

ABSTRACT

Crestfallen: An Original Fairy Story for the Modern Age

Autumn Purcell

Director: Arna Bontemps Hemenway, M.F.A

In J.R.R Tolkien's essay *On Fairy Stories*, Tolkien outlines some of the key characteristics every good fairy-story should have. This manuscript explores the modernization of those traditional Tolkienian fairy-story concepts while incorporating successful fiction strategies which I discovered through my close examination of *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and other fairy-stories. In my own fairy-story, a character closely resembling a modern college student explores the relationship between self-sacrifice and self-actualization, trying to ascertain the importance of memory in forming one's own identity. In the preface, I offer a contextualization of my manuscript by discussing its relationship to Tolkien's guidelines, the application of those ideas in *Harry Potter*, and the role of both in my work. In both manuscript and preface, I explore how Tolkien's ideas on fairy-stories may be subverted in a modern context without losing their essential truth.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

Dr. Arna Hemenway, Department of English

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM:

Dr. Elizabeth Corey, Director

DATE: _____

CRESTFALLEN: AN ORIGINAL FAIRY STORY FOR THE MODERN AGE

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Baylor University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Honors Program

By

Autumn Purcell

Waco, Texas

May 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	iii
Bibliography	xix
Crestfallen.	1
Table of Contents.	2
Chapter 1: Hello, there	4
Chapter 2: A Missing Rose.	15
Chapter 3: Something a Unicorn Would Poop Out	34
Chapter 4: The Belly of the Beast	55
Chapter 5: No Blue Pill.	78
Chapter 6: Even in Dreams.	100
Chapter 7: A Sleeping Bag for Two.	113
Chapter 8: Into the Rabbit Hole.	131
Chapter 9: A Giant Problem.	140
Chapter 10: Mermaids Have More Fun.	162
Chapter 11: Squirrels Gone Wild.	186
Chapter 12: The Name's Bond.	210
Chapter 13: The Birds.	236
Chapter 14: Team Summer.	252
Chapter 15: Asleep in a Meadow.	268
Chapter 16: Identity Theft is Not a Joke.	281
Chapter 17: Roses Are Red.	296
Chapter 18: Ain't No Mountain High Enough.	308
Chapter 19: Reap What You Sow.	326
Chapter 20: The White Tree.	339
Chapter 21: The Cost of Silver.	366
Chapter 22: The Max of it All.	382
Chapter 23: Lies We Tell.	396

Preface

When I was younger, writing a story had always seemed an almost futile endeavor to me, rather like taking a picture of a sky that had been photographed a million times before, captured by people with better cameras, better lighting, a better eye for such things than I would ever have. Little did I know then, that the sky rarely looks the same every day, and rarely do those who look at it even on the same day see the same thing. J.R.R Tolkien's sky was filled with the roaring of war planes, J.K Rowling's with the smoke of falling towers, and I soon realized that I could create something worth reading, something original, because I had an original perspective, that whatever it was that filled my sky would undoubtedly find its way onto my page.

Unfortunately, during one sunny spring morning my sophomore year, the only things clouding my sky were carbon bonds and functional groups as I suffered—I mean *sat*—through my 8:00 AM Organic Chemistry II class—back when being stuck inside an air-conditioned room on a beautiful day was still only an inconvenience rather than the new normal. And I don't know if it was the teacher's British accent or my obsession with the current Spiderman movies that was to blame, but it was during that class that I began to indulge in a rather embarrassing daydream that Tom Holland—actor, dancer, universal heartthrob—would suddenly appear in the BSB and profess his undying love for me.

Obviously, there were some logistical problems with that daydream, ones I attempted to dispel as quickly as they appeared by modifying, bit by bit, my own little imaginary world. Why didn't I remember Tom Holland and I dating? Maybe I'd had my memories erased. How could someone have erased my memories? Maybe they had used

magic, something not of this earthly realm. Why would someone want to mess with my memories? Maybe they had lost something, something they couldn't bear to be without, and I was the key to getting it back.

And it was during this seemingly frivolous exercise that I realized there was a story there, in that imaginary world of mine, one that wasn't my own, and yet felt like something only I could tell. Like I'd caught a glimpse of a hidden reality, one full of magic and mayhem and love, and I knew if I could somehow manage to find the right words, then maybe others could catch a glimpse of it, too.

I didn't know it yet, but that was the moment I would begin to formulate my own 'fairy-story,' as Tolkien called it, a type of story he goes to great lengths to both explain and defend in his essay, "On Fairy Stories." In this essay, Tolkien attempts to dispel some of the falsities and misunderstandings surrounding the genre of fairy-stories. He does this in part by describing the characteristics that every decent fairy-story should have, focusing on what doesn't constitute a good fairy-story just as much as what does. In his essay, Tolkien also delineates the role of what he calls a subcreator, one who attempts to create a Secondary World, made from bits and elements of the Primary World, in which a reader can live, albeit temporarily.

As a contextualization of my work, in this preface I examine the ideas expressed in Tolkien's essay "On Fairy Stories" and discuss the way in which my manuscript seeks to answer those ideas while taking into account the modern age in which it is being written. I do this partly by exploring the application of Tolkien's ideas in *Harry Potter*, a similarly modern work relative to Tolkien's yet still a product of a time very different from my own, focusing on how those characteristics and rules laid down by Tolkien have

perhaps changed over time, as well as how their modernization seems to simultaneously subvert the original rules *and* prove them to be true.

In “On Fairy Stories,” one of the first things Tolkien does is eliminate those books from the fairy stories canon which he believes lack the fundamental characteristics that mark a true fairy-story. Tolkien deems *Gulliver’s Travels* by Jonathon Swift to be one such misattributed story, not due to its satirical nature, as one might expect, but simply to the location of those rather fantastical lands to which Gulliver travels. They are lands that contain marvels, to be sure, but “they are marvels to be seen in this mortal world,” marvels that exist within our own time and space and are concealed by “distance alone” (Tolkien 12). That is to say, the Secondary World in which the story is set coincides in many ways with the Primary World, something that Tolkien claims is not in the nature of a true fairy-story, purveyor as he was of stories set in another age entirely, in a time well before, and a world entirely different from, our own.

Tolkien doesn't specifically state the reason for this rule, but to me it seems to have something to do with the intended purpose of a fairy-story: escape. Escape is, as Tolkien says, “one of the main functions of fairy-stories” (Tolkien 60). Although, in Tolkien’s day, and even in our own, there are those who believe such escapism into magical worlds to be irresponsible to say the least, speaking of it only with a “tone of scorn or pity” (Tolkien 60). In his essay, Tolkien refutes this claim partly by likening the “Robot Age” in which he was writing to a prison of sorts. It was an age when electricity lined every street, shaming the light of the stars, when black smoke billowed from factories, stinging the eyes and choking the lungs, all of which “produced the desire to

escape,” not from life, but from one’s own “present time and self-made misery” (Tolkien 64).

Therefore, one might assume Tolkien’s distaste for those fairy-stories which are interwoven with the real world might have been caused by his dissatisfaction with his own world, his own time, a dissatisfaction which perhaps made it difficult for him to believe such a tale to be capable of producing the kind of escapism he deemed essential to every good fairy-story. After all, how can one truly escape the terrors of the world if they are forced to remain—in any way, shape or form—within that world?

In the *Harry Potter* books, J.K. Rowling describes a magical world hidden practically in plain sight, the story taking place in Great Britain in the nineties, roughly the very time and place in which it was written. This seems to break Tolkien’s rule regarding fairy stories, as the world of *Harry Potter*, should it actually exist, could supposedly be reached merely by catching the right train at the right platform, never mind that the platform lay nestled about three quarters between nine and ten. And yet, more people, children and adults alike, have escaped into the world of *Harry Potter* than perhaps any other literary world before, the books having sold more than 500 million copies since the first book was released in 1997, making it the bestselling book series of all time (Pottermore). These readers seem unbothered by *Harry Potter*’s juxtaposition to our own little world, perhaps because, at the time the books were written, the world as we knew it had begun to feel like someplace else, entirely.

When Rowling was constructing the world of *Harry Potter*, terrorist attacks were happening around the globe. 9/11 in the U.S. 7/7 in the U.K. Rowling, herself, would have grown up in an England terrorized by IRA bombings. People were frightened,

changed, filled with “terrible sadness and a quiet, unyielding anger,” and “the realm of children’s literature was certainly not left untouched by the shock” (Bush and Strimel 35). There were perhaps no better conditions for an escape into another world, somewhere where one could forget the uncertain nature of their own reality, just as Tolkien had described. However, what Tolkien perhaps couldn’t foresee was that during such a dark and tumultuous time, the nature of escape, itself, would change along with its readers. The readers in Rowling’s time didn’t just want to sneak off to an alternate world, they wanted the power to save it. Tired of always feeling anxious, of fearing the day they became a victim of the terror that surrounded them, their greatest means of escape was empowerment, itself.

Magical fantasy is unique in that it “allows children to deal with timeless, realistic, frightening topics while maintaining a safe distance from the agent causing the anxiety” (Strimel 37). In *Harry Potter*, we see a world that not only exists within our own, but that reflects our own. That world, too, is being shaken by fear, the author delving directly into “themes of terror as a result of large-scale, national strikes,” and allowing the story to center around “the battle between good and evil” (Strimel 36). The government is changing, trying to adapt to face a new and sinister threat and in many ways failing miserably. Friends are dying. Buildings are falling.

Only, in the world of *Harry Potter*, there is a chosen one. In the world of *Harry Potter*, it is an orphan—someone who grew up without a real family, without love—who has the power to defeat the great evil that has befallen them. This is a world racked with terror, yes, but is also a world with hope, a hope that every child and adult wishes they could have, wishes they could *be*, in such a time. It may be filled with horrible loss and

danger and death, but the overriding theme of the *Harry Potter* series isn't terrorism, itself, but rather how to cope with it (Strimel 37).

It wasn't that Rowling's world was any less terrible than Tolkien's, it was simply that the world had changed, the threats were different. People wanted to escape the fear they lived with every day, only they didn't want to do it by jetting off to another world, but by reading about someone living and surviving in a world much like their own, someone that, unlike them, had the magic and the power necessary to properly fight and banish the evil all around them. Although Rowling technically broke one of Tolkien's principal rules regarding fairy-stories, this dissonance seems inevitable to me, a consequence of writing in such a time as she did, and was necessary in order to allow her readers the kind of genuine escapism Tolkien, himself, believed to be one of the main functions of a fairy-story.

While Tolkien may have been of the opinion that a "bridge to platform 4," was, to him, "less interesting than Bifröst guarded by Heimdall with the Gjallarhorn," Rowling proved that a simple platform could be just as effective in transporting someone from one world into another as an otherworldly rainbow bridge (Tolkien 62-63). After reading both Tolkien's work and Rowling's, I realized that in order to properly transport my readers, to allow them to fully escape the horrors of *my* world, I, too, would need to break the rule Tolkien put forth, albeit for different reasons.

When one is telling a story, they essentially become what Tolkien refers to as a "sub-creator." The job of this sub-creator is to make a "Secondary World" which a reader's mind can enter. In that Secondary World, what the sub-creator relates is "true" as it corresponds with the "laws of that world." The reader, therefore, believes it while they

are “inside” (Tolkien 37). In this way, a Secondary World, although created by bits and pieces of the Primary World that we live in every day, isn’t bound by its same laws.

And yet, the moment disbelief arises in this world, “the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed” (Tolkien 37). In this way, we see that this Secondary World is, in fact, bound by at least one law not of the sub-creators' own making: it must be believable. Not believable in the way that it could actually happen, but believable enough to make the reader imagine, at least for a little while, that it could.

The problem is, today, we live in a world where almost anything is possible, and more importantly, where almost anything can be made to *seem* possible. Technology has advanced so much that it can be difficult to imagine what it can’t do at this point, but with this advancement comes a kind of distrust. Whether it’s through the deep fakes or “fake news,” we can no longer trust what we’re told, what even our eyes can see. We are, in this way, a generation of skeptics.

Because of this, today it’s no longer enough to simply expect a reader to imagine blindly what a sub-creator wishes them to. The sub-creator has to convince them of every spell, every trace of magic. They have to make them believe it could *actually* happen. If they didn’t, then any means of escape it proposed would, in the end, be fruitless.

Consequently, I realized that if my readers refused to jump blindly into a Secondary World, then I must find a way to trick them into it, a way to seduce them, almost, into believing the unbelievable. And so, I decided that convincing my reader to believe in my Secondary World could only be done if I took the time to do the same thing with my main character.

Although the whole fairy-story technically takes place in the Secondary World, in order to combat the skepticism of modern readers what seems to be required now is a kind of partial continuum of reality. By making the first chapter of a novel appear to take place in a world very similar to the Primary World, it becomes a sort of intermediary step. A Primary and a half World.

Summer begins the book as ordinary as any college student, living on far too little sleep and far too much coffee. She spends the morning worrying about how to deal with the complicated feelings of a friend she's afraid to lose. She argues with her best friend in a coffee shop about her plans after graduation. She goes to class and tries to pay attention yet is inevitably distracted by her own romantic drama. In this way, this book begins in a world that is extremely familiar to the reader, a world that, for all intents and purposes, resembles their own. It's only later that the reader discovers that there is more than one world to be explored in this novel, this other world being decidedly stranger, and decidedly more difficult to believe in, than our own.

In this way, the first chapter of the book is essentially a misdirection. It could have been plucked from any novel of contemporary fiction on the shelves today. It is only as the book goes on that Summer is immersed, little by little, into a world of magic and monsters, asked to believe not only that such a magical world exists, but that she actually has a crucial role to play in its survival. Summer starts out skeptical, but she, like the reader, is gradually made to believe. Every chapter brings with it a greater understanding of who Summer is, and with it, a greater ability to believe what she, and perhaps the reader, had dismissed only pages before. Enough time is spent in the Primary World—that is to say, the part of the Secondary World that most resembles the Primary World—that

when Summer eventually makes the literal jump into an otherworldly realm, she is fully convinced of, and fully immersed in, her new fate. Thus, the reader is too.

Although it may seem like the effectiveness of Rowling's story and my own subverts the rule that Tolkien put forth regarding the role of the Primary World in a fairy-story, in reality, the purpose behind that rule—to allow readers to fully escape into one's Secondary World—remains fulfilled. A modernization of this rule doesn't negate that purpose, it merely presents an alternative means of achieving it.

In addition to stating what a fairy-story shouldn't be, Tolkien also takes the time to describe what a fairy-story should be. One characteristic Tolkien considers important to any fairy-story is the presence and role of humans, as “most good ‘fairy-stories’ are about the adventures of men” as they journey about an otherworldly place, whether it be in the “Perilous Realm or upon its shadow marches” (Tolkien 9). Tolkien doesn't say exactly why this is the case, other than to say it has something to do with how greatly our—that is to say, fairies and men—respective fates differ, and how seldom our paths meet (Tolkien 9). I interpreted this to mean that the best fairy-stories are the ones where the readers may see themselves in the characters, perhaps because it suggests a certain possibility for them they'd never dared entertain before, a kind of adventure or life that could never exist for them in the Primary World.

The beginning of the *Harry Potter* books accords quite well with this rule. The first time we really meet Harry Potter, he is simply a lonely boy from Surrey, a child who was made to feel like a burden to the only family he had ever known, a child who longed for something more than what his life appeared to be. And eventually, on his eleventh birthday, he gets his wish. Harry Potter is revealed to belong to a world far different from

the one he knew, a world where he is important, where he matters. A world full of all the magic and friendship he's spent his whole life longing for.

It is here, also, that Rowling subverts Tolkien's rule by making Harry Potter a wizard, giving him magical powers the readers themselves could never hope to possess, an empowerment which, as we discussed before, was a necessary divergence in light of the events going on at the time the series was written. Still, Rowling manages to maintain some of that possibility on behalf of the readers by giving Harry Potter a sort of split identity: he's both a regular boy from Surrey and a wizard. These two identities seem to exist alongside one another throughout the series despite the many changes and trials Harry undergoes, much the same way the Wizarding World itself exists alongside the human one. However, this doesn't change the fact that after Harry's eleventh birthday, it becomes much harder for the reader to see themselves in him. Anyone can be lonely, but not everyone can be a wizard.

While Rowling, in the beginning of the novel, does present that possibility Tolkien seems to hint at in his essay, she takes it away just as quickly by introducing a deadline, of sorts, bringing about a question that every enthusiastic reader must eventually face: what happens when my letter never comes? This is a lament that has been echoed across social media for decades now, tweeted and posted and even printed on T-shirts, things like *I didn't find a wardrobe to Narnia when I was eight, I didn't go to Camp Half-blood when I was twelve, I didn't get my Hogwarts letter when I was eleven, so I'm counting on Gandalf to take me on an adventure when I am fifty*. By centering these magical worlds around specific ages or age-related events, the author places a sort

of expiration date on the hope of the reader, thereby limiting the possibility the story can present for them.

My book is essentially an answer to this lament, a furthering of those ideas explored by both Tolkien and Rowling. On the surface, Summer is a completely ordinary college student. She has friends, a school, a life that, by all appearances, seems to be free of any kind of magic whatsoever. There are even aspects of Summer's life that seem to directly contradict the idea that she could be anything special, things about herself that she believes wholeheartedly to be true.

And yet, as the story goes on, it is revealed that there is more magic in Summer's life than she could ever have imagined. Those things that Summer thought she knew about herself, the things she remembers, turn out to be nothing but lies; a false identity, one composed mostly of false memories, used to cover up who she really is. Not only has magic been used to put new memories in Summer's mind, it has also been used to take away old ones, to erase the life she had before, a life full of all the love and wonder and magic she's always felt she's been missing.

I wanted every reader to be able to see themselves in my main character, even those who felt like their circumstances precluded them from the possibility of having a magical heritage they knew nothing about. I didn't want the air of possibility around my story to be clouded with deadlines or expiration dates, to establish a point where the reader would say to themselves, "this no longer applies to me," or "I missed my chance." And so, instead of attaching the discovery of Summer's magical identity to any specific milestone or age, I decided to simply rob her of her memories, and in doing so, in presenting the possibility, however improbable, that the same could have happened to

them, I allow every reader the opportunity to believe that they are, perhaps, more magical than they had previously thought. They just can't remember.

In many ways, this idea ties back to my previous discussion of the nature of escape in a modern world. The skeptical reader of today must be fully convinced of a Secondary World before they immerse themselves in it, and while the concept of memory alteration and removal may seem innately magical and unbelievable, it also has a way of making everything seem possible. As I said before, the modern reader must be tricked into believing, and what better way to do that than to use those bits of the Primary World embedded in a story to make the reader question exactly which world they're in? After all, if a reader cannot trust their own memories, how can they be sure of anything, much less what's believable or not?

Lastly, in his essay, Tolkien also attempts briefly to define the nature of faeries themselves, although, in describing them, he seems to use only the vaguest of terms. Besides the fact that, despite popular belief, fairies do not have to be small, and that their "power," as it were, lay partly in the way they play on the "desires" of man's "bodies" and "hearts," Tolkien says little about the true nature of the creatures (Tolkien 8). This is perhaps because, like the perilous realm of faerie itself, they "cannot be caught in a net of words" (Tolkien 10). It's possible that, when using the word "fairy" in relation to my characters, I may be taking more liberties with the term than Tolkien had perhaps intended. It is very likely that Tolkien would not have put the kind of magical persons depicted in my novel or Rowling's in the same category as those traditional fairies he discusses in his essay. However, given that the genre of fairy-stories, itself, is a rather

encompassing and diverse group, I believe those rules Tolkien laid down in his essay about fairies apply just as much to my versions of them as his.

One characteristic Tolkien does describe as belonging to fairies is a deceptive nature—not deceptive in the way that they like to trick people, although that is perhaps another common characteristic of theirs, but rather that “they do not always look like what they are,” especially considering the fact that they tend to “put on the pride and beauty that we would fain wear ourselves” (Tolkien 8). In humans, usually the only things that lay behind our beauty are good genes and a decent skin-care regimen, but in fairies, beauty can mean something entirely different. It could be the mark of a magical blessing, the curse of a dark sorcerer, or perhaps nothing more than an alluring mask, one best suited to hide the monster underneath. In some ways, faeries put on the same masks as humans, only behind their masks usually lies something much more unexpected, and perhaps, much more dangerous, than we could ever imagine.

From the beginning of the series, Harry Potter is considered a legend in the Wizarding World, his name a battle cry, something to toast to in the quiet moments of the night, all because he was the only one who had ever been able to stand against Voldemort and live to tell the tale. Capability. Power. These are the traits that Harry Potter wears even without meaning to, traits that we can recognize in ourselves and in others, although, in us, they may take a different, less magical, form. However, unlike us, Harry Potter is a wizard. A fairy. Therefore, according to Tolkien’s rule, there should be something more behind that capability and power, something dark and unexpected.

Rowling was writing in a strange time, a time when wars were being waged thousands of miles from where they began, when governments were working on “the

dark side,” and spending time in the “shadows” of the world all in order to combat an “axis of evil” (Cheney and Bush). Right and wrong weren't so black and white anymore, and it was becoming harder and harder to distinguish the heroes from the villains. It was a morally gray world—not all good, not all bad—and it needed a morally gray hero.

Although Harry was first able to defeat Voldemort using the power of his mother's love, the reason that he's capable of facing Voldemort over and over again even after that is because Harry carries a piece of Voldemort's soul inside of him. The thing that grants Harry such strength throughout the series, such capability, is also the thing he most hates in the world, a fragment of the evil everyone believed he was destined to destroy. Harry is the hero, yes, but he is also a walking manifestation of the villain, and with every step he takes toward defeating him, he becomes that much closer to *being* him, or at least being more like him. Like all fairies, he is not what he appears to be.

And yet, this darkness that lies behind Harry's power doesn't keep him from being the hero of the story. On the contrary, without it, he likely could never have defeated Voldemort in the first place. He may be able to speak parseltongue and open the chamber of secrets, may be able to hear Voldemort's thoughts and sense the pieces of his shattered soul, but that doesn't make him any less worthy of the friends he makes along the way, of the good he is able to do even with the evil inside him. He is a fairy, at least in the way that Tolkien describes them to be, he is not what he appears to be, but he is also a hero.

Like Harry, the main character of my story, Summer, also turns out to be a kind of fairy. However, the familiar characteristics that seem to define Summer in the beginning of the novel aren't capability or power, rather the opposite, in fact. Like many college students, Summer is unsure about her future, about her place in the world. She doesn't

know who she really is or who she'd like to be. This is a characteristic many people can empathize with, and yet, because Summer is a fairy, there is something that lies behind those familiar attributes, a secret hidden even from Summer herself. The truth is, Summer has trouble determining who she is because she is caught between multiple different identities, multiple versions of herself, all pulling her in different directions. She's Summer and Rose. She's a college student and a princess. She's a human and a fallen. She's a fallen and a silverling. She's Max's crush and Lee's girlfriend. She's Cassie's best friend and Maeve's best friend. There is much more behind Summer's human uncertainty than there at first appears to be, and yet, similarly to Harry Potter, this rather fairy-like characteristic only serves to make Summer a better hero.

While we still live in a morally gray world, we also live in a world where identifying with multiple groups, where being different and unique, can be a strength rather than something that holds someone back or keeps them from finding their place. Summer isn't just one thing. She has to balance multiple different identities while staying true to herself. This is a challenge that is especially relevant in my time given how ardently my generation seems to seek out an identity for themselves, trying to juggle who they are and who the world perceives them to be. In this way, Summers' many identities are my way of modifying Tolkien's rule to apply to my time. She is not who she at first appears to be. She is so many more people, and she has to choose which versions of herself she wants to embrace and which she wants to say goodbye to, or find a way to be everything, everyone, she's meant to be.

Whether one's contemplating race, religion, sexual orientation or the countless other things we look to for identity or belonging, belonging to one group shouldn't

exclude someone from belonging to another. While not perfect by any means, I live in a time where a person's differences can be heralded, where being a part of multiple communities is something to strive for. I wanted to create a hero who was so many more people than she appeared to be in an effort to capture the spirit of appreciation and inclusivity that I hope characterizes my generation. This also connects to the earlier ideas we discussed regarding empowerment. Sometimes, power is learning to appreciate those different parts of yourself that don't seem to fit with the person everyone expects you to be. It's embracing all the many people we are and all the communities we belong to.

I don't think that what Rowling did with Harry or what I did with Summer goes against what Tolkien says about the deceptive nature of fairies. If anything, it seems most to contradict his rule about men and their place in a fairy-story. According to Tolkien, the fairies are often on the other side, as it were, of a good fairy-story, and yet in a modern fairy-story, a hero is often both man *and* fairy. What Rowling and I have done doesn't so much subvert Tolkien's idea as it does complicate it in order to speak to the modern age in which it was written.

Different times call for different forms of escape. Different conflicts require different heroes. In exploring both Tolkien's essay "On Fairy Stories" and *Harry Potter*, I discovered how Tolkien's ideas on fairy-stories may be subverted in a modern context without losing their essential truth. I wanted my fairy-story to be more than just an embodiment of Tolkien's ideas. I wanted to make it relevant, influenced by the complicated nature of my own present, in the hopes that one day, someone may read my book and be able to see the sky, *my* sky, reflected within its pages.

Bibliography

Bush, George W. "Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation." 11 Sept. 2001. *National Archives and Records Administration*. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html>

Bush, George W. "President Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address." 29 Jan. 2002. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/sou012902.htm>

Cheney, Dick. "Meet the Press with Tim Russert." 16 Sept. 2001. *National Archives and Records Administration*. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/vicepresident/news-speeches/speeches/vp20010916.html>

Pottermore. "500 Million Harry Potter Books Have Now Been Sold Worldwide." *Wizarding World*, Wizarding World Digital, 9 Oct. 2019, <https://www.wizardingworld.com/news/500-million-harry-potter-books-have-now-been-sold-worldwide>.

Rowling, J. K., author. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. New York :Arthur A. Levine Books, 1998

Strimel, C.B. The Politics of Terror: Rereading *Harry Potter*. *Children's Literature in Education* 35, 35–52 (2004).

Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy Stories." *Tree and Leaf*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1965.

Crestfallen

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Hello, There	4
Chapter 2: A Missing Rose	15
Chapter 3: Something a Unicorn Would Poop Out	34
Chapter 4: The Belly of the Beast	55
Chapter 5: No Blue Pill	78
Chapter 6: Even in Dreams	100
Chapter 7: A Sleeping Bag for Two	113
Chapter 8: Into the Rabbit Hole	131
Chapter 9: A Giant Problem	140
Chapter 10: Mermaids Have More Fun	162
Chapter 11: Squirrels Gone Wild	186
Chapter 12: The Name's Bond	210
Chapter 13: The Birds	236
Chapter 14: Team Summer	252
Chapter 15: Asleep in a Meadow	268
Chapter 16: Identity Theft is Not a Joke	281
Chapter 17: Roses Are Red	296
Chapter 18: Ain't No Mountain High Enough	308
Chapter 19: Reap What You Sow	326
Chapter 20: The White Tree	339
Chapter 21: The Cost of Silver	366
Chapter 22: The Max of it All	382
Chapter 23: Lies We Tell	396

When I'd thought about my future, about the person I was meant to be, the image had always been a little blurry, like the lens of my life was perpetually out of focus. Even before that day, before everything happened, the world around me had never really felt all that stable, all that real. Still, there were some things I thought would never change. Some parts of me that seemed eternal.

I was wrong.

CHAPTER 1

Hello, There

I woke up in a cold sweat, the scream dying on my lips as I pressed my hand against my chest, my heartbeat thundering beneath my palm. I sat up, trying to take in my surroundings. With a sigh of relief, I confirmed that I was in my bedroom, the lightsaber night-light in the hall dimly illuminating my bookcase and dresser, the moon barely peeking out behind the curtains of the window. I took deep breaths, trying to slow down my racing heart.

As the fear slowly seeped from my body, frustration took its place. This was the third night in a row I'd woken abruptly, some unknown nightmare plaguing my sleep. Unfortunately, I could never remember what it was that scared me so much. The only clue I had was the fear it left behind, filling my veins with ice, sending a shiver down my spine, even after I woke up.

I glanced at the clock beside my bed, the bright red numbers breaking through the darkness. 5:07. I flopped back on my bed with a groan. I still had an hour before I had to get out of bed and get ready for class, but I knew the chances of actually getting my still-frightened-heart and mind to quiet down enough to sleep were slim. With a sigh, I pulled my weary body from the damp sheets that lay tangled around me, the feeling of being trapped and afraid still lingering under my skin.

My throat felt scratchy, sore, and I thought, not for the first time, how grateful I was not to have a roommate to witness my nightly screaming sessions. It was a miracle, if a bit worrying, that the neighbors hadn't yet been bothered enough by my screams to call the cops. I mean what if I *had* been attacked? I made a mental note to get some pepper spray or something since clearly they were not to be relied upon in a time of crisis.

I headed toward the bathroom, carefully picking my way around the mounds of clothes and books that lay strewn around my apartment. I let out a muffled curse as my pinkie toe came into contact with a tattered copy of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. As much as I swore to Cassie that there was a method to the madness that was my

apartment, this was the fourth book related injury I had sustained since moving in two years ago. Pretty soon, I was either going to have to finally let Cassie reorganize this place or get better health insurance.

I continued down the hallway, a hot shower my only hope of becoming awake enough to survive the rest of this already dismal Friday. As if my recurring nightmares weren't torturous enough, today was also the day I had to go to both Organic Chemistry and Calculus. As an English major, my heart lay in dissecting the various works of Tolkien and Austen, not struggling through the exceedingly tedious math and science courses I was required to take by the university.

Cassie would say I used books as a crutch, a way to keep myself from facing reality, and as a future psychiatrist, she was probably right. But the truth was, my reality wasn't that bad. I went to a good university that I barely had to pay for thanks to the many scholarships I had busted my ass getting throughout high school; I guess when you didn't have any friends, studying was really the only way to pass the time. Still, I was lucky. My time in foster care, however lonely, was free from any significant abuse or trauma, so I didn't have any lasting scars to contend with. Now, I even had friends. Well, two friends. Cassie and Max.

Oh no, *Max*. I let out a groan as I shed my pajamas and stepped under the hot spray of water. I had completely forgotten about him. Max was in the same Organic Chemistry class as me, and although having him there usually made the class significantly more bearable, today, the thought of seeing him filled me with dread.

Max was my friend, but lately I couldn't help noticing that maybe he wanted to be something more. I rested my forehead against the warm tile, trying to ignore the feeling of unease I felt whenever I thought about it, about *him*, like that. I let out a huff of frustration before stepping out of the shower. There had to be something wrong with me.

Still wrapped in my towel, I sat on my bed and closed my eyes, trying to picture Max as a boyfriend and not just as a friend. I thought of his smile, the sound of his dorky laugh, the way he would wave his hands around animatedly whilst trying to convey the genius of whatever ancient Russian composer he was obsessed with at the moment. The images warmed me with affection, but not passion. I sighed. Max was kind and good looking, but there was no spark between us, no...magic.

I walked over to my dresser and began angrily pulling out drawers, looking for something to wear. I wanted to smack myself. Here was a real boy who liked me, who wanted to be with me, and yet, I was throwing him over for a dream, a love that probably only existed in the pages of books. I paused as my hand brushed a soft, light green shirt with the words *I'll be Bach* written on it above a picture of the famous composer dressed as the Terminator. It had been a gift from Max.

It was freshman year. He, Cassie, and I had met during orientation and had become instant friends. One day, Max stole my driver's license out of my hands, realized my birthday was only a week away and planned a little party in my honor. I used the term party loosely. Cassie had ordered my favorite pizza: extra cheese, extra pepperoni, easy on the sauce, stuffed crust, and had purchased an obscenely large chocolate cake with *Happy birthday Summer (like the season)* written on it. Apparently, Cassie hadn't been clear enough when she ordered it over the phone, and the baker had jokes. I thought it was hilarious. Cassie, however, was still cursing him out as she consumed her fourth piece.

Max had rented some movies, and we all sat in front of the tv and gorged ourselves until dawn. It was a simple night filled with pizza, cake, and the *Lord of the Rings*, but it was the best birthday I had ever had. Before the movie started, Max shyly handed me the ugliest, most poorly wrapped present I had ever seen. My mouth dropped open a bit. No one had ever given me a birthday present before.

As I tore off the paper revealing the shirt, I felt my eyes well up with tears. Max had panicked, telling me it was just a stupid shirt, and I didn't have to wear it if I didn't want to-- but I stopped him with a hug.

He was so shocked, it took him a second before he wrapped his arms around me, holding me tightly to his chest. Despite a few protestations, Cassie eventually joined in, too. We all clung together in an awkward bear hug, and I hid my smile in Max's shoulder as I felt for the first time what it was like to be loved.

A smile touched my lips, echoing the one from my memory, and I grabbed the shirt, throwing it on with a newfound determination. Maybe the kind of love I'd always wanted didn't exist in the real world, but that didn't mean there wasn't love worth having out there; I just had to be open to it.

Besides, I'd never had a boyfriend before. I'd never even been kissed, so maybe this was how it was supposed to feel. Maybe the queasiness I felt at the thought of kissing Max was from excitement and not dread. Maybe once we started dating, my feelings would gradually transform from platonic to romantic.

By the time I had finished throwing on the shirt, some jean shorts and my white high-top Converse, I had convinced myself. If Max asked me out, today or any day, I would say yes.

Still, just in case it *did* happen today, I made sure to put a little more effort in my appearance. My eyeliner around my greenish, bluish eyes was just a bit darker, my cheeks a bit pinker. I even went so far as to curl my auburn hair, which usually fell straight down my back, into soft waves. By the time I was done getting ready, the clock read 7:05. Still a bit too early to head to class.

I flopped back on my bed and texted Cassie, who was one of those annoying, early rising people, and asked if she wanted to grab coffee at the Starbucks inside the science building. Only five seconds passed before my phone dinged, and her YES!!! lit up my screen. I didn't question her excitement. She was probably worried I would change my mind.

The few times she had tried to get me up early to run or get breakfast had ended with curses and shouting until one day she stopped trying. Not that I could blame her. I had sworn up and down the next day that I couldn't even remember calling her a slut-faced whore and throwing my pillow at her face...but I didn't think she ever quite believed me.

I put my favorite green studs in my ears before grabbing my *Harry Potter* tote, the white one that said *Ronald Weasley is Bae* in romantic letters, and headed out of my apartment into the warm Texas sunshine. The walk from my apartment to the Baylor Science Building wasn't long, but apparently it was just long enough to allow me to lose all previous calm regarding the whole Max situation.

All the different ways this thing with Max could go wrong danced around and around in my head, each scenario worse than the last. What if it didn't work out? What if we broke up, and he never wanted to see me again? What if I think he's a bad kisser? What if he thinks *I'm* a bad kisser?

My once comforting t-shirt became a weight on my shoulders, the sweat from the Texas heat causing it to stick to my body like a second skin, a perpetual reminder of what I could lose should my worst fears play out in real life the way they were currently playing on a loop in my head.

I stepped in the coffee shop attached to the BSB, the cool air momentarily clearing my anxious mind, and looked around for Cassie. I found her leaning against the counter and glaring down at her phone, no doubt waiting impatiently, if the tapping of her business casual pumps was any indication, for her signature, non-fat, almond milk frappuccino. Her long black hair was pulled back into a tight business-like ponytail, her navy pantsuit a perfect match to her nude heels. Big blue eyes lay hooded by unfairly long lashes. Her button nose was scrunched up slightly as if she smelled something unpleasant, her glossed lips twisting into a scowl as she tapped furiously on her phone.

I usually had a quick remark for everything, but Cassie wasn't just quick, she was cutting. Still, she never turned her talons on me. It was kind of like being best friends with a pit bull disguised as a chihuahua who only allowed *you* to pet her. You were safe, but God help anyone else who got too close. The overdue drink probably wasn't going to help the situation, and my heart went out to whichever unlucky barista was about to have their ass handed to them by the five-foot four tornado that was an under-caffeinated Cassie.

As I made my way toward her, I couldn't help my smile as I realized the reason for the delay. The kinda cute, if a bit dorky looking, barista was stumbling around the machines, not really paying attention to what he was doing. Maybe if he would quit sneaking glances at my friend and focus on the drinks, they might actually be ready in time. Not that I could blame him. Cassie was beautiful. In fact, one look at that button nose and most people made the unfortunate mistake of assuming she was as sweet and innocent as the angel she so resembled. They were in for a rude awakening.

"Hey Cass," I said, lightly touching her arm so as not to startle the beast too much. She quickly looked up from her phone, a bright smile replacing the disapproving frown as her eyes met mine. "You came! I honestly wasn't sure if you had actually meant to text me," she narrowed her eyes, "given what happened the last time I tried to get you out of bed before 9:00 AM."

I let out a little laugh as she turned to grab our drinks from the frazzled barista. He opened his mouth to say something, but Cassie cut him off. “About time,” she grumbled at him before practically ripping the drinks from his hands. I cast a sympathetic look over my shoulder to the smitten kid, his mouth closing and his shoulders slumping as he swallowed whatever declarations of love he had been building up to.

Sliding into the stool across from Cassie, I closed my hands around my warm drink, the sweet smell of hot chocolate already helping to soothe my frayed nerves. “That’s one killer pantsuit,” I remarked approvingly between sips. If there was one thing Cassie and I had in common, it was a love for clothes. “Do you have another meeting today?”

As a pre-medical student with a double major in psychology and neurology *and* as head of basically every pre-health club or organization the university had to offer, Cassie was perpetually attending meetings or overseeing the horde of freshmen that were at her beck and call, freshmen she ruled over with an iron fist.

“An interview, actually,” Cassie sipped her coffee delicately, trying to act nonchalant, but her eyes sparkled with excitement, “for a summer research internship program in Norway.”

I beamed at her. “Wow, Cassie, that’s so great! I’m sure you’ll get it.”

“Whatever. It’s not that big of a deal,” Cassie shrugged dismissively, but she couldn’t quite hide her smile. She’d been wanting an opportunity like this for a long time, and I could tell how excited she was despite the casual vibes she was trying to exude. Still, I understood her reluctance; she clearly didn’t want to get her hopes up until it was a done deal, so I didn’t argue when she turned the tables. “What about you? Have you figured out what you’re going to do over the summer?”

I picked at the black polish on my nails, not meeting her eyes. “Oh, you know...a bit of this, a bit of that.”

Cassie narrowed her eyes at me disapprovingly. “Summer.”

“What? It’s only April. I have plenty of time to figure out something to do over the summer.”

“And as for the rest of your life?”

I crossed my arms and leaned back in my chair, meeting her chastising stare with one of my own. “What about it?”

“Have you thought anymore about what you’re going to do after you graduate?”

“Something with boo--”

Cassie let out a huff of frustration, cutting me off. “With books. Yes. I know. That’s what you always say, but what exactly? Writing?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. The one time I had tried to take a creative writing class had ended in tears, mainly the professor's. We were supposed to write about a tragedy, but apparently writing a graphic description of the death of her cat was “insensitive” and “vulgar” even though *she* was the one who talked about it *all the time*. “We both know that’s not my thing.”

“Well, what about editing? You could intern at a publishing company, work your way up. You know I have a friend in the English department who might know someone...”

I tuned Cassie out as she droned on and on, trying to plan out my future the way she planned out hers.

I understood her worry, I really did. As a former foster kid with little to no money, the idea of being thrown out into the world after school was more than a little daunting. I wasn’t like Cassie or Max. I didn’t have parents I could go to if I couldn’t meet my rent or afford gas. All I had were my friends. They were my only support system, and they did a damn good job at helping me keep my head above water, but they couldn’t help me financially, and I wouldn’t let them, anyway.

Suddenly, my throat closed up as tears welled in my eyes, threatening to spill over. No matter how many times I told myself that Cassie and Max were enough, that I didn’t need a mom to nag me every five minutes or a dad to embarrass me, I was never that convincing. I might have friends, but I’d never really had a family. I was alone.

I blinked the tears away quickly before Cassie could see them and tried to focus on what she was saying. After all, I loved books, and working for a publishing company didn’t sound too bad. I tried to picture it. Me, behind a desk or fetching coffee, reading through manuscripts and attending meetings.

For some reason, the image made my stomach turn. It just felt...wrong. I would never tell Cassie this, she would psychoanalyze the hell out of it and me for days if I did, but the truth was, when I thought about what I would do after graduation, a strange feeling overtook me, this sense that I wasn't where I was supposed to be, that I didn't belong here or something.

It kinda freaked me out, so I usually chose not to think of it. Cassie had no such problem.

Thankfully, I was soon saved by the appearance of a certain blonde. "Hey, Summer. Hey, Cass." Cassie paused her lecture to toss a wave to Max as he passed by our table on the way inside the BSB. He was in his typical uniform of jeans and a t-shirt with some obscure band logo I didn't recognize, a backpack slung over his shoulder as he walked backwards, waving back. I blushed as his eyes met mine and lingered, a smile breaking out on his face when he noticed the shirt. "See you in O-Chem, Summer."

I just nodded as he walked away, forcing a smile as my stomach sank. Cassie raised an eyebrow at me, a smirk playing on her lips. "You do know Max likes you, right?"

I let out a little sigh as I tucked a piece of hair behind my ear, gathering up my things. "Yeah, I know."

The idea that Max liked me, that any guy liked me, should make me giddy with joy. After all, no other guy had ever shown interest in me before, and Max wasn't just any guy, either. Being with him was so easy, so natural, and I loved him, I knew I did, just not in the way I think he wanted me to.

"Hey, listen," Cassie touched my hand gently, stopping my movements. "I know you don't really think of Max, you know...like *that*, but I think you should give him a shot."

I opened my mouth, ready to argue despite my resolution to do just that earlier this morning, but she waved her hand, cutting me off. "You don't have to marry the guy, okay? Just....go on a date with him. See what happens."

Cassie met my eyes pleadingly. I could tell she was afraid. Hell, I was too. Neither of us knew how Max would take it if I turned him down, if our little trio could survive his heartbreak. Despite all her bravado, or maybe perhaps because of it, Cassie

had never been that great at making new friends. She clearly didn't want to lose the few she did have. "Don't worry. I will."

I gave her hand a reassuring pat before she pulled away, clearing her throat as she stood up. Cassie was never one to show too much emotion. I stood up too, grabbing my bag and telling her I'd call her later before setting off to face Organic Chemistry. And Max.

For me, sitting through Organic Chemistry class was sort of like sitting through a foreign language. Sure, by the time the tests rolled around, I usually had read the book and studied with Max enough to understand what was going on, but during lecture? The professor could be speaking Greek for all I knew. Max paid about as much attention in class as I did, but he could afford to, given the fact that O-Chem came almost as easy to him as music. Lucky bastard. The guy was constantly ditching school and disappearing to god knows where in order to "work on his art," and yet he was still somehow able to maintain a practically perfect GPA. Although, he never missed Organic Chemistry—the one class we had *together*...

I tried not to put too much thought into why.

We usually passed the time in class by passing notes and sharing memes, trying to hush each other's giggles so we wouldn't get shushed by the professor for the umpteenth time.

Today, there was no giggling, no leaning toward each other to whisper jokes. Max sat straight up in his chair, his hands fidgeting with his pencil as he looked around the room. I tried to follow the lecture, staring straight ahead even as I felt his eyes drift toward me over and over again. I wanted to punch him and tell him to quit acting like such an idiot. He hadn't even asked me out yet, and it was already awkward between us.

I scanned the crowded classroom, eager to focus on anything besides the anxious boy at my side, when I saw him. There was a boy sitting in the third row who, despite it being at least the sixth week of class, I'd never seen before. If I had, god knows I would have skipped the class less.

I could tell he was tall, his long, jean-clad legs stretched out beneath the table. His brown hair was slightly pushed up in front and mussed, like he'd been running his hands through it, and he was clearly muscled, his toned arms peeking out from the sleeves of his

shirt. My gaze traced his strong jaw and perfectly sloped nose before finally reaching his eyes.

Even from ten feet away, I could tell they were a dark green, the color brought out by his green shirt. My heart raced and my breath caught as I locked eyes with him. He was easily the most attractive guy I'd ever seen, and he was looking directly at me.

I maintained his intense stare for a moment before quickly looking away, embarrassment flowing through me at being caught checking him out.

Then again, he'd been looking too, right? Dare I believe Mr. Hotness was the one checking *me* out? The thought seemed too fantastical to be true. I turned my head slightly, trying to casually sneak a peek at the guy, and to my surprise, he was still staring. At me. The guy wasn't even trying to pretend to be paying attention to whatever the teacher was droning on about now. I felt a hundred butterflies take flight in my stomach when his gaze met mine once more.

Relax, Summer. He's just a hot guy. You see hot guys all the time. Okay, maybe I'd never seen a guy quite this hot, and maybe none of those other hot guys ever looked at me like I was the last piece of cake at the birthday party, but still. No need to overreact.

I quickly turned away again, and my gaze collided with Max's. We both looked away, and the only option I had left was to stare straight ahead. I shook my head a bit in disbelief. I was pretty sure I'd experienced more male attention these past few minutes than I had my entire life previous. Who knew O-Chem could be such an aphrodisiac?

Finally—mercifully—class ended, and I leapt up from my chair, hurriedly shoving my books in my bag, trying to escape what I feared was coming.

“Hey, Summer? Could I--um--ask you about something?” Max's voice broke a bit on the last word, and he cleared his throat as I turned to face him, eyeing the rest of the students shuffling out of the room with envy. My eyes caught on the hot new guy as he headed toward the door, and my heart sank a bit as I watched him go. The guy stared at me for basically the entire class and didn't even introduce himself? What was up with that?

Max cleared his throat once more, dragging my attention back to him.

“Oh, sorry, Max. What's up?” I forced a smile on my face and met his gaze.

He shook the sandy blonde hair out of his eyes and cleared his throat. “Would you like to go out tonight? On a date, I mean. Would you like to go out on a date tonight...with me?” Max finished his rambling and looked at me hopefully, his cheeks puffing out like he was holding his breath.

I could do it. I could turn him down, and we could just forget this ever happened. Nothing would have to change. Unfortunately, I’d read enough books to know that nothing concerning the heart was ever that easy. Sure, if I turned him down, Max might pretend to be okay, like he didn’t care, but he would. My rejection would create a hole in our friendship, worming its way between us, shoving us further and further apart until the closeness we once shared was only a memory.

“Okay.” I tried to put some enthusiasm in my answer, but I was afraid it came out sounding more resigned than excited. Thankfully, Max didn’t seem to notice. His shoulders sank in relief as a huge smile broke over his face, lighting up his blue eyes. All nervousness was gone, replaced with an almost child-like excitement. It would have made me smile if it wasn’t for the guilt sitting like a rock in my stomach. It felt cruel, leading him on like this, making him think I liked him when I didn’t, but I didn’t see a way around it.

Max pressed a quick kiss to my cheek before heading toward the door, causing a blush to rise in my cheeks. “I have to get to class, but I’ll pick you up at five.”

I gave him a little half-hearted wave before grabbing my bag and making my way out, my heart heavy. I needed to snap out of this. There was no dream guy, no prince charming coming to rescue me. Even the ones that stared at you couldn’t be counted on to stick around.

Sure, Max wasn’t the guy I’d pictured having my first date with. Sure, there wasn’t any *magic spark* between us, but you know what? Maybe that spark didn’t exist. Maybe the dream guy I was waiting for, the one whose smile would quicken my heart and whose touch would set me on fire, was just that. A dream. Maybe--

“Hello, there.”

CHAPTER 2

A Missing Rose

I was pulled out of my inner ranting by a deep voice. The hot new guy was leaning against the wall, but he pushed himself away from it and towards me as I exited the classroom. I was right. He had to be six foot, at least. He stopped in front of me, obviously waiting for me to say something back. Unfortunately, it was like his presence had caused my mind to empty itself completely, and only the words *General Kenobi* were left behind. Eventually, I mustered an almost unintelligible hello of my own.

The guy leaned a bit closer, causing more of those damned butterflies to take flight in my stomach again. “Is there something I should know? What’s going on? Fill me in.”

I blinked at him, not quite sure what he was talking about. Then, it hit me. The guy had missed a bunch of classes. He probably needed help catching up. Shit, why hadn’t I paid attention today? What were we even covering right now? Hot new guy was going to think I was dumb as a rock and then never let me tutor him, which I would gladly do if it meant the opportunity to stare into those beautiful green eyes a little longer. Thankfully, I thought I vaguely remembered the professor saying something about functional groups. “Oh, well, aldehyde reactions really aren’t that tough. I could--um help you with it, if you want?”

Hot new guy just sort of looked at me peculiarly, and I wanted to smack myself. Here I was, practically throwing myself at the guy. I wasn’t even sure if we had covered aldehydes today. I was so screwing this up.

Eventually, a light seemed to dawn in the guy’s eyes as he looked around the crowded hallway. “Right--uh, okay. Maybe we could go somewhere more private to talk?”

“Um--okay. Yeah, sure.” I wasn’t sure why the hot guy wanted to go somewhere private to talk about chemistry, but I honestly couldn’t bring myself to care. Maybe it was because of the strange feeling that seemed to come over me as I looked at him. At first, I

thought it was just attraction, but as I continued to look at him, I realized there was something more. It was like an invisible cord was tied between us, and the closer we got to one another, the tighter the cord became until I wanted nothing more than to run into his arms. I felt my body lean forward like it might actually try it, and I had to consciously pull myself back. What the hell? *Get it together, Summer. You can't just jump the guy in the middle of the hallway.*

The guy looked around a bit before he spotted a maintenance closet at the opposite end of the hall. He grabbed my hand, and before I could protest, not that I'm sure I would have, he pulled me quickly inside and shut the door. I glanced at him a little nervously. A part of me thought maybe following a stranger into a maintenance closet wasn't the smartest move in the world, but a bigger part of me was quite of the opinion that when a hot guy beckoned you into a dark closet, you went into the closet. "So, what did you want to talk ab---"

Before I could finish my question, the guy closed the distance between us quickly, his hands reaching forward to cup my face, pulling my lips toward his own in one swift motion. I froze as his mouth met mine, utter surprise rooting me in place. Um--what the hell was happening, right now?

I didn't know what I had been expecting when the hot guy pulled me into the closet. Maybe that he was just embarrassed about being behind in O-Chem. Maybe that he was hiding from the local truancy officer; I didn't know, but I certainly didn't expect him to make out with me, a girl he'd literally known for five minutes.

My hands rested on his chest, caught between us. I couldn't remember if I had put them there to push him away or pull him closer. I knew I should shove him off me, to tell him he had no right to walk up and kiss complete strangers in the middle of maintenance closets. The only problem was: he was really good at it. His lips moved against mine with expert precision. Not only that, but he didn't exactly *feel* like a stranger. I knew it sounded crazy, but something about him, about the feeling of his arms around me, felt familiar. Like home.

Oh, what the hell. He was probably going to come to his senses soon. Or maybe I was. Might as well make the most of it. My hands smoothed over his hard chest, coming to rest on his neck before sinking into his silky hair. I kissed him back with a passion,

matching each movement of his mouth against mine with equal force. I always thought my first kiss would be clumsy, that I'd be unsure how to move my mouth or where to put my hands, but kissing this guy didn't feel awkward at all. I somehow knew that if I were to bite his bottom lip, he'd gasp and kiss me harder, or if I ran my hands through his hair, he'd pull me even closer. Kissing him felt...familiar. Right. As if I'd done it a thousand times before.

A fire flew through me, his hands scorching my skin as they drifted from my face to my hips before wrapping around my waist, pulling me closer until not a single breath of air existed between us. Time slipped away. At that moment, I all but forgot that we were in a closet and that he was a complete stranger and that I had just agreed to go on a date with another guy because... this was it. This was what I had been searching for, what I had been *longing* for my whole life. This, him, his kiss...it felt like magic.

After a few minutes or hours or days, he pulled back, resting his forehead against mine as we both attempted to catch our breath. I pulled back slightly to examine the random stranger I had decided to make out with more closely. He had a smattering of freckles on his nose, barely visible even at this distance, standing out against his pale skin. His eyes weren't just the solid green color I had originally thought they were. Flecks of gold were scattered amongst the green, like a wildfire was burning within them. Warmth filled my stomach as those eyes traced my features again and again, as if he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing.

As he stared at me, I couldn't shake the feeling that I knew him. There was a connection between us that I didn't understand, feelings that I couldn't explain. I lifted my right hand from where it lay still tangled in his hair, dropping it down to rest against his chest once more. I felt his racing heart beneath my fingertips and couldn't help my smile. It seemed that he was just as affected by our kiss as I was.

His answering grin was just as disarming as the first, lighting up his eyes and revealing the most adorable dimples. My breath caught. There had to be something wrong with me. They were literally just divots in his face; they should not affect me this much. He lifted one of his hands from my waist, moving to rest it atop mine on his chest. For a moment, we just looked at each other, smiling, the heartbeat beneath our palms

gradually slowing. Everything was perfect. Then he, like all boys, had to ruin it by talking.

“Rose,” he sighed, his voice whispering the name like a prayer. I froze. It was as if a cold bucket of water had been thrown over my head, ripping me from a beautiful dream. The smile fell from my lips, my body growing cold where it touched his. He noticed the change in my expression, his eyebrows furrowing in confusion as he searched my face, trying to figure out what was wrong.

“Rose?” he said again, this time with a question in his voice. Yikes. Okay, so this was awkward. Apparently, Hot guy here had me confused with someone else. I had to wonder how similarly we looked for him to mistake me for her so completely. Either I had a doppelganger walking around campus, or this guy seriously needed some glasses. Something told me *Rose*, whoever she was, wasn't going to be happy when she found out I had thoroughly made out with her boyfriend.

Ugh, this is what I get for allowing a complete stranger to kiss me, *and* for kissing him back. Embarrassment flowed through me, reddening my cheeks. How in the hell was I supposed to explain that? *Um, sorry sir for not stopping you when you tried to kiss me, but I felt this connection between us, see, and I thought maybe you felt it, too, so I decided it would be a good idea to follow you into this closet and shove my tongue down your throat.*

The worst part was, beneath the overwhelming embarrassment, I felt...sad. For some reason, the thought of this boy being with anyone else, being with this *Rose* girl, caused my eyes to swell inexplicably with tears. I blinked them away quickly. This was crazy. I didn't even know this guy's *name* for crying out loud, and now I was getting all weepy because he had a girlfriend? *Get it together, Summer.*

The guy was still watching me, concern knitting his brows. Okay, it was time to face the music. Like it or not, lover boy needed to be set straight. I broke his gaze and stepped away from him, the blush still hot on my cheeks as I tried to think of how the hell I was going to explain this. “I’m sorry, but I’m not--”

He cut me off, pulling me tightly back against him. “No, *I’m* sorry,” he said forcefully, desperately, turning my face until I was looking at him once more. There was so much regret in his eyes, so much pain that it took my breath away. “I’m so sorry that I

couldn't stop him, that I couldn't *save* you. You needed me, and I--I *failed* you." His voice broke on the last word, and he looked away, a tear sliding down his cheek.

I blinked at him. Well, that was unexpected. Clearly, he and this Rose girl had some things they needed to work out, but what should I do now? Just blurt out *hey, by the way, you got the wrong girl* after he delivered that heartfelt speech? I debated making a run for it, but that didn't quite feel right either. He just looked so...defeated. It was strange. I didn't know anything about this guy, but leaving him like this just felt...wrong. Maybe it was because he was my first kiss or because he looked a bit like Legolas from *Lord of the Rings*, whom I'd always had a crush on, but it was like I felt the echo of his pain in my own heart, and I wanted nothing more than to take it away.

Before I could stop myself, I reached up, wiping away the tear with my thumb. He closed his eyes for a moment, leaning into my touch. He opened his mouth to say something but was interrupted by a cacophony of crashes and screams echoing outside the dimly lit closet. We both turned toward the door, yet neither of us made a move to open it. Another scream ripped through the air, and I inadvertently shifted nearer to Legolas, pulling myself closer into his chest, fear surging through me.

I tried to tell myself that it was probably just an under-caFFEinated student wailing over a spilled coffee or maybe a disgruntled teacher who just couldn't read another paper lacking a proper heading and snapped. Unfortunately, my mind kept drifting toward the darkest scenario, the one that made me draw tighter to this stranger and watch the door like it was suddenly going to spring open of its own accord, allowing a spray of bullets to fly through. "Do--do you think it's a shooter?"

"Man, that'd be great, wouldn't it?"

I quickly pulled away from Legolas, hoping I'd heard him wrong. "Um--what?"

Legolas began to move toward the door, pulling out a small round device and observing it closely. "I'd much rather be fighting a bunch of overly armed humans than a pack of ashers any day, wouldn't you?"

"Ash--what?"

"I figured it was only a matter of time until they caught on to us." Legolas peered through the blinds on the small window on the closet door. "I'm sorry, but whatever low-profile undercover escape strategy you were trying to do here isn't really an option

anymore. Don't worry, though. We planned for this. Maeve and Tom already mapped out an exit route."

"An exit route?"

"Yeah, but they won't be able to hold it for long, and we need to get through a shit-ton of ashers to get there."

I shook my head. I didn't know what exactly was going on here, but clearly I'd gotten myself trapped in a closet with an insane person who seemed to believe our school had been overrun by some sort of non-human, *ash*-things.

Maybe he'd been on psych leave or something, and that's why he'd been away from school for so long. If that was the case, clearly he'd stopped taking his meds. Unfortunately, I couldn't just say peace out and leave him and his hallucinations to entertain each other in this closet. Crazy or not, Legolas didn't seem dangerous, yet, and judging by the screams and apparent chaos still raging outside, that was not the case for whoever or whatever was wreaking havoc out there. So I stayed still, pressing my back into the shelves filled with toilet paper and Windex, hoping he would forget I was there.

Suddenly, the little device in Legolas' hand turned purple, and he closed his fist around it tightly, looking intensely at the door. "They've found us."

I looked between him and the little purple rock in his hands. "I'm sorry? What found us?"

"The ashers. They're right outside. We have to go. Now."

Before I could very politely but firmly tell him no way was I going out there, he smacked a hand against his chest like a frat boy Tarzan. I opened my mouth to question the weird gesture, but I was immediately silenced by the appearance of an otherworldly shimmer enveloping his body, glowing so bright for a moment I had to close my eyes.

When I opened them, gone were the jeans and t-shirt. Instead, they were replaced by this green... outfit? I didn't really know what else to call it. It was dark green, almost black and consisted of a short sleeve top and pants. The material looked like it was made of some sort of leather. As if that wasn't weird enough, there was a sword strapped to his side. Basically, he looked like a tactical elf. A really hot tactical elf. Holy shit. He really *was* Legolas.

My heart raced and my breath caught as I looked him up and down, trying to process what just happened. Maybe he'd used a sort of hallucinogenic lip balm a la River Song, and he'd dosed me when we'd had our little make-out session. Yes, clearly I was under the influence of some heavy drugs and that was why his clothes had seemed to melt off his body, why he'd practically transformed into a copy-cat of the character I'd imagined him to be. Who knows? Maybe there wasn't even anything wrong outside this closet. Maybe the crashes and screams I'd heard were internal warning bells echoing in my mind, telling me to get as far away from this weirdo as possible and to give those after school specials a closer watch next time.

"Rose? Are you ready?" Legolas was looking at me expectedly, like I should be commenting on his battle plan or complimenting his sick armor or something. I felt my mouth open and close like a fish as I stared at him. I couldn't even muster a *For the love of God, I'm not Rose* or a *Get the hell away from me*. I was too confused, too freaked out to actually be able to string words into sentences. Before Legolas could question me further, his little glow rock of destiny glowed brightly again, and he swore and grabbed my hand. "Shit, there's more coming. It's now or never."

"I choose neve--"

Before I could fully voice my protestations, Legolas pulled me from the closet quickly, like he was ripping off a band aid. I braced myself, expecting to see blood, to see chaos, only the scene raging around me was decidedly different from the nightmare I'd been concocting in my head. Decidedly different, and decidedly worse.

Don't get me wrong. There was still chaos and screaming students sprinting down the halls. It was *what* they were running from that made my blood freeze and my heart pound, that made me want to run right along with them, only faster and farther than my feet could carry me.

The lights seemed to flicker as dark shadows flew across the fluorescent beams. Swirls of angry black mist flew around the hallway, teeth and claws occasionally reaching out and dragging across the walls or slashing through the air. The creatures felt like pure fear and rage and sadness, the black mist of their bodies closely resembling the dark emotions they conjured within me with just one look.

I felt the urge to compare them to dementors (how could any self-respecting *Harry Potter* fan not?) but the truth was that they were much worse. They didn't rid you of hope, didn't empty you out. Instead, they filled you up, filled you with something.... wrong. Something oily and dark and warm but in the worst way, like you were burning from within. No, these things felt more like demons than dementors. Not only that, they felt familiar. Or should I say, the fear they inspired did, like the worst kind of old friend.

Another scream ripped through the air, shocking me out of the temporary stupor my fear had put me in, quickly followed by a chorus of shouts and shrieks as students flew around us in a panic.

Legolas glanced behind me, his eyes growing wide. "Get down!" he shouted, yanking me forcefully to the ground as something dark whizzed above us, narrowly missing our heads. I landed in a crouch, instinctively wrapping my arms around my head. A beat passed, and I chanced another look around.

The once peaceful hallway had turned into a battle ground. Everyone seemed to be panicking in their own way. Many simply ran, leaving book bags and loved ones behind. Others, it seemed, were attempting to fight the creatures, tossing pencil cases and binders, but the objects had no effect, simply passing through the mist-like form of the monsters' bodies. Some, surprisingly, didn't seem to be afraid at all. In fact, one guy just stood there staring at the shifting beings with a disappointed scowl on his face, like he thought they were some promotional stunt for a horror movie, and he'd expected the CGI to be better.

Abandoned backpacks and papers were littered across the carpet floor with more being forgotten every second as frightened students and faculty ran from...whatever these things were. My mind refused to accept the idea that these were actual monsters. That one dude must be right. It must be a prank or an ad or something, something besides ash--whatever Legolas had called them.

They filled the hallway, about five in all, though it was hard to distinguish one from the other because of the way they shifted and changed form so quickly. They whizzed around students, coming in close before moving on, but they didn't attack. It was almost like they were looking for something.

“C’mon, Rose! We can’t stay here! We have to move!” Legolas grabbed my hand and yanked me toward the open study area at the end of the hallway, away from the monsters. Despite the fear and confusion filling my brain, I had to admire how Legolas was keeping his cool, not freaking out and screaming like the other students. Then again, it was almost like he had known they were coming, like he knew what they were. I wasn’t sure what to make of that, what to make of any of it, but I’d have to sort all that out later. Right now, my main concern was not dying.

Legolas pulled us down the hallway toward the coffee shop, until he stopped so fast that I couldn’t help but crash into his back. I peeked over his shoulder as a shadow monster rose up in front of him, quickly followed by two more. Legolas cursed and turned around, yanking my arm so hard it felt like it might get pulled out of its socket if I didn’t follow him.

I tried to shake off the fearful daze that the sudden appearance of the monsters had left me in and let myself be pulled along by Lee as he leapt over abandoned backpacks and overturned chairs. I didn’t look back, didn’t want to know if those things were following us. Fear made me run faster than I ever had, and I stumbled as I tried to match Lee’s breakneck pace. The guy was like a freaking gazelle.

We entered a study area occupied by various couches and chairs scattered across the wide, high-ceilinged room. Sunlight was streaming through the tall windows lining the back wall. Through them, I could see the panicked students pouring into the parking lot. Some were speaking animatedly into their cellphones and gesturing back at the building wildly. Others were just plain running away. I experienced a brief moment of relief when I realized the room was free of shadow monsters. Unfortunately, it was also a dead end.

Sirens began to echo throughout the building. Someone must have pulled the fire alarm. Legolas dropped my hand, typing something urgently on his little purple rock thing before reaching to grab the sword strapped to his side. How the hell did he even get that thing on campus? I gave him an incredulous look as he faced the hallway, assuming a defensive position. Just what was he planning on doing with that? The monsters were *made of mist*.

He noticed my look and gave me what I assumed was supposed to be a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. Backup is on the way." I hoped he meant the police or a SWAT team or something, although I wasn't sure bullets were going to work much better than his sword. I had a sinking feeling he was referring to the other members of his L.A.R.P group or medieval club or whatever it was that he was involved in that required him to dress like one of Robin Hood's merry men.

Before I could question him, a loud thud from somewhere in the hallway broke the relative quiet. I jumped behind Legolas. Right now, he and his sword were the best defense I had. I held my breath, clinging to his shoulders. His very strong shoulders. Wow, the guy clearly worked out. Not to mention, he smelled amazing. *Do not smell his neck, Summer. Do not smell his ne--*Too late. Geez, what was it about this guy that made me act like a freaking nutcase?

Suddenly, two figures entered the room. They were both clothed in similar garb as Legolas, only the girl was wearing a tank top and the boy had a hood. They both looked around my age. The boy was Asian, with olive skin and dark hair that hung in his eyes. He had a quiver on his back and carried a bow in one hand, an arrow nocked and ready to fire.

The girl had dark brown skin and eyes, her hair pulled back in a tight French braid. She didn't have a bow or a sword. Instead, she carried two scary looking daggers, the ends jagged and sharp. Looked like I was right, and we had the rest of Legolas' merry men to back us up. Fantastic.

The guy with the bow, whom I decided to refer to as Hawkeye, a la the Avengers, was limping slightly as he came in, muttering curses with every step. "Who in the hell just leaves their backpack lying in the middle of the hallway?"

Ah. So that explained the thud. The girl seemed uninjured, yet she was wearing a scowl as sharp as the daggers in her hands. She narrowed her eyes at Legolas. "What happened to waiting to engage until we had determined the coast was clear, Lee?"

I felt Lee's shoulders shrug up and down beneath my palms before replying, a smile evident in his voice. "Yes, well, as you can see, I got...distracted."

Lee stepped aside abruptly and gestured his sword at me with a flourish, revealing who exactly was hiding behind him. Both Hawkeye and the girl's mouths dropped open

in shock as they stared at me. I gave them a little wave, feeling self-conscious. Why were they looking at me like that?

“Rose!” Hawkeye cried out, a smile lighting up his face as he lowered his bow to wrap me in a one-armed hug. Oh, right. That.

The girl, who I decided to call Elektra, echoed his grin, not taking her eyes off me even as she began to talk to Lee. “I can’t believe you found her so quickly! I thought we’d have to search the whole campus.”

Yikes. Okay. Apparently, they had made the same mistake this Lee guy did. I had got to meet this Rose girl. I mean, maybe I had a secret twin or something? We must look freaking identical for all *three* of them to mix us up. I returned Hawkeye’s hug half-heartedly, opening my mouth to try and clear up this misunderstanding once and for all. Unfortunately, yet again, I was interrupted.

A shadow monster whooshed into the room, black mist swirling and churning into inhuman shapes as it hovered ten feet above the ground. I told myself to run, to jump behind Lee, but fear kept me frozen in place. Elektra raised her daggers while Hawkeye dropped his arm from around me, quickly notching an arrow and aiming it at the monster. Great. Not only did we have a sword, we also had *wooden arrows* to defend ourselves against the monsters made of *shadow*. Oh joy.

Before Hawkeye could let one of his arrows fly, the monster locked eyes on me. Not literally, of course. I mean, I wasn’t even sure the thing had eyes, but as I stared into the churning mist, I could feel the moment it noticed me, could feel its gaze crawl across my skin like a million spiders. I sucked in a breath, my heartbeat thudding loudly in my ears, and waited for it to look away. It didn’t.

The monster dove at me, claws reaching forward from the dark mist. There was no time to move, to defend myself. All I could do was brace myself for the pain...but it never came. Instead, a gleam of silver flashed in front of my eyes. One second, the monster was in front of me about to tear out my throat with its claws, and the next, it was gone, a spray of falling ash the only clue that it ever existed at all.

I stared at Lee with wide eyes as he rubbed his sword against his thigh, casually wiping it clean of the black ash that covered it like a fine powder. My mouth dropped open. “You--you *killed* it.” I couldn’t believe it. Lee had actually managed to kill one of

those things. Not only that, but unlike me, he didn't seem at all surprised that it had worked. It was like he had already seen these things, and fought them, before. My mind rebelled against the impossible notion.

Lee turned his attention from his sword to me, leveling me with a confident smile and wink. "I did do pretty good, didn't I?"

Despite my surprise, I had to bite back my smile at his cockiness. That's definitely not what I meant, and he definitely knew it. We didn't have time to celebrate before the rest of the monsters appeared. Lee took charge, shouting commands at the others. "Maeve, try and engage as many as you can! Tom, fire arrows into anything that gets too close! Rose and I will handle the rest."

I was nodding along with what Lee was saying, moving to get safely behind him and his nice sword when the last bit sunk in. "Wait, what?"

Before Lee could answer, the monsters attacked, all four diving toward me just like the last one. Maeve let out a battle cry and slashed at the one on the left with one of her daggers. It turned toward her with an angry snarl, annoyed but not dead. It seemed you couldn't just kill the things with any old stab. You had to hit it in just the right spot.

Tom let loose arrow after arrow at the other three, his movements fluid as he pulled arrows from his quiver and nocked his bow in one continuous motion. Damn, he really *was* like Hawkeye. Still, the arrows only seemed to slow the creatures down, their bodies shifting and changing form too fast to ensure accuracy. Another peeled off to attack Tom, and he directed his shots toward it. That left two monsters racing toward Lee and me, and they were pissed.

"Here!" Lee shouted, pulling a knife from his belt and tossing his sword to me. We both watched as it clattered to the ground at my feet. Lee gave me a questioning look, confusion furrowing his brows. Clearly, I was supposed to catch it. "Rose?"

I didn't have time to respond before the creatures were upon us. "Lee, behind you!" I screamed, my eyes tracking the monster as it snuck up behind him, looking to take advantage of his distraction. Lee turned, thrusting forward with his knife as he did so. The monster reared back as it stabbed through its right side, letting out an angry snarl before attacking again. I wanted to keep watching, to make sure Lee was okay, but my

attention was drawn to the last monster as it drew closer, a shifting form of anger and darkness heading directly toward me.

I hurriedly picked up the sword from the ground. It wasn't heavy like I expected, but it still felt clumsy in my hands. I had no idea how to use it, but my only other defense was currently fighting for his life a few feet away. For now, I was alone. Besides, it had already proven itself capable of killing these things. I just had to aim it at the right spot. Easy peasy.

I gripped the hilt with both hands and raised it in front of me the way I'd seen it done in movies. The shadow monster had stopped its movement and now hovered in front of me as if sizing me and my sword up. I puffed up my shoulders, trying to look more confident than I felt, but I worried the shaking of my hands gave away my fear. Without warning, the creature rushed at me, teeth as sharp as daggers jutting out from the shifting darkness, mouth open in a fierce snarl. I slashed out wildly with my sword, desperation and fear driving my movements.

Unsurprisingly, I missed, and the strength of my swing caused me to stumble slightly to the left. I felt the cold of the monster as it whooshed by me, teeth closing in a resounding snap around the air where my throat used to be.

I regained my balance, letting out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. That was close. Too close. Adrenaline coursed through my veins as I tried to focus, to push down the crippling fear that seemed to flow from the creature to me, making my heart race and my legs shake.

The creature made a circle, continuing forward slightly before reeling back to engage me once more, this time with silvery claws extended instead of teeth. I slashed at it with my sword at the same time as I jumped away, trying to dodge its attack like before. I wasn't so lucky this time. I felt jagged talons dig into my side as I turned, and I couldn't help the bloodcurdling scream that tore from my throat as the pain ripped through me like another set of claws.

"Rose!" I heard various voices call out in a panic, but I couldn't respond. The creature had torn deep gashes in my right side, blood turning my light green shirt a sickly brown color. I pressed my hand to my side, trying to stop the pain ripping through me, but the contact only made it worse. It felt like someone was pressing a hot poker to my

skin, like I was burning from the inside. I gritted my teeth against the pain and lifted the sword half-heartedly with my right hand, spinning in a slow circle. My whole body shook with pain and exhaustion as I struggled to keep the sword up, trying to keep the monster in view as it circled me, taunting me, like a wolf playing with its food.

Tears welled in my eyes as I desperately tried to make myself wake up, to free myself from this nightmare I'd stumbled into, but my side gave another painful throb, and I knew no amount of wishing would save me. This was real. I was going to die.

The monster dove toward me, its snarls of anticipation echoing loudly in my ears. I used the last of my strength to raise the sword above my head, the pain of the action making me see stars, but I was determined not to go down without a fight. I swung hard... and stumbled forward as shadow suddenly dissolved in front of me.

My eyes widened in disbelief as I stared at the pile of ash on the floor, all that was left of the monster that had almost killed me. My gaze drifted to Tom and Maeve, the ground at their feet littered with ash as they stared at me, chests still heaving from the efforts spent during the fight. Tom's quiver was empty of arrows, a small gash on his face the only sign of injury. He was looking at me with his head tilted to the side like a confused puppy, as if what he was seeing didn't quite make sense. Maeve also seemed to have escaped the battle with only a few bruises on her arms and face. Her dark eyes scanned me with a penetrating look, something like suspicion lingering in her gaze.

My sword clattered to the ground as fiery pain and exhaustion rolled through me. My eyes landed on Lee. His fight had taken him halfway across the room. Like the others, his green clothes were covered in ash, his brown hair a bit more chaotic and disheveled than before. He was staring at me intensely, his hands empty of any weapons.

I took in the spray of ash still lingering in the air in front me, my eyes catching on the knife laying haphazardly on the ground. It looked like Lee had saved my life. Again. He began walking toward me, his pace increasing with every step until he was practically sprinting, panic growing in his green eyes. I tried to take a step toward him, but the pain in my side had become so intense, it was making me dizzy.

The room began to tilt, the floor rocking beneath me like the deck of a boat in the middle of a storm. Both of the Lees were looking at me, worry glimmering in all four of their eyes. Wow, such pretty eyes and now there were four of them! I fell towards the

floor, my legs finally giving out, but thankfully the Lees were there to catch me. They were good like that. I felt myself being lowered slowly to the ground, the tense conversation happening above me merely white noise.

“Did you see the way she was fighting? It was like she had never held a sword in her life.” Tom’s voice floated above me, shock and concern filling the low tones. The pain had turned into a numbness that spread over my body, leaving me cold. I welcomed it. Anything was better than the fire that was burning me up a few seconds ago.

“Why isn’t she healing herself?” Maeve questioned tensely, grabbing my wrist and pressing her fingers to my slowing pulse. “The poison has almost reached her heart.”

I blinked slowly, the time between opening my eyes and closing them becoming longer and longer until I could feel sleep was only a breath away.

“Right now, it doesn’t matter why. Let’s heal her and then get our answers.” Lee said authoritatively. I felt a warm hand cover my wounded side and another lightly pat my cheek, forcing me to open my eyes. “Hey, Rose! Don’t fall asleep, okay? You can’t fall asleep!” Lee’s face came into focus above me, the flames burning brightly in his wildfire eyes.

He shifted his focus away from my face, focusing intently on my side. Suddenly, warmth flowed from his hand. The numbness was pushed back, replaced with what felt like sunshine flowing through my veins. Lee had his eyebrows scrunched up in concentration, sweat beading on his forehead as he directed all his attention to whatever he was doing to my side. I felt the sunshine cascade through me, starting in my side and spreading to the tips of my fingers and toes. I let out a soft sigh as the numbness was entirely replaced with that warm feeling, leaving my whole body feeling refreshed.

Lee lifted his hand from me and fell back on his heels, his breath coming out in heavy pants. I sat up and pressed a hand to my side, dipping my fingers between the torn fabric and running them over my skin, but there was nothing there. No scar, no pain. It was like it had never happened at all. I looked around at the merry men, only they really weren’t all that merry. Tom tried to give me an encouraging smile, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. Maeve wasn’t quite scowling at me, but she wasn’t smiling either.

Finally, my eyes landed on Lee, who seemed to have almost recovered from...whatever it was he’d done. Even *thinking* the word magic still felt crazy to me, but

what other explanation was there? Besides, if monsters made of darkness could somehow appear and attack me in real life, Lee using magic to heal me really wasn't that far of a stretch.

