towered in the air, the sails mechanically folded into grooves along its sides. The controls were housed in a metallic shed on a raised platform at the stern of the ship. Along the bow where a wooden maiden would have stood just fifty years before, sharp plating was built into the front structure that converged into an armored blade designed to slice through anything sea or ship.

“How’re we going to get this on the *Ryno*?” Carmen asked, setting the egg in a soft spot in the sand. “Same way as the cages?”

“The magnetic hoist won’t work. We don’t have a cage for this, and it’s too risky to try the ones in my pocket again,” Kane stated, pulling one out and turning it in his hand. He looked as though he were contemplating throwing it into the sea.

“Guess we’ll have to do it the old-fashioned way,” said Marvin. He raised a hand to his helmet and pressed where his ear should have been. “Engage the ladder, boys, we’ve got a surprise for you.”

They watched the ship from its starboard side as wide slats shot out of holes accompanied by rapid clicks, forming the ladder. Marvin went up first, grasping the rungs through oblong holes cut into their centers.

“Need us to warm up the hoist, cap?” one of the crew asked.

“Nope, we’re going back with empty cages. But,” he explained, “I think you’ll like what we brought instead.” Marvin left several of the men craning over the side to look down at the team while he disappeared below deck.

Back on the ground, Kane was inspecting the egg despite the headache that returned with a touch, running a hand over the shell and trying to peer down into it. The crystal appeared cloudy like someone was fogging up the glass from the inside.

“Technically, you’re molesting that Fae baby,” Carmen pointed out, pulling out a cloth to clean her guns with.

Kane stopped moving his hands over it but said, “It’s called science. We’ve never been able to identify the elements in these shells, just like we’ve never been able to figure out why Fae islands produce such a heavy hydrogen-based atmospheric cloud.”

“Which is why the Fae are hunted and used. They are like dangerous aliens. They’ll destroy this world if we let them spread.”

“We don’t know if they are aliens,” Kane said, crouching in the sand to have a better perspective. “All our tests have put them as mammals basically. There is nothing alien about them at a molecular level.”

“Molecules or no molecules, they’re still a threat,” said Carmen, gesturing with her gun towards the egg.

“Because we threaten them. You guys treat them no better than if you were hunting for game. If you corner a lion and shoot dirt in its eyes, of course it’s going to attack.”

Kane stood between her and the egg, frowning down at her weapons. A whirring sound echoed down from the ship where the crew had strung up an old-fashioned fish net on the hoist's metal claw. It lowered to the ground between the two teammates.

“If you two are done bickering, let's get that diamond aboard and call it a day,” Marvin shouted from the top deck.

Securing the package in several loops of thick rope, Kane motioned for the hoist to be raised and started towards the ladder.

“Your daughter would look like a tasty little snack for a lion, K,” Carmen spoke into his ear, brushing past him to board the ship first.

\*\*

Chatter about going home after weeks of carrying the Black team floated around Kane as he picked at the bacon in front of him. The cook burnt everything he touched down to the coffee. Kane's fork broke the brittle strips into small crumbles, feeling the sway of the ship stronger than ever as it sat through a tropical storm. It had moved in before they were able to detach from shore, and Marvin had decided to stay put for the night. Kane wasn't sure his stomach was twisting because of sea sickness though.

*Daddy.*

Kane jerked hard enough to send a piece of bacon spinning across the table, breaking apart as it fell to rest on the opposite side. A childish whisper, soft and light as a fairy's, had flitted across his mind. He turned around, craning his neck to look at the crewmen standing in groups, lounging against counter tops and gulping coffee dregs.

“...brags to her friends all the time. Tells ‘em her daddy’s a tough captain,” one man said, holding out his wallet where a picture of his daughter was tucked in a fold for the surrounding men to see.

Kane, half-twisted out of his seat, slumped back over and rubbed his eyes.

“Next time you throw bacon, K, aim a little higher. I’m sure one of us will grab it. Food don’t go to waste here,” another man said.

*Daddy.*

This time, he leapt out of his seat so fast, the chair toppled over. Conversation stalled, the crew eyeing him with a mixture of pity and annoyance.