Unlike the others, Lee wasn't staring at me like I was a science experiment that had gone awry. There was concern in his eyes, yes, but there was also undeniable love and affection. He was looking at me the way he did in the closet, like I was his world and his heart all rolled into one, like I was his Rose.

I took in a long breath as I looked up and away from the oddly dressed trio, blowing it out slowly as I got to my feet, the three of them rising with me. I still had about a million questions buzzing around my head, but I knew I wouldn't be able to get proper answers for them until I resolved this whole mistaken identity issue. "Okay, so you might find this question a bit alarming, so don't freak out, but..." I said, bringing my eyes back to look at them, bracing myself for the onslaught of anger to come. "You guys really think I'm this Rose, girl huh?"

The three of them simply stood there, staring at me, like they couldn't quite process what I was saying. I shifted my weight awkwardly and cast a longing glance toward the door, wanting to escape the uncomfortableness of the moment, but I stayed where I was. Whether they meant to or not, these people had saved me, so I kinda owed it to them to help sort this whole thing out. Besides, they actually seemed to have experience with these shadow monsters. After they found their real Rose, which I imagined would be their first priority, maybe they could help me figure out why these monsters were here, and why they'd chosen to attack me.

Tom was the first one to break the silence, reaching forward to punch my shoulder, a nervous grin on his boyishly handsome face. "Haha, Rose. Very funny. C'mon, quit playing around."

I rubbed my shoulder with a grimace, not returning his smile, and spoke slowly, "Listen, I am *not* Rose, okay? My name is Summer. I'm a student here." I shifted my gaze to Maeve and Lee, hoping they would get the message better than their friend.

Maeve scowled at me, crossing her toned arms across her chest. "This really isn't funny, Rose."

I threw my hands up in exasperation. “I’m not trying to be funny! I’m trying to tell you that I. Am. Not. Rose!”

I finally turned my attention to Lee. He grabbed my hand, the confusion in his eyes quickly transforming into panic. “What are you doing, Rose? Is *he* making you say this?” Lee darted his gaze around the room, as if he expected this mysterious “he” to be behind him, holding up cue cards for me to read.

I placed my other hand over his, pulling his panicked gaze back to me. “No one is making me do anything, okay? I’m not Rose.”

I began to pull my hand away, but Lee just shook his head and held it tighter, his eyes squeezing shut as if he were trying to block out what I was saying. “You’re lying. I *know* you’re lying.” His eyes snapped open as he looked at me, anger twisting his features. “If you’re not Rose, then why did you kiss me? Who the hell just makes out with a random stranger?”

I moved to take a step back, a bit offended despite the fact that the guy had a fair point. I pointed my finger at his chest. “Hey, *you* were the one who kissed *me*! I should have shoved you off--”

Lee cut me off, stepping into my personal space once more. “But you didn’t, did you?” My cheeks warmed, and I tried to look away, embarrassed by the memory, but he grabbed my chin, forcing my gaze back to him. “*You* kissed *me* back. You *knew* me. You *know* me because you’re Rose.” He was practically panting by the time he was finished, anger and desperation stealing his breath.

As I looked into his eyes, so desperate to believe I was the one he had been searching for, any remnant of anger faded, leaving only sadness in its wake. I didn’t want to hurt him. Clearly, he cared about this Rose a lot, but no matter how much he, or I, wished differently, I wasn’t her.

I grabbed his hand, gently removing it from my face and stepping away, even as my body urged me to lean closer. This time, he didn’t fight me on it. “That’s just the thing. I *don’t* know you.” I shifted my gaze to Tom and Maeve. “I don’t know any of you. I have no idea who you are. I have no idea what those--those *things* were. All I know is I’m not Rose. I’m sorry for making you think differently, however accidentally.”

I shifted my feet as the three of them just stared at me, like I was the crazy one in this scenario. “Maybe it’s a duplicate?” Tom suggested. “Or something spelled to look like Rose, but underneath it’s actually some slimy monster.” Tom gave me a curious once over as if he expected me to suddenly sprout a tail now that my cover had been blown.

Lee began to pace, hands roaming through his hair. “If he wanted us to believe it was the real thing, why would she pretend not to know us? No...” he stopped pacing, training his intense gaze on me. “It’s her. I know it’s her. She just....doesn’t remember us. She doesn’t remember who she is.”

Maeve finally uncrossed her arms and rested a hand on Lee’s shoulder. “Could he really have done this? Is that kind of spell even--even *possible*?”

Lee shook his head, stepping away from Maeve. “With him, anything is possible.” He looked at me for a long moment, placing his hand on his chest. “I know it’s her. It has to be her.”

“But Lee--”

“*Maeve*. It’s her, okay? It’s her. Trust me.”

Maeve clearly wasn’t as convinced, but she stopped trying to fight him on it, choosing instead to glare at me, like she thought she could get me to unmask my true self through the sheer power of her dark stare. I couldn’t help but shiver a bit under her scrutiny.

Lee stepped forward, grabbing both of my hands and looking intensely into my eyes. “Rose, whatever game, whatever strategy you’re playing, you need to fill us in, okay? You’re scaring me. Tell me right now. Do you know who you are?”

I looked into his eyes, trying to make him understand the truth. The others clearly followed him. If I could convince him, he would convince them. I was sure of it. “Lee. I am *not* Rose. I’m Summer. Summer Raven Wood. Always have been. Always will be.”

Lee was shaking his head at my words, but he stopped suddenly and looked up at me. “Wait, what did you just say?”

I sighed. This guy really wasn’t a very good listener. “I said, I’m Summer. Not Rose.”

Lee nodded quickly. “Yes, right. But Summer what? What’s your full name?”

I spoke slowly, hoping he might finally catch on. “Summer. Raven. Wood.”

Lee grinned ear to ear, and the dramatic change in expression threw me for a loop for a second. He looked back toward Tom and Maeve. “See, I told you it was her.”

Tom nodded, echoing Lee’s smile, but Maeve’s face seemed to be etched permanently into a frown. “Still might be a trick if you ask me.”

Lee ignored her, turning back to me, his face becoming more serious. “Okay, listen. Your name isn’t Summer, and you’re not a student here. Someone took your memories. They made you forget who you are, *what* you are. At least, they tried to.”

“And what, exactly, do you think I am?”

“A Princess.”

CHAPTER 3:

Something a Unicorn Would Poop Out

I blinked a few times, his words slowly sinking in. Lee's gaze searched my face, trying to gauge my reaction, and I couldn't help it. I began to laugh. Hard. I dropped Lee's hands and bent over, tears streaming from my eyes as I gasped for breath, but I couldn't stop laughing. Maybe it was because I almost died five minutes ago. Maybe it was because the guy I recently made out with just *healed* me with his freaking hands. Or maybe it was because I'd wished my whole life for a guy to think of me as a princess, and yet *this* was how it happened. Apparently, I needed to be more specific.

"Guys, I think we broke her," I heard Tom whisper to the others out of the corner of his mouth as laughter continued to pour out of me. Gradually, the breathless cackling turned into giggling, which then became light chuckling, which finally dissipated into a sigh.

I stood up straight, wiping the lingering tears from the corners of my eyes. "I hate to break it to you guys, but I'm not a princess."

Lee shook his head. "Yes, you are."

"Okay, well then riddle me this, loverboy. Aren't princesses supposed to grow up in a castle? I've lived in a lot of foster homes, but none of them were exactly fit for royalty."

I expected a quick retort, but the three of them just looked at me a little strangely, like I was speaking a different language. Tom held up a finger. "Um, what's a foster home?"

I blinked at him. Was he serious? "It's a temporary home for children with no one to take care of them."

Lee ran a hand through his hair, looking deep in thought. Maybe he was finally getting it? "So, you think you've grown up in foster homes--"

"I don't *think*. I know." I interrupted, but Lee continued on as if I hadn't said anything. He began pacing back and forth and mumbling to himself like a mad scientist

trying to work out an exceptionally difficult equation. Maybe that was it. Maybe they were all mad.

I cast another glance toward the exit. It was currently blocked by Tom and Maeve. Maybe a quick getaway was my best option, but I'd have to get by tweedle-dee and tweedle-dum, first. I eyed Maeve and her scary knives. She caught me staring and leveled me with an intimidating scowl, resting her hand on the hilt of her blade, daring me to try it. Then, again maybe not.

--but you could have only been here for what? Two years? So, that means..."

Lee abruptly stopped his pacing and turned toward me.

I shifted my weight a bit, uncomfortable under his heavy gaze. "What?"

"Describe it to me."

"Describe *what* to you?"

Lee crossed his arms and was looking at me challengingly. "Describe it to me. Growing up in foster care, what was it like?"

I continued to stare at him, a little puzzled as to why he'd be interested, but answered all the same. "It was...lonely."

Lee narrowed his eyes. "Okay, but surely you must have been close to somebody. Who did you live with? What were their names?"

Uh--their names? I racked my brain, trying to remember anyone specific I'd lived with, but nobody stood out in particular. "I--uh--I can't remember anyone specific--"

Lee raised an eyebrow at me. "Eighteen years in foster care, and you can't remember a single person? Okay, then tell me about something specific that happened to you. Something good. Something bad. Anything."

I stared at him, uncertainty worming its way into my mind. Why couldn't I remember anyone? I shook it off. At least I could answer his second question and put this whole game to rest.

I reached for a memory, any memory of my time in foster care, but there--there was nothing there. No, that couldn't be right. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to concentrate. It's like I could see the shape of the memories, the outline clear as I looked from far away, but whenever I tried to get closer, to pull out something specific, the memories became wispy and insubstantial, slipping through my fingers like smoke. I

searched my mind desperately, looking for something, *anything*, but there was nothing concrete, nothing I could hold on too, just the whisper of the idea in my mind. “I--uh-- nothing, there’s nothing--”

“And this school? You say you go here. How do you pay for it?”

“I--I studied. I got a scholarship--”

“What scholarship? What was it for? Who funded it?” With every question, Lee stepped closer. I thrust my hand out, trying to keep him away. It was like the walls were caving in on me, the panic in my chest growing with every step he drew toward me.

“I--I--” I pressed my fingers to my temples, pain flashing in my mind as I searched for a memory that wasn’t there. “I can’t remember. I--can’t--I-- Why can’t I remember?” My words fell faster from my lips as panic filled my chest.

Lee laid his hands on my shoulders, dipping his head, forcing me to meet his gaze. I frantically searched his eyes, hoping they somehow held the answers I couldn’t seem to find on my own. There was undeniable compassion in his green gaze, the flecks of gold flickering bright with the emotion, but there was also firm resolve.

“You can’t remember because it didn’t happen. None of your memories are real.”

His tone was sure, leaving no room for argument, but sympathy flashed in his eyes as he saw the effect his words had on me. My hands dropped from my head to wrap around my middle, my breaths becoming more and more rapid as the truth of his words struck home.

No. No, that couldn’t be true. Surely, there was something-- “My friends!” I shouted, a tendril of hope blooming inside of me. “My *friends* are real! Max and Cassie. I have memories of them, vivid memories. And this school!” I waved my hands around, gesturing at the building as if to emphasize my point. “I remember things about going here, *specific* things. See that classroom? I fell asleep there last week. Over there, I spilled hot chocolate all over myself when I tripped over that step. So there, see, that proves it!”

I smiled at Lee hopefully, wanting him, *needing* him to tell me that he had been wrong, but he just looked at me sadly, sympathy flickering in his gaze. “How long?”

“What?” The pain in my head was still there, increasing with every second he looked at me like that, like he was waiting for me to fall apart. “How long have you gone to school here? How long have you known Max and Cassie? Let me guess. Two years?”

I froze, the last bit of hope I had that this was all some misunderstanding shriveling into dust. “How--How did you know that?”

Lee opened his mouth to answer, but Maeve cut in, stepping towards us with impatience. “Because two Earth years is precisely how long you’ve been missing.”

“What? That can’t be--wait did you say *Earth* years?” What the hell did that even mean? Unless...I cast a wary glance over the three of them. “You guys aren’t from another planet or something, are you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Maeve scoffed at me, flicking her French braid over her shoulder. I let out a little sigh of relief. This day was already weird enough. I didn’t think I could handle many more surprises. “We’re from another realm. Time moves differently there. For us, you’ve only been gone for six months.”

My jaw dropped open. “Realm?” Who the hell *were* these people? “I can’t--I don’t believe you.”

Maeve opened her mouth, ready to argue, but Lee spoke first, grabbing my hand gently. “Ro-Summer. I know this is hard. I can’t imagine what you’re feeling right now, but can you honestly look me in the eyes and tell me what we’re saying doesn’t make at least a little sense?”

I looked him in the eyes, but I didn’t speak. It didn’t make sense. Nothing about this made sense. I had just assumed most people struggled to remember specific things about their childhood, about high school in general. I mean, didn’t everyone in college make stuff up when asked about their past, fill in the gaps that time had made a bit blurry? I had thought that was all it was, why I couldn’t ever seem to remember my first foster mom’s name or any special birthday I’d had. I just brushed it off, made something up, and quickly moved on, like my mind didn’t want to linger on the details, like it couldn’t.

But that didn’t explain why I couldn’t remember *anything* specific up until two years ago. My time in foster care, the scholarship. It was like the ideas had been planted in my head, but when I tried to pick at them, to get a closer look, they fell apart in my

hands. The harder I tried to hold the fragile pieces together, the faster they slipped through my fingers until they were whisked away entirely by the breeze.

My *memories*, if you could even call them that, were more like notions that had taken root in my mind without anything to substantiate them, and I'd never questioned it. Until now. A chill ran through me. It terrified me to think I had no real memories of my life up until two years ago, but it scared me even more that I'd never noticed it.

Lee was still staring at me intensely, but I couldn't bring myself to answer him. I was afraid that once I did, there would be no going back. "Come with us and we'll give you answers, but we have to leave now."

The pain still echoed in my head as I tried to fight past the false memories, tried to find something real, but the harder I fought, the more intense the pain became until I had to stop. It was like my own mind was working against me, and any answers that lay locked inside weren't going to reveal themselves anytime soon.

I wanted to tell them to get lost, to take their crazy theories about missing princesses and realms and hit the road, but I couldn't. I couldn't deny what had happened today. I'd been attacked by monsters made of shadow. I had been kissed, rather intensely I might add, by a boy I had never met yet already seemed to care about, and I had no real, tangible memories of my life up until two years ago. Lee was right. My memories, my life. None of it made sense. I needed answers, and it looked like they were the only ones who could give them to me.

However, who's to say that what they were saying was the truth? Maybe, despite the matching outfits and the swords and magic, they weren't the good guys here. There was even a chance that *they* were the ones that had done this to me. For all I knew, they could have taken my memories and now they were trying to manipulate me into helping them with some nefarious plot.

I pressed my hands to my head. I didn't know, I couldn't know for sure until I got more information, or until I got my memories back, whatever they turned out to be. "Fine. I'll go with you, but I want answers. Like now. I know a place where we could talk."

"There's really not ti--"

“Listen, we both know you can make me go wherever you want, but if you want me to cooperate, if you want me to even entertain the idea that anything of what you're saying is true, we're doing this on my terms.”

It needed to be somewhere public. Somewhere I could ditch them once I got the answers I needed. Somewhere they couldn't kill me if the answers I found weren't the ones they wanted. Somewhere we wouldn't stand out, and we wouldn't be disturbed. I knew just the place.

Lee looked at me as if trying to gauge how serious I was, before finally nodding his head. I let out a little internal sigh of relief. I really didn't feel like being kidnapped today.

We wound our way down the hallway. I reached down and grabbed my bag that I had dropped whilst Lee and I were fleeing the monsters. This was crazy. I *knew* this was crazy. Going off with these strangers. Actually considering the idea that what they were saying was true, that I was some sort of magical princess from another realm, but what else could I do? Those shadow monsters were clearly after me. If I ditched these guys and went home, who's to say they wouldn't follow? I'd already proven myself incapable of fighting them, and it's not like I could go to the cops and tell them I needed protection from otherworldly creatures made of darkness.

I thought briefly about calling Max or Cassie, but they'd probably think I was crazy, too. Not to mention, if those shadow monsters really were after me, I didn't want my friends anywhere near me. It would only get them hurt. No. I needed help, and I needed answers, and for now, these guys, however strange, were my best bet.

The deserted halls were littered with abandoned papers and backpacks. I saw Tom give an especially large one a kick as we passed by, eyeing it hatefully as he rubbed his knee. He caught my look and gave me a little wink, his dark hair falling into his twinkling eyes. My eyes widened a bit in surprise at the familiar gesture. These guys may be warriors from a magical realm, but they still seemed rather...human. Still, I couldn't deny that what Lee had done had been magical. However, accepting that also meant accepting that this “realm,” as well as whatever magical creatures might call it home, actually existed.

Oddly enough, the idea wasn't that shocking. Maybe it was because I had so much experience with the fantasy genre, but the possibility that magic and magical creatures existed wasn't so much alarming as it was...exciting. After all, how many times had I wished to see a dragon or ride a unicorn or battle a troll? Now that my wish had finally been granted, part of me— the very *small* part that wasn't scared out of my mind— found the idea of stumbling into this new world thrilling rather than frightening. This whole having my memory erased, being a princess thing? Less so.

I glanced at my companions. My running theory was that they were elves. I eyed Lee positioned in front of the group, sword drawn in case the shadow creatures decided to make another appearance. That jawline and those eyes were like something out of *Lord of the Rings*-- too perfect to be just human. Not to mention the small fact of him healing me with his *bare hands*. Yep. All signs point to elf or possibly warlock. Like I said, both seemed surprisingly plausible after the morning I'd had.

At the end of the hallway, I instinctively turned toward the entrance, but Lee caught my hand. I hadn't even realized he'd stopped. I tried to ignore the warm tingles that crept through my hand as he held it. Tried being the operative word.

"I don't know about you, but I think we should try to steer clear of large crowds." Lee pointed towards the mass of students and police swarming the parking out, visible through the clear glass doors.

I raised an eyebrow at him before giving all three of them a blatant once over. "Well, if you were worried about blending in, maybe you shouldn't have dressed like a trio of Robin Hood's merry men." Maeve sniffed, clearly offended, but Tom let out a laugh. "Can't you just change back into the clothes you were wearing?"

I poked at Lee's chest, wanting to see if it would magically transform his green outfit into the t-shirt and jeans from this morning. Nothing happened. Lee shrugged his shoulders, a smile of his own tugging at his lips. "Sorry, only enough charge in the material for one outfit change."

"Well, that wasn't very smart, was it?"

"Well, we weren't exactly expecting to find you being held prisoner in broad daylight in the middle of a university campus."

I wonder what they *had* been expecting. If all they said was true, and I had really been.....taken, whoever or *whatever* had done it must have been bad news given that these three seemed to have expected to find me tied up in a cave somewhere. I added it to the million other questions I had stored up. If I stood a chance of surviving against those monsters chasing me, then I needed to acquaint myself with this new world I'd stumbled into. Until I did, I had only my extensive knowledge of *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the rings*, and other fantastical works to guide me.

I was so screwed.

"So, do y'all have a car, or did you like teleport here or something?" I waved my hands around to simulate the sort of magical movements I'd associate with teleportation, but I began to lower them when I noticed that all three of them were staring at me. The silence was eventually broken by their combined laughter. Apparently, I had said something funny. I narrowed my eyes at them, thoroughly unamused, but it only made them laugh harder.

Tom wiped a tear from his eye, his chuckles slowly dying out. "Of course we have a car. No one can *teleport*."

His laughing started back up on the last word, and I crossed my arms and glared at them. Clearly, the actual nature of magic differed from its many literary depictions. "Excuse me for not knowing all the magical ends and outs of your world." I pointed a finger at Lee, accusingly. "You healed me with magic. I saw you. Why is it so crazy an idea that you could also use magic to teleport?" Or *aparrate*, a la Harry Potter.

Lee smirked at me. "That's not how magic works."

"Explain it to me, then."

"Not here. Let's get to the car, and then I'll answer all your questions. I promise." I sighed but dropped it. "We've already mapped out an exit. Follow me," Lee said, leading us into the coffee shop and toward a back entrance I didn't even know was there.

Had it really only been a few hours since I was here sipping cocoa with Cassie, discussing our plans for the summer? This morning my biggest worry was Max's unwanted attentions, and now I was faced with the possibility that my entire life was a lie, that I was, or had been, someone entirely different. Not Summer, but *Rose*. A girl who was apparently a sword wielding magical warrior princess with a badass entourage

and a devoted boyfriend. I snuck a glance at Lee who was peeking his head out the door, making sure the coast was clear. The sunlight shone on his brown hair, casting a light over his determined expression.

I couldn't deny that a small part of me, the one that wasn't freaking out that my whole life might be a lie, was thrilled at the idea that the kiss hadn't been a misunderstanding. Could you blame me? Those green eyes, those strong arms, that hair---

Maeve snapped her fingers in front of my face, interrupting my ogling. She looked from me to Lee with narrowed eyebrows, a frown tugging on her lips. "You may have Lee completely convinced that you're Rose, but I, for one, see no reason to trust you. You might be wearing her face, but as far as we know, you could be a spy, or an assassin, or an ogre for god's sake. So, act as lovesick as you want, but know that I'll be watching you, and if I think you're any danger to my friends or the kingdom, I will take you down."

Maeve turned away before I could respond, not that I thought I'd be able to. The girl was seriously frightening. Still, she was also the only one who seemed to believe me when I said I wasn't Rose. I didn't know exactly what to believe yet, but I, like Maeve, wasn't quite convinced that I was the girl, or princess, as it were, that these people thought I was.

Lee gave us a nod, indicating the coast was clear. I followed him and Maeve out with Tom behind us, covering our backs. I stepped outside, shielding my eyes against the bright glare of the Texas sunshine. We had emerged into an alley behind the school. I could hear the distant hum of police sirens echoing from the parking lot. "So, where's your ride?"

"Right here," Lee led us around the corner. A van came into view, one that looked an awful lot like...

"Is that the Mystery Machine?"

Tom patted the side of the van proudly. It was an exact replica of the one from the tv show. "Isn't she a beauty? This style is very popular on Earth."

I raised my eyebrows, looking between him and the neon teal and orange monstrosity he was leaning against. "Actually, it's not."

Tom's face fell, looking like a puppy who just got his favorite toy taken away. "But I saw it on that show, the one with the dog that solved crimes. They drove it everywhere!"

"Yes, but that was a television show from decades ago. Do you see any cars that look like that now?" I gestured toward the parking lot at the end of the alley, and Tom followed my gaze to see the sea of cars that were decidedly not neon teal vans.

Tom sniffed and crossed his arms. "Well, clearly this isn't a very stylish neighborhood."

Lee groaned and punched Tom in the shoulder. "You told me you had done research to prepare for this mission. I gave you all those books and films about Earth culture."

Tom scratched the back of his neck, looking guilty. "I may have found the DVD with the Scooby doo mysteries on top and... didn't touch any of the rest." Lee rolled his eyes, but Tom rushed to defend himself. "It's high-quality cinema, okay? How was I to know--"

Tom abruptly stopped talking as his eyes caught on something over our shoulders. "Uh, guys? I think we have a problem." I turned around and caught a glimpse of a woman in a tight pencil skirt holding a microphone, hovering at the edge of the parking lot where it met the alley. At the sight of us, her face lit up, and she began walking briskly towards us, an entire camera crew following at her heels. This wasn't good. I looked at our little group. Three oddly dressed characters carrying weapons and a girl in a blood-soaked t-shirt sneaking away from what was likely now a crime scene. No wonder the reporter was scurrying over here as fast as her six-inch heels could carry her.

"In the van. Now!" Lee shouted. I slid the door open and quickly jumped inside, Lee right on my tail. Maeve hopped in the passenger seat while Tom took the wheel. He had just turned the ignition when the reporter lady and her entire crew swarmed the car, shouting at us for a statement about this morning, asking why we had weapons, why I was covered in blood.

Tom tried to move the van forward, but the media people weren't giving him an inch of space. He laid down the horn, but they refused to budge. It seemed we were a

story worth dying for. He smacked the steering wheel in frustration. It was no good. We were trapped. "I can't get out without running them over. I need more room."

Panic filled me as I tried to come up with a solution. We could try and wait them out, but something told me it wouldn't be long before someone else, another reporter or worse, a cop, noticed all the hubbub and came to investigate. We needed to get out of here. Now.

Suddenly, Maeve began digging around in a bag that lay at her feet. "Wait--I can't believe I almost forgot--Got it!" Maeve pulled out what looked like a translucent glass egg. I peered closer. Only it looked like there was some sort of pink mist trapped inside and wait, were those... *sparkles*? Maeve caressed the egg lovingly while Tom gave a little whoop of victory. Apparently, whatever was in the egg was going to get us out of here. "Is it charged?" Lee questioned.

Maeve nodded. "I charged it before we left the hallow just in case we ran into a problem that required a more...humane solution."

I raised my hand. "Uh--What the heck is that thing?" It looked like something a unicorn would poop out.

"This, *princess*, is a coruscent," Maeve said, getting ready to roll down her window.

"What does it d--"

Before I could finish my question, Maeve rolled down her window just enough to allow her to shove the ball through. The reporters stepped back and the ball smashed into the cement. By the time it did, Maeve had rolled up her window, which turned out to be a good thing because as soon as it hit the ground, it exploded. Turns out, the glowing egg of destiny was a bomb. A glitter bomb, that is. One second the reporters were pressing themselves against the van, the next they were covered in pink dust and about a million sparkles. Some began to scream and run while others scraped desperately at their clothes, trying to get off some of the glitter.

"Freedom!" Tom cried and used the newfound space to skirt around the people and out of the alley. As we drove away, I caught a glimpse of the reporter lady shaking her hair back and forth over and over again. No matter how many times she did it, the glitter continued to pour out, never lessening.

Maeve saw her, too and laughed. “Yeah, good luck with that. That pink dust will wash out, but the glitter? She’ll be sparkly for at least a month.” I sat there, absorbing the fact that I had just witnessed what I suspected was another act of magic. I knew I should probably be freaked out, but I was more intrigued than anything. What the hell was that thing? They said they “charged it,” so was the egg itself not magical? How did the magic get *inside* the egg? And most importantly, where could I get one?

Now that the crisis had been averted with the help of the sparkly egg bomb-- *coruscent*, I took a closer look at my surroundings. The inside of the van was just as outrageously decorated as the outside. It had teal shag carpet, and the walls were a blinding orange. The windows were tinted, and the glass seemed to be thicker than normal. Bullet-proof, maybe? Various food wrappers lay littered around the floor along with crumbled up fast food bags. It seemed my rescuers had the eating habits of a thirteen-year-old boy.

Lee, who sat across from me on the opposite bench in the back of the van, noticed my pointed look at all the trash and grinned bashfully. My breath caught at the sight of those damn dimples. That’s it. He shouldn’t be allowed to smile like that. It was too distracting. “We don’t have this kind of food in our realm.”

“Well, what do you eat in your realm?” It still felt weird to say the word “realm” out loud and even weirder to be seriously considering the idea that I was from a magical one, but until I got more answers, I had decided to keep an open mind. I couldn’t deny I had seen some strange things today. Shadow monsters, glitter bombs. What’s one more impossibility?

“Small children, mostly.” Maeve deadpanned, sharpening the tips of her knives as she looked over her shoulder at me from the passenger seat. My heart stopped for a second before Max punched her in the shoulder.

“She’s lying,” he called over his shoulder before directing his glare toward Maeve. “We’re trying to get her not to be afraid of us, remember?”

Maeve grumbled that he was no fun, and I let out a small sigh of relief. “Well, why don’t you just pop to Earth whenever you have a craving for taco bell?”

Lee smiled at me. “We can’t teleport, remember?” I rolled my eyes and leaned forward. It was time I learned more about just what kind of world I’d stumbled into. “So, how exactly does one travel between realms?”

“Well, it can be kind of tricky where Earth is concerned. It requires magic, and Earth doesn’t exactly have a lot of that.”

I furrowed my eyebrows at him. “So, the magic doesn’t come from within you? You have to draw it from somewhere else?” I had assumed their magic worked kind of like in *Harry Potter*, and they all had their own powers they could use whenever they liked. Apparently not.

Lee nodded, though he had a peculiar sort of expression on his face, like the fact that he had to explain this stuff to me unsettled him. I didn’t blame him. If I really was their princess, and that’s still a big if, the fact that I literally knew nothing about their world must be a little freaky for them. “Exactly. Magic is drawn from the land. We don’t own it, but sometimes we can harness it. Get it to do what we want.”

“Like healing someone?” Or enchanting exploding glitter bombs.

“Yes. Magic can be used to mend what’s been broken, or to move what already exists, but it can’t be used to create or destroy anything, at least not without...consequences.” Lee looked away on the last word, a grim look replacing his smile.

I was about to ask what exactly those consequences were when Tom cleared his throat. “Hate to break up the magic lesson, but can someone tell me where I’m supposed to be going?” I rattled off an address, and he took off, making sure to avoid the gaggle of onlookers still standing in front of the building.

A momentary silence fell over the four of us, and Lee met my gaze, his eyes guarded, like he was preparing himself for something. “So, what exactly do you remember about your life?”

I stared past him, trying to put into words the jumbled mess that was clattering around my brain. “It’s sort of like there’s a clear outline of my life written in my head. There are certain things that I’ve always believed to be true. I grew up in foster care. I got a scholarship to this university. But when I look closer, when I try to think of specific events or memories, the outline fades away, and I’m left with nothing.”

Lee rubbed his chin, contemplating my words. “It sounds to me like the spell didn’t just get rid of your old memories. It also planted certain ideas in your head, ideas that would make your current life make sense. Why don’t you have a family? You grew up in foster care. How do you pay for school, for daily expenses? You got a scholarship. It’s like the spell was covering its tracks, keeping you from seeing the holes in your new life. It didn’t bother to attach specific memories. After all, you had no reason to question the ideas placed in your head. Until now, that is.”

Lee looked like he was trying to appear calm, but his eyes gave away a rage hiding just beneath the surface. Someone had stolen him from the memories of the girl he loved, at least, he believed they did, and it seemed like the consequences, the loss of something like that, was finally starting to sink in.

I tried to shove down the pity, the pain I felt at seeing him so destroyed. He was still practically a stranger to me, and I had no reason to trust him other than the way he made me feel all warm and tingly inside. I focused instead on what he’d said. I couldn’t deny that it made sense. Well, as much as any of this could make sense. I’d never questioned it when I saw the money pop into my account, simply assuming it was a part of the scholarship, but no scholarship was that extensive. I wondered how I could have missed that, missed all of it, but Lee was right. I’d never had a reason to second guess it before. Those facts were ingrained within my mind, to question them would have been to question my own memories, something I’d never had cause to do until today.

“The first memory I have, the first real one, was going to orientation.”

I could still remember the nerves rattling around in my stomach as I had looked around the crowded auditorium full of students and parents. The lecturer had tapped the microphone, signaling he was about to begin his introductory speech welcoming us to campus, and I had panicked, glancing desperately around for an empty seat as I clutched my class brochure nervously between my sweaty fingers. I saw an open aisle seat a few feet away and made a beeline for it. A beautiful girl with raven hair occupied the seat next to it, her mouth twisted up into a scowl as she argued with her parents sitting to the left of her.

“Is this seat taken?” I squeaked out, tucking my hair behind my ear nervously. The girl turned from her parents to me, taking in my pink dress and white converse.

Perhaps she could tell I was nervous, or couldn't help noticing I wasn't surrounded by an adoring family like everyone else, but she smiled at me, such a contrast from the way she had been scowling at her parents, and gestured at the seat welcomingly. "Only by you. I'm Cassie, by the way."

We had spent the entire speech making fun of the speaker's toupee, giggling even harder when Cassie's parents repeatedly tried to hush us, and we were glued at the hip for the rest of orientation. Cassie had sent her parents back to the hotel. I attended all of Cassie's boring business school meetings with her, and in exchange, she slept through the presentations by the English department with me. During lunch, a blonde boy with a name tag that read *Max* slapped haphazardly on his shirt, alongside some obscure band logo I didn't recognize, had nervously asked to sit with us, and we'd let him. The rest was history.

"I don't remember anything concrete before that day." I said softly, a numb realization settling over me. "I remember waking up in my apartment that morning. Everything before that is just...gone."

I met Lee's eyes, the pain my words had caused written plainly across his face. "You don't remember *anything* before that? Anything about your real life, about...." Lee looked down, trying to tamp down the pain leaking into his voice. The unspoken *me* hung over us like a heavy cloud. I just shook my head. My earliest memory of him was our kiss, before we were attacked by-- "The monsters!" I exclaimed. Lee's head snapped up.

"Monsters? You mean, the ashers?"

"Ashers?"

"That's what we call the monsters made of shadow."

"Oh, well I think--I think I've been having dreams about them." It made sense now, why the fear I felt of the ashers felt so familiar. I didn't know how, but it was the same sinking feeling in my stomach, the same terror I felt whenever I emerged from one of my nightmares. They had to be connected somehow.

"What kind of dreams?"

"I don't know. I can never remember. Except...."

"Except, what?" Lee pressed, leaning forward in his seat.

I sighed but saw no sense in keeping it from him. “Whatever it is...whatever they do to me...I always wake up screaming.”

Silence fell over the vehicle, broken only by the honking of cars and the gentle hum of the radio. Even Maeve’s knives stilled their scraping as the trio contemplated what that could mean for them, for me. Lee’s eyes turned cold and he began to shake his head as if refusing to entertain the darker possibilities of what a dream like that could mean. I suppose he’d already lost me once. Twice if you consider his disappointment upon discovering that the girl he’d searched for wasn’t exactly the girl he’d found. Something told me Lee wasn’t going to let me out of his sight anytime soon.

“Maybe some of your memories seeped through your dreams, or maybe you know something about his plan, and you’re trying to, I don’t know, warn yourself?” Lee looked at me, a lost expression on his face, like he was hoping I might have all the answers.

Unfortunately, all I had were more questions. “Who’s plan? Who do you think took my memories?”

Lee clenched his jaw, fighting back some emotion I couldn’t name. “His name is Varian. He’s a sorcerer.”

I held up my hand. “Wait, isn’t a sorcerer just someone who uses magic? Aren’t you guys sorcerers, too?” I pointed a finger at Lee. “Or are you the only one who can do magic?”

“Everyone has some affinity for magic,” Maeve called out from the passenger seat, resuming her task of making her deadly knives even deadlier. “Some can channel magic from anywhere, and others can only do so in places where magic is extremely concentrated.”

“So, even people on Earth can use magic?”

“Yes, though humans’ affinities are generally pretty low. The rare few who are born with a more powerful affinity are what you like to call witches. Still, Earth has so little magic, most humans can barely sense the magic around them much less harness it, even those with unusually high affinities.” The fact that she was referring to the people of Earth as humans, implying that the three of them were, well, *not*, wasn’t lost on me. However, I decided to save that somewhat terrifying question for a later time.

“So, some places are more magical than others?”

Lee nodded his head in confirmation. “Right. Our realm, Crestfall, is full of magic. Earth, on the other hand, has hardly any magic at all. There are special places in each realm where magic is more concentrated. We call them hallows. On Earth, hallows are pretty much the only places where there is enough magic to do more than mend a rope. Unfortunately, there are only about a dozen hallows scattered across the realm of Earth.”

“Is my university a “hallow?” I made air quotes around the last word.

Lee looked at me quizzically. “No, what makes you say that?”

“Well, you were able to channel magic there. Do you have a really high magical affinity?”

Lee blushed and Tom laughed from the front seat. “High magical affinity? Lee could be standing in the middle of the most powerful hallow on Earth, and he would only barely be able to channel enough magic to tie a shoelace.”

Lee shot Tom an evil look, but I pulled his attention back to me, the confusion evident in my voice. “Then, how were you able to heal me? That was magic, right?”

Lee opened his mouth to respond, the blush still reddening his cheeks, but Tom beat him to it. “Oh, that’s just because you’re b--”

“A princess!” Lee interrupted, cutting Tom off sharply. “Magic is easier to control when a member of the royal family is involved.” I looked between the two of them quizzically, still confused as to why something like that would make him blush. “So, people of the royal family are what? More powerful?”

“Yes, that’s why they were chosen to rule thousands of years ago. Their blood--your blood--carries a great affinity for magic.”

“And that’s what allowed you to heal me even though you don’t have that strong of a power?”

“Um, yes that’s right.” Lee didn’t look at me when he answered, instead choosing to concentrate intently on the shag carpet beneath his feet.

“But aren’t you a prince?” I blurted out.

Lee’s head snapped up in surprise. “What makes you say that?”

Now it was my turn to blush. “Well, I just thought, given the fact that you kissed me earlier, that we were maybe, um, ya know, together. And if I’m a princess, I guess I just assumed that you were a prince.”

Lee’s eyes grew hard as he looked away from me. “Sorry to disappoint you.”

Oh, crap. Now I’d offended him. I honestly didn’t care if he was a prince or not, I was still just trying to understand everything. The truth was, he could deliver trash for a living, and it wouldn’t make me any less attracted to him. “No! No, I’m not disappointed. You’re perfect--I mean, well you’re great the way you are, and you’re really good at ya know, kissing, and stuff and--”

I slammed my mouth shut before I could blurt out any more embarrassing things. Great, I’d gone from snobbish to desperate in less than a minute. That’s got to be a new personal best.

Fortunately, Lee didn’t look upset anymore. In fact, he was grinning at me. “You think I’m a good kisser?”

My face was on fire as I tried to come up with some response to wipe that cocky grin off his face.

Maeve made gagging noises from the passenger seat. “Ugh, can y’all keep the sweet nothings to yourselves. That’s definitely one thing I haven’t missed in the last six months.”

Lee held his hands up in a gesture of innocence, a smile still occupying his features. “Hey, it’s not my fault Summer thinks my kisses are irresistible.”

I rolled my eyes at him, but something he’d said gave me pause. “Summer?”

Lee met my questioning look with a kind one of his own. “Until you get your memories back, I’d figure I’d make this whole thing a bit easier on you and call you by your own name. At least, the only name you remember.”

My heart warmed at the thoughtfulness of the gesture. It was becoming clearer and clearer to me why I had fallen for Lee. *If* I had fallen for Lee, I told myself. *If* any of this magic and realm stuff was even true. I couldn’t let myself drink the Kool Aid, not yet, not until I was sure. After all, believing in them meant believing that all the things that made me *me*, all the work I’d done to get where I was, was basically meaningless. Rose might have a cool boyfriend, but I wasn’t ready to give up everything that Summer

had accomplished, everything that she was. Not until I was sure. “So this sorcerer guy, Varian, what makes his magic different from anyone else’s?”

“Remember how I told you that one can only use magic to do certain things?”

“You said something about how it can only be used to control what exists? It can’t create or destroy anything?”

“Right, well, a sorcerer is a magic user who ignores the rules of nature. They channel more magic than they should, than what is allowed, and they use it to do...unnatural things.”

“Like removing someone’s memories.”

Lee’s eyes flashed with anger. “It would seem so. Though the amount of power needed to perform a spell that massive would have to be extraordinary.”

“Didn’t you say that breaking the rules of magic had consequences? What consequences, exactly? And why isn’t this Varian guy suffering them?”

Lee’s gaze darkened, his voice dropping dangerously low. “When one breaks the natural laws of magic, their very soul is tainted, darkened, along with their magic. Trust me, Varian has suffered for his power, and he will again.”

The threat in his voice made it clear that Lee wanted to be the one to make him suffer. Was it weird that I found it kinda hot? Yeah, it was weird. Forget it. *Focus, Summer*. “So, why do it? Why take my memories?”

“Six months ago, Varian attacked Crestfall. He overthrew the kingdom and kidnapped you in the process. We’ve been searching for you ever since.”

“And my kingdom? Is he now in control of it?” The thought filled me with alarm for two reasons, the first being because the idea of any innocent kingdom, whether it was mine or not, being overthrown by a mad sorcerer filled me with dread. The second was because I really was beginning to think of it as *my* kingdom, my responsibility, despite not being sure about the whole princess thing. Shit. I was drinking the Kool aid.

Tom piped up from the front seat. “Right now his reach only extends to the Hallowed Town, but it won’t be long until he has enough power to take over the entire realm.”

“And he won’t stop there.” Lee continued, a grim look darkening his handsome features. “After taking full control of Crestfall, he won’t hesitate to attack the other realms.”

“But why? What does he want?”

“Destruction, chaos, power. Take your pick. He’ll never stop, not until every realm is under his control. No doubt he’ll start with Earth given that it’s the least magical and the most defenseless.” I stared at them with wide eyes. This was getting worse by the second. My panic must have been evident on my face because Lee rested a reassuring hand on my knee. “Don’t worry. Now that we’ve found you, we can stop him. Together.”

I looked at him like he was crazy. He’d seen me with a sword. I had barely held my own against one of Varian’s minions much less the master that controlled them. “But what can *I* do? I have no memories, remember?”

“You have the strongest affinity for magic Crestfall has ever seen, and a whole kingdom to back you. If anyone stands a chance at stopping him, it’s you.”

Yeah, I wasn’t so sure about that. I had never experienced any kind of magical anomalies before. Never accidentally made a vase fall off a shelf or made glass magically disappear in the zoo. There was a good possibility that whatever power I’d had might have vanished along with my memories. Lee must have seen the doubt in my eyes. “I’m sure your memories will return eventually. Your dream of the monsters is proof of that.” He said it like he was trying to convince himself along with me.

“But I can’t just go galivanting off to another realm! What about my friends? School?”

Lee touched my hand. “We don’t mean to push you, Summer, but do you truly feel like this is your home, that you belong here?”

I wanted to say yes, this was my home. After all, I had Max and Cassie, school, a future that didn’t involve going up against crazed sorcerers and fighting shadow monsters. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that there was something more, something stronger that beckoned me away from all I’d known. How many times had I thought that I felt more at home in my fantasy books than I did in reality? I had put it down to my own romantic tendencies, the innate desire everyone had for the otherworldly and the magical, but I was beginning to see that it went deeper than that.

I had failed to feel at home on Earth because it wasn't my home, not really. As much as it scared me, the world of magic and monsters called to me in a way Earth never had. Besides, according to these guys I was a princess, and that muscly dream boat sitting across from me was my boyfriend. Maybe this new reality was worth a little more exploration.

Before I could fully absorb this life-altering revelation, Tom spoke up from the driver's seat, confusion evident in his voice as he slowed the van down to a crawl. "Uh-- Summer? Where exactly have you taken us?"

"Somewhere safe," I called back before smirking at Lee's questioning gaze. "Somewhere you'll blend right in." The screams of children began to echo outside the van, and Lee peeked around the passenger seat, peering through the front windows at the mayhem ahead. A mixture of confusion, dread, and panic played across his features as he read the sign aloud.

"Welcome to Medieval Marty's Magical Adventure Zone."

CHAPTER 4

The Belly of the Beast

I had traded my blood-soaked top for a soft white t-shirt Maeve had in the van. I was shocked when Maeve threw it at me, but apparently, the leather armor stuff they were all sporting was used mainly in battle. The rest of the time, their clothes were pretty normal looking, or so they claimed. Either way, I was grateful for the clean shirt. My blood-stained shirt looked a little alarming, and I'd hate to traumatize any children.

When I'd first tried to come up with somewhere safe we could go, my initial thought had been my apartment. However, if what these guys said was true, that apartment belonged to the same evil sorcerer that was currently sending those ashers after us. Not to mention, if this Varian guy really had been keeping tabs on me, he must have known about Max and Cassie, so their places were out, too.

All that was left was somewhere public, somewhere we wouldn't stand out. Besides, this morning I'd been thrown into a world I could barely believe was real, much less understand. Right now, I wanted to be surrounded by something familiar, wanted to learn about this world on my own turf, as if doing so might give me back some of the control that had been ripped away from me today. Only one place came to mind.

The entryway was guarded by a fierce green dragon. Well, it was probably fierce once. The green had faded, and its head hung over the doorway a little lopsided, its once sharp teeth looking more like yellowed nubs. He also appeared to be missing an eye. The dull echo of children's screams transformed into a roar as the wings of the dragon parted and we stepped, quite literally, into the belly of the beast.

Medieval Marty's Magical Adventure Zone could only be described as the hellish spawn of a chuck e cheese, medieval times, and a severely understaffed day care. The smell of pizza and parental desperation washed over us as we stepped inside. Maeve, Tom, and Lee came to a halt just inside the entryway, eyes wide as they took in the chaos around them.

The interior was decorated like the inside of a medieval tavern, full of wood paneling and royal flags and fake weapons hanging on the walls. Scattered around the large room were various arcade games, all modified slightly to match the theme. There was a ball pit that was full of soft jewels as opposed to plastic balls, aptly named the Dragon's Lair. There were half a dozen skee ball lanes with little gnomes guarding the holes. There were also a few basketball hoops, but instead of basketballs, the kids were tossing what looked like ogre heads. Classy. The waiters were dressed like wenches and knights' valets, serving fried pickles and mozzarella sticks to tired parents and ravenous children.

"This is the stuff of nightmares," I heard Tom whisper to Maeve. I smiled. Good. See how they liked being out of their element for a change.

The three of them were still cemented in place, no doubt trying to decide whether or not they should make a break for it while they still could. I scooted past them and made my way toward the hostess station where a teenage girl dressed like a serving wench was typing something on her cell phone. Her nametag said *Rosie*. Oh, irony. We meet again.

The girl didn't look up as I approached, her eyes never drifting from the screen. "Welcome to Medieval Marty's Magical Adventure Zone. Are you ready to begin your quest?" She deadpanned.

I smiled despite her apparent lack of enthusiasm. "We are, indeed."

"How many in your fellowship?"

I peeked over my shoulder at the trio who had begun to make their way towards me, eyes still wide with fear at the chaos around them. "Four."

"Right this way, please." The girl grabbed some menus and turned to lead us toward one of the wooden booths. Lee sidled up next to me as we followed behind.

He was still glancing around, absorbing the utter pandemonium. "So, do you come here often?" I raised an eyebrow at him, a smile dancing on my lips. A confused look crossed Lee's features as he looked at me before he rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean."

I tried to make myself feel afraid of him, to convince myself that we still didn't know if he was one of the good guys, if any of what he was saying was true.

Unfortunately, my heart was apparently of the opinion that he *was* to be trusted and that my mind should get with the program. So, I couldn't help it. I flirted, telling myself that it was only because it would be better to make him believe I actually trusted him, that way he wouldn't expect it if I decided to escape. Yep, that was definitely the only reason.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I come here occasionally with Max and Cassie."

Cassie's mom had brought Cassie here when she was fifteen before her first date. She had offered to drive Cassie and the boy to the movies but stopped here first on the way. Then, she'd pointed to all the screaming children and told the boy to keep his hands to himself or this would be his future. Needless to say, the rest of the date was ruined after that. Cassie was furious, but her mom refused to apologize. Apparently, she considered this place the best birth control money could buy.

When Cassie told Max and I the story, we'd demanded to see the raging hellscape full of prepubescent munchkins for ourselves. We'd been coming here ever since. Cassie liked to observe people in crisis, purely for scientific reasons, of course, she was a future psychiatrist after all, and Max and I liked to challenge each other to skeeball competitions.

Eventually, when we were down to our last token, one of us would be the lookout while the other ran up the lanes and dropped the skee balls into the holes with the highest points. I had a shelf in my room dedicated to displaying the various prizes we'd gotten with all the tickets we'd won. We hadn't been back here for a while, not since one of those snot-nosed kids had tattled and the manager threatened to ban us. Kids were such narcs.

The girl placed our menus on the table. "Your server will be right with you. Have a magical time." I expected her to make some comment about their outfits, but she never even looked up from her phone. I guess, working here, she was used to crazy.

The four of us slid into the booth, Lee and I on one side and Tom and Maeve on the other. I couldn't help the little thrill of excitement that ran through me as Lee's side pressed up against mine. I tried to tell my heart to cool it, our shoulders were barely brushing for goodness sake, but it wouldn't listen. Traitor.

Tom and Maeve had finally seemed to get over their shock at this place. Tom was flipping through the menu, an excited grin lighting up his features. “Guys, if we get a large Meatball Magic, they’ll throw in thirty free tokens! Who wants to go halvesies?” Tom eyed the three of us hopefully. Maeve rolled her eyes at him, and Lee was still combing through his menu like it was the latest Sarah J. Maas.

“I’m down.” I glanced at my watch. It was only 11:30, but I was starving. All the excitement and adrenaline of the morning had zapped what little energy my hot chocolate had supplied me with.

“Awesome!” Tom reached across the table to fist bump me.

As I raised my fist up to meet his, I didn’t know what happened, but instead of hitting his fist head on as I had originally intended, I tapped it twice on the right side then twice on the left before pulling away elaborately with the traditional explosion noise that accompanied such a move. Tom echoed my movements, ending his explosion at the same time I did, but his jaw had dropped open. I stared at him quizzically, “What?”

Before he could answer, Lee grabbed my hand that was still lingering in the air from the explosion. Excitement danced across his features. “You did it! You did the handshake!”

I glanced from him to Tom, whose smile was now practically bursting from his face. “What handshake?”

“The stupid handshake you and doofus, here,” Maeve gestured at Tom, “invented a few years back.” Maeve’s voice was mocking, but even she had a smile tugging on her lips.

Tom scoffed. “Stupid? Try awesome. You’re just jealous that you and the princess don’t have a secret handshake.”

Maeve rolled her eyes. “It’s not exactly a secret when you talk about it every five minutes.”

“Hey, I don’t--”

“The *point* is,” Lee said, interrupting their bickering, “You remembered something.” Lee stared into my eyes, hope sparkling in his own as we absorbed what this might mean. He was right. I remembered something! Well, my body remembered

something. Sure, it was just some silly handshake, but still. It was something. If I could remember this, maybe my other memories would come back.

Lee squeezed my hand with excitement, and warmth filled my chest as I stared into his eyes. The waiter appeared at the table. Lee and I broke each other's gaze, but when I went to pull my hand away he squeezed it tighter, lowering it so that it rested between us under the table.

Wow, lover boy sure didn't waste any time, did he? I knew I should pull my hand away, to remind him that while I was willing to go along with this insane other realm idea, my double identity as a princess, and any romantic attachments involved therein, were still entirely suspect. Yes. That is what I should have done.

Instead, I barely held back my squeal, and let our hands rest between us. *Be cool, Summer. Be cool.* Thankfully, I was saved before I did anything too humiliating, like stroke his chiseled chest or shove my tongue down his throat, by the sudden appearance of the waiter at our table.

"Hello, my name is Monty and I'll be your--"

The waiter stopped talking as I finally looked up and into his eyes, realizing who, exactly, was waiting on us. You had got to be kidding me. He had on a dark blue collared shirt with gold stitching over the right pocket spelling out the words *Head Valet*. Monty was around mid-thirties, with a large nose and incredibly bushy eyebrows, like two furry caterpillars had been glued to his forehead. Cassie liked to joke that he had more hair in his eyebrows than his head. She wasn't wrong. Those caterpillars furrowed as he narrowed his cold eyes at me. "Summer," He said with a haughty sniff, exaggerated formality in his tone.

I crossed my arms as I glared right back at him. "Montgomery." Monty treated his slightly above minimum wage position as more of a calling than a job. He disapproved of Cassie, Max, and I's "antics," and had tried to get us kicked out on multiple occasions.

"I see you have some new friends with you this time." Monty took in Maeve, Tom, and Lee's outfits. "They certainly seem... enthusiastic. I hope you're not up to any mischief, again."

I placed a hand over my heart, batting my eyes with exaggerated innocence. “Mischief? Me? Oh, Montgomery. You know I would never do anything to disrupt the magic and sanctitude of such an esteemed establishment as this.”

Monty glared at me before pulling out his pen and notebook with a sigh, his voice defeated. “What can I get for you?”

I looked around the table expectantly, but my friends were rapidly glancing between Monty and I like we were the most interesting tennis match they’d ever seen. I gave Tom a light kick under the table. He sat up straight with a jolt. “Right, um, I’ll have one Meatball Magic, please, and they’ll have...”

“Order of mozzarella sticks.” Maeve said bossily, shoving the menu toward Monty without looking at him. She was actually smiling at me, something like respect reflected in her dark eyes.

“Nothing for me, thanks.” Lee handed his and my menus to Monty, a smile tugging on his lips as Monty grabbed them with two figures, curling his lip at them like they were covered in dog poop. He didn’t even wait to see if I wanted anything.

“Have a magical time,” He grumbled. I gave him a little finger wave as he sulked off.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Lee turned toward me. “Okay, what was that all about?”

I feigned innocence. “What was what all about?” Just then, Monty walked by and slapped the thirty free token coupon on the table with surprising force, not even looking at us as he continued on his way.

Lee raised his eyebrows. “I’m talking about your apparent sworn enemy, the Head Valet.”

“Oh, Monty and I go way back.”

“Really?”

“Yep. He’s been itching for a reason to get me banned from this place, but so far, he can’t prove anything.”

Maeve smiled deviously, leaning toward me eagerly. “What did you do?” For once, Maeve wasn’t looking at me with distrust in her eyes, but genuine interest.

Apparently, she was as fond of getting into trouble as I was. I smiled back, glad to have found some common ground between us.

“Let’s just say, Max and I like to take some of the games into our own hands.”

Maeve grinned and looked like she wanted to hear more, but I caught a glance at Lee who had a peculiar expression on his face. “What?”

“Nothing, it’s just you and this Max guy seem really... close.”

My eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “Yeah, he’s my friend.”

“Yeah, it sounds like you guys are good *friends*.” Lee crossed his arms in annoyance, and I narrowed my eyes at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Before Lee could answer, Tom grabbed the coupon for tokens and started aggressively shoving Maeve out of the booth. “Wow, you know what sounds really fun right now? Playing some arcade games, right Maeve?”

“Great idea, Tom. Let’s go.”

Lee and I continued to glare at each other as they desperately tried to escape the sudden tension that had filled the booth. “It means that it seems your life hasn’t exactly been as *lonely* as you’ve previously implied.” Oh no he didn’t.

“Max and I are *just friends*. That’s all.” Sure I had recently agreed to go on a date with him, but that was neither here nor there. “More importantly, you have no right to be jealous or insinuate that I was doing something wrong when I literally had no memory of you until an hour ago.”

If all they said was true, then I had been kidnapped, my memories had been stolen, and the last two years of my life had basically been a lie, so if Lee wanted to condemn me for having *friends*, for the small aspect of my life that had actually *meant* something, then he had another thing coming. Rose might have put up with this crap, but Summer sure as hell wouldn’t.

Lee continued to stare at me, trying to maintain his glare, but eventually he sighed, uncrossing his arms, and grasped my hand once more. “I know. I’m sorry. You’re right. I have no right to be mad at you. It’s just the thought of you hanging out with this other guy, playing arcade games together, laughing together...It just hurts to think I’ve spent the last six months missing you like crazy, and you...haven’t.”

As Lee looked at me, his pain evident in his eyes, I realized how strange it felt, having someone love you without really knowing you. It was even stranger to look at someone and feel things for them that didn't make sense. I didn't know Lee, and he didn't know me, at least not the me I was now. And yet, I couldn't deny what I felt when I looked at him, when I touched his hand. I may not have missed him in the same way he missed me, but that didn't mean I hadn't missed him. It was more like I had been living with a dull pain near my heart, one that I hadn't even realized was there until he came and took it away.

I took his hand and squeezed it, trying to convey with my eyes the mess of feelings running through my head. "Hey, my life here? It hasn't been all arcade games and rainbows. Why do you think I'm going along with all this so easily? Why do you think I'm not in the middle of having a nervous breakdown despite all this talk of magic and realms? I've always felt like there was something missing, that I wasn't where I was supposed to be. And then you came along, and for the first time, I feel....whole."

Lee stared at me intensely, his thumb rubbing soft circles on the top of my hand. "I've missed you so much."

As I looked at him, his brown hair ruffled, his green eyes full of emotion, I realized something. "I think I've missed you, too. Even though I didn't remember you, I missed you."

Lee's gaze fell from my eyes to my lips, and I sat motionless, afraid to even breathe and ruin the moment. I knew he was still practically a stranger, and I shouldn't have been dying for a stranger to press his lips against mine in a darkened booth, but hey, I was just a woman, okay, a human woman, and Lee was looking at me with those green eyes, and he kept drawing those circles on my hand, and my body had completely taken control of my mind. And you know what? For this moment, I was okay with that. I could almost feel his lips on mine when an angry shout shattered the moment.

Then again, maybe an medieval arcade full of small children wasn't the best place for a make out session. Shame.

I sighed and pulled back, looking past Lee to see what the commotion was about. Turns out, it wasn't a toddler throwing a temper tantrum. It was Tom throwing a temper tantrum. "Give me the tokens, you worthless piece of machinery." Tom was bonking the

token machine over and over, demanding it give him what he was owed, but no tokens came out. A line of kids stood behind him, waiting impatiently for their turn. Tom turned from the machine to Maeve, who had stood off to the side and was carefully cleaning out her nails with one of her knives. “A little help over here, Maeve?”

Maeve didn’t even look up. “I believe in you.”

Tom let loose a frustrated sigh and turned back to the machine. I was about to get up and help when someone beat me to it.

“Excuse me, mister.” Tom looked behind him for the source of the voice. A boy around six years old with a dinosaur on his shirt was looking at him disapprovingly. “You’re doing it wrong.”

Tom crossed his arms petulantly. “No, I’m not. It’s obviously broken.” The boy pushed past him and started pressing buttons on the machine. All at once, thirty tokens came spilling out. The boy turned back, a smug smile on his face.

“Whatever. Let’s go, Maeve.” Tom swept up the tokens angrily and grabbed Maeve’s hand, pulling her towards the skee ball lanes. Maeve poked fun at his ineptitude and gifted the boy a smile as he watched them go. The boy blushed and turned back toward the machine, ducking his head. Huh, who knew Maeve had a soft side?

“So,” I said, turning my attention back toward Lee, “You dress like you’re from medieval times, yet drive an actual mystery machine. You don’t seem fazed by a university campus yet are confounded by token machines. Just how much experience does your realm have with Earth?”

Lee laughed and ran a hand through his hair. “Well, we still have access to modern technology like you lot, only what you can do with machines, we can do with magic. We don’t have washing machines or telephone poles, but we do have objects that we’ve enchanted to do a lot of the same things. Because we’ve been hesitant to adopt some of the more modern practices on Earth, I guess our realm could seem a bit...old-timey in a way. We have theater, but not movies. Shops, but not shopping malls. Also, as you can see by our ride, we don’t have that much experience with cars. The kingdom isn’t that big of a place, and we actually give a shit about our environment, no offense, so we ride animals instead. As for the clothes, like I said, this is just our battle gear. A lot of our clothes look rather similar to those found on earth.”

I nodded, absorbing all the information. “But if you don’t have cars on Earth, how did you come up with the mystery machine?”

“We built it.”

“You did?”

“Hey, don’t look so surprised. We had some books on earthly automobiles in the library. Add in a little magic, and boom, mystery machine. ”

“But surely, you must have seen that there were hardly any cars decorated like that on Earth.”

“The truth is most of what we know about Earth comes from movies and books. Despite being only one portal away, most people in Crestfall don’t like to visit it that often.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, because Crestfall is so full of magic, we’ve grown rather dependent on it, or at least, attached to it, used to it. Here, on Earth, there’s so little magic, it can make some people feel....powerless.” I nodded my head, trying to understand the people I was once a part of. It made sense. Why visit a place you couldn’t predict or control?

“But not you.”

“What?”

“You always had a fascination with Earth, especially pop culture stuff. You were always up to date on all the latest news and tv shows, and you were fascinated by Earth history. You said so much happened in such little time here. Wars were won and lost. Cities rose and fell. You said Earth was a realm whose people made every second count.”

Lee’s eyes had softened as he looked past me, lost in the memory of the girl he once knew. My stomach clenched painfully at the reminder that *I* wasn’t the girl he cared about, at least not yet.

Lee continued, unaware of the turmoil inside me. “You watched tons of movies and read all sorts of books, even the ones that weren’t set on Earth. There was that one author you read, Tolkien, I think. You said he described a world so magical it made ours seem boring in comparison, and don’t even get me started on *Harry Potter*,” Lee rolled his eyes, but his features brightened, the memory making him smile. “After reading those

books, for a month you refused to do any form of magic without saying some sort of spell of your own invention.”

He let out a little laugh and I joined in, picturing it. Now, that sounded like me. I was wondering how my obsession with certain books had felt like a constant my whole life. Though I didn’t have any specific memories about reading them for the first time, I had always felt like they’d been there. I guess, because they were from Earth and not Crestfall, whatever spell that had taken my memories had left my love for them behind, along with any other Earth knowledge I had amassed which, according to Lee, was a lot.

“So, what? You don’t like *Harry Potter*?” Not that that was a deal breaker or anything...except it definitely was. After all, I didn’t date guys that were stupid.

Lee raised his hands up in the air in mock defense. “Hey, I didn’t say that.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, a smile tugging at my lips. “Ooh let me guess.” I stroked my chin thoughtfully. “At first glance, one might be tempted to dismiss you as just another brave and arrogant Gryffindor. *However*,” I continued, cutting off Lee’s sound of protest. “I’m thinking you’re more of a.....Ravenclaw.”

A smile broke over Lee’s face, and I did a little victory dance in my seat. Lee leaned back in the booth. “As much as I want to believe you just got another memory back, something tells me Summer is just as much of a *Harry Potter* aficionado as Rose.”

I nodded my head in acknowledgment. “You would be correct.”

“And let me guess, you’re still the predictable Hufflepuff you’ve always been.” I scoffed. “Predictable? Please. More like ‘true and unafraid of toil.’”

I expected a rebuttal, but Lee smirked, his eyes catching on something over my shoulder. “This should be good.”

Tom and Maeve were each poised in front of a basketball hoop, both of them clutching an ogre head. Beside them, a group of kids seemed to be holding their tickets for them, waiting for them to begin with bated breath. I held my hand out to Lee, my eyes still on the two competitors. “Ten bucks on Maeve.”

Lee shook my hand firmly and leaned forward. “You’re on.”

An animated ogre counted down as Maeve and Tom readied themselves for the first shot. “Three....two....one... GO!” The kids started screaming and cheering as the two fired ogre head after ogre head into the little basket shaped hoops. The group was

split with half the kids cheering for Maeve and half cheering for Tom. However, that ratio abruptly began to change as Maeve proceeded to wipe the floor clean with Tom.

For every shot Tom managed to land, Maeve scored three. As the clock wound down, I joined in with the cheers, the pack of children entirely Team Maeve now.

“C’mon Tom. You’re embarrassing me!” Lee shouted between cupped hands, but he was smiling too much to be too upset that his ten bucks were about to be mine. As the buzzer sounded, the animated ogre voice announced that Maeve was the winner, and she grinned as a dozen children swarmed around her, jumping up and down in victory.

Tom’s shoulders slumped as he stood off to the side, but a little girl broke away from Maeve’s group and gave him what looked like a reassuring pat on the back. I couldn’t hear what she said, but whatever it was made him smile and join in the victory hug Maeve was currently the center of.

I could barely believe my eyes as I saw a girl who I’d come to think of as an ice queen high five dozens of sticky children. I turned to Lee. “I never would have guessed Maeve could be so...gentle.”

Lee smiled. “Despite what she’d have everyone believe, all of Maeve’s insults and hard exterior mask one of the kindest hearts I’ve ever known. Once you’ve earned her trust, it’s yours forever.”

“Oh. Were we not friends or something, before?”

“Are you kidding? You guys were inseparable. Best friends since you were five years old.”

I felt my eyes bug out of my head. “Best friends?!”

“Yeah, her mom worked on the grounds at the castle, and you two grew up together. You were constantly playing pranks and getting into trouble together. Now she’s your bodyguard. Well, technically she’s also your handmaiden, but don’t let her hear you say that.” I laughed at the image of Maeve in a long dress, trying to cinch me into a corset.

“If we’re best friends, why has she been so cold to me since everything went down?”

“I wouldn’t call it cold so much as cautious. Maeve’s not great at letting other people in, and when we found you, well we didn’t exactly find you, did we? At least, not

the way any of us expected. Just give her time to get to know this you, and I'm sure she'll come around."

I nodded my head. I hoped he was right, that I could prove to Maeve, to everyone, that I was as good a friend as I apparently used to be. I just wasn't sure how, or if I'm being honest, if I even could. Old me sounded like a badass, after all, and new me? Well, new me was still trying to figure out who she was, much less who she was meant to be.

I was pulled out of my thoughts as Tom and Maeve returned to the booth, a large Meatball Magic and a plate of mozzarella sticks in their hands. Tom plopped the food on the table, and stared at it dreamily, drool practically falling from his mouth.

Maeve plopped down next to him, only she wasn't alone. The little boy in the dinosaur shirt who had helped Tom earlier stood next to her, gently placing the mound of tickets he had apparently been holding for her at her feet. Maeve offered the kid a mozzarella stick for his trouble then dug in herself. "We intercepted these from bushy eyebrows over there," Maeve gestured to where Monty was standing behind the register, punching buttons furiously on the computer. "Thought it best to cut out the middleman lest he try to poison the food or something."

I laughed and thanked her. Tom reached for a piece of pizza. "Hope you two are done with your lovers' quarrel. I'm starving!"

Lee raised an eyebrow. "I'm not surprised. Losing that badly must really work up an appetite."

Tom paused with the pizza halfway to his mouth, throwing a glare at Lee. "Whatever, you didn't see me destroy her at air hock--"

"Are you a princess?" the little boy blurted out. Apparently, he had never left, munching on his mozzarella stick in silence. For some reason, I expected him to be looking at Maeve, seeing that he'd been staring at her earlier with hero worship in his eyes, but he was looking directly at me.

"Uh- what makes you say that?"

"Well, everyone else is dressed weird, except for you. Like they're protectors or something." Damn, first the token machine and now this. Nothing got past this kid. "Plus there's just something princess-y about you, I guess. I don't know." The kid grabbed

another of Maeve's mozzarella sticks and chewed on it thoughtfully, staring at me like he couldn't quite figure out what made me a princess.

You and me, both, kid.

I looked to the others, not quite sure how to handle the situation. Maeve and Lee just shrugged their shoulders at me while Tom didn't look up from his pizza. Guess I was on my own here. I sat up a little straighter. "As a matter of fact, I am a princess."

I decided to go with the truth. Why not? It's not like this kid was going to go tattle to Varian where I was. Plus, I kind of wanted to milk this whole being a princess thing for as long as possible. After all, there was still a pretty good chance that this was all some massive dream or hallucination, or the even likelier scenario that these guys were either full of crap or crazy or both.

The boy kept staring at me. "Where's your crown?"

"I-uh don't have one?"

The boy shook his head. "That doesn't make sense."

I laughed a little before a devious plan entered my mind. I let out a long sigh. "I know. If only my prince would care about me enough to buy me nice things." Lee narrowed his eyebrows at me, trying to maintain his frown, but he couldn't help the smile peeking through.

Seeing what I was doing, Maeve unexpectedly joined in, leaning in to whisper to the boy. "He's not even a prince. He's just pretending so she'll go out with him."

The boy gasped and turned back toward me. "You should break up with him."

I tried to cover my laugh with a cough as Lee glared at the boy. "You think?"

The boy nodded his head. "Absolutely. You're a princess. You don't have to settle."

Lee threw his hands up in the air before shoving the mountain of tickets at the boy. "Okay, that's quite enough. Take these and be gone, you little gremlin."

The boy frowned at Lee before grabbing the tickets and scurrying away excitedly. "Bye, Princess! Bye, *fake prince*!" The boy threw a gap-toothed smile our way before running up to the prize booth.

We all erupted into laughter, except for Lee of course, though even he couldn't help but smile. I wiped a tear from my eye, my cheeks sore from laughing. "How did he possibly know?"

Maeve shook her head. "Maybe he has a high affinity for magic, and could sense the same in you? Maybe that was the "princess-y" feeling he couldn't explain?"

Lee grabbed my hand. "Or maybe it's because you're so beautiful."

I beamed at him, but Tom just cackled. "Forget it, lover boy. She's definitely going to ditch you for some prince who buys her tiaras."

Lee pressed his hand to his chest in fake outrage before turning toward me. "Hey, tell them that's not true. Tell them I'm an excellent boyfriend."

I tapped my chin thoughtfully, pretending to think it over. "Well, I don't remember you buying me a single present. Ever. In fact, you actually *owe* me ten dollars. Not to mention that since I've met you I've been severely injured and suffered repeated attempts on my life, so I don't know. Maybe the kid has a point."

Tom and Maeve burst into laughter while Lee threw his hands up in the air. "That's not fair! I've given you some awesome presents, you just can't remember them."

I raised an eyebrow challengingly. "Oh really, like what?"

"Well, I got you that tea pot from that show you like so much, the one where the guy is secretly in love with the receptionist."

I gasped when I realized what he was talking about. "You got me the teal teapot Jim gives Pam in season two of the office?"

"Yeah, and I even filled it with all our inside jokes just like they did in the show."

My mouth dropped open. Okay, that's it. Lee was definitely a keeper. Old me had chosen well. How many times had I watched that episode and dreamt of finding a guy who would do something like that for me? I beamed at him, and he smiled back.

Maeve was less impressed. "Big deal. You copied a gift from someone else. Where's the originality? The personal touch?"

"Well, there was that time I took you to that waterfall where we had a picnic for your birthday."

I pressed my hand to my heart. "Aw, a picnic? Really?" Damn I wish I could remember that. That sounded romantic AF.

Lee smiled before Maeve coughed loudly. “Cheap.”

“Hey, I’m not cheap!” I laughed at the outrage on his features as he crossed his arms. Lee was clearly a guy who took pride in being a good boyfriend and didn’t like to have his abilities questioned, but I couldn’t help it. It was too easy to get to him. “Oh yeah, well where’s my ten bucks then?”

Lee grumbled and began digging around in his pockets. Finally, he slammed some bills and change on the table. “Boom, there you go. See? Not cheap.”

My eyes widened as I picked through the bills. “You do realize this is like fifty dollars, right?”

Lee scratched his head, looking a little bashful. “Yeah, I haven’t exactly figured out how Earth currency works, yet.”

Maeve reached across the table to punch him in the shoulder. “Have you been overpaying this whole time? No wonder those people at McDonalds kept thanking us and told us to come back anytime.”

I laughed as Lee rubbed his shoulder, an adorable little frown on his face. I took out ten dollars from the pile of crumpled bills and slid the rest back to Lee. “Here, you better hold on to this. I’m all for leaving huge tips, but I would rather die than see Monty walk out of here a richer man.”

Everyone laughed at that, and Lee shoved the rest of the bills back in his pocket. He grabbed my hand once more and gave me a little wink. “Don’t listen to them. I was a great boyfriend. Just wait until you get your memories back. You’ll see.”

I tried to smile at him, but my stomach dropped a bit. Lee may be convinced that all my memories were going to come back, but I wasn’t so sure. Who knew if whatever spell Varian had put on me had erased my memories or just repressed them? Sure, I remembered the handshake thing, but that was more like muscle memory than an actual memory.

I wanted to believe that Lee would still want to be with me even if my memories never came back, but the tiny voice in the back of my head whispered that I was nothing like the girl he’d once known. Sure, we had similar tastes in TV, and in guys, but I was no princess. No leader.

What if Lee didn't like Summer as much as he liked Rose? What if my memories never came back, and he didn't want to be with me? Not to mention, *if* my memories never came back, how in the hell was I supposed to save this kingdom I was supposedly responsible for? From the desperate look these guys had gotten on their faces when they discussed Varian, something told me I was their last hope. But if I couldn't defeat him before, what makes them think I could do it now?

Lee must have seen the worry on my face. "Hey, you okay?"

I pasted a smile on my face and squeezed his hand. "I'm fine." I didn't want to tell him how worried I was. A part of me was scared that if I did, they would realize what a big fraud I was. No, I had just discovered this amazing new world. I'd do whatever it took to hold on to it.

"Hey, look who's back." I was snapped out of my reverie by the appearance of the little boy again. He was standing at the edge of the table, holding something behind his back.

"Great," Lee grumbled, and I nudged him to keep quiet.

Maeve gestured to whatever the boy was holding. "What'cha got there? Did you get something cool with those tickets?"

The boy blushed a little before revealing the plastic tiara he had been hiding behind his back. It had little blue jewels peppered throughout and seemed to sparkle under the fluorescent lights. "It's for you." The boy held it out to me, and I felt tears well in my eyes. This kid had spent what was probably the majority or all of his tickets to get me a crown of my own.

I beamed at him. "That has got to be the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me." The boy blushed again, still clutching the crown with sweaty fingers.

"You have got to be kidding me," Lee grumbled.

I all but shoved him out of the booth before sliding out myself. Once free, I knelt in front of the boy. "Thank you so much."

The little boy nodded and reached to place the crown on my head. "Every princess needs a crown."

He's going to come. I know he's going to come.

I smiled brightly at the various lords and ladies who came to bow and curtsy to me, thanking them for coming, for the compliment they paid my dress, remarking on the odd weather we were having and the lobster we'd special ordered from the other realm, but my eyes watched the door like a hawk, searching in vain for the only person I really cared about attending this party, my party.

"May I have this dance, princess?"

A relieved smile filled my face as I turned around, but it soon shifted into a frown—one I quickly tried to cover up with another, more forced, smile—when I discovered who exactly was asking me. Harry looked nervous, his rosy cheeks an even brighter red than normal, matching the color of his hair, as he tugged at the collar of his green waistcoat, fidgeting in place the same way every thirteen-year-old boy seemed to do, like he was uncomfortable in his own skin.

He held a slightly pudgy hand out to me, his cheeks puffed up slightly like he was holding his breath. I didn't want to dance with him. I would much prefer to continue watching the door, but Harry was nice. It wasn't his fault that boys were stupid and horrible and I hated them. So, I simply nodded at him, and watched as his shoulders sagged in relief, allowing him to lead me out onto the dance floor.

The clock ticked on, the minutes passing by like hours. The line of guests entering the party began to trickle down to only a few fashionably late nobles until it stopped altogether, and the doors to the ballroom were closed with a resounding thud. Tears sprang to my eyes, and I looked down to hide them, fingering the material of the stupid dress I'd been so excited to wear only half an hour ago, the skirt a pretty royal blue color. His favorite color.

Dumb, dumb, dumb. Those other girls must be right. He must not really care about me. If he did, he'd be here. What kind of person didn't show up to the girl they liked's birthday party?

The rest of the party seemed to pass in a blur of sweaty hands and fake smiles, the latter being mine, the former being half the boys in my year. I'd had my feet stepped on and my hands kissed more times than I could count. It seemed like every boy wanted to say they danced with the princess. Some more than others.

I swear if Harry asked me to dance with him one more time I was going to punch him so hard in the face his nose would match the color of his ginger hair. I mean, three times was more than enough, I'd say. I didn't care how strong his magical affinity was, how "perfect for each other" we were, at least according to his parents. He wasn't the boy I'd been waiting all night, all week, to dance with.

It made me wish I was turning twenty-one and not thirteen. Then, I could ease the disappointment of the night with some of that icky tasting drink my mom had let me try one time. It tasted like crap, but I'd always noticed at my parties that the ones holding a glass of the stuff tended to have more fun.

I sat on my bed at the end of the night. The calm purple of the walls around me did little to soothe my heart. The room was dim, the only light coming from the candles burning in ornate golden holders positioned around the room, filling it with a soft glow along with the subtle scent of roses. The four-poster bed lay in the back center of the room, a wispy canopy flowing over it.

I sighed, kicking my feet and watching my nightgown flop up and down. I could feel the warmth of my mom as she sat behind me, pulling a brush through my long hair with gentle strokes. "Did you enjoy your party?" she asked, her voice soft but a bit probing, like she already knew the answer wasn't going to be a simple one.

I let out another sigh, reflecting on the long night of dancing and sweaty palms and cakes that had ended only an hour ago. "It was...alright." My voice drifted off as I fingered my nightgown in my hand.

The brush stilled in my hair. "Just alright?"

"Yeah, it was great-- I just--I was hoping to see someone there tonight."

My mom let out a little laugh behind me, the sound like tinkling wind chimes, before pulling the brush through my hair once more. "Really? I couldn't tell. I thought you were simply watching the doors all night to make sure Varian didn't show up." My mom made little ghost noises as she poked my belly, drawing a laugh from me.

I turned toward her, trying to maintain my scowl. "Mother, I'm no longer a child. I'm not afraid of the boogeyman, anymore."

My mom nodded in mock seriousness. "Oh yes, I agree. Besides, boys are much scarier than bedtime stories, anyway."

*I turned back around, and she pulled the brush through my hair once more.
“Exactly.”*

I tilted my head back, the feeling of the brush passing through my hair and my mother’s warm hands on my head luring my anxious heart into a more peaceful state. It had to be one of the best feelings in the world, having your hair brushed by your mom.

“I know something that will cheer you up.” My mom said in a sing-song voice, setting the brush down beside her.

I immediately perked up. “What’s that?”

She smiled and shrugged her shoulders. “Why don’t you go check your vanity?”

My gaze flew to the ornate vanity leaning against the wall. A small present wrapped in dark blue paper lay perched on the counter in front of the mirror. I sprinted off the bed toward the present, my mom’s laughter echoing behind me as she followed at a much slower pace. I delicately undid the silver bow before lifting the lid of the box. I gasped upon discovering what lay inside. I reached in and carefully pulled out the most beautiful tiara I had ever seen, every little diamond sparkling in the candlelight. A dark green stone lay in the middle. My favorite color.

I beamed at the glittering treasure in my hands. Sure, I’d worn crowns before, but they weren’t really mine. They were dug out of the treasury for special occasions and placed right back in when those occasions were done. This one was different. This one was just for me.

I felt her warm presence behind me as my mom lifted the tiara from my hands and placed it on my head. I stared at our reflections in the mirror, my young face beaming with excitement at the sight of the sparkling ornament.

My mom’s face appeared next to mine, her smile echoing my own as we both took in our reflections. Her face had a few more lines, mostly around her eyes and mouth, evidence of all the smiling she did in her life, but we shared the same bluish-green eyes, and the same auburn hair that lay pinned on top of her head flowed around my own shoulders. I turned away from our reflections to throw my arms around her.

“Thank you, mom!”

*Her warm arms hugged me back as she leaned down to whisper into my hair.
“You’re very welcome, darling. After all, every princess needs a crown.”*

“Summer, you good?” I felt Lee’s hand on my shoulder. I blinked up at him, surprised to find I was still kneeling on the floor next to the boy. It had felt so real, so vivid, like the most intense dream.

Like a memory.

My mind whirled as I tried to process everything I’d seen, everything I’d felt. I stood up on shaky legs, looking at Lee, at all of them as if seeing them for the first time. “I think--I think I remembered something.”

I watched as Lee’s, Tom’s, and Maeve’s eyes lit up. Lee grasped my hands. “That’s amazing! What did you remember?”

“A party, I think?” I thought back to the birthday I’d remembered, to the feeling of disappointment that had characterized the night until my mom had managed to cheer me up. I assumed the absent boyfriend must have been Lee, which was something I definitely needed to discuss with him later, but there were more important things the memory had shown me. “And my--my mom. I remembered my mom.”

My heart swelled with joy as the realization of what that meant sank in. “I have a mom, Lee. I--I have a mom.” The thought left me in a bit of a daze. For some reason, that was one part of this new reality that I’d never considered. Now, maybe I could have more than just friends. Maybe I could have a family. I squeezed Lee’s hand, smiling despite myself. I’d wanted a family for as long as I could remember, and it turned out, I had one all along. I had someone who would brush my hair and talk to me about boys, someone to help me adjust to this whole new world I’d stumbled into.

Lee was still, the smile leaving his face. His expression seemed odd to me, like he was torn about something, like he was struggling to make a choice. “What is it? This is a good thing, right, Lee?”

Lee paused, glancing quickly at Maeve and Tom, who seemed to be wearing matching looks of uncertainty, before pasting a smile back on his face and pulling me into a hug. “Yes, it is.”

I squeezed him back quickly before pulling away. “So, where are they? My parents, I mean. Are they in Crestfall?”

Lee looked down, not meeting my eyes. “Well, they were... away when Varian attacked, so no, and they need to stay away until we defeat him.”

“What, why? Don’t we need their help?”

Lee shook his head. “No, you’re the one Varian wants. You rule Crestfall now that they’ve passed it on to you. Best to keep them out of harm's way.”

I nodded, though I couldn’t deny I was disappointed. I didn’t want to wait until after we defeated the evil sorcerer to meet them, something I wasn’t even sure I was capable of doing.

However, the prospect of seeing them again soon filled me with a sense of urgency, a desire to try and get this done, but before I did, there was one thing I needed to understand. “Why me?”

“What?”

“If I wasn’t able to beat him the first time, what makes you think I could do it now? Why do you need *me*?”

Lee shook his head. “You weren’t ready last time. Varian caught us all off guard. This time, we’ll be the ones on the offensive. I’ve been keeping in touch with the remaining guard members during our search for you. They’re ready for battle, and you’ll be the one to lead them.”

“But my memories--”

“Will come back,” Lee interrupted. “We’ll work on your magic, hopefully your body will remember what your mind doesn’t.” I looked at the three of them, wanting nothing more than to be deserving of the faith they had in me.

“You guys really think I can do this?”

Maeve leveled me with a confident grin. “Alone? No, but together? I’d say, we stand a fair chance.”

I stood up from the booth, my heart full of resolve. Sure, I was scared out of my mind of what was coming, but there was no denying it now. What these guys said must be true: I really was a princess. This place, this *realm*, wasn’t my home, not really. I felt my heart give a soft ache as it struggled to accept all that meant, that all my accomplishments, my identity, my friends...It was all a lie. Or at least, it was founded on one.

Still, if that memory had shown me anything, it was that I had more to gain from embracing this new reality than I did by pushing it away. I’d wanted to wait until I was

sure, but after that memory... Well, let's just say I was sure, and I was ready to fight for my family and my kingdom. "Okay well, then let's go."

"Go where?"

"To Crestfall." It seemed both my past and my future held challenges I wasn't sure I was ready to face. I didn't know if I was strong enough, brave enough, powerful enough to do what I needed to do, be who they needed me to be, but there were some things I did know. After the memory, there was no denying it now. Magic actually existed, monsters lived outside of dreams, and these guys really were from another realm. And so was I. Crazy as it sounded, terrified as I was, I was a princess, and I had a kingdom to save. "I'm in. I'll help you stop him."

CHAPTER 5

No Blue Pill

Lee threw some bills on the table, and the four of us made our way back to the mystery machine. When we reached the van, I slid open the door and hopped in the back. I expected Lee to slide in behind me. Instead, I saw him whisper something to Tom, who nodded and tossed him the keys before hopping in and sitting beside me on the bench. Interesting. “Hey,” I called toward the front seat. “We need to stop at my apartment before heading...wait--where exactly are we going? How are we getting to your realm?”

“A hallow, of course,” Maeve said from the passenger side. “Only places magical enough to house a portal. Luckily, there happens to be one nearby.”

“You mean there’s a virtual magical hot spot in Texas, and no one’s ever noticed it before?”

“Oh, they’ve noticed it.” Tom chuckled, stretching his arms up and resting them behind his head. “How else do you think it got its name?”

I stared at him for a few seconds before a light bulb suddenly went off in my head. “No, you can’t mean--”

“Yep, we’re on our way to Enchanted Rock.”

I rolled my eyes. Of course the most magical place in Texas would be Enchanted Rock. “Fine, Enchanted Rock it is, but my apartment, first.”

Tom raised an eyebrow at me. “Care to explain why you’d want to go back to a place that was given to you by an insane sorcerer and is most definitely a trap waiting to happen?”

“Look, who knows how long I’ll be gone or even if I’ll ever--ever come back.” I stumbled a bit through my words as the truth of what I said sank in. I really was leaving this life behind, leaving this world. Not to mention, I still wasn’t sure what kind of new life, what new world awaited me. Better to be prepared just in case the place wasn’t as....civilized as Lee described.

Not to mention, there was something I needed to do, something I wasn't sure the rest of them would be okay with. "I just need to get some of my things. We'll be in and out in five minutes."

My stomach twisted a bit as I lied to them, but they weren't the only ones who cared about me, and I couldn't just leave this life in complete shambles before I began another. Tom still looked doubtful, so I caught Lee's eyes in the rearview mirror. I could see the worry in his gaze brought upon by the idea of entering what was essentially the lion's den. I mouthed the word please, trying to convey how important this was to me. Finally, Lee let out a groan and turned the ignition. "Fine. Five minutes. That's it."

I smiled brightly at him. "Thank you! Thank you!"

I rattled off the address, and Maeve chuckled from the passenger seat. "Man, I almost forgot how utterly whipped you are."

"Shut up," Lee grumbled, but Maeve just laughed.

As we headed out onto the highway, I turned my attention back toward Tom. "So, to what exactly, do I owe the pleasure of your company on this car ride?"

Tom removed his hands from his head, and placed one on his heart, an expression of faux indignation on his face. "What? A guy can't sit next to a beautiful girl without some sort of ulterior motive being involved?"

I rolled my eyes at him while Lee protested from the driver's seat. "Hey, I told you to sit with her, not flirt with her."

Tom waved a hand dismissively. "Semantics." I raised an eyebrow at Tom. He sighed before clasping his hands in front of himself. "Fine. The truth is, Lee thought I might be able to help you."

I furrowed my eyebrows in confusion. "Help me with what?"

"Well, I'm not sure if you've thought about this yet, but as you get back more and more memories, there's a chance you'll remember some things that are...well, less *pleasant* than a birthday party. Things that will hurt."

I looked down at my hands. Of course, I'd thought about it. I'd worried about remembering something terrible, something I'd rather forget, but I hadn't really let myself dwell on the idea. I already had to deal with Varian, with returning to a kingdom at war. I didn't want to think that even once I saved it, there would still be pain to be

endured in this new life. I needed to believe that once I managed to defeat the nightmare, the rest would be a dream.

I shrugged my shoulders dismissively, trying to convey less worry than I felt. “What’s there to help me with? Who knows if I’ll even get all my memories back, or if the negative things from my past would even affect me as much as normal memories.”

Tom shook his head. “That’s what I’m worried about. It may be easy to ignore the pain in the beginning, when the memories come slowly, but any pain, any... losses you’ve had are only going to grow as you get more and more memories back. With each passing day, pain will become deeper, more real, so it’s best we deal with it each step of the way.”

I eyed him a little suspiciously. “Is there something I should know?”

Tom shifted a little nervously. “What? No-- I mean. It’s nothing that you should hear from me.”

“Then why did Lee send *you* to talk to me about it?”

Tom looked away, choosing to stare out the window as he answered. “When Varian attacked six months ago, my parents were killed during the battle.”

I pressed a hand to my mouth, my eyes swelling with tears. “I’m so sorry, Tom.”

Tom just nodded, his jaw clenched tight with emotion. “They were members of the guard, and they died defending the throne.”

I squeezed his hand. I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know how to make it better, to fix something so broken.

Tom squeezed back. “Take it from someone who kept it bottled up for too long. If you do remember something painful, don’t run from it.”

As I looked into Tom’s brown eyes, warm despite the cold grief and loss that seemed to emanate from them, I wanted to press him for answers, to make him tell me why Lee had really sent him. There was clearly more to my past than they were saying, challenges lurking there that they were trying to prepare me for.

I turned toward the window, trading Tom’s knowing gaze for the blur of green trees and gray houses as the whooshed by the van window. I couldn’t push Tom anymore; it had clearly been hard for him to talk about his parents. Besides, there was a

part of me, a tiny voice in the back of my mind, that warned me not to ask, that whispered softly in the dark that all this was just a little too good to be true.

After a couple moments, I broke the silence, not looking away from the window as I asked, “After I get all my memories back, if there’s something there that’s painful, that I’d rather forget, then will it get better? With time, I mean?”

I could feel Tom looking at me, but I didn’t face him. He sighed, running a hand through his hair as he thought about it. “Yes and no. People tend to think that pain lessens over time, changes into something bearable, but the truth is, the pain doesn’t change. You do. You learn to expect the knife in the heart whenever someone mentions their name or what happened to them. Soon enough the pain in your chest ceases to shock you, and living with it becomes kind of like breathing. You don’t even know you’re doing it until something makes you remember.”

I was saved from having to ponder that somewhat depressing answer further by the sudden stopping of the van. I looked out the window and saw my apartment.

Lee turned off the ignition and twisted around his seat to face all of us. “Okay, so here’s the plan. I’ll take the lead. Maeve, stick close to Summer. Don’t leave her side. Tom, cover us from behind. Once we’re inside, I’ll cover the door while you monitor the windows.” Lee focused his attention directly on me. “Five minutes, Summer. Then we’re out of here.”

I nodded my understanding, and we all filed out of the van into the warm Texas sunshine. I grabbed my key and my phone. I checked the time, ignoring the dozens of texts I’d received from both Max and Cassie. Two o’ clock. Was it just me or did this day seem to last a hundred years?

The apartment was on the first floor. I told Lee the number then followed behind him until we reached the dark green door. The entire group was on high alert. I could hear Tom’s soft footsteps behind me. Maeve walked by my side, both hands resting on the knives at her sides.

When we reached number one hundred and sixty-three, Lee motioned for the keys and I handed them to him. He raised an eyebrow at the sparkly pink ball attached to them. I just shrugged.

I couldn't help peering over my shoulder as Lee jostled with the keys. It was like I could feel something watching from somewhere amongst the tall trees that lined the crumbling sidewalk. I stole a glance at Maeve and Tom who were carefully monitoring the surroundings with a trained and watchful eye. Did they sense it, too? The feeling of an oily gaze sliding along their skin? A shiver crawled up my spine at the uncomfortable sensation.

I peered a little harder at the trees but could spot nothing within the leafy boughs. Maybe I was imagining things. Maybe the fear that Varian or one of his cronies would show up was affecting me, making me paranoid.

"Let's go." Lee called, swinging the door open before creeping cautiously inside. The three of us followed suit. Tom kept his back to us, never tearing his eyes from the doorway until we were inside, after which he abruptly closed it and slid the lock into place.

A part of me thought it was silly. If one of Varian's minions really was watching this place, surely a locked door wouldn't be the thing to stop them from attacking. Nevertheless, the familiar *click* of the lock did provide me a measure of comfort, however irrationally.

Lee stayed by the door while Tom went through the apartment, checking to make sure each room was empty. He wasn't gone for long. There were really only three rooms. The small living room/kitchen where Maeve, Lee, and I were currently waiting, my bedroom, and my bathroom. The bedroom was connected to the living area via a narrow hallway with the bathroom stationed in the middle. The only window was in my room, so Tom accompanied Maeve and I there as I went to grab some things.

Despite being exactly the same as I left it, the apartment felt...different somehow. Or maybe I was the one that changed. The books strewn about the floor, the posters hung haphazardly about the walls, the bed, the chairs, all of it seemed to belong to another girl, another life.

When we reached my bedroom, Tom stationed himself in front of the window, pulling back the curtains and peering outside with a watchful eye. I grabbed a purple backpack from my closet and threw some clothes in it. A few t-shirts, some underwear, a

pair of jeans, and two pairs of jean shorts seemed like a good amount, though I really had no idea how long I'd be away or if I'd ever even come back.

No, no I would come back. Max and Cassie deserved an explanation at some point, and who knows? Maybe once we got this whole Varian situation under control, they could come to Crestfall. I tried to picture it.

Maeve and Cassie would most likely argue constantly. Tom would probably fall head over heels for Cassie only for her to break his heart. And Max and Lee? Yikes. Okay, on second thought, I didn't even want Lee and Max in the same *room* much less the same realm.

That reminded me, I snuck a quick glance at Tom. Thankfully, he was watching the window, not me. Maeve, too, didn't seem to be watching me right now, choosing instead to survey the posters and pictures on the wall with reluctant interest. Perfect.

I meandered over to my bookshelf, trying to appear nonchalant, although my heart felt a bit like it was going to beat out of my chest. I scanned the spines until I found what I was looking for: *Paper Towns* by John Green. I grabbed a pen from my nightstand and flipped through the pages quickly, circling different letters on different pages. Finally, I slipped the book back, peeking quickly at Tom and Maeve to make sure my actions had gone undetected, but neither of them were paying me any attention.

I made my way back to the closet, heartbeat gradually slowing a bit. Still, anxiety nagged at me as I worried about whether I'd done the right thing. I didn't want to lie to them or put them in danger, but I had to explain, I had to---

My eyes caught on the green dress hanging on the door, stopping my anxious train of thought. It had cap sleeves, and a sweetheart neckline with little buttons placed along the bodice before flaring out in a puffy skirt.

It had been a present from Cassie, a product of one of our many shopping trips together. I'd fallen in love with it the second it caught my eye. Unfortunately, the price tag and I weren't as compatible. Cassie had insisted on buying it for me, claiming it would be a crime to deny the world the sight of me in such a dress.

My eyes stung a bit as I thought about my best friend, as I wondered if we'd ever go shopping together again, if I'd ever see her again.

I swallowed back the tears and shoved the dress in my bag. I knew it was irrational. Who brought a dress on what was essentially a magical quest? But at that moment, I couldn't bear to leave it behind. Bringing it kind of felt like I was bringing a part of Cassie, a part of the girl I once was, with me.

I emerged from the closet and caught sight of Maeve staring intently at the posterboard full of pictures that hung next to my bed. There were dozens of small photos of Max and Cassie and I. Laughing. Smiling. Goofing around. She leaned in to get a closer look and I cleared my throat. "I'm going to go get some things from the bathroom."

Maeve blushed a bit at getting caught snooping before looking back between the photos and me. "You really were happy here, weren't you?" Her voice wasn't judging, as I expected, but gentle, curious. I just nodded, my throat tight. Maeve turned back toward the photos. "Well, I guess that answers that question."

"What question?"

"Why Varian took your memories, why he kept you here as opposed to chained up in a cave somewhere." I just looked at her. My confusion must have been evident on my face because she continued. "The best prisoners are the ones who don't want to escape."

I stared at Maeve, some unknown emotion beginning to burn brightly within me. It wasn't sadness or anger. No, it went deeper than that. It was *rage*. I didn't think I'd ever truly felt it before, not that I could *remember* anyways.

My hands clenched into fists at my side. The idea that Varian took my memories, created this false life just so he could more *conveniently* hold me prisoner filled me with anger.

I stormed toward the bathroom. I could feel Maeve following behind, but I didn't acknowledge her. I feared if I opened my mouth the only thing that would emerge would be the frustrated scream I could currently feel crawling up my throat. I furiously threw my toothpaste and toothbrush into the backpack along with some tampons.

I wanted to shout about how unfair it all was. All those pictures on the wall, all those memories with my friends, they were the highlights of a life, *my* life, that had actually been pretty happy. Sure, I might not have had a family or a kingdom, but I did

have friends, I had love, I had a life that *meant* something, at least to me, but now that life was lost.

Even if Tom, Maeve, and Lee suddenly disappeared, even if Varian gave up on chasing me, on conquering my kingdom, I could never go back. Not really. I knew too much about the world, about myself, about what I'd lost and what I stood to gain, that things could never go back to what they once were.

There might be other joys in my future; things, people, that would make me happy. My mind drifted to Lee, to my mom, and I felt my heart lighten a bit. The only problem was: my past had been happy, too. *I* had been happy, and ironically, Varian was the one responsible for that. He'd orchestrated this life, but he was also to blame for ripping me from it, for opening my eyes.

My blood was practically singing with the desire for revenge, to make Varian pay for what he'd done, not just to me but to Tom and Lee and Maeve, to my kingdom.

I pushed past Maeve and stepped once more into the hallway. I locked eyes with Lee who was still positioned in front of the door. His whole body tensed, and his expression changed when he saw me, looking around for whatever threat had caused the pain that I'm sure was written plainly across my face. I just shook my head. This wasn't something he could just stab with his sword.

He couldn't protect me from this, couldn't rid me of this fury. Only one thing could do that.

I opened my mouth to tell Lee I was ready to go when I was interrupted by the sound of a key turning in the door. I felt my body turn cold, fear piercing my heart as I imagined whatever monster Varian had sent after us this time.

Maeve pushed me behind her, drawing her knives. Tom appeared at the end of the hallway, bow loaded and ready to fire, and Lee stood directly in front of the door, sword raised and eyes hard.

"Hey, Summer! I know it's not five yet, but I thought since classes were canceled, we could start our date a little ear-" Max was abruptly cut off by the sword leveled at his throat.

Oh no.

I shoved past Maeve and emerged from the hall into the living room where Lee currently held Max at sword point, looking at him with suspicious eyes before shooting me an angry glance. “*Date?*”

Son of a nutcracker. Why did I agree to go on a date with Max? And why was he three hours early!?

Max was in the same blue t-shirt and jeans from earlier and his hands were up in a position of surrender as he looked between Lee and I with panicked eyes. “Uh--Summer? What’s going on here? Who are these guys?”

Maeve and Tom filed in behind me, weapons drawn. I looked between him and the warriors. I fumbled to come up with an explanation for all this, but I failed to think of anything that didn’t sound completely crazy. “It’s kind of hard to explain.”

Max gulped, his eyes on the sword at his throat. I rushed over to Lee and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Hey, put away the sword, will you? He’s not a threat. He’s my friend.”

Lee narrowed his eyes at Max but dropped his sword. Max let out a breath of relief and lowered his hands.

I looked toward Maeve and Tom who still had their weapons raised threateningly. “I mean it guys. He’s cool. Lower your weapons.”

Maeve looked as suspicious as Lee but secured her knives back to her thighs. Tom loosened the arrow from his bow, reaching to put it back in his quiver.

Confident that none of my friends were going to kill each other anytime soon, I turned back to Max who was looking between me and the trio with confused and scared glances. “Summer, seriously. Who are these guys? Why are they dressed like that? Why do they have *swords*?”

I decided to start with the easiest question first. I gestured to Maeve, Tom, and Lee. “Well, this is Maeve, my friend.”

Max focused his attention on Maeve, and she bared her teeth at him, smiling when he flinched back a bit.

I rolled my eyes at her. “And this is Tom, another friend.”

Tom inclined his head toward Max, a genuine smile on his face. Max cautiously smiled back before finally turning his gaze toward Lee.

The two were almost the same height, but Lee was just a bit taller. I could tell it made Max a little uncomfortable. He wasn't used to looking up to people. "And this is Lee, my--"

"Boyfriend." Lee said, leveling Max with a hard stare. I dropped my jaw at him. Did he really think now was the time to stake his claim on me?

Max stepped back suddenly, looking at me with confusion and hurt in his eyes. "Boyfriend?"

I searched my brain for an explanation. I couldn't very well tell Max that Lee was my boyfriend from another life I couldn't remember, so I just shrugged my shoulders. "It's new?"

Max looked rapidly between Lee and I before reaching forward to grab my arm. "Summer, could I talk to you for a moment? Alone?"

I felt the three of them lean forward when Max touched me but tried to reassure them with a wave of my hand that everything was fine. Max led me to the entry of the hallway before leaning down and whispering intently. "What the hell is going on, Summer? Who are those guys, really? Do they have something to do with what people are saying happened at the school?"

I took a breath and met Max's confused blue eyes with my own. "Listen, I can't explain everything right now, okay? I have to go with these guys. They need...my help with something. Something important."

Max looked at me like I was crazy, panic edging into his voice. "What do you mean, you're going with them? Going where? Summer, this is crazy you don't even know these people!"

I opened my mouth to respond, to defend myself, but at that moment, I realized that he was right.

I glanced over my shoulder at my friends. I didn't know them, not really, and yet, I already considered them friends. Why? Because we had a secret handshake? Because we shared a past I couldn't remember?

This entire day had felt more like a chapter from one of my fantasy books than real life, and maybe that's why I had adapted to the idea of this other realm, this other life

so easily. It's why I had begun to feel like these guys were my friends despite only really knowing them for a few hours.

But this wasn't a fantasy. This was real. I felt my stomach twist in an uncomfortable knot. Max was right. How much did I know about these people, really? It was foolish of me to become comfortable with them so easily, to become attached. This new world had already proven itself capable of ripping things I held dear away from me: my memories, my safety, my sense of self. Until I learned more about what kind of world I belonged to, it would be wisest to keep my distance, at least emotionally.

I looked back toward Max. "You're right. They are strangers," I replied, and Max sighed in relief, grabbing my arm and pulling me toward the open door. "Great, now let's go--"

"No." I pulled my arm from Max's grasp and went to stand next to Lee. "I still need to help them. I need to do what's right, and trust me, going with them, seeing this through, it's right."

Max just looked at me standing next to Lee, shock written plainly across his features. When he found his voice again, it wasn't angry like I expected. It was calm.

Max lowered his hands in a placating gesture, his voice low and soothing like he was trying not to startle a scared animal. "Summer, whatever these guys told you isn't true, okay? Just because they carry swords and are dressed like wood elves doesn't mean they're like the characters in your books."

I rolled my eyes at his condescending tone. Oh, great. It seemed Max thought I had become so desperate for adventure I'd let any weirdly dressed dudes trick me into believing they were magic. "Shut up, Max. It's not like that. I know what I'm doing, okay?"

Max still didn't look convinced, but maybe we could have ended the whole confrontation without any violence if only *someone* hadn't decided to make it all a thousand times worse.

Lee grabbed my hand that had been hanging at my side, intertwining our fingers while he smirked at Max. "Yeah, *Max*. She knows what she's doing."

Max's face turned an angry red color at the sight of our intertwined hands. Fantastic.

“C’mon, Summer. Let’s go.” Max reached forward to grab my arm, again, but Lee stepped in between us. “She said no.”

Max stepped forward, getting into Lee’s personal space. “*She* doesn’t know what she’s doing.”

I raised my hand, a bit offended. “Hey now, I know exactly what I--”

Max cut me off, poking a finger at Lee, accusingly. “You guys brainwashed her or something. The Summer I know would never go running off with a group of strangers or date some freak dressed in green leather.”

Lee didn’t move, just raised an eyebrow at Max. “Clearly, you don’t know her as well as you think you do.”

Max’s face was roughly the shade of a tomato now. A very angry tomato. He opened his mouth to speak, but Lee cut him off, turning to look at me. “Summer, kindly tell your friend to back off before he hurts himself, will you?”

I looked from Max to Lee. Lee looked calm, but beneath that cool demeanor I could see barely contained rage simmering within his wildfire eyes. I knew Max was strong, but Lee was a warrior, push him too far and he’d lay Max out. I was sure of it.

Although Max had been almost insultingly overprotective these past few minutes, I didn’t want to see Lee beat him up. I mean, I kind of understood where he was coming from. I was the one who agreed to go on a date with him this morning only to show up a few hours later with a new boyfriend and a weirdly dressed squad.

Still, it kind of stung that Max thought I could be so easily duped.

Lee, on the other hand, had already proven that he considered me more than capable of handling myself. He didn’t push me behind him when we were fighting the ashers. He tossed me a sword and trusted I could use it.

At that moment, as I looked between them, I realized something. I hadn’t known exactly what it was that had kept me from liking Max, but I realized now that part of it was because he tended to treat me like I was helpless, like I needed someone to take care of me.

I reached a hand toward Max, intending to pull him away from Lee and avoid an all-out fist fight.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t fast enough.

At Lee's final comment, Max reared back his arm to punch Lee when he suddenly crumpled to the ground like a sack of flour. Maeve stood behind his unconscious form, one of her knives turned upside down in her hand. My jaw dropped open.

"Maeve!" I shouted. "What the hell? Why'd you knock him out?"

"Maybe because I want to get out of here sometime in the next century, and lover boy here clearly wasn't going to let you go without a fight."

Lee must have seen the panic in my eyes. "Relax, he'll be fine. He'll wake up in an hour or so with a headache and probably a mild concussion and go about his day as usual."

I was nodding along until--

"Wait, concussion? *Concussion*?!"

"Just a mild one," Tom added helpfully.

I sighed and pressed a hand to my forehead, trying to figure out what to do. I glanced at Max's crumpled form and winced. We couldn't just leave him on the floor. "Okay. Tom, Lee, help carry him to my bed."

Tom grabbed his legs while Lee looped his hands under his shoulders. Max's head lolled from side to side as they half carried, half dragged him down the hallway to my room.

"Does he have to go in your *bed*?" I heard Lee grumble to himself.

I shot him a dirty look when Max's head bumped into the wall as they turned the corner.

"My bad," he said, feigning innocence.

I rolled my eyes at him and opened my bedroom door for them. Once they laid him on the bed, I spotted the notepad on my nightstand and decided to write Max a little note for when he woke up.

Gone for a while. Don't come after me. Sorry about your head. (P.S Lee's sorry, too.)

"Hey, what did I do?" Lee exclaimed, reading the note over my shoulder.

I narrowed my eyes at him, laying the note gently on Max's chest. "You know exactly what you did. You practically threw it in his face that you were my boyfriend."

"Oh, my apologies. I didn't realize you wanted to keep our relationship a secr--"

“We don’t have a relationship!” I snapped, tears springing to my eyes.

All anger vanished from Lee’s face, hurt and confusion taking its place. I turned away from his wounded expression, focusing instead on the late afternoon sunlight as it drifted through my bedroom window.

Right here, right now, I had a choice. If I went with Lee and Maeve and Tom, if I chose to step into the role of princess, to take responsibility for this new life, then that’s it. There would be no undoing it. My life, as I knew it, would be over, but if I stayed...

I tried to picture it, staying behind. Living life in what was essentially a prison, albeit a happy one. I still had Max and Cassie. I still had school, but I knew I would always be looking over my shoulder, wondering who, or what might be watching, forever haunted by what was and what could have been.

My eyes lingered on a photo of Cassie and Max and I on the wall, my frozen smile feeling more like it belonged to someone else. My old life felt almost as far away from me as the new one seemed to be. I pressed my hands against my head in frustration. I felt like Neo, with my two choices, my two lives stretched out before me. One red, one blue.

I wiped my eyes before turning back toward Lee. “I’ll go with you to Crestfall. I’ll help you defeat Varian, but as far as anything else...”

I shook my head, not wanting to say the words, to end something before it even got the chance to begin, but if I was going to choose this world, this life, then I needed to go in with my eyes wide open. I needed to do whatever I could to hold on to the person I was or risk getting lost in the person I used to be.

Because the truth was, there was no blue pill. There was no going back now. No matter how much I might want to.

I wanted to turn around, to wrap my arms around Lee and press my lips against his, but everything that was between us, everything our connection was built on, was simply a remnant of another life. It wasn’t real.

Lee didn’t *really* love me. He couldn’t. He didn’t know me well enough, and until he did, until any of them got to know who I *was* rather than who I’d been, it was best to make sure the lines were clearly drawn between us. “Max was right about one thing. I don’t know you, not really. I--I shouldn’t have pretended that I did.”

Lee didn't say anything as I turned and left the room, wiping away the lingering tears. I told myself that I was doing the right thing by distancing myself, that I deserved to be loved as Summer and not just as Rose, but a voice in my head whispered to me that I was a coward, that the real reason I was pushing him away was because I was afraid.

Well, that voice could shove it.

Suddenly, a loud thump erupted from the front door. I found Tom and Maeve staring expectantly at the locked door when another thump sounded against it, the force making the entire door rattle on its hinges.

"Another suitor of yours?" Maeve asked.

I shook my head. Whatever was behind that door was way stronger than anyone I knew. Fear raced through me as the door shook again and again, the sound eerily similar to that in my nightmare.

"We could leave through the window," Tom suggested.

"Too risky. They could have the whole apartment surrounded."

I jumped a bit at the sound of Lee's voice behind me. I hadn't even realized he'd followed me out. "Who's *they*?" I asked, looking over my shoulder at Lee.

He looked determined, focused on the problem at hand. You'd have no idea he had just been dumped less than five minutes ago. Nothing in his face gave away his sadness save his eyes. I could see the inner turmoil raging in those green eyes.

I expected his reply to betray some of that conflict, some of that pain, but it was cool, matter of fact. "Varian has amassed various allies within Crestfall. The trolls, the goblins, and the pixies are among them. He could have sent any of them to come after you."

I wanted to respond, but my mind was reeling with the idea that all these magical creatures actually existed. "And the ashers?" I managed to say, finally.

"Ashers aren't really allies, more like minions. They're creatures created by Varian to do his bidding. They have no thoughts or feelings, just unending hunger and aggression."

Yeah, that sounded about right.

"My money's on it being the trolls," Tom said, raising his bow. "They like to make an entrance."

With one final thud, the door flew off its hinges and landed right at our feet.

“Wait, *Ogres?*” Tom questioned, sliding a glance towards Lee. “But how--?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Lee said grimly as he raised his sword.

As I stared at the aforementioned creatures, two things immediately grabbed my attention. Firstly, they were wearing clothes. *Actual* clothes.

I guess in retrospect it wasn’t that weird that they would be wearing clothes except it seemed that in every literary or cinematic adaptation I’d come across, ogres tended to sport mainly loincloths and the occasional animal hide of whatever unlucky beast had the misfortune of crossing their path.

These ogres’ dress was significantly more sophisticated. Some had on long pants and others had on shorts. Some wore tank tops and others wore shirts. One even had a *shawl*. Their clothes all seemed to be made of the same simple material though the colors varied greatly. It seemed they tended to favor rich jewel tones that corresponded with the colors of their eyes.

Aside from their clothes, their physical appearances seemed to correspond with the adaptations I’d seen. Pale bluish skin. Scant hairs populating the crowns of bulbous heads. Their hands looked to be the size of baseball mitts, and their general body shape resembled that of a large grapefruit that had somehow sprouted arms and legs. They had barely any necks to speak of, and their features had a sort of smooshed look about them, with large flat noses and wide mouths, like a giant rock had fallen on their faces.

The second thing that caught my attention was the smell. Somehow these creatures smelled worse than they looked. Like rotten cabbage. I wanted to cover my nose with my shirt.

Two appeared in the doorway but more tried to push through, shoving and climbing atop one another to get a better look at their prey. “Um, I don’t recall any of you mentioning ogres.”

“We didn’t think they had aligned with Varian,” Maeve grumbled bitterly. “Until now.”

As more and more piled in, it became clear that we were hopelessly outnumbered. At least six ogres had managed to shove their way into the doorway with more pushing in

behind them. They formed a circle around us but didn't attack. It was almost like they were waiting for something.

Lee eyed the ogres gathering around us. "Where's their leader?"

"Their leader?"

"Ogres are strong, but they don't have much in the way of brains. An attack like this? Someone, or something, has to be directing them."

Fear raced through me. I didn't think I wanted to meet whatever was powerful enough to bend all of these guys to their will. Although, it didn't look like I had much choice given that we were completely trapped.

"Hey, Maeve? Got any more coruscents?" Lee said, eyeing the ogres warily.

Maeve pulled a dim orb from her bag and handed it to Lee. "Yeah, but it's not charged, and if you hadn't already noticed, this place isn't a hallow. "

"*You* may need a hallow, but Summer doesn't."

I felt my jaw drop open as Lee shoved the smooth orb into my hands. "Me!? I can't do magic."

"Yes, you can. You have the highest magical affinity out of any of us. You don't need a hallow."

"But I have no idea how to recharge a magical glitter bomb!"

Lee just looked at me, eyes patient even as the ogres began shifting around us. They clearly didn't like the coruscant. "It's simple, okay? Just connect with the energy in the ground and funnel it into the orb."

I looked at him like he was batshit crazy because he most definitely was.

"Nothing about that sounds simple."

"Listen, Summer. It's like muscle memory, okay? Just like Tom's handshake."

I shook my head, panic filling me. How the hell could he compare remembering how to do a handshake to remembering how to do magic?

The ogres began shifting closer and Lee grabbed my hand, squeezing it. "Either you do this, or we're all these ogres' lunch. Please, just try."

I stared into his green eyes, calm despite the growing danger around us, and reluctantly nodded my head. Lee released my hand, and I placed it back on the orb, trying to concentrate.

“Yep, it’s only our lives at stake. No pressure.” Maeve grumbled.

I ignored her and focused on the ground beneath my feet. I felt a little ridiculous, looking for magic, trying to find something that I only recently learned existed at all.

Seconds passed, but the only thing I felt was the hard tile beneath my shoes.

I looked harder. C’mon, there had to be *something*. Sweat beaded at my forehead as the ogres grew more and more restless around me. I felt tears well in my eyes. This was hopeless. I couldn’t do magic. I couldn’t--

One of the ogres surged forward, clearly tired of waiting for whatever was leading them to make an appearance. It reached a meaty hand out for Maeve’s arm, but she slashed forward with one of her knives so quickly I could barely follow its movement as it arched above her, a blur of silver flashing through the air.

The ogre just watched as his large blue hand tumbled to the floor. He paused for a moment, glancing between his bloody stump of an arm and his lost appendage like he was confused about why they were no longer connected. Suddenly, a large wail erupted from his throat, and he surged forward with new fury.

The other ogres, which had taken a collective step back after witnessing their friend’s unfortunate dismemberment, growled and started forward, too, seeking vengeance. Lee slashed his sword over and over again, trying to keep them away from me, while Tom stood at my back, firing arrow after arrow into the fray.

My stomach clenched with fear as the monsters pressed in around us. I held the coruscent with shaking hands, trying to concentrate, but there was too much panic, too much fear. My heart thundered in my ears along with the snarls of the ogres around us.

I shook my head, trying to block it out, but the roar only grew. I couldn’t focus. I-

-

Suddenly, one of the ogres slipped past Lee’s sword, reaching forward quickly and wrapping a large hand around his throat. Lee’s sword dropped from his hand as the ogre lifted him up, struggling to escape as the monster squeezed the life out of him.

“No,” I screamed, fear racing through me. *Not Lee.*

Suddenly, the coruscent flashed hot in my hands, the heat and glow surprising me so much I almost dropped it. I looked down at the egg for a moment and then back up to

Lee, his struggles against the ogre growing weaker and weaker. The sight filled me with more fear, more despair, and I felt the orb warm in response.

Emotion. The thing was fueled by *emotion*.

I closed my eyes, focusing on my time with Lee, how I felt when I was with him, how scared I was of losing him.

Wait, there was... *something* there.

I concentrated harder. I could feel a sort of warmth pulsing beneath my feet, similar to what I felt when Lee had healed my side. Excitement flooded my veins. I tried to will the warmth, the magic upwards, through my feet and up towards my hands, and to my great surprise, it actually obeyed.

I gasped a little as the warmth flowed through me. It felt like more than just heat. It felt like the warmth of Lee's skin when he held me, like Cassie's smile, like Max's laugh.

I channeled the magic into the coruscent, feeling the egg itself warm within my hands, all the while thinking about the people I loved, about the fear I had of losing them.

That's it, magic. Get in the little egg bomb.

Finally, I opened my eyes to a bright purple light radiating from the orb. It had to be at least twenty times brighter than it had been in the alley, and the ogres didn't like it. At all.

They began to snarl as they pushed forward harder, threatening to crush us. Okay, that's probably charged enough. I tried to stop the magic, to will it back where it came from, but it didn't ease up, if anything it flew faster and faster into the coruscent.

I began to panic. *Shit, shit, shit!* I couldn't control it. It wasn't listening to me. The egg grew so hot it burned my hands, and I yelped as I dropped it to the floor.

If the coruscent in the alley had been a grenade, then this one went off like a freaking atomic bomb.

The room immediately burst into a mess of glitter and pink and purple lights, only this time the explosion was so big that I felt the ground rattle a bit beneath my feet. It seemed like my entire apartment was filled with exploding fireworks of glitter and light.

I looked up at the sound of voices. My upstairs neighbors peered back at me through the five-foot hole I'd made in their living room floor. They're mouths were open in shock. I waved my hand apologetically. "Um-I'll pay for that?"

Tom laughed as Maeve looked at me, an expression of awe on her features that quickly morphed into an eye roll. "Kind of overkill don't you think?"

I didn't respond, trying to find Lee amongst all the glitter and mayhem. The sound of coughing drew my gaze to the floor where Lee was resting on his hands and knees where the ogre must have dropped him. I quickly leaned down and helped him up, and he rose slowly, leaning on me while he attempted to catch his breath.

Maeve grabbed Lee's sword from the ground, and she led the way as we hobbled toward the door, past the ogres who were busy trying to swipe at the fireworks and rub the glitter out of their eyes. Some were just staring at the pretty lights, wonderstruck expressions on their faces.

I was almost out the door when I remembered---"Max!" I turned toward Lee with a panicked look. "We can't just leave him! We have to go back!"

"It's too late," Lee said, his voice rough as he gripped my hand and urged me toward the van even as I pulled against him, trying to get back toward the apartment. "Besides, they're looking for you. The farther from Max you are, the safer he'll be."

I wanted to argue with him, to tell him we couldn't risk the ogres finding Max, but he was right. They had no reason to look. As long as he stayed asleep until they were gone, he'd be fine. I hoped. Besides, whatever happened between us, I knew Lee would never abandon Max if he was actually in danger.

Still, a part of my stomach twisted at the thought of leaving him behind, but as I turned to look back toward the door of my apartment, I could see the ogres begin to tumble out after us. They were so covered in glitter and pink and purple powder, they looked like they had been sitting front row at a Kesha concert.

I tumbled into the back of the van with Lee as Maeve jumped in the driver's seat, and Tom took the passenger seat. I was a bit confused as to why until Tom leaned out of the window and began pelting the ogres with arrows as Maeve pulled the van away so quickly the tires squealed. A few seconds passed and I let out a sigh of relief, glad to have made it out in one piece.

Suddenly, the van jostled from side to side, like some invisible hand was swatting at it, until it suddenly stopped dead, only sixty yards or so from the apartment. Maeve looked in the rearview mirror and swore. “Looks like their leader finally showed up. It’s a grim.”

A *grim*? That didn’t sound good. “What the hell’s a grim?”

“A telekinetic wraith that never dies.” Maeve said quickly. I blinked at her. Sounded peachy.

Lee swore and peered out the window. “Of course, it’s a grim. We just need to get out of range, and he won’t be able to touch us.”

Suddenly, the van began shaking again. Maeve’s knuckles tightened on the steering wheel as she tried to maintain control. “Well, we’re not going anywhere unless we manage to throw him off.”

Lee turned toward Tom. “Do you have a shot?”

Tom shook his head. “It’s too far, and I only have one arrow left.”

I peered through the back window at the shimmering black and gray creature. It was clad in dark robes and seemed to almost hover above the ground. The only part of its body that was visible beneath the robes was his hands, gnarled and gray. It had them raised and it looked like he was using them to drag the van back toward him. It was making slow progress, but I could also see the ogres lumbering towards us. Pretty soon, they’d catch up. I searched my brain for a way out.

Suddenly, a thought entered my mind. I could still feel the magic thrumming beneath me. Maybe I could use it to--

“Tom, get ready to take your shot,” I commanded, opening the van door. Lee reached out a hand to stop me. “Wait--What are you doing, Summer?”

“You said magic could be used to move something that already exists, right?”

“Right...?” Lee replied, a question in his voice.

“Well, that arrow already exists, and I have killer aim.” So long as I didn’t make it explode. I leaned out the van. I pictured Lee’s warm embrace, pictured my mom brushing my hair with gentle strokes, and felt a corresponding surge of warmth radiating from the ground. “Ready, Tom?”

“On your mark, princess.” I could practically hear the grin in his voice.

“Now!”

The arrow flew out of Tom’s bow as fast as lighting, and I quickly channeled the magic to latch on to it. Tom had good aim, but he was right. The shot was too far. As the arrow began to fall forward, I pushed my magic beneath it lifting it up and up until ---

“Aaagh!” The grim let out an inhuman scream as the arrow embedded itself into its shoulder. I barely had time to feel the rush of victory when I felt Lee yank me back into the van as it suddenly surged forward. Thankfully, the rough interruption stopped the flow of magic through me before it had a chance to get out of control.

I sat on the floor, still shaking from pent up adrenaline. I couldn’t believe I had done that. Maeve chuckled from the front seat. “Well, at least you didn’t make it explode. Maybe, we stand a chance after all.”

Lee just shook his head at me, smiling. I smiled back. I was worried he’d be mad at me about what I said in the apartment, but if he was, he was hiding it extremely well. I looked at him, a little nervous. “Hey, Lee? Are we...okay?”

Lee paused for a moment then nodded. “Yeah, we’re okay,” he said before leaning close to whisper in my ear. “I’m in it for the long game.”

CHAPTER 6

Even in Dreams

The drive to Enchanted Rock from Waco was about two hours, but it only took about thirty minutes for all the adrenaline from fighting the grim to wear off, leaving me totally zapped. I leaned my head against the window, the steady hum of the engine combined with the stress of the day making my head droop and my eyelids grow heavy.

I shook my head quickly, trying to force myself to stay awake. I knew I probably needed the sleep, having only slept about nine hours the last three nights combined, but the ever-present threat of another nightmare kept me blinking my eyes rapidly, trying to stay awake.

I turned toward Lee, hoping he could provide a bit of distraction. So far, I had only made a small dent in the millions of questions I still had about everything. Maybe this car ride was the perfect opportunity to get some more answers. Lee was looking out the window, a slight smile on his face.

“Hey, Lee?”

Lee looked toward me suddenly, his smile dropping as he was startled from whatever reverie he’d been lost in. “Yeah, Summer?”

“How did you find me?”

Lee gave me a confused look. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, how did you find me at the school? How did you figure out where I was?”

Lee glanced nervously toward Tom and Maeve, fidgeting a bit in his seat. “Well, um--I, well we--”

“We put a tracker on you,” Maeve called from the front seat, looking over her shoulder and rolling her eyes at Lee. Lee let out a breath of relief before nodding his head rapidly. “Yep, we tracked you. With a tracker. That’s how we found you.”

I narrowed my eyes, glancing between Maeve and Lee suspiciously. I couldn’t see Maeve’s face, but Lee was currently sweating bullets, his leg bouncing up and down.

Maybe he was embarrassed? He did apparently put a tracker on his girlfriend after all.
“What is it?”

“I’m sorry?”

“What did you use to track me with?”

“Um--we used...” Lee glanced toward the front seat, silently pleading for Maeve to assist him, but she was too busy trying to drive and toss m&m’s into Tom’s open mouth while he slept to notice. I tucked my hair behind my ear, leaning forward toward Lee. The boy was clearly hiding something.

“Your earrings!” Lee shouted suddenly, pointing at my ears. “The tracker is in your earrings. You were wearing them when you were kidnapped.”

I raised my eyebrows at him. While it’s true I couldn’t exactly remember when I had gotten my favorite pair of green studs, it hadn’t occurred to me that they had been from my previous life or that they had apparently been endowed with magical tracking abilities. Then, again, a lot hadn’t occurred to me until today.

“Well, then how come it took so long? To find me, I mean?”

“Well, the um--the signal was really faint. It was hard to tell where it was coming from. It hadn’t occurred to us that Varian might have taken you to another realm. We looked all over Crestfall, then, more as a last-ditch effort than anything else, we portaled into Earth and the bo--the signal became incredibly strong, and we knew we could find you so long as we followed it. So, we prepared the mystery machine and headed off.”

Wow, so my boyfriend had tracked me across realms with a pair of earrings. I should probably be upset, but I couldn’t bring myself to be too mad. If they hadn’t shown up when they did... I shivered at the thought of having to face those ashers alone. “Still, it’s been two years, right? Why attack me now?”

“Well, we kind of bumped into a few ashers on our way in. Apparently, they had been watching you, standing guard most likely. I left Tom and Maeve to finish them off and that’s when I--uh-- found you.”

Lee grinned at me, and I blushed, remembering our first encounter, before quickly changing the subject. “I don’t get it. Why keep me alive only to try and kill me later? In fact, why keep me alive at all?”

Lee shook his head. "I don't know, Summer. Best I can figure is he might have wanted to use you as a bargaining tool in the future, a way to make sure your people stayed in line. When we showed up to rescue you, he probably figured he'd rather have you dead than free and ordered the ashers to finish the job."

I leaned my head against the window once more, turning the idea over and over in my mind, trying to discern what exactly Varian's motives were, trying to make any of the twisted puzzle pieces of my life fit together. The steady hum of the van played like a lullaby against my cheek, and despite my best efforts, it wasn't long until sleep overtook me.

Darkness enveloped the room, pressing down on me, suffocating me, the feeling of the wall against my back the only clue that I was in a room at all, but I didn't need it. I knew where I was.

One by one, they appeared. They had no true shape, just a shifting form of darkness and shadow. Now and again, sharp teeth and claws would emerge from the churning mist, slashing out with a snarl before receding back in.

A breath, a blink, and they were upon me.

Instinctively, I threw my arms and legs out, trying to keep them away, but it was like trying to battle smoke, my hands passing harmlessly through their bodies. I, unfortunately, was a much more solid target.

Claws slashed at my chest, drawing blood as the darkness around me took form. I couldn't help the screams that ripped from my throat each time their talons broke my skin, the pain ripping through like another pair of claws, so intense it brought tears to my eyes. I kept screaming, kept struggling as they dragged me toward the other side of the room. To the door.

A plain, white door had appeared against the wall. It vibrated from whatever lay trapped behind it, the hinges rattling with each hit as it fought to escape. A greenish light seeped through the cracks, casting an eerie glow on the room and the monsters that inhabited it.

All at once, the shadows released me, tossing me in front of the door. I rested on my knees, trying to catch my breath around the screams still lingering in my throat. The

monsters didn't rush me. They were waiting. Whatever was behind that door, they wanted it. Badly.

I closed my eyes, sucking in a breath as I stood. I pressed my bloody hands against the vibrating door, marring the white paint with streaks of red, my heartbeat quickening with every thud as the thing behind it fought to get free.

I didn't want to open it. I feared whatever was behind that door almost as much as I feared the monsters behind me.

Almost.

I could sense the monsters growing impatient, inhuman snarls emerging from the dark mist. I knew I didn't have much time left before they attacked again. With shaky hands, I reached for the iron knob, turning it slowly before swinging it wide open, closing my eyes. Fear clenched my stomach as I tried to imagine what was behind it. Something told me I didn't want to know.

With a terrible cry that sounded almost like a laugh, the creatures rushed through me. At the same time, the power, the force, whatever it was that was behind that door, rushed out. A scream ripped through my throat as I was torn apart, my world exploding into pain until everything went black.

With a flash, the dark room was gone, replaced by what looked like a study. A fire roared in the fireplace to my left and rows upon rows of books were stacked all around me, the smell of old paper and oak permeating the small space.

There, in the center, was what looked to be an impossibly old man, perched on an armchair as he squinted wrinkled eyes at the open tomb in front of him.

Suddenly, he glanced up, staring directly at me, his blue eyes so light they looked almost white, twinkling as he raised his eyebrows at me. "Now what on Earth are you doing here?"

I woke with a startled gasp as the dream faded around me, replaced by the worried eyes of Lee as he clutched my shoulders, as if he'd been shaking me, trying to get me to wake up. "Rose?! Rose, are you okay?"

I nodded, trying to focus on Lee despite the lingering fear from the nightmare still flowing through me. With a jolt, I realized I actually remembered it this time.

I'd known as soon as I appeared in that room that that was the same nightmare that had been haunting me the past week. However, I'd expected to forget again, to have it fade from my memory once I woke up like all the others.

Only this time, it hadn't. I could still remember it, could still see the bloodied white door and feel the sting of the ashers' claws as they tore into me.

I shook my head, trying to clear my still frazzled mind. I looked at Lee once more, expecting him to have calmed slightly, but he still looked worried, eyes a little wild as they stared at me. I placed a hand on one of his that still rested on my shoulder. "Hey, don't worry. It was just a nightmare. Sorry, if I was screami--"

"Summer, stop." Lee cut me off, clenching his jaw as he looked not at my eyes but at the rest of me. "Look."

I wrinkled my brow in confusion but did as he asked, glancing down at the white shirt Maeve had given me before we went into the adventure zone, only it was no longer white. Horror flowed through me as I saw the dark red stains that were beginning to bloom on the white fabric.

Blood.

"What? How?"

Lee slowly lifted up my shirt, revealing my stomach. It took me a moment to process what I was seeing, so shocked was I by the bloody claw marks that scored my stomach and chest, in the *exact* same places where the ashers had attacked me. Fortunately, that was where the similarities ended. In my dream, it had felt like the ashers were tearing me apart, but these scratches seemed to be skin deep, like the wounds were only barely able to manifest themselves in the real world, just enough to mark me.

I heard cursing and shocked gasps from Maeve and Tom in the front seat as they looked at me, but Lee remained silent, the tightness of his jaw the only thing revealing how upset the sight made him. As the adrenaline slowly began to wear off, I realized I could feel them, all of them, stinging slightly as the cold air of the van hit them. At first I thought I was imagining it, that I was still in the dream, but there they were, so real I couldn't deny them.

I arched my back, wincing a bit as the skin stretched and moved, and I knew the scratches weren't just on my stomach, but all over my torso. I shuddered a bit, squeezing Lee's hand tighter as I looked at him, hoping he'd have answers. "What happened?"

Lee gently lowered my shirt back down, not letting go of my hand. "You were screaming, Summer. You were screaming so loud. It sounded like something was tearing you apart, like you were dying."

Lee's voice broke a bit toward the end, like even the memory was too much to bear. "I was trying to wake you up when you just---started bleeding. I couldn't stop it, and more and more cuts just kept opening up out of nowhere."

I looked from Lee to Tom to Maeve, matching looks of worry and fear clouding their features. "I had the dream, the one I was telling you about before, with the ashers. Only this time, I remember it. All of it."

Lee's eyes widened. "What happened?"

"I was trapped in this dark room, and they--the ashers attacked me. They made me open this door for them and...."

"And what?" Lee said.

"And I think it killed me."

I watched the three of them try to digest this new information, but my gaze was ultimately drawn to Lee, fear and anger shadowing his features, making them look darker, more severe.

I debated telling them about the second part of my dream, about the odd old man and the study, but I found myself holding back. It was just so strange, and we had enough puzzles to work out right now. The main one being: how can injuries that occurred during a dream manifest themselves in real life? And beyond that, how could I defend against it? How could I fight something that wasn't even real?

Lee seemed to be thinking the same thing, shaking his head slightly as he clenched his jaw in frustration. "He can even get to you in your dreams."

The thought sent a shiver down my spine, and suddenly Lee was moving, sliding open the van door with an angry pull before leaping out and stalking angrily through the empty field Maeve had parked us next to. She must have pulled over when all the craziness started.

I watched Lee through the van door as he paced back and forth in the field. There was a half-broken fence post near him, and I was shocked when he suddenly kicked it over, cursing and shouting as he did. It wasn't night yet, but storm clouds darkened the sky, threatening to burst open at any moment. Not unlike someone else, it seemed.

"Don't worry about it." Tom said, drawing my gaze to him. "He'll be back. He just needs to cool down a little."

I shook my head. "I know. It's just odd. Lee's usually so...calm."

Tom's eyes bulged out a bit, and Maeve scoffed from the driver's seat. "Calm? Lee? I think you're thinking of the wrong guy, princess."

I raised my eyebrows at them. "Are you kidding? First, with the ashers at school and then with ogres and the grim? Lee never freaked out. He just handled it."

Lee was like the leader of our little team, always ready with a plan, with a solution, with a reassuring word in the face of doubt.

Tom shook his head. "That's fighting, Summer. Battle. Lee's never had a problem with that. *You're* the one that makes him a little...crazy."

"*Me?* What are you talking about?"

Maeve eyed Lee speculatively. "He's been hiding it pretty well since we found you. He was so happy to have you back that nothing really got to him, but now...He knows the fight isn't over, yet. It's barely even begun."

I shook my head. "He doesn't need to be worried about me; it's just a few scratches."

"Lee will *always* worry about you, Summer." Maeve intoned, eyes serious.

Tom's voice drew my attention from Maeve, only he wasn't looking at me but out the window, at Lee. "You don't remember, but the final battle, the last time we saw you, you gave yourself up."

"What?! Why?"

"Everyone was in the throne room when Varian attacked. The guard, the nobles, and as many commoners as there was room for. When Varian arrived, there weren't enough soldiers to defend the civilians. Hordes of ashers swarmed the room, killing everything, *everyone*, in sight.

“You fought bravely, we all did, but it wasn’t enough. We were losing. People were dying, so when Varian offered to spare your people if you surrendered yourself, you didn’t hesitate.”

I tried to picture it, the chaos and bloodshed they were describing. The death and destruction. The fear. I didn’t have to try very hard.

“Lee went crazy,” Maeve said softly, her gaze far away like she was watching it all over again. “He was screaming at you, begging you not to do it, but you didn’t listen. You laid your sword at Varian’s feet and looked him dead in the eyes, just waiting.”

“Lee tried to get to you, but he was too far away. There were too many ashers between him and you, so he just watched as Varian snapped his fingers and the two of you vanished.”

“While he was gone, we used the distraction to get as many people out as possible, but as soon as we did, Lee wouldn’t focus on anything but finding you.”

“You didn’t see him.” Tom continued, taking over the story from Maeve, eyes still on Lee. “You weren’t there for the past six months, but Lee...he was like a shell of himself. It wasn’t until we found you that we actually saw him smile, again, heard him laugh. The thought of losing you again...”

Tom trailed off, leaving me to put the pieces together myself. “So, that means---”

“It means you have a bad habit of putting yourself in danger, Ro--*Summer*.”

Maeve interjected, her eyes almost angry as they looked at me. “And loving someone like that, it’s---it’s not easy.”

Maeve looked away quickly, apparently done talking about it, and I just sat there for a moment, struggling to wrap my head around it. The depth of the feelings that Lee, and perhaps Tom and Maeve, too, seemed to have for me. Well, for Rose, anyway. The thought warmed me at the same time as it chilled me to the bone.

I couldn’t help thinking that the girl I was now wasn’t worthy of that kind of devotion.

Rose may be a hero, a magical warrior princess, but I was just Summer.

Rose might have sacrificed everything for her people, but what had Summer done? Read books? Avoided thinking about her future? They might have spent the last six months searching for their princess who would save them from this evil threat, but *I’d*

spent the last two years playing skeeball and studying for tests. Not preparing to fight sorcerers.

I wasn't the same girl they'd once known, and I worried that the second they realized it, the second Lee realized that I wasn't the kind of girl guys fell for, the kind of girl they fought evil sorcerers for, the kind of girl they *loved*, he'd leave. They all would.

And I would be alone.

We all sat in silence for a few minutes, until Lee finally returned to the van. At first, he didn't say anything other than a quick command to Maeve to drive, but soon he turned towards me, eyes a bit wide as if emerging from a kind of daze.

"Summer, your scratches! God, I'm so sorry." Lee shook his head as he reached for my hand, and I was tempted to let out a sigh as the warm feeling of the magic quickly flowed through me, easing the sting of the scratches. It felt different this time, Lee healing me. The first time I'd been half dead and delirious, but this time I was fully conscious, fully aware of how....intimate it actually was. The thought drew a blush to my cheeks.

When it was finished, Lee tried to pull his hand away, but I held mine over it, not letting him go. "It's okay, Lee. Really."

I was talking about more than just the scratches, and I could tell Lee knew it, letting me hold on to him, even squeezing my hand tighter like he was afraid I was the one that was going to slip away, but he didn't meet my eyes, choosing to look down instead. Like he was ashamed.

"It's not. I shouldn't have lost it like that. It's just...these past few hours...despite," he waved his hand around, "everything...it's like I was able to forget for a bit, ya know?"

"Forget what?"

"Just how easily I could lose you, again."

My heart broke a bit at the anguish in his voice. "Lee..."

Lee just shook his head, cutting off any reassurances or placations before I could utter them. "I can't lose you again, okay? Promise me."

"I don't know if--"

"I know you can't control what happens to you, just please. Don't offer yourself up, don't put yourself in harm's way. Promise."

I looked at Lee, who was waiting for my reply, the moisture in his green eyes causing tears to well up in my own. I didn't know what was in store for me, but I did know that if I could spare Lee any kind of pain, I would.

Besides, Summer wasn't the hero type, anyway.

"I promise."

A pointed cough drew my attention away from Lee, and I quickly scooted away from him when I remembered we weren't alone.

An awkward silence befell the van, and it became clear a topic change was in order. I cleared my throat. "So, speaking of ashers and ogres and such, what other magical creatures should I expect to find in Crestfall?"

Lee just looked at me a little blankly, like he'd forgotten just how clueless I was. He then turned toward Maeve and Tom with a lost look on his face, like he had no idea where to begin. Tom scratched his head, the same uncertainty echoed across his features. "Oh, well there's the pixies."

"Pixies, right."

Tom's eyes lit up. "Oh, and the mermaids--"

Lee quickly cut him off with a punch to the shoulder. "Hey, maybe don't mention the mermaids. We're trying not to scare her, remember?"

Tom frowned. "Oh, best not to mention the reapers, then ri--"

"Yeah, best not."

A silence fell over the van while the three of them seemed to be thinking hard about what else to tell me. They clearly weren't used to having to explain this kind of stuff to someone over the age of five. Still, I didn't mind. I was still trying to figure out what exactly was so scary about a mermaid.

Eventually, Tom snapped his fingers. "And there's the worlens, who are like the best warriors--"

Maeve rolled her eyes. "Please. The trolls could take the worlens, any day."

Tom threw his hands up in frustration. "Are you kidding? The trolls may have height, but the worlens are quick, sma--"

"They're *tiny*, Tom. There's no way they could take on a troll."

"Well, size doesn't matter."

Maeve let one hand off the steering wheel, using it to reach over and give Tom a rather condescending pat on the shoulder. I couldn't see her face from the backseat, but her grin was practically audible. "Sure, it doesn't."

Geez, it was like listening to a couple of twelve years olds debate the strengths and weaknesses of their favorite Pokémon. I decided to jump in before casual bickering turned to more personal insults. "Okay, so a lot of creatures. I get it. So, which ones are on our side?"

The three of them just kind of stared at me blankly. "What do you mean?"

"Like which ones are going to be fighting with us?"

Their confusion turned to bewilderment as Lee replied, "Nobody will be fighting with us."

I crossed my arms. "Wait, so they're all on Varian's side, then?"

Lee shook his head. "No, but just because they aren't against us, doesn't mean they're with us."

I leaned forward, somehow even more confused now than when this *lesson* first began. "Isn't this their kingdom, too?"

"Well, the truth is the other magical creatures of Crestfall, originals, they're called, aren't really...involved with affairs of the kingdom."

"Originals? As in...?"

"The original natives of Crestfall. They were living there long before our people, the fallen--that's what we're called--arrived. Anyway, they're still technically under your parents' rule, but it's more like they leave us alone and we leave them alone..." Lee drifted off, not really looking at me, and it became clear he was holding something back.

"And?"

"And there are those in Crestfall who think them...beneath us."

I raised my eyebrows at him. It seemed small minded people existed everywhere, even in magical realms. The idea sparked a thought in my mind, unbidden and unwelcome.

I looked down, not meeting Lee's eyes as I asked, "Is that what my parents think?"

“No, of course not,” Lee said, shaking his head. “They just thought it was best to leave them to themselves. They didn’t-- no one ever saw anything like this happening.”

I let out a little internal sigh of relief. I had only one memory of my mom, but I had hoped my parents really were as loving and kind as my memory supposed, as Maeve and Lee and Tom clearly believed them to be.

Still, I realized with a sinking feeling that I’d had certain hopes about this new world. Hope that it was free from the same earthly politics and conflict that I had to deal with on Earth--above it, maybe. Unfortunately, it seemed like every civilization was just as divided as any other, always seeking to create factions, to build barriers instead of bridges. The thought made me wilt a little in my seat.

As I looked out the window, the rain finally let loose from the clouds, smacking atop the van and rolling down the window in fat droplets, the sound like hooves clicking across the roof. Hearing all this about Crestfall kind of felt like I was learning about the North Pole, like we were actually heading to see Santa Claus and his elves and not a wicked sorcerer and a kingdom I was sworn to protect. That is to say, it felt like we were heading for an illusion, for something that didn’t really exist.

Despite all I’d experienced today, I knew I wouldn’t really be able to believe in a place like this until I saw it, until I literally crossed the threshold into the other world. Until then, all this talk of pixies and magic felt more like a game than real life, like the wishes little girls make when they’re young.

Only now, the wish was coming true, and it wasn’t at all like I expected.

The rosy kingdom I’d imagined was, in reality, littered with thorns. The prince destined to be my guide was simply a stranger in love with someone else, and the allies meant to aid me were too caught up in their own politics to care.

So, yes, a part of me clinged to the idea that this place, like Santa Claus, would simply turn out to be the dream of a lonely child.

After all, a dream couldn’t hurt you.

Only, as I dragged my fingertips over my healed skin, the phantom pain still lingering in my memory, I realized that wasn’t exactly true.

Not anymore.

As the minutes passed by, I heard the soft sounds of sleep begin around me, Lee's soft breathing and Tom's muffled snores mixing with the rain to form a rather unusual symphony, yet comforting, nonetheless. I closed my eyes despite knowing sleep was likely but a dream given the anxious state of my thoughts.

Suddenly, a soft voice began to drift from the front seat, lending melody to the sounds of rain and sleep. I'd heard Maeve speak before, of course, but her voice as she sang--so open, soft, and inviting--seemed to be everything she wasn't, or couldn't be, in real life.

I felt the words of the song wash over me, like small waves settling against the shore. I didn't recognize the language, couldn't understand the lilting words and phrases.

Still, somehow I knew, deep in my bones, that it was about coming home.

CHAPTER 7

A Sleeping Bag for Two

I sat up with a jolt as the van came to a stop.

“We have arrived! Rise and shine, sleepy heads!” Maeve’s voice called out from the front seat. I heard the sound of a groan from the passenger side followed by a round of coughing and sputtering.

“What the hell, Maeve? Again?” Tom mumbled around a mouth full of m&ms.

I stretched my arms above my head and looked around. Having been too afraid to fall asleep again lest that strange little man or worse, the ashers decided to make another appearance in my dreams, I’d spent the last hour of the trip contemplating--read: *obsessing*--over the million monumental things that seemed to have happened to me since this morning. It had almost made me wish I’d just gone to sleep. Almost.

I glanced over at Lee who actually looked like he managed to get some rest during the trip. His brown hair stood up in strange places, and there was a little red mark on his cheek from where he had been leaning against the window.

He looked way too adorable for someone who had just woken up. *Way* too adorable.

He yawned and rubbed his eyes before looking up at me, his gaze focusing on my arms and torso, scanning for any open wounds, no doubt. “Any nightmares to report?”

I shook my head. Lee’s shoulders immediately relaxed a little, and I didn’t have the heart to tell him I hadn’t slept at all. A part of me wanted to let him retain some hope that maybe the whole mutilating nightmare episode was just a one-time thing. One of us should.

Somehow, without my noticing, Lee had become my sort of rock on this wild rollercoaster of a day. My anchor. I hadn’t realized how much it had shaken me, hearing him doubt, seeing him so...afraid for me. Now, as we prepared to enter this whole new world, I really needed the other Lee back, the smiley, optimistic one. I much preferred being the cynic, anyway.

We all filed out of the van, and I looked around, taking stock of my new surroundings. Despite only living two hours away from it for the past two years, this was the first time I'd ever been to Enchanted Rock. Maeve had parked us in the back of the visitors parking lot, and I watched as sunburned tourists headed toward their cars in the fading afternoon sun. Enchanted Rock pierced the sky, surrounded by hills large and small, but none its equal.

As the others stretched, I reached into the van and grabbed my purple backpack. I had already transferred my phone, chapstick, and makeup bag from my school tote into the pack. I knew it was a bit silly. After all, you never saw Alice or Bilbo packing any makeup when they embarked on their adventures. Still, bringing it along kind of helped me pretend, at least for a little bit, that this trip was just like any other, that I'd soon be standing in front of a hotel mirror with Cassie, jostling for counter space, while Max waited impatiently in the hallway, and not roughing it in some magical realm where evil sorcerers and mermaids lurked in the dark, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Not to mention, I was confident that if Bilbo had begun his quest with a spontaneous make-out session the way I had, he wouldn't have forgotten his strawberry lip gloss. Just in case.

"So where is this hallow?" I asked as I slung the straps over my shoulders.

Tom pointed at the highest point of the rock. "The top."

I sighed. "The top. Of course, it's at the top." Never mind the fact that I was deathly afraid of heights and hadn't walked more than a couple miles in the past two years.

I turned to head toward the rock, but Lee stopped me, grabbing hold of my hand. "Woah, hold up. We can't go yet. We have to wait."

"Wait for what?"

"Just like magic is stronger in certain places, it's also stronger at certain times. The witching hour is the most magical time of day. We'll wait till then. Besides, we should probably let all the tourists leave before we start trying to summon magic portals."

Lee walked on, but I stood still for a moment, the implications of what Lee had said almost overwhelming me. If the witching hour was real, something I'd read about

before and disregarded just as quickly, was *all* of it real? Could everything I'd dismissed as purely fantasy before actually have some truth to it? The idea made my head spin.

I shook my head quickly and shoved the revelation aside along with all the others this day had brought. I'd deal with it later when I didn't have an evil sorcerer and mutilating nightmares and a million other things to worry about.

"Okay, so when exactly is the witching hour?" I asked, eager to get started. We were so close to finally entering Crestfall, to me getting more clues about my past, about who I was. I needed to focus on the good, on the answers that were hopefully to come, rather than the many challenges I knew I had yet to face.

Lee pointed to his watch. "3:00 am."

I sighed. Of course it was.

We waited in the van until night fell, and all the tourists had gone. By then we were all eager to get outside, so Tom suggested we camp out until the witching hour. No one objected, so he opened the back of the van and began pulling out extra-large sleeping bags. He handed one to Maeve and then to Lee before finally grabbing one for himself. I stood next to him and peered into the back of the van. It was empty. "Hey, where's mine? You didn't pack four?"

Tom scratched the back of his neck, looking a bit sheepish. "Oh, well. It's just that you and Lee usually share one so...."

I felt a blush darken my cheeks as I turned to look at Lee. He didn't say anything though, just sort of glanced at the sleeping bag with a wistful look on his face before holding it out to me. I just stared at it for a moment before shaking my head. "No, it's okay. You should have it."

"No, no you take it."

"It's fine. Really--"

"Well, *I'm* going to go get some firewood while you two....sort this out," Maeve called out as she walked into the woods.

Lee walked over to me, placing the sleeping bag in my hand. I opened my mouth to argue, but he turned and walked away before I had the chance. I looked down at the sleeping bag, at the reminder that Summer, that *I* wasn't the girl they'd expected to bring

home, wasn't the girl Lee had spent so long searching for. The way he'd looked when Tom mentioned us sharing...

Lee had been so happy before, in the beginning---I think I'd forgotten that he had been expecting to find someone he loved, and someone who loved him in return. They all had.

Maybe I'd been a bit harsh back at the apartment. I didn't want Lee to think I was telling him, telling *us* goodbye. It was more like *not yet*. Not until I figured everything else out.

"Hey, let's make a fire and roast some marshmallows!" Tom exclaimed, no doubt trying to ease the tension that had seemed to settle over our small group.

"We don't have marshmallows. You ate them all, remember?" Maeve said, returning with the wood, dropping it down between us and setting out to make a fire.

"Oh yeah. I forgot about that," Tom sighed, hanging his head in disappointment before he suddenly perked back up. "I got it! Let's just use twinkies!"

"Sounds like a good idea to me. I'll take one," I said, my stomach growling at the thought. I hadn't had anything to eat since the pizza earlier today. Tom let out a little whoop of excitement as he headed toward the back of the van.

After Maeve had finished lighting the fire, she grabbed her sleeping bag and, to my surprise, dragged it over next to me. She plopped down on it and peered into the fire, the flames casting shadows on her dark skin and eyes. There was no denying Maeve was beautiful.

It seemed the more I tried to pin her down, the more she surprised me. Her kindness with the kids at the arcade, her respect for the way I'd handled Monty, now, her sitting next to me---small things, really, but they revealed a warmer Maeve, one that was typically hidden beneath her icy exterior.

Tom and Lee had found some sticks near the van and shoved the twinkies on them. Apparently, they did so too aggressively, and they swore as mushed twinkies fell into the flames.

"God, they're idiots," Maeve said, watching them fight over the correct way to position the twinkies on the sticks, a small smile giving away her obvious affection for

the pair. I almost jumped, surprised by the fact that not only was Maeve choosing it to sit by me, apparently she was also willing to talk to me as well.

“Are they always like this?” I asked, curious about the answer and also about whether Maeve was actually willing to keep up a conversation with me.

“Yes, they’ve always been idiots.”

I laughed, but then Maeve’s smile faded slightly. “Lately though, Tom’s been too wrapped up in the loss of his parents, and Lee’s been so desperate to find you that things have just been...different. This is one of the first times I’ve seen them let go and goof off in six months.” Maeve smiled as she stared into the flames.

“What?” I asked, fairly certain this was the most I’d seen her smile all day.

“This fire reminds me of the one we set in the castle.”

I raised my eyebrows at her. “We set a fire in the castle? How? Why?”

“Well, it started off as a harmless prank on this girl, Lucia. You see, you and Lee had always had your share of admirers—one guy, especially, who was in the guard with Lee, had always been a bit obsessed with you—but they all backed off once you and Lee became serious. Not this girl. She was insufferable. Thought she was the shit just because her father was on the council.”

“The council?”

“The group of advisors formed to assist the king and queen.”

“Oh, got it.” Well that was one question answered. Good to know I wouldn’t have to make all the important decisions myself, especially since I had forgotten anything I might have been taught about ruling.

“Anyway, she kept asking Lee if he would help her with her swordsmanship which wasn’t that odd a request. Lee is the best swordsman in Crestfall, perhaps in any realm.”

I looked at Lee with a new appreciation, unintentionally focusing on his strong biceps and forearms. The guy was even more skilled than I thought. No wonder he was so cocky.

“Soon, though, it became clear that she was after more than just his fighting skills.”

I gasped. That bitch. I already hated her guts.

“And Lee? Did he like her, too?” I asked, a little insecurity leaking into my voice. I was almost afraid to ask her. It felt almost painful, the idea of Lee being with anyone else but me.

Maeve widened her eyes at me in shock. “Of course, not! He very politely, but firmly, told her that he wasn’t interested. I believe his exact words were, “I’m sorry, but I’ve already met the love of my life. I suggest you find a new teacher.”

I couldn’t help but smile at her words, picturing Lee delivering them with infuriating civility. “Let me guess. She was pissed?”

Maeve snorted. “That would be an understatement. She told everybody that, as princess, you forced Lee to be with you and ordered him to turn her down.”

I gasped. “No!”

“Yep. I’m afraid our only option was to exact revenge.”

I leaned in closer, rubbing my hands together eagerly. “So we set her on fire?” I asked, lowering my voice to try and sound all super villain-like; however, I was afraid it came out more Batman than Joker.

Maeve rolled her eyes at me and laughed. “No, we didn’t set her on fire.”

“Well, what did we do, then?”

“Well, late one night, we went out to the lake and caught a whole bunch of frogs. Then, we snuck into her room at the castle and put them all in her bed.” Maeve barely finished talking before she started laughing at the memory, and I couldn’t help but join in, imagining the poor girl asleep in bed surrounded by slimy frogs.

Between laughs I managed to get out a question. “What happened after that?”

Maeve wiped her eyes. “Apparently, she awoke to the frogs, freaked out, and jumped out of the bed, only in the process she managed to knock over a candle that had been sitting on her bedside table. The candle hit her sheets, set them on fire, and pretty soon the whole room was ablaze.”

“Was everyone okay?”

“Yeah, nobody was hurt...except for maybe the frogs.”

“I imagine having to wake up in bed with her was practically torture.”

“Too true.”

“And nobody ever found out it was us?”

“Nope. Jalyn did threaten to tell unless I gave her knife lessons, but I was planning to teach her anyway, so no big loss.”

“Who’s Jalyn?”

Maeve looked taken aback by the question, “Who’s— oh yeah, she’s my little sister. She’s—she’s twelve.”

I remembered Maeve’s behavior at the arcade. Her patience with the kids, her smiles and warmth. What had been so shocking to me then made a lot more sense now. I wanted to ask more about Jalyn, about her family, but Maeve suddenly turned away from me, moving to lay down in her sleeping bag. Well, it looked like our conversation was over then. I didn’t know what I’d said or done to cause nice Maeve to recede back into her icy shell, but it was clear that sharing time was over.