“You alright there, poindexter?”

Kane waved at them, crossing over to the stairs that led to his quarters.

“Sea sick.”

He ignored their laughter, easing himself down the stairs before they could see the morose look on his face. His cabin was the last in the hall, a closet turned bedroom, just large enough to hang a cot and store a chest underneath. Kane slammed the door and flung himself on to the bed before he let his mind unravel.

*“What’s that, Daddy?”*

*Kane looked away from the microscope to follow his four-year-old’s finger covered in Dorito crumbs. She was pointing at the yellow door on the far side of the room.*

*“It’s a secret, Ellie. Top secret. Even I’m not allowed in,” Kane said, turning his eyes back to the cells on the slide. Perfectly circular, they had gone from crystalline*

*white to grey in the short time he hadn't watched. Dead. Sighing, he pulled out the ruined slide, tossing it into toxic waste disposal.*

*"I bet it's a friend thing," Ellie said before crunching down on another chip.*

*"What? Friend thing?" Kane asked, taking the bag out of her lap. He noticed her apple slices were untouched and told himself to keep a closer watch on what she ate.*

*She glared at him for a moment, contented herself with licking her fingers, then said, "It's what Austin said today. He wouldn't let me swing cause it's a friend thing."*

*"He was just being a mean boy. You remember what we do to boys that are mean?"*

*Ellie paused with a finger in her mouth, thinking hard about it. She sat up straight abruptly, nearly pushing herself off of the office chair she was seated in.*

*"Bop them in the nose!"*

*"Yes," Kane stated, shutting off the containment cube they used to keep contaminants off their sample cells while they worked on them. "But only if you eat your fruit like you're supposed to."*

*She peered at them, eyebrows scrunched down as if she were analyzing them.*

*"Did you take the green stuff off?"*

*"I peeled them, baby duck, just like you like them," said Kane, pulling a colleague's chair over to sit beside his daughter. He brushed her bangs out of her eyes while she began to munch on the rest of her dinner. It was like fine silk and deep red, the color of wine. She would turn heads when she grew up just like her mother turned his, maybe even twirl it in her finger to tease men like she did.*

*"When do I get to do the friend thing, daddy?"*

*“When you have friends,” he said.*

*“When will I get friends?”*

*“You do already. Sally’s your friend.”*

*“No she isn’t. She said I looked like a hippopotamus. She only said that cause Ms. Briggs showed us a picture.” She looked down at her lap and mumbled, “She didn’t even say it right. But I did.”*

*Kane watched her pick at a thread on her pink shirt featuring the newest Disney princess whose name he’d forgotten. After about fifty different dvds, each set on repeat at least a couple times, all the tiaras started to run together. Glancing around the room, he saw that all the additional computer monitors were off; his colleagues had gone home for the day.*

*“Ellie, you want to go on a mission with me?” Kane asked, crouching down in front of his now-bouncing daughter. She squealed her reply, pushing herself off the chair and into his waiting arms. He pulled her close, then led her towards the bright yellow door marked with caution up and down its face.*

*“Now this is very important. We have to find a magical fairy in here. Just one look from it will make sure you’re never called names again. Don’t. Touch. Anything. Alright?” Kane tapped on the keypad beside the door and swung it open at the beep.*

*Ellie started to nod her head but stopped suddenly as she peered into the waiting darkness. She slipped her hand into his while he flipped on the fluorescent lights. A long corridor opened up before them, lined on both sides with flashing equipment, storage units, and heavy-duty coolers for samples. Their eyes were drawn to the white glow at the end of the hallway.*

*Kane led his daughter past all the equipment, keeping an eye out to make sure she didn't stretch out a wayward hand to touch anything. He had a faint understanding of how mothers had eyes in the back of their heads. She only focused on the white glow, however. It began to shimmer as they approached.*

*Inside a chamber lay an adult Fae, encapsulated under fiberglass and restrained at the arms and legs by velcro straps despite its constant heavy sedation. IV's were threaded through vent holes, dripping sleep and nourishment as it had for almost a year while they conducted their research. Even under the fluorescents, its skin shimmered as if each pore were a tiny glass mirror. Kane, after picking Ellie up and settling her on his hip, held a hand in front of his eyes to keep from seeing spots.*