Still, despite its abrupt ending, I couldn’t help feeling happy about the interaction. When I was talking with Maeve, laughing with her, I’d caught a glimpse of the close friendship we had apparently once shared. Somehow, bitching about bitches and gossiping about pranks felt right, like something we’d done a thousand times before. I wasn’t sure if that was due to our old relationship or if Maeve was just finally warming up to me after everything that had happened today.

Or maybe it was none of those things, and Maeve just wanted to tell me about the time she set a girl on fire.

“Your Twinkie, princess,” Lee said, handing me a paper plate with a roasted twinkie on it. Well, I’m not sure roasted was the right word. Apparently, if you held a twinkie over a fire, it simply melted into a pile of mush. Still, I didn’t mind. It was the most delicious looking mush I’d ever seen.

I took the pastry from him, spotting the dark red mark on his arm as he handed it to me, and looked between him and Tom suspiciously. “How many times did you burn yourselves making these?”

Tom looked up from where he’d been holding a cold water bottle to the tips of his fingers. “Um..not many?”

I rolled my eyes at them and was about to take another bite out of my twinkie when Maeve suddenly perked up, a devious smile on her face. “You know, this would be

a perfect opportunity for Summer to practice her magic, don't you think? She hasn't gotten the chance to try and heal anyone yet."

My eyes brightened as I stood up, excited about the opportunity to do more magic, but I saw Tom and Lee share a look of panic before hastily shaking their heads.

"You know, it doesn't really hurt that bad." Lee said, walking backwards so fast he tripped over a rock and fell.

I turned toward Tom who was studiously avoiding my gaze as he looked down at his burnt twinkie. "Yeah, I'm sure it will heal up soon. No need to rush things," he said quickly.

My mouth dropped open, offended. I looked between the two of them. They clearly didn't think I was capable of doing magic without blowing something up. Granted, I wasn't that sure I could either, but still. "Hey, who was the one who killed that grim, huh?"

"You're also the one who blew a five foot hole in the ceiling of your apartment." Lee pointed out. He was now standing six feet away from me, hiding his injured arm from my view, like he wanted to keep me from getting any ideas.

"Yeah, I'd like to keep *all* my fingers actually," Tom said.

Maeve laughed. "Cowards."

I narrowed my eyes and strode toward Tom before sitting down beside him and yanking his injured hand toward me. He let out a little yelp of fear as I examined the angry red welts on his fingers, and I rolled my eyes. "I'm not even doing anything yet. Relax." I turned toward Maeve. "Okay, so how do I do this?"

"Pretty much the same way you did the coruscent," Maeve said with a shrug. Tom began to protest heavily, and Maeve rolled her eyes. "Just without the blowing up bit, of course. Magic isn't about being used so much as directed. Draw it from the ground, channel it to do what you like. In this case, heal what's been hurt."

"But what if I can't control it?"

"Well, magic is kind of about will. You know what you want it to do, but magic has a will of its own, too. Your will has to be stronger if you want it to obey you. Otherwise, instead of you using it, it will use you."

"What do you mean, use me?"

“Magic wants to be free, to be let out; however, it can’t do it on its own. It needs a vessel. A path. That’s where we come in.”

“And if I can’t control it?” I asked again, though something told me I wouldn’t like the answer.

Maeve’s eyes darkened. “There’s a reason why we’re so careful with magic, why we follow so many rules. If you lose control, if you let the magic have its way, it will burn you up inside. No one can survive that much power inside them.”

“You talk about magic as if it’s...alive.”

“It is alive, in a way, but it doesn’t have thoughts or feelings or anything like that. It has only two desires: to be free and to maintain balance.”

“What do you mean ‘maintain balance?’

“It has to do with what we talked about earlier with the sorcerers. Magic mustn’t be used to create or destroy, doing so throws off the balance of nature. Because of this, sorcerers don’t channel magic, they force it out, drag it from the land to do whatever they please. This takes more than just a hallow or a high magical affinity. It requires sacrifices. Blood magic. Not only that, the effort to conduct such magic drains you, taints you, in more ways than one. The cost of sorcery is nothing less than one’s soul.”

Damn. Okay, so lose control and the magic will destroy you. Abuse the magic and it will steal your freaking soul. Brilliant. This all seemed like much more fun a few minutes ago.

All this magic talk was clearly making Tom nervous as he tried again to tug his hand away. “Maybe this isn’t such a goo--”

“Oh, shut up, Tom,” I said, concentrating intently on his fingers. I thought about Cassie and Max, about the birthday they threw me and the feeling of their arms around me, how happy I’d been in that moment. Suddenly, I could feel it, the magic humming beneath me; it was stronger here than at the apartment. I began to channel the magic up and into Tom’s hand, trying to imagine his fingers healed and healthy. After a few minutes of concentrating intently on his fingers, the burns finally lessened, the red fading away.

Smiling, I began to reel the magic back in, to get it to stop, but it was like trying to make running water change direction. My smile quickly melted off my face as the

magic just kept flowing and flowing, almost gleefully, through the door I'd opened to it, the feeling of it inside me growing warmer and warmer, hotter and hotter. I clenched my fists, trying as hard as I could to close the door, but it seemed the more my panic grew, the faster the magic flowed, like the power of my emotions was calling to it, drawing it out. Like it was acting as a reflection of myself, copying my feelings like an image in a mirror.

Fear filled me as I imagined what would happen if I couldn't stop. Would I just catch on fire, the magic burning me from the inside? Would Tom die, too? Would the magic flow from me to him until he, too was nothing but a burnt corpse--

No. I squeezed my eyes closed, forcing myself to calm down. Breathing in slowly, I tried to transform my rapid breaths into deep inhalations. It wasn't easy, the fear of what would happen if I didn't--if I *couldn't* stop pushing at the edges of my mind, but I focused on shoving it aside. Gradually, my heart rate slowed, and to my relief, the magic slowed with it, echoing my calm like it had my panic, until I finally managed to break the connection, the magic retreating back into the ground.

I dropped Tom's hand and sank back, body still shaking from the fear of what had happened, or rather, what had *almost* happened. For a moment there, I hadn't known if I'd be able to stop the magic or if it would burn me, and everything I touched, up from the inside, like Maeve had said. The thought sent a shiver down my spine.

I lowered my head, ashamed, and braced myself for my friends' disappointment, for their fear, but Tom simply let out a sigh of relief as he studied his fingers. "Well, everything looks to still be attached. Never doubted you for a second, princess."

He smiled at me, but I just looked at him a little incredulously, not understanding how he could be so calm when I'd almost gotten him killed. I glanced at Maeve and Lee, but found that they too, didn't seem afraid at all, simply looking at me with proud smiles on their faces.

Maeve rolled her eyes at Tom. "Honestly, I don't know why y'all were being such babies. It's not like she's ever had a problem with control before."

Tom nodded, and I just looked at them all with wide eyes as I suddenly realized--they didn't know. They didn't know just how close I'd been to losing control, how easily it could have gone wrong.

And why should they? According to Maeve, the old me had apparently never had trouble controlling the magic. The thought both reassured and scared me. On the one hand, it meant that I was capable of learning control, eventually, but on the other hand, I didn't know just how long learning that control would take, especially in my current amnesiac state.

And yet, if I'd really grown up with Maeve and Lee, surely they would have known that controlling the magic hadn't always been so easy for me, right? At least in the beginning? So, why'd they let me try now at all? As much as Tom and Lee had protested earlier, it was like they didn't really think it was possible that I would hurt them, that I even *could*.

Either the old me really was somehow naturally better at controlling it or...

She never told them.

Maybe she-- Maybe *I'd* never let on just how tenuous and frightening our connection to magic really was. Maybe, as much as the three of them claimed to know me, they had no idea what I was capable of.

I sat back, my entire body drooping with the motion. Maeve seemed to notice my fatigue, if not my anxiety. "It takes much more effort to control the magic than it does to let it run free, especially for you."

No kidding. Now that the adrenaline was fading, I felt like I just popped a couple Benadryls. "Why me?"

"Because of your blood. Because you have the highest magical affinity Crestfall has ever seen. Magic doesn't just answer your call. It responds to it, *flies* to it. It flows through you more easily and more strongly than anyone else, which makes controlling it all the more difficult."

I scoffed internally. *Difficult*? Try, damn near impossible. When the boys had joked about me hurting them earlier, I, too, hadn't really taken it that seriously. I hadn't believed that magic, something capable of such miracles, of empowering and healing and saving, could be anything but benevolent in nature.

I was wrong.

Magic wasn't benevolence. It wasn't salvation.

It was chaos.

Something I'd only realized when I'd tried to control it.

Lee came to sit by my side, and I didn't look up at him, didn't touch him even as he held his injured wrist out to me. They might not understand how dangerous my magic could be, but I was becoming keenly aware of it, and I didn't want to use anyone else as my personal guinea pig, not until I gained better control of it. Lee placed a hand on my knee, drawing my gaze to him. Unlike the others, he seemed to sense my apprehension. "It's okay, Summer. You won't hurt me."

I just shook my head. "You don't know that."

Lee just kept looking at me, holding his arm out expectantly, and I sighed, taking his hand in mine reluctantly, knowing he wasn't going to back off until I tried. Still, my heart raced as I drifted my fingers over his skin, trying not to imagine what would happen if I couldn't stop it, unable to bear the thought of hurting him. It didn't help that the burn was on his wrist and I could feel his pulse, as rapid as my own.

This time, I couldn't help but think about Lee, about the look in his eyes when he made me promise not to put myself in harm's way, about the safety I felt when I was with him. I felt the magic humming beneath me once more and quickly funneled it toward Lee's hand, trying to get it over and done with as soon as possible. As I watched the red marks fade, I scrunched my eyebrows, preparing for another few minutes of concentration and effort, bracing myself for the panic and fear I would no doubt experience as soon as I tried to get the magic to stop flowing, but to my surprise, I simply blinked, and the magic ceased. Like I'd banished it with half a thought.

"Well, that was...easier?" I said, looking to Lee for an explanation, but he avoided my gaze. I turned toward Maeve and Tom. "Why was it easier with Lee?"

Maeve and Tom just shrugged, staring intently at their twinkies. "Guess you're just a quick learner," Lee said quickly, pulling my attention back to him.

I narrowed my eyes at him. The boy was definitely hiding something. "I don't thin--"

"Just trust me, okay?" Lee cut me off quickly, pleading with his eyes not to ask any more questions.

The sky stretched out above me, sprinkled with bright stars. They formed constellations I'd never seen before. I spotted a small cat, a curved dagger, and

something that vaguely resembled a cinnamon roll before my attention was caught by a strong hand reaching toward me. "You coming, slow poke?"

I smiled as I grabbed the hand and let myself be pulled up and onto the flat boulder. I settled atop the boulder and overlooked the valley below. Sprawling meadows stretched out before me, surrounded by a sea of dark trees. In the distance, I could see the tip of the castle peeking out above the forest. "It's so beautiful," I murmured as I watched the sun sink, barely visible behind the low clouds.

"Yeah, it is."

I turned and smiled at the source of the voice. Lee was sitting beside me, though it was clear that this was not the same Lee I'd met today. This Lee was younger, about sixteen, with a bit less muscles and a bit more hair, all thrown up in different directions, but still handsome. He wasn't looking at the view but at me. Lee began pulling out various items from a picnic basket. Some strawberries, some sandwiches, and a couple of empty canteens. I watched as he reached back toward the waterfall that flowed steadily behind us, the gentle rush of water like music breaking up the quiet night, and filled them up.

"Wow, you really have thought of everything," I laughed as I reached for one of the strawberries.

Lee's ears turned a bit pink. "Yeah, well, I guess I just wanted everything to be perfect." I smiled at his awkwardness, my own nervousness causing a hundred butterflies to take flight in my stomach. Lee laughed a bit, and some of the nerves faded. "Can you blame me? I've been begging your father to let me take you out for years, and he finally says yes. I'm not taking any chances. He may never allow me to do it again."

I rolled my eyes at Lee. "I don't know why you kept asking. You know my parents always said I had to wait until I was sixteen."

"Yeah, well. I guess I was just impatient."

"No kidding. I've been sixteen for what? 10 hours?"

"Hey, I couldn't risk anyone swooping in and stealing you away before I had the opportunity to sweep you off your feet."

"You sure you wouldn't rather be sweeping Lucia off her feet?" I teased.

Lee groaned. “Ugh, please don’t remind me. That girl does not know how to take a hint–” I laughed, accepting the sandwich Lee offered– “Kind of like someone else I know.”

I rolled my eyes at Lee’s irritated expression. “You know Harry hasn’t made any kind of move on me since I told him I was with you.”

Lee scoffed. “Yeah, well you don’t have to train with the guy. He still talks about you all the time.”

“Yes, and I’m sure you make him pay for every word in the sparring ring.”

Lee sighed, throwing an arm around my shoulders. “You know me so well.”

We both laughed and began to eat, content with eachothers’ company, talking about everything and nothing.

Suddenly, a howl broke the relative quiet. A chill ran down my spine. “Reapers,” I whispered.

Lee grabbed my hand, meeting my worried gaze. “Don’t worry, they’re miles away, and they never leave their territory.”

I nodded my head, trying to take comfort in Lee’s reassuring gaze, but fear raced through me. “What about other originals? What about--Lee, mermaids don’t live in this waterfall, right?” I gripped Lee’s hand tightly at the thought, glancing fearfully around. The once peaceful looking water that pooled below seemed insidious all of the sudden, possible danger lurking in its clear depths.

“Rose, relax, okay? You’re totally safe.” Lee met my frightened blue eyes with his warm green ones, and my heartbeat began to slow. “You know,” Lee said, “They’re not all bad. The originals, I mean.”

I blushed, ashamed of my fear. “I know, Lee. I’m not one of those hypocritical jack asses on the council. You know I don’t think they’re beneath us or anything. They just make me feel so...”

“Afraid?”

I looked down, avoiding his gaze, and nodded. Lee lifted a hand to my cheek, pulling my gaze back toward him. “That’s completely understandable, Rose. After what you’ve been through...” He trailed off, and a shudder ran through me at the reminder. We were both silent for a moment.

I forced a smile, wanting to change the subject. "So, childhood trauma, controversial politics, this is some heavy material for a first date, don't you think?"

Lee laughed. "Well, considering the fact that we've been unofficially 'together' for the past ten years, I'd say there isn't much else left to discuss. I pretty much already know everything about you."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Oh, really? What's my favorite flower?"

"Pink roses."

"Favorite food?"

"Cake."

"Childhood crush?"

Lee scoffed. "Me, obviously."

I rolled my eyes at him. "Deepest fear?"

"Spiders," Lee answered, and I nodded, opening my mouth to shoot out another question when his face grew serious. "And not being as good a ruler as your parents."

I blinked at him in surprise before smiling softly. "You really do know everything, huh?" The distance between us had shrunk to almost nothing, both of us having unconsciously shifted closer throughout my interrogation. Lee leaned in until he was only a breath away from my lips. My breath caught and my heart raced, my stomach filling with a mixture of nerves and anticipation as he closed the distance.

His lips were soft against mine, as if he were posing a question, asking if this was okay. I pushed back eagerly, hoping enthusiasm would make up for any lack of experience. Gradually, the kiss deepened. We both laughed as our teeth knocked together, fumbling a bit as we both got to know one another in this new way. Eventually, we pulled apart, leaning our foreheads together as we both attempted to catch our breath. "That was..." I began, not knowing how exactly to put the experience into words.

"Amazing? Life-changing? Best kiss of your life?"

I laughed. "Well, considering that it's the only kiss I've ever had...yeah, I'd say it was the best."

Lee pulled me closer once more. "Well, there's plenty more where that came from..." He began kissing me again, but before I completely lost myself in the feeling of his mouth on mine, I noticed the darkening sky.

Lee made a sound of protest as I reluctantly pulled away. "We should probably head home, Lee. You know my dad will never let me out again if you bring me home late on our first date."

Lee sighed, hanging his head forlornly. "Alas, the fair princess is correct. We wouldn't want our dear king to lock you in the tower like in that Disney movie you made me watch."

I scoffed as I let Lee help me down from the rock. "Made you? As I recall, someone was crying their eyes out at the end of that film, and it wasn't me."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Lee claimed, smiling as he hopped down. I turned to go, but he snaked a hand around my waist, pressing my small frame against his tall one. "I do know that it would take more than a tower to keep me from you."

"Is that so?" I teased, though my smile vanished as his eyes grew serious, looking deep into my own with an incredible softness. "There is nothing that could keep me from you, Rose. No matter what, I will always be there for you. Trust me."

"Summer? Summer, snap out of it!" Lee was shaking me, staring at me with anxious eyes as I was pulled back to present.

I blinked at Lee, trying to reconcile him with the younger version I'd seen only moments before. "I--I had another memory." I lifted my hand to my head, expecting a headache or some other physical consequence of the memory overtaking me, but there was nothing. It was eerie, watching moments of your life play across your mind like videos on a screen, only it wasn't *my* life that I was witnessing. At least, it didn't feel like it was. These were the memories of another life, one I would have to learn to acknowledge as my own, although I didn't know how many memories it would take before that finally happened. Hopefully not too many.

I didn't like feeling like an outsider in my own mind.

Lee lifted a hand to my cheek, worry still lingering in his wildfire eyes. "You were zoned out for way longer this time, and you weren't responding to us. It was like you were in a trance or something."

My gaze shifted to Tom and Maeve, who both seemed to be wearing matching looks of anxiety. Maeve had one of her knives out, like she had been preparing for some

kind of attack, and Tom's twinkie mush lay forgotten on the ground. "So?" Maeve asked, a bit impatiently, after a few seconds of silence had passed.

"So, what?"

"*So*, what did you remember?"

My eyes unconsciously flickered to Lee's before I looked away, embarrassed, hoping the darkness would hide the blush that I now felt blooming across my cheeks.

I saw Tom and Maeve exchange rather pointed looks with each other before Tom suddenly yawned dramatically, making his way to his sleeping bag. "Okay, well, I'm just plain tuckered out, you guys. I'm gonna go ahead and hit the hay. See you in a few hours."

"Yeah, uh--me too." Maeve said, stretching a bit as she moved to slip into her own sleeping bag before turning her back on Lee and me rather obviously, trying to give us at least the illusion of privacy.

I rolled my eyes at their antics before I locked gazes with Lee. For a second, I was frozen as I stared into his green eyes and at his pink lips, the same eyes that had stared back at me below a blanket of stars, the same lips that kissed me so tenderly on that smooth rock. I found myself unconsciously leaning towards him before shaking my head slightly, trying to snap myself out of it.

Lee didn't seem to notice. He was looking at me expectantly, obviously waiting for me to tell him about the memory. Well, he could just keep on waiting. "You know I'm pretty tired, too. We should probably get some sleep. Big day tomorrow."

I didn't wait for him to respond before I unzipped my sleeping bag and crawled inside, lying on my back and gazing at the constellations above me. A few seconds passed, and then I heard Lee sigh and chuckle softly as he lay down next to my sleeping bag, resting his hands upon his stomach as he, too, watched the stars.

A couple moments passed, and I thought maybe Lee had fallen asleep, that maybe he wouldn't ask. The silence lay thick between us. That is, until he broke it. "What did you remember?" Lee's voice was soft, almost inaudible amid the sounds of night, but I heard him. He turned toward me, and after a moment, I did the same, resting my hands beneath my cheek as I looked at him.

The foot between us suddenly felt too far, the intensity of his gaze drawing me toward him. I wanted him to wrap his arms around me like he did in the memory, to hold my hand tightly, to press his lips against mine. I wanted to tell him that I'd never felt anything before like the passion I felt in that memory, like the passion I felt even now as I looked at him.

A man I barely knew, yet already seemed to love.

In that moment, I realized that Lee could be this negative thing in my life, a reminder of this person I could never be, or he could be this comfort, this guiding light as I discover who I was. Simpler than that, being around Lee kind of felt like standing next to a warm breeze, like relief from a pain I didn't even know I was feeling. I might not be ready to be his girlfriend, I might never be ready for that, but I knew that I wanted him in my life, needed him even.

Slowly, I lifted the flap of the sleeping bag open. A few seconds passed, and Lee didn't move, like he was worried I might change my mind. Eventually, he moved closer, not saying anything as he slipped inside, lying down next to me in the small space. We didn't look at each other, the weight of what should be stealing the words from our lips. We *should* be sharing this sleeping bag happily. We *should* be reminiscing about times we both remembered and catching up on all the time we'd missed being apart. Lee *should* get to hold the girl he loved and know that she loved him back.

Unfortunately, what *should* happen didn't always come to pass, and while this might have been an imperfect reunion, it still felt right somehow. Like home.

Eventually, I murmured, so quietly it seemed the dark night might simply swallow up the sound, "It was our first kiss."

Minutes passed in silence, and it seemed Lee wasn't going to respond. I began to slowly drift off. Finally, when I was on the edge of sleep, I heard him whisper softly beside me, "I won't let anything separate us again, Rose. I promise."

And despite everything, despite the possibility of another nightmare, or the danger that lay ahead, I fell asleep with a smile on my face.

CHAPTER 8

Into the Rabbit Hole

I blinked slowly and rubbed my eyes, gazing at the stars above me and smiling softly. Cassie had mocked me when I purchased them, saying only children decorated their ceiling with plastic stars, but I didn't care. They made me feel like I was Wendy, soaring among the night sky with Peter Pan, or Cinderella, gazing up at the stars and longing for another life to find me. Tonight, those stars glowed so brightly, they almost seemed like the real thing.

That's when I remembered I wasn't inside my apartment, snuggled beneath my Hufflepuff comforter. I was outside, miles away from home, and those were *actual* stars above me.

Suddenly, the events of the day returned to me. Lee, Maeve, Tom, the ashers, the ogres, the grim. The knowledge that I wasn't Summer, but Rose, that I was actually from another realm, and not Waco, Texas. All of it came rushing back. Surprisingly, these realizations were not startling, but fell upon me in soft waves. Somehow, in that space between sleeping and awake, between dreams and reality, it was easier to accept the truth, to embrace what *was* rather than what should be.

However, it wasn't long until this temporary peace was broken by the movements of the group around me: rolling up sleeping bags, securing weapons. It wasn't the memory of my newfound and complicated past, but the recollection of the terrible responsibility that lay ahead that startled me awake. Varian, the ashers, all the danger that was to come came tumbling back.

I sat up quickly and readily joined the others in packing up, not wanting to waste any more precious time. I brought my sleeping bag up to Tom and Maeve who were currently arguing at the back of the van.

"We can't just abandon her," Tom argued, taking my sleeping bag without looking at me and tossing it in the back of the van.

“We *can* and we *will*,” Maeve insisted, hands placed resolutely on her hips. “Might I remind you this is a *covert* mission. She’ll draw too much attention. End of story.” Maeve took something out of Tom’s hand and strode away, leaving him looking dejected and forlorn.

“Who are you guys talking about?”

Tom didn’t answer, and for a small, terrifying second, I thought they had been talking about me and had decided to split and leave me at the hands of the ashers and whatever other hellish creatures Varian decided to send after me.

“It’s Missy,” Tom sighed, resting a hand tenderly on the van.

“Missy?”

“The *mystery* machine, Summer. Maeve said we have to leave her behind. Our trusty stallion. Our noble transport. Tossed aside like garbage.”

Ah. That must have been what Maeve took. The keys. I felt a prick of sadness at the idea of leaving the van behind, but Maeve did have a point. After all, if the mystery machine stuck out like a sore thumb here on Earth, I couldn’t imagine it would blend in well in Crestfall. Nevertheless, I rested a hand on Tom’s back, patting it awkwardly as he caressed the vehicle. “Oh--um, that’s too bad, Tom. It--I mean--*she* was a good van.”

Tom sighed. “She was, wasn’t she?”

I nodded and looked away from Tom, not able to repress my smile of amusement yet not wanting to belittle his clearly very serious feelings for the machine. I caught eyes with Lee, who was kicking dirt on the smoldering embers of the fire, and couldn’t help my blush as my memory from last night came back to me with full force.

To say that memory left me with some questions would be an understatement. First of all, what the hell were *reapers*? I couldn’t help but imagine what kind of creature went along with the name, picturing a skeleton in a long black cloak dragging me to the underworld. I suppressed a shiver at the thought and tried to think positively. Who knows? Maybe the reapers were nice. Maybe they harvested wheat and resembled small rabbits.

Unfortunately, as much as I wanted to believe reapers were nothing to be afraid of, the memory made it clear that I *was* afraid of them, or at least that I had been at one

time, so much so that *all* the originals set me on edge. The thought gave me a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. What kind of leader feared her own subjects?

Lee smiled softly at me when he saw my blush before walking over to me, picking up his backpack and slipping it on as he went. I prayed he wouldn't bring up last night, the memory *or* the whole sharing a sleeping bag thing. I didn't regret it, but I also wasn't quite ready to explain myself or delve into exactly why I'd done it, just yet. Some truths were more easily faced in the dark.

Thankfully, Lee seemed to sense this and simply gestured toward the rock, handing me my bag. "You ready for this?"

I opened my mouth to respond, but I didn't get the chance before Maeve interrupted me. Good thing, given the fact that I wasn't quite sure what my answer would have been. "Hey, love birds, let's go! We have to make it up to the top, and we only have an hour," Maeve called out.

I quickly took my bag from Lee before joining Tom and Maeve at the edge of the parking lot which was thankfully empty of any cars or tourists. As we set out toward the rock, all the crickets and nightingales and the soft whisper of the wind combined to form a nocturnal symphony. Despite the darkness that surrounded me, lessened only by the twinkling stars that peppered the night sky, I couldn't bring myself to feel scared. In fact, the night felt almost comforting, like it was hiding me from any unfriendly eyes that may be watching.

There was a dirt path that led from the parking lot to the base of the rock. After a few minutes walking it, I glanced down at my converse. The once white shoes were completely covered in fine, reddish dust. I sighed. Another casualty of this day.

As we drew nearer and nearer to the rock, a hum seemed to settle over my skin, like a soft buzzing I could feel rather than hear. That must be the hallow. The dirt road ended at the base of the rock, and I looked up, up, up at the peak that stretched above us.

Yikes. That was a big rock. The peak seemed almost to touch the stars.

I tried not to dwell on just how high we had to go or just how much I was afraid of heights, something I'd discovered when Cassie had made me ride the swings at six flags. I didn't remember much from that ride, but apparently I had screamed so much and so loud that they had to stop the whole attraction. I did, however, remember being berated

by some seven year olds for being responsible for their ride being cut short. Fortunately, Cassie eventually scared the little bullies off and apologized for the terrible experience by buying me a funnel cake.

The rest of the gang seemed unbothered by the staggering climb, so I swallowed my fear and followed them up, promising to buy myself a funnel cake when this was all over for my bravery.

The rock was covered by various shrubs and bushes, but for the majority of the trek we were almost completely exposed. Lee was in front with Maeve at my side and Tom at my rear, looking around the quiet night with alert and suspicious eyes, seeming to find the darkness less comforting than I.

As we rose higher and higher, I was inclined to agree with them. The wind whipped around us as we neared the peak, startling me with each rush of air. I was half afraid it would blow me right off the edge.

With every step, the humming on my skin grew stronger and stronger until I was practically vibrating from the force of it. I felt the magic coursing beneath my feet, calling me, practically begging me to let it out. I squinted my eyes shut and stopped for a moment, trying to block it out. I felt Maeve and Tom stop beside me, but they didn't say anything. They could probably guess what I was feeling, though none of them apparently had as strong a magical affinity as me. I let out a slow breath and kept moving, I would *not* let the magic control me. I would *not* let the magic control m--

"We're here."

I blinked my eyes open in surprise. I had been so focused on resisting the magic, I hadn't even realized we'd reached the top. The top of the rock was wide, flat and shrubless, the edges sloping downward rather than just dropping off completely, like standing atop an overturned bowl. I slowly turned in a circle, gazing out at the miles and miles of emptiness stretched before me. The night hindered the visibility of anything too distant, making the rock where we stood seem like a single island in a sea of shadow. The view was beautiful, but there was also something lonely about it. Up here, the darkness felt more confining than comforting.

Maeve sat her pack down and began wandering around, staring at the dirt like she was looking for something. I wasn't sure what exactly she was hoping to find, given that the entire top of the rock seemed to be covered in a fine tannish dirt and little else.

After a few more minutes of searching, Maeve turned to look at Tom. I couldn't quite make out her features in the dark, but her frustration was evident in her tone. "Tom, I thought you said you marked where the portal was?"

"I did! I found this cool looking rock---"

"A cool rock, Tom? Really? Any kid could have picked that up since we've been gone!"

"Well, how was I supposed to know that Earth children have a propensity for collecting cool rocks?!"

Their bickering continued, and soon, Lee stepped in, whose intervention was rewarded with childish insults from the pair of them. My attention was drawn away from the three of them when I felt a sort of tugging, a pull that seemed to be coming from deep inside of me. It urged me forward, calling to me, almost, and as I followed it, I found myself walking further into the center of the rock.

"Summer?" I heard the question in Lee's voice as he called my name, but I didn't answer, staring down at my feet as if they belonged to someone else, watching to see where they, where that irresistible pull, would take me.

Finally, they stopped, and I took the opportunity to look up as Tom, Maeve, and Lee came to join me. I wasn't quite in the center of the rock, and there didn't seem to be anything all that special about where I was standing. Still, I felt in my bones that I was where I was supposed to be.

"There it is!" Tom called out, reaching down to pick up a stone that I hadn't noticed resting next to my foot, its gray surface dark save the streaks of coral running through it. A very cool rock, indeed. "See, Maeve? I told you it would work out."

Maeve rolled her eyes, turning to retrieve her pack. "It worked out because the princess has an incredibly strong magical affinity. The girl's like a walking magic detector. Your rock did nothing."

"*Your rock did nothing,*" Tom mimicked in a sing-song voice, frowning at her back as he slipped the stone into his pocket.

I turned toward Lee. “Okay, so what now?”

“Now, you summon the portal.”

I felt my eyes widen. “Me?!”

“Yes, you. Only a royal can summon a portal to Crestfall. It’s easy, though, so don’t worry. It honestly should be child’s play after charging a coruscent and healing--”

I held up my hand. “Wait, wait, wait. Does that mean, when you came to Earth, you had no idea if you were going to be able to get back?”

Lee looked away, running a hand through his hair. “Well, I mean we knew you weren’t in Crestfall, so it seemed like a safe be--”

“Lee.”

Lee’s green eyes softened, focusing on me. “If you weren’t here, then...there wouldn’t be anything for me to go back to, anyway. There’s nothing for me in Crestfall, there’s nothing for me anywhere, if it’s not where you are.”

My throat grew tight as I looked at him, my heart clenching at all the pain I saw there, all the love. It wasn’t even *what* he said that shocked me so much, but *how* he said it. Present tense. Lee wasn’t describing his feelings, his *love* for the girl I used to be, but rather, the girl I was now. Summer, Rose--to him, there was no difference. He couldn’t be without me, then, and he wouldn’t be without me now. No spell was powerful enough to change that.

All this I understood from those few words, from the look in Lee’s eyes as he beheld me, like he was memorizing my features, cementing this moment in his mind. I knew, because that’s what I was doing, too. Whatever happened next, whatever challenges awaited the both of us in Crestfall, I wanted to remember the way Lee was looking at me right now, like I was for him, and he--

He was for me.

I turned my head, wiping my eyes quickly before eyeing Tom and Maeve, still bickering as they made their way over to us. “And Maeve and Tom?”

Lee followed my gaze, a soft smile playing on his lips. “It took some convincing, but...they had hope. Now, they still do, thanks to you.”

I turned back to him, smiling, and he did the same, and that’s how Maeve and Tom found us, grinning at each other with “dopey” looks on our faces. At least, that’s

how Maeve chose to describe it. I clapped my hands together. “Okay, so how does one go about summoning a portal?”

Lee gently took one of my hands and drew it toward the ground until it rested against the tannish dirt. “Imagine Crestfall, picture it clearly in your mind, and the portal will appear.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “How am I supposed to imagine someplace I’ve never been?”

“You have been there, Summer. You even have memories now that can guide you. Use them.”

I closed my eyes and tried to do what he said, picturing the ballroom where I’d had my party, the starlit night and the waterfall where Lee and I had our first kiss. Seconds passed, and nothing happened. I frowned at the dirt in frustration. “It’s not working.”

Suddenly, Lee rested his hand atop mine, drawing my gaze to him. “Don’t just focus on the physical locations of the memories but how they made you feel. Crestfall is your native land, so try focusing on that, on the feeling of home.”

I closed my eyes, trying to figure out what felt like home to me, only to realize it wasn’t a *what*, it was a *who*. Multiple whos, actually. I pictured Cassie as she smirked at me over her latte, her blue eyes full of knowing amusement. I felt magic stir beneath my hand in response, warm and bright, so I kept going. I pictured Max as he bobbed his head and danced in his seat, fully absorbed in the music flowing from his headphones, and the warmth grew, the magic making my fingertips tingle.

Suddenly, I felt two more hands rest atop mine and Lee’s, offering their support, urging me on, and I realized that my family, my home, had become bigger in the past day, almost without me noticing it. So, I pictured Tom as he goofed off at the arcade, and Maeve as she sat beside me, the light of the fire making her dark eyes glow. I pictured my mom, her face smiling beside mine in my vanity mirror. Finally, I pictured Lee, the way he’d looked at me only moments before, the way I felt when he first kissed me.

Suddenly, the warmth beneath my hand spiked so hot I almost pulled it away, until the dirt began to fall from beneath it, caving in on itself over and over until finally, only a dark hole, about the size of a sewer grate, remained. Everyone drew their hands

back, and I could only stare in shock at the portal before me, so deep and dark that I couldn't see whether it went on for miles or only a few meters. The thought made me feel a little dizzy.

Tom clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Knew you could do it, princess. Let's get this show on the road!" Then, he jumped in.

I couldn't help a little scream as he disappeared into the dark. Maeve rolled her eyes as I pressed a hand to my racing heart. "Relax, Summer. It's perfectly safe. Well, I say perfectly." Then, she grinned at me a little evilly as she, too, stepped into the hole, vanishing into the shadows.

I approached the hole with small steps, peering over the edge and into the dark. My heart raced in response, and I closed my eyes. I *really* didn't want to jump down a deep dark hole, especially without knowing what was at the bottom. I sighed as I felt Lee behind me. "This is some straight Alice in Wonderland bullshit, you know. All we need is a rabbit with a pocket watch."

Lee looked confused. "What's a rabbit?"

I sighed again, turning back toward the hole. "Nevermind." I took another step forward, my toes right at the edge, and I hesitated. Not because it was dark and scary and probably led to the belly of some horrible beast or something, but because this was really it.

The point of no return.

If I took this next step, I could never go back. Sure, right now, I might have to do some hiding, not to mention some explaining, but I could call Cassie and ask her to come pick me up. I could apologize to Max and go on that date with him. I could pretend like everything that had happened today had been nothing but a bad dream.

I could be happy, I think, despite all the pretending. I could survive.

But as I clenched my fists at my sides, steeling myself for what was to come, I knew that I wouldn't. I wouldn't call Cassie, I wouldn't go back to a life of pretending. No matter the danger that lay ahead, the pain and the loss, I wanted to know what was out there, what was waiting just beyond my imagination. Not only that, I wanted to find where I belonged, to discover my place in all of this craziness.

I didn't want to wake up in twenty years and wish I'd been brave enough to take the next step. I wanted to, I *needed* to know that I was willing to risk it all to find out who I really was.

That I was willing to jump, and I was willing to fall.

So, I did.

CHAPTER 9

A Giant Problem

Darkness. That's all I could see, all I could feel as I seemed to fall forever *down, down, down*, not even the promise of shrinking potions or enlarging cakes to make the journey less frightening. Seconds passed, and panic ripped through me. I reached out for something, for Lee or Tom or Maeve, but found only empty air, only darkness and fear, nothing for me to hold on to. Just as I'd begun to believe I'd be falling forever, I felt tingles spread throughout my body, washing over me like warm sunlight. Magic.

Suddenly, the space began to turn at an angle, and I could only put my hands over my head as I tumbled out of the dark hole, turning over and over before coming to rest on my back, staring up at the star filled sky. Only, as I caught my breath, I realized it was not night above me. It was a tree, or rather its branches, that shielded the real sky from view. Trickle of sunlight slipped through the thick limbs, like stars shining in the dark.

I sat up quickly, before immediately lifting a hand to my head as an unexpected wave of dizziness washed over me, making the world tilt a little bit on its axis. Before I could tip over, I felt strong arms reach under my shoulders and lift me up. "Oops. Yeah, probably should have warned you about that. The first time's always the hardest."

I focused on Tom's voice, on his warm hands on my shoulders, and slowly felt my vision return to normal, the dizziness fading like a bad dream. When the world began to come into focus around me, I found Tom looking at me with concerned eyes, eyeing me closely as if he expected me to tip over again, but I couldn't reassure him, couldn't even thank him, so entranced was I by what lay before me.

We had emerged out on a tall hill covered in green grass, granting us a rather picturesque view of the world in front of us, the sight vaguely reminding me of a desktop wallpaper. More rolling hills stretched below us, covered in that same bright green grass, rising up and falling down like there were giant boulders buried just beneath them. The hills ended in a large meadow about the size and shape of a football field, filled with flowers of every shade of the rainbow--bright yellow, crimson red, sky blue, hot pink---

the colors so bright it almost seemed like the petals were glowing. A warm breeze ruffled my clothes, carrying the fragrant scent of the meadow with it, the smell strong and sweet despite the distance.

Past the meadow lay a dark and ominous wood, with trees that stretched high into the afternoon sky, tall as redwoods. Taller, even. Despite the sunshine all around, the forest seemed almost devoid of light, the tall canopy of the trees blocking out the sun. It was beautiful in a haunting sort of way, but for some reason, I began to feel more and more uneasy the longer I looked at the dark wood, so I quickly turned my attention elsewhere.

Opposite of the woods and in stark contrast to the darkness that seemed to emanate from them, white rocky cliffs jutted upwards, their jagged peaks practically touching the sky. The array of mountains stretched out into the distance as far as I could see, seemingly devoid of any greenery other than the foliage scattered about the bottom. The sunshine glinted off the pale rock, making me almost squint as I took them in. The woods and the cliffs were separated by a river that snaked through the hills and alongside the meadow, the pale blue water practically sparkling in the late afternoon sun.

Scratch that. *Suns*.

There were three of them, forming a wide triangle in the blue sky, the middle one shining slightly more brightly than the other two.

I didn't know what I'd been expecting. Maybe that the sky would be green and the grass blue, or the mountains would be made of rock candy, or something like that. It was rather like Earth in a way, but like Earth on its best day. The grass was just a little too green, the sky a little too blue. Everything seemed to be enhanced. Brighter. Like someone had looked at Earth and decided to turn the saturation up a bit. In fact, the whole place looked like it had been run through the vivid filter on Instagram. Every influencer's dream.

"It's so..." I trailed off, not even sure how to finish that sentence. It was beautiful, breathtakingly so. I felt the urge to compare it to Narnia or the Shire, but in reality, it was almost like a combination of the two, of every fantasy world I'd ever watched or read. A dark and mysterious wood nestled right beside a warm and sunny meadow, towering cliffs rising up toward strange suns, like every fantastical story was represented in some

way. With a jolt, I wondered if maybe it was the other way around. Maybe I wasn't the first Earth dweller to visit. Maybe this magical world had actually been the inspiration for all those others. The thought made me feel dizzy again.

Tom stretched, taking in the view with me. "I know, right? Although I don't remember it being this hilly here before. Weird."

I just nodded, not really hearing what he was saying. I knew I should probably be freaking out about the fact that I was now standing in another realm, a realm that had not one, not two, but *three suns*, but for some reason all I could think was that I wished I'd remembered to pack my sunscreen.

The sound of a thump behind me drew my gaze away from the view in front of me and back to the hole I'd emerged from, identical to the one on Earth, only this one rested at the base of a rather large willow tree. Pale pink flowers were entwined amongst the leafy boughs, forming a canopy of petals that hung around us like a curtain.

I noticed Maeve leaning against the tree, sharpening her knives and looking surprisingly non-plussed despite having just fallen through a magical portal. Then, I spotted Lee on the ground, hand resting on his stomach as he tried to catch his breath. "For some reason I thought the trip back would be easier, but I'd say they're both equally unpleasant."

I looked at the hole we'd tumbled out of, nestled against the base of the tree. "So, how do we close it?"

Lee looked up, following my gaze. "Oh, it'll close on its own in about an hour or so. Long before any tourist has the chance to stumble upon it."

I nodded and reached down a hand to help Lee up. He took it, lifting himself up until we stood face to face, our hands still clasped tightly between us. For a moment, we just stood there, staring, until the sound of a throat clearing caused us to break apart.

"So," I said, turning toward the rest of the group, trying to ignore the butterflies that seemed to have taken up permanent residence in my stomach. "Which way are we going first? I'd just like to go ahead cast my vote that we *not* explore the scary forest--"

Lee put his hands up, cutting me off. "Woah, woah, woah. Before we go anywhere, we need to disguise you."

"Disguise me?"

“Yeah, nothing big. Maybe just change your hair and eye color.”

I scrunched my eyebrows in confusion. “But why? Surely, Varian knows by now that y’all were the ones who rescued me. If I’m with y’all, a different hair color probably isn’t going to fool him.”

“Varian, maybe not, but the originals...?” Lee stepped back, giving me a contemplative once over. “Yeah, it should work.”

I scrunched my eyebrows, confused. “You really don’t think my own people will be able to recognize me just because I changed my hair?”

Maeve shrugged her shoulders, tucking her knives back into her belt. “In the Hallowed Town, sure--”

“Wait, the Hallowed Town?” I shot a confused glance at Lee, who explained. “The Hallowed Town is built on the strongest hallow in Crestfall, right next to the palace. It’s where most of the fallen live.”

“--But everywhere else?” Maeve continued, ignoring mine and Lee’s interruption. “Well...you were just never that involved in it.”

I felt my stomach drop a little. “Not involved in what, exactly? My world? My kingdom? Why?”

The three of them didn’t answer, avoiding my gaze, but it didn’t matter. I knew the answer. I’d seen it in my memory.

Rose had been afraid of the originals. *I* had been afraid.

An awkward silence fell over the group until Tom broke it, trying to steer us back on track. “So, we still don’t know for certain who’s aligned with Varian at this point. He could have spies anywhere. Hence, the disguise.”

I nodded, trying to shake off the shame that rested like a rock in my stomach. “Okay, I get it, but how am I going to convince them if I’m in a disguise?”

Lee furrowed his eyebrows as he looked at me, confused. “Convince who of what?”

“The originals. How am I supposed to get them to fight with us if they don’t know who I am?”

The three of them just stood there looking at me like I was nuts, but I didn't get what was so crazy about the idea. We needed all the help we could get. *I* needed all the help I could get. I didn't want the fate of this world resting entirely on my shoulders.

Eventually, Lee shook his head, his voice incredulous. "Fight? You don't understand, Summer. The originals won't fight for you."

I threw my hands up in frustration. "Maybe not for me, then, but surely for the kingdom, right? For *Crestfall*? Don't they want to protect--"

Maeve held up her hand. "You don't know what you're talking about, Summer. You don't remember what it was like, what happened--"

"I know we fought, and Varian almost---"

Maeve cut me off, voice tight with anger. "Varian didn't *almost* do anything, Summer. He won. The battle for our kingdom already happened, okay, and we lost. We lost." Despite the initial anger, the last two words ended up coming out more sad than anything else. Surprised, even. Like the idea still shocked and disturbed her even after all this time. Tom placed a comforting hand on Maeve's shoulder, and she turned away, but not before I saw the way her eyes were shining, filled with unshed tears.

Lee grabbed my hand, meeting my gaze. Unlike Maeve, he didn't seem angry, but the same sadness was reflected in his own eyes. "Varian has control of the kingdom, *has* had it for who knows how long. This, what we're doing...we're not fighting some invasion. We're starting a revolution. We might not have anything left to lose, but that may not be the case for the originals, at least some of them. Who knows what Varian has offered them for their allegiance, or at least just for them to stay out of it. They won't risk that for you. Princess or not."

I just looked at Lee, realization dawning on me as I did. It was like before we got here, maybe without even knowing it, the three of them had been handling me with kid gloves, giving me just enough information that I understood the necessity of my going with them, but not so much that I'd refuse to help, that I'd break. Now, I was here, and the gloves were coming off. The severity of our situation, the truth of it, was finally coming to light.

I wasn't just here to save my kingdom.

I was here to avenge it.

And while our odds weren't zero, they weren't great either. We had Tom's bow, Maeve's knives, Lee's sword, and...me. Not exactly a team anyone, original or not, would be rushing to join. Still, I couldn't quite get the thought out of my head, couldn't let go of the hope of securing more allies, of making this fight, this revolution about saving more than just *our* people, but the realm itself. Maybe even making it whole in the meantime. Rose had been afraid of the originals, and who knows? Maybe she had good reason, but I was much more afraid of what was coming, of the fight ahead, and something told me I wouldn't be able to win it alone. "Okay, disguise me. I'm ready."

Tom tilted his head at me. "You don't want to do it yourself?"

My mind flew back to healing Tom, to the panic I felt when I couldn't control it, the magic growing hotter and hotter inside me--

"You know what, I think one of y'all should do it. We don't exactly have a mirror lying around, and whoever's going to be magicking my appearance should probably be able to see what they're doing."

The three of them nodded, accepting this explanation, and I let out a little sigh of relief. That relief soon faded as Tom replaced Lee standing in front of me. "*Tom?* Really?"

Tom placed a hand to his chest, a look of faux indignation on his face. "I'll have you know that cosmetic magic happens to be my specialty. It's what I'm best at. Well, besides--"

"Tom knows what he's doing, Summer. You'll be fine." Lee interrupted, shooting Tom a dirty look.

Tom raised his hands up innocuously, but there was a devilish smile dancing on the edge of his mouth. "What? I was going to say archery, of course. *Archery* is what I'm best at." But then, Tom coughed, the sound only slightly covering his next words. "And sex."

Maeve sighed loudly, and I rolled my eyes as Tom turned to face me, our reactions doing nothing to stifle the gleeful smirk on his face. "Okay, so what are we thinking here? Midnight Blue? Bubblegum Pink? Royal Purp--"

"How about black?" I interrupted before Tom's imagination could run away with him. I thought of Cassie's raven locks, wishing she was here with me. She'd know what

to do about the whole inspiring an army to follow me thing. She'd always been a born leader.

Tom frowned and let out a disappointed sigh. "Fine, black, it is. Hold still." He held a hand over my head, and I shivered a bit as a tingly feeling spread over my head, radiating from my roots to the tips of my hair. I tried to ignore it, focusing on Tom's face as he worked the magic on me, looking for signs of some internal struggle, but he didn't show any. His face remained completely relaxed, like he was sitting at a picnic and not summoning magic. Did the magic really not affect anyone like it did me, or was I just that bad at controlling it?

"Okay, all done." Tom said, clapping his hands together. I looked down, fingering a strand of newly darkened hair between my fingertips. The color was so black it looked almost blue as the sunlight hit it. Guess Tom got his wish after all. "What about your eyes?" Tom asked.

"My eyes? Um--purple?" I blurted out.

Tom raised his eyebrows. "Purple?"

I fiddled with my fingers. "Yeah, like from sleeping beauty?" I'd always been jealous of her eyes. I was convinced it was the main reason Prince Phillip fell in love with her at all.

"Okay, purple eyes it is. Oh, and try to stay as still as possible. Unlike hair, eyes don't grow back."

I felt my eyes widen despite Tom's instruction, eying his hand as it hovered in front of my face warily, like it might bite me. "What's that supp--" I abruptly stopped talking when a bright light flashed before my eyes, my vision turning white for a moment. I blinked a few times and the white faded, crinkling my nose slightly as a strange prickly feeling washed over my cheeks.

"And we're done." Tom said, stepping back to admire his work. "Damn, I'm good."

Maeve stepped in front of me, taking a long look before shrugging her shoulders. "It'll do. The freckles were a nice touch."

Tom inclined his head. "Why thank you."

Lee wasn't really saying anything, so I turned to face him, twirling a strand of hair nervously around my finger. "Well? What do you think? Does it look okay?"

Lee's eyes were a little wide as he stared at me, mouth hanging open slightly. "What? Oh, uh, yeah, it looks good. Great, even. Not to say that how you looked before wasn't also--uh, great. It's just that you look great for the mission that we're about to--"

Maeve rubbed a hand across her forehead. "Oh, please stop before this gets more embarrassing for you and more awkward for us. Just say you think she looks hot and be done with it."

A blush rose in my cheeks, and I noticed a similar one painted across Lee's features, but he smiled around it. "You look hot."

I smiled back. "Why thank you. Okay, so disguise? Check. Now, what's the plan?"

Tom clasped his hands together. "Glad you asked, princess. So, step one is to meet up with the guard. You don't remember it, but there's this waterfall that you and Lee--"

"She remembers," Lee interrupted Tom, gazing at me with a rather intense look on his face, and I couldn't help the blush that rose over my cheeks.

Tom raised his eyebrows, looking back and forth between Lee and I. "Oh, *oh*, she remembers. Okay. Well, there's actually an entrance to a secret cave behind the waterfall. That's where the guard will be along with anyone else who's willing to fight."

"So the guard has been hiding there since Varian attacked six months ago, just... waiting?"

"Waiting for *you*, Summer," Lee said, resting a reassuring hand on my shoulder, "And now that you're here, we can finally fight back."

"I'm still not sure what you expect me to do--"

"You're the only one with a great enough magical affinity to face Varian. You'll find a way to stop him. I'm sure of it."

Suddenly, Lee's reassuring hand began to feel more like a weight on my shoulder, a reminder of the heavy responsibility that lay there, too. Their whole plan seemed to hinge on my ability to out-magic an evil sorcerer. They appeared to have forgotten that this was Summer, not Rose, that they had rescued, that I was just a college girl, and not

some otherworldly princess who had spent her whole life training to fight baddies and save kingdoms. I still didn't know if I was capable of doing what they needed me to do, *be* who they needed me to be. "Okay, so find the guard. Stop Varian. Sounds like a plan."

Their answering smiles were almost enough to squash the fear and dread that was settling like a stone in my stomach. Almost.

Lee pointed toward the cliffs, adjusting his pack and beginning to walk forward, Maeve and Tom following behind him. "I've already mapped out a route. We'll need to avoid the trolls, the pixies, and the goblins, so we'll head west--"

"And the ogres." I added. "They're with Varian now, too...right?"

The three of them stopped at my question, before turning around slowly, the worried looks on their face immediately putting me on edge.

"Guys? What's wrong?"

Lee grimaced. "Shit, I completely forgot about that new development."

Tom seemed to notice my confusion. "The ogres occupy a large stretch of land that runs in front of the waterfall. It isn't vast, but it's wide. We'll have to go around if we want to make it to the waterfall safely."

Maeve seemed to do some sort of mental math in her head before glancing at Lee. "Avoiding them will add at least a day. Minimum."

Lee worriedly ran a hand through his hair, and Tom shook his head rather forlornly, but I was still a bit lost. "Okay, so it takes an extra day to get there. No big deal. After all, I'll need some time to get a handle on all this magic and ruling stuff before we go up against Varian, anyway, right?"

I looked to Lee for confirmation, but he seemed to be studiously avoiding my gaze. I glanced at Tom and Maeve who were doing the same. "You guys better tell me what I'm missing here."

Lee sighed, straightening his shoulders like he was readying himself to face something unpleasant. "So, remember how I said that the strength of magic may vary depending on the time of day?"

"Yeah, it's strongest during the witching hour, right?"

"Yes, well it can also vary depending on the time of *year*." Lee paused as if waiting for me to interrupt him, but I was still lost.

“Okay....?”

“And there’s one day that happens every five hundred years, one cosmic event really, during which the magic is at its weakest. So weak that...it can’t be channeled at all.”

I nodded slowly, trying to understand. “Okay, so during this...cosmic event, no one can use magic?”

“No one...except sorcerers.”

I froze. “What?”

“Only dark magic can be used on that day, and it’s even stronger than usual, or so the stories say. The truth is, no one alive has ever witnessed one. We’re not even sure exactly what it is, only that some people at the time referred to it as the Luna Infinita.”

“The Luna In—....and what happened? The last time the event occurred?”

Lee just held my gaze, grim determination along with something darker, something like dread, clouding his green eyes. “They say a dark sorcerer slaughtered multiple villages, hundreds of people, before—before she was killed.”

Lee went quiet, but I could tell there was more. He still had that look on his face, like he was bracing himself, like he hadn’t even gotten to the worst part yet, and suddenly, I knew. “When? When is it?”

“Soon.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “How soon?”

Lee scratched his head. “That’s the thing. We don’t know.”

“You don’t *know*?”

“Time passes differently on Earth than in Crestfall, and it’s not always exact; the amount of time passing in one realm isn’t always equal to a certain amount of time passing in the other.”

“But y’all were only on Earth for a couple days. Surely, not much more time has passed here than that, right? Right?”

Tom nodded his head. “Right, Luna could still be months away...”

I let out an audible sigh of relief before Maeve cut in. “Or it could be tomorrow.”

The birds stopped chirping, the sun stopped shining. Time effectively ceased to be as I was rendered utterly frozen by the earth-shattering bomb that had just been dropped

on my head. “*Tomorrow*. Are you telling me we could be completely powerless *and* Varian could be ten times as strong, practically undefeatable, by tomorrow?!”

“Well, it doesn’t have to be tomorrow.” Tom said. “It could have been yesterday or sometime last week, but judging by the fact that the realm hasn’t been completely destroyed and Earth hasn’t been invaded, I’d say—oh--ok, yeah--I’ll just shut up now...” He trailed off as Lee and Maeve both sent him dirty looks.

Lee must have seen the panic in my eyes, my breaths becoming more shallow as the consequences of what that meant surrounded me, pressing down on me. He grabbed my hand, giving it a comforting squeeze. “Don’t worry. We’ll stop him before the Luna. No matter how much time we have left.”

I knew Lee was trying to be reassuring, but I could feel a steady panic growing inside my chest. Going up against Varian had always felt like a long shot, but I thought I’d at least have some time to train, to get more memories back, to do *something*. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Lee opened his mouth, only to close it a second later. It didn’t matter. I knew the answer. I was their only hope, and when they’d found me, well, I hadn’t exactly been gung-ho about the whole going up against an evil sorcerer thing. They were probably afraid that if I’d known, I would’ve run, and their mission would have been for nothing.

All this I knew, all this I understood just from the look of regret painted across Lee’s face, but it didn’t make it hurt any less. I was *beyond* sick of being lied to about who I was and what I had to do. Still, that was an argument for another time.

I turned my back on Lee, choosing to face Tom and Maeve instead. I knew they were all equally to blame for keeping the secret from me, but somehow, Lee’s betrayal hurt the worst. I didn’t stop to think about why.

Tom grabbed my hand. “Listen, Summer. You’re not doing this alone, okay? You have us.” I could still feel Lee behind me, silently affirming Tom’s statement, and even Maeve laid a hand on my shoulder, the warmth of the gesture almost startling me.

I wanted to turn back, to give up on this whole ridiculous plan, but as I looked at my friends, the fear and worry in their eyes betraying their confident smiles, I knew I couldn’t just crawl under my bed and hope Varian didn’t find me. I couldn’t fall apart,

not when they were all depending on me to save them, so I simply nodded my head, trying to appear more confident than I felt.

Tom nodded back, turning to make his way down the hill, and I made to follow him when Lee grabbed my arm. I refused to turn around, so Lee came to stand in front of me.

I looked up at him, trying to hold on to my irritation, but it all but melted away at the look on his face, the frustration and regret burning in his wildfire eyes. "I'm sorry, Summer. I shouldn't have kept you in the dark. I'm trying to do the right thing, here. It's just been so---" Lee trailed off, running his hand through his hair in frustration. He didn't finish. He didn't need to, because I could see it as I looked at him. The same crushing responsibility I felt was echoed across his own features.

I might be the princess, but Lee was the leader of our little group, and I could tell it weighed on him, trying to keep us all safe, to make the right decision when everything went wrong, and it had. Gone wrong, that is. Nothing about their mission had gone according to plan, and although I wanted to stay mad, to punish him for lying to me, I couldn't. I knew him too well, and, well, I *cared* about him too much, to hold on to my anger for too long.

"I know this doesn't make up for anything, but I want you to have it. Just in case." Lee held his other hand out to me. In it, lay the most intricate and beautiful dagger. The hilt was forest green with three jewels embedded in the end--one pink, one blue, one green--and the blade itself seemed to be made up of some sort of semi-transparent stone, a single vein of gold running through the center.

I picked it up gently, marveling at how light it felt in my hands. Lee handed me a sheath and quickly helped me secure it against my side. "Never know when you might need to defend yourself, and judging by your performance with a sword, I figured something small would probably be best."

I rolled my eyes at him, but couldn't help but smile nonetheless. Lee's eyes lit up at the sight, seemingly both surprised and relieved that I had forgiven him so quickly. "Thank you, Lee. It's perfect."

Lee's grin changed into something softer then, and he squeezed my hand gently. "That's exactly what you said the first time I gave it to you."

The distance between us had shrunk to almost nothing, and I wanted nothing more than to close it, to press my lips against his, to give in to the almost irresistible pull that existed between us. However, a part of me was still scared of what that pull meant, of growing attached to something that could disappear at any moment, so I stepped back, trying to ease the tension between us. “By it, do you mean herpes?”

Lee’s eyes widened for a moment before the intense look on his face was replaced by a wide grin as he began to laugh so hard he clutched his stomach. “Yes,” he said, wiping a tear from his eye. “That’s exactly what I meant.”

“You lovebirds coming?” Maeve shouted, already heading down the hill with Tom.

Lee just shook his head and rolled his eyes, a smile still on his face, as he let go of my hand and began walking down the hill. “C’mon, princess. Let’s go before they come back up after us.”

I followed Lee down the hill, the dagger now strapped to my hip both a comfort and a worry. It meant a lot that Lee had even thought to give it to me, that he’d somehow known how little I wanted to depend on my magic to protect myself, given how unpredictable it could be. However, the weapon also felt like a cool reminder of the danger that lay ahead, a warning that before this journey was over, I’d likely have to use it, to kill--or be killed.

The warm breeze whipped through our hair and clothes as we made our way, exposed on the grassy hills, the only tree around us being the massive willow from under which we’d arrived. Tom decided to play the role of tour guide, a role that he seemed to enjoy immensely despite everything. Not that I minded. The others rolled their eyes, but I just listened, wide eyed, trying to take in as much as I could despite being more than a little overwhelmed by it all. “See that big mountain over there, Summer? That’s Grave’s Peak, the highest point in all of Crestfall.”

I squinted my eyes at where Tom was pointing, the peak so high it practically disappeared into the clouds. “What’s that?” I asked, pointing toward the dark patch that rested near the base of the mountain, gray clouds hovering over it despite the clear sky all around.

The smile fell from Tom's face. "Oh, that's reaper territory, but don't worry, we'll steer clear of them."

I tilted my head. I hadn't remembered Lee mentioning the reapers when he listed Varian's allies. Then I remembered my memory, how afraid I'd been of reapers, then. A shiver ran through me. Maybe it was best we stayed away.

Finally, we reached the meadow, full of brightly colored flowers of varying shades. They were so beautiful that I was hesitant to trample on them, but Maeve and Tom and Lee were already ahead of me, making their way through the knee deep meadow, so I had no choice but to follow.

However, about halfway in, a low buzzing sound began to fill the meadow, droning out Tom's narration of the surrounding landscape. I froze, and I heard Maeve and Lee curse as the buzzing grew until suddenly, a thousand tiny creatures rose up from the meadow. I couldn't help my scream of surprise as the creatures swarmed us, reaching my hands up to swat at the tiny things, when Maeve suddenly appeared beside me, grabbing my hands and forcing me to keep them at my sides. "Best not to do that. These folk don't take too kindly to being swatted. Trust me."

It seemed to go against every instinct I had, but I kept my hands at my sides, letting the creatures whirl and buzz around me. Now that some of the shock had faded, I was able to get a better look at them. They were small, about the size of my hand, and vaguely humanoid in appearance aside from the wings and little pointed ears. Also, their skin tone seemed to range in color from pale pink to midnight blue to sunset orange and everything in between. "Fairies?" I whispered softly, since that's what they resembled most to me.

Maeve shook her head, though I couldn't help noticing she shuddered a bit at the word. "No, not fairies, thank god. Wisps. They're called Wisps."

Now I knew why the meadow had seemed to glow when I first saw it. It was the Wisps. Each one glowed a different color, some brighter than others. As if that wasn't weird enough, some of them also appeared to be on fire. Others seemed to be dripping wet. I even saw a few whose clothes and hair continually whipped about them, like they were caught in a miniature tornado.

Maeve leaned in closer. “Wisps are elementals. They have a high magical affinity, like us, but they can only use it to manipulate the elements: fire, water, air.”

As she spoke, I saw one blue Wisp send a blast of water at a fire Wisp, giggling softly as the orange Wisp trembled in anger, a little whisper of smoke rising from her soaked head. That is until the doused Wisp pulled out what looked like a tiny lighter and lit it up, quickly blowing a stream of fire at the other Wisp’s face, who proceeded to squeak and fly away, a trail of steam in his wake.

I raised my eyebrows at their antics. “What about earth?” I asked.

“Oh, that’s a whole other---”

“Greetings, fair queen. It’s been far too long.” Maeve was interrupted by Tom as he bowed gracefully to a fire wisp that was floating in front of him, only this one seemed to glow much brighter than the rest and wore a golden circlet above her brow. She had long red hair and dark freckles across the bridge of her nose and kind of reminded me of Tinkerbell, in a way. A very angry Tinkerbelle, that is.

“That’s Queen Feyre. She and Tom used to date once upon a time.” Maeve whispered, rolling her eyes as Tom winked flirtatiously at the queen.

“An old flame, huh? But how exactly do they...you know,” I raised my eyebrows suggestively, and Maeve had to bite her lip to keep from bursting out laughing.

Before she could respond, a little blue water Wisp appeared next to my cheek, her high-pitched giggle tinkling in my ear like a wind chime. She had long strawberry blonde hair and pretty features, her blue glow setting off her light blue eyes. “We can grow to your size when we want to,” she said, before lowering her voice and whispering conspiratorially, “Though if you ask me, there’s fun to be had either way.”

I held my hand over my mouth to stifle my giggle at the audacious Wisp’s comments, surprised she was willing to discuss her queen’s love life so casually. Thankfully, Tom and the queen were distracting enough that nobody noticed, especially when the queen flew up to Tom’s face and slapped him hard with her little hand, leaving a tiny scorch mark across his cheek. “That’s for leaving the realm the second everything went to shit, Tomwell!” *Tomwell?* I mouthed to Maeve, but she just rolled her eyes. “What the hell are you doing out in the open like this? Are you and your friends trying to get yourselves killed?”

Tom wiped the soot from his cheek. “Feyre, baby, we were just ---”

“There are spies everywhere, Tomwell!” The queen said, glancing around nervously like the trees and mountains themselves could be listening. “You’ve been gone for a long time. Varian’s gotten stronger. Bolder. If he sees us consorting with the fallen--

Lee stepped toward her, eyes serious. “Wait, how long have we been gone? How long until the Luna?”

“The Luna? It’s next---”

“Your majesty!” A little green wisp seemingly dressed in some sort of armor flew up to the queen, saluting quickly. “Our scouts just returned. The tracker—he’s close. We can’t afford to wait until nightfall. We need to leave now.”

The queen seemed to think about it for a moment before nodding once. As soon as she did, the whole meadow burst into motion, all the wisps moving up the hill we’d just climbed down. To the portal.

No, no. They couldn’t leave. They couldn’t run. I needed their help. I’d seen their magic, firsthand. It was powerful. I needed power on my side. I ran to the queen, stepping in front of her. “Wait, please Queen Feyre. Don’t go. Fight with us. Help us stop Varian.”

The queen’s eyes widened in shock. “*Fight* with you? Do you have some kind of death wish? There’s no fighting Varian, girl. I may not have bowed to the bastard like the others, but that doesn’t mean I’m sticking around to watch what happens to those dumb enough to draw their swords against him.”

The queen tried to move past me, but I followed, ignoring Lee as he shook his head at me, trying to get me to stop. “Please, your majesty. If you fight with us, I can return the favor one day. Give you a seat on the council, help protect your people--”

The queen laughed, but there was little joy in it. “And who are you to promise such things? You’ll die like all the rest if you go against him, and your favors will be worthless.”

Before I could respond, the little blue fairy that had been talking to us flew forward, cautiously placing a hand on the queen’s shoulder. “Mother, maybe we should liste--”

“No, Aelia. I’ve told you before. I won’t risk our people in a fight we can’t win. This girl’s empty promises don’t change that.”

I narrowed my eyes, lifting my chin as I looked at the queen. "I'm not just some girl. My name is Rose. *Princess* Rose."

I heard Maeve swear behind me, followed by Lee. He tried to grab my arm and pull me away, but I didn't budge. "Okay, we need to get out of here. Now."

The queen just looked at me, doubt painted across her features. "You can't be. The princess is dead." Her voice sounded certain at first, but as she continued to look at me, past the dark hair and lavender eyes, the disbelief gradually changed to shock, then dread, before finally resting on fear. "No, no, no. You--you don't understand what you've just done," she said, voice almost quivering as she looked around in a panic, watching as her people fled toward the willow tree. The fastest of them had only made it about halfway there. She turned back toward me. "You stupid girl. You've killed us a--"

BAM! The ground suddenly began to shake, and thunderous booms broke the warm sounds of spring. "GIANTS!" I heard one of the Wisps shout, although the warning was soon echoed by the entire group, the word buzzing loudly in my ears as the tiny creatures began swarming about in complete panic and chaos, trying to escape from above the ground and into the sky before---

BOOM! I reached my arms out to steady myself as a giant muddy hand emerged from the ground, scattering clumps of dirt and flowers everywhere. I just looked at it in shock, not quite able to process what was happening, when Lee grabbed my arm and tried to drag me away. "Run, Summer! You have to r--"

Lee was cut off as another giant hand suddenly shot up from the ground in front of us, knocking us both apart. I felt pain roll through me as I hit the ground. I quickly shook it off, but I only had time to scurry backwards on my hands, trying to get out of the way as the hand was soon followed by an arm, then a head, then a torso, and so on until a giant stood in front of me, or should I say, above me. It was three stories tall at least, made up of what looked to be dark soil and a little bit of rock scattered about, with bits of roots and vines hanging from different parts of its body. It had an extended jaw with a rather severe underbite, a flat nose, and two large, amber colored eyes peeping out from under a wide forehead.

As I watched, it reached down an earthy hand and scooped up a handful of Wisps who had been too slow in flying away. I could only watch in horror as it lifted them to its

open mouth, shoving them inside before closing it, silencing their screams with a sickening crunch.

The sight filled me with horror and fear, and I shot to my feet, my heart thundering in my chest and adrenaline coursing through my veins as I looked around for Lee, Tom, Maeve, *anyone*. At first, all I could see were more giants, dragging themselves from the earth like enormous zombies emerging from the grave. I'd thought the hills had looked like buried rocks, but I see now what they were really hiding: Spies.

And they'd heard every word we'd said.

My stomach dropped, guilt tightening my throat until it felt like I couldn't breathe. I'd done this. I didn't allow the wisps enough time to escape. I'd revealed who I was. I'd been so desperate for allies that I'd sentenced all these people to death. This was *my* fault.

The ground continued to shake, making it hard to keep my balance as I attempted to dodge the giants' feet, trying to hear past the screams echoing in my ears, to think past the haze of guilt clouding my mind. The giants didn't seem to be interested in eating me, preferring to snatch the wisps in their earthy mits, but they didn't have any qualms at all about stepping on me, and it was all I could do to stay on my feet and out from under theirs.

Finally, I saw Lee about a hundred feet away, slashing at the giants' ankles with his sword. They didn't like that, stepping away from him, and suddenly, a path was cleared. Lee's frightened eyes met my own, and he gestured for me to run to him. I didn't hesitate, setting off towards him at a sprint, focusing all my concentration on keeping my balance as the ground continued to shift and move.

"Help!" A cry drew my attention from Lee, and I couldn't help but stop in my tracks, because there was Aelia, trapped between a giants' large fingers along with hundreds of other Wisps. Her frightened eyes met my own, and I watched as she struggled to free herself, but it was no use, the giant was lifting them up, up, up towards his gaping mouth.

I could hear Lee shouting for me in the distance, telling me to keep moving, and I knew I needed to go, and go now, before I got squashed or eaten or both, but I couldn't. I couldn't leave her behind.

I felt the magic coursing beneath me, roaring like a thunderous river, begging me to let it out, but I couldn't. I was too afraid I wouldn't be able to stop, wouldn't be able to control it. I was the farthest from calm that I'd ever been, and I knew the magic would be the same. Angry, Vengeful, chaotic. I'd gotten enough people killed already. While I didn't mind cutting the giants down to size, I was worried some wisps would get caught in the crossfire.

So, I went for the next best thing. I took out my knife, taking aim at the giant's eyeball and praying all those nights ax throwing with Max and Cassie was actually good for something other than freaking out Cassie's neighbors. Thankfully, the giants were nothing if not a big target. I took a deep breath before leaning back and throwing the knife with all my might. I gasped in surprise when it actually hit its mark, sailing straight into the giant's eyeball.

The giant let out an angry shout, the sound reminiscent of a monstrous landslide, and dropped the Wisps from his hands before reaching up and clutching his wounded eye. The Wisps zoomed away, and I got the chance to feel victorious for about half a second before the giant lowered his hand, focusing his angry bloodshot eye on me. Uh oh.

The giant swung his enormous hand toward me, smacking me so hard that I flew through the air for a few seconds before landing roughly on my back, the fall causing the air to whoosh out of my lungs and my vision to blur. Pain filled me as I tried to catch my breath. I wanted to get up, I *needed* to get up, but I could only lie there, dazed, the sounds of the chaos around me strangely muted somehow, like someone had turned the volume way down. I fingered the soft ground below me only to find that I seemed to have landed in a pile of roots that had been dredged up by one of the giants, the soft vines cushioning my fall.

Finally, sound began filtering back in, the world slowly drifting back into focus. I heard my name, shouted over and over, and I tried to sit up, reaching a hand to my aching head as I did and squinting at the battle that still raged around me. Most of the Wisps seemed to have escaped, with only a few lingering flashes of color zipping by me every few seconds, racing to join their kin floating high above us, well out of reach of the giants' hands. I prayed Aelia was among them.

My gaze was drawn away from the sky as I saw the giants, there seemed to be four in total, doing battle with my friends. Lee was simply sprinting around them, slashing at any hand or leg that got too close, trying to make his way to me. Tom was busy firing arrow after arrow into the giants' faces. The ones that hit their skin seemed to lodge harmlessly into the dirt or simply bounce off to the ground, but as I watched, Tom let an arrow loose, aiming it straight for the giant's eye. I found his bellow of pain oddly satisfying. I hoped it was the one that swatted me.

Most surprising of all, I saw what looked like the queen fluttering around Tom, lighting his arrows on fire as he shot them. I figured she'd be up in the sky, escaping with her people, but there she was, fighting side by side with my friends.

And Maeve, well, Maeve was using her scary ass knives to *scale* a giant's body, stabbing into it over and over, lifting herself higher and higher until she reached its neck. The monster reached up a hand, trying to swat her off, but Maeve just dodged his swipes before letting out a battle cry and stabbing it as hard as she could into the back of the neck. The giant roared, pawing at its neck, but remained on his feet. It seemed you couldn't kill dirt by stabbing it. Maeve had no choice but to hold on tight as the giant swung its head around, looking for its attacker. I wracked my brain, trying to figure out how to stop them. How do you get rid of dirt?

You wash it off.

I cupped my hands around my mouth, shouting at Lee who was closest. "Water, Lee! We need to get it wet!"

I saw Lee's confused look from across the meadow, until a light bulb seemed to go off in his head. He turned, shouting something at Tom and the queen before turning his attention to Maeve. He made some kind weird hand gestures at her, sign language, maybe, and she nodded before climbing over the giant's head and onto his face. With a shout, she dug her remaining sword into its last good eye. The giant roared, stumbling blindly backwards. Toward the river.

A few steps later, the monster tripped, falling down, down, down into the river below, Maeve practically *riding* the thing all the way down. As soon as it hit the water, its earthy body began to soften into mud before dissipating entirely into brown sludge, swept along by the current. Only its upper body had landed in the river, its stumpy legs

thrashing against the shore for a few moments until they finally stilled. I watched as Maeve pulled herself onto the bank, casually wringing the river water out of her clothes like she hadn't just taken down a veritable dirt colossus single handed. In my dazed, and likely concussed, state, I was tempted to shout at her that it only counted as one.

Toward the hills, I saw the queen and a few other wisps who were dressed in armor like the messenger had been, summoning wave after wave of river water at the remaining giants, causing bits and pieces of them to soften, melting and dripping like ice cream cones.

Seeing one of their own liquified seemed to really freak the rest of the giants out, not to mention that most of them were half blind and dripping sludge at this point, because they began to turn and run away, heading toward the dark woods. Well, run was a bit of a loose term. More like they waddled away on their stubby little mud legs, but they covered so much distance at one time that it felt like they were running.

I stood up as my friends began to make their way toward me, all of them covered in so much dirt that it looked like they'd been making mud pies together. The sight would have made me laugh if it wasn't for the wild look of worry in Lee's eyes as he drew closer. I was about to call out that I was fine when a rustling sound drew my attention to my feet. I looked down to see the pile of roots and vines below me rapidly unraveling, like they were still connected to the giant they had emerged with, and as it ran away, so did they.

I tried to step out of the pile, but I felt resistance on my left foot. I looked down to find that it had gotten tangled in the roots whenever I'd fallen in. Panic filled me as I felt the vines unraveling faster and faster, and I tugged on the root as hard as I could, over and over again, but it wouldn't budge. In fact, it almost felt like the knot was growing tighter and tighter around my ankle the more I pulled at it.

Magic.

It was a trap. The attack on the wisps had been a distraction. The giants were here for me.

And they weren't leaving without me.

I patted my side, feeling for my dagger so I could cut myself free, before I remembered it wasn't there, that it was probably still implanted in that giant's eyeball. I was trapped.

I met Lee's panicked eyes with my own and saw the realization dawn on him as he noticed the vines rapidly unraveling, the slack running out. I watched him take off at a sprint towards me, sword in hand ready to cut me free. "Hold on, Summer! Just hold on!"

I reached out for him. Just a few more feet. I saw Lee's hand stretch toward mine, even as the rustling of the vines below grew louder and louder, the slack running out. He was going to make it. He was going to make---

Suddenly, as if in slow motion, I felt the vine around my foot draw tight, pulling me backwards just as Lee's fingertips brushed mine. I saw his eyes widen in shock and fear as I was yanked away from him, his fingers closing around empty air. "NOOO!"

Panic and fear coursed through me, and I screamed as time seemed to speed back up, the wind roaring past me as I flew farther and farther away from Lee with every second, until I finally slammed into the ground, pain ripping through me as I was dragged behind the retreating giants. I heard my friends screaming my name, saw them run after me, but it was no use. I was moving too fast. They would never catch up with me in time.

It was the last thought I had before my head hit a rock and everything went black.

CHAPTER 10

Mermaids Have More Fun

Darkness enveloped the room, pressing down on me, suffocating me. I held my hands to my head, rocking back and forth. Not again. Not again. I heard a hissing sound behind me, and I darted my eyes around the room in panic, searching for the cold claws and teeth, the ones so sharp they left marks in the real world. Nothing. There was nothing, and then suddenly, they were there, talons raised and mouths wide. I closed my eyes as they drew near me, squeezing them shut so tight I saw stars. Wake up, Summer. C'mon, wake up. I felt a cold breath on the back of my neck, cool claws run along my skin, and I knew it was coming. The pain, the door, all of it. My breathing quickened as my heart thundered in my chest. I smacked a hand against my head over and over. Wake up! Wake up! I shouted the words this time, not wanting to go through it all again, terrified I'd end up with a claw through the heart. The snarls around me drew louder, competing with the pounding in my head, and I saw them rushing toward me, felt the first sting of their claws, and put my hands up, screaming so loud the sound stung my own ears. Wake up, wake up, WAKE UP! And suddenly the monsters, the room, everything disappeared, the dark world flashing a brilliant white.

As I blinked, the bright white eventually faded, and I raised my arms up defensively, expecting to find myself once again surrounded by ashers, but as the room around me came into focus, I realized I was back in that study, surrounded by shelf upon shelf of books. The fire still burned brightly on my left, and despite my lingering fear, I couldn't help a little sigh as the cold of the ashers was lessened by the warm glow.

My attention was drawn upward by movement above me, and I felt my mouth drop open in awe as I saw that the ceiling stretched so high above me that I couldn't see where it ended, the light of the fire only stretching so far, but I could see more books lining the wall, seemingly going all the way up. While I'd initially dismissed this room as a rather small study, I soon realized it was much more than it. It was a library. Ladders rested against the walls, and I watched as the old man from before hung off one, shelving

books from a basket hanging from the crook by his arm, the other hand casually gripping the ladder like he wasn't perched precariously forty feet in the air. Basket empty, I watched as he shimmied down the ladder. He still looked old as Father Christmas, skin wrinkly and worn, hair white as snow, but the man moved like he was in his twenties.

I tilted my head, too busy observing him to make myself known, and suddenly the man let out a little shriek as he turned around and found me in his armchair by the fire, holding the book in his hands out in front of him like a shield. I shrieked, too, the surprise startling me out of my observation. When he seemed to realize it was just me and not some terrible beast, he relaxed, pressing a hand to his heart. "What do you think you're doing, scaring me like that?"

I gasped. "*I* scared *you*? I'm not the one abducting young women and then screaming like a banshee!"

The man rolled his eyes. "I didn't abduct you, sweetheart. You were brought here, at least your consciousness was."

"My consciousness? What are you talking about? I was in the room with the ashers, and then I left, and now I'm---"

He just shook his head, interrupting me. "You really should pay more attention to visions, you know."

I crossed my arms. "It wasn't a vision, it was a dream. And so is this. I think." The truth was, I wasn't really sure what any of this was or wasn't. Dream, vision, hallucination. Hell, maybe all of the above. I was in a new realm. That meant new rules, rules which, despite all the crazy things I'd experienced so far, I knew very little about. Still, *he* didn't need to know that.

The old man just let out a sort of harumph sound as he moved about the room, pulling out books and putting them back, like he was looking for something specific. He was wearing a striped shirt with dark pants and suspenders. Typical old man attire, though rather at odds with the room around him. "Who are you?"

Pinstripe man ignored me, still mumbling to himself as he moved around the room. I sighed and looked around for a door, a way to escape. This dude may say that only my consciousness was here, or whatever, but that didn't mean I couldn't find a way out, and since opening a door was what usually ended my nightmares, who's to say it

wouldn't work in this...whatever this was? Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be any doors or windows to speak of. Just books. And Pinstripe man.

I slouched back in the comfortable armchair, blowing out a breath of frustration. "Will you at least tell me what you're doing?"

Pinstripe man didn't look at me, choosing to examine the title of an old paperback before tossing it away. How those ancient eyes could read anything in this low light was beyond me, but then again I wouldn't have expected a senior citizen to hang off a ladder one-handed, so who's to say what he could or couldn't do. "I'm helping you, sweetheart. It seems to be what *they* want me to do. Not that they'd say it straight out, passive aggressive little buggers." He tossed an annoyed look above him, mumbling curses as he did.

"Who's *they*?" I asked, but Pinstripe man just ignored me. The bastard seemed to have selective hearing. I huffed. "Fine, don't answer my questions, but could you stop calling me sweetheart? You're like a hundred years old. It's gross."

Pinstripe man just chuckled. "Try a thousand."

My eyes widened. "Wha--" but he interrupted me, reshelving books a little angrily as he sulked. "And yes, how easy it is to forget my cursed form."

"Cursed?"

"That Varian thought he was being clever, didn't he? Like making me look all withered and senile would render me as harmless as any old librarian. Prick."

Summer's eyes widened. "Varian...? Wait, so are you real? Like a real person? Or is this really just a dream?"

Pinstripe man just shrugged his shoulders. "Who can tell these days? Anyways, they obviously want me to help you, so here I am. Helping. Ah! Here it is!" He pulled out a large leather bound tomb, blowing off the dust as he walked over to me.

I examined it closely but couldn't seem to find any title. Still, the man was holding it out to me rather expectantly. "What--you want me to read it?"

"Yes and no," the old man said with a grin, still holding the book in front of me. "Touch it."

"Touch it? You mean open it?"

Pinstripe man rolled his eyes. “Did I say, open it? Just *touch* it. C’mon, sweetheart I haven’t got all day.”

I eyed him suspiciously, wondering what the old curmudgeon was up to, but I eventually reached out and grabbed the corner of the book.

Suddenly, the study around me disappeared, and I was standing in some kind of crop field, the green grass soft beneath my feet, three suns shining brightly above me. I screamed and removed my hand, the dimly lit study replacing the sunny field the instant my fingers left the cover. “What the hell was that?”

Pinstripe man ran his hand across his face and let out a frustrated sigh. “It was a memory, sweetheart. What else? And you need to see the rest of it, so if you wouldn’t mind *too* terribly, could you please get on with it? Believe or not, I have more important things to do today than babysit lost princesses.”

I narrowed my eyes at Pinstripe man’s sarcastic tone, but did as he said, slowly placing a single finger on the cover of the book, bracing myself for the drastic change in scenery.

The sunny field appeared around me once again, a warm breeze rustling my hair as I took a look around. The presence of the three suns made it clear that I was in Crestfall, but besides that, nothing much seemed familiar. The field didn’t look like the meadow I’d walked through before, and there were no mountains or dark forests in sight. However, the more I looked, the more I began to notice a kind of fuzzy quality to the landscape, a blur at the edge of my vision, like the world around me existed only where I was looking at it.

“Dinner’s ready!” I heard a soft feminine voice call out behind me, followed by the ringing of a bell. I turned to look at her. The woman looked young, around my age, with her orange hair tied up in a loose bun and an apron around her dress. Unlike me, she looked to be from an older time, her long skirt brushing the grass, and the house behind her did, too. Like they’d been plucked out of a renaissance painting. Although this lady clearly wasn’t a part of the upper class, her dress a little shabby and the house behind her simple and small, her bright smile gave her an almost elegant air, like the look of a fair princess awaiting the arrival of her prince.

I shifted a little awkwardly as the woman surveyed her yard from her front door. I knew it was just a memory, or so the old man claimed, but I half-expected her eyes to land on me standing ten feet in front of her, to question me about who I was or why I was on her property. However, her gaze didn't even flicker toward me, her attention caught by something over my shoulder.

"You know you don't have to ring that damned thing, Isabelle. It's only me out here, and I can hear you well enough." Suddenly, a handsome young man walked out from among the crops, making his way toward her. He was wearing simple clothes as well with dark black hair cut close to his head, and eyes so blue they looked almost purple. He kind of reminded me of Thomas Shelby in *Peaky Blinders*, only if the show was set in the seventeenth century rather than the early twentieth.

The woman, Isabelle, placed her hands on her hips. "Well, what do you expect me to think given how little you seem to listen to what I say."

The man was sweaty and dirty and clearly just came from working outside, but Isabelle didn't pull away as he pulled her toward him for a kiss, even wrapping her arms around him like they were standing under a lit gazebo and not next to a pig trough. I, however, couldn't help but wrinkle my nose a little. Unlike her, I didn't have a handsome man to distract me from the smell of pigs and other livestock. Love really was blind.

Finally, they pulled apart, and the way they smiled at each other made me want to smile, too. Despite the simple surroundings, I didn't think I'd ever seen two people look more happy.

"Fine, you're right. It's like an answer to my prayers, that bell. Hearing it means it's time for me to come home to you." The man's voice was deep, but his tone was light, and I thought I heard a hint of an English accent in his words.

Slowly, Isabelle moved the hand that was on her waist to rest on the center of her belly. "Speaking of prayers answered..."

The man's blue eyes widened as she smiled at him. "Really? You're sure?" Isabelle nodded and joy lit his features as he suddenly picked her up and swung her around, her laughter echoing through the trees like birdsong. He suddenly put her down, worry creasing his brow. "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I shouldn't--"

Isabelle just smacked him on the shoulder. “I’m not made of porcelain, Ian. You needn’t treat me like I’m bound to break. I’m safe.” Ian still seemed a bit concerned, so she grabbed his hand, smiling. “We both are.”

Ian squeezed her hand softly, his eyes turning a little glassy as he returned her smile. “And you always will be. I’ll make sure of it.”

Pain. That’s all I could notice at first. Pain, followed by confusion, and then finally fear as I looked up at a darkening sky, trying to recall how I ended up there, flat on my back, every inch of my body stinging and aching and burning. I couldn’t help the whimper that escaped me as my senses returned. The more awareness I gained, the worse the pain grew. I wished I was back in pinstripe man’s study, or in the fields with that nice couple. Anywhere but here, in this unknown place, agony rippling through me like a raging river. Emphasis on rage.

Still, I tried to push through the pain, to take stock of my injuries and my surroundings. Amazingly, I could feel that my backpack was still in place, something I was immensely grateful for as it apparently kept my back from being torn up by the ground as I was dragged. However, after attempting a small movement of my toes only to be met by an agony so acute it stole all the breath from my lungs, I realized the rest of me hadn’t been so lucky.

Not moving my head, I glanced down the length of my body, alarm filling me immediately as I noticed my left foot was bent at an odd angle, like the ankle had been twisted past the point of breaking, agony radiating from it as it throbbed painfully in time with my heart. My shoulder, too, felt like it was in the wrong place, the pain like a deep ache inside me, and I realized that it was probably dislocated.

I noticed, and felt, dark bruises peeking out from beneath my clothes as well as numerous cuts of varying depth covering my body, most still seeping blood as I lay there. I licked my chapped lips, tasting blood, and cautiously reached up my left hand to touch my face, ignoring the spikes of pain it triggered in the rest of my body. My fingers grazed my cheek, and I hissed at the pain it caused, the soft touch like sandpaper against my skin. It seemed the left half of my face was burned and raw, probably from where it had dragged on the ground for who knew how long.

Still, despite the injuries, I knew I was lucky to be alive, that the root or whatever had trapped me must have come untethered from the giants sometime during the journey. At least, that's what I suspected had happened, considering that if the giants had actually succeeded in bringing me to Varian, I'd undoubtedly be dead by now.

I needed to figure out where I was, to find a way to meet up with my friends, to---

The thought of my friends made my stomach sink, made the sting of the cuts a little sharper, the ache of my shoulder and ankle a little deeper. The truth was, I didn't even know if my friends *wanted* to find me after what I'd done. All those wisps...dead. Because of me. The guilt made me want to remain there on the ground, to let the pain and my injuries consume me until my body gave out. It was what I deserved.

I squeezed my eyes shut tight, ignoring the stinging in my cheek as a result, trying to push past the wave of guilt threatening to swallow me. I couldn't just lie here, waiting for help to come or for some magical animal to come finish me off. It was only a matter of time before Varian realized I got separated from my kidnapping party and sent someone else after me. Besides, the guilt wasn't going to just go away, not until I'd actually done something to make up for it. Unfortunately, in order to do that, I first needed to do something far scarier. Something I'd fight a hundred giants and aspers to avoid.

I needed to use magic.

Gritting my teeth, I pressed my hand against the dirt, tentatively seeking out the magic. I found it immediately, the power rushing to my fingers the second I called it forth. I began to reach for different memories, for emotion that would draw the magic in, but found I didn't need to. It seemed pain was a powerful enough emotion to fuel it all, and I was in pain, more pain than I had ever been in my life, at least that I could remember.

I felt the warmth of the magic flow through me, and despite the fear and worry growing in my chest, knowing what would come next, I couldn't help but marvel at the way the magic worked, slowly and meticulously easing the pain inside me. Being healed felt different when it was being done by my own hands, more miraculous somehow. I watched in amazement as my cuts stitched themselves back together, as my ankle turned the right way, even as my shoulder slipped back into place with a satisfying, if unsettling

click. I reached up a newly healed hand and felt the layer of skin on my face grow smooth and soft once more.

Finally, as I saw the last cut heal and the last bruise lighten, I took a deep breath and cut off the magic, willing it to cease. At least, I tried to cut it off. It was so much stronger here in Crestfall, and I was so weak already from being literally dragged around all day that I didn't have enough energy, enough will to fight the magic. Unchecked, it continued to flow through me, like a faucet turned all the way on.

Having fixed all my injuries, it continued to search for something to correct, for some imbalance it could right. Finding none, it just kept flowing and flowing, growing hotter and hotter as it began to burn its way through me like molten lava, the pleasant warmth replaced by hissing fire. I panicked as I felt the burning magic sink into my skin, like it was pooling there, in the absence of anything else to heal. I felt it seep through my scalp and to the tips of my hair, to the tips of my toes, moving, pushing its way through my body.

I clenched my eyes shut, unable to fight the tears that slipped from my eyes at the pain that raged through me, at the thought of dying here, alone. In a strange place. Away from all my friends, from the people I loved. From Lee.

Suddenly, the fire eased slightly, the pain lessening, and I gasped, the small relief combined with the thought of my friends lending me the strength I needed, and I screamed as I wrenched my hand from the ground, forcing the magic back into the ground with every bit of willpower I had left.

Amazingly, it obeyed, albeit barely. I sighed in relief and exhaustion as the feeling of fire eased from my limbs, leaving only the heavy weight of exhaustion. I could still sense the lingering effects of the excess magic flowing through me, and it felt a little like someone had poured liquid honey into my veins, sweet and warm, but clogging, like it was weighing me down a bit. I shook my limbs, and the feeling eventually faded, leaving me feeling extremely healed. And extremely tired.

I slowly sat up, taking stock of the dark trees arching above me, cutting into the twilight sky. I assumed I must be in that forest I'd seen when I first entered Crestfall. In other words, in the opposite direction from where Lee and them had been heading.

Oh no. My mind shot to Lee. He must be freaking out. They all would. They travel all the way to earth to fetch their princess only to lose her the second they get back home. Not to mention, Lee made me promise not to put myself in harm's way again. The man's probably losing his shit right now.

Still, a part of me couldn't help feeling glad that they weren't here, that I didn't have to face them after what I'd done, that I didn't have to see the disappointment in their eyes after I'd let them down. Again.

Tears filled my eyes, but I blinked them away, focusing on the chance that I'd get to make it right somehow. Even if it wasn't possible, it was the only thing keeping me from curling up on the hard ground, so I clung to it, pushing everything else away for now.

Speaking of Lee...with an excited gasp I reached my hands up to my ears, looking for the special earrings Lee had used to track me with. My face fell as I felt nothing, the earrings gone from my ears. I cursed. They must have been ripped out when I was being dragged. I felt the rising panic within me grow. Without them, Lee had no idea where to find me.

Pushing down the panic, I glanced at the darkening sky, one sun already disappearing beneath the horizon, the others soon to be on their way. When we first got to Crestfall, it seemed to be around three or four o'clock. Assuming their suns moved on a similar schedule as Earth--which I guess was still a rather big assumption given that Crestfall's days and nights could be entirely different for all I knew-- I had to have been missing for at least three or four hours. And Lee and them still hadn't found me.

I darted my eyes around the dark wood that surrounded me, jumping at every snapping twig, every rustling branch. I seemed to have landed in a small clearing bordered by dark trees that stretched upward in twisted curves and shapes, like they were trying to block out the sky. The trees were almost impossibly tall, some of the exposed roots arching up out of the ground high enough for me to walk under. Dark green foliage coated the treetops, letting in very little of the fading afternoon light.

That feeling of uneasiness I'd felt while looking at the woods before seemed to triple as I wrapped my arms around myself despite the balmy twilight air, working on

controlling my breathing so I wouldn't hyperventilate. Just because they hadn't found me yet didn't mean they weren't going to. I just had to keep it together until they got here.

I cast another glance around me, trying to remember what Bear Grylls had said about surviving in an unknown environment, but the truth was Cassie and I usually just watched those shows because we thought Bear was hot, rather than for educational tips about roughing it in the wild.

Max would catch us ogling him, roll his eyes, and say we both wouldn't last a day in the actual wild, although we weren't sure how Max knew anything about the 'actual wild,' given that the guy had grown up in Cleveland. Still, he was always saying stuff like that, acting like his life before Baylor had been something decidedly un-Cleveland like. If only he could see me now, maybe he wouldn't be so quick to disregard my survival skills. I mean, I'd made it this far, hadn't I? Granted, I was currently lost in the woods with no food, no way to find my friends, and no idea how to get out, but that was beside the point.

I wanted to slap freshman Summer for not paying enough attention until I remembered: Water! Rule one in surviving the outdoors: Find water. Or maybe that was rule two. Either way, it was a good place to start.

I looked around and was both surprised and delighted to see the river not twenty feet from me, the same one I'd glimpsed when I'd first entered Crestfall. At least, I hoped it was the same one. It was impossible to know just how far I traveled while stuck in the giants' trap. I could be only a couple miles from where I started or on the other side of the realm for all I knew.

I stood up and walked over to the river, trying to ignore the deep ache of exhaustion in my muscles brought on by channeling all that magic. I reached into my backpack and pulled out my water bottle, refilling it quickly as I peered down at the water with suspicious eyes. I wished I had some iodine tablets or something to clean it. Fortunately, the water was crystal clear and running pretty quickly--I think I remembered that that was important--and I was so parched I was willing to risk almost anything at this point. Besides, if it started to kill me, hopefully I could just heal myself again, although the thought of trying to use more magic sent a shiver of fear down my spine, the memory of the chaos and panic like an ever present shadow in the back of my mind.

After satisfying my thirst, I worked up the courage to look at my reflection on the water's surface, expecting Frankenstein's Bride-esque hair and dirt and grime and--

WTF. I--I looked *amazing*. My hair was shiny and soft, falling over my shoulders in ebony waves, the darkening spell Tom had cast still in place. I brushed a finger across my newly freckled cheeks, but that wasn't what shocked me about them. My skin was so clear, clearer than it had been since before I came to Crestfall, and a warm, healthy pink radiated from my cheeks. Not only that, the bags that had been lingering under my eyes from my nightmare-induced lack of sleep seemed to have disappeared, and my light eyelashes looked longer and fuller. I blinked, my mouth slightly open in awe, and I was surprised when the girl in the reflection actually blinked back. How did this even--

The magic. It had to have been the extra magic. I guess after it had finished healing me, it had set out to make everything else better and more healthy. I shook my head in disbelief. Well, this was...stupendous. I couldn't wait to tell Cassie. She'd love me forever if she knew I could keep her from ever getting a zit the day of a big date again. The hot quarterback she'd met at the gym had never asked her out for a second, and she'd blamed her zit. She'd never forgiven her skin for that.

I frowned a little, guilty that I could be thinking about something so frivolous after everything that had happened, but a part of me clung to the little superficial joy at the change in my appearance. I needed something to smile about or I was worried I might start crying again.

However, my smile abruptly dropped off as I caught sight of the rest of me. I looked like the last surviving girl in a slasher movie. The t-shirt I'd been wearing, or what was left of it at least, hung off my body in pieces, exposing my light pink bra for all the world to see. My shorts, too, were thoroughly ripped up, but not in the cool, *I paid a hundred dollars for these* kind of way. More like the *I've literally just survived a shipwreck, please send help* kind of way.

I quickly dug through my backpack, looking for some new clothes, only to feel cool air brush my fingertips as my hand emerged through a hole at the bottom of the bag. I groaned. It seemed sometime during my kidnapping, my bag had ripped open, and almost everything I'd packed had fallen out. All my clothes were gone, along with my

phone and my makeup bag-- which thankfully I didn't seem to need any more-- everything except for my water bottle and---

You have *got* to be kidding me. I rolled my eyes as I drew out the dark green material, clutching the skirt in a frustrated grip. The dress. The only article of clothing that had somehow survived the journey was the dress I'd brought from Cassie. Not exactly the best outfit for trekking through dark woods all by yourself. I fingered my torn shirt for a couple more seconds before letting out a resigned sigh. I quickly pulled on the dress, extricating myself from my shirt underneath it, looking around the dark forest with wary eyes. I wasn't interested in giving a peep show to any troll or pixie that walked by.

Finally, I shoved my water bottle back into my bag, tying the frayed sides of the hole back together in a tight knot, hoping it would hold. No way was I using magic to fix it.

Before I turned from the river, I couldn't help sneaking another glance at the reflection on the surface. Somehow, the girl I saw there managed to surprise me again. Not because her appearance had changed, but because she looked... like those other girls. The ones I'd read about in books. It wasn't just the dress and the hair. It was the look in her eyes, the light despite all the darkness that surrounded her. She may be in danger, she may be lost and scared and grieving for what she'd done, but in spite of all of that, she just looked so...free. So completely and utterly alive. I'd never seen that look in my eyes before, and despite everything, despite the guilt resting like a rock in my stomach and the fear squeezing my heart, I gave her a small smile.

As I turned to go, determined not to just sit around and wait for Lee and the others to find me, I thought I saw something under the water, like glowing green circles set a little aways apart, like--

Eyes. They were *eyes*, staring up from beneath the current. And they were looking right at me.

Suddenly, a head broke the surface of the water, quickly followed by two more, and I screamed, backing away so quickly I tripped, landing on my bottom with my knees bent in front of me, my hands shaking as they propped me up from behind.

The three women who had emerged from the water now leaned their elbows against the riverbank, observing me with keen and watchful eyes. They were beautiful,

with long bluish-black hair that flowed like a waterfall over their shoulders and down their backs, tucked behind pointed ears. The middle one's eyes were a vibrant, almost neon green, and I realized she must have been the one I'd spotted underwater. I noticed the woman on her left had light purple eyes, and the one on her right had eyes the color of an ocean after a storm.

However, I could barely focus on their faces, too distracted by the *tails* rising behind them to take much notice. They were dark green and covered in hard scales that seemed to shimmer in the sunlight, periodically making splashing noises as they broke the river's surface. Propped up on their elbows on the river's edge with their tails flicking behind them, they kind of reminded me of three girls at a slumber party. If mermaids had slumber parties, that is.

The one with the purple eyes had her hands over her ears as she glared at me. "Do you *have* to be so loud?" Her voice had a strangely echoing quality, like it was coming from underwater.

I just looked at her in shock, not responding, trying to process what I was seeing right now. Wisps were one thing, but these were real, actual *mermaids* in front of me. I vaguely wondered if I was still unconscious.

The glaring one raised her eyebrows at my silence before turning to her friends. "What, do you think it's incapable of speech?" She sighed. "Fallen are such defective creatures. Still, you're right, Mira. She *does* look rather familiar..."

The middle one, Mira, threw up her hands. "I told you so, Shuri."

The third one didn't even bother to look up at me, choosing to examine her nails instead. "Well, I don't recognize her."

Shuri rolled her eyes. "No shit, Neri. You don't remember anything." Neri raised her gaze from her nails, peering at Shuri with indignant blue eyes. "Hey, I can remember stuff."

I watched them continue to bicker for a few moments and debated just getting up and making a run for it, hoping those tails couldn't easily transform into legs on the fly. I remembered what Tom and Lee had said about mermaids, and although these ones seemed more like a group of mean girls than killer sea monsters, I didn't want to take any chances.

Still, for the moment, I remained where I was. Despite the mean girl facade, there was something distinctly predatory about the way they held themselves, the way their eyes followed me even as they argued with each other. Something that warned me to avoid any sudden movements.

Suddenly, a soft breeze blew through the trees, ruffling my hair around my shoulders. Mira turned her gaze on me once more, lifting her slightly pointed nose into the air. She sniffed a few times, and her eyes widened. “Impossible. She smells like a *royal*, and something else, something unfamiliar...”

Shuri smacked her shoulder. “The princess! That’s who she looks like, although the hair and eyes aren’t quite right.”

The three of them eyed me with newfound interest. Shit, shit, shit. This was not good. The last time my identity was revealed it had led to chaos and bloodshed and me being kidnapped by some of Varian’s goons. I needed to get out of here. *Now*.

I began to slowly inch my way backward, trying to put as much distance between me and the mermaids as possible before turning my back on them. Neri looked me up and down, her disinterested gaze never changing. “Doesn’t look like much of a princess to me.”

Suddenly, Shuri’s eyes widened, turning toward Mira. “Should we grab her for him? Just imagine how he’ll reward us!”

Mira nodded, eyeing me with a scary sort of glint in her eyes, an equally creepy smile tugging on her lips. “Not a bad idea, sister.” She grinned, her smile revealing rows of needle-like teeth. “Think he’ll settle for her head?”

Fear shot through me as I turned to run, hoping the mermaids wouldn’t be able to follow, until the most beautiful sound I’d ever heard made me stop in my tracks. One of the mermaids was humming, and the sound was so lovely, so wonderfully hypnotic, it took my breath away. I tried to pick my feet up, to turn around, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t move away from the song, not when every part of me yearned for more of the sound, for the haunting melody to seep into my brain and never leave again.

The other mermaids grinned as Mira continued to hum, the wordless melody as soft and sweet as birdsong. “Where do you think you’re going?” Shuri held out a claw tipped hand. “Come here, princess.”

My legs seemed to move of their own accord, drawing me closer to the water's edge, unwilling to listen as I urged them to stop, to turn around, to do anything else. The song Mira was humming clouded my senses further, somehow wrestling control of my body away from me. I couldn't get it to listen to me. It only had ears for that song and any commands the others uttered while it was sung.

As I reached the river's edge, I even resorted to seeking out the magic, but even that was impossible under the influence of the mermaid's song. I could feel it, rushing beneath me, begging to be set free, but I couldn't channel it. I couldn't do anything as Mira wrapped her clawed hand around my ankle, preparing to pull me under. Desperation seeped into my bones, panic following soon after, but it remained there, unable to get past my skin, to make my body run.

Neri sighed, glancing between me and the others. "Won't killing her make him mad? That's not what he wanted."

Shuri rolled her eyes. "Only because he wants to be the one to kill her himself. He'll be fine with the head. Trust me. Or maybe the heart. Those are always a bit too sweet for my taste."

Fresh fear shot through my veins like ice. Holy shit. They weren't just going to kill me. They were going to *eat* me. For a moment, the fear faded, and I felt almost... angry. I couldn't believe that after all this time, after all I'd survived and battled, I was about to die alone at the hands of these creatures. I mean, c'mon! Death by *mermaid*? I literally owned a shirt that said *Mermaids have more fun* and a water bottle that had *I'd rather be a mermaid* written on it.

Not to mention, if I was gone, who would stop Varian? My heart squeezed painfully, knowing the answer. My friends. My friends would still try to stop him. It's who they were. But they would lose. Just like they had before. Only this time, they wouldn't just lose the kingdom, they'd lose their lives. I shook my head, or tried to, at least. This wasn't how the story was supposed to end. This wasn't how *my* story was supposed to end.

A noise in the trees drew my attention from the mermaids, momentarily distracting me from my anger and fear. I thought I saw something darting amongst the shadows, something that looked vaguely like a squirrel or maybe a cat. I narrowed my

eyes, trying to make out what it was, but before I could, I felt the hand around my ankle tighten, the clawed nails digging into my skin. With a hard yank, they pulled me into the water.

Hitting the cold water kind of felt like waking up from a dream. The mermaid's song ended as soon as my head had gone under the surface, and I could move again. Not that it mattered much. I looked down, watching as the mermaids swam below me, seemingly heading straight toward the bottom of the river. I fought and struggled, trying to pull myself upwards, but no matter how hard I thrashed, the hand around my ankle remained tight as the mermaids swam deeper and deeper, pulling me right along with them. I threw my arms out, trying to grab something to slow my descent, but there was nothing, nothing but blue water all around me. Panic filled me as my chest began to burn and my ears began to pop, not understanding how the river could even be this deep, how I could still be sinking down. I tried to access the magic, but I couldn't focus, couldn't think past my terror, my desperate need for breath. Fear ripped through me as black spots clouded my vision. I looked up, the surface growing darker as it grew farther away. My struggling began to slow as I focused all my remaining energy on not breathing in despite the burning in my lungs. It hurt too much. I had to breathe. I had to---

Suddenly, I felt the grip on my ankle slacken, and I looked down to see a dark shape swishing about in the water, waving around something long and shiny at the mermaids, who backed away with angry hisses. I didn't bother to stick around and watch whoever or whatever had saved me. I pumped my legs as hard as I could, pressing toward the surface, but it was too far away. I had too little breath. *Just a few more feet*, I tried to tell myself, but the edges of my vision were dark and blurry, my legs felt like lead, and I knew I wasn't going to make it. I reached a hand toward the surface, toward the light shining above me, and opened my mouth, water rushing into my lungs as the world around me faded to black.

There was something on my face. I could feel it, tickling my nose and scruffing along my cheeks. I wanted to scratch my nose, but I couldn't lift my arms. In fact, I'm not sure I could tell where my arms even were. Oddly enough, the thought didn't trouble me much. It was dark here. Dark and cold, but also kind of peaceful, like I was floating. I tried to ignore the feeling on my face, but it was persistent, poking and prodding and scratching at me. It kind of felt like...fur?

With a jolt, I rolled over, gagging up water as I desperately tried to catch my breath. My throat burned with each gasp, like someone had stuck a scalding iron down my throat. After coughing up about a gallon of river water, my lungs began to feel full again, my breaths came more steadily, and I turned over. I blinked and rubbed my eyes, trying to get rid of the water that swam across my vision, to get the world around me to come back into focus.

When my vision finally cleared, I came face to face with...*something*. The creature was inches from my face, just staring at me, and I wanted to let out a shriek of fear, but instead, all that came out was a muffled squeal as my throat seized with pain. I sat up, coughing hard, and the creature moved away from my face. However, I soon felt a little clawed hand on my back, patting me consolingly. I chose to ignore it, focusing on not hacking my lungs out.

Eventually, the coughing died down, and I looked over, observing my rescuer a little more fully. It stood on two legs and kind of looked like a cross between a cat and a squirrel, with its body resembling the latter and its face resembling the former. It had pointed ears and eyes set close together with little whiskers fanning out from its cheeks. Its body was long and lean, with short legs and arms, both ending in little claws. Its eyes were crystal blue, almost exactly the same color as the sky, and they were looking at me rather worriedly. It had reddish brown fur covering its body, except for its fluffy squirrel-like tail, which seemed to be a shade lighter than the rest of it and decidedly more red than brown, although it was hard to tell given that he was sopping wet. Strangest of all, it had a belt wrapped around its tiny waist which supported a small sheathed sword, ready to be drawn at a moment's notice.

Its cat-like face and eyes continued to watch me, but it didn't have that predatory glint like the mermaids. Instead, its gaze had an almost nurturing quality, looking at me like it thought I was a baby deer that it wasn't sure would make it through the night.

"What happened?" I asked softly, the words coming out raspy and weak, talking to myself more than the creature. I wasn't sure it could speak, or if it even knew what I was saying, although I thought I noticed a distinct intelligence in its gaze.

"Well, you almost died, didn't you?" The creature replied, surprising me. It had a decidedly masculine voice with a strong accent that sounded vaguely Scottish. "Those nasty hags--" he clenched his tiny fist as though even mentioning the mermaids made him angry-- "had you in their grasp, and then you sucked in all that water. I had to drag you onto the shore and get ya to start breathing again, myself."

I just blinked at him, trying to ignore how weird it was to hear human words coming out of an animal's mouth and process what he said, but one thing caught my attention and held it, and I felt anger and frustration roll through me like a heavy cloud. "Are you kidding me?"

The creature furrowed his furry eyebrows, clearly confused by my sudden angry tone. "Pardon, I--"

I threw my hands in the air, ignoring his interruption. "--Are you freaking *kidding* me? You're telling me I got knocked unconscious, again? *Again*?! I mean this is just ridiculous!"

I pointed a finger at him. "Do you know how many times I've been unconscious in the past twenty four hours? Do you?" The creature shook his head, a somewhat baffled look still painted across his face.

"I'll tell you how many: A. freaking. lot. Like four times, a lot! Which is four times too many if you ask me. I mean what do I look like, sleeping beauty? First all those damned memories, then the creepy old guy, then the stupid giant things, and now mermaids. *Mermaids* of all things. I'm just--I'm sick of it. I'm so--"

I stopped talking when I felt a touch on my knee and looked to see the creature had placed his little hand there, looking at me with obvious concern in his gaze. I sighed, rubbing my hands down my face, trying to pull myself together. I knew I had plenty more things to be worried about, like the fact that I'd almost died and was currently being

comforted by a squirrel/cat warrior thing, so I let the getting knocked out thing go, resolving to stay conscious as much as possible in the future.

I gave the little guy a small smile, patting the hand on my knee appreciatively. I knew I should probably be afraid of this unknown creature, but despite the sword hanging down at his waist, I couldn't quite manage any fear. He had saved my life after all, and I so badly wanted to put my trust in someone else right now, if only just to feel a little less alone. Besides, it was kind of hard to be afraid of someone who was only as tall as your knees. "I'm sorry, and, um--thank for saving me, Mr...?"

The creature puffed out his chest, shaking off some of the water before reaching out his hand for me to shake. "It's Sir Gemmi, my lady, of the Official Worlen Guard." Gemmi said the last bit with a sort of proud look on his face, like he expected me to know what the hell he was talking about, so I just nodded, offering my hand and trying not to be too freaked out when he brought it to his lips, his soft whiskers tickling my skin slightly as he kissed it. "Thank you, uh--Sir Gemmi."

Gemmi waved his paw dismissively. "Don't ye worry about it, my lady. Saving damsels in distress is a pastime of mine. What were you doing tangling with those harpies, anyway?"

The question seemed innocent enough, but I eyed him closely, trying to figure out how much he'd overheard, hoping he hadn't witnessed the whole princess reveal.

Gemmi seemed like a good guy, but I couldn't risk telling him the truth. Varian seemed to have eyes and ears everywhere, and I couldn't be sure who to trust. "Um--well, I got separated from my friends, and then I heard this humming, and suddenly, I wasn't in control of myself anymore." I shivered as I remembered that feeling of complete powerlessness. I never wanted to feel that again.

Sir Gemmi nodded. "Yeah, that mind control is nasty business. Easy to combat, though."

"Really?"

"Indeed. All you need to do is have another song ready in your head. Helps if it's a pretty catchy one. Can't listen to their music if you're listening to yours," he narrowed his eyes a bit, "but every school child knows that, so what's your story? I take it you're not from around here."

“Oh, well, yes. I’ve only just arrived here with my friends.”

Gemmi raised his eyebrows. “You’ve never been to Crestfall, before?”

“Not that I can remember,” I answered honestly.

Gemmi shook his head as I went to retrieve my backpack, leaving my torn clothes on the ground. Not like they’d be of much use to me now. “Wow, you’re the second outsider I’ve met today. Seems odd given how many people are getting out.”

“Getting out?”

Gemmi frowned, a shade coming over his features. “I’m afraid you’ve chosen a poor time to visit, my lady. A dark sorcerer has taken over our land. It’s only a matter of time before he has the entire realm under his thumb.” Gemmi looked up, worriedly surveying the darkening sky. “Nowhere’s safe from his spies anymore, and most people, those who haven’t bowed down to the bastard already, are leaving before things get worse. Not that that’s going to do much good for them. You can’t outrun the dark.”

“So, does that mean you’re not with him? The dark sorcerer, I mean?” I held my breath, waiting for his answer, prepared to take off at a sprint in case my instincts about him were wrong.

Gemmi gave me an indignant look, obviously offended. “The worlen? Side with *that* evil monster? Now, lassie. I understand you’re new around here and all, but the worlen are an honorable race. We fight for those who cannot fight for themselves. It’s our code.”

“But aren’t there people here who you could..I don’t know--fight with?”

Sir Gemmi shook his head. “If you’re referring to the fallen, I doubt they would want our help for whatever little rebellion they have planned. *If* they’re bothering to fight at all. No, we’ll fight the bastard on our own terms, or die trying.”

I opened my mouth to tell him just how wrong he was about the fallen, to beg for his help, but the words got stuck in my throat. Before the Wisps, I hadn’t realized what being in a war *really* meant. It wasn’t all romantic gestures and noble quests, all valiant heroes and impassioned speeches. No, fighting a war meant watching people die. *For* you, *because of* you, it didn’t matter, really. It was the same thing in the end, the same cost. So, no matter how much I felt I needed Sir Gemmi’s help, I found myself unable, or unwilling, to ask him, or anyone else, to die for me.

After a beat or so of tense silence, Gemmi seemed to shake off his solemnity and patted my hand gently. “Anyways, that’s not for you to worry about. Once you find your friends, you can head back to whatever realm you came from. Right now, though, you need to rest. You did almost drown after all. Why don’t you come back to my camp with me, and we’ll help you find your friends when the sun comes up. Dangerous things lurk after dark, especially these days.”

I just nodded, letting Gemmi guide me out of the clearing, wishing he was right and it really wasn’t for me to worry about, like he said, but that wasn’t the case. What was happening here was more my problem than anybody’s, and I’d have to face it, sooner or later.

As I followed Gemmi into the forest, the last of the suns slipped below the horizon and for a moment, everything became dark. I froze, fear shooting through me as the world around me turned pitch black, like someone had suddenly turned the lights off. I heard Gemmi stop ahead of me, his voice drifting toward me in the night. “Oh, don’t worry, my lady. Just wait for it.”

I furrowed my eyebrows in confusion. “Wait for wha--”

Before I could finish, the darkness suddenly began to lessen, and I couldn’t help my gasp at the transformation of the forest around me. I watched as veins of silver crawled through the cracks in the bark of the trees, pulsing softly with light. I looked up as flowers hidden in the dark foliage of the trees bloomed in a matter of seconds, their lavender petals glowing brightly in the dark. As I watched, lightning bugs began to flit amongst the blooms, glowing a brilliant white rather than the soft yellow found on earth. Everywhere, the forest seemed to come alive with light, only visible when the rest of the world went dark.

Sir Gemmi cleared his throat, gesturing for us to continue, and I tore my attention away from the glowing paradise to look at him, following in his footsteps as his walking resumed. As my eyes went to my feet, I noticed little bits of rock shining in the dirt, the colors ranging from bright blue to turquoise, and I had to fight the urge to pick one up for Tom. They were definitely the coolest rocks I’d ever seen.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Sir Gemmi remarked, slowing down his quick little strides to come walk beside me. I just nodded in response, unable to put my awe into words. Gemmi sighed a little wistfully. “You should have seen it before.”

“Before what?”

“Before the magic began to die.”

I felt my breath catch in my throat. “What do you mean?”

“Magic is what does it, what makes it all glow. As it fades, grows darker, so do the plants.” Gemmi pointed toward a dark patch of the wood as we walked, the lights practically non-existent there. “It’s like an infection, that sorcerer’s magic, and it’s spreading, popping up randomly throughout the realm.”

My eyes widened. “It’s Varian? He’s destroying the magic.”

Sir Gemmi raised his eyebrows, though he didn’t question how I knew the dark sorcerer’s name. “Indeed, my lady, although I’ll ask you to refrain from using that name out here in the dark. In my experience, it has a bad habit of drawing unfriendly ears.”

I didn’t respond, trying to process what he’d said. Not only had Varian taken over Crestfall, he was also destroying it from the inside out. I looked at the beauty of the forest around me, dread filling me at the thought of all the light going out. Leaving the forest, and the kingdom, shrouded in darkness.

I tried to shake off the worry, the crushing weight of responsibility that rested heavily on my shoulders. I was already so tired, my feet dragging with every step as the adrenaline from the attack and the awe of the forest finally faded away. All I wanted was to find a safe place to sleep. I could worry about the rest in the morning.

I turned toward Sir Gemmi, the worlen, whose people I’d remembered Maeve and Tom had talked about in the van--well, *fought* about, really. “So, the worlen are great warriors, huh?”

It was dark, but I could see a faint blush rise in Sir Gemmi’s cheeks. “Indeed, my lady. It’s all a part of our code. We’re fighters by nature. It’s what we’re best at.”

“By nature?”

“Unlike most of the other originals, the Worlen can’t channel magic.”

“Really? I thought everyone in Crestfall had some magical affinity.”

Sir Gemmi shook his head. "I'm afraid not my lady, but it's for the best. We've learned to fight and live in other ways. Without magic. How do you think I saved you back there?"

I paused, eyeing Sir Gemmi as a somewhat horrifying thought suddenly popped into my head. "You--you didn't give me mouth to mouth, did you Gemmi?"

Gemmi puffed up his chest, trying to project confidence, but I noticed a twinge of embarrassment to his words. "I--well, I did what was necessary to save--"

I reached down and smacked him playfully on the shoulder. "*Gemmi!* What the hell?"

I knew I really had no right to be mad at the little guy. He had saved my life after all, but still, it was weird. It was strange enough to go from kissing zero guys to making out with Lee in the span of a day. Now, not only had I shared a knee-weakening kiss with a man I couldn't even remember properly, I'd also locked lips with a not-so-magical warrior squirrel/cat. I couldn't help the incredulous laugh that escaped my lips. What was my life even turning into?

Gemmi rubbed his shoulder, frowning, but his expression lightened when I laughed, clearly relieved that he hadn't upset me too badly. "Well, you certainly are feisty, my lady. Just like the other one."

"Other one?" I asked, but Gemmi didn't respond, moving ahead of me. I could hear the faint sounds of conversation, the voices growing louder as Gemmi and I ducked under some branches, emerging into another clearing, this one much wider than the one we'd come from.

The space was lit by several fires as the worlen bustled about. There looked to be about twenty of the creatures in all, the color of their fur ranging from reddish brown, like Gemmi, to blonde to inky black. Some were stoking the fire while others seemed to be preparing some kind of meal. A couple stood on the outskirts of the clearing, monitoring the forest with watchful eyes. They nodded to Gemmi as he entered, their curious gazes lingering on me only for a moment before they resumed their watch.

The sound of raucous laughter drew my attention to the middle of the clearing where a group of worlen were crowded around a fire, watching with gleeful smiles as someone sitting on the ground told a story. A feminine voice reached my ears, projecting

out from amongst the chittering and laughter of the Worlen. “And then *I* said, ‘Well it was your idea to let my mom drive us to the movies. It’s not my fault she’s afraid I’ll end up a star on sixteen and pregnant.’”

My mouth dropped open. “*Cassie!*?”

CHAPTER 11

Squirrels Gone Wild

“Hold up, so you traveled here through the portal? By *yourself*?”

Cassie nodded, and I just blinked at her for a moment, still trying to wrap my head around the fact that she was here. In Crestfall. Calmly sipping tea from her tiny, worlen-sized cup like we were back in the BSB Starbucks and not in an entirely different realm.

After I’d managed to shake free from my initial shock and actually ran and embraced Cassie, who seemed almost as surprised, and relieved, to see me as I was to see her, we’d spent the next twenty minutes catching up on everything that had happened since we last saw each other. The worlen had been kind enough to give us some food (I hadn’t realized how utterly ravenous I’d been until I’d bitten into one of their delicious rolls and had to keep myself from letting out an audible moan at the taste) and some privacy by the fire, so we could catch up in peace.

Cassie shrugged. “Well, I saw you three climb up the top of the rock and then disappear. Then, when I got up there--not easy to do in a pantsuit, I might add--I saw the little tunnel thing, and I figured it must be where you’d gone. You can imagine my surprise when I got out and saw--” Cassie gestured her hands at the scenery around them-- “all of *this*.”

I shook my head, unable to believe my best friend was really here, in another realm, casually discussing how she came to be in said realm like she was talking about the weather. I checked her blue eyes, looking to see some sign of distress or denial, some proof that she was freaking out the way any normal person would, the way I did when I got thrown into this mess of monsters and magic.

She met my scrutinizing gaze, not flinching or ducking her head like I would, but I thought I could see some hint of something, fear, maybe, or just sheer incredulity at the world she’d stumbled into. Either way, it was only a glimmer, and Cassie hid it well--the same way she hid most of what she was feeling--behind a facade of calm capability. In a

second it was gone, and I was left wondering if it was only a trick of the firelight as it danced across her face.

I assumed that sometime, a bit later on maybe, all of it would catch up with Cassie, and she'd have to face what she'd been casually brushing off, but until then, she seemed determined not to let anything faze her. Not magic portals. Not otherworldly realms. Not even talking squirrel-cat warriors, it seemed.

Speaking of the worlen, I couldn't help noticing the little glances they kept throwing toward Cassie and I as they moved about the camp, preparing for some sort of ritual or game that they said they put on whenever they had visitors. I had no idea what they were talking about, but they seemed pretty excited about it. Apparently, they hadn't had visitors in a long time.

Still, despite their preparations, their eyes kept flicking back to us. They were clearly already rather fond of Cassie, something that surprised me almost as much as I think it surprised her. After all, Cassie didn't exactly make friends easily. Still, I guess tough respected tough, and despite the tattered pantsuit she was still wearing from this morning, and the fact that most of her hair had fallen out of her bun, Cassie still looked like a force to be reckoned with. Something the worlen, warriors that they were, seemed to admire.

Still, despite Cassie's tough facade, I couldn't help but notice how fragile she looked compared to the strange world that now surrounded her. The dark woods at her back seemed filled with unseen threats, every bump and shadow a sign of a possible danger to come. Varian's spies could be anywhere, maybe even watching us right now, and I felt a shock of fear as I realized what her being here actually meant. There was a target on her back now, growing larger with every second she spent with me. The thought sent a shiver down my spine.

Still, the worlen seemed confident that their camp was secure, undiscovered by the dark sorcerer and any of his spies. They had sentries and guards who would alert us at any sign of trouble, and it seemed, for the moment, at least, that we were safe.

"I can't believe you're here." I murmured, not for the first time.

Cassie narrowed her eyes. "Can't you? You're the one who left me that secret message although, to be honest, you could have been a *tad* more specific. Given me *some*

idea of what to prepare for. As it was, *In case of emergency, Enchanted Rock* really wasn't all that helpful in the long run. Maybe something like *I'm being chased by shadow monsters. Send help* would have been more appropriate."

I widened my eyes at her. "You know about the ashers?!"

Cassie snorted. "*Know* about them? They attacked me the second I came through the portal, all pointy teeth and sharp claws." Cassie shivered, lost in the memory. "I'd heard what had happened at school, but I didn't believe it until..."

"You know about what happened at school?"

"Well, I know that you're a fugitive."

My eyes widened in shock. "A fugitive!?"

Cassie nodded, gesturing with her hands dramatically as she told the story. "There I was, surfing insta on my lunch break and boom! There *you* were on the news, covered in blood and apparently fleeing the scene of a crime with some very suspicious, and kind of hot, weirdos in matching outfits carrying weapons."

I slid my hand down my face. "Ugh, I was hoping they hadn't got a shot of us."

Cassie raised her eyebrows at me. "Oh, they got a shot of you, and now you and your merry band are apparently wanted for questioning about what went down at the school. For some reason, the police seem hesitant to believe it was the 'shadow monsters' that everyone keeps raving about on social media. Can't imagine why. Anyway, that's when I went to your apartment to find you only to find the place partially destroyed and looking like the inside of the easter bunny's butt hole. Your neighbors send their regards, by the way. Also, a bill, apparently. Anyway, not only that, but just who do I find snuggled up in your bed, but good ol' Max, a knot on his head the size of a ping pong ball and an odd note taped to his chest."

I grabbed her hand. "You saw Max?! Is he okay?"

Cassie waved a hand dismissively. "He's fine, although he did seem super pissed. Like more pissed than I'd ever seen him. He started ranting about how you'd been brainwashed and had a boyfriend and that he had to find you before something or another, and then he stormed off. That's when I remembered that time we watched *Paper Towns* and how you always said if you disappeared you'd leave some sort of clue behind.

I tore apart the room before I realized you'd probably just put it in the book (sorry about that), and voila, here I am."

"So, you came...to rescue me?"

Cassie squeezed my hand. "Of course, Summer. After all, I couldn't very well get the police involved because I didn't know if you'd be culpable or whatever for anything you'd done when 'brainwashed.' I debated bringing Max along, but I figured there was more to *that* story than what he was saying, and given the whole boyfriend development, I didn't think he was in the right mind to help out."

I nodded, trying to process everything. "So, you got through the portal, and the ashers attacked you? How did you get away?"

"Why these little fellas of course." Cassie patted one of the *worlen* as he walked by and he blushed before continuing onward. I felt my jaw drop open a bit at her endearing tone. Clearly, the *worlen* had wormed their way into her heart when they'd saved her. Cassie caught my shocked expression and quickly dropped the affectionate smile. "Anyway, there I was, getting attacked by those ash-thingies, and then all of a sudden what looked like half a dozen large squirrels jumped out with swords and started to fight them off."

I cast a horrified look at Cassie. "The *worlen* fought the *ashers*?" The thought of the tiny, sweet creatures going up against the nightmare-inducing ashers filled my stomach with dread.

"Yeah, and they made quick work of them, too."

I raised my eyebrows. "You mean they actually defeated them?"

Cassie nodded, although she looked almost as astonished as I did despite having witnessed it. "It was crazy, Summer. The *worlen* moved so fast with their little swords that the shadow thingies just couldn't keep up. Pretty soon, they were just piles of dust on the ground. Well, ash, I guess."

I just sat there, trying to picture the tiny *worlens* actually managing to kill the ashers. I guess there was more to the little guys than met the eye. "Okay. Then, what happened?"

"Well, then they started to speak to me. I almost fainted, naturally, and then after convincing myself that I'd somehow been dosed with a hallucinogen, I decided to follow

them back to their camp. I was curious as to why my psyche had chosen squirrel-cat warriors to communicate with me, and thought it might be a good topic for my honors thesis whenever I woke up, but...”

I rolled my eyes, not surprised that Cassie managed to make journeying to another realm something she could use in school. “But..?”

Cassie just shook her head, looking past me at the camp, the forest, and I did too, trying to see it through her eyes. I eventually turned my attention to the sky, filled with all those constellations I’d seen only once before. So different from home, but familiar all the same.

Despite everything that was strange here, stars were still stars, lighting up the dark, and I was grateful for that.

“The more time I spent here, the more I realized it wasn’t a hallucination. That it couldn’t be. First of all, I’m not creative enough to come up with all of this, and second of all, you’d gone this way, too, and honestly Summer, this--” Cassie gestured at the world around her--” has *you* written all over it. Which meant that you probably weren’t brainwashed. Which meant that there was something much crazier going on here than anything I knew about. So, I decided to spend the night with the worlen and try to find you the next day, and then here you are.”

“Here I am,” I murmured, eyes still on the stars.

Finally, Cassie sat back, looking at me expectantly. “Okay, now, it’s your turn.”

“My turn?”

Cassie rolled her eyes. “I’ve told you how *I* got here. Now, how the hell did *you* get tangled up in all this?”

I paused for a moment, trying to decide where I should start. Finally, I took a deep breath, and suddenly it all just poured out of me. Everything that had happened the past two days. I left nothing out, telling her about Lee and Maeve and Tom, about the memories and past identities and mermaids and wisps and giants. I even told her about the injury-causing dreams and the old man, which didn’t seem all that crazy anymore, relatively. She listened to it all in silence, only interrupting to ask for certain clarifications. When I finally finished, my throat was dry from talking for so long.

I took a sip of my water as Cassie looked at me, seemingly thinking hard about something. “So you’re a princess? Like a real one?” I just nodded, squishing a buttered roll nervously between my fingers as I waited for her reaction. “And you have magical powers?”

I nodded again, glancing up through my lashes at Cassie, who simply looked past me, like she was processing everything that I’d said. I waited for her questions, her fear and worry, but it never came. “Are you *freaking* kidding me?”

I leaned back, surprised by the animosity in her tone. “What?”

She threw her hands up in the air. “Are you telling me I’ve spent the last twenty four hours worried sick about you, not knowing where you’d gone or who was after you, and it turns out, not only are you A: Not dead in a ditch somewhere, you’re also B: a goddamn magical princess?”

I crossed my arms. “I mean, it’s not that simple--”

Cassie scoffed. “The hell it isn’t! I thought you were *dead*, Summer. I jumped down a dark hole and fought freaking shadow monsters looking for you. I risked my *life* for you, and you’re bitching about what? Finding out you have a gorgeous boyfriend? That you’ve inherited an entire kingdom?”

I wanted to turn away from Cassie’s enraged gaze, utterly taken aback by her sudden anger. As long as I’d known her, Cassie and I had never really had a real fight, never shouted at each other or even raised our voices. Although she could be hard on other people, the truth was, Cassie had always been my ally in every battle, my biggest supporter. My heart thundered in my chest. I wanted to shout back that she had no idea what she was talking about, that I’d felt more pain and rage and loss in the past two days than I had in my entire life previous, but the longer I held her gaze, the more I began to notice something else, hidden there beneath her anger.

It took me a second to realize that it was fear. Cassie, my unflinching best friend, a warrior in her own right, had been afraid for me, for what had happened to me, and after having spent the past two days alone in that fear, not even having Max around to help her, she traveled all the way to another realm only to find out that, in her mind, she’d worried for nothing. That everything she’d gone through had been for *nothing*, and as

someone who only recently found out that their entire life, all their supposed experiences, were, in fact, just lies, I couldn't help but sympathize with her.

I placed my hand on Cassie's knee, the warmth of the gesture clearly surprising her. "I'm sorry, Cassie. I should have warned you, should have known you'd worry. I just--" I threw my hands up in the air-- "I have no idea what I'm doing, okay? I don't know how to do this, how to *be* this person. I'm trying so hard, I just--I just keep failing. Over and over. I'm sorry." I felt tears well in my eyes, and I quickly turned away from Cassie, wiping at them furiously. I was so sick of feeling weak.

A moment or two of silence passed until Cassie finally sighed. "I guess it's not *entirely* your fault that you were kidnapped by magical warriors and brought to another realm, and *maybe* I *shouldn't* have jumped down a dark hole just because I saw my friend do it."

I let out a little laugh, relief coloring the sound. "You think?"

Cassie rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, that's the last time I try to save you. Next time, you're on your own."

I laughed again, before shaking my head. "Can you believe that it was only *yesterday* that..."

"Yeah, I know."

I gestured my hands around the camp. "And *now* we're--"

"Yep. It's crazy." Cassie shook her head. "I honestly should have known something strange was going on. You never get up that early."

I rolled my eyes at her before smacking a hand across my forehead as a sudden thought came to me. "Shit!"

"What?"

"I'm pretty sure I had a paper due today."

Cassie just looked at me, not saying anything, until we both suddenly burst out laughing. It wasn't quiet laughter, but rather the bending over and clutching your stomach kind, the kind that makes your cheeks sore and your body shake. I noticed some of the worlen giving us strange looks.

It wasn't that the missing paper was particularly funny--the teacher was kind of a dick, and something told me he wouldn't be happy to give me an extension if I used

“kidnapped by elves” as my excuse--it was simply that it seemed so incredibly insignificant all of a sudden in the face of all that had happened. It was laughable really, how foreign my old world had become. Not that this new one felt any more like home to me. It seemed I was stranded, at least for the moment, somewhere between the two, and despite how terrifying that idea was, and the danger we were both in, I couldn’t help but be grateful that Cassie was stuck there with me.

Cassie wiped a tear from her eye, her laughter finally dying down. “Oh well, you can just turn it in when we go back.”

“Go back?”

Cassie nodded in Gemmi’s direction. “Yeah, what’s-his-name said he could take us back to the portal in the morning, and I don’t know about you, but I for one don’t want to wait around for this Varian guy to find us.”

I opened my mouth to tell her that I couldn’t go back, that I had responsibilities here, but the words got stuck in my throat. As alien as my old world had become to me, it was still home, still a place where I didn’t have to worry about saving kingdoms or fighting giants or outsmarting mermaids. A place where death and danger didn’t seem to follow me like a dark cloud, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

On Earth, I wouldn’t have to work so hard to be someone I wasn’t, to fill the shoes of the girl I once was. My heart clenched as I thought of the wisps, my stupid mistake the cause of so many of their deaths. My mind also turned to my out of control magic, to the danger I posed to everyone around me until I somehow managed to master it, *if* I even could. The truth was my kingdom was probably better off without me.

And yet.

If I went home, what would become of it? What would become of my friends? To Lee? Pain shot through me as I thought of never seeing him again, of never seeing any of them again. And what about my parents? Would I never get to meet them, to see them outside of what felt like another girl’s memories? Would they be disappointed in me? Knowing I gave up on them, on the kingdom? I’d never had to worry about disappointing anyone before, but now even the thought of it caused dread to rest like a stone in my stomach, the weight of it pulling me down.

“I can’t.”

Cassie narrowed her eyes. "Can't what?"

"I can't go back."

"What are you talking about?"

"I can't just leave everyone--"

Cassie interrupted me, leaning in close. "Summer, you don't owe these people *anything*, okay?"

I shook my head. "You don't understand."

Cassie let out a frustrated huff, leaning back. "Explain it to me, then. Explain why you think it's somehow *your* job to save this entire kingdom just because you *used* to have a life here. A life that, let me remind you, you can't even remember."

"Because I *did* have a life here, Cassie! Whether or not I remember it, it still happened, and I can't just abandon my duty to this place."

Cassie shook her head. "You're *duty*? Listen to yourself, Summer. Are you really willing to die for people you don't even know? You have a life back home. You have Max and I. Since when is that not enough for you?" Cassie's voice lost some of its anger by the end, something like hurt coloring her words.

"Since I found out I have a real family out there, waiting for me!" I burst out, not quite hearing what I'd said until it was too late.

Cassie reared back like I'd struck her, and shame immediately filled me at the wounded look on her face which she quickly covered with a scowl. I softened my voice. "I wasn't--I didn't mean it like that, okay?" I reached out and took her hand, but she resolutely avoided my gaze. "You and Max have been better friends than I could have ever asked for. It's just...you don't know what it's like to spend your whole life feeling like you're alone in the world, like you don't have a home, only to find out that you actually *do* have a family out there. Flesh and blood. And a place where you used to belong."

Cassie didn't turn toward me, but she didn't pull her hand away either, so I kept going. I needed to make her understand, make her see that my wanting to stay here had nothing to do with her or Max or my old life, really. It was about doing right by whatever family I had left. "I have to help my parents. I have to see this through. I don't expect you to under---"

“I get it.”

I looked up, surprised by the soft sound of Cassie’s voice. She still wasn’t looking at me, her gaze on the camp, or rather the world, around us, and yet it didn’t feel like a sign of anger, just contemplation. “I get it, Summer. Really, I do. I mean, I wish it wasn’t like this. That it hadn’t taken a journey to another realm and a dangerous sorcerer to help you find your family, but it did, and you have. Or at least, you’re going to, soon.” Cassie finally let her blue eyes land on me, her gaze warm if a bit sad-looking. “I’m not going to stand in the way of that.”

I nodded, squeezing her hand, grateful she understood. “Thank you, Cassie. And don’t worry. Tomorrow, I’ll tell Gemmi to take you straight back to the portal, and you can--”

“Oh, I’m staying.”

I blinked at her. “Um, what?”

Cassie rolled her eyes. “Did you honestly think I was going to let you do all this magical warrior princess shit by yourself?”

I shook my head, both comforted and panicked at the prospect of her staying. On the one hand, I was so homesick that just sitting next to her felt like wrapping myself in a warm blanket, but on the other hand, Crestfall had already proven itself to be a more than dangerous place. Especially to those who spent time with me. “I’m not by myself, Cassie. I have Lee and Maeve and Tom--”

Cassie waved her hand dismissively. “And where are they again?”

I opened my mouth to respond but eventually closed it when no answer came.

Cassie nodded. “That’s what I thought. I’m staying. You need me.”

I shook my head again, the panic taking over the sliver of joy as I thought of my friend being attacked just for being with me, of possibly having to watch her get hurt because I made a stupid mistake trying maneuver in a world I didn’t fully understand. “You don’t understand, Cassie. I can’t protect you, okay? I don’t even know what I’m doing half of the time! Just because I was some bad ass in the past, doesn’t mean I have any idea of how to fight what’s coming, or how to protect the people I love. This isn’t *really* me. I’m not actually this person.” I glanced down at my dress, the confidence and certainty I’d felt before at the river nothing more than a distant dream. Try as I might to

be like the girls in my books, I couldn't help but feel like I was simply play-acting at being brave, at being strong. That I was pretending to be someone I wasn't. Someone I could never be.

Cassie tilted her head to the side like she was thinking it over. I waited for her to tell me that I was right, that she'd be gone by tomorrow, but she never did. "I disagree."

"What?"

Cassie shrugged her shoulders. "I mean, I can see it."

"*See* it? *See what?*"

Cassie squeezed my hand, the warmth of the unexpected gesture surprising me. "Summer, you've never really been a part of our world. You've lived in it, sure, but you weren't really meant for it, you know? At least it never felt like you were. *You* never felt like you were. So, yeah, you being from another realm? I can see it."

"But--"

"I mean, it's crazy. All of this is literally, bat shit crazy. I recognize that, but I'm not about to deny what I've seen with my own eyes."

"Still, I--"

"And as far as the princess thing goes, I've always thought you'd make a great leader. You're strong and trustworthy and brave. You just never had anything that you were willing to fight for, any group that you wanted to lead. Now, you do."

I looked down, my empty plate shifting in my lap as I fidgeted in my seat. "I don't know, Cassie. I don't remember--"

Cassie cut me off again, leaning closer to me so I'd have to meet her gaze. "Listen, I don't know about this Varian guy, okay? Or Maeve or Tom or Lee or anybody else you've mentioned. I don't even know about Rose. I don't know who you were before you were my best friend, but I do know *you*, Summer. I know that it doesn't matter if you never remember who you were before, if you never get your memories back. Who you are, *right now*, is enough."

I sat still for a moment, absorbing her words, and then tears filled my eyes as I pulled Cassie in for a hug. She resisted at first before finally relenting, albeit begrudgingly, patting my back a little awkwardly as I squeezed her tight. For some reason, hearing the words come from her lips was the closest I'd come to believing them

so far. Maybe it was because, unlike Lee or Maeve or Tom, Cassie had no stake in this world, in my living up to who I once was.

Or maybe it was simply because I so badly wanted them to be true, that I let her words burn within me, helping reignite my broken spirit.

The quiet sound of a small throat clearing caused us to break apart. I looked down to see a small, chipmunk looking creature, smaller than the Worlens even, with big round eyes and short stubby legs. It had a black stripe down its head and back, and it kind of reminded of a small brown potato that had spontaneously sprouted appendages. “My apologies for the interruption, Milady Cassie, Milady Summer,” he said, nodding to each of us in turn. “Would either of you like a refill on your refreshments?”

The little creature's voice was soft, his accent much less gruff sounding than the worlen, yet there was still a certain Scottish lilt to his words. He held up a tray filled with more small cups of tea, and I took one, a little dumbfounded by his presence. I'd only just barely gotten used to speaking with squirrel-cats. Now, it seemed I'd have to add chipmunk-like creatures to the list.

Cassie grabbed another cup as well, replacing it with her empty one. “They're called parabi, and they're kind of like the worlen's squires.” She whispered to me, before addressing the parabi directly. “Thanks, Cricket.”

Cricket blushed, as much as a chipmunk could blush anyway, acknowledging her thanks with a nod before scurrying off into the camp. My gaze followed him as he left, and as my eyes drifted over the camp, I began to notice more and more of the parabi darting about to and fro, their tiny bodies barely visible in the low light. I watched as they polished some of the Worlen's swords or handed them more food and refreshments. “So, they're like servants?”

Cassie shrugged her shoulders. “I'm not sure, but there seems to be more to it than that. Each parabi only serves one worlen. Helps them with their weapons and stuff. Cricket is Gemmi's parabi, which is probably why he was the one to serve us, given that Gemmi was the one that found you and all. There were a few parabi there during the clash with the ashers, but none of them actually seemed to fight. Honestly, I'm not sure what the relationship is, but every worlen seems pretty tight with their parabi. More than with a servant, at least.”

As I watched, Cricket meandered his way through the camp and back to Gemmi, who was helping set up some sort of ring in the middle of camp. Gemmi absentmindedly patted Cricket in greeting as he went about his task, Cricket soon joining him in the work.

Soon, my eyes were drawn to a different worlen, one whose coat was all black and who had clearly had too much tea or whatever it was the Worlen drank to let loose. He was stumbling around the camp, cup in hand, and utterly oblivious to his surroundings. All of a sudden a little squeak was heard, and some neighboring worlen turned to find that the drunk one had almost stepped on a passing parabi with stark white fur, who was now clearly shaken and afraid, cowering away from the worlen's clawed feet. A gray worlen let out a cry of outrage and went to pick up the frightened parabi, holding it close to his chest before drawing his sword and pointing it at the drunk worlen. "Bifur, you drunken fool! You almost squashed Samson!"

Bifur held his hands up in surrender, the threat sobering him up a bit. "I'm sorry, Reg. It was an honest mistake, truly." The apology came out a little slurred but seemed to satisfy Reg, who, after a rather tense moment, withdrew his sword, putting his back to Bifur and focusing his attention on his frightened friend.

"I'd say you're right."

Cassie flicked her hair over her shoulder. "Of course I am."

I flicked my eyes between her and the furry creatures. "So, I gotta say you seem to be taking all this fantasy stuff a lot better than I would have thought."

Cassie shrugged her shoulders. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's your fault."

"My fault?"

"Seriously, Summer. How many times did you make me watch *Lord of the Rings*, again? And all those Hobbit movies? And, oh my god, Harry *freaking* Potter?"

"Um, a lot?"

"Understatement, but yeah. Honestly, I think you desensitized me to weird stuff. Not to mention, all this weird stuff kind of reminds me of you in a way? Maybe? Who knows. I've just decided to roll with it."

I shook my head in amazement at my best friend's blasé attitude, but before I could respond, Gemmi appeared in front of us with Cricket by his side, rubbing his hands

together and bouncing up and down on his toes (or maybe claws?). He seemed like he was about to burst from excitement. "Excuse me, ladies, but if you're ready, it's time."

Cassie and I looked at each other. "Time for what?" I asked.

"Why the tournament of course! Come, come! It's about to begin."

Gemmi each took one of our hands, leading us up and away from the fire and towards a ring that had been constructed in the middle of camp. Cassie and I both had to hunch over slightly to keep from lifting the worlen into the air, but he didn't loosen his firm grip.

All around the ring, which upon closer inspection, was actually a really large hole about four feet deep and ten feet wide, were little fence posts, allowing the worlen to peer into the ring without actually falling in. It was a good thing, too, as it seemed like all the worlen--and their parabi--in the camp were crowded around the ring, pushing at and even crawling over each other to get a better look. I noticed some worlen had hoisted their parabi onto their shoulders, no doubt worried they might get squashed in all the mayhem. I even noticed little Samson among the bunch, perched proudly on Reg's shoulder, his earlier near-death experience seemingly behind him.

In front of the ring stood two stumps, and Gemmi quickly guided us over to them before moving to stand at our side. Cassie and I sat down as twenty pairs of worlen eyes turned to rest on us, and I cast her a bewildered look, hoping she might have some idea of what was happening. Unfortunately, she looked just as confused as I did.

Gemmi cleared his throat before addressing the crowd in a booming voice, the sudden volume making me jump in my seat. "Greetings, brothers! Tonight, in honor of our esteemed guests, we shall have a tournament to determine who amongst us is the best and bravest!"

His proclamation was met with a cheer from the audience in front of us, followed by some playful boasting and wrestling between some of the younger worlen. Gemmi waited for them to settle down before speaking again. "As is the custom, each of our guests will choose a warrior upon which to bestow their favor. These warriors shall begin our tournament and will no doubt be granted much luck by the support of such kind and beautiful maidens!"

This statement was met with an even louder cheer, followed by shouts of “Pick me!” from many of the worlen. Others simply puffed up their chests and tried to subtly catch Cassie or I’s gazes, too proud to beg.

Eventually, the cheering and shouting died down, and Gemmi and the rest of the worlen just looked at Cassie and I expectantly, waiting to see who we would choose. “Um--” I fidgeted in my seat, not quite sure of how to go about this. “Can I pick you, Gem--uh Sir Gemmi?”

The other worlen groaned, but Gemmi silenced them with a wave of his hand. “I’m afraid the previous champion is not allowed to participate in the tournament, although I am flattered by your offer, truly.” Gemmi bowed, clearly pleased that I’d thought of him, but I was less enthused. Now I was back to square one.

I nervously peered around at the rest of the worlen, their intense gazes unnerving to say the least. “Um--okay. Then, I choose--” I paused, and it seemed like the worlen all collectively held their breath, waiting to hear what I’d say--”I choose...Reg.”

My statement was met by some cheers but many more groans as other worlen lamented not being chosen. Reg made his way to the front of the group, his chest puffed up and his chin lifted with pride. His parabi, too, pointed his nose in the air as he remained perched on his shoulder, clearly proud of his friend. I wanted to roll my eyes at the cocky display, but I’d admired the way he’d defended his parabi, and he seemed like he’d be a fierce fighter.

Finally, Reg stopped in front of me before kneeling down, his head bowed in deference.

“Your warrior awaits your token of favor,” Gemmi said.

“Um--my token of favor?”

“Yes, he shall wear it in battle as a symbol of your support.”

“Oh, okay, then. Let me see...”

My mind raced as I tried to come up with something to give the little warrior. I’d lost most of my things during the whole ordeal with the giants. Besides, it would need to be something small, something that wouldn’t get in the way of his fighting.

My eyes landed on the pink scrunchie on my wrist, and I quickly tugged it off, hoping it would be enough. “Um--hold out your arm, Sir Reg, so I can bestow my--uh,

token.” I tried to project my voice like Gemmi did, but I wasn’t sure how successful I was. Sir Reg obediently held out his arm, and I reached down and slid the scrunchie up until it rested on his bicep (Did squirrels have biceps?). Samson reached down and used his little hands to help slide it into place. Reg turned toward the crowd, thrusting his arm out proudly, and they gave a tremendous cheer in response.

I turned toward Cassie, expecting her to be as frazzled as I was when selecting a warrior, but she simply let her gaze glide over the settling crowd, her attention making them fall silent once more. Her gaze was calculating, seemingly sizing up each worlen individually as she surveyed the group, unconsciously leaning forward in her seat. I just rolled my eyes, not surprised in the slightest that she was taking the competition so seriously. If Cassie was truly passionate about anything, it was winning.

Finally, she leaned back, her perusal finished. “I select...him.” Cassie pointed her finger at the crowd, and I followed it, expecting to find she’d chosen the largest and strongest worlen. Instead, it turned out she was pointing at a worlen with dirty blonde fur, who actually seemed rather small compared to the others. He wasn’t in the center of the circle but stood off to the side, not jostling for position like the rest of the Worlen.

A beat of silence passed as everyone turned to see who she was pointing at, unable to hide their shock at her choice. The chosen worlen, himself, actually looked more surprised than anyone, he and his parabi exchanging dumbfounded glances like they couldn’t quite believe what was happening.

Finally, the silence was broken and muffled cheers and groans broke out amongst the group, although they sounded more confused than excited. I heard some grumbling that sounded like “Trevyr? Really?” but none had the audacity to question Cassie’s choice directly. The chosen worlen, Trevyr, made his way up to the front as if in a daze before finally coming to kneel before Cassie. I watched as his little parabi whispered something in his ear. Trevyr responded by simply shaking his head. “Your guess is as good as mine, Olaf,” he said softly.

“Your warrior awaits your token of favor,” Gemmi repeated, and I waited for Cassie to pull out a hair tie or something to give to the little guy. My jaw dropped, as did many others, when she actually withdrew the sword from his belt and *sliced off a lock of*

her own hair. My mouth remained open as she tied the dark lock around his wrist, his little blond parabi, Olaf, too dumbfounded to be of much help.

Finally, Trevyr rose and turned to face the crowd, still moving like he couldn't quite believe what was happening, but this time they met him with excited cheers and whistles. I didn't quite understand the significance of Cassie's gesture, but it apparently wasn't lost on the rest of the group who was looking at the little blonde worlen with new eyes.

Gemmi clapped his hands. "Now the warriors shall venture into the ring and choose their weapons."

Trevyr and Reg moved toward the ring, and Reg slapped his back excitedly as they made their way, almost knocking the little guy over. I leaned toward Cassie as the rest of the group turned their attention to where the warriors were choosing from a vast array of weapons. "Um--you want to tell me what that was all about?"

Cassie shrugged her shoulders, fingering her cropped strand of hair as she watched the ring. "Some people just need someone to believe in them. Besides, he reminded me--he looked like he needed a win."

I blinked at Cassie, feeling like I was seeing her for the first time. Before I could question her further, I heard a kind of trumpet sound, and all of a sudden, the fight was on.

Pretty soon, I learned that Worlen didn't just rely on their swords, which was the weapon both had chosen, instead, they seemed to fight with their whole bodies, jabbing with fists and feet in between parries and blocks.

At first, Trevyr's movements were slow, skittish even as he dodged Reg's strokes and attacks despite the fact that Reg seemed to be taking it easy on him, pulling his punches, slowing his blocks. I found I liked him all the more for it. I expected the fight to end almost as soon as it began, but pretty soon a change seemed to take place in Trevyr. He grew more and more confident, even going on the offensive a few times.

Pretty soon, it was almost hard to follow the little creatures, so quickly were they moving around the ring. Swords clanged and people cheered each time a blow was landed, and even though the swords had blunted edges and couldn't do any terrible damage, I couldn't help but flinch each time they met skin.

Eventually, it was Reg that was on the defensive as Trevyr came at him with everything he had, the cheers of the crowd urging him on and adding strength to his swings and speed to his feet. It seemed the battle was nearly over, and Reg lifted up his sword for one last block despite his obvious fatigue, the sound of steel meeting steel echoing across the camp.

Clang!

“C’mon, Rose. You can do better than that.”

I gritted my teeth and went on the offensive again, making short, quick strikes that kept him retreating, but Lee simply blocked or evaded every single one of them, dancing around the sparring circle, his blade glinting in the early morning sun. Two hours of practice, and he'd barely broken a sweat. The bastard was playing with me. Finally, growing bored of being on the defensive, Lee feinted high, and I was so tired that I fell for it. Fast as lightning, Lee dropped low and swept my legs out from under me.

I landed on my butt on the dusty ground, and my frustration only grew as Lee began to laugh at me. “You think this is funny, you son of a--”

“Wow, is that my daughter I hear? Always so ladylike.” My father strolled around the corner of the armory, hands in his pockets and a simple coronet above his dark brow. He must have just come from a council meeting.

Lee immediately stopped laughing and bowed low, which my father waved away with a dismissive hand. He'd tried to get him to stop doing that--Lee was practically family after all--but the boy persisted. Kiss ass.

“So, this is what all these early morning training sessions have gotten me? A daughter who falls on her butt in the middle of a fight? Are you sure you two haven't been doing... other things with your time?” Father sent Lee a hard look, whose face immediately seemed to lose all its color. He was no doubt thinking of the many times we'd foregone training to make out behind the armory, and I couldn't help my smile as he squirmed under father's knowing gaze. “Of course not, your majesty. I--uh, we would never--”

My father's abrupt laughter cut him off, and I joined in, getting to my feet as Lee let out a sigh of relief that he apparently wasn't about to be banished for playing tonsil hockey with the king's daughter.

"You think you can do better, old man?" I said cockily, moving into a ready position.

Father let out an indignant gasp. "Old man? That's it. Here, Lee. I'll trade you." Father slipped off his coronet and handed it to Lee, taking his sword as he did. My father mirrored my stance, managing to look completely natural in a sparring ring despite the fact that he was wearing his official royal robes, the kind he only pulled out for council meetings and funerals.

Lee just stood to the side, holding the coronet awkwardly in his hands, looking around like he was afraid someone would catch him with it and accuse him of stealing.

Father gave me a look, and I smiled. Lee might have been training me now, but my father was the one who taught me to fight, who showed me how to hold a sword and how to outwit an opponent if swords failed. All this to say, with one look, I knew he wasn't going to fight me. He was going to help me get revenge.

"Now!" Father shouted, and we both immediately turned toward Lee, attacking him from both sides. Lee was obviously taken aback, but he recovered quickly, dropping the coronet in the dirt before bringing up his arm to block my strike with his wrist guard while simultaneously shifting away to avoid my father's jab. We didn't relent, coming at him with attack after attack, but he somehow managed to avoid or block every single one of them. He was just that good.

However, unlike when he'd only been fighting me, now Lee was clearly having to use all his focus to fight two enemies, unarmed. Still, the man was a machine. There wasn't anyone in the realm who could match him, and if I wanted to win this fight, I'd have to get creative.