*"This is the fairy. Now you'll be protected."*

*Ellie was dumbstruck, mouth hanging open with the glimmer reflected in her brown eyes.*

*He turned away to go. He was sure he'd catch hell in the morning if they looked at any video, but the subject had been comatose for months. She was all he had. She was worth breaking protocol for and more. When they were about half way to the door, he put her down and took her hand again. She craned her neck around to keep looking.*

*"She's a princess."*

*"No, she's just a fairy. We have to go now," Kane replied, his mind back on the cell samples he needed to test tomorrow.*

*"No, she's a princess. They cut off her hair."*

*Ellie tore her hand from his and took off running towards the Fae. For a moment, he couldn't process what had happened, blinking at his right hand. Within seconds, though, he was after her shouting.*

*Although she had sprinted as if her life depended on it back to the 'princess,' Kane caught her simply staring up at the encasement, hands limp by her side. What he saw when he peered inside made him go just as still as she.*

*The Fae was indeed female—Ellie had no way of knowing that—and her eyes were wide open, staring straight ahead as if looking into the cosmos through the layers of insulation and flooring. Kane thought, perhaps, that he saw stars swirling in its pupils, meteors darting across as they do in the night sky. The Fae took no notice of its audience.*

*“She can help,” Ellie said, mesmerized, looking up at a creature she couldn't fully see.*

*“Get away from her,” he told her, checking the i.v. to make sure they hadn't been careless. The bag was almost full, the liquid running down steadily into its arm.*

*The monitors began to beep, flashing small red lights at him. Kane watched, helpless with his daughter in the room, as the Fae's heart monitor began racing wildly and vitals dropped. Had Ellie not been there, he would have opened the case, but the creature was too dangerous. It didn't thrash, twitch, or even blink at its impending bodily failure, the loss of light and limb.*

*“Let her out, daddy, she wants to help,” Ellie said, pressing her hands on the glass and giving the casing a shove that failed to even make it rock.*

*Kane snatched her away from the case as soon as he saw the Fae place her hand in front of Ellie's on the glass. The broken connection caused the long fingers to drift*

*back down slowly, leaving two handprints, one dwarfing the other. The monitors went silent, cutting off in mid-frenzy, and the light dimmed within the case, the white glow diminishing until nothing but the yellow fluorescents of the complex remained. The stars exploded in her eyes, swirling the cosmos into blackness darker than any moonless night as the universe expired forever. On her lips, a word.*

*“Evalia”*

He was falling only for a brief second before his forehead smashed down on the wooden planks of the ship, crushing an arm beneath his chest while the other thrashed in the air for something to hold on to. The storm had flung him out of his swinging bunk by a careless roll in the sea. Kane’s body shifted with the turbulence while he felt the miniature explosion on his forehead creep into his skull and around his eyes, replacing the faint image of his daughter with a spray of dust and dirt.

There wasn’t any going back from that. He couldn’t sleep from the nightly hauntings of his memories of Ellie. Sometimes, the Fae crippled her before it died; others, it was the Toyota with the Yankees sticker—Kane watching the blood splatter and smudge on the windshield from across the street; the wrecker man pulling her art poster, now sparkled red, off the hood. Waking felt as though his own blood had been poured out, leaving something terribly shriveled and cold, a 2-D puppet in the attic, some assembly required. He was stuck in a never-ending circle: the lab accident, the Fae, the medical bills, the Fae. It all came back to them, and with a flash of anger, he could almost agree with Carmen. Perhaps they were playing with forces that were too dangerous.

Kane tried to imagine a world without these creatures. Which was crueler, abusing their entire species or losing his daughter? Hot tears dripped into the dust beside his cheek, and he entertained a vision of life where none of these things had come about.

He pushed onto his knees after a while, the feeling of hands and feet all but nonexistent to him—his body keeping him alive even if he didn't want it. He wanted to check on the egg, perhaps warm himself by it. The faint shouts of deck hands and sloshing of waves helped him get back into the rhythm of reality.

Taking a flare from a hallway bracket, he staggered into the adjacent room and twisted the flame on. The egg was swathed in the netting and nestled inside a crate surrounded by packing peanuts. Kane found a wall mount and placed the light in it; the ship heaved and the door swung shut on its own. The crate was so tightly jammed between boxes that he ended up lifting the egg free from its nest instead, and sitting down under the flare, Kane wedged the egg between his feet. Heat soaked into his bloodless hands and despite the spike in his headache, he leaned forward until his forehead touched the smooth surface.

"I'm sorry. I'll try to make sure you go to a good lab," he whispered. He doubted he would have any say but maybe one of the nicer companies would bid high.

*Evalia.*

His head exploded as if buckshot had shattered a block of ice inside his skull. Kane was no longer on the ship. He seemed to speed backwards in his own timeline, catching glimpses of events he had spent years repressing. A bloody art poster, his lab coat, his wife's hair as viewed from the back all spiraling through his mind in microscopic seconds. There were his drunken buddies in college popping Adderall, there

was his mom making dinner, his dad watching the Reds game, then the fast reel sped up and blurred beyond recognition. Angular, shadowy figures danced across his vision, hiding in the landscapes of places he'd never been before: Egypt, France, Greece, Taiwan, Antarctica, and what he thought might have been the moon. The figures flitted back and forth, always melding with the scenery until dazzling whiteness expanded across his conscious at what he could only assume was the beginning of time. A figure strode from the white expanse, red hair shorn to her ears, hollowed cheekbones, and pale skin that seemed to be the source of the entire time lapse. She walked hesitantly at first but strode with more security as her legs held up to gravity. She was older, still with green eyes, thinner and suppler than she'd ever been before. But she wasn't Fae...she couldn't be Fae...Ellie.

The visions ceased abruptly as if someone had pulled the plug. His forehead now dripped a cold sweat down the egg's rounded surface and he gasped as though he'd been trapped underwater for a long time. Kane nearly kicked the egg to the opposite side of the room trying to get away from it.

"You're alive in there, aren't you?" he panted, gazing at its foggy shell. There wasn't even an outline of anything. "Stop messing with my head. I can't do anything about this. It's life."

As he spoke, he thought he saw movement along the surface. He shuddered at the thought of touching it again barehanded and nudged it farther into the light with his foot. Kane watched the very top turn into a spot of red. It spread fluidly, agonizingly slow. It was about a fifth of the way down when Kane realized it looked just like blood. An acrid smell hit him: it was decaying, dying.

*Walk away, his head said. Leave the little monster to rot.*

Kane was almost out the door when another image hit him. His vision didn't black out before. It was more like a hologram in front of him, a picture dimly projected on top of wooden boards, ocean spray, and portholes. If anything, it made him feel crazier. Grown Ellie walked down the hallway towards him and then stumbled. One leg dragged behind, then the other collapsed, and she tried to drag herself forward, holding a hand out to him. She was talking to him but no words met his ears. Kane nearly choked and lunged for her only to have her dissolve in his hands.

By the time he found the box of machetes in a storage closet, the egg was half red. Kane couldn't get Marvin's words out of his mind. *They have treatments for that because of Fae.* They came at such expense but if Marvin were right, a fraction of the auction sale would pay for her treatments. If there weren't a lot of eggs in the world, there couldn't be too many Fae children either, so he'd have to chance that they brought a high price too.

Kane wedged the egg sideways between his feet again trying to decide how to crack it open. He didn't know anything about Fae births. How big were the children? How much space in the egg did they take up?

As the blood color crept closer to the bottom, he decided just to slice off the top and hope he didn't kill the child in the process. Gripping the knife in sweaty palms, the bulky handle unusual in hands meant for tuning microscopes, Kane plunged down only to have the blade scrape off the side without so much as a scratch on the egg. He tried again, this time wedging the egg in between two crates. As he bore back down on the shell, the ship decided to roll, throwing him forward. The knife sunk into the shell farther down than he'd meant it to, the top splintering off and sticky fluid gushing out from inside.