Lee sent another blow my way, just a punch that I could have easily blocked, but instead I leapt back to avoid it. "Ah!" I cried out, suddenly stumbling and gripping my ankle like I'd landed on it wrong. My father stopped attacking, and Lee immediately rushed to my side, his green eyes filled with concern. When he reached a hand out to help

me, I grabbed hold of his wrist and yanked with all my strength, leaning into his weight like my father had taught me, and flipped him over my shoulder and onto his back.

The breath whooshed out of his lungs as he landed, gazing up at me dazedly as I placed a hand on his chest, pinning him to the ground. "I win."

My father let out a roar of laughter, clutching his belly as he picked his coronet off the ground before handing Lee's sword back to him. "That's my girl."

Lee took it, grumbling about us both being 'cheaters' but was unable to keep a smile from slipping out as my father helped him to his feet. "That was amazing, son. You'll make a fine Captain of the Guard one day, to be sure."

Lee beamed at the praise, a hint of a blush on his cheeks, before the smile began to fade, and he shook his head. "There are others who might disagree with you, your majesty."

Father just scoffed. "Other people don't know what they're talking about. Besides, I'm the king. It's really only my opinion that matters, after all."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "I think mother might disagree with you, there."

Father laughed a little nervously. "Yes, uh-maybe don't mention that I said that to your mother, dear."

My father turned to leave the sparring circle, replacing his coronet and looking decidedly unruffled despite just engaging in an intense sword fight at seven in the morning, but that's just who he was, my father. Nothing fazed him. "By the way, Lee. I think your father would be very proud of the warrior you've become."

Unable to form words, Lee just nodded at the king as he left, his eyes shining a bit with unshed tears, although he tried to blink them away before anyone could see. Men.

I turned toward him after a moment, allowing him the opportunity to hide his tears. "So, ready to go again?"

Lee nodded at me, lifting the sword before grabbing his arm, the one that I'd used to flip him, and wincing. I took a step toward him, worried I might have yanked too har--

Next thing I knew, Lee had knocked the sword from my grasp and wrenched my hand behind my back, trapping the other between us as I crashed into him, my body pressed tightly against his chest. He looked down on me with a satisfied smirk, light brown hair falling into his eyes. I tried to wiggle free but he just tightened his grip on my

wrist, holding me even closer to him. I looked up at him and pouted, and he let out a little laugh, his chest vibrating with the sound. "I can't believe you fell for that."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Who said that I did?"

Lee raised his eyebrows, using his free hand to brush the strawberry blonde strands out of my eyes. "You're saying you meant for this to happen?"

I stretched up to my tiptoes, brushing my lips softly against his. His breath caught, and I pulled away. "I don't know, did I?"

Lee didn't respond, choosing instead to press his lips firmly against mine while using his hands to lift me up. I wrapped my legs around his waist, returning his kiss just as fiercely as he walked us to the back of the armory.

"Well, she *did* say she tends to be unconscious, a lot."

"Oh, well that's comforting. Don't you guys have a doctor or a vet or something?"

I heard Cassie and Gemmi's voices arguing in front of me as I was pulled back to the present, their worried faces filling my vision as the memory faded from view. The tournament seemed to have stalled, and it seemed that every worlen had now turned their attention on me, their worried eyes like little glowing stars all around me. Shit. I must have zoned out again.

"It's okay, guys. I'm fine, really."

Cassie and Gemmi both jumped at the sound of my voice before turning to face me, clearly shocked by my sudden return to the land of the living. Cassie grabbed my hand. "Summer? Are you okay? What happened? You were completely unresponsive for like ten minutes."

"Oh, I think I just...fainted. I guess all this excitement just got the better of me." I pressed a hand to my forehead, trying to play the part of the hapless maiden who swoons at too much commotion. Cassie already knew about my amnesiac state, but I wasn't particularly keen on letting anyone else in on that little secret just yet. Luckily, the worlens' seemed to buy it, mumbling about the 'daintiess of females.' I'd never been so grateful for misogyny before.

Cassie, however, was not so easily convinced. “But your eyes were open.” I threw her a look that hopefully said *shut up, you ignorant slut before you spill the beans*. Thankfully, she seemed to catch on. “--which is the way people from earth faint. Right. How silly of me to forget.”

With that, the rest of the worlen finally moved away, Gemmi included, eager to resume the tournament I’d so inconveniently interrupted. However, a little tapping on my ankle revealed Cricket was still by my side. “If Milady Summer would like to retire and recover from the festivities, we’ve prepared a tent for you and Milady Cassie. This way.”

I nodded my head, beyond grateful I wouldn’t have to stay and pretend to watch the fight while silently obsessing over all I’d seen in the memory. We followed Cricket to a tent that had been set up on the edge of camp, much bigger than the Worlen’s yet still on the small side, by human standards at least. Still, it was private and that was enough for me.

Cassie and I gave our thanks to Cricket before crawling inside. There were two cots on either side of the tent as well as a lantern and some more cups of tea. I was also glad to see they’d moved my backpack in here. It wasn’t much, but it was all I had left from home.

However, as we settled down on our cots and Cassie cleared her throat, drawing my gaze back to her, I realized that wasn’t exactly true. Not anymore. “Okay, so *now* can you tell me what the hell happened back there? You were completely out of it.”

“It was a memory.”

Cassie raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“I mean sometimes something just randomly triggers a memory, and I sort of have to relive it for a minute or two. Hence, the zoning out.”

Cassie blinked at me. “So, you’re saying that you regularly hallucinate moments of your former self’s life?”

“I mean when you say it like that it sounds---”

“Batshit crazy? Yeah, I’d say so. How do you even know that what you’re seeing is real?”

“I don’t know. They just don’t *feel* like hallucinations though, Cassie. They feel...real. Really real.”

Cassie narrowed her eyebrows. “And you would know what hallucinations feel like because...?”

I rolled my eyes. “C’mon, Cassie. Can you get out of analytical psychiatrist mode for one second, please?”

Cassie let out a sigh before pasting an enthusiastic smile on her face. “Fine. You had a memory and/or psychotic break! Yay! What was it?”

I rolled my eyes quickly before I began to tell her, unable to keep from smiling when I talked about my father, or from blushing whenever I got to the whole making out bit.

Cassie fanned herself. “Wow, I’m still not sure about this Lee guy, but damn. Fighting is kind of like foreplay for you guys, huh? I like it.”

I threw my pillow at her, and she caught it, her tone growing more serious. “So, where are your parents, then? They didn’t come to get you with Lee and them?”

The smile fell from my face. “Oh, um no. Lee said that they aren’t in Crestfall right now, and that they need to stay away until after Varian is defeated.”

A strange look seemed to pass over Cassie’s face. “That’s all he said?”

“Yeah, why?”

Cassie shook her head. “It just seems weird to me that they’d just disappear and leave you to stop Varian all by yourself. Like how much do you *really* know about them? About what happened to them when Varian took over?”

I sat back. “What are you saying? That Lee’s *lying* to me about them?”

“I don’t know, Summer. It just seems weird to me. That’s all.”

I shook my head, trying to dismiss her words, but doubt began to spread through my mind like a virus. Was she right? Was Lee not telling me everything about my parents? Maybe they *were* actually here in Crestfall. Maybe they had been taken prisoner when Varian attacked or maybe--maybe they were....

I pushed away the dark thoughts, shaking off the doubt. Lee would tell me if something really bad had happened to them. He and I were past the point of secrets. I was sure of it.

Cassie and I got ready for bed, and I turned off the lantern, immersing the tent in complete darkness. The sounds of the tournament could still be heard outside, and I

almost snorted at the fact that they were continuing the competition meant to honor their visitors despite the fact that both their visitors had gone to bed.

As my head hit the pillow, I tried to tune out the clashing of swords and cheers of the worlen, choosing instead to remember my father's kind face, the way just being near him made me feel so warm and safe inside. However, that joy soon turned to pain as I realized just how badly I wished my dad was here with me now.

Before, I'd only longed for parents in a kind of abstract way, missing the idea of them more than the people themselves. Now, I had a voice to remember, a face to picture. Cassie's doubt suddenly snuck back into my brain, tainting the memory with worry, but I pushed it away once again, managing to fall asleep with the sound of my father's boisterous laugh echoing in my ears.

CHAPTER 12

The Name's Bond

“Oh, great. You’re back.”

I blinked as the dimly lit library filled my vision, the fire warm beside me, although it was really just embers now, glowing softly from amongst the gray ash. Pinstripe man was out of his pinstripes, surprisingly, and was instead clothed in what looked like pajamas and an old fashioned night cap, both the same light blue color of his eyes. Those eyes were trained on me as he sat across from me in a matching armchair set close to the fire, a glass of something that looked like whiskey in his hands. His grumpy gaze narrowed before he rolled his eyes up to the ceiling and let out a frustrated sigh, clearly annoyed that I’d interrupted his night cap.

“Again, really?” he called out as he looked up.

A beat of silence passed. “Um--who exactly are you talking to?”

Pinstripe man narrowed his eyes, gaze still trained upward. “Them.”

“Oh, right. *Them*. It’s all very clear to me now,” I grumbled, resting my chin against my palm.

If Pinstripe man noticed my grumbling, he didn’t comment on it. Instead, he heaved himself out of the armchair with a dramatic sigh, before padding on socked feet over to one of the shelves on the wall, mumbling to himself as he did. “How much free time do they think I have? I’m a librarian. I’m always booked!”

Pinstripe man turned toward me with an expectant look on his face as he said the last bit, like I was supposed to marvel at his cleverness or bust a gut or something. I just raised an eyebrow at him, and he harrumphed and turned back toward the shelves. “*Rose* would have laughed,” he grumbled.

I shot up from the chair. “You knew Ros-- I mean, me? You knew me?”

Pinstripe man shook his head. “I knew *Rose*. I’m afraid whether or not I know *you* remains to be seen.”

I clenched my fists, barely resisting the urge to knock just *one* clear answer to my questions right out of him. Instead, I sat heavily on the armrest of my chair, trying to reign in my frustration despite the fact that it seemed all this guy ever did was speak in riddles. “How’d you know, her then? Rose.”

Pinstripe man rolled his eyes. “Well, as the Royal Librarian, it would have been a bit odd if I didn’t know the royal family. You know, Rose was never this slow on the uptake.”

My eyes widened, peering around the room like I was seeing it for the first time. “So does that mean...wait--are we in the *castle*, right now? Like the *actual* castle?”

Terror filled my heart at the realization. I darted my eyes around the room, suspicious of every creak, every shadow. If this really *was* the castle, then that meant more than just crotchety old men roamed these halls. A shiver ran through me, imagining the dark sorcerer suddenly jumping out at me, practically feeling his breath just behind me. There weren’t any entrances I could see, but that didn’t make my heart beat any slower. Something told me a simple lack of a door wouldn’t be enough to stop Varian. I wasn’t sure if anything could.

Pinstripe man seemed to sense my terror, holding up a hand like he was trying not to startle a scared deer. “Relax, sweetheart. *I* may be in the castle, but you’re simply in my head, or rather, your consciousness is. Invisible to everyone but me.”

Letting out a breath, I felt my shoulders slump in relief. Still, as much as I wanted to believe that what Pinstripe man was saying was true--well, some of it anyway--I was having trouble convincing myself that I really was just in the old man’s head. I stretched out my hand toward the fire, feeling the flicker of heat dance across my palm, and the scent of paper and leather and books filled my nose as I breathed in. It all just felt so real. “Why do you--I mean, *they*--only bring me here whenever I’m asleep?”

Pinstripe man tapped his forehead. “Only time the mind is open enough to allow the connection to be made.”

I nodded my head like that made perfect sense to me, which I think we both knew was a lie. Even when Pinstripe man deigned to answer my questions, most times the answers just left me feeling even more confused. “So, why bring me here? Is it really just so you can show me someone’s memories?”

Pinstripe man stepped away from the bookshelf, finally having found what he was looking for. I quickly realized that it was the same book he'd had me touch last time. "You know, Rose never asked this many questions."

I rolled my eyes as he held the book out to me. "I highly doubt that."

Pinstripe man sighed, a small smile at the edge of his mouth. "Yes, you're right. She *was* rather nosy. Anyway, you know the drill. Touch the book. Watch the memories. Save the realm. C'mon, quick as you like."

I let my hand hover over the cover of the book, indecision gnawing at me. Despite how little I understood about what was happening, or even who Pinstripe man really was, he seemed to want to help me. Well, maybe *want* wasn't the right word. He seemed *compelled* to help me, urged by this mysterious *them*, about whom I knew even less. That was the problem. I still didn't really know *anything* about this world I'd stumbled into. Whatever these memories might mean, whatever the purpose *they* had in showing me them, didn't really matter. What mattered was that they might offer some information, or maybe even some answers, to the list of questions that had been growing in my mind since I arrived in Crestfall.

Still, I didn't make a move to touch it, not particularly looking forward to being sucked inside another person's memories. Again. "But who's memories are these, anyway? And how's watching them supposed to help me save the realm?"

Pinstripe man rolled his eyes and gripped my wrist lightly before I could pull it away, quickly pulling my hand down until it made contact with the cover. "Too many questions."

"Jaimie, come inside! It's time for dinner."

I looked around, surprised to find myself indoors, the crop field where I stood the last time barely visible through the slightly open window. It seemed I was now inside the house I'd seen before, just as plain on the inside as on the outside, but with little touches that made it clear that it was a home. Some freshly cut yellow flowers in a vase on the table, a child's drawing pinned up on the wall. I watched as Isabelle, who seemed just a tad older but just as beautiful, maneuvered around the kitchen area with busy hands, placing plates of bread and cheese on the table as well as some sort of meat that I couldn't identify but that smelled amazing.

Ian sat at the table reading a book, his hair a little longer than before, the dark ends just barely brushing the edge of his strong jaw, which seemed to twitch occasionally whenever he read something he found to be funny.

Just then a little boy ran into the room, a soft bundle wrapped in his tiny arms. “Father, father help!” He looked to be about five or six, and he had the same red hair as his mother and the same light blue eyes as his father.

Ian immediately set the book down and rushed toward his son, rubbing his hands over his shoulders and along his arms like he was checking for injuries. Isabelle stood beside him, reaching down to brush a strand of hair out of the little boy’s eyes. “What’s wrong, Jaimie? Are you hurt?”

Jaimie just shook his head, barely able to form words around his hiccups as tears streamed down his freckled face. “It’s--it’s not me. It’s Pippa! I found him by--by the forest, and he was--he was--”

Jaimie sobbed and lifted up the bundle in his hands, unable to get the words out. Ian exchanged a quick look with Isabelle before he slowly unwrapped it, revealing what looked like a small gray and white cat, its light fur marred with crimson stains, its chest barely rising and falling with shaky, uneven breaths. “Oh, no,” Isabelle whispered softly, holding a hand to her mouth.

The sight caused Jaimie to break into another bout of sobs, and I felt tears well in my own eyes as I looked at the distraught child, wanting to comfort him, to do something, yet forcing myself to remember that all these events had happened long ago. I couldn’t change them. I could only watch them play out.

Ian gently ran his hands along Pippa’s body as if he were surveying the extent of his injuries, and my heart broke as a painful meow escaped the small creature despite Ian’s light touch. Still, for a moment, I was comforted. This was Crestfall, after all, not Earth. This was a place of magic, a place where wounds could be healed in a matter of seconds.

However, any hope I had faded as Ian looked over his shoulder at Isabelle, softly shaking his head. Isabelle paused for a moment before nodding, resting her hand on Jaimie’s shoulder and giving it a small squeeze. “Why don’t you give Pippa to your father, okay, Jaimie?”

At first, Jaimie resisted, holding the animal tighter to his chest, but after a little coaxing, he released him, throwing his arms around his mother instead.

Ian took a step toward the door. "I'm going to go find a good spot for Pippa to rest, oka--"

"No!" Jaimie called out, breaking free from his mother's embrace to go stand in front of the door, arms flung wide like he was trying to bar his father from leaving. "Just save him, father! Please! Use the magic!"

I took a step forward, forgetting for a moment where I was, wanting to come to the little boy's aid. What the hell? Ian wasn't even going to *try* to save him?

Ian stopped, turning to exchange a meaningful look with Isabelle, who walked over to Jaimie, crouching down until she was at eye level with him. "Jaimie, Pippa is hurting, okay? Your father just wants to help take his pain away."

"*I'm* hurting!" Jaimie shouted at his mother before looking up at his father, eyes swimming with unshed tears. "Please, father. *Please.*"

As I looked at the gut-wrenching pain on the little boy's face reflected in his father's light blue eyes, my anger faded, grim understanding taking its place. Ian would save his son from this pain if he could, any good father would, which meant that there were perhaps some wounds too severe for even magic to heal, some line between life and death that once crossed couldn't be crossed again. Not without consequences.

Ian shook his head, reaching down to place a hand on Jaimie's shoulder. "I'm sorry, son, but there's nothing else we can do for Pippa."

Jaimie sniffed twice, before saying in a scratchy voice, "Yes, there is! You can use the magic. You can--"

"No, Jaimie." Ian's voice wasn't loud, but it was firm, his tone final.

He reached a hand toward his son, but Jaimie just swatted it away, before running into another room, the door slamming behind him with a resounding thud.

Isabelle watched him go, flinching as the door slammed shut. She turned back toward Ian with pleading eyes. "Maybe there's a way--"

"You know there isn't Isabelle. Not one that's worth the cost."

As I beheld Ian's grim yet determined face, I was reminded of Maeve's somber look as she stared into the flames of the campfire, her warnings about the dangers of

abusing magic echoing in my ears. She said doing so could leave you changed. Tainted. I hadn't quite understood what she'd meant then, but now, as I witnessed Ian's pain at denying his son's request, it became clear to me. This was a man who would have done anything for his child. Anything that was right. And yet, he wouldn't do it. He wouldn't give life back to Pippa. Maybe it was because he knew that doing so would mean killing a part of himself.

She looked back at the closed door. "We don't know for sure, and Jaimie--"

"He needs to learn, Isabelle."

Isabelle gripped the top of the chair in front of her, her knuckles turning white as she squeezed so hard I was worried the wood might splinter. "To learn what? How to grieve?--" she shook her head--"He's too young."

Ian rested a hand upon hers, and her grip noticeably lightened as she looked up into his light blue gaze. "How to let things go."

Isabelle just looked at him for a moment before nodding, and Ian pressed a quick kiss to her cheek before heading out the back door.

For a moment, Isabelle stood in silence, the soft sounds of Jaimie's weeping from another room not quite loud enough to cover the sickening *snap*. She flinched at the sound, and I did, too, not wanting to believe it was what I thought it was, before heading toward the closed door. To Jaimie.

The tent was so dark when I opened my eyes that for a moment I wondered if they were still closed. Then, I noticed a soft glow from outside the tent and began to see Cassie's profile as she snored lightly in her cot, mouth wide open and drool hanging from her mouth. I longed for a camera to capture the moment and send it to Max. Not to mention the potential it would have for future blackmailing purposes.

As I listened to her soft but persistent snoring, I wondered if that's what woke me up, not that I'd wanted to linger in that particular memory for any longer than I had to. I felt like someone had just forced me to rewatch *Old Yeller*, the echo of the little boy's grief still present in my mind like a dark cloud. Not to mention the vivid reminder of what would happen if I broke the rules of magic.

Muffled voices filtered through the tent wall, startling me, and I realized that must have been what woke me up. I suspected they were simply a few worlen who'd over

indulged during the tournament, but as the voices began to grow louder, I realized that they really didn't sound like worlen at all, not all of them at least. I carefully slipped from the cot and toward the flap at the front of the tent, not wanting to disturb Cassie if it turned out to be nothing. I pulled back the flap and stepped into the cool night air, the grass soft beneath my bare feet.

"I know she's here, and if you don't release her to me, *right now*, I will kill you."

I saw Lee first. He was about fifty feet away on the other side of camp with his sword pointed directly at Sir Gemmi in the fading firelight. Relief flowed through me, the force of it so strong I had to grab the side of the tent to keep from falling over.

Lee. Lee was okay. I hadn't been sure, couldn't have known what had happened to my friends since I got separated, but a part of me had feared they'd been taken by Varian's goons as well, if not killed.

However, despite looking fine, physically, Lee was clearly *not* okay. His face looked calm on the surface, but I could hear the barely contained rage hidden beneath his words. This wasn't the Lee I'd kissed in a closet, wasn't the one I'd invited to share my sleeping bag with me. Gone was any softness from his gaze, replaced with only steely resolve.

For a moment, despite my relief at seeing him alive, I felt a flicker of fear pass through me. I'd seen Lee's anger before in a field beneath a darkening sky, when my dreams had left me bleeding and afraid, but this was different. There was an unpredictability about him now, a wildness that unnerved me. I imagined the rage in those wildfire eyes one day directed at me, and the image sent a prickle of fear down my spine.

It was like Maeve and Tom had said, Lee had a short fuse, and my kidnapping had clearly burned up what little control he had left, leaving him nothing more than a walking, talking grenade.

Speaking of Maeve and Tom, my eyes drifted to where they stood behind him, knives out and bow raised as the three of them faced off with what looked like almost the entire worlen camp. All twenty of the little guys stood between my friends and I, swords high and hackles raised.

Despite their small size, I couldn't help but notice how formidable the worlen looked, growling and grumbling with anger at the fallen who dared attack their camp and make such demands. Maybe it was because I knew they'd destroyed ashers or because I'd watched them fight, myself, but something told me that if the two groups did, in fact, come to blows, it wouldn't be an easy battle for either of them. Still, Lee didn't seem worried in the slightest, his eyes on Sir Gemmi as they faced off in front of the camp, circling each other slowly as they both leaned forward, ready to do battle.

At Lee's words, Sir Gemmi spat on the ground between them. "I'd no sooner hand her off to the likes of you than let the mermaids have her! Brothers, at arms!" The rest of the Worlen let out a tremendous battle cry, racing toward my friends.

"Wait!" I ran towards them while waving my arms wildly, not wanting to see any of my friends kill each other because they couldn't sit down and have a conversation like normal people. "Stop!"

The whole camp froze in their tracks, and I lowered my hands into a placating gesture as two dozen pairs of eyes fell on me. "It's alright. *I'm* alright. You don't need to fight."

"Summer?" Lee's breathless voice drew my attention toward him as he dropped his sword on the ground and began to make his way toward me.

I braced myself for his disappointment, his anger. "Lee, about the wisps--"

Before I could finish my sentence, Lee reached me, a shocked breath leaving me as he grabbed my waist and drew me roughly toward him, wrapping his arms tight around my back. I stood still for only a second before returning his embrace, standing on my tiptoes and pressing my face against his neck as I wrapped my arms around him. I hadn't realized the weight I'd been carrying around in my chest since we'd been separated until he lifted it, his warm touch the only thing I knew, the only thing I could focus on as the rest of the world faded away.

"You gotta stop doing this to me," he whispered into my hair, his warm breath tickling my neck.

I leaned back so I could look into his eyes. "Doing what?"

He leaned his head against my forehead, and I sucked in a sharp breath at the nearness of his lips to mine. “Getting kidnapped, almost dying. Making me lose my damn mind worrying about you. Take your pick.”

Lee’s tone was light, but his eyes didn’t lose their haunted look, so I lifted a hand to his cheek, forcing him to meet my gaze. “It’s okay, Lee. I’m fine. Really.”

Lee looked me up and down like he was trying to reassure himself that what I was saying was true, eyebrows only raising slightly at the sight of the dress, before he nodded, finally taking a step back, although he still kept one hand wrapped tightly around my waist like he was worried I might disappear again. Not that I was complaining.

I peered around Lee to wave at Maeve and Tom, who the worlen, luckily, were letting through without a fight. Apparently my mushy reunion with Lee had convinced them that my friends weren’t here to kidnap me, thank god.

“Okay, nothing to see here. These are clearly the girl’s friends. Best leave them be,” Gemmi called out, and the rest of the worlen reluctantly dispersed, clearly disappointed about not getting to fight the trespassers. Sir Gemmi moved toward us with a friendly smile, although I noticed there was still some wariness in his gaze as he looked over my friends, subtly sizing them up.

I waited where I was until my friends reached us, not really sure how the two of them would react to seeing me. Sure, Lee was all hugs and welcome backs, but he and I were--we were just, just--it was different between us. I didn’t know if my other friends could forgive me as easily as he seemed to. I wouldn’t blame them if they couldn’t.

However, my mouth actually dropped open in surprise as Maeve wrapped me in a quick hug, not even giving me time to properly return it before stepping away from me and clearing her throat. Tom and I did our special handshake before embracing each other quickly. “Thank god you’re okay, Summer. We’d started to fear the worst, no matter what Lee said.”

I sent Lee a confused glance, who clenched his jaw and jerked his chin toward the direction of the river. “We found your bloody clothes by the river, and it seemed--well, it seemed like--”

“--you were dead,” Maeve finished, her brown eyes calm, although I thought I could hear a flicker of worry in her voice.

Well, shit. No wonder Lee had seemed so relieved to see me. I wanted to smack myself for leaving my clothes behind and making them all worry. “Oh, well. That’s actually a funny story, you see, these worlen here saved my life.” I gestured toward Sir Gemmi who seemed to stand a little taller at my praise.

At my words, my friends finally put away their own weapons, Maeve sheathing the knives at her sides and Tom sliding his bow across his back. Lee nodded at Sir Gemmi, respectfully. “Thank you for looking out for her.”

Sir Gemmi opened his mouth to respond, but before he could, another voice broke the relative quiet of the dark night. “Can’t a girl get her beauty sleep? What the hell is going on out here?”

Cassie emerged from the tent. Her hair was dark and curly and tangled from sleep, and there was a red pillow mark on her cheek, but she still looked like she could have just stepped off a runway as she rubbed her light blue eyes and peered at the scene in front of her like she couldn’t quite believe what she was seeing.

Both Lee, Tom, and Maeve looked at her with open mouths, although their shocked expressions seemed to be for decidedly different reasons. “Dibs,” Maeve and Tom both shouted suddenly as they looked at Cassie, before quickly turning to face one another.

Tom crossed his arms. “You can’t call dibs. I saw her first.”

Maeve rolled her eyes. “We saw her at the same time, dipshit.”

“Fine, but I still said it firs--”

“Guys, you can’t just call dibs on my friend,” I said, looking toward Cassie so she could back me up on this.

“I’m not mad at it,” Cassie replied unhelpfully, eyeing Tom and Maeve appreciatively.

I dragged my hand down my face. Great. Just what my life needed. Another love triangle.

Gemmi finally stepped forward, clearly tired of waiting for all the bickering to stop. “So, Lee, was it? Sorry about the unfriendly welcome. I’m afraid you caught my brothers and I in a rather pugnacious mood, and one can never be sure who to trust these days. Still, if I’d known you were *Lee Ravenwood*, Captain of the Royal guard, I

wouldn't have been so quick to challenge you to a fight. Your skill with a blade is practically legend around here. They say you've destroyed more ashers than anyone else living. Some are even calling you Shade Hunter."

Lee just nodded at him before freezing, like exactly what he said finally registered in his mind.

"Hold up, Ravenwood? But that's Summer's name..." Cassie looked around at the three of them who studiously avoided her gaze. "Holy shit, Summer. You're *married*, and you didn't tell me!?"

I didn't respond to her, my gaze focusing on Lee as he fidgeted a bit where he stood, looking awkward as hell. Hard to believe this was the same guy who was prepared to take on two dozen Worlen without batting an eye. "Lee?"

"Yeah?"

"This is the part where you explain."

Lee scratched his neck nervously. "We're not married." I let out a sigh of relief, but apparently, he wasn't quite done yet. "At least, not in the human sense of the word."

I just looked at him as he rubbed his neck, trying to remain calm. "In what sense are you talking about?" I questioned, my words composed if a bit clipped sounding.

"Well, the truth is--we're actually, um..."

Lee looked toward Maeve for help, but she shook her head. "Just tell her, Lee. It's time. She deserves to know."

"I deserve to know what?" I said, growing more and more anxious every second that Lee looked at me like that, like he was waiting for me to lose it. Suddenly, realization dawned on me as another possibility entered my mind. My eyes widened in horror as I looked at Lee. "Oh no, this isn't a Luke and Leia situation, is it?"

Lee had opened his mouth to say something before abruptly closing it at my words, his eyebrows creased in confusion. "Luke and who? I don't know what--"

"Are we-- we're not... *brother and sister*, are we?" I asked, anxiety and fear making the words come out louder than I'd intended them to be.

Lee stepped back in shock, horror painted across his features as he furiously shook his head. "*What?*! No, of course not. The truth is--" Lee took a deep breath-- "we're bound."

I heard a gasp from beside me as Sir Gemmi took a step back. “Well, I haven’t heard of such a thing since...,” he marveled as his voice faded away, too awestruck to complete his sentence.

My eyes widened. “Bound?”

I heard Cassie whispering behind me to Tom, who seemed to have strategically maneuvered his way next to her. “Not gonna lie, that sounds kind of kinky.”

I sent her daggers with my eyes, needing her to cool her libido for five seconds so I could try to figure out what the hell was going on. “So, being bound is like being married?” I said, my voicing coming out just a bit too high.

“No,” Lee said, in a reassuring voice at the same time that Tom was saying, “Yeah, no it’s *much* more serious.”

Maeve punched Tom in the shoulder, and I felt my breath coming faster and faster. “Lee, can I speak to you alone for a moment?”

Lee hesitated, “Okay, but there’s kind of something else we need to talk about first...” he said, before he caught sight of the look on my face, and wisely shut his mouth. Whatever it was, we’d deal with it later. We had bigger things to discuss right now. *Much* bigger things, apparently.

As I led him toward the edge of camp, I heard Cassie’s voice call out behind me. “Booo! I want to know if you’re married, too, Summer. *I*, for one, am single by the way. Hello, nice to meet you guys. Maeve and Tom, right? I’ve heard a lot about....”

Cassie’s voice faded as we moved further away. I wasn’t exactly sure where I was going. I just knew I needed to get away from everyone else, from Cassie’s comments and Maeve’s knowing eyes and the Worlen’s curious stares.

We reached the edge of camp, and I kept going a few more paces. Not so far that the nearest fire’s glow couldn’t reach us, but far enough that I felt fairly certain that we were safe from any prying ears. I felt Lee watching me as I paced back and forth before plopping down on an overturned log, his gaze wary like he was worried I would suddenly run away or start yelling at him or something.

Instead, I simply patted the log beside me. I’d learned enough crazy things about the world and myself in the past few days to know that nothing was ever quite what it

seemed. So, I'd let Lee have a chance to explain. Sure, if I didn't like said explanation, I might run away and/or yell at him, but I wanted the truth first. "Go ahead."

Lee paused for a moment, seemingly trying to determine the best place to begin. Finally, he nodded and took a deep breath. "Varian didn't just show up the day of your coronation. He's actually been around for far longer. At least, the idea of him has."

I froze. Out of all the things I'd thought he might mention right then, Varian wasn't one of them. I opened my mouth to question him, but he continued on quickly, like a dam had been broken inside him and all the information he'd been keeping from me came rushing out. "For as long anyone could remember, Varian had been a name whispered around campfires, a scary story used to warn children about the dangers of misusing magic."

I blinked in surprise at Lee, but suddenly, a scene from my first memory flashed through my mind. I hadn't noticed before, too distracted by everything else, by my mom. Now I heard her soft voice echo in my ears. I saw her playful smile as she teased me. *I thought you were simply watching the doors all night to make sure Varian didn't show up.*

I'd told her, then, that I wasn't afraid of the boogeyman.

If only that were still true.

"What was the story?"

"There were lots of different versions of it, but all of them basically revolved around the same thing." Gradually, Lee's voice became softer, like even now, he couldn't help but recall the story the way he'd always heard it: murmured around campfires, whispered in the dark. "There was once a man, a simple farmer, who lived with his family many centuries ago. One day, his wife died. Drowned in the river near their house. Overcome by grief, the man--sometimes called Varian and sometimes simply 'the sorcerer'--tried to raise his wife from the dead using the magic of the land. Of Crestfall. Not only did his attempt fail, the man was... *changed* because of it. Made darker. Made evil. It is said that afterwards he slaughtered the rest of his family before disappearing into the dark wood. Whether it was because he no longer knew them or because he simply didn't care anymore, no one knows, but some say he still lingers in the forest, alone, waiting."

Maybe it was just my imagination, but as Lee told the story, it felt like the shadows around us deepened, the comforting sounds of night developing a more sinister tone. Lee's mouth was drawn into a tight line, and his face seemed more drawn and pale than usual in the moonlight, the freckles on the bridge of his nose standing out like stars against his skin. "Waiting for what?"

"We don't know--at least, we didn't. Not until..." Lee's gaze became unfocused, and his voice trailed off, lost in the darkness of memory, unwilling or unable to finish his sentence, but I knew. Not until the kingdom was attacked. Not until I was taken.

Suddenly, Lee shook his head, as if trying to loosen himself from the grip of the past. "That's all we thought he ever was, Summer. Just a story. Crestfall has always been a peaceful place, at least, the kingdom has, but a few years ago...*strange* things began to happen. People reported areas in the mountains and the forests where the magic was dying. Friends and neighbors began to go missing at night, disappearing without a trace. Whispers of an unnatural darkness began to spread throughout the kingdom. Something stirring at the edge of the realm, but getting closer. Gradually, fear began to creep into the hearts of the creatures of Crestfall, fallen and original alike. It was like we could *feel* it. Something was coming. Something powerful. Something terrible. We just didn't know what, or who, it was until...well, until he was already here."

The sheer dread I heard in Lee's words sent a shiver down my spine. I didn't know why I'd always assumed that Varian's coming had been sudden and quick. Maybe it was because I'd hoped that I could blame our defeat on the lack of time we had to react, to prepare. Or maybe it was because it seemed like if Varian had come suddenly, then maybe that meant he would disappear suddenly, too, that his defeat could be just as swift as his victory.

However, it turned out that wasn't what had happened at all. Varian hadn't used an ax and the element of surprise to cut down the kingdom. Instead, he'd dug deep. He'd taken root. And the fear of him spread like an infection, poisoning the kingdom, weakening it from the inside out, growing with every day another loved one disappeared without a trace, every day the realm began to go dark. "But what does that have to do with us being bound?"

“You’ve always had trouble controlling your magic, Summer. More than anyone else we--”

“You knew?” I interrupted softly. “You knew I couldn’t control it.”

Lee blinked at me in surprise. “Of course.”

I looked down, twisting my hands in my lap. “I thought--Well, I’d thought that I hadn’t told anyone about it. That I was... alone.” The last word came out shakier than I’d intended, the fear and uncertainty almost stealing it from my lips. The truth was, I’d assumed that Rose had been too ashamed to share her struggles with control. That she’d been too afraid.

Like I was.

Lee shook his head, reaching over and grabbing my hand. “No, I knew, and your parents did, too, but that was it.”

My eyes moved back toward the worlen camp, and Lee followed my gaze before shaking his head. “Maeve and Tom don’t know. At least, not about everything. Your parents thought that the fewer people who knew, the better. They were always quick with cover stories, reasons for any unintended...explosions and the like. Eventually, your parents and I took on your training ourselves. I handled the physical fighting, and they helped you with your magic.”

“But it wasn’t working.” I said, glancing down at my hands, remembering the way they shook as the magic wrenched itself through me, like I was merely an opened door through which it would flow forever. Unchecked and unstoppable.

Lee shook his head. “No, it wasn’t. You had all this pressure on you, but you were so afraid of losing control, of hurting someone you loved...” Lee’s voice trailed off a bit before he continued. “Usually, it wouldn’t have mattered if you needed a few extra years to learn control, but the people were afraid. They knew something was coming, and they wanted there to be someone to meet it. Someone they could depend on.”

I just looked at him with wide eyes, fear and dread settling in my stomach like a heavy stone. “Someone like me?”

Lee nodded. “You have the strongest magical affinity Crestfall has ever seen. Ten times that of your parents. Because of that, you’ve always been lauded as a kind of a miracle. A once in a millennium phenomenon. People expected you to step up, to fill the

role they felt you were born for. They didn't realize that the same thing that gave you so much power also made it practically impossible for you to maintain control."

I closed my eyes at Lee's words as the little relief that I'd felt after finding out my parents and Lee knew about my control issues was rapidly replaced by overwhelming pressure, overwhelming guilt, so heavy that I felt like any second I might sink to the ground under its weight.

Before, my duty regarding the protection of Crestfall, and consequently the guilt I'd felt at letting it fall, had been rather vague in nature. I'd been its princess, not its defender. I'd been its sovereign, not its champion. I'd still cared about what happened to it, still felt culpable, but in a roundabout way. Kind of like the way one feels guilty when picking out a steak from the freezer section, trying not to think about the cute little cow it came from.

However, now Lee was telling me that that was no longer the case, that I'd been chosen, that I'd been *born* to defeat Varian, to keep the darkness from taking over the kingdom. This was my duty. My *purpose*.

And I'd failed.

And as the depth of that failure became clear to me, the guilt only grew stronger, more acute until it felt like I couldn't breathe, the force of it suffocating me. I was no longer standing in a grocery store but in a barn, rod gun in hand, the barrel pressed between the cow's frightened, blinking eyes.

"Summer? Summer, what is it?" My pain must have been evident in my face or something because Lee's voice soon drew me out of my dark thoughts, his green eyes filled with worry as he looked at me.

I shook my head at him, waving away his concern. "Nothing, it's nothing. Keep going."

Lee paused, seemingly not quite convinced, before he eventually continued. "The darkness was growing stronger, and rumors about a dark sorcerer were beginning to reach the castle. The people looked to you, but you still couldn't control the magic. We were running out of time, so..."

"So?"

"We were bound."

“But why? How did we know that was going to help?”

Lee looked away from me. “We didn’t.”

My eyes widened at him. “What?”

“No one had been bound for five centuries, but there were legends, rumors that said binding with someone could help one control their magic.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I feel a *but* coming sometime soon...”

“*But*, there was a reason why no one did it anymore. No one really knew for sure what effects a connection like that would have on the two people involved. It’s said that it drove some people mad, and others...well--”

Lee cut himself off, glancing back toward me with wary eyes, like he was trying to gauge how close I was to losing it. I squeezed his hand, urging him to continue. “Well, what?”

“It’s said that some that were bound...died from it.”

My mouth dropped open. “*Died*? How?”

“Some say it was simply because they weren’t strong enough to withstand the spell, and others say it was because they didn’t--they didn’t love each other enough, that they didn’t keep the...connection between them alive.”

“And my parents actually *agreed* to this?”

Lee shook his head. “Of course not. In fact, they expressly forbid it. They thought it wasn’t worth the risk, that with a few more years of practice, you’d be ready.”

“So, why’d we--”

“You disagreed, Summer. You, perhaps more than anyone, seemed to be able to feel what was coming, could sense how the magic of Crestfall was being tainted, somehow. You had the responsibility of an entire kingdom on your shoulders, and you--well, you were willing to try anything. So...”

“We were bound,” I finished for him, still trying to process what that meant. On the one hand, I felt real hope bloom inside me for maybe the first time since I’d tried to use my magic, hope that I could actually use it without hurting anyone else. With Lee by my side, maybe I actually did stand a chance at stopping Varian. Maybe who we were, together, would be enough. However, soon a sick feeling of dread crept into my stomach as I looked at Lee.

“So, you *had* to bind with me?” The words came out more heartbroken than I intended, but I couldn’t keep the worry from leaking into my voice. Being bound to Lee might not have seemed like such a burden if I’d thought that he’d done it because he’d *wanted* to, and not because he felt he needed to help me get control of my magic; it didn’t sound like something you could just undo, something you could ever really come back from, which meant that in choosing to bind with me, Lee might have sacrificed a multitude of possibilities, of futures he’d never get to see through.

Lee must have seen my worry because he squeezed my hand, pulling my attention from my fears and back to him. “Hey, nobody forced this on me, okay? I bound myself to you because I loved you, Summer. Because I love you more than anyone else in the entire realm. In *any* realm.”

My breath caught as I stared into his green eyes. They looked so dark in the starlight. It seemed that for once the flames, the rage and pain, were quenched, at least for the moment. Butterflies filled my stomach as I wondered if he’d close the distance between us, if he’d press his lips to mine like he did that day in the closet and kiss me until all my worries and fears seemed far away, harmless and removed, like somebody else’s nightmare, but he merely cleared his throat and leaned back, and all that I’d learned in the past few minutes came rushing back to the forefront of my mind, anxiety replacing lust with disappointing speed.

“But it didn’t work, did it? I mean, I still can’t control the magic.”

Lee let out a little laugh, but there was very little humor in the sound. “Oh, it worked. So long as we’re touching, controlling the magic should be a lot easier for you. At least, it was before. The bond--our connection--seems to allow it to pass between us like a current, and the additional resistance of another person helps keep it from flowing out too fast.”

My gaze drifted away from his as I looked back on the events of the past two days with new eyes. “So, when you said you could heal me without a hallow because I was a princess...and when it was so easy for me to heal you at Enchanted Rock...and after I shot the grim...”

Lee nodded. “It was because of the bond.”

I felt my heart lighten, the burden on my shoulders easing upon hearing Lee's words, understanding what they meant. I wanted to smile, to rejoice in the fact that all my problems with control might actually be over, but there was something about the look on Lee's face that made me pause. His eyebrows were drawn together, his mouth set in a grim line.

My eyebrows creased in confusion. "If it worked so well, then why---"

Lee cut me off, roughly running his hand through his hair. "There was just...more to it than we originally thought."

"What do you mean, more?" I asked him warily.

Lee raised his eyebrows. "Don't you feel it?"

"Feel what?"

"The bond. Being in different realms had seemed to mute it for a while, at least for me. Then, when we found you, and you still didn't seem to notice it, I thought that maybe, if you were really *you*, you needed to know it was there in order to sense it."

"I don't know, Lee. I don't feel anything."

Lee just looked at me, an expression in his eyes that I didn't really understand. It almost looked like wariness, like...

Distrust.

Shocked, I leaned back. I'd never seen him look at me that way before. Even when we'd first met, when Maeve and Tom had doubted if I was really Rose, if I could really be trusted, Lee had never wavered, never seemed to doubt me even for a moment. But now...now he was looking at me like he didn't even know me. Like I was lying to his face.

Then, as quickly as it appeared, it was gone, and there was the Lee I'd always known, gifting me with an encouraging smile, leaving me wondering if I'd imagined the whole thing. "Just focus, okay? For me, most of the time it kind of feels like a tiny flame burning inside me, or maybe like a voice in my head, or a *feeling*, kind of, or"--Lee ran his hands roughly through his hair again before letting out a frustrated sigh-- "it's not something that's exactly easy to put into words."

I squeezed his hand, forcing him to look at me. "Just try. Maybe if I knew what it was, it would help me find it."

Lee let out a breath. “Okay, well, the bond...it seemed to manifest itself in different ways, in different...forms.”

I blinked at him, thoroughly confused. “What do you mean?”

“Okay, so for me, part of it is like I can sense where you are, can feel it like a string has been tied between us. If I follow it, then I can find you.”

“Like *anywhere*? No matter how far?”

“Yep.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Prove it.”

Thus followed ten minutes of what was basically a strange mix of hide and seek and marco polo. Lee sat on the log with his eyes closed and his ears plugged. After giving me enough time to hide in the surrounding area, he proceeded to walk--eyes still closed and ears still plugged--*directly* to where I was. Wherever I was. Every single time.

Granted, a few times he ran into a tree or tripped over a rock on the way there, and I learned that just because he could tell where *I* was didn’t mean he could tell where *everything else* was. He wasn’t a “goddamned bat,” as he so eloquently put it the last time he ended up on the ground, cursing and covered in dirt.

In the end, I was convinced, and although I knew I should probably be more freaked out about the fact that Lee would always be able to find me, I actually felt more relief than anything. Crestfall had already proven itself to be a dangerous place, and Lee and I had already been separated from each other once by Varian’s goons. I remembered how it felt waking up alone next to the river, my panic at not knowing where I was or how my friends were ever going to be able to find me.

Sure, it was a little unnerving that I could never hide from Lee, especially considering his rather breath-taking anger management issues, but all things considered, right now, it was hard for me to see his internal GPS system as anything but a distinct advantage, a secret weapon in the battles to come, and frankly, I could use every one of those I could get.

Eventually, we sat back down, and Lee brushed the dirt and leaves off his shoulders as I reached up and rubbed my index fingers over my earlobes thoughtfully. “My earrings were never magical, were they?”

Lee shook his head, a hint of a blush rising in his cheeks. “No. Although, I hadn’t been able to track you when you were on Earth, not until I got there, too.”

I raised my eyebrows at him. “Any other extraordinary abilities of yours that I need to know about?”

Lee’s expression immediately darkened, and I felt the smile drop quickly from my face. “What?”

“I can also...feel what you’re feeling.”

“What I’m *feeling*?”

“Your emotions. Sadness, fear, grief, joy. I feel them--I feel them as strongly as my own.”

“*All* of them? All the time?” I asked, caught between utter fascination and horror.

Lee nodded, a grim look on his face. “The bond isn’t something we can just turn on and off, Summer. At least, if there is a way, we hadn’t figured it out yet.”

Lee’s voice was angry, and it surprised me, at first, until I tried to picture it, tried to imagine what it’d be like to constantly have to feel another person’s emotions in addition to my own, how confusing, how exhausting it must be never knowing if what you were feeling really belonged to you or someone else.

There was a small part of me that couldn’t quite wrap my head around the idea, that wanted to make him prove it, but the truth was I didn’t need a demonstration, didn’t need any more proof other than the weariness on Lee’s face as he looked at me, the emotional fatigue that came from having to feel two of everything--pain and pleasure. Joy and heartbreak.

Then, I remembered what I was feeling only a minute ago, how badly I wanted to kiss him...and suddenly, I wanted to crawl under a rock and die. “What do you mean, we hadn’t figured it out yet?”

“We were only bound for a couple of days before you were...before Varian attacked.”

A silence fell after Lee’s statement as I tried to absorb it all, to understand. So, we’d only been bound for what? Less than a week? No wonder Lee seemed so unsure about everything, so uncertain how it all worked. What must he have thought when I disappeared? Didn’t he say that the bond had to be maintained or the people *died*? Did he

think that might happen to him? Is--is that why he'd tried so hard to find me? To save himself?

I shook my head, trying to clear away the doubt. Lee might have had more than one reason to look for me, but that didn't mean everything he'd done since then no longer mattered. We'd come so far. I wouldn't start doubting him now, especially now that I knew he was my only chance of controlling my magic enough to defeat Varian, and especially given how much I lo--how much I cared about him. "And me?" I said, breaking the silence. "How does the bond affect me? Can I track you or feel your emotions?"

Lee shook his head. "No, yours doesn't seem to work like that."

"Okay, so how does it work?"

Lee frowned. "I don't know."

"What do you mean, *you don't know*?"

Lee looked at me with piercing eyes, the flames back again in full force. "I mean, you wouldn't tell me. You just said you could feel it, like I could. That you felt me, felt my life, the same way I could feel yours."

"Your life?"

Lee nodded, absentmindedly laying a hand on his chest. "It's the reason I knew--the reason I *hoped* that Varian hadn't killed you. I could just *feel* that you were alive. You said you could feel that, too."

"But I didn't tell you anything else?"

"No, you didn't." I watched as a flash of anger passed across Lee's features before he hid it away, and I could tell that this was something that we'd disagreed on, maybe even something we'd fought about, before I'd been taken. I racked my brain, trying to imagine what could be so terrible that I couldn't tell my boyfriend, couldn't tell *Lee*, the person I was *bonded* to, but came up with nothing. Something told me I didn't want to find out.

However, the more my thoughts lingered on Lee, the more I began to feel...something.

I laid a hand over my chest and closed my eyes. It was like I could feel another presence there, near my heart. A concentration of magic, only it seemed different than any magic I'd felt before. More familiar, somehow.

Lee had described it like a flame--of course, he would--but to me it seemed more like a star; vibrant and bright, twinkling with every heartbeat. It felt like the warmth of Lee's smile, like the glimmer of pain he always seemed to carry in his eyes. It felt safe and strong and sure, like he did. It felt like *him*. It *was* him, in a way, I think. Like the bond was allowing me to see the very essence of his soul.

"I--I think I can feel it, Lee. The bond...you. Your life?" I said, half in amazement, half in disbelief, because that's what it felt like, like a living thing inside me, something that could grow and--

Something that could die.

As I concentrated on this little light inside me, a jolt of fear passed through me as I realized how fragile it seemed, how easily it could be quenched. I wanted to cup my hands around it, to shield it from the world and all its dangers, to shield him.

Lee met my awed look with a small smile, placing his hand over my own where it rested on my chest. We both just sat there for a moment, looking inward at the little lights shining there, reflections of the person in front of us, of the life within them.

While it was true that I still didn't quite know where I stood with Lee, and that the whole being bound thing would probably make it infinitely harder if I did decide not to pursue whatever was between us, right then, I couldn't bring myself to care. It kind of felt like a miracle, this connection between us, like we were a part of something ancient and sacred.

That wasn't to say it didn't also absolutely terrify me. It was clear to me that in binding to each other, Lee and I had meddled with forces we didn't fully understand. For all we knew, the same thing that helped me control my magic could perhaps never itself be controlled. Lee might be forced to live the rest of his life with my emotions inside him. I might be forced to live the rest of my life without any privacy, my heart an open book that Lee could read--would be *forced* to read--every time a powerful enough emotion ripped through me.

“Hey, Summer?” Lee said softly, and I opened my eyes only to find his face now much closer to my own.

“Yeah?” I breathed, my gaze flickering down to his lips.

“I like your dress.”

I laughed as the tension between us broke. A part of me was disappointed, but the other part of me thought that today had been full of enough unexpected revelations and life-altering experiences and was grateful for the subject change.

I stood up, giving him a little twirl. “Well, you can thank the giants for the wardrobe change as I suspect the rest of my clothes are scattered somewhere between here and the portal.”

Lee grinned but the mention of my most recent abduction quickly wiped the smile off his face. I didn’t know what he and Maeve and Tom had gone through after I’d gone, what terrible scenarios had gone through their heads while they searched for me, but based on how Lee had seemed when he showed up at the camp, all desperation and rage, I couldn’t imagine it had been very pleasant.

Wanting to see his smile return again, I sat down and grabbed his hand, deciding a subject change was in order. “On a slightly happier note, relatively speaking, I did have another memory when you were gone. It was about my parents, and--”

Lee’s head snapped up, his voice alarmed as he asked, “Your parents? What was it? What happened?”

I rolled my eyes at him. “If you quit interrupting me, I’ll tell you.” I opened my mouth to do just that but stopped at the strange look I saw lingering on his face. “Hey, are you okay? You just got really pale all of a sudden.”

Lee paused for a moment before seemingly shaking it off, pasting a small smile on his face. “Yeah, I’m fine. It’s nothing.”

Lie. The thought appeared so suddenly in my head that I actually leaned back in shock, hardly even recognizing it as my own. It *wasn’t* my own, not really. It echoed in my head as Lee spoke, like a voice had whispered it to me at the edge of my mind. *Lie.* And the strangest part was...I felt certain that it was true. What Lee had said had been a lie.

My mind raced as I tried to understand what that meant, as Lee looked at me with a furrowed brow, no doubt sensing the turmoil raging inside me.

So, *this* was the power, the ability the bond had granted me? I could tell when Lee was lying? But why hadn't Rose--why hadn't *I*, told him? I'd loved him, right? That's what--what he'd told me. That's what the memories, at least the ones I'd seen so far, seemed to imply. So, why wouldn't I tell him unless--

Unless I didn't trust him.

Why *else* wouldn't I tell him? Why else would I keep the ability to myself unless I thought I might one day need to use it?

"Summer, are you okay?" Lee looked at me with worried eyes, no doubt trying to make sense of what he was feeling--what *I* was feeling. Hell, I was too. Betrayal. Confusion. Pain. Denial. They were all fighting for room inside me.

Finally, I met his gaze, his green eyes alight with fear and confusion, and I pasted a smile on my face, trying to will my heart to stop beating so fast, my chest to stop aching. "I'm fine, Lee. It's nothing." I didn't know why Rose had done what she did, why she kept the ability from him, but in that moment, I decided that, until I knew more, I would do the same.

I didn't want to doubt Lee, and there was a part of me that refused to believe that he would ever betray me, that there must be another explanation. However, I wasn't going to take any chances. Not when I'd already screwed up so many times before, not now that I knew that saving Crestfall wasn't just my duty, but my destiny, in a way..

Lee still seemed on edge, but as I began to describe the memory to him, he relaxed more and more, laughing as I told him about the surprise attack my dad and I had launched at him. "I think I remember that day," he said, his eyes far away. "It was only a year or so after--well, after my father died."

I felt my stomach drop at his revelation, sadness creeping into my heart as I remembered what my father had said in the memory, how Lee had almost cried at his words. "I'm sorry, Lee."

He shook his head. "Don't be. It was--it was a long time ago. You got me through it, you and your family. You saved me." A soft smile drifted over Lee's face as he looked a little past me, lost in some memory of the girl he'd once known.

Pain pierced my heart at the look on his face because, for a *moment*, I'd forgotten. I'd forgotten that all these promises Lee had made were really to another girl, all these moments between him and me were really between him and *her*. Rose. Lee hadn't bound himself to *me*. Not really. He'd bound himself to her, and even though I wasn't sure if I could fully trust him, even though we'd only just met, I couldn't help but be jealous of Rose, of the girl I once was. *That* was the girl Lee really loved. And I couldn't help but feel like I was just the fill in replacement until she showed up again.

"It's okay, Summer. Like I said, it was a long time ago."

Lee's concerned voice broke me out of my anxious thoughts, and I sent him a confused glance. "What?"

Lee took my hand. "I could feel your sadness, your pain, but don't worry, it doesn't hurt like it used to. I promise."

I forced a smile, grateful his ability only allowed him to sense the emotion and not the cause behind it. "Oh, okay, good. Now, what was that other thing you wanted to talk about?" I asked, eager to change the subject before he could see just deeply his words had affected me.

I'd hoped to switch to a lighter topic, but Lee's face immediately grew more serious. "It's the Luna Infinita, Summer. We found out when it is."

Dread filled me at the grim look on his face, the shadows around us seeming to deepen and grow more menacing at the reminder of what still had to be done, like night pushing inward. I braced myself. "How long?" I asked, the words almost getting stuck in my throat. Something told me I didn't want to know the answer.

"Four days."

CHAPTER 13

The Birds

There were only a few wispy clouds to clutter the purple-pink sky, the coming dawn causing the stars to wink out one by one, light extinguishing light. I kept my eyes trained upward, trying to ignore the worried grumbles of the others as they stood bent over a wrinkled map that they'd laid across a wide tree stump, each end secured with small stones so it lay somewhat flat.

It seemed they'd all come to the unspoken conclusion that I should be left alone for a little while so I had time to process the whole having-to-save-the-world-in-four-days thing.

I'd *like* to say that I'd taken the news well.

"*Four days?* Four days?!" I'd shrieked, jumping up from the log and pacing back and forth in front of Lee so quickly I was surprised I didn't wear a hole into the ground with my feet. "That's insane! It took me a *whole week* to learn how to do a smokey eye, Lee! A whole week! Now I'm supposed to become some sort of magical-expert/ realm-defender/ princess-extraordinaire in four-freaking-days? It's impo--"

Lee had followed my panicked pacing with a concerned albeit unsurprised gaze, his neck practically on a swivel, before he finally jumped up and grabbed my arms, gently holding me in place. "Together, Summer! We'll do it together, okay? Me and you. This is why we chose to bind, this is what we've been preparing for, even if you can't remember it."

I shook my head at his words, my panic not yet allowing me to be comforted by them. Lee stepped back yet kept hold of both my hands, letting them hang in the space between us. "Trust me, Summer. Just trust me."

I wanted to. I wanted to so badly, and maybe that was the problem. Maybe I was letting my feelings for Lee cloud my judgment, but as he said the words, I believed them, and not just because my sudden polygraphic powers didn't go off, although that certainly didn't hurt.

It was the way he looked at me. Like he thought I could do anything. No one, not Max or Cassie, had ever really looked at me like that. Hell, most of the time, Max treated me like a china doll that needed protecting and Cassie treated me like a list of problems that needed fixing, but not Lee. Lee looked at me like he knew I could protect myself, like he knew I could handle my own problems. Like he believed I could defeat an evil sorcerer in four days' time.

And for that moment, he made me believe it, too.

But now Lee and his encouraging words had left me in order to consult maps and make plans, Tom and Maeve by his side, and I knew I should be there with them, trying to learn everything I could about the world around me, about the journey ahead, but I couldn't quite get myself to move from my spot on the log, to look away from the lightening sky. I knew once I did, there would be no more time for reflection, for hesitation. They expected me to be their princess, their champion, but right now, sitting here, I could pretend for a little while that that wasn't the case, that I was still a regular old college girl watching the three suns come up on another day.

Well, I could almost pretend.

"I take it you'll be heading out soon, then. Won't you, princess?" Gemmi's gruff voice pulled my attention from the sky as he plopped down beside me on the log.

I nodded absentmindedly before what he said really sank in. Panic seized me as I turned toward him, eyes wide with fear. "Wait, who told you tha--"

Gemmi raised up a little claw before nodding his head to something over my shoulder. "Your friend's voice carries rather far, and Cricket, I'm afraid, is quite the nosy type."

I turned my head and saw Cassie on her knees in front of a group of worlen, giving them all hugs and little pats on the head as she said her goodbyes. The worlen weren't taking it well, some of them clinging to her sleeve and weeping into her hair, but their parabi seemed oddly collected and helped pry their friends off of her after a few seconds. At first, I thought Cassie might be annoyed by this, but she seemed to have tears in her own eyes as she bid the Worlen farewell, the parting apparently just as hard for her as it was for them.

I turned back toward Gemmi, bracing myself for---well, I don't know what exactly for. Maybe for him to be angry like the wisp queen, for him to accuse me of lying to him, of putting his people in danger. Instead, as his soft blue eyes met mine, I thought I saw something else there---something like understanding and maybe even pity. "You're not mad that I lied to you?"

Gemmi shrugged his shoulders. "You had reason enough to keep it to yourself, I'm sure. Besides, you've shown the lads kindness, you and your friend. I dare say you're quite different from any fallen we've ever met."

"You have no idea," I murmured, but as I felt his knowing gaze rest on me, I suspected that might not be true. Damn Cassie and her big mouth.

Gemmi sighed, leaning back. "It's a good thing though, that you're different. Lets you see the world with new eyes, I think."

I shook my head. "I'm not so sure about that. The others--they know how to fight. How to survive. I'm supposed to be the powerful one, and yet *I'm* the one that keeps having to be rescued, to be saved."

Gemmi shook his head. "Nothing wrong with being saved every once and awhile, princess. Goodness knows how many times Cricket has saved my life, and I, his. You and this shade hunter...your bond is a powerful thing. Be cautious, for it is also an ancient thing, little understood. But, in times of doubt or fear, don't be afraid to lean on it, on *him*, for you will always be stronger together."

"Besides, something tells me you'll have more than enough battles of your own to fight soon. This venture you and your friends are planning...well, I won't lie to you, princess. The dark sorcerer, he's--he's an evil the likes of which I haven't seen for a few centuries, but I'll wager when it comes down to it, to you and him, it won't be about who's the strongest, or the most powerful. It'll be about will. What are *you* willing to sacrifice to win? What are you prepared to lose?"

I could tell Gemmi wasn't really looking for an answer right then, which was good because I didn't have one. Going up against Varian still seemed like such a faraway thing. I couldn't quite picture it, me in the middle of battle, fighting for my life, for the lives of my friends, fighting to *kill*. It didn't seem possible, didn't feel real, but even now I knew it was coming, quicker now than I'd ever expected. I'd have to face it at some

point, have to figure out an answer to Gemmi's question. What was I willing to give up for this kingdom I didn't really know, for these people I'd only just met? *Who* was I willing to lose?

My gaze wandered to my friends as they prepared for the journey, for the battle ahead. "I'm not going to ask you, you know."

"Ask me what, princess?"

"To fight for me. I know we talked about it before--before you knew who I was. I just wanted you to know that I'm not going to ask that of you." My mind went to the wisps, to their screams and terror. "I can't--I won't watch anyone else die because of me."

"Tough shit."

I turned toward Gemmi, eyes wide with surprise. "What?"

Gemmi stood up from the log, his blue eyes blazing as he gestured to the camp, to the worlen, all around him. "You think I like leading my brothers into war? Sending them into battles they might never return from? Of course, not. But that's what it means to lead, princess. Sometimes, standing up for what's right means watching the ones you love fall all around you--" Gemmi paused, kneeling in front of me, his voice losing some of its severity but none of its firmness-- "True leaders don't need to ask people to fight. People fight for them because they believe in their cause, because they believe in *them*."

I looked at him, wanting to project strength, to appear confident, but I could feel the uncertainty, the doubt spreading inside me. "But how do I do it? Be a leader people can believe in?"

Gemmi grabbed my hand, squeezing it gently. "You *try*, milady. Even when everything in you wants to quit, even when all hope seems lost. You try."

I looked at him with wide eyes, not really sure what to say, if there were even words enough to express what I was feeling. "Thank you," I said softly, although it didn't feel like quite enough.

"Summer, we should get going now. The suns are almost up." Lee's voice drew my gaze away from Gemmi's, and I nodded at him before standing up, dropping Gemmi's hands and falling into what was probably a rather pathetic attempt at a curtsy. "Until we meet again, Sir Gemmi."

Gemmi bowed low. “Until then, princess,” he replied, sending me a dashing smile as he did. Then, he turned toward Lee and the rest of my friends, Cassie now among them. “Farewell, friends. I wish you all the luck in the realm--and then some. You’re going to need it--” Gemmi turned to go before he paused, his voice growing more serious-- “Oh, and you should know--one of my brothers just came back from patrol. He said the tracker isn’t far behind you.”

I sent Lee a questioning glance, but he just nodded, no sign of surprise on his face, his mouth set in a hard line. Gemmi threw one last wink my way, and then turned and strode away.

Surprisingly, I felt tears in my eyes as I watched him go, my new friend, but I wiped them away quickly before turning to face the group. “Tracker? What is he talking about?”

Lee turned his head, although I could see his jaw clenching slightly. “Trackers were members of the guard, like me. They have a...special sensitivity to magic. If they know a person, if they’ve felt them use magic before, they can track their magical signatures. Every time that person uses magic, a tracker can feel it, and they can follow it.”

“But if trackers are members of the guard, why would they--”

“All the trackers were killed when Varian took power--” Maeve said, undisguised anger coloring her tone-- “All except one.”

“So this tracker what? Switched sides?”

Lee nodded. “He’s been coming after us ever since we started searching for you. We’ve had to use very little magic, tried to stay one step ahead of him, but there were a few times when he...caught up to us,” Lee’s eyes grew dark, and I could only imagine what those confrontations looked like. It was a wonder the tracker was still walking around at all. He must have been extremely skilled--and extremely dangerous--if he’d been able to survive my friends’ obvious wrath, and if each of their run-ins had, in fact, ended with my friends as the ones who were left running scared. “Now that we’ve found you, he’ll be doubling his efforts to find us. Chances are he’ll have an entire army behind him, and if he catches us...this time there won’t be any escape. We need to move quickly if we want to stay ahead of him. ”

“But you said the tracker had to know a person in order to track them—”

“We knew him,” Lee said quickly, cutting me off. A sore subject, apparently. “You, better than any of us, although you never really had much choice in the matter.”

I raised my eyebrows at Lee—if anything his answers had only given me more questions about the tracker that hunted us—but I decided to keep them to myself for now. The subject was clearly making Lee more than a little tense, and besides, time was far from being on our side at the moment. “Okay, so what’s the plan? Or the new plan, I should say?”

“Well, first I’d say a wardrobe change is in order, wouldn’t you? That dress isn’t exactly quest material if you catch my drift. Besides, it’s kind of *last season* if you ask me.” Tom said, reaching into his pack and digging around for a couple seconds.

“I picked that out,” Cassie said, crossing her arms.

Tom immediately paused his digging, looking up at her slowly with wide eyes. “So I’d like to begin my three part apology by saying that you’re so lovely--”

“Just get on with it, Tom,” I interrupted, rolling my eyes at him.

He looked between me and Cassie for a moment before sighing and continuing his search. Finally, he pulled what looked like a little clear rectangle about the size of a credit card out of the front pocket of his bag. As he handed it to me, I heard Maeve whisper to Cassie behind me. “I liked it.”

Tom shot daggers at her as I scrutinized the card, trying to discern its purpose. Pinching it with two fingers, I noticed one side was stickier than the other. “What do I do with this?”

“Just stick it on your shirt like a nametag,” Lee said, miming the motion with his hand.

I did as he instructed. “Okay, and now?”

“Now, you smack it.”

“Smack it?”

“Yeah, that’s how you activate it.”

Suddenly, I remembered being in the closet with Lee, his glowing transformation...I smacked the small card, the movement vaguely resembling that of a

very enthusiastic fifth grader reciting the pledge of allegiance. All of a sudden, bright light washed over me, replacing my green dress with dark green leather armor.

My outfit was pretty much the same as the others except it had minor variations. The sleeves were long and stretched partially over my hands, my thumbs peeking out of small holes. Still, despite the full coverage, there were areas of the shirt that were cut out, leaving my skin exposed to the warm spring air and allowing for some ventilation beneath the firm material. I noticed my sneakers were also replaced by thick boots which, after a few steps, I soon discovered fit perfectly and were surprisingly light.

Cassie gave me an appreciative whistle and clapped her hands. “Oh, hell yeah. My turn now.” She turned toward Tom, who was in the process of handing her another little card when Maeve snatched it out of his hand. “Allow me,” she said, as she laid the card over Cassie’s shirt, the two of them maintaining heavy eye contact the whole time. Wow, I had literally no idea how Maeve managed to make what was essentially putting a nametag on someone else sexy, but damn if she didn’t somehow pull it off.

Tom looked between the two of them, open-mouthed and obviously distressed by their sudden chemistry. Then, in what was clearly a very little thought-out move, he abruptly reached over and smacked the little card, conveniently ruining the moment as a bright light washed over Cassie until she stood in an outfit similar to mine, only for some reason hers didn’t have the long sleeves.

Cassie took a moment to look over herself in astonishment, before reaching over and smacking Tom on the arm. “Ow!” Tom cried out, pouting as he gripped his injured arm, but Cassie just flicked her ponytail at him before turning and walking back to our tent to grab our packs. Turned out she’d had her backpack with her when she came, which didn’t surprise me in the slightest. Only Cassie would bring homework on a magic quest.

Tom watched her go with a frown on his face while Maeve just smirked at him. Lee rolled his eyes at both of them before he gestured toward the map, drawing a path on it with his finger. “We’re not too far from where we started, believe it or not, just a few miles or so, but they just so happen to make all the difference. We’d planned to cut around the mountains to get to the waterfall--and then the castle--on the other side, but now, with Luna only a few days away...we’ve no choice. We have to go through.”

“Which is bad because...?” I asked warily, not liking the grim look on Lee’s face.

“There’s just a chance we’ll run into...some bad things. But honestly, that’s not our biggest problem right now because to get to the mountains, we have to cut through the Open Plains, which are usually uninhabited, so that’s good, but they also offer virtually no cover, no places to hide should Varian’s spies catch wind of us—or if the tracker catches up.”

“And after the Open Plains...?”

“After the Open Plains....well, we’ll cross that bridge when we get there. One problem at a time.” I could tell Lee was trying to be reassuring, but there was a certain edge to his voice, an anxiety that made it sound like he was trying to convince himself of his words as well as me.

I couldn’t bring myself to ask for more information, though, thinking that he probably had a point. It was frightening enough knowing how dangerous our destination was. It would probably be best if not all the remaining horrors of the journey were made completely clear to me right now.

Soon, Cassie returned, and the five of us left the worlen camp, which seemed to be only just now coming awake, to step once more into the dark forest. Cassie, Maeve, and Tom went on ahead, but I paused at the edge for a moment, feeling for some reason like this next step was much more important, more meaningful than I currently realized. I hesitated until I felt Lee’s warm presence beside me. He didn’t look at me, but grabbed the hand dangling at my side, giving it a reassuring squeeze. I took a deep breath, focusing on the warmth of his hand in mine, on the strength of him as he stood beside me. Then, I stepped forward.

Gone was the seemingly enchanted forest I’d seen the night before, the glowing flowers and twinkling stones made dim and dark once more. I’d forgotten how small it made me feel, walking amongst the giant trees, how insignificant, but in a pleasant sort of way, like no matter what trouble I faced, what evil befell my friends and I, the trees would still be here, watching it all. Persisting long after we’re gone. However, the farther I journeyed in, Lee at my back and Cassie at my front, the more I noticed the little areas of blackness where the dimness of the forest was rendered completely dark, once green leaves turned shriveled and black.

It seemed Cassie noticed them, too, and she soon pointed them out, interrupting one of Tom's multiple attempted flirtations. The man clearly had some hard work to do before he was back in the running again. "What are those little dark patches? They look...dead, almost."

Tom followed her gaze, his flirtatious smile transforming into a frown. "They are dead in a way. Utterly devoid of magic. Without it, things in Crestfall can't grow."

Cassie raised her eyebrows. "Really?"--she looked around at the forest with new eyes-- "the biology of this realm is fascinating. How entwined it all is with the magic. It seems like everything depends on it."

Maeve snorted. "Well, if you want to study it, now's the time. If Varian keeps going the way he is, there won't be any untainted magic left in Crestfall. You're right about the dependence thing though, but damn if we aren't paying for it now."

I creased my eyebrows, confused by the sudden bitterness in Maeve's tone. "What do you mean?"

Maeve sighed, like she was reciting an argument she'd made hundreds of times. "I mean that the fallen came to rely way too much on magic. We took it for granted, based the entirety of our strength on it, and it failed. We failed."

"When Varian---or more specifically, his ashers--came, we tried to fight them with magic, but it wouldn't work. For whatever reason, somehow being the product of dark magic rendered *all* magic completely useless on them. That was why the casualty list of that day is so high, why most of us were slaughtered so quickly. Only the ones who could fight without magic, only they stood a chance--" Maeve's gaze flicked toward Tom, who had his head down, focusing on the trail with unnecessary intensity-- "but even they died, trying to protect the ones who couldn't protect themselves."

I almost stopped walking, so shocked was I by this new information, but the more I thought about it, the more it seemed to make sense. When we'd faced the ashers before, my friends had never used magic to fight them, only to heal me after I'd been injured. And then there were the worlens, who had no magic, who relied only on speed and steel, and were able to defeat the ashers. "But why? Why rely so much on magic? Not everyone even has a high magical affinity, right?"

Maeve nodded, throwing her hands up in frustration. “Exactly! But there were those in Crestfall--on the council, especially--who looked down on those with low magical affinity, deemed them too weak, too *powerless* to be depended on in a fight, kept them from the positions they *rightly* deserved---”

“Maeve, enough.” Lee interrupted Maeve’s ranting with a firm voice, but Maeve just rolled her eyes at him. “C’mon, Lee. Those bastards tried to keep you out for years. Even members of your own guard never failed to second guess your abilities. Summer has a right to know what kind of society she comes from.”

I looked over my shoulder at Lee, who didn’t say anything, just kept walking, and I remembered his words from my memory, how he’d said not everyone would be happy to see him as Captain of the Guard. No wonder he was so good with a sword. Apparently, with so little magical affinity, he had to be or he would never have earned their respect. It also shed light on the whole ‘shade hunter’ thing. Who better to kill creatures impervious to magic than someone who grew up learning how to fight without it?

In that moment, my admiration for Lee grew, as did my disappointment regarding my kingdom and the type of people in it. It wasn’t enough that we’d created divisions between us and the originals, placing ourselves above them, we’d apparently also made divisions on the inside, assigning value to people based on something they couldn’t control, something they were born with. We weren’t just a house divided against itself, but against the rest of the realm, too. No wonder Varian took over so easily. He learned our weaknesses, and he took full advantage of them.

There was very little talking after that as we trudged through the forest, each of us silently contemplating what had been said, but soon, I could see a patch of light up ahead, peeking around the trees and filtering between the branches.

Finally, the forest ended, and the five of us stepped out into the Open Plains, or least I guessed that’s what they were. Miles and miles, for as far as I could see, there was nothing but light green grass, rising and falling in hills so gradual they were practically flat. In fact, it seemed to me like the whole place had been recently smooshed like a pancake.

It was beautiful, deceptively so, because I knew the second we’d stepped out there, we’d be painfully visible to any and all of Varian’s spies.

Lee turned toward us, eyes hard and face serious. He was in full warrior mode now, and I was suddenly caught between the desire to run away from the incoming danger that made him look so serious and the sudden urge to lick the side of his face. “Okay, guys. We need to move quickly but cautiously. It’s only about five miles wide to cross, but there won’t be any place to hide out there should Varian’s spies catch wind of us. If they do--” Lee turned toward Cassie and I-- “you two just keep moving. We’ll hold them off and meet up with you later.”

I opened my mouth to argue when Lee raised his hand, cutting off my protestations. “No, Summer. You’re the princess. If you get captured or killed, then all this will have been for nothing. Your safety is our number one priority. Understand?”

Lee raised his eyebrow at me, waiting for my answer, and I noticed Maeve and Tom looking at me over his shoulder, their faces resolute and determined. At that moment, I didn’t see my kind-of boyfriend and my two friends. I saw the Captain of the Royal Guard. I saw three warriors willing to give their lives for this kingdom. For me.

I felt my throat grow tight as I held their gazes. There was a part of me that was moved by their willingness to sacrifice themselves at the same time as the rest of me was left feeling utterly terrified, a voice inside my head whispering that I wasn’t worth that kind of devotion. Still, I knew arguing with them about it would be pointless, and after a pause, I nodded my head, and Lee nodded back, apparently satisfied that I seemed to understand, if not like, what he was saying.

Cassie, seeming to sense the sudden tension that had befallen the group at our newfound peril, apparently decided it was up to her to lighten the mood. “Wow, this place is flatter than you, Summer. I didn’t think that was possible.”

There was a pause, and then the rest of the group all burst out laughing, the big, stomach-clenching kind that makes your cheeks hurt from smiling. I rolled my eyes at her and began to walk forward. “Oh, please. It’s like two fresh apples back here, and you know it.”

“That’s not the area I was talking about, and *you* know it!” I heard her call out from behind me, but I ignored her, waiting a moment for Lee to catch up with me before moving forward.

To be honest, I had zero idea which direction we were supposed to be going, and I was having a hard time figuring out how Lee supposedly did. The further we moved into the plains, the more everything began to look the same, no mountains in sight. Still, Lee didn't waver, striding confidently forward like he could see the mountains directly in front of us, hand resting casually on his sword, although I could tell by the tight set of his shoulders and the way that he kept looking around the open space with wary eyes that he was anything but relaxed. "Um, Lee? How can you tell where we're going?"

"It's hard to notice it, but we've been walking pretty steadily downhill for the last hour or so. The plains are flat but they're also kind of like the base of an extremely large valley, so we'll only be able to see the mountains when we climb up the other side."

I nodded, a black spot against the blue sky catching my attention. I froze for a moment, heart in my throat, expecting to see an asher diving toward us any second, but it was just a small bird.

I let out a sigh of relief and kept walking. Lee, who was now in front, set a brisk pace, and it wasn't long until I was huffing and panting despite the flat terrain. It didn't help that there wasn't a cloud in the pale blue sky, nothing to diminish the sun's rays as they washed over us. I shielded my eyes and looked up, hoping to spot at least a wisp of a cloud, some hope of shade, but there was only the bird. Well, birds. There were four of them now, streaking across the sky like black paint across a pale blue canvas.

All of a sudden, I stumbled, my toes hitting a rock, and when I looked up again, there were suddenly more birds, around fourteen or so. "Uh, Lee? What's with all the birds?"

Lee stopped, sending me a confused glance before looking up, the rest of the group following suit. I looked, too and was shocked to see that the number of birds had somehow tripled in the last three seconds. Not only that, but they seemed to be heading directly toward us at alarming speed, like a living storm cloud bent on destruction. "Shit," Lee swore before cupping his hands around his mouth and yelling, "DARKGULLS! RUN!"

The five of us took off at a sprint, Maeve and Tom and Cassie catching up to Lee and I until we were all neck and neck, chests heaving and legs blurring as we tried to escape the oncoming swarm.

“Agh!” I heard Tom shout as a black, crow-like shape dived toward him, ripping at his hair before flying away. All of a sudden, more and more dropped down one by one, sharp claws and beaks tearing at my clothes and skin while I frantically swatted at them, running blindly forward with my eyes practically closed. I lost sight of the others, of everything as the swarm descended, black feathers clouding my vision, foul screeches filling my ears until all of a sudden they let up, and I stumbled forward onto my knees, lungs gasping for air and face and arms stinging from a hundred different cuts and bruises.

I staggered to my feet, blinking my eyes open slowly, only to have to close them again before I passed out. For a second, I thought the walls were moving, then I realized there *were* no walls. The birds had penned me in a small stretch of grass about fifteen feet across, flying in circles around me so that they looked like a solid, shifting wall of feathers.

Tearing my eyes away from the blurred wings, I saw my friends--all except Cassie-- sprawled in various positions in the grass, only the grass seemed different here, more blue than green, with an odd aroma attached to it. I quickly ran toward them, praying Cassie had somehow managed to escape, and tried to get them up, to get them into action, for they seemed strangely still, sitting on the ground, staring at the wall of birds rather dazedly.

“C’mon, guys we have to get out of here. I think Lee and I can use magic to bust through and then--” I abruptly stopped talking when I realized none of them were listening to me. In fact, none of them were even looking at me, eyes far away and faces twisted into various expressions of fear and pain.

I kneeled next to Tom, who was the closest, leaning back against his hands as he looked up at something in front of him, something I couldn’t see. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry,” he repeated over and over, tears streaming down his face as despair filled his features. “It’s my fault, all my fault. You’re right. I should have saved you, should-- should have saved you, but I didn’t--I didn’t and I’m sorry--”

Tom kept going, kept sobbing his apologies even as I tried to shake him awake, as I slapped him lightly on the cheek and screamed in his ears, but no matter what I did, he couldn’t see me, couldn’t see anything other than whatever nightmare he was trapped in.

Desperate, I moved toward Maeve, who was on her knees, hands clasped together with tears filling her brown eyes. “Please, please don’t take her,” she begged desperately. “Please, I can do this. I can do this, please! Don’t take her--”

She kept going, kept pleading with invisible men. I shook her, I slapped her, but like Tom, Maeve refused to break free from whatever terrible vision she was trapped in.

Finally, I moved to Lee, who sat on the ground looking down at something in this lap, one hand lightly caressing the air above it. Unlike the others, there were no tears in his eyes, no desperation, just complete and utter emptiness, a loneliness so endless and echoing that it took my breath away. “Do you remember that time in the hallway? I think that was the first time I realized I loved you. You were so angry at me, but I realized I’d rather have your anger than anyone else’s joy. I remember. I remember...and remember when we found that puppy when we were kids, how we pretended to be a family. Just me and you and him. I remember. I remember--”

I didn’t slap Lee or shake him. I already knew it wouldn’t work, knew that whatever had been used to trap my friends here was stronger than anything I’d seen before. It was like they were hallucinating their worst fears, like they’d been drugged....

My gaze shot to the blue grass beneath my feet, and I stood up quickly, trying to put as much distance as possible between me and the now ominous seeming plant. My mind raced as I tried to put the pieces together. Varian must have known the birds wouldn’t be enough to stop us, wouldn’t be enough to render us helpless, so he had them herd us toward something that would, some substance that would leave us incapacitated until some of his more capable minions arrived.

I didn’t know why he hadn’t it worked on me. Maybe it was because I’d spent so much time on Earth, or maybe it was because I simply hadn’t been exposed to it long enough, and if the ladder turned out to be the case, I only had a limited time before I ended up just like my friends. Utterly helpless.

Think, Summer. Think. Why were the birds still here? If one hit of the hallucinogenic grass was enough to incapacitate someone, why keep us in this one spot? Why put makeshift walls around us unless breaking free of this spot somehow meant breaking from the hallucination?

Well, I guess that meant that I just had to somehow get all my friends through the bird wall into the fresh air and hopefully non-toxic grass, which meant...

I was going to have to use magic.

Unfortunately, using magic just so happened to be a flawed plan on *multiple* levels, the first being the fact that I couldn't control it on my own, meaning I would probably somehow have to use the magical bond thing between Lee and I, something I'd only just discovered existed *yesterday*. The second was regarding the not so small problem of the dangerous tracker currently hunting us—A.K.A the traitor to my kingdom. A.K.A Varian's apparent right hand man. A.K.A someone who would be able to feel it the second I used my magic and would therefore be able to figure out exactly where my friends and I were at this moment.

Although, the truth was, the giant swarm of killer birds currently darkening the sky had probably already let that cat out of the bag.

Shit, well, it clearly wasn't a very good plan, but it was all I had. I took a deep breath, trying to remain calm, to ignore the screeching of the birds around me and the desperate sobs of my friends. Clenching my fists, I strode toward Lee and grabbed his hand tightly in mine. He didn't even look at me, and I prayed that this bonding thing would work without his concentration, otherwise we were likely to all end up swept away by the magic.

Still, if we did nothing, we were dead anyway. Varian, or one of his minions, would come, and they'd slaughter my friends where they lay, utterly helpless, in the grass.

I would *not* let that happen.

Gripping Lee's hand tightly in my own, I called for the magic in the land and immediately felt it rush out, a gasp escaping my lips at its speed, at its intensity. I'd almost forgotten what it was like, the feeling of chaos hurtling through my veins, through my blood, and with a scream I hardly recognized as my own, I sent forth the magic in the form of a gust of wind, ripping through the birds over and over, battering at their makeshift wall like a tornado pressing into a house.

The magic continued to rush out, and my hair whipped around me as the wind grew stronger, ramming into the birds with devastating force.

Still, they resisted, but not for much longer, I could tell. The wind was too strong.
I was too strong.

Finally, with one final collective screech that could barely be heard over the sound of the wind rushing by my ears, the wall of feathers burst apart, and the green plains opened up around us once more.

But the wind kept rushing, the tornado kept forming as the magic continued to pour out of me with ever-increasing force. I knew I needed to shut it off, to send it back, but for a moment, I didn't want to. I *liked* the way it felt, liked the way the chaos was bent entirely to my will.

Until, beneath the deafening roar of the wind, Lee's voice somehow managed to filter through, his soft murmurings echoing in my ears like thunder, breaking through the haze, the euphoria, and I suddenly realized what I was doing. Horrified, I prepared to send the magic back, expecting pain, expecting resistance, but miraculously, almost as soon as I thought it, it obeyed.

The magic had gone back where it came from.

But I soon realized there was a part of me, buried somewhere deep inside, that wished it hadn't.

CHAPTER 14

Team Summer

The ground was littered with birds. Some were still moving, writhing on the ground as they attempted to get up, to fly with broken wings, but most of them lay still. Dead.

“Summer! Summer, thank god you’re okay!”

I looked up somewhat dazedly from the dying birds to see Cassie racing toward me. Her face was covered in bright red scratches and her hair had fallen mostly out of her ponytail, but overall she looked relatively uninjured. “Cassie? You’re--where were yo-- wait, stop!” I shouted as my senses returned, holding out a hand forcefully.

Cassie stopped in her tracks, fear freezing her into place despite her obvious confusion. I pointed down at the bluish grass she was only steps away from, and then nodded to the others still sprawled on the ground, completely unaware of the mini tornado they’d just been in the center of.

Cassie cast her gaze over them worriedly. “What’s wrong with them? Is it the grass? Some kind of hallucinogen?”

I nodded my head. “I think so. I think the birds tried to trap us here for a reason. To incapacitate us or something until reinforcements arrived.”

“But why aren’t you--”

I lifted up a hand, cutting her off, my heart pounding as the sense of danger returned. The birds were gone, but who knows what else might be on its way. “I don’t know, Cassie. All I know is that we need to move. Quickly. Before the tracker gets here. I had to use magic, so--”

“So, he knows where we are,” Cassie finished for me, eyes wide in fear.

I stood up, quickly reaching down and hooking my arms under Lee’s. “Yes, but it’s okay. I’m sure once I get them out of the grass, they’ll wake up,” I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt. At least, that’s what I *hoped* would happen. The truth

was I had no real idea what I was talking about, or whether the grass was even the problem, but I had to do *something*. Fear shot through me as my mind returned again and again to the incoming danger, to the spies or ashers that were no doubt currently in route to kill us. The tracker would be here soon, and with him—

Maybe even Varian, himself.

The thought sent a shiver down my spine, and I moved quicker, getting ready to try and drag Lee over to the edge. Cassie glanced between me and the horizon with worried eyes. “But Lee said if--”

“I know what he said, Cassie,” I snapped, pulling on Lee with all my strength. The dude weighed like a thousand pounds. “But I’m *not*--” pull -- “leaving *anyone*--” pull -- “*behind*, okay?”

After three hard pulls, I finally got Lee to the edge and rolled him not so gently until he was fully out of the bluish grass. Then, I looked at Cassie, making sure she wasn’t going to freak out, that she understood I wasn’t going anywhere without my friends.

I could tell she was afraid, glancing up at the sky like she expected more birds to return any minute, and for a moment I wondered if she was going to argue with me about it. I wouldn’t blame her if she did. These were, after all, my friends, not hers. She had no real loyalty to them, no ties other than me. And yet, after a seemingly long moment, Cassie nodded, reaching down to pull Lee even farther from the edge. “Okay then, best to get them as far away as possible. Just in case it’s partially airborne.”

And so we worked. I pulled the other two to the edge, their desperate tears and cries never ceasing, the sound of it echoing like thunder in my ears, and Cassie got them the rest of the way until they were all in a makeshift pile about five feet from the ring of bluish grass. We were both panting by the end of it, and both increasingly on edge as we felt the precious seconds ticking by, the risk of more than just birds hanging over both of our minds like a heavy cloud threatening rain.

I’d hoped that just removing them from the grass would snap my friends out of whatever hallucinations they were trapped in, but they didn’t even seem to notice that they’d been moved at all. Cassie shot me a worried look. “What, now?”

I bit my lip, staring at them intently, trying to think of some way to wake them up, but the rising panic in my chest was making it hard to concentrate. “I don’t know. I already tried shaking them and--”

“Did you hit them?”

“Yeah--”

“How hard?”

I threw my hands up in the air. “I don’t know, Cassie! Hard! I hit them hard!”

Cassie rolled her eyes. “Please, Summer. You have the punching power of a small rabbit. Let me give it a try.” She squared her shoulders and walked resolutely over to Tom. Dread filled me as she yanked him up by his collar. My eyes turned toward Maeve, who still had tears in her eyes as she yelled at invisible men, and Lee, who’s gaze still lay resolutely on his lap as he mumbled to himself, voice empty and eyes hollow. If this didn’t work, I didn’t know what we’d do. What *I’d* do. I needed help.

I needed Lee.

I had to resist the urge to cover my eyes with my hands as Cassie reared her arm back. I swore I thought I heard her mumble something under her breath that sounded suspiciously like “this is for my dress” before she let her fist fly towards Tom’s face. I closed my eyes, waiting for the sickening sound of skin hitting skin, but it never came.

Confused, I opened my eyes to see Tom holding Cassie’s fist tightly in his hand as if he’d caught it mid-throw, the two of them staring at each other rather intensely. Tom raised an eyebrow before glancing from Cassie to me. “Uhh, someone want to explain?”

Shock and relief passed over Cassie’s features before she quickly schooled them into a look of cool indifference. Extricating her fist from his grasp, she shrugged her shoulders. “You were unresponsive.”

Tom blinked at her. “So you thought punching me might help?”

Cassie just shrugged her shoulders again, but I quickly ran over to Tom and threw my arms around him. “Thank goodness you’re awake!”

Tom leaned back, surprised, the force of my hug nearly knocking him over before he patted my back gently. “Awake...?” he asked confusedly. “But the last thing I remember was the darkgulls and...” Tom looked around, doing a double take as he caught sight of the bluish grass and Maeve and Lee still on the ground. Swearing, he

moved quickly toward Maeve, holding his hand to her forehead for a moment before doing the same thing to Lee. He swore again. "Delirium."

"What?"

Tom gestured toward the odd grass. "The blue plant. It's called Delirium, makes whoever comes into contact with it hallucinate their worst fears."

"How long till it wears off?"

"Should be pretty soo--"

"Rose?" Lee's confused voice drew my attention to him. His brown hair was sticking up in all different directions, and his eyes were bloodshot, the green standing out even more against the red, but they were focused. Aware.

"Lee!" I cried in relief, running over to him. I expected his confusion to fade slightly as he regained his senses, but he was still looking at me as if he couldn't believe I was there. I crouched down beside him, and he reached up and ran his hand slowly along my cheek, like he was checking to make sure I was real.

I furrowed my eyebrows in confusion. "Lee? What's wron--"

Lee crushed me tight against his chest, cutting off my words, and I only hesitated for a moment before returning the hug, wrapping my arms tightly around him and pressing my face into his neck, relief sweeping through me so strongly I feared I might have tipped over had he not been holding me so tightly.

Everything had happened so fast. There had barely been any time for fear, but now that Lee was back to himself, now that he was in my arms, I realized how completely and utterly terrified I'd been at seeing him so defenseless, so vulnerable. I hadn't realized how much I'd depended on his ability, on his strength until it was stripped from him and my friends. I hadn't known how much my own happiness and well-being seemed tied to him, to us being--whatever it was that we were--until I wasn't sure if what we were would ever be again.

Then, what he said finally registered in my brain, and I froze in his arms.

Rose, he'd said. Like he couldn't believe I was here, that I was...alive. I remember....in the hallway...the first time I realized I loved you...I remember...

The truth hit me then, the intensity of it piercing my heart like an arrow. Lee's biggest fear...It hadn't been losing Summer, losing *me*--

It'd been losing Rose.

But I *was* Rose, wasn't I? At least, partly? So, why did hearing that name on Lee's lips leave me with such an empty feeling, even more so than the first time I heard it, after he kissed me, when I thought he was in love with someone else...

"What happened?" Maeve's voice broke through my troubled thoughts, and I pulled away from Lee quickly, avoiding his questioning gaze as I looked over to find Maeve wiping at her face dazedly, staring in confusion at the tears like she wasn't quite sure how they got there.

"Delirium," Lee said grimly, and I turned back toward him, surprised. He must have read the question on my face because he continued, albeit vaguely. "It's not the first time I've come into contact with it."

"Okay, guys. Hate to break up the love fest, but we should probably get going, right?" Cassie asked, looking around nervously as she helped Maeve up, who still seemed a bit disoriented.

Lee stood up quickly and I followed, the warm breeze whipping through my hair as I watched him and the others quickly retrieve their weapons from where they'd dropped them a little ways back, trying to ignore the odd feeling of dread in my chest as my gaze lingered on Lee, but I shook it off, determined to focus only on getting out of these damned Open Plains in one piece. Everything else could wait.

When we regrouped, Lee nodded at us, and we somehow all seemed to make the mutual decision to take off at a brisk jog rather than walk again, each of us periodically throwing nervous glances at the sky as we ran.

Unfortunately, it seemed no matter how fast I moved my feet, I couldn't seem to outrun the feelings of doubt, of worry, whirling around my head because the more I thought about it, the more I turned it over and over in my mind, the more I realized why Lee's hallucination had affected me so much, why the proof of his love for Rose left such a bad feeling in my stomach.

It was because *I* wasn't Rose.

Sure, they could tell me that I was, and I could pretend, I could *keep* pretending like the girl they'd lost was still buried somewhere inside of me, but the truth was, that

girl, the one who had all those experiences, who grew up laughing with Maeve and falling for Lee, surrounded by a family who loved her...

That girl was dead.

She had died the second Varian ripped those experiences from my head, the second he'd stolen my memories and left me to pick up the pieces of who I was, to form them into something new. And I had. I had become Summer, and I couldn't just *un-*become her. Even as I gained more memories from my past, it didn't mean that my life on Earth, my memories with Max and Cassie, were suddenly going to disappear.

But I also knew that my friends hadn't fought demons and crossed realms to rescue *Summer*, and even after they'd found me, they hadn't realized--*still* didn't realize--that the girl they'd gone to find was gone forever, that I could never really be her again.

And--I realized with a start-- that I didn't want to be.

Maybe this whole journey had started out being about me trying to connect with the girl I once was, with Rose, and maybe it still was, but if doing so meant losing who I was now, if finding Rose meant erasing Summer, would I still do it?

If you'd asked me a week ago, I'd have probably said yes. Summer hadn't seemed all that special to me then, at least not compared to Rose, not compared to a princess with a family and a love strong enough to cross realms for, to fight demons for. But now...

Now, I'd fought those demons myself. I'd survived mermaids and giants and made friends with the most unlikely of creatures and healed wounds and wielded tornadoes with my bare hands. I'd become someone who I believed was *worth* saving, and that was a good thing, I knew it was.

But how did I tell them? How did I tell *him* that his worst nightmare, his greatest fear, had come true? That the girl he fell in love with was gone.

Forever.

Maybe it wouldn't be so hard, maybe the mere idea of it wouldn't steal the breath from my lungs, if I didn't---if I wasn't so....oh, you know what I mean.

But I did and I was, which meant that telling him also meant offering him a choice, it meant putting myself out there--*me*, as I was now--and waiting to see if that was someone he could see himself being with one day. Someone he could love.

These thoughts and fears continued to swirl around and around in my head until eventually, the pain in my heart began to be overshadowed by the pain in my body. A sharp stitch throbbed in my side as my legs cramped, the pain and fatigue stealing the breath from my lungs. I felt the flat terrain start to angle upwards. I inwardly cursed it for a moment before I remembered what Lee had said, that the plains were basically a big valley we had to get out of in order to get to the mountains, and felt some small hope that there would soon be an end to this terrible pain.

I shot a glance at the others, expecting them to be as out of breath as I was, but was annoyed to find that Tom, Maeve, and Lee seemed to have barely broken a sweat. Damn warriors being all in shape and stuff. However, my gaze soon shifted to Cassie. She was mumbling a curse word with every step, half bent over as she gripped her side and panted heavily, and I felt slightly less pathetic.

Lee, who had been at the front, must have sensed my pain or desperation through the bond because he quickly nodded to Tom, and the two of them dropped back as Maeve took the lead.

Lee ran over to me as Tom ran over to Cassie, and I tried to put on a tough face as he looked at me in half amusement/half concern. I didn't look at him, hoping if I ignored him he'd go away.

A couple seconds passed, and I opened my mouth to tell Lee that I was fine when he wordlessly picked me up and spun me around him until I was hanging onto his back like a spider monkey. How he managed to do it while still maintaining a brisk jog I'll never know, and I opened my mouth to voice my protestations before I noticed how much quicker he was going now, like my weight was nothing against his back, and I realized that this was probably the safer option, frustrating as it was to have to be this close to him when I was torn between wanting to stay as far away from him as possible and wanting to kiss him all over.

I turned around to see how Cassie was doing with the whole being carried thing, half-expecting her to try and punch Tom again. Instead, I merely watched as Tom gestured toward his back, and Cassie immediately jumped at him, clearly willing to sacrifice her pride if it meant an end to the running. I even thought I heard her mumble "about freaking time."

Maeve began to steer us in a slightly different direction than we'd been going before, or at least, it seemed like she did. Everything here looked the same to me, and I had to keep my eyes practically glued to the ground so the bobbing up and down of the horizon wouldn't make me puke my guts out.

When the incline became noticeably steeper, I lifted my gaze from the ground and was surprised to find that a hill had risen in front of us, the slope gradual but getting steeper all the time.

Eventually, Lee crested the hill, and I couldn't help but gasp as the mountains I'd only seen from far away came into view. They seemed to be made of a pale blue rock, almost white, that shone in the late afternoon suns. I craned my neck up to try and catch a glimpse of their peaks, each one surrounded by a ring of gray clouds like a wispy halo. In the center, one peak rose higher than all the others, the only mountain capped with white snow. Grave's Peak, I think Tom had called it. I looked from side to side and noticed that the mountain range seemed to stretch out for miles and miles with no way around, at least not one that was visible to me. At the base of the mountain range there was a wide forest, less dark and foreboding than the one we'd begun our journey in, with tall trees that resembled the pines from Earth.

Maeve led us directly to the forest's edge, and I let out a sigh of relief as we left the openness behind. It almost felt like the trees were wrapping themselves protectively around us as we entered, guarding us from unfriendly eyes.

I expected Lee to put me down, or at least for everyone to slow their pace, but they kept moving forward through the woods quickly. Not pausing once to stop or rest. "Why aren't we stopping? We're safe now, right? I mean, more safe now that we're less exposed?" I whispered into Lee's ear, something about the tension in the air making my voice come out softer than I'd originally intended.

"We had to alter our course a bit, just in case the tracker managed to figure out which path we were taking," Lee whispered back, eyes never stopping as he scanned the scenery warily.

"So...?"

"Pixies," Lee said grimly, like that explained everything.

I raised my eyebrows, picturing pudgy little hobgoblins with wings, not quite understanding why something like that would cause Lee to look so worried. I opened my mouth to ask more questions before deciding better of it. The truth was I probably didn't want to know.

Finally, as the afternoon suns faded and the forest grew darker, Maeve stopped and Lee crouched down so I could slide off his back. I stood on shaky legs, wobbling for a moment before casting a nervous look around. "Uh, Lee? What about the pixies?"

Lee opened his mouth to respond but Maeve beat him to it, sliding off her pack and setting it on the ground. "We had to go a couple miles into the forest to avoid them. We're lucky we didn't run into any on the way. "

"Why? Are they dangerous?" I asked, still trying to reconcile the mischievous little creatures from *Harry Potter* with something I should actually be afraid of.

Tom slid off his bow and gestured around him. "See these trees? They're called Wethrain. They look harmless enough, but their roots are the key ingredient for some of the deadliest poisons in the world. That's what the pixies do, what they're good at. They make poisons and sell them to the highest bidder. I'll give you one guess who that is."

Varian. I didn't bother to say the name out loud. The answer was clear, and I felt dread fill my stomach as I imagined the deadliest poisons in the world in the hands of that monster.

"But we're safe here, right?" I asked, glancing at the dark trees which now suddenly seemed much more insidious than protective.

Maeve shrugged. "Pixies can only stay within a mile of the Open Plains, in the wooded area right against the mountain. Some say they're cursed, others that they simply won't go past the border for fear of the creatures beyond. We're almost into rea--into another original's territory."

Cassie stretched, glancing back toward the way we'd come with raised eyebrows. "So, we're currently hiding from agoraphobic pixies in a forest full of deadly Christmas trees? Great. So glad I could make it."

"We'll rest here for the night before continuing on, tomorrow." Lee said authoritatively as everyone began to set up camp.

I blinked at him before casting a shocked look at the sky, now completely dark, only a few stars twinkling between the branches. I hadn't realized the suns had set, how quickly the day had passed. The thought made my heart race and my stomach clench with fear. One more day gone, and only three left before I had to defeat Varian, had to save the kingdom and everyone in it. The fear and worry struck me so strongly it almost took my breath away, but I beat it back. It wouldn't do to have a nervous breakdown now, in front of everyone. No, I'd do the mature thing and wait till I was alone.

Besides, I'd used magic today, and more easily than ever before. The bond had worked, even with Lee trapped in his hallucination. The thought should make me happy, but it wasn't joy but dread that filled my stomach as I remembered what had happened on the plains. Yes, I could control the magic, but for a moment there, I hadn't wanted to. In fact, I'd wanted nothing more than to let the magic burst out of me in wave after wave, to reduce the landscape around me to nothing but dust and emptiness. The sheer euphoria I'd felt, the intense craving for more, had worked like a drug inside me, clouding my mind, my judgment.

It was like the more control I gained over the magic, the less I had over myself.

I was pulled out of my dark thoughts by the touch of Lee's hand on my arm, a touch I couldn't help but shrink away from. Lee raised his eyebrows in surprise at my reaction before narrowing them and nodding his head over to the edge of the clearing we'd stopped in, indicating I should follow him.

I debated just walking away, but I knew Lee wouldn't let it drop, so I followed him until the sounds of the others talking was dulled to practically nothing. Finally, he stopped, and I crossed my arms as I looked at him. "What is it, Lee?"

"What's wrong?" He asked, eyeing me closely.

I looked away from him. "Nothing's wrong--"

"Bullshit. You've barely even looked at me since the whole delirium thing. Not to mention, I can *feel* it. Your--your sadness. Your fear. What's wrong?"

I looked down at my hands, not wanting to say the words but knowing they needed to be said just the same. Knowing we couldn't just keep going back and forth, pretending that we were something we weren't. "It was Rose."

Lee looked at me in confusion. "What are you talking about? *What* was Rose?"

“The hallucination. Your greatest fear. It wasn’t *me* dying. It was--it was Rose.”

Lee just looked at me for a moment, the seconds ticking slowly by as his expression of shock began to morph into something else, something I couldn’t quite identify. He shook his head. “You have got to be kidding me. *That’s* why you’re upset? Summer, you *are* Rose.”

I shook my head. “Am I, Lee? Am I *really*? Because I’m *not* the girl you fell in love with. I wasn’t raised in a castle. I didn’t learn how to fight when I was two. I--”

Lee cut me off as he stepped closer, getting into my personal space. “How many times?”

“What?” I tried to take a step back from him, partially unnerved by his nearness, but he followed, not letting me put an inch of space between us.

His eyes caught mine, the green forest practically alight with flame, and I found I couldn’t look away. “How many times do I have to tell you, to *prove* to you that I love you no matter what memories you have or what ones you don’t? What more can I do, Summer? Because nothing seems to be enough for you.”

I threw my hands up in the air in frustration. “You don’t get it. It’s not about you *proving* anything to me, Lee. It’s about the fact that the girl you fell in love with is gone. She’s *gone*.”

Lee shook his head. “But the memories will--”

“They’re not real memories, Lee. At least, they don’t feel real the same way my memories of Earth feel. Yes, they help me learn more about my past, and *yes* they help me understand it--understand you-- a little better, but they’re not going to suddenly make me a new person. Even if I got all my memories back tomorrow, they *still* wouldn’t feel like mine. I still wouldn’t be Rose.”

Lee just looked at me, not saying anything, and I shook my head. “You don’t understand--”

Lee cut me off, pacing back and forth as his voice rose with frustration and anger. “Do you have any idea what it’s been like, what it *feels* like to watch the person you think you’re going to spend the rest of your life with disappear in a *moment*? To search for her for months and months, to *find* her only to realize that she’s changed, that what you’ve lost has only been partially returned to you?”

I took a step toward him, heart aching at the pain in his voice. “Lee--”

Lee backed away, shaking his head in frustration. “And every moment, *every moment*, becomes a struggle, a fight between pain and guilt and indescribable joy. *You* don’t understand how--” Lee cut himself off, looking away from me and swallowing hard as he tried to regain his composure.

And as I looked at him, I realized we were both right. We didn’t understand each other. Neither of us could ever really comprehend the messed up stuff the other had gone through.

I stepped toward Lee, taking his hands in mine. “I’m *trying*. Okay, Lee? I’m trying to relearn these things, to get close to you, but the truth is, I don’t really know you.”

Lee shook his head. “Summer, you know—“

“Three days.”

“What?”

“That’s how long *I’ve* known you, Lee. And yes they’ve been the three craziest days of my life, and yes I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like you, that I’m maybe even falling--” I stopped myself, unable to say those words, at least not yet. I took a deep breath before continuing. “But I need time, time to feel for you all those things you felt for me. But more important than that, I need you to understand that Rose, the girl you knew, the girl you *loved*, is gone. If you’re going to be with me, then be with me as *Summer* because she’s the only one that’s here...that is, if--if you still...want me.”

I waited with bated breath for his answer, caught between hope and fear as I stared into eyes, trying to gauge his reaction.

Lee’s eyes were soft as they looked at me, gentle despite the anger and frustration he’d been expressing only a moment ago, but they also had this sadness to them, this grief that seemed to make the flames in his green irises go dark.

After a few moments of heavy silence, Lee gently extricated his hands from mine, and I felt my heart drop as he stepped away from me. “I think--I think I need some time, too. Okay?” Lee’s voice was soft, unsure, like he didn’t quite know what to feel, yet.

He was also looking at me with worried eyes, and I could tell he was afraid his words would hurt me, so I pasted a fake smile to my face, trying to keep the pain out of my eyes. "Of course. It's fine. I--I understand."

Lee nodded, my words taking a little of the tension out of his shoulders, before walking back toward the camp. I watched him go, waiting until he was out of sight before I let the tears slip down my cheeks. I knew that just because Lee'd said he'd needed time to decide didn't mean that he was rejecting me, didn't mean that there was no future for the two of us, but I'd be lying if I said that there wasn't a small part of me that had hoped he would embrace me immediately, that he would be sure that letting go of Rose and loving Summer was something he could do, something he *wanted* to do.

Still, even as my heart ached from the pain of his hesitation, I knew that it wasn't fair to expect Lee to be sure about me when I wasn't even sure about him, to expect him to know any more about what he was feeling than I did.

And yet, even as I stood there, as I watched him walk away, I couldn't help but feel like I was falling. Lee's love had been one of the only things in this new realm that I could count on, that I could hold on to. Without it, it kind of felt like I might tip over any moment, that the very world beneath me had begun to shift.

Still, a part of me knew that time was a good thing, that time was what we both needed in order to sort through the jumbled up emotions inside of us.

Unfortunately, as I turned my tearful gaze toward the night sky, I remembered that time was actually the one thing we didn't have. That in three days, our time to choose, to feel, to be together, might very well run out.

After squaring my shoulders, I made my way back to camp, only Lee wasn't there, and neither were Maeve and Tom. Cassie sat alone by the fire, staring into the flames rather intently.

"Well, that sounded...heated," Cassie said, turning her gaze from the fire to me.

I winced. "You heard all that?"

"Afraid so. It wasn't exactly the quietest of romantic squabbles."

"Where are the others?"

Cassie waved a hand dismissively before leaning toward me. "Scouting the perimeter or something. I don't know. Anyway, so are we going to talk about it or what?"

I groaned. “Can we not please? Besides, you hate talking about his stuff, anyway.”

Cassie held up a finger. “What I hate is hearing you go on and on about how you’ll never find a boyfriend, and no guys like you, and Aragorn isn’t real, so why are you so attracted to him and blah, blah, blah. Now, you have real, *actual* stuff to talk about. So, spill it.”

Cassie just continued to look at me expectantly, and I knew she wasn’t going to drop it anytime soon, so I relented. “Well, I don’t know, Cass. When I’m with him, I feel all these...feelings.”

Cassie blinked at me. “Okay, how about you try that again and this time be a bit more vague and unhelpful if at all possible.”

I threw my hands up in frustration. “Oh, you know what I mean! I just--I like him a lot, and he makes me feel brave and smart and like--like maybe I can actually do this.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“What do you mean?”

Cassie shrugged her shoulders. “If you want to be with him so badly, then just be with him.”

I shook my head, an incredulous laugh escaping my lips despite everything that happened. “First of all, it’s not that simple, and second of all, since when are you Team Lee, all of sudden?”

Cassie held up a hand. “Okay, first of all, I’m Team Summer--even though you’re being really difficult about it--and *second* of all, it’s absolutely that simple. You have a choice here, Summer. You need to make it.”

I just looked at her, not saying anything, and Cassie leaned over, grabbing my hand as she softened her voice. “Look, I understand why you’re hesitant. The dude may be hot as all hell, but he’s pretty much constantly throwing himself in danger and has a bit of an anger management problem, not gonna lie.”

I laughed again before wiping more tears from my eyes; the damned things wouldn’t go away. “True.”

“But he’s also brave and kind and like I said, hot as hell--”

“Okay, I get it.”

Cassie ignored me. “And yeah the whole Rose/Summer, lost memories thing is tough and confusing and difficult to sort out. You just need to figure out if it’s worth it to you, sorting through all those messy emotions. If *he*’s worth it to you.”

I looked away, picturing Lee’s cocky smile, his green eyes alight with amusement and passion, his strong arms as they wrapped around me. I pictured the way I felt when I was around him, how he made me feel like I could do anything, how he made it feel like I had a home for the first time in my life. “I--I think he might be.”

Cassie looked at me for a moment, an odd sort of sadness darkening her blue eyes before she blinked quickly, and it disappeared. “Okay well, you’ve done what you can, then. Now, it’s up to old Shade Hunter to make his own choice.”

“But what if--what if his choice is-- what if he doesn’t choose me,?” I asked, practically having to force the words out, like my heart wasn’t really sure if it wanted to know the answer.

Cassie shrugged before looking at me with a serious gaze. “Then we’ll steal one of Maeve’s knives and stab him through the heart.”

My mouth dropped open. “I’m sorry, what?”

Cassie flicked her dark hair over her shoulder nonchalantly. “I mean we’d obviously wait until after he helped you defeat Varian of course, and I’m sure getting the knives from Maeve will require a bit of *persuasion* which I’m happy to take care of--- Hey!”

Cassie shot me an indignant look as she rubbed the spot on her shoulder where I’d punched her. I rolled my eyes at her theatrics, trying to keep the smile out of my voice. “There will be no killing and no *persuading*.” I made sure to put finger quotes around the last word. “What is between you and Maeve, anyway? Or should I be asking about you and *Tom*?”

Cassie leaned back on her hands. “What can I say? The heart wants what the heart wants.”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “And your heart wants both of them?”

“For now,” Cassie said, winking at me before turning to face the fire once more. “I mean, I might be leaving some broken hearts behind me whenever we get back to Earth, but if that’s the price of being this sexy, so be it.”

She sent me a flirty smile, and I wanted to smile with her, but something she'd said gave me pause. I looked at her, waiting until her smile faded and her eyes grew serious before I spoke. "Do you think we're actually ever going to go back?"

Cassie furrowed her eyebrows in confusion. "Of course. I mean, you'll have to find a way to split your time between princess-ing and classes, and we'll have to find a way to explain all this to Max, but-- wait, do *you* think you're ever going back?" Cassie looked at me with concerned eyes, waiting for me to reassure her, to tell her I knew exactly how our story would end.

Instead, I turned my gaze toward the stars, watching as they fought to shine through the thick clouds, as less and less light managed to escape the darkness.

"I'm not sure if we'll get the choice."

CHAPTER 15

Asleep in a Meadow

I laid down on the ground as close to the fire as I dared, trying to block out the sudden chill that had crept into the night. Cassie still sat next to me with her chin and arms resting on her knees, her blue eyes deep in thought.

The truth was I wasn't that sleepy either, but a part of me wanted to avoid the inevitable awkwardness of a run in with Lee whenever he and the others returned. I knew avoiding Lee was stupid and pretty much entirely unfeasible given the fact that we were currently on a magical quest together. Not to mention that minor fact that we were apparently *bonded for life*, which could mean that the awkwardness between Lee and I, the lack of understanding, if not love, might actually be able to kill us. Or it might not. Lee had been pretty vague on the subject, so who knows, really?

Still, despite the anxious thoughts swirling around my head, the longer I lay there with my eyes closed, the more tired I became, the events of the day catching up with me, until I could feel myself slipping away into the warm nothingness of sleep.

At least, that's how it started. Don't get me wrong, it was still warm, the soft fire flickering steadily in the fireplace to my left heating my cold body, but the library that had taken shape around me was far from the peaceful nothingness that I desired right then.

I stretched my arms out and yawned, looking around for Pinstripe man. "Okay, let's get this show on the road. Show me one of these dude's memories, so I can get back to sleep." As I cast my gaze about the room, I noticed the shelves and desks were in more of a disarray than usual, books and papers strewn across the surfaces and floors like a mini tornado had passed through here.

"You *are* asleep."

I let out a little scream as I turned my head to find Pinstripe man resting in the soft green armchair in front of me, the armchair I could have *sworn* was empty only two seconds ago. I opened my mouth to yell at him for scaring me when I finally took in his

appearance. He was back in his pinstripes, but they were dirty and torn like they'd been dragged across the floor, and he looked old, older than I'd ever seen him, leaning his head heavily on his hand. "Are--are you okay?"

I stood up quickly and hesitated only a moment before laying my hand on the old man's shoulder. I didn't know him all that well, and he annoyed me with his half-answers more often than not, but he'd been a sort of friend during this whole journey, and I didn't want to see him hurting.

Pinstripe man reached up and patted my hand, shaking his head gently. "I'm fine sweetheart, no need to fuss. Just managed to get on the wrong side of our favorite resident sorcerer. Again. Still, the prisoners *have* to eat. Not everyone can live on evil and broken dreams. Besides, if that bastard's gonna allow me to stay alive, then I'm gonna be sure to make it everyone's problem."

Pinstripe man's voice started out strong, but by the end he was coughing, his whole body shaking with the effort, and my heart broke to see him actually look his age for once. When the coughing finally subsided he looked up at me, something like fear and hope all tangled together in his features. "You are coming, right? You're almost here?"

I nodded, and his shoulders lost a bit of their tension. "Good. That's good. We only have a few days before--before..." Pinstripe man eased up from his chair slowly, like every twitch of his muscles caused him pain.

"Before what?"

Pinstripe paused before sending me a grim look over his shoulder. "Before he's too powerful to stop."

I stepped toward him quickly, anxiety and frustration making my questions tumble out quickly, one after the other. "What do you mean? What is he going to do? What does he *want*?"

Pinstripe didn't answer, simply grabbing the familiar book off of the table and bringing it over to me. "I'm sorry," he said, holding the book out in front of me.

I looked between him and the book warily as I reached out my hand. "Sorry for what?"

He just stared at me, something like pity glistening in his pale eyes.

“What’s to come.”

In a flash, the world around me changed, and I found myself in a field of green grass on the edge of a dark forest, the trees stretching so high above me that I had to crane my neck to see their tops. The light of day was fading, the three suns edging toward the horizon as night began to fall. I’d never really understood that phrase. It seemed wrong, somehow. To me, night seemed to creep upwards, darkness stretching into the sky like searching fingers. Usually, day was there to hold it back, to keep the darkness at bay. It was only when the light went out that the gloom was able to make its way into the world once more.

Only when day fell, did night arise.

I could hear the faint rushing of water, like there was a river nearby, and the shrill murmur of what sounded like cicadas in the trees. Summertime. That’s what it sounded like, what it felt like as a warm breeze ruffled my hair--at least, Crestfall’s version of it.

Soon, my gaze was drawn to two figures about fifty feet away from me, kneeling on the ground, their backs turned towards me. I could see Isabelle’s red hair tied up in a braid, the bright color shining in the fading light, almost glowing slightly against her light pink dress. Ian was beside her, at least I assumed it was him, his raven hair seemed to be cut close to his head once more, and for a moment, I wondered if I’d gone backwards, if I was now seeing a memory that took place before the last one. I still hadn’t a faintest idea what the rules were, if the memories I was drawn into were in some type of order or if they were completely random. Pinstripe man seemed to have some understanding of what I was to see, but the man was about as easy to read as a brick wall. Still, I remembered the look in his eyes as he handed the book to me, like something between dread and pity. Like he knew exactly what awaited me and regretted that I had to see it.

I felt dread settle like a stone in my stomach as I took a step toward Isabelle and Ian. At first, I thought they were praying, their heads bent intently toward the ground, but the longer I looked, the more I noticed their frantic movements, the desperate shake of their shoulders.

I took a step forward, then another, and another. The closer I got, the more I began to hear other sounds above the roar of the river and the trees. Sounds of crying and begging.

Sounds of pain.

They were kneeling over something, Ian and Isabelle...No, not something. *Someone*. The feeling of dread grew as I drew closer to them, as I caught sight of reddish hair, of freckles over pale skin. His eyes were closed, but I knew if he opened them they'd be blue, the same sky blue as his father's.

Jaimie. It was *Jaimie*.

And he wasn't moving.

My hesitant steps turned into a run as I closed the distance between them and me, moving in front of them until we were face to face.

If I thought I was prepared for what I'd find, I was wrong.

I stared down at Jaimie, at his still body, his rumpled appearance as he lay on the ground. He looked about the same age as when I last saw him, maybe a little older. His clothes were wet, like he'd been swimming in them, and his skin was pale, so, so pale, as his parents hunched over him. I watched as Ian pumped his hands on top of Jaimie's chest, realization and horror crashing over me one after the other, like waves breaking against rocks. His movements were steady despite the obvious shakiness of his hands, the muscles in his arms straining with the effort as he attempted to keep the rhythm unbroken.

Like he'd been doing it for a long time.

I sank to my knees beside Jaimie, turning my attention from him to his parents. Ian's jaw was clenched tight, his eyes narrowed in concentration as he leaned over Jaimie. Ian's black hair was wet, too, like Jaimie's, steadily dripping water onto his son's still face as he worked over him, the droplets slipping down Jaimie's cheeks like tears, but Jaimie didn't react to it any more than he did to the desperate pleas of his mother, who held his hand in hers in an ironclad grip, her knuckles turning white.

"C'mon, baby. C'mon, b--baby, *please*," Isabelle repeated over and over as tears streamed down her face, pressing her lips to her son's hand and closing her eyes intently as if trying to wake him up through sheer force of will. I noticed a small basket next to her with some kind of fruit and a small knife resting inside, like she'd simply been out going about her day, like she'd had no warning. There were damp spots covering the front of her dress, water darkening the light pink color, and her hair had come partially

undone out of her braid, the bright red strands falling into her face, but she paid them no notice, never taking her eyes off of Jaimie other than to wish.

To pray.

After a few moments, Ian paused his movements, breathing quickly as he leaned down and pressed his ear to his son's chest. The world grew silent as he listened for a heartbeat, some sign of life, and I found myself holding my breath, too, afraid to make any sound.

Slowly, Ian lifted his head from his son's chest and turned toward Isabelle, whose eyes were wild and bloodshot. He shook his head at her.

"No. He's not, Ian. He's *not*." Isabelle grabbed Ian's hand while still keeping tight hold of Jaimie's in the other. "*Again*."

Ian just looked at her for a moment, face slack with sorrow, light blue eyes dark with hopelessness, but I could see it there, the flicker of faith, of a desperate need to believe. Ian nodded, and they both turned toward Jaimie, Ian reaching up to place his free hand back on Jaimie's chest.

It didn't take me long to figure out what they were doing. It was the same thing I wanted to do, been *desperate* to do since I got there, fingers twitching as I imagined calling the magic up from the ground, up and into this poor broken boy, imagined watching his cheeks grow warm and red once more as his blue eyes blinked open, as the magic healed his body like it had done mine so many times, his bright smile eclipsing the sharp ache piercing my heart, the one that made every heartbeat feel like a knife to the chest.

Then, all of a sudden, I watched as the grass beneath Jaimie's body grew taller, as it grew greener, flowers of all shapes and colors springing up around him--red roses, white daisies, blue lilies---until he looked like he'd fallen asleep in the middle of a meadow, the flowers like a kind of bed beneath him.

But Jaimie, Jaimie didn't change at all.

It wasn't working, I realized, as panic grew inside me, my heart beating faster and faster until it felt like I couldn't breathe. I reached up a hand and pressed it against his pale face, his skin cold beneath my fingertips. Why wasn't it working? It *had* to work...unless, unless--

Unless the magic wasn't even reaching Jaimie, and instead was simply slipping off his body and onto the ground, like water droplets sliding off a leaf, making the plants grow tall while the child above was left wither. Like he couldn't be healed. Like he was already too far gone.

Like he was already dead.

The realization crashed into me, smothering me, until I felt like I was drowning in it. Pain squeezed my heart as hot tears ran down my cheeks, blurring my vision of the boy below me, of the world around me.

Suddenly, Isabelle opened her brown eyes, and at the sight of the flowers, she began to shake her head and sob, pressing her fists into her eyes as if trying to erase the image of them from her mind, and I found myself wanting to do the same. It felt wrong, unjust, that they should grow so beautiful and strong while Jaimie was left with nothing. No strength. I'd thought magic was supposed to be about harmony. About balance. How could the loss of a life so barely lived not disrupt the balance, how could it not cause the whole world to shift beneath our feet?

Ian reached down and gathered Jaimie's body close to his chest, tears slipping down his cheeks as silent sobs wracked through him, his whole body shaking with the force of them.

"No, *No*." Isabelle suddenly stood up, her eyes wild with pain and desperation as she stared at Ian intently.

Ian just looked up at her with lost eyes, tears still sliding down his cheeks. His eyes remained confused for a moment before they widened, shock flashing across his features. "No, Isabelle. I--"

Isabelle sank to her knees, looking at him with pleading eyes. "*Please*, Ian. Please."

I looked between them, saw the conflict in Ian's eyes, the desperation in Izzy's, and I knew. I knew what she was asking him to do. I knew because it was the same idea that had been lingering there, in the back of my mind since I saw the flowers, since I realized the magic wouldn't work. At least, *this* kind of magic wouldn't.

I heard Maeve's warnings in my mind, her whisperings of tainted souls and forbidden darkness. At the time, they'd chilled me to my core, and I couldn't imagine,

couldn't understand how someone could do it, couldn't imagine what could possibly be worth the cost of one's soul. However, as I looked at Jaimie's still form hanging limply in his father's arms, knowing that I could save him, that I could restore the life that had been taken from him... suddenly the cost didn't seem so high. The act didn't seem so wrong. How could it be? How could saving a life, the life of a *child*, be anything but right?

But then I remembered, I remembered that there was more than just a personal cost to this kind of magic. What was it that Maeve had said? It required *blood*, it required *sacrifice*.

A life for a life.

For a moment, I watched Ian pause, watched him hesitate for just a second as he stared at his wife's tear-stained face and then at his son in his arms, as all the thoughts that had been running through my head undoubtedly passed through his, until finally, he shook his head once more, his voice full of pain and sorrow but also steely resolve. "I *won't*, Izzy."

I sat back in shock as relief and disappointment ripped through me, and I watched as Isabelle held his gaze for a moment before turning her eyes toward Jaimie. Ian did, too, and for a moment I thought she'd given in, given up, but then I heard her voice, her words coming out in a soft and regretful whisper. "You will."

And then, so quickly that Ian didn't have time to stop her, she grabbed the knife from the basket beside her and drew it quickly across her neck, a thin red line springing up in its wake.

"NO!" Ian cried as he caught her body as she fell, pressing a hand to the blooming mark of crimson on her pale throat, the bloody knife falling from her listless hand as she gazed up at him with fading eyes.

I watched in horror as blood trickled out of the corner of her mouth and down her neck. I watched as her fluttering chest exhaled one last time, before it suddenly stilled, her eyes becoming sightless as she stared at the sky.

Soon, realization dawned on me, understanding replacing shock as I stared at her lifeless form. Ian had refused to break the laws of nature, to use dark magic to save their son, so she forced his hand. The sacrifice. The blood. Izzy--Izzy supplied it, she'd taken

her own life because she knew, must have known, that Ian wouldn't let her death be in vain. That he couldn't.

"No," Ian repeated again in a hopeless voice, clutching his family's bodies to his chest, one in each arm, before turning his head toward the darkening sky as a scream of pain and anger tore from his throat.

Chest-heaving, he lifted his bloody hand from his wife's still chest, staring at it blankly for a moment before turning toward his son. Clenching his jaw, I watched as he laid his wife gently on the ground before placing his bloody hand atop his son's head, crimson marring the pale skin as he closed his eyes.

Dread and fear filled me as the wind picked up around us, as sheets of freezing rain began to fall upon us and dark storm clouds gathered above our heads, blocking out what was left of the sun. I watched as the flowers and grass began to shrivel up and die beneath Jaimie's body, the blooming meadow reduced to a barren patch of waste. I watched as Ian's skin grew pale and gray, as dark black lines ran down his face and arms, like pure darkness was flowing through his veins.

And, astonishingly, I saw it begin to work.

I saw the red blush return to Jaimie's cheeks. I saw his eyelashes flutter and his hands twitch at his sides. I saw life return to him, even as it was pulled from the very ground beneath him, from the body of his mother beside him.

For a moment, joy filled my heart at the sight, sheer relief that not everything of this family had been lost, that something, some speck of love had been salvaged.

The roaring wind and falling rain grew louder and louder, until it was practically all I could hear, all I could feel. Suddenly, Ian's eyes flashed open, the once blue irises a dark and empty black. The sight sent a jolt of fear through me, but I watched as he glanced down at Jaimie, at his warming cheeks and fluttering eyelids. I watched as those eyes opened, as light blue eyes met pitch black ones in the midst of all the chaos.

"Father?" Jaimie whispered, his mouth clearly forming the word even as the sound of it was lost to the wind. Indescribable joy seemed to sweep over Ian, lighting up his features even as darkness invaded his body. I watched him cry tears of relief as he mouthed "Jaimie," as he stared into his son's open eyes.

And then I watched them close.

Despair and disbelief fell over Ian's features. "No...no, no, it can't be," he murmured, desperation leaking into his words, but even as he said them, I felt the wind begin to lessen, felt the rain weakening, and with it, Jaimie, himself. "Bring him back! *Bring him back!*" Ian screamed as he shook his son roughly, begging him to open his eyes once more. Instead, we both watched in horror as life faded from his cheeks, from his fingertips, until he was as still and silent as before.

At the same time, the wind died, the rain stopped, and the clouds parted, the edge of the sun just barely peeking out over the horizon, illuminating Ian where he remained kneeling on the ground, rocking Jaimie in his arms. Only now that I could see him clearly, he looked nothing like the Ian I'd come to know. His skin was the color of ash, his eyes still as dark as they were in the midst of that tornado.

I watched as those eyes looked down at his gray hands like he'd never seen them before, horror and shame flickering across his features before he glanced desperately toward the body in his lap, the body on the ground, pressing his hand to their chests, listening for sounds of their breath.

Nothing. There was nothing.

Finally, Ian sat back, the bodies of his family at his feet, the land dark and gray and dead all around him.

Then, he screamed.

I woke up with a start, my heart racing as Ian's scream died in my ears. For a moment, I just lay there next to the campfire trying to recover from the shock of the memory, the sadness of Jaimie's death, of Isabelle's, trying to let my frazzled brain put the pieces of what I'd seen together, trying to understand what it all meant, but before I could, I became distracted by the sound of voices near me. My back was to them, and I could barely hear the words, their whispers mostly swallowed up by the cool night air.

"Hey, Tom?" I heard Cassie ask, although her voice sounded softer than usual. More unsure.

"Yeah?" Tom answered, voice slightly groggy from sleep.

"What's he like?"

"Who?"

"Varian." Cassie whispered the name so softly, I barely even heard it.

I heard rustling as Tom sat up, seemingly shaking off his sleepiness. He sighed. “He’s a sorcerer.”

A beat of silence passed, and I wondered if that would be the end of it, before Cassie’s voice broke the relative quiet of the night once more. “Describe him to me.”

“Cassie...” I heard the hesitation in Tom’s voice.

“Look, the only thing I’ve seen of this guy is flying creatures made of darkness and evil and ash and birds and--I just, I need you to describe him to me, okay? I need to know how much of him is a man and how much is--is a monster. I just...I need to know.”

Tom paused, and I wondered for a moment if he’d ever answer her. I heard more rustling, like Tom had scooted closer to Cassie, maybe grabbed her hand. “He is a monster, Cassie. He’s done terrible, terrible things, but he’s still a man, too. At least, part of him is, and a man can be killed. *Will* be killed, I just--

“Just what?”

“I wish I knew what he *wanted*, what all this was for: Rose’s banishment, my parents--my parents’ death...all of it, you know?”

And as I lay there, I realized I *did* know. After all, it was the *man* that Pinstripe man had wanted me to see, the man whose life I had walked through like the pages of a book, whose darkest moment I had experienced by his side. Maybe the monster had its own goals, its own purpose, but I knew the man, and I knew that what he wanted more than anything was his family, and perhaps, after centuries and centuries, he’d finally worked out a way to do it.

Varian had already been so close, *so* close to bringing Jaimie back. The problem wasn’t that Ian hadn’t been powerful enough, at least it didn’t seem to be, not to me. The fact that Isabelle insisted he had to be the one to do the spell...Ian must have had a high magical affinity, all the signs were there, but Izzy–Izzy didn’t, and maybe, just maybe, that lack of power made her an insufficient sacrifice as well. After all, that sacrifice, her blood, had been the true cost of bringing Jaimie back; everything else seemed to have only been a side effect.

But if *I* realized this, surely, Varian would--

And then it was like a lightbulb went off in my head, the truth becoming so clear to me I wondered how I’d missed it all this time. What was it that Lee had said? I had the

greatest magical affinity Crestfall had ever seen. All this time, Varian hadn't been trying to kill me, but to capture me. He banished me for a reason, kept me alive for a reason, and for the first time since this whole journey started, I finally understood why.

Varian needed me.

More specifically, Varian needed me to die.

I was the key, the only sacrifice that had a chance of bringing his family back, one that wouldn't fail at the last minute, wouldn't fall through.

All this time, I thought I'd been defying Varian's will, thought I was thwarting all his carefully laid plans, but the truth was, I was doing almost exactly what he wanted. I was bringing myself to him, playing into his grand design. In the end, he wouldn't need to capture me in order to bring me to the castle, I would bring myself there, like a lamb to slaughter. And he would kill me in order to bring his family back.

And the truth was, I couldn't exactly blame him. I'd watched as his entire world had been torn from his arms, watched as he tried to do the right thing only to be forced into doing, into *becoming*, what he despised most. He'd already paid the internal cost, already sacrificed his soul, the only one that would be hurt from giving him what he wants would be--

Me.

As these realizations dawned on me, one after another, I knew I should probably feel fear or frustration or rage, but in that moment, I couldn't help but feel a kind of...relief. Before, my friends had been expecting me to defeat Varian magically, to use my power to succeed where all others, including my past self, had failed. To be the leader they'd set out to find. But it seemed, in order to banish Varian, I wouldn't need to do all that, *be* all that.

I would just need to die.

To let Varian sacrifice me, bring his family back, and hopefully, disappear.

Don't get me wrong, I was in no hurry to die, and the thought of never returning to Earth, of never getting to finish the life I felt I'd only just begun, made my chest feel tight and my eyes well up with tears. I didn't want to die, I knew that, but I also knew that I'd do whatever it took to protect my friends, my family, my realm.

And if I decided against that, if I said my life wasn't something I was willing to give up in order to stop Varian, did that mean that I should run instead? As fast and as far away as possible? That I should go home? Wouldn't it be safer for the kingdom that way, for my friends, if Varian never got what he wanted? If he never got me?

And I guess there was a third option, the most unlikely one if you asked me, the one where I used my magical powers to somehow best the most powerful sorcerer in the realm, the one that my friends seemed intent on banking on despite my many doubts and protests. Still, I couldn't help but want to share their confidence, to close my eyes against logic and reason and create the life I'd always wanted for myself. I wouldn't have to leave or to die. I'd get to live and love and find my own place in this magical realm.

Like I said. Unlikely.

"Summer, are you okay? Is something wrong?"

I hadn't realized I'd sat up until Cassie's voice broke me out of my thoughts, her blue eyes perplexed by whatever emotion she seemed to see on my face.

And as I looked at her and Tom, I realized I wanted to tell them everything, wanted to hear their advice, to ask them what to do, but the truth was, I didn't need to ask them the question in order to know what their answer would be. I would tell them about Varian, about what he wanted. They would wake Maeve and Lee, and Lee would tell me *no, don't even think about it*, would tell me that he *believes in me* and that I was *capable of anything*. Would tell me that my death wasn't an outcome he was willing to accept. The others would agree, and I would smile, shaking off the memory like a bad nightmare, allowing them to convince me that my life was worth the risk, was worth endangering the lives of everyone else in the kingdom.

Or, they would send me and Cassie home, and they would try to take on Varian by themselves, and I would be back once more in my same old life, sipping hot chocolate at Starbucks with Cassie, goofing off with Max during chemistry, trying to avoid thinking about the future, about my place, as if all of this had been but a bad dream that I'd finally awoken from.

"Everything's fine, Cassie. Everything's fine."

CHAPTER 16

Identity Theft is Not a Joke

I hadn't slept. In fact, I hadn't even moved for most of the night, like my body was unsure of whether rising meant running away, meant going forward or back, and so resolved to remain still. It wasn't until the three suns began to peek over the green treetops that I felt the camp begin to stir to life around me, and I with it.

Sometime during the night, in between anxiously watching the stars for any dark and ominous bird shapes and fighting the urge to grab my backpack and make a break towards the nearest portal, I'd come to a decision. Well, a *sort* of decision.

I'd decided *not* to decide. At least, not yet.

Right now, Varian, my magic, everything might seem impossible, but I didn't want to pursue the idea of sacrificing myself until I was sure I couldn't do the job any other way. I was learning new things about this world, about myself, every day, and I was determined to hold onto some form of hope for as long as I could. Besides, I wasn't even sure that I even understood what I'd witnessed in the memory, what had gone so wrong with Isabelle's sacrifice. I felt now more than ever that I was continuously being surrounded and manipulated by forces I could barely hope to understand much less control.

Still, it felt selfish...wrong, to ignore the option that would spare the most innocent lives. Even if I had the power to defeat Varian, the necessary strength, it would mean a battle. It would mean a war. With casualties on both sides.

My eyes were drawn to Cassie as she sighed heavily and heaved her pack onto her shoulders before turning to look at the triplet sunrise, her gaze lingering for a moment like she'd all of a sudden been struck once more by the unfamiliarity, the strangeness of her situation reflected in the light of those foreign suns.

I watched as she pulled her pitch black hair into a business-like ponytail, tugging on the sleeves of her leather suit like she didn't quite feel comfortable in it. She didn't belong here, even more than I didn't. She was staying for me. She was only here because

of *me*. Because she wouldn't leave me to fight this alone. Sure, I had Maeve and Tom and Lee with me, but Cassie wouldn't think they could offer the same support, that they could understand me in the same way she could, and she was right in a way. Cassie knew a part of me the others would never fully understand, the same way the others knew a part of me Cassie would never quite understand.

And I knew, the second the fight began, the second all this became real for her in a way it perhaps hadn't been before, she wouldn't run like any smart person would do, wouldn't keep out of harm's way, not if harm's way was exactly where I was, where I had to be. No, when the battle came, she'd be right in the middle of it. That was just who she was.

Was I really willing to endanger her life just to save my own?

And Maeve and Tom and...Lee. They would all die for me, for the kingdom, if it came down to it. Without question. What kind of ruler would I be if I wasn't willing to do the same?

I gathered my things in silence, as did the rest of the group, like we were all too afraid to disturb the morning air with our voices lest any unfriendly ears be listening. Lee didn't look at me, and I made an effort not to look at him, but it was hard, I found my gaze continuously drawn back to him as he busied himself around the camp. I wanted too much to talk to him, to tell him what I'd learned. I wanted to feel his tight arms around me, to tell me exactly what I should do, what the *right* thing was to do, but the longer I looked at him, the more I realized that Lee, despite all his confidence and strength, perhaps had even less answers than me. And it showed.

His hair was a tousled mess, like he'd been running his fingers through it all night, and his eyes were bloodshot as he gazed into the distance, deep in contemplation about something.

I wish I didn't know what that something was, what inner turmoil was to blame for disturbing his rest. I wished that I didn't know, but more than that, I wished that I didn't *care*. All this would be so much easier, so much simpler if I didn't care so damned much. If I didn't care what Lee thought of me, whether he loved me. If I didn't care about Crestfall, or about my life on Earth or about living at all.

But I *did* care, and as the four of us arranged ourselves in front of Lee, waiting for his lead, I found that I didn't want anything more in that moment than for him to turn and look at me, to *see* me, because without him, without seeing myself reflected in those forest green eyes, I didn't think I could do it, didn't think I could justify it: living, when my death might just be the only thing that could save us all.

Lee's eyes were hard as he looked at us, his expression determined, and I couldn't help thinking that he'd never looked more like a true Captain of the Guard than in that moment. "We'll be approaching reaper territory soon, but we will not, I repeat, we will *not* engage with them. They're a solitary race, and I doubt they've aligned with Varian, but that doesn't mean they're not dangerous, and I'd rather face a pack of dark gulls *and* ashers than let them know we're here. Understood?"

The rest of the group nodded, and I heard Cassie whisper, "um--what the hell are reapers" to Maeve. That was a question I wouldn't mind being answered myself. The name had kept popping up since all this began, on Earth, in Crestfall, in memories that I didn't fully understand. From what I'd been able to piece together, something had happened when I was young, something that made me--at least, the old me--fear reapers above all other creatures, so much so that all originals had become something to fear in my eyes.

I tried to picture the most terrifying creatures I could think of, but I couldn't quite imagine anything worse than the ashers, or the grim, or the ogres or any other creature I'd faced in the past week. A part of me wanted to ask Lee about it, wanted to know exactly what it was about them that made them so dangerous, but I couldn't quite get the words out, couldn't make my mouth form the question when I didn't really want to know the answer. Right now, my fear of them was more vague, more abstract, mixing with my fear of Varian and everything else. I didn't want to make it any more potent, any more real, not when I needed to stay focused, now more than ever. No, I'd ask *after* we made it through, not before.

Lee nodded his head toward Maeve. "Maeve, you take the lead. Tom, stick close to Cassie--no," he said sharply when Tom raised his eyebrows suggestively at Cassie, "No distractions. Understood?"

Tom nodded solemnly, all traces of humor gone from his features, and Lee finally turned toward me. He didn't let his gaze on me rest for very long before he caught himself, before he turned to address the entire group, but it had been just long enough to suck the breath from my lungs, my heart aching at what I saw in his eyes. Pain. Beneath all the firmness and determination, beneath the facade of the captain of the guard, there was so much pain, and I couldn't help feeling like it was my fault, that I put it there, all because I couldn't be what he wanted me to be--*who* he wanted me to be. The thought made me shift my gaze toward the ground. "Summer and I will bring up the rear. Any sign of reapers, we take off back to where we camped and regroup. Follow us when you can."

I jerked my head up in surprise. If we ran into trouble, Lee wanted us to--what? Leave them behind? He's got to be out of his mind if he thought I was even going to consider doing that. What was so scary about these reapers that they made him willing to abandon his friends in order to keep me safe? What the hell were we walking into?

We set out through the woods, following the path. Well, I think calling it a path was a bit too generous. It was more like a slight lessening in the dense green foliage. There *was* an actual path. I could just barely see it about twenty yards away, but Maeve seemed to think this would be a stealthier route. I would be inclined to agree with her if I was able to move the way she could. I could see her about a hundred feet ahead of me, meandering swiftly between the branches and hopping gracefully over the rocks and exposed roots littering the ground, each footstep as noiseless as the last.

Cassie, surprisingly, didn't seem to be making much noise either, but I soon realized it was because Tom was practically clearing the way for her, pulling branches away and giving her a hand as she stepped over rocks and past broken limbs. I half-expected Cassie to reject his offered hands, but she seemed to accept them rather gratefully. I guess their midnight chat last night had brought them a bit closer than I realized.

Unfortunately, all this had the unfortunate side effect of making my awkward bumbling that much more conspicuous. I didn't know how I did it, but I somehow managed to step on every twig and crunch every leaf, so much so that it felt like my racketous progress could be heard by any and all creatures who happened to be walking

through these woods. It didn't help that every *snap* and *creak* was met by a disapproving *hmpf* by Lee as he walked behind me, his steps as frustratingly silent as Maeve's.

"I don't need a babysitter, you know," I grumbled.

"I disagree," he replied from behind me, reaching out and plucking a leaf from my hair. "Last time, I told you to run if we got into trouble, and instead, you--"

I swatted his hand away from my head. "*Instead*, I saved your life. No need to thank me by the way."

"I won't thank you. You're lucky that we got away last time, that we were able to stay ahead of the tracker, but trust me, the odds of that working out again are slim. This time, I'm not taking any chances."

I stopped walking, squaring my shoulders angrily as I turned to look at him. "If you think there's any way I'm going to leave my friends--"

"You will. I'll carry you over my shoulders if I have to."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You wouldn't--"

Lee cut me off, his voice rising in anger and frustration. "Listen, Summer. You're the princess, and that means making sacrifices for the common good. You can't be selfish--"

"*Selfish*?! You-- you---" I turned my back on him before taking a deep breath and moving clumsily once more down the path, Cassie's back in the distance just barely visible through the broken foliage. I assumed Lee chose to follow me. I couldn't tell because the bastard was just too silent. Still, I refused to glance back to check, too angry at what he'd said.

Selfish? He thought *I* was being selfish, after everything I'd given up to come here, every effort I made to be the girl he really wanted, he had the audacity to call *me* selfish. The thought made my blood boil in my veins, and we walked in fuming silence for a bit, until Lee's voice unexpectedly broke the relative quiet.

"I'm sorry."

I was so surprised that I almost stopped in my tracks, and I felt any residual anger that I had fade into nothingness at his soft words. "Me too."

Lee sped up a little until he was walking beside me, but he didn't look at me, eyes angled toward the ground. "It's just easier to be mad than--"

“Yeah, I get it,” I said softly, because I did. Being angry *was* easier, was simpler than trying to sort out all the mixed up feelings swirling around inside me, but I knew I wasn’t really angry, at least not with him. With myself, maybe, with the situation, *definitely*, but not with him. In fact, now more than ever, I wanted to talk to him. I needed his help, and maybe now that we’d sort of drawn a line between us, between me and the girl he actually loved, he might be able to look at my problem with clearer eyes than if...well, than if it was me that he loved.

Summoning up my courage, I looked towards him. “Lee, I know things are weird between us right now...and that I’d said I’d give you time, I just-- I--I need you.”

Lee looked up at me, his eyes softening. “What is it?”

I looked away from him, away from that softness, before it made me lose my nerve. “What would you do if there was a way that we didn’t have to fight Varian?”

Lee gave me a confused look. “I don’t understand.”

“I mean, a way we could give him what he wants and still keep Crestfall safe.”

Lee shook his head. “Summer, Crestfall safe is the exact *opposite* of what Varian wants; he wants to destroy it--” he gestured around him-- “To destroy *everything*. You’ve already seen the dead magic--”

I waved a hand in the air, cutting him off. “But what if we could get him to stop, to go away without a fight?”

“Summer, I don’t--”

I continued, not really hearing what Lee said, lost in the notion, in the dream of having all the people I was responsible for, all the people I loved and cared about, safe from harm. “Think of all those people, Lee. All the members of the guard, all the people left in the castle and the town. Cassie, Maeve, Tom...--” I turned toward him, meeting his concerned green gaze-- “you. You would all be safe.”

Lee just shook his head again. “There’s no way--”

“There is, Lee,” I insisted, and Lee paused his walking and just looked at me, his face both patient and skeptical at the same time as he waited for me to tell him what magical solution I’d found that would solve all our problems.

I took a deep breath, trying to steel myself for his reaction. “I know what Varian wants, what he’s always wanted. I’ve been having these visions--”

“Visions--like memories?” Lee interrupted excitedly, hope dancing in his eyes and leaking into his voice before he could stop it. I felt my heart squeeze painfully in my chest. To Lee, more memories still seemed to mean more Rose, to mean I was becoming more the girl he wished I was.

It hurt me to smother the hope in those eyes, the light, almost as much as it hurt to see it there in the first place. “Yes, but not my own. At least, not all the time. And in these visions, I saw Varian, I saw what made him the way he is, what turned him from the light.”

“You’ve been having visions of Varian?” Lee said slowly, like he was trying to process it. I nodded, and Lee shook his head, green eyes flashing in anger and fear as they rested on me. He didn’t even need to say it. I could already see the words written there in those wildfire eyes. *You should have told me.*

Lee ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “So, how do you know what you’re seeing is even real? How do you know he’s not tricking you, messing with your mind--”

I grabbed Lee’s hand. “They’re real, Lee. I know they are, and I saw something in them. I saw--” I took a deep breath, steadying myself. “The stories got it wrong, Lee. Varian’s son died, and his wife killed herself so Varian would be forced to try to bring him back.”

I watched as Lee drew in a sharp breath, his eyes darkening as he absorbed what I said. “She *forced* him to use dark magic?”

“Yes, but it didn’t work. Isabelle, his wife--I think, I think she wasn’t a strong enough sacrifice, she didn’t have enough...” I turned away, not wanting to finish the sentence, not wanting to face whatever reaction Lee might have to the news. A part of me was worried that he might be angry and protective, that the suggestion of sacrificing myself might cause him to lose his grip on his emotions and send him over the edge, but a bigger part of me was worried that he wouldn’t do those things. That he wouldn’t be angry at all. That he wouldn’t tell me that I was crazy or that we had to find another way. That he wouldn’t care about losing Summer. About losing me.

Lee squeezed my hand, drawing my gaze back to him. “Enough what?”

I took a deep breath, continuing. “Enough magical affinity. In fact, I don’t think anyone has...until now. Why else would Varian wait this long? Why attack now?”

Lee's eyes widened. "You think he was waiting--"

"For me--" I looked down at myself, at my hand clasped in his, his grip growing tighter by the second, before turning my watery gaze toward Lee. I gave him a small, sad smile, but there was no joy in it. "Yeah, I think he was. So, what would you do, Lee? If you could save the entire realm, all those innocent lives, just by giving up one?"

Lee just looked at me in silence, his face hard and unreadable, before he finally said one word. "No."

"Lee--"

"No!" Lee repeated forcefully, stepping closer until we stood chest to chest. He raised his hands to my cheeks, shaking his head desperately as he wiped the tears from my skin. "How could you even--don't even say that, Summer. There's no way. No way."

"But if it will save--"

"It's not worth it, Summer. I can't--I can't lose you again, I won't, I *won't*--"

"Don't you see, Lee?" I said, lifting up a hand until it rested on his cheek. "You're not really losing the girl you love because she's already gone. You're just--just losing the girl that loves you."

The words seemed to float there between us for a moment, and I knew I couldn't take them back even if I wanted to. I waited for the fear to come, the panic from putting myself, my heart out there where he could so easily save or break it, but it never did. Maybe it was the newfound knowledge that I might not live through the week, but suddenly I didn't see the point of keeping it all in anymore, of denying everything that I was feeling. I might not know why, or for how long, or even if he could ever love me back, but I knew I loved Lee. He'd made me fall in love with him, the bastard, and I suddenly couldn't take another step without him knowing it.

"But what if that girl's not someone I can bear to lose?" Lee's voice was soft, gentle, yet his tone was sure.

My heart practically leapt with joy at his words, yet still, I shook my head, looking down. The last thing I wanted was his pity. "Lee, you don't have to--"

Lee cut me off, his eyes so open and honest that I didn't need a special bond to know he was telling the truth. "I don't know what I feel yet, Summer, and I know you think that the girl I knew is gone forever, and maybe you're right, but the girl I *loved*?"

She's still there, Summer. I know she is, and I'm not about to let her go just yet--to let *you* go.

"Lee--"

"We can defeat him. Together, we're strong enough--"

"You didn't see him, Lee, when it happened. The entire sky went black, the wind raged..." I felt a shiver creep down my spine at the memory. "His eyes--his eyes went so dark, Lee, *so* dark--"

Lee's jaw grew tight, his mouth set into a grim line like he too had been drawn into an unpleasant memory. "I have seen him, Summer. I've fought him, and I'd rather fight him a thousand more times than hand you over to him."

I removed his hands from my face and stepped away from him, wiping any remaining tears from my cheeks. "Well, that's not your decision to make."

"Summer--"

"*Being a leader means making sacrifices for the common good.* That's what you said, Lee, and you're right."

Lee stepped toward me, his hands up in a pleading motion. "Please, Summer. It's not just me. This *kingdom* needs you, too. More than you know. "

I threw my hands up in the air in frustration. Lee was a leader, a warrior, a man of honor. Why couldn't he understand? They were all willing to sacrifice their lives for me. For the kingdom. I had no right to do any less than that. "This is my duty, Lee. You said it yourself. This is what I was born for. The kingdom will be fine. You'll still have my parents to rule and--"

"No, Summer. You don't understand--"

Whoosh! Whatever Lee was going to say was abruptly cut off by the sound of something whipping past our faces and impaling itself in the trunk to our right with a hard *thunk*. For a second, Lee and I could only stare at it in confusion and surprise. It was long and thin and had soft purple fletchings, and the end seemed to be dripping black goo, like it was covered in some sort of---

"POISON DARTS!" Lee shouted. "RUN!"

Lee grabbed my hand and we took off at a sprint as the sound of more darts whooshing through the air filled our ears. There were no more measured steps, no more

attempts at stealth. Instead, we crashed through the woods like wild boars, branches and leaves scratching at our faces and arms as we tried to outrun whatever new horror was chasing us.

“Reapers?” I shouted breathlessly at Lee as we ran, who had us moving and bobbing and running in a zigzag motion, trying to throw off the pursuers' aim. Still, my heart thundered in my chest and fear filled my veins as I was sure any second a dart would impale me and seep poison into my veins.

“Wrong direction!” Lee shouted over his shoulders. “Those darts--” *jump*-- “were dipped--” *duck*-- “in poison--- so that means--”

“Pixies,” I finished for him, the word coming out as a breathless groan. Great, like we didn't have enough problems already.

I had just enough brain power not involved in running and jumping for my life to acknowledge how remarkably lucky we were that we hadn't been hit yet. If it hadn't been for Lee's evasive maneuvering and the thick brush that surrounded us, I was sure we would have been struck down by now. Despite the scratches and bruises, I was exceedingly thankful for the lack of clear space.

Unfortunately, no sooner had the thought entered my head than I began to notice a bit of light and green peeking out through the branches ahead.

Suddenly, we crashed through what seemed to be the last branches of the wood and bright sunshine appeared once more, its intensity practically blinding me after the shade of the forest. I was only barely able to register that we seemed to have emerged at the bottom of a mountain in a rocky and barren clearing surrounding its base before I heard Cassie's voice ring out from somewhere ahead of us.

“DUCK!” She shouted, but I barely had time to comprehend what she said before Lee yanked us both to the ground.

The sound of darts whooshing past us suddenly mixed with the sound of arrows whizzing over our heads, followed quickly by inhuman squeals of pain. I quickly looked up and managed to catch sight of a pixie just as it was falling from the sky, one of its little gray wings pierced by one of Tom's arrows and leaking what looked like navy blood. Its skin was light gray, almost blue and appeared tough and leathery. It had beady little black eyes, a pudgy little stomach, a snout type nose and ears that were small but

floppy. It kind of looked like a mix between a bat and basset hound, although much more the former than the latter.

All in all, I was pretty sure they were the first creatures in Crestfall that didn't completely surprise me. Whether it was because they actually looked a bit how I imagined pixies would look or because I was just becoming *that* desensitized to these kinda things, I wasn't sure.

More and more pixies emerged from the woods, most of them carrying what looked like a thin piece of bamboo and a small brown bag full of the dripping black darts, and I felt Lee pull me backwards as Tom continued to shoot arrows over our heads, slowing the pixies approach, but not my much. There were just too many of them, and we had no real place to go, pinned down as we were, between a mountain and the woods we'd just emerged from. And unlike us, they had wings.

We finally reached the others who had formed a little line with their backs to the mountain. Maeve with knives in hand and an almost excited gleam in her brown eyes. Tom, bow drawn and firing, his expression cool and determined. And Cassie, who seemed to have equipped herself with a pile of small rocks which she was currently hurling at the swarm heading toward us, her face brave, although I thought I could see the shine of fear in her eyes.

The pixies were still shooting darts at us, their shots getting closer and closer to hitting the mark as they closed the distance between us. I knew it would only be a matter of time until they found their targets.

So, I didn't think. I just squeezed Lee's hand and imagined the air shifting around us, growing firmer, more dense. I channeled the magic from the ground, lifting a hand and swinging it above and around my head kind of like I was swinging a rope, the magic following with it. I felt Lee squeeze my hand back, and I saw him copy the motion out of the corner of my eye. I sucked in a rapid breath as the force of the magic suddenly seemed to double, the shield around us growing stronger and more quickly until our little group was completely surrounded by a kind of buffer that allowed nothing to pass, inside or out. It was almost completely transparent save for a bluish glow surrounding its edges. A forcefield straight out of Star Wars, just like I pictured.

“Holy crap. This is like some straight jedi shit,” I heard Cassie whisper behind me.