Kane backed away just in time before the whole shell shattered apart from an unseen force, scattering shards across the room. A small body, about three feet high and panting heavily, fell out of the hole between the crates. He kept the machete in one hand and the flare off the wall in the other, watching the child cough up amniotic fluid. It eventually pushed itself on its knees, dripping still, and crawled into the torch light.

Her beauty clashed chaotically in such a small body. No baby fat clung to her cheeks or muscles, no stubby fingers accentuated her hands. She was born a wraith, hardly enough skin to cover her veins but graced with emerald eyes, thin lips, and hair about four inches long sticking out everywhere. A patch on her left side was shorn down nearly to the scalp where his machete had cut through. He was afraid that if he touched her, she would flake away like wet bits of paper. She gazed up at him with a mixture of gratitude and caution, taking quick glances around a place that clearly was not what she was expecting. Opening her mouth to take a great gulp of air, he saw short fangs already in place. A little taller and she could have been Ellie in a Halloween costume.

Kane's thoughts ran races in his head staring at what already looked like an adult Fae in a child's body. Someone was bound to check on the egg at some point. He was surprised he hadn't been caught yet. Yet he needed her, one way or another.

"Can you speak? Do you understand me?" Kane asked the child, tucking the machete behind him.

She offered him nothing in return, merely squinting through the torch light at everything. Then she opened her mouth again and murmured something silently. A flash of white seared through his mind. Apparently images were all he was going to get from her.

Kane set the torch back in its bracket and hurried to his room. Throwing his own Black gear back on, he made sure the faulty cages were still in his pocket, and he belted on his gun. He pulled a brown trench coat from his locker. Darting back to the storage room where the Fae still crouched, he bundled her into his coat and took her into his room where she settled once more into the space left in his chest. She didn't seem to mind.

He was starting up the stairs, machete still in hand, when Carmen nearly crashed into him with a heave of the ship.

"Watch it. What are you doing waving that machete around?" she asked, brushing past him. Kane seized the opportunity.

"Stop, stop! It's hatched!" he cried, seizing the part of her arm that wasn't spiked. She took in his wide eyes, Black suit, and weapons again.

"Tell me what's going on," she said. "And give me that machete. You're holding it like a bread knife."

Giving up his knife, Kane continued.

"I went to check on the egg before I turned in and it has hatched somehow. Must've been thrown out of the crate with the storm; there are shell bits everywhere. The door's swinging wide open, go see for yourself."

Carmen ran to the end of the hall, peeked into the room, and sprinted back past him shouting, "Secure this level. Check every crack and go to the next one. Contain the Fae."

Only moments passed before he heard Marvin bellowing the same orders to those who weren't needed on deck. Kane pretended to be checking other shipmates' cabins

when a herd of soaking wet deckhands thumped through the stairway and down to the lower levels armed with anything from rope to crowbars. Kane went back to his room.

“Okay,” he said, opening the trunk. The child was still staring, more bemused now than anything. “We’re going to make a run for it. Here and now. I help you , you help me, so don’t be afraid to work some sort of Fae voodoo.”

He gathered her in his arms and made a dash for the stairs. Out on deck, people ran blindly into a heavy blanket of a tropical storm, calibrating ropes and making sure gears were holding up to the strain. Kane blended in with the night for the most part, and what little visibility existed was cut even shorter by sheets of rain. Pressing the child tight against him, he snuck around the back of the captain’s room, trying to reach the long boat swinging at the side of the ship.

“Kane, you know this isn’t going to work,” a voice shouted behind him. Marvin appeared around the corner from the control room, Carmen in tow.

“My daughter. She’ll cure my daughter,” Kane yelled back, clutching the child and twisting her away from his gaze.

“You’re dancing around way too many people with guns. Guns they know how to use, unlike you.”

“Please, Ellie needs her...she showed me what it will be like,” Kane said, trying to inch towards the long boat. He had zero hope of getting it into the water even if he did get it there. Marvin pointed a pistol at him.

“Where you going to go, K?” Carmen said, a sadistic grin on her face. “I’m going to enjoy throwing your lying, useless carcass overboard. A dream come fucking true.”

Kane lowered his head unconsciously, pressing his nose into the Fae's hair as he used to do with Ellie. Through the slime, he detected a floral scent like lilies that reminded him of all the times he'd carry Ellie through Bath and Body Works, opening every flavor for her to sniff.

Heart thundering under his ribcage, he fingered the cubes in his pocket. They were still active—a simple toss was all it took. He could vaguely remember a time when a life was a life, but the world had long since changed. Sentiment, that's all it was anymore.

“Alright, I give. You get the Fae,” Kane told them, walking toward them and staring down the barrels of their pistols.

As Carmen reached for the bundle in his arm, Kane let the cubes fall from his fist and dove behind the control room wall. A bright flash of light illuminated half the deck, but only a handful of crewmen were at work in the storm, looking up at the sky for a moment before returning to their tasks. Peering over his shoulder, he watched the cubes shrink quickly back into their inactive sizes. The devices were meant to contain creatures vastly more powerful and resilient than any human. Carmen and Marvin had left no mark on the floor, their bodies snuffed out of existence almost instantaneously under the destructive energy of the cages.

Realizing he was practically crushing the child underneath him, Kane scrambled up and tossed the malfunctioned cages into the ocean. His adrenaline crashed and the full weight of the murders fell on him. The crewmen finally found him vomiting over the side, barely standing and crying between gasps of breath.

“They’re dead. She killed them before I could stun her, and they’re just gone! I’ve never seen the like,” he babbled to them, pointing a shaking finger at the child. She huddled to the side of the control room, looking asleep with the coat pulled tightly around her naked frame. She did not seem overly bothered by the rain, the nauseating tossing of the sea, or the fact that he was baiting the crew through her.

Several sailors carried her back down to a storage closet where she was tied up against some pipes, and guards were posted at the door. Kane was helped to his cot where he remained ill the rest of the night, staring at his ceiling until he thought he might go blind. He hoped that maybe some god would provide him a quick death, Ellie’s photo clasped between his hands, and maybe they could just live happily in the afterlife. At dawn, the navigator approached him.

“Are you okay, Kane?” he asked, a man with gorilla-like arms and constant upturned nose.

He nodded in reply.

“We hate to bother you over this...you must have been close to your team. They were good, honest people to me...,” the navigator trailed off.

Kane refused to say anything.

“See, Marvin hired us out to man his ship ‘bout two months ago. With him and Carmen gone, that leaves you in charge of the expedition, sir. We got paid half upon boarding, and he’d promised us the other half from what we brought back.”

“You need to know what to do,” Kane finally said, sitting up in his cot. He stomach knotted in protest. The navigator nodded.

“Set a course for home. I’m finished with this business,” he told him. The man hurried above deck, leaving Kane to contemplate his new role. In Black teams, not many questions were asked. Not between teams, not from customers, not from hired grunts. Everyone wanted to get back to their homes and drink away the residual soot of death. He rose and walked into the room that held the Fae child, two crewmen standing outside the door with pistols. The rope was biting into her thin arms and her hair had matted into thick cords, but she looked up at him with mild curiosity.

“You’re going to cure Ellie, right? That’s what those hallucinations were?” he asked her.

Her mouth didn’t move but a word rang around in his head in a soft, flute-like tone.

*Evalia.*

“No, Ellie,” he said, feeling himself near tears. “Ellie. My daughter. The redhead. You know her, I know you do.”

*Evalia.*

Kane thought for a moment that it might be kinder to simply toss himself into the sea, but that would not help Ellie walk again. Her image, tall, proud, independent, rose in his mind and beckoned him on.

“I’ll teach you her name. You’ll get it eventually, Evalia, right?” Kane said, taking a wild guess at that word. She merely lowered her head back down, a hint of a smile on her blanched face.

He wouldn’t sell her, not if he could avoid it. He’d sneak her into the hospital, or finally put his daughter into home healthcare where they’d be even safer. Kane had

destroyed enough life. The Fae child was a princess, just like Ellie, an orphaned queen of time and space with gifts the world could only speculate about. She didn't belong encased in a bed of glass, sleeping in beauty.