The pixies amassed themselves in front of us, what looked to be about fifty in all, touching the barrier and pressing in on it like they were looking for weaknesses. They seemed to grow more and more desperate when they didn’t find any, growling angrily and shooting dart after dart into the shield, seemingly more in frustration than in an actual attempt to get through. I even saw one pixie grab hold of the pixie closest to him and hurl him straight at the barrier with all his strength. The unfortunate pixie projectile hit the barrier with a *thwack* and bounced off like all the darts, falling to the ground for a few feet before catching itself, rubbing his head, and squealing what I assumed were various pixie profanities before launching himself at the one who yeeted him at the shield.

I tried to stay focused, but the longer we held the magic up, the more I began to feel it. That same... pleasure I’d felt in the meadow, the same intoxicating desire, not to keep the magic pressed down, but to let it go, to let it all out, to let it destroy *anyone* or *anything* that dared stand against me.

I tried to push that feeling down, to silence the little voice inside me that told me to unleash it all, to *destroy* them all, but I could feel it there, lingering beneath my skin, threatening to bubble up like maniacal laughter.

It was like, with Lee’s help, I could control the magic, could make it do whatever I wanted, but suddenly—

Suddenly, there was a part of me that didn’t want to. Like the more control I gained over the magic, the less I had over myself.

I sent Lee a panicked look. I couldn’t keep this up for long, didn’t know how long I could resist the intoxicating pull of the magic. Lee just looked at me with wide and helpless eyes. I didn’t tell him what I was feeling. Thanks to the bond he already knew, could feel the temptation of the magic as strongly as I did, *exactly* as strongly as I did, and I could tell by the look in his eyes that he didn’t know how long he could last either, but what could we do? We were safe, for now, but we were also completely and utterly trapped.

Fortunately, it seemed the pixies were having a bit of trouble deciding on their next move as well. Two of the larger pixies had maneuvered their way to the front of the

pack. They seemed like they were in charge, although besides their size there wasn't much to distinguish them from the rest of the group, at least, not as far as I could see. "What do we do, sssire? We cannot get through the magic wall." They're words had a slither about them that sent a shiver down my spine, and I thought I caught sight of a forked tongue peeking out from between leathery lips.

The other pixie, who I assumed was the king, (or queen, it was rather hard to tell), seemed to stroke his chin thoughtfully as he examined both the wall and the motley crew trapped inside of it. "He sssaid the girl would have dark hair now, didn't he Sssarkin?"

I felt my heart thump loudly in my chest and had to resist the urge to shoot a glance at Cassie.

"Indeed, sssire."

"Well, which one iss it?"

"I'm...not sssure, sssire."

The head pixie looked at us for a moment longer and sighed, before waving a clawed hand like he was beckoning someone forward. "Bring it."

A couple of pixies flew toward him holding a small brown box over their heads. They positioned the box in front of him, and he slowly opened the lid, eyes widening as he stared at whatever was inside. The other pixies behind him leaned away from the contents of the box but, at the same time, couldn't manage to tear their eyes away from them, fear and awe fighting for placement on their features. "He had usss make thisss special for you, princesss, whenever you... got away."

The head Pixie slowly lifted what looked like another poison dart from the box, only this one seemed different, the end covered in a bright red substance that gleamed in the afternoon sun. "I do hope you appreciate our craftssmanship."

I felt sweat drip from my brow as my limbs shook, as I fought to maintain control. I shot Lee a questioning look, hoping he might have some clue what was so special about the dart, but his eyes were squeezed shut as he gritted his teeth, like resisting the magic was the only thing he could focus on right now. I turned back toward the pixie as he loaded the dart, trying to tell myself it didn't matter, that the shield would hold, that I would *make* it hold. No matter what.

“Problem iss: I have one dart, and two maidens fitting the princess’ description.” The head pixie clicked his forked tongue as he looked between Cassie and I with his beady little eyes. “Quite a conundrum, issn’t it?”

“Sucks to be you, then,” Cassie shouted from beside me.

I wanted to tell her to be quiet, but the pixie chuckled darkly. “Oh, I wouldn’t be too worried ssince you’re ssimply going to *tell* me which one of you is the princess.”

“And why the hell would we do that?” I spit out through clenched teeth.

“Because, the princess...” he said, looking between us, “*whichever* of you that is, has the rather ssickeningly ssweet habit of doing *anything* for her friendss, or sso our ssources tell uss. A habit we’re now going to put to the tesst.”

The head pixie stroked the dart with loving fingers, although I noticed he was careful to avoid making direct contact with the poison at the end. “The poisson on this dart will torture you, mercilessly, I might add, and eventually, kill you. Unless, you’re given the proper cure, of course.”

“And you just happen to have that cure?” Cassie asked, sarcastically, although I could hear the slight edge of panic in her voice.

The head pixie nodded. “Ass a matter of fact we do, but I’m afraid it only worksss on those with *royal* blood—” The pixie paused, smiling darkly—”Sso come out, come out, wherever you are, little princesss. And ssave your friend from a rather agonizing death.”

I felt Cassie’s eyes on me, but I didn’t tear mine away from the pixies, needing a moment to process what he’d said, to try and to tell just how much of it was a lie. The pixie had seemed sincere, almost gleefully so, as he stated our inevitable demise should we get shot by the dart, but these pixies worked for Varian, and Varian needed me. Alive. At least for now.

What if I got shot and my friends decided not to hand me over? What if the cure didn’t work on me? I found it hard to believe Varian, a man who had spent the last few centuries carefully plotting his next move, would risk destroying his most valuable piece right when he’s this close to winning the game. No, the pixies must be lying. That dart wouldn’t kill me.

But it would kill Cassie.

She was just a human. She had no place here, no magical strength. The poison might not hurt me, but it would destroy her, I was sure of it.

But before I could decide whether or not to just say the words, to do what I'd been thinking about doing all night and give myself up, or at least to just call them out on their lies and see what they'd do next, Cassie stepped forward. "It's me. I'm the princ—"

Whoosh! It seemed like the dart moved in slow motion as it left the pixie's stick and flew through the air, red tip gleaming as it cut through the shield like it wasn't even there, seeming to fly faster and faster until it impaled itself in Cassie's neck, and she fell to the ground. She didn't even have time to scream.

But I did.

I screamed in rage and despair as Maeve knelt by Cassie's body, holding her shoulders as she convulsed on the ground. "No!" Tom shouted, falling to his knees beside her, and I tried to go to her. I would have let the shield drop if Lee hadn't squeezed by hand, drawing me from my panic, and I was only barely able to keep it up, realizing that if I let it drop there would be nothing to stop the pixie's from killing us all.

The head pixie lowered his stick, observing Cassie's shuddering body with cool indifference. "Give us the Princess, and we'll cure her. Don't, and she will die. You have until sundown." The head pixie turned to go, but before he did, he smiled darkly at us, letting his eyes linger on me. "And if that *isn't* the princess, well then...my condolences."

And with that, the pixies left almost as quickly as they came, the buzzing of their wings growing quieter and quieter as they disappeared back into the dark woods.

CHAPTER 17

Roses Are Red

I knew I should have waited, should have held on for a few extra minutes just to make sure all the pixies had gone, but the second the last one crossed the tree line, I let the shield drop, ripping my hand from Lee's as I raced over to Cassie's side. "Cassie?! Cassie!"

She was still convulsing on the ground, her body jerking this way and that as little cries of pain escaped her lips, tears streaming from her closed eyes. Panic rushed through me as my hands fluttered above her, unsure of what to do, how to help. Tom had moved until her head rested in his lap, stroking her hair as she thrashed and thrashed. He looked up at me with tear-filled eyes. "What do we do?"

I turned back toward Lee who seemed to have fallen to his knees where I left him, trying to catch his breath. I held my hand out to him, trying to ignore the way it was shaking. "C'mon, Lee, we can— we can heal her, right? We can—"

"I already tried," Maeve said softly, shaking her head as she looked at Cassie, holding one of her twitching hands gently in her own. "Whatever poison this is... magic can't fix it."

I stared at Maeve's hand in Cassie's for a moment before I shook my head, refusing to believe it. I'd seen everything that magic could do here. The miracles it could perform. Maybe Maeve just wasn't strong enough. Maybe Cassie just needed more magic to save her, more than Maeve could channel, more than anyone could channel, except me.

I suddenly felt Lee's presence behind me, warm and reassuring, and I held one hand up to him and placed another on Cassie's shoulder, wordlessly asking for his help to save my friend, knowing it meant asking him to endure the temptation of the magic itself, knowing and asking anyway.

I half-expected him to refuse, or at least to pause before agreeing to call forth such power, to resist such intoxication, because that is what it felt like, using the bond to

control the magic, like you'd been hit with a strong dose of heroin, and all you wanted was more, more more, and yet you had to force yourself to resist. To abstain.

But Lee didn't even hesitate, gripping my hand tightly in his own. Perhaps it was because he could feel it, all my desperation, all my anger and grief, like it was his own. Or perhaps it was because he'd come to care about Cassie, or at least had begun to understand what kind of bond the two of us had, and what it might do to me if that bond was lost. If she was lost.

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and called forth the magic, bending it to my will, the action almost as easy as breathing thanks to the presence of Lee's hand in mine. But then there was the cost of that control, the intoxicating pull to let the magic out, to test all my limits, to utterly unleash it, to unleash myself, my true power, upon the world.

My current rage only amplified this desire, and it took everything in me to focus only on letting the magic heal, to force it to mend when all it wanted to do, all *I* wanted to do, was to destroy.

After a few moments, I opened my eyes, praying that when I did I would see Cassie again, whole and healthy beneath my fingers, smiling and laughing at me as she told me to quit being so dramatic and to practice the harry potter shit on somebody else. But instead of a smile, instead of warm and rosy cheeks...

I saw real roses.

They grew up, up, up, tickling Cassie's cheeks and intertwining with her dark hair. Some were red as blood. Some white as snow. A few spots of sunshine yellow were mixed in with the bunch. All bursting from the ground and crawling their way to the sky, enthroning Cassie in a bed of flowers until she looked like she'd fallen asleep in a meadow. Until she looked like—

No. No. She wasn't like him. This wasn't like what happened to him, to *them*. Cassie was still moving, still writhing back and forth like she was trapped in a nightmare she couldn't awake from. Still, the sight of the flowers made me lean back suddenly, like I'd been slapped. Because I knew what they meant. Like a bouquet resting against a headstone, they meant wounds so severe even magic couldn't heal them. They meant powerlessness.

They meant death.

I shook my head wildly, not bothering to wipe the tears away as they streamed down my face. “No, no, no! Shit, Lee. This can’t happen. I can’t lose her.”

Lee’s face was ashen as he leveled his dejected gaze on me, reaching a hand toward my cheek. “I’m sorry, Summer—”

I swatted the hand away, turning back toward Cassie. “No, don’t say that. She’s still here. She’s still—”

Lee’s voice drifted over my shoulder, gentle but firm. “You heard what they said, Summer. This poison will kill her.”

“So we get them to give us the antidote.”

“There is no antidote for her.”

I shook my head. “We can’t know that. Not for sure. We’ll go to them, *force* them to help us—”

Lee grabbed my hand, forcing me to look at him. “That’s exactly what they want you to do, Summer. They want you to head back into those woods without a plan, without thinking, and run right into their trap. I doubt we’d get three steps into their territory before they took us down.”

I turned to look over my shoulder at him, meeting his concerned gaze with my own resolute one. “I do have a plan.”

“And what’s that?”

“A trade.”

I saw Lee’s eyes widen as he grasped what I meant, but before he could open his mouth up to protest, Maeve beat him to it. “Are you crazy? You’d be serving yourself up to Varian on a silver platter.”

I nodded and raised my chin, trying to ignore the fear, to be brave long enough to do what I had to do. “If that’s what it takes—”

Lee shook his head, his desperation and anger rising once more to the surface. “You’d be giving him exactly what he’s wanted all along. And everything, all this would be for nothing, Cassie’s sacrifice would mean noth—”

I threw my hands in the air. “It shouldn’t mean anything because it never should have happened! Her death won’t help anyone—”

“What, and yours will?” Lee snapped.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You know the answer to that.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Tom asked, glancing between the two of us in confusion, his soft voice interrupting our shouting match.

I took a deep breath, tearing my eyes away from Lee’s angry green gaze to look at Tom and Maeve. “I know what made Varian this way, this evil, and I know what he wants—”

“You *think* you know,” Lee interrupted. “You told me, yourself you weren’t sure—”

I whipped my head back toward him. “Well, one thing I am sure of is that I’m not just going to let Cassie die to save my life, especially when my death just might be the one thing that saves us all.”

Lee ran his hands through his hair in frustration before reaching out and taking my hands in his own, pleading with me as he stared into my eyes. “Even if you go to the pixies and tell them what happened, what makes you think they’ll cure Cassie? That they even can? You heard what they said, if Cassie doesn’t turn out to be the princess, they’re not banking on you storming into the forest to save her, but to *avenge* her.”

“No,” I protested, but understanding wrapped around my heart like a vice, squeezing it so hard it felt like I couldn’t breathe. Lee was right.

“And when you find them, chances are they’ll just kill the rest of us on the spot and take you away, and Cassie will end up dead either way—”

I pulled my hands away from his roughly, trying to make him stop talking, trying not to hear the truth in his words. “Okay. Okay, I get it. So what am I supposed to do? Just sit here and watch her die?” My voice broke on the last word as I ran a hand along Cassie’s forehead, lingering on the crease in her brow as she fought some unknowable pain, unable to ignore how pale and clammy her skin felt.

“She made her choice, Summer,” Lee said softly. “We all did when we decided to come with you, to help you defeat Varian. Now, you just have to let her go—”

My mind flashed back to my conversation with Gemmi, the look in his eyes as he asked me what I was willing to sacrifice to win. What I was prepared to lose. At the time, I’d thought he was talking about my life, whether I was willing to give it up to save a people that didn’t really feel like mine, but now I see he wasn’t referring to me, but to the

people I loved. Preparing me for it, for their inevitable loss, should they stay by my side. And as I looked down at Cassie's shaking form, her face scrunched up in pain, mouth slightly open in a silent scream, I realized this wasn't about the cost of being a leader. It was about the cost of loving me.

Too high. It was *too* high.

I shook my head. "No, no this isn't right! This isn't how it's supposed to be. Cassie's not even supposed to be here. She's supposed to be interviewing for that Norwegian internship. She's supposed to get to live her life on Earth, she'd supposed to get to *live*."

"She made her choice—"

I pressed my hands over my ears. "Stop saying that. She may have made her choice, but I get to make choices, too. I get to decide who lives and dies for me. I—I get to decide who lives and dies." I stared at Cassie, and with barely a thought, almost without meaning to, called up the magic from the land. I felt it rush towards me, a raging river of power, but I also knew that it wasn't enough, that it couldn't help me do what I needed to do. For that, I'd need something stronger.

I picked up a rock by my side, squeezing it in my hand, squeezing so hard it's edges dug into my skin, but I barely felt it. The only thing I felt, the only thing that mattered was the blood now pooling in my palm. I heard voices calling my name, but they sounded like they were coming from somewhere far away, somewhere I couldn't quite reach. I felt the wind pick up around me, saw the sky darken above me as the feeling of a different kind of power began to pull at the edges of my mind. It felt wild and ancient, impulsive and strong.

More than that, it didn't feel like it was coming from the land, from Crestfall, but that it was coming from *inside* me. Not only that, it was like it actually felt... *good* to wield it. Right. Not intoxicating, like it was with the bond, or uncontrollable, like it was without it, but more...familiar. Natural. As instinctive as drawing a breath.

Before, the magic had always seemed to have a mind of its own, wanting to be unleashed, to be free, but this power didn't seem to yearn for freedom, but for something else, and as I felt the stinging of my hand, I realized what it was.

Blood. It yearned for *blood*.

Unlike regular magic, this power wasn't just restless.

It was hungry.

All of a sudden, the feeling of the power fled as I felt a strong hand slap my face, my blurred vision focusing on the hard brown eyes in front of me, on Maeve's sharp jaw, her mouth scrunched up in a concerned frown. I held a hand to my stinging cheek as I struggled to understand what just happened. "You—you slapped me."

Maeve shrugged her shoulders. "Well, shouting wasn't doing the trick and Lee refused to hit you, so I had to take matters into my own hands."

I turned to look at Tom and Lee, who were both on their knees in front of me, looking at me with wide and horrified eyes. I noticed with a start that Tom had an arrow half drawn on his bow.

Lee grabbed my hand, his voice gentle but wary, like he was trying not to spook a scared animal. "Summer, you wouldn't answer us. It was like you couldn't hear us or see us at all. And your eyes..." Lee's voice drifted off, and I looked at the sky, bright again once more, remembering how it had gone dark, how the wind had blown around me. I still couldn't understand it, couldn't fully comprehend what I'd almost done until I noticed the ground around me.

It was dead.

I sat in a circle of scorched earth, the once green grass black and broken. My eyes widened in horror as my breath came faster and faster. Dark magic. I'd almost used *dark magic*, I—I couldn't process all the emotions that realization stirred within me. Horror about how close I'd become to the very thing I was meant to hate and destroy. Thankfulness that my friends had been able to snap me out of it.

And there, buried beneath everything else...there was *anger*, anger that they hadn't let me keep going, hadn't let me do what I needed to save Cassie. I tried to push that feeling down, knowing it wasn't right, wasn't sane to even *consider* using dark magic given what I knew, what I'd seen, but when it was gone, all that was left was pain. Loss. Emptiness, until I almost wished it would come back, wished I could feel anything but this guilt, this grief. I didn't look down at Cassie, I couldn't, and instead turned my gaze away from all of them, whispering numbly, "I'm not worth it."

Lee shook his head beside me, his voice breaking slightly. “You are, Summer. You—”

“No, Lee...I’m not.”

I got up slowly and began walking toward the trees. I heard them call my name as I went, but I didn’t stop, didn’t slow down. I just kept moving, wanting to block out the darkening sky, the look of pain on Cassie’s face, the feeling of blood and power still lingering on my fingertips.

And then suddenly, I was running, forcing my way through the branches, tripping over roots and rocks as I pushed myself to go faster and faster, farther and farther, like I could somehow outrun this feeling. This pain. Sharp branches and thorns tore at my clothes, at my skin, but I didn’t care. I didn’t care about the scratches, didn’t care if I ran into the pixies or something worse. Tears swam in my vision, blurring the foliage around me until I was practically running blind. My lungs burned as they fought for air between sobs, but I didn’t dare slow down, didn’t dare stop for fear it would all catch up with me, everything I was running from, and pull me under.

Suddenly, my foot made contact with a rock, and I was flying through the air before landing heavily on the ground, the hard fall knocking the wind from my chest. For a moment, I just lay on my back, watching as the dark foliage above me slowly came into focus. I could just barely see the fading afternoon light peeking through the branches, and as I watched it grow dimmer and dimmer, a feeling of numbness seemed to settle over me.

It would be dark soon. The tracker would have felt us use magic, would know where we were again. The pixies would be coming for Cassie. We’d— we’d have to leave beforehand, I guess. Before they realized their mistake. Leave her behind, and keep moving forward. That’s what a real leader would do. What Rose would do.

But Rose wasn’t here.

So, I just lay there, grieving for the living. Wishing for the first time that I’d chosen the blue pill, that all this could be reduced to a dream inside my head, that this pain was something I could wake from.

I closed my eyes against the light, for a moment wishing I could just sleep, if only so I could escape it all for a time, but then my mind drifted to Cassie, lying where I left

her. In pain. Surrounded by strangers. A wave of guilt came over me, breaking through the numbness. What was I doing, running away like that? I should be there with her, until—until the end.

I slowly stood up, brushing the leaves and dirt off my clothes and noticing for the first time the sting of the scratches on my face, the ache of the muscles in my legs. I looked around at the dark forest that surrounded me, panicking for a moment as I tried to remember which way I'd come, before I noticed the broken branches and scattered leaves to my left, the evidence of my reckless and destructive path through forest like breadcrumbs leading me home. I took a step forward...

...and stumbled as the forest around me was suddenly replaced with a cool dark library, the fire that was normally burning in the fireplace nothing but ash and embers. Pinstripe man was standing in front of a bookcase with his hands clasped behind his back, staring at it like he was looking out a window.

I pressed my hands to my temples in frustration. "I don't have time for this right now. I can't be here. I have to get back."

Pinstripe man quickly turned at the sudden sound of my voice, shock passing over his ancient features. "How did you—"

I threw my hands in the air. "What else could you possibly have to show me?" I tried to hold on to my anger, but I couldn't keep my voice from shaking as I thought about all the pain I'd had to witness in the past twenty four hours, all the suffering. It was already too much. I didn't think I could handle anymore.

Pinstripe man paused, taking in my watery eyes, my desperation, before replying. "Nothing. There's nothing left to show you."

"Then why bring me here?"

"It wasn't me."

I rolled my eyes at him. "Right. Fine, why did *they* bring me here? I wasn't even asleep."

Pinstripe man shook his head. "I don't think it was them, either. In fact, I think it was....you."

I just blinked at him. "Me? But I didn't mean to—"

Pinstripe man took a few steps toward me, awe on his features. “Yes, that’s what makes it so extraordinary. You shouldn’t be able to—it isn’t possible, yet here you are.”

“But I don’t even want to be here.”

He raised an eyebrow at me. “I think you do. You must or else you wouldn’t be.”

I started to shake my head, but I stopped. There was something I’d been wondering since I last saw him, something I needed to know the answer to before I took another step, before I decided what the right thing to do next was. I just didn’t know if I *wanted* to know it.

I looked away from him, my voice coming out softer than I would have liked. “Why did you show me all those memories? Was it—was it so I could see that I was supposed to die, that sacrificing myself was the only way to save my people?”

Pinstripe man grabbed my hand, squeezing it tightly, forcing me to meet his light eyes. “No, Summer. No. I can’t know exactly why *they* do all that they do, but I believe they brought us together so that I could show you that although you’ve spent so long running from a monster, from a myth, that monster was once a *man*, a man who lost everything. A man that should be pitied.”

I tore my hands out of his, shaking my head as tears fell from my eyes. “But I don’t *want* to pity him. I hate him. I *want* to hate him. He—he killed Cassie.”

Pinstripe man raised an eyebrow. “She’s dead?”

I looked away, not wanting to say it, the words coming out as a whisper. “She will be soon.”

Pinstripe man patted my shoulder. “I wouldn’t lose hope yet.”

I spun back towards him. “What do you mean? Do you know how to save her?”

Pinstripe man just smirked as he turned away, going back towards his desk. “Why don’t you ask your friends about the white tree.”

“The white tree?”

“You might find what you’re looking for there.”

I beamed at him, barely resisting the urge to throw my arms around him, hope springing up in my chest for the first time since everything happened. I knew I shouldn’t be too hopeful, that Pinstripe tended to speak in riddles, but I couldn’t help myself. It was such a better feeling than the emptiness, than the grief, that I clung to it with all my

might, not caring whether it meant a greater fall later. I readied myself to go home, something I didn't even know if I knew how to do, but I stopped, turning to look at Pinstripe man as he sat heavily down at his desk.

"Should I do it, anyway?"

"Do what?"

"Give myself up. Before anyone else gets hurt because of me."

Pinstripe man just looked at me, his light blue eyes softer than I'd ever seen them. "I'm afraid, princess, that people getting hurt because of us is the price we pay for being loved. And even if you were to give yourself up in order to save your friends, how many others would you be condemning in the process? This dark magic...It's like a poison to this land. No one fully understands the consequences of its being called into being. Besides, Varian doesn't seem like the type to keep promises or to go quietly into the night once he's gotten what he's wanted. And with you gone, there would be no one strong enough to oppose him. You have a responsibility to protect this kingdom, a duty to the throne as well as to your heart. The two often coincide, but not always...Not always. Be ready."

"Ready to do what?"

"To choose."

I blinked and the library disappeared, replaced by the dark wood. I glanced at the light between the branches, just barely filtering through, and cursed. It was practically sun down. The pixies would likely be here any second. We had to get Cassie away from here and to the white tree, wherever the hell that was, as soon as possible. I raced back the way I came, panic filling me as the sound of shouting voices echoed through the trees from the clearing. I broke through the forest, expecting to see pixies or some other enemy doing battle with my friends. What I found was much worse.

Maeve had one of her knives in her hands, and Tom was standing over Cassie's body protectively, bow drawn and arrow pointed directly at Maeve. Lee was watching them both warily, hand on his sword like he was ready to step in at a moment's notice. For a moment, I couldn't understand what was happening until Tom's voice broke the heavy silence.

"I said, get away from her," Tom growled, his hand flexing where it held the bow.

Maeve didn't back down, gesturing to where Cassie lay behind him, convulsing on the ground. "She's in *pain*, Tom. You heard what that pixie said. "Merciless torture—"

"So, we help her!" Tom snapped. "We don't—"

Maeve took a menacing step forward, her knuckles practically turning white where she gripped the knife. "I *am* helping her. I'm ending her suffering, no matter the cost to myself. If you *really* cared about her, you'd be willing to do the same."

My mouth fell open as realization dawned on me. Maeve was trying to *kill* Cassie, to save her from the pain of the poison. And judging by the look on her face, she wasn't going to stop for anyone, even her best friend.

"Wait!" I yelled, running to them. "Wait, I know how we can save her."

Maeve hesitated, glancing between Tom and I for a moment before putting down her knife, and only when it was out of her hands did Tom lower his bow.

I watched as Lee's shoulders sagged in relief when he saw me, slipping his sword back into its sheath, and I realized he had probably been worried I wasn't going to come back. "How, Summer? What happened?"

"A... friend told me."

"A friend? What are you—"

I shook my head, interrupting him. "It doesn't matter now. He said to ask you guys about a white tree. He said it could help save Cassie...wait, what is it? What's wrong?"

At the mention of the white tree, all three of them froze.

Panic filled me as the one hope I had began to fizzle in my chest. "What, is it far away or something?"

Tom was the first to unfreeze, shooting a worried glance at the others before turning to me. "No, it's nearby, actually. A couple miles east and—"

"Right in the heart of reaper territory," Lee interrupted.

I froze. "What?"

"The reapers practically worship the white tree, they're its guardians. It's said to be the oldest tree in Crestfall. The first tree. And it's rumored to have...unknown magical properties," Maeve said.

I swallowed down my fear, trying to look brave despite all the warnings and stories I'd heard about the reapers dancing in my head. "Okay, so we go."

Maeve shook her head. "It's not that simple. Even when the reapers were on good terms with the kingdom, they never allowed any outsider to see the white tree. We don't even know if it's real."

"It doesn't matter. We have to try."

"You don't understand, Summer," Lee said softly. "You don't remember what they—"

I held my hand up. "Whatever the reapers did to me when I was a child doesn't matter now. I'm older, I'm stronger, and I'm not afraid of them. At least... not more afraid of them than of losing Cassie." I looked down at her on the ground, her skin even more pale than it had been before, her breaths coming slower and slower. "I'm going. There's no choice." I turned to the rest of them. "Who's coming with me?"

CHAPTER 18

Ain't No Mountain High Enough

"You need to calm down."

I tried to ignore the note of condescension in Maeve's tone, tried to ignore everything but the cool rock beneath my fingertips, but turns out, when you're clinging to a mountain *hundreds* of feet into the air, in the middle of the *night*, it's kind of hard to ignore anything. Like just how far from the ground, and just how close to death, you really are.

"I *am* calm," I snapped through clenched teeth.

I heard Maeve scoff from a few feet below me. "Please. You're practically shaking the whole mountain. Your legs look like vibrating spaghetti noodles."

I wanted to look down and shoot her the evil eye, but that would mean seeing how high we were, something I really, really didn't want to know. Besides, she was right. I *was* shaking as I dug my fingernails into the rock, my heart pounding in my chest as I fought to push down the wave of dizziness and nausea that came over me whenever I even *thought* about looking down.

Besides, I didn't need to look to know that we were high. The wind was cold against my neck as it swept under my hair, colder than when we began. I paused for a moment, leaning my forehead against the cool mountain in front of me, my headlamp making the gray rock look almost blue in the light.

I had been surprised when Tom pulled them from his backpack earlier, along with four lengths of rope and some claw-hook thingies that, when I'd asked, he said were called *carabiners*, looking at me like he'd expected me to know such an obvious thing, never mind that the closest I'd ever come to climbing up a mountain before was watching *Free Solo* with a racing heart and half-covered eyes, clenching my blanket with sweaty hands. I didn't make it past the first twenty minutes.

So, now I found myself attached to a disturbingly thin rope, and the only thing keeping me from falling to my death a hundred feet below was one of those little damned

carabiners a few feet below me, hooked into one of the holds Tom had magically made in the mountainside.

“Everything okay down there?” I heard Lee’s voice call from above me, and I wished for the millionth time that he was the one climbing below me, the one to try and steady me if I lost my grip. To know he was behind me, steady and unafraid, would have made this whole climbing a mountain thing seem a whole lot less impossible.

In fact, that had been the original plan, but when we were only about twenty feet up and my apparent visceral fear of heights had decided to make itself known, we’d had to pivot.

It would seem that like all my other emotions, Lee felt my fear of falling just as intensely as I did, so that meant when I had a panic attack after I made the mistake of looking down, and wouldn’t take another step forward, Lee couldn’t offer me a helping hand or even words of encouragement. He was too busy having his *own* panic attack, courtesy of the bond. Needless to say, we didn’t exactly make the safest team.

So now Lee was about ten feet above me, trying to block out my own anxious emotions and just focus on climbing up. Thankfully, Tom offered the perfect distraction, and volunteered to help keep Lee’s mind off my fear and on something else, his solution being to simply chat Lee’s ear off about random things that I’m pretty sure Lee most definitely didn’t want to know about. How he managed to do that and climb with Cassie strapped to his back, I’ll never know, but the girl did only weigh about a hundred pounds soaking weight, so that helped.

From the bits and pieces that had filtered down to me, I gathered Tom had just finished recounting the ups and downs of his relationship with the Wisp queen...lingering on the details.

I’m pretty sure Lee would have rather had the panic attacks.

“Everything’s fine!” I called back, trying to make my voice, and my body, appear calm. The more scared I was, the greater danger Lee was in. I had to focus. I could do this. For Cassie, I could do this. I *would* do this. There was no other choice.

When Lee had first mentioned that the entry into reaper territory had been through the mountain, I’d been hoping for some kind of secret lever at the bottom that revealed a

hidden passageway through the mountain or something. Turns out there *was* a hidden passageway, it just happened to be located a little higher.

Like two hundred feet higher.

Needless to say I didn't take the news too well, but after only a couple minutes of mild hyperventilation, Tom pointed out all the divots and cracks in the mountain, how there were plenty of places to put your hands and feet, like the mountain was set to a beginner level. And as far as all the technical stuff went, I wasn't sure exactly how it all worked. I was fairly certain I'd blacked out whenever Tom started explaining it. All I knew was that every ten feet or so, I had to click my rope into one of the carabiners Tom had secured to the mountain. That way, if I fell, it would only be until the last carabiner, the last place I clipped in my rope.

In theory, at least.

I'd lost track of how long we'd been climbing, and every time I'd asked Tom how close we were to the entrance, he just said "a little further." Eventually, I stopped asking, needing to devote all my attention to not letting my shaking legs and arms give out...Oh, and also to not killing Maeve who, unsurprisingly, just so happened to be the worst peptalker of all time.

"You know if we keep up this pace, we'll probably reach the entrance by the *next* luna. You know, the one that's happening in another *five hundred years*," Maeve called out from below me, and I just gritted my teeth and concentrated on putting one foot and one hand up at a time. I would like to say I took extra time with it just to piss her off, but the truth was I probably couldn't go any faster if I tried. And I was *so* not going to try.

I looked up as a little blinking light came into view—the marker Tom had placed on each hold so I would be able to spot it in the darkness. I reached up my rope with shaky hands, slipping it through the carabiner, making sure I saw the little latch close tightly, heard the tell-tale *click* before I let go. I let out a little sigh of relief and allowed myself a moment to relax, to give my aching legs and shaking arms a moment of rest. I'd been too afraid the first few times to just hang for a moment after I'd attached myself, but unfortunately exhaustion had made it a necessity, triumphing even over my fear.

Only this time, as I let go of the wall and leaned back, my terrified mind taking a backseat to the screaming pain in my legs, the rope didn't draw tight, secured snugly into the hold.

Because suddenly, there wasn't a hold.

I watched as the ring of rock and earth Tom had magically carved out of the mountain crumbled suddenly into nothingness—like it was being unmade just as quickly as it had been made—the carabiner, and my rope, falling with it.

For a moment, there was nothing. Then, I dropped, a scream tearing from my throat as I grabbed blindly for the mountain, for anything that would slow my fall.

Unfortunately, the only thing I managed to grab was Maeve.

My flailing arms and legs knocked her about as I fell, causing her to lose her grip until she was falling beside me, a muffled shriek the only sound she let escape her lips as she, too, became weightless. Free-falling, until, suddenly, we stopped.

The rope pulled tight, the previous carabiner holding true. Our momentum was abruptly cut off, and we were left dangling from the mountainside, swinging from side to side as we fought to catch the breath that had been ripped from our lungs during our sudden stop.

"Summer, Maeve, are you okay?!" Lee's frightened voice called out at the same time as Tom shouted, "What happened?!"

"We're fine!" Maeve shouted up at them, catching her breath before I could, and shooting me an evil glare. "*Someone* couldn't manage to secure their rope properly."

I coughed, glaring right back at her, and shouted at the boys. "The hold—it just crumbled—I'm not sure how!"

"Just hang out there for a moment!" Tom shouted, and I had to fight the urge to roll my eyes at the rather inappropriately timed pun. "I'll climb down and make a new hold somewhere more secure!"

I heard sounds of movement and scuffling above us as Tom and Lee worked, leaving Maeve and I to hang side by side for a moment in silence. It might have felt awkward, if I hadn't been so scared out of my mind. Still, I couldn't afford to be terrified. *Lee* couldn't afford it, so I forced myself to focus on something else, something besides the fact that I was dangling a hundred feet in the air by a tiny metal clip on a tiny little

hold that had already proven itself to be potentially unreliable. Unfortunately, the only something—or rather, someone—that happened to be around didn't seem to be too eager to help me take my mind off things, even for a moment.

I stole a glance at Maeve, the bright shine of my headlamp illuminating her dark eyes, reflecting off her brown skin. Anyone else might have looked unattractive under the harsh light, but Maeve looked just as fiercely beautiful as always, despite having just fallen off a literal mountain. It really wasn't fair.

Still, despite the perfectly symmetrical features and straight lines, there was a kind of haunted quality to her face, like she wasn't really here, in the moment. Like she was miles away, with something—or someone—else. Somewhere she couldn't tear her mind away from.

I know I should be angry with her. When I'd first stumbled into that clearing, first realized what Maeve had been trying to do to Cassie, that's what I had expected to feel: anger. After all, that was a rational response to someone threatening your best friend's life, but the truth was, it made me more...sad, I think, than anything else. Sad that Maeve had taken it upon herself to make such a terrible choice, to do something she might spend the rest of her life regretting.

I knew a little something about that.

It felt like every other minute I was being faced with another impossible choice, forced to decide who was going to live and who was going to die. The only difference between Maeve and I was that she seemed to have even less hope than I did, less faith in the good conquering the evil simply because it had to. This whole trip she had always been the realist. Tom, more the optimist. And me, somewhere in the middle. So, it shouldn't surprise me that in the end, she was willing to do for Cassie what we wouldn't. What we couldn't.

"Just spit it out," Maeve said suddenly, startling me out of my thoughts.

"Uhh—spit what out?"

"Whatever the hell you're working the courage up to say."

I leaned back from her, surprised and a bit unsettled by the fact that I was apparently so transparent, before I squared my shoulders and schooled my expression. "I know why you did it," I said, a bit more softly than I'd intended, my voice barely audible

above the wind whipping through our hair, but Maeve's gaze shot towards me, colliding with mine. Yet still she was silent, her dark eyes indecipherable. "I mean, I can understand—"

But Maeve cut me off, tearing her gaze away. "You understand *nothing*."

"I understand that there are some fates worse than death," I said sharply, drawing Maeve's gaze back to me.

Fates like watching the ones you love die for you, like letting down a kingdom you'd been born to protect, like disappointing parents you never had the chance to know. I'd been wrestling with that very question since I'd discovered what Varian wanted me for, what exactly he *needed* from me, and I still didn't have the answer. The only thing I did know was how it felt to want to try and spare the ones you loved pain, even if it meant bringing that pain upon yourself.

I didn't say any of this out loud, I didn't have to. Maeve was smart. She might not have all the pieces of the puzzle, but she'd heard enough of Lee and I's conversation to have some idea what I was talking about. The way she was looking at me now, that piercing expression, the one that seemed to be a mix of both irritation and maybe a little respect, showed me that she knew.

Silence stretched between us for a moment as we hung there, and I wondered if Maeve was going to respond, but it didn't really matter. I'd said what I wanted to—

"I've been cold to you," Maeve said suddenly, but there was no defense, no apology in the words, like she was simply stating a fact. She took a small breath and looked away before continuing. "I didn't grow up with a loving family. My parents abandoned us on the palace doorstep when I was six and Jalyn was just a baby."

It took me by surprise, this sudden outburst of personal information, the kind Maeve had seemed to loathe to share since the day I met her. I proceeded slowly, scared I might spook her into closing herself down again. "Jalyn's your sister, right?"

Maeve nodded. "We only had each other back then, and...you."

"Me?"

"You took me in. Practically forced me to become your friend," Maeve said, and I thought I could see a hint of a smile on her face. "And then you introduced me to Lee and Tom and suddenly...suddenly, my family got a whole lot bigger."

I smiled, trying to picture a six year old Maeve at all, much less a Maeve that I'd been close friends with, but I had a hard time imagining her ever being so young and defenseless.

"But still, Jay and me. It's always kind of been like just us against the world, and I— I miss her. So *much*." Maeve's voice broke a little at the end, and I was shocked to find just how unsettling I found it to be. Seeing Maeve so shaken, so vulnerable, it kind of felt like watching one of those medical tv shows and seeing someone resting on an operating table, their bare heart beating within their chest, helpless and exposed.

"Where is she?" I asked, tentatively.

"She's trapped...in the castle. With *him*."

I froze, trying to process what Maeve said. All this time...her sister had been Varian's *prisoner*? Trapped in the castle, the place I'd been so terrified I'd fallen into the first time I'd met Pinstripe man, the place I'd only glimpsed in memories.

And in nightmares.

That's where Maeve's sister was? Where she'd been the *entire* time I'd been away?

"She begged me to come along to the coronation—" Maeve continued, her voice sounding so full of regret, and at the same time, utterly empty—"And I said yes. Even though I *knew* it was a dangerous time, I *knew* the coronation might possibly be the target of some attack, I thought—" Maeve let out a little laugh, although there was no humor in it—"I thought the safest place she could be was by my side."

Maeve still didn't look at me, choosing instead to lean her head against the cool rock of the mountain in front of her. "It all happened so quickly, and I told her to run—I told her, but she didn't listen. She wanted to fight. She'd always wanted to fight. Just like her big sister."

I could just barely see the tears streaming down her face, the sight of the strongest person I knew breaking down making my heart squeeze uncomfortably in my chest.

"Maeve—"

Maeve turned toward me, her brown eyes more lost and empty than I'd ever seen them. "I lost her, Summer. I kept waiting to find her body washed up with all the others, thrown into the lake below the castle like they were—were *nothing*, but I never did."

I wanted to place a hand on her shoulder, to give her some sort of comfort, but I didn't. I didn't know how. "It's not your fault, Maeve, and she's alive, so we can—"

"--*If* she's alive."

I just looked at her, almost afraid to ask the question. "You think—you think Varian killed her?"

"God, I hope so."

I jolted in shock, the motion causing me to swing slightly away from Maeve. "Maeve, you don't mean—"

But Maeve just shook her head, cutting me off. "Tom doesn't get it. His parents died. He doesn't know what—what it's like...I mean, is there a part of me that's ecstatic that she might still be alive? Of course. But it's the selfish part of me, because the truth is, wishing she survived means wishing that she's been a prisoner, wishing she's—she's—I've heard stories," Maeve said softly, like she was afraid to say the next words too loudly, like it might make them more true. "Whispers. About what exactly Varian *does* to his prisoners. How he uses them to fuel his dark magic, how he sucks the very life from their bodies until there's nothing left, and when I think what Jalyn—when I think about how she's been beaten or tortured for—for almost *a year*—" Maeve's voice abruptly broke off, and she shook her head before turning toward me, her eyes distant and lost. "That's how long it's been, Summer. Six months for me, but *ten* for her."

Ten months. I didn't know—I hadn't thought to ask. Tim passed differently on Earth, or so my friends had said, and when we'd first set foot on Crestfall, I hadn't known—none of us had known—exactly how long we'd been gone. And when we'd found out how close Luna was... it was all that was on my mind. How much time we had *left*.

Not how much had already passed us by.

To me, those months had simply been lost time, but to Maeve, to everybody else—it had been that many more days, that much more time that the people they cared about were left to fend for themselves. At the mercy of someone who had already lost too much too long ago to remember what it was really like, to care about anything or anyone other than the ones that had been taken from him.

And it was all my fault.

I was the reason why my friends had been away for so long. I was the reason why they had to leave in the first place. All those months Maeve's sister had spent locked away, tortured and alone. All that time my friends had lost trying to find me, to get me to do what I was always supposed to do: defend my kingdom. If I really were to give myself up, to *let* myself be killed...wouldn't that mean that all of it would have been for nothing? All that pain, all that time would have been spent fighting for a cause that had been lost long ago.

I'd been spending so much time thinking about what my death could do for the kingdom, for its future, I hadn't thought about what it would mean for its past, how it would have made every second spent trying to find me be in vain. How the people who died in my name would have done so *in vain*. How I would be leaving my people, my *friends* to fend for themselves yet again while I did nothing to protect them.

And yet here I was, heading directly into the heart of reaper territory, chasing down some magical cure for my sick friend and endangering both myself and my friends in the process. How must it be for Maeve to walk into a place of almost certain death with her one hope of saving her sister? I wasn't just risking my own life, my own future, but hers as well. The whole kingdom's really, just to save my friend.

Maybe Lee was right. Maybe I was selfish.

"I'm sorry," I said, not knowing which of my many mistakes I was apologizing for, knowing only it wasn't enough.

Maeve shook her head, and I got the feeling that those were the words she'd heard the most in response to her sister's imprisonment—so much maybe, that they'd somehow lost their meaning. "A part of me is glad I don't know exactly what happened to her—what *is* happening to her, but somehow the not knowing—it's even worse. It's like I'm failing her all over again, letting her suffer alone. Forgotten. I'd—I'd give anything to spare her that kind of suffering, Summer--" Maeve just looked at me, her head lamp shining above her face like a little moon—"To spare *anyone* that kind of suffering."

We looked at each other for a moment, and I saw it there, in her eyes. Her apology. All the things Maeve couldn't quite put into words. I had wanted her to know that I understood why she'd done what she'd done, but Maeve—Maeve wasn't looking for understanding.

She was looking for forgiveness.

Not from me, but from—well, I didn't know exactly who. Cassie, maybe. Her sister.

Herself.

Maeve hadn't defended her actions, not really, she just allowed me to see them for what they were, to see her for what she was: a product of her time. Wartime. Lost time. They all had a hand in making her what she was, and maybe for the first time, she'd wanted me—Summer, not Rose—to understand just what that meant. What it was like to be a soldier in this war, rather than a princess.

Before I could respond, not that I was really sure what I was going to say, Tom called down to us, "Okay, I've made another one, and—and I think we've reached the top! It's just here!" I looked past Maeve to see the two little lights from their head lamps disappear for a moment as they pulled themselves over the ledge before reappearing side by side as they looked down at us, like a pair of glowing eyes monitoring our progress.

We resumed our climb, Maeve waiting for a moment so I could get ahead of her once more, neither of us saying anything. My mind seemed to go around in circles, torn between focusing on my fear and my conversation with Maeve. I realized that I'd never really felt like I understood her, hadn't been able to reconcile her willingness to rescue me with her coldness, her loyalty with her apparent indifference, but now...

I tried to imagine what it'd be like. To lose the only family you had, the only home you'd ever known, all the while believing it was your fault, that you had failed in some way... And then, then you find some hope, someone you think you can depend on, someone you can *believe* in—only they're changed. They're not the person you thought they were, and suddenly, all your dreams of redemption, all your hope, disappears in an instant.

That might push anyone to do things they never thought they would, never thought they *could*.

Maybe even some things they regret.

"That's it, Summer. Now, give me your hand."

I almost jumped at the sound of Lee's voice, so lost in the climb and my own thoughts that I hadn't even realized we'd reached the ledge. I looked up and away from

the rough stone of the mountain, my light illuminating Lee's pale face. His normally dark green eyes seemed more of a light mossy color in the brightness, and he squinted slightly against the intensity of the light, resting on his knees and reaching a hand over the ledge.

I took a deep breath and slowly reached up to take his hand, lifting up my foot as I did, but suddenly there was resistance, and I looked down, only to see my rope had gotten snagged on a crevice below. I tried to tug it free, but it was stuck fast.

I looked up at Lee with panicked eyes. "My rope's stuck! I can't pull it free!"

Lee's eyes widened in alarm, and he turned to the side, exchanging some words I couldn't hear with Tom, before turning back to me, his face neutral, yet strained, like he was trying to appear more relaxed than he really was. "Summer, Tom says you're going to have to untie your rope."

I froze for a moment before managing to find my voice. Of all the stupidest, most insane ideas— "Well, you can tell Tom that *I* say he can go f—"

"Don't worry, Summer. I've got you," Lee said, although I barely heard him, the wind having picked up slightly while we were talking. "Just untie your rope and grab my hand!"

I hesitated, staring up at Lee's resolute face for a moment before reaching down and untying the rope around my waist. It wasn't easy. I could only use one hand, and the knots were tight for obvious reasons, not to mention the fact that my hands were shaking uncontrollably, but I eventually got the rope loose, flinching slightly as I felt it fall from around my waist into the black nothingness below.

I clung tightly to the mountain, keenly aware that there was nothing left to stop me if I were to fall. I would just keep falling and falling until there was nowhere left to fall, nothing left to do, but land. The thought made me cling even tighter to the rock, my heart beating so rapidly in my chest I could barely hear Lee's voice over the roaring in my ears. "It's okay, Summer! Just take my hand!"

Lee held his hand out once more to me, and I began to slowly reach up my own when the wind suddenly picked up speed, an especially strong gust rushing past me and almost making me lose my grip on the rough stone. My stomach dropped as I yanked my hand back down and clung close to the mountain once more, too panicked to do anything but press my forehead against the rock and breathe, or try to at least.

“You’re okay, Summer.” Lee’s strained voice pulled my gaze to him once more, his jaw clenching in frustration as he tried to push down my fear. He closed his eyes and took a couple of deep breaths, and when he opened them his gaze was softer, more sure. He reached out his hand once more. “I’m right here. Just let go.”

In a flash, the night disappeared, the wind, the mountain. Replaced with somewhere brighter. Somewhere louder. With movement and shouting and chaos on all sides. I didn’t know where I was, all the lights and colors of the room seemed to blur together. I think—I think I was on my back, and there—there was a coldness against my exposed skin, like I was laying on cool tile...and there was something, some pain deep in my chest, radiating outward.

I tried to concentrate, to figure out where I was, what was happening, but the only thing in focus was the frightened face of the little boy above me, eyes full of tears he was trying not to shed, his wild green gaze shifting between the surroundings and me as he squeezed my hand in his. At least, I think he was squeezing it. I realized I couldn’t feel it. I couldn’t feel anything anymore as even the little boy’s face began to shift out of focus. “I’m right here, Rose. I’m right here! Don’t let go. Don’t—”

I gasped as I felt the cold wind whip against my face, blinking quickly as I tried to process where I was. The night, the mountain came into clear view around me, as did Maeve who was above me, her muscles clenching and her mouth twisting in pain as she held onto the mountain with one hand, her other firmly wrapped around my wrist.

And that’s when I realized I was dangling over a two hundred foot drop.

I let out a little scream and grabbed hold of Maeve’s wrist, swinging closer to the mountain and kicking my legs wildly as I tried to find purchase on the rock. It took me a few tries, and I could hear Maeve’s quick breaths above me as she struggled with the effort of maintaining her grip. Finally, the toe of my left foot managed to catch on a little divot in the rock, and I was able to pull myself close enough to grab hold with my right hand. The second I had a good grip and a sure footing, Maeve released my wrist and reattached her hand to the wall, and after a moment spent catching our breath, the two of us managed to climb the last few feet without incident.

When Lee finally pulled me up and over the ledge, I tore off my head lamp and collapsed to my hands and knees, my body shaking in fear and exhaustion as it fought to

process everything that happened. Lee knelt down beside me, rubbing a hand along my back as I struggled to catch my breath, to make my heart stop pounding so hard in my chest.

I locked eyes with Maeve who was lying on her back with her hands pressed to her head, her chest rising and falling with heavy breaths. “Thanks,” I said between gasps, and she just nodded.

Eventually, when I’d calmed down enough, Lee gently pulled me to my feet, and I opened my mouth to talk to him, to try to piece together what had happened, but he just shook his head and put a finger to his lips, gesturing toward a small opening in the mountainside that I’d been too distracted to notice until now.

I hesitated for a moment, but then followed Maeve through the small crack, barely wide enough for two people to pass chest to chest, and expected to emerge into inky blackness, but as I stepped through the opening, I noticed a soft blue and green glow emitting from the walls. I looked closer and realized they were covered in a beautiful array of iridescent crystals. Some as big as my head, and some as small as the tip of my pinky finger, all helping to illuminate the small bedroom-size space we crowded into.

I saw Tom a couple feet away, leaning over a still Cassie. Too still. Panic filled me as I raced over to the two of them, grabbing Cassie’s hand where it lay on the ground. It was cold. I felt Maeve wordlessly kneel beside me. “Why isn’t she moving? She’s not— She’s not—”

I couldn’t get the words out, but thankfully Tom just shook his head and inclined his head toward her chest, which I noticed with a gasp of relief was still rising and falling, albeit slowly. “No, but Summer...”--he met my eyes, ignoring Maeve’s presence altogether, his brown gaze worried and dark-- “I don’t think she’ll last much longer.”

I held his gaze for a moment, my throat tightening as I tried to swallow down the fear, the worry before jumping to my feet. “Well, then we’ll have to move quickly. Which way?”

I turned toward Lee who had begun to walk toward the far corner of the cave where the crystals seemed to be glowing a little brighter. I watched as he ran his hand along the wall, his eyes closed and his eyebrows creased like he was feeling for

something specific, until finally, he paused, hand resting over a rather small, unexceptional-looking crystal. He pressed it, and for a moment nothing happened.

Lee ran his hand through his hair and stepped away from the wall, staring at it like he was trying to figure out what he'd missed. My heart dropped. What if we were in the wrong place? What if we couldn't find the entrance? What if we had come all the way up here only to—

Then, all at once, the crystals went out.

I stifled a scream as we were engulfed in complete darkness, and I jumped when I felt a hand grab my arm until I realized it was Lee. I wrapped an arm around his waist as we waited, none of us daring to make a sound. Waited for what, I wasn't sure. An attack? A magic door? A blinking sign that said *This way to the magical white tree?*

Just when I was about to suggest Lee try pressing another magic crystal, a soft glow began to fill the cave again, a few of the crystals beginning to shimmer, shining and rippling until it formed almost a river of light, continuing toward the back of the cave and further, deeper, continuing on into a passageway that I was almost eighty seven percent sure had been nothing but solid rock and crystal a minute ago.

Well, I'd asked for a blinking sign.

In a moment, we were ready to go. Tom had Cassie on his back again and was currently taking the lead with Lee and I in the middle and Maeve bringing up the rear. The formation had been borne more out of necessity than strategy as Tom had seemed intent on putting as much distance between him and Maeve as possible, Maeve clearly hadn't wanted to push him, and Lee had basically refused to leave my side since reaching the top of the mountain.

We followed the shimmering crystals, making our way down the passageway, first cautiously, then with greater speed when no monsters jumped out at us from the dark, and the urgency of our mission began to make itself felt, Cassie's pale skin growing more and more ashen in the soft bluish light.

The only sound in the caves was the scuff of our boots on the stone along with the constant *drip drip* of water as it seeped through some of the cracks on the walls and dropped from the ceiling, occasionally landing on my forehead and rolling down my

cheeks like tears. I whispered to Lee, scared my voice might echo loudly off the cave walls and land on unfriendly ears, “How did you do that? With the crystal?”

He caught my gaze for a moment before looking away. “My dad told me. Told us.”

I felt my heart clench tightly, the way it always did when I was reminded of something I’d been made to forget. “I thought you’d never been here before?”

“I haven’t, but he had—before...”

“Before the reapers...hurt me?” It was a guess, but an easy one. No one had said the words outright, but it made the most sense, explained why I had been so afraid of them.

“Yeah...” Lee ran a hand through his hair and cursed.

“What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong is I have no idea what we’re walking into here, Summer. No idea what to expect. How can I protect you if I—”

I touched his shoulder. “Hey, for once this isn’t about saving me. It’s about saving Cassie. No matter the cost.”

Lee narrowed his eyes at me. “That’s not what Cassie would want.”

I shrugged my shoulders at him. “Yeah well she went and got herself poisoned, so she kinda doesn’t get a vote right now.”

We walked in silence for a bit, and I could tell Lee wanted to argue more but that he also knew there was no making me change my mind, so he changed the subject instead. “So are we going to talk about it?”

I sent him a wary glance. “What?”

“The memory? I’m assuming that’s what it was when you— when you fell...”

“Lee—”

“God, you know I thought that was it,” Lee interrupted me, his eyes wide and empty, lost in the memory. “That you were gone. For good this time, no second chances. And it was like time slowed down, you know? Like I was watching you fall, watching you die—second by second, and then when Maeve caught you...you still weren’t responding, weren’t moving, and I knew Maeve couldn’t hold on for much longer, and I thought—I thought—”

I squeezed Lee's hand as his voice broke, the remaining words going unsaid. Truth was, they didn't need saying. I'd heard them enough times before. Lee had lost me so many times that it must have felt like an old wound by now, continuously inflamed whenever someone or something tore me from him again and again.

Lee just looked at me with his wildfire eyes, wet with unshed tears, and I could tell he wanted me to tell him that that was the last time. That he'd never have to lose me again. But we both knew that was a promise I just couldn't make.

But there was one promise I could.

I raised a hand to his cheek. "Hey, I don't know what's going to happen, but I do know that if—if I have to leave you again...it won't be by my own choice, okay?"

Lee just looked at me for a moment, trying to gauge whether or not I was serious, before wrapping his arm tight around my shoulders and pressing a kiss on my head, whispering a relieved "thank you" in my ear.

He knew what I was really saying, even if I didn't say the exact words. He knew.

And in that moment, I could see how much it had been weighing on him. The fear that I would leave in the middle of the night, that I would turn myself over to Varian and give him exactly what he wanted.

My death.

But I'd realized something as I'd watched Cassie writhe in agony on the ground, as I thought about Maeve's sister, a prisoner for almost a year. My people had needed a protector, and they'd chosen me to do it. They'd *trusted* me, and I couldn't just abandon them now.

Just because I'd forgotten the promises I'd made didn't give me the right to break them.

I may have changed, but one thing hadn't. They still needed protecting, needed saving. And I would do my best to save them. I owed them no less.

Lee removed his arm from my shoulders, and I shot him a confused look. "What?"

Lee looked down for a moment. "There's something else, Summer. When Cassie first got shot, you— you—"

I shook my head, interrupting him. "--Summoned dark magic. I know. It's horrible, Lee. I just—I couldn't stop, and Cassie, she—she looked like—" I cut myself off, not wanting to relive the horror of my vision. I had enough of it in my own life. "I'm sorry, Lee--"

Lee just shook his head, a strange look passing over his features. "No, Summer. That's—That's not it."

I furrowed my eyebrows at him. "What do you mean?"

Lee finally met my eyes, but there was something there I couldn't quite identify. Something that looked a lot like...fear. "You didn't need the blood."

I shook my head, lifting my hand, the one that still bore the jagged cut. "But the rock—I drew my own blood--"

"Yeah, your *own* blood, Summer. All the stories I've ever heard about dark magic required someone else's blood, a-a--"

"--sacrifice," I whispered, Isabelle's cut throat flashing through my mind.

"Exactly. The cost was always paid by another. Paid in blood. In death. No one's ever been powerful enough that they didn't need that....it's—it's unheard of. Even in legends."

I just looked at him, hoping for once he'd have all the answers. "What does it mean?"

Lee just shook his head. "I don't know, Summer. I don't know."

I closed my eyes, trying to push back the tears, the frustration. No matter what I did, my identity, my *power* continued to be a complete mystery, like a Pandora's box I couldn't manage to close. With every answer, came another question. No matter how much I learned, I still knew nothing about it. About myself. The truth was I had no idea who I was...

Much less what I was capable of.

Suddenly, a herbal smell began to drift through the cave, something like lavender but with an edge to it. A bitterness I couldn't identify. "What is that?" I asked, pressing a hand to my head as the room began to spin, the smell making me woozy.

"What's what, Summer?" Lee looked at me with worried eyes. "What's wrong?"

All of a sudden, Lee was gone, and I was looking at the little boy again, chaos whirling around us as he held my hand. *“Rose!” he shouted at me, tears streaming down his freckled cheeks.* I blinked and there was Lee again, his face lit by the crystals behind him. “Summer?”

I raised both hands to my head as the smell grew stronger and my surroundings kept flashing in and out between the cave and the memory, Lee and the little boy. Every time I blinked it changed, and I was pulled back and forth between the two. Trapped. Lost. Unable to ground myself in either one.

Pain ripped through my head as I started running, trying to find a way out, out of these caves, out of the memory, out of the agony of being caught between the two of them. I faintly heard Lee’s voice screaming my name behind me, or was it the little boy? I couldn’t tell the difference anymore, couldn’t slow down or I was sure my mind would be torn in two, I would be split apart.

The smell grew stronger until it was all I could taste, all I could sense, and I collapsed to the ground, pounding on my head as the world continued to change and flash around me. From chaos to calm. From light to dark.

Until it finally stopped.

I slowly pulled my hands from my head, keeping my eyes closed, afraid that when I opened them I wouldn’t know where I was, *when* I was. I could hear footsteps along the passage in front of me. I’d probably gotten turned around when I was running from the memory. My friends had to backtrack to find me. I heard someone come and kneel in front me, their breath warm on my face.

Lee. He had found me. I knew he would.

I took three deep breaths, trying to steady myself. I would need to reassure Lee that everything was okay, would need to explain to him what I saw, although, the truth was, I wasn’t really sure I understood it myself. I opened my eyes, ready to meet Lee’s green gaze—

And then I screamed.

Because the eyes in front of me weren’t green.

They were black.

CHAPTER 19

Reap What You Sow

My left sock kept slipping down.

Also, the room was warm, uncomfortably so. I wanted to ask mother to have the servants open the large windows lining the back wall to let a little of the cool night air into the large, candlelit room, but I knew she wouldn't. She'd say it wasn't proper at a fancy gathering like this.

Apparently, fancy people liked to sweat.

And besides, I had bigger worries. Like my sock. The little monster just would not stay up, and instead gathered uncomfortably around my ankle. Sure, my long green dress hid the unfortunate situation, but I knew it was there, and that was torture enough.

I wanted so badly to reach down and pull it up, but mother had told me to stand up straight, to smile at the visiting people, to act like a princess would.

And a princess didn't pull at her socks in the middle of a party.

At least, mom said it was a party. The invitations did, too, when I'd caught a peek of one on my mother's desk. A Celebration of Unity. All Originals Welcome. The event only took place every five years—although I'd heard my father mention that if the council had its way it wouldn't happen at all—and I'd been too young the last time to attend. I vaguely remembered throwing a fit about it, hating the feeling of being excluded from anything remotely party-ish, and yet, I also remember being kind of relieved when my father put his foot down. I wasn't sure why then, but I did now.

Five years old was too young to be in the presence of monsters.

I shifted my foot, my sock twisting uncomfortably around my ankle, but I didn't reach down, didn't touch it. I couldn't screw this up. It had already taken a significant amount of begging to get them to let me come at all, despite me being a whole ten and a half years old. It was too important, too public if I were to have one of my...accidents. At least, that was what my parents liked to call them.

I guessed it had a slightly better ring to it than magical explosions.

Still, it would have been odd if I didn't attend. Some guests might even have perceived it as an insult. So, here I was. A grenade in a green dress. But I was going to do it. I was going to keep it under control, which meant not even thinking about doing magic the whole party. Easy peasy.

Besides, it wasn't like there wasn't plenty to be distracted by.

The wisp queen was floating around, so tiny yet also a little scary at the same time, made even more so by the attendants or guards or whatever that surrounded her, some small like her, but others full size and shimmering. Then, there were the pixies, who were rather unpleasant to look at, and who had spent most of the evening making eyes at the wisps. There were the trolls by the punch bowl, all green and short and angry looking, the ogres staring at one of the candelabras on one of the walls, inexplicably mesmerized by the small flames, and even more that I recognized, but couldn't name.

All the creatures from my storybooks right here in this room. Sure, I'd constantly heard their names in the castle, usually associated with adult-sounding things like border disputes and trade negotiations, and I'd seen pictures of them in my books, but it was so completely wonderful and strange, getting to see them up close and personal, and even stranger to see them doing something so mundane as flirting or drinking from a crystal flute, kind of like meeting your favorite actor and being surprised when they behaved differently than the character they portrayed. It wasn't just their strangeness or their sameness that was disconcerting, but rather the mixture of the two.

Like two worlds that should never have touched. Pressed together.

And I didn't care what Lucia said, they really didn't seem all that mean or scary, not most of them anyway. So what if her dad said they were inferior? She didn't even know what that word meant. And if you asked me, the fact that he said it at all reflected worse on him than it did any of the originals at this party.

Although to be honest, it didn't really feel like a party. There wasn't any cake, or dancing, just a lot of important-looking people standing around the grand reception room and laughing with each other. Or maybe at each other. Some of them had a knack for doing both at the same time. As did their children.

I turned my head in the direction of an especially boisterous laugh, and I noticed a few of the council-people my father worked with gathered together, looking down at

something and smiling, but there was something not quite right about their faces. Smiling people were supposed to look happy, but these guys' faces looked kind of pinched and thin, like they were forcing themselves to smile even though they didn't want to.

Finally, one of the fatter council-guys moved, and I was able to see what they were looking at, or rather who. There was a small creature standing before them, gesturing wildly with its arms, and I couldn't help but let out a gasp when I realized what it was, recognizing it from one of my story books, the one about the band of warriors who rescued damsels and defeated demons. A wor...something or another.

My eyes landed on the little sword hanging from his belt, and I remembered that they were supposed to be the greatest warriors in the whole realm. I couldn't believe I'd missed him coming in! The boisterous laugh had clearly come from him, the rest of them seemed too uptight to make such a happy noise, as he told a story that had the council-people riveted, even though they seemed to be trying not to show it.

Suddenly, I noticed an even smaller creature resting on the worlen's--that's what they were called, worlens!--shoulder. It was stark white with large eyes, and I let out another gasp when it locked eyes with me. It paused for a moment, tilting its head as it took me in before waving a little clawed hand at me. I looked around really fast to make sure no one was watching before lifting the hand up by my side just a little bit, waving it, and then returning it as swiftly as possible.

The little creature turned back toward the bigger one, and I barely kept in a squeal of delight. It waved at me! Still, I pushed down my excitement, trying to keep my cool. A princess did not fan girl over adorable creatures and their even more adorable miniature best friends.

My gaze landed on Lee across the room. He was standing with his dad, a tall, brown haired man a little younger than my father. His dad was so big and strong, and he had so many scars covering his face and body... I used to be kind of afraid of him. But when he'd smiled at me and ruffled my hair, it was like his entire face changed.

Turns out, it was impossible to be afraid of someone with dimples.

Lee looked tiny standing beside him with his fancy coat and slicked back hair, his back straight and his chest all puffed up like he was trying to appear bigger than he was. He noticed me looking and stuck his tongue out at me. I stuck mine out right back.

I felt a pinch on my left arm, and I turned to find Maeve facing straight forward beside me like she hadn't done anything. She was in this ridiculous purple ruffled dress that I could tell she hated. I'd seen her trying to subtly pull off the little flowers that covered it all night. Still, that didn't give her the right to go around pinching people. I opened my mouth to tell her so when I heard the sound of a throat clearing, and I turned to find my mother a few feet away sending me a scolding look, realizing too late what Maeve had been trying to warn me of.

I quickly faced forward again, angry that it hadn't been my dumb sock but a dumb boy that had gotten me in trouble. He was always getting me in trouble.

Just then the trumpets gave a piercing cry, and I had to fight the urge to cover my ears. Mother and father stood up from their fancy chairs, the ones I was never allowed to sit in, and faced toward the front doors of the reception room. I held my breath, excited to see what kind of creature might arrive next. I'd thought there wouldn't be anymore, since the party had been going on for a while now, yet those trumpets could only mean one thing: visitors.

The heavy doors were pulled open, the hinges making a rather ominous creaking sound, and they walked in. Well, walked didn't quite feel like the right word. I couldn't really see their feet—their dark purple hoods were so long that they brushed the floor—but it almost looked like they were gliding, they moved so smoothly.

With them came a smell that I couldn't quite place, something floral maybe with an edge to it. Like perfume that had recently expired.

The people in the room pressed toward the walls and away from the doors, creating a path for the newcomers. The room was utterly silent aside from a few muffled whispers as everyone in the room watched the robed figures with wary and frightened eyes.

I tilted my head as I looked at them, trying to figure out who, or what they were. I didn't recognize them from any of my books. In fact, they looked just like us—some were old, others were young. Some had dark skin, others had light. Some had fiery red hair and others had barely a few wisps of gray on their head—but that didn't make sense. This party was for the originals. At least, the ones that felt like coming.

However, the longer I stared at them, the more I began to notice that something wasn't quite right with the way they moved. I couldn't really figure out why, but they reminded me of Ori, Cook's cat, who she sometimes let me play with when she was making dinner. The way they tilted their heads to the side as if listening for something only they could hear, the way they held themselves perfectly still one moment only to move in a blink the next. And their eyes...I jumped as I finally noticed them, an inexplicable chill passing through me.

Black as night. No whites, no color.

Just darkness.

Fear filled me, my heart racing in my chest.

I knew of only one person who had eyes like that.

I cast desperate looks around the room, not understanding why people weren't screaming, why they weren't running for the exits. It was him—one of them had to be him—and he was going to take us, to kill us—

Maeve noticed my terror, putting a hand on my arm and leaning in close to me. "They're reapers, Rose," she whispered quickly in my ear, and the name sent a shiver down my spine even as relief rushed through me. Reapers. Not him. Not the boogeyman.

I shook off my fear and peeked around, hoping desperately that no one had seen that, especially my mother.

I was much too old to be afraid of scary stories.

Still, I wasn't sure these guys were much better, although I knew they couldn't be worse. However, the longer I watched them, the more...mesmerized I became. These were not creatures I'd heard stories about or seen pictures of. On the contrary, they existed only in the real world, as if the fictional world couldn't contain them, which made them all the more intimidating—and intriguing.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the reapers as they made their way across the room, and my mouth was still slightly open when they came to stand in front of my parents. It wasn't until Maeve pinched me again that I remembered to close it. For a moment, no one moved, and it felt like the whole room was holding its breath, until finally, simultaneously, without any signal I could see, the reapers bowed. Well, I guess you could call it a bow. It was really more like a slight lowering of the head, like a sign of

respect rather than deference. Nothing like the way the other Originals had greeted my parents. My parents nodded back to the reapers and sat down, and the room seemed to let out a collective sigh, like some unspoken tension had been broken, some potential catastrophe averted.

The music started up once more, but people had yet to start walking around again, like they were afraid of making any sudden movements. I noticed my father trying to strike up a conversation with someone to his right, and my mother doing the same, but it did little to quell the stiffness of the partygoers in the room.

The reapers didn't move much either, choosing instead to remain clustered in the center, idly surveying the room and its occupants with their dark, seemingly unseeing eyes. As I watched, one of the partygoers, a woman in a blue dress, seemed to accidentally make eye contact with one of the reapers. Before she could look away, the creature tilted its head, and, as it stared at her, transformed, its body nothing but a blur one moment and the next— the next it looked exactly the same as her. Exactly the same.

Except for the black eyes.

The woman gasped in horror as she stared at her living reflection, as did much of the room, but the reaper simply turned away and straightened the woman's—now its—blue skirt, and nodded, like it approved of the shape and intended to keep it for a while. I watched in amazement as the same thing happened around the room, the robed figures changing in a blur to resemble various people at the party, sometimes electing to keep the shape, other times shrugging it off like a coat that didn't seem to fit quite right.

The room erupted in murmurs and gasps, the majority of the party goers clearly uncomfortable with the idea of having to attend a party with copies of themselves milling about the room, but gradually they got used to it, a few of them simply shaking their heads as if to say What can you do? and rapidly downing their glasses of champagne.

I smiled and had to resist the urge to clap my hands together at the marvelous trick. I leaned my head this way and that, trying to catch one of the creatures' eyes. Maeve grabbed my arm, but I shrugged her off. "Relax, M. I just want to see them do the magic trick on me."

As I turned away from her, my gaze collided with one of the reapers standing about six feet away from me. It looked to be around my father's age with a thick black

beard and pale, only slightly wrinkled skin. However, as I looked into the empty blackness of its eyes, my smile faded, and I began to feel an uncomfortable tugging sensation in the corners of my mind, like there was a door to my thoughts and—and—

And someone was twisting the handle.

Fear began to flutter in my stomach, and I wanted to look away, I needed to look away, but I couldn't. I was frozen in place, unable to move a single muscle as the creature took one step toward me. Then, another.

I waited for someone in the room to step between us, to intervene, but everyone was too distracted by the other reapers' transformations. No one seemed to notice that one had broken from the group, that it was slowly making its way toward me, that I was trapped in its empty gaze with no means of escape. No one, I realized, except Maeve. And I felt a tiny twinge of relief cut through the fear when she grabbed my hand, bravely staring the creature down.

But it wasn't looking at her.

As I watched, its head began twitching oddly, this way and that, like it had caught a strange scent in the air. It paused for a moment, and then shook its head fiercely, roughly, like it was trying to shake the smell from its nose, its ragged black hair flying, and a strange animalistic noise, somewhere between a growl and a whine, echoing from its throat.

Still, it never took its eyes off of me. Like it, too, was trapped. Urged into motion by forces it couldn't control.

My panic grew, but I told myself not to be afraid. I was the princess after all. It wouldn't hurt me. They wouldn't let that happen. The guards, my parents, Lee's dad—they wouldn't let it... right?

By this point the creature's strange behavior had gained the attention of the other reapers. One reaper, the one that now resembled the woman in the blue dress, placed a hand upon its shoulder, trying to get its attention, but it simply shook her off, its gaze never leaving me. Not even for a moment. The rest of the party simply stared at it in confusion and fear, the conversation drifting into silence, seemingly unsure whether this kind of behavior was simply another example of the creatures' strangeness or something more dangerous.

Suddenly, the bearded reaper fell to its knees, holding its hands to its head, its whole body shaking as it tore its gaze away from mine and looked up at the ceiling, a piercing scream tearing from its throat and echoing around the large, silent room. I heard Lee's dad call out to the other reapers, bringing a hand to rest on his sword. "Get your man under control!"

The guards stationed around me moved toward the creature, swords raised, but before they could get to it, the other reapers intervened, stepping between the guards and their friend.

The room erupted into chaos. People ran toward the exits, dropping purses and flutes of champagne, the cool glass shattering into a million pieces as it collided with the tile floor, and I suddenly realized that I could move again, that whatever spell the creature had put on me when it held me in its gaze had vanished when that gaze was torn away. I could move. I could run.

So, I did.

I grabbed Maeve's hand and took off across the room, trying to get to my parents, to Lee, to anyone, but I couldn't see them, I couldn't see anything except colorful skirts and white gloves as I was jostled and pushed by panicking partygoers. I didn't know where I was going, if I was even heading in the right direction. It took all my concentration just to avoid getting trampled.

I gripped Maeve's hand tightly, feeling like it was the only thing keeping me from being swept away by the flood of people, and together we pushed forward, our only thought to get away, to put as much distance between us and the creature that seemed to have lost control of itself, and that seemed to be focused only on reaching me.

With one final push, we broke free of the crowd, emerging in the far corner of the large room. Maeve and I turned around, pressing our backs to the wall as we watched the rest of the room, waiting for someone to help us. To find us.

And someone did.

The bearded reaper emerged from the frantic crowd. Its robe was torn, strips of it fluttering behind it like the tails of a kite, and there were dark stains marring the purple fabric. Blood. The same blood that was splattered across his pale face, framing its black eyes like tiny stars.

It was breathing heavily, and one of its feet was partially dragging behind it as it limped toward us, dark eyes fixed on me.

Fear wrapped around my heart like a vice, squeezing so hard it felt like I could barely catch my breath much less scream for help. I wanted to move, to run away, but it was like my feet were glued to the floor, again. Its gaze trapping me in my place. I tried to find my parents, my guards, anyone, but everyone else was too far away, caught up in the raging battle and frantic exodus happening in the room. I thought I could hear someone calling my name, Lee, maybe, but it sounded far away. Too far.

I was alone.

Then I felt Maeve's hand squeeze mine softly, watched in terror as she stepped in front of me, between me and the monster. She clenched her hands into fists, holding her head high as she brought them in front of her face. I wanted to scream at her to go, to run away, but I couldn't move my lips. I couldn't move anything. I couldn't do anything.

Or maybe I could.

The idea rose in my mind, taking shape, a shape that was almost as frightening as the creature in front of me. Magic. I could use magic. I felt it just underneath the floor, writhing and twisting beneath my feet, pushing for me to let it out. To let it all go, but I hesitated, fear leaving me frozen. Every time I used magic, someone got hurt. I hurt them. I didn't know if I could control it—if I should—

But in the end the decision was made for me, my hesitation costing me precious seconds. I watched as Maeve's back swelled for a moment, like she was taking a deep breath, and then suddenly she was off. Sprinting toward the monster. I watched her steps seemingly in slow motion, watched as she approached the reaper—

And watched as it sent a strong hand out to meet her. Watched as her body flew sideways and crashed into the tile floor.

Watched as she didn't get back up again.

I felt a sob well up in my throat as the reaper drew closer, readying myself to draw the magic from the ground, having nothing at all left to lose—

Then, it began to change.

Suddenly, I was staring at my mother, strands of her auburn hair falling into empty black eyes, her expression tormented and afraid. My teary eyes widened as I

fought the urge to reach for her, trying to tell myself it was an illusion, a lie. Then, faster than I could process, the creature shifted forms. Now, it was my father before me, a coronet resting above his brow and a desperate, searching look on his face, like he was looking to me for an explanation, for answers as to why all this was happening.

Then, it was the little worlen. It was Maeve in her purple dress, it was Lee and so on, the speed with which the reaper changed increasing with every transformation until its body was reduced to a blur of motion, with only barely discernible images appearing every couple of seconds, the only constant being the black eyes, peering out from amongst the chaos like two empty voids, and the desperation in its features, the fear. I couldn't tell if it was mocking me, mimicking the terror that must have been painted across my features.

Or if the agony, the horror, the fear was all its own.

It staggered closer, and I wanted to close my eyes, but I couldn't. It wouldn't let me. So instead I watched its progress through my tears, watched as it came within inches of me, its nose practically brushing mine. Felt its warm breath fall upon my cheeks, the bittersweet smell of it invading my mouth, my nose until it was all I could smell, all I could taste. Watched as, for a moment, some shape seemed to take hold, to stand out amongst the blur. Something bright and shimmering, with long glistening hair and some kind of a star between their eyes, twinkling different colors. Something that almost looked like it was smiling at me...

Then, I watched as it stuck a hand deep in my chest.

I screamed. The room spun. Everything went black, and then there was Lee above me, eyes filled with tears. "Rose!" Lee shouted, hand pressed hard against my chest. "Rose!"

The tile felt cold against my skin, and there was a pain, a pain deep in my chest, radiating outward.

"Rose!" Lee's voice was smaller now, like it was coming from farther away.

Then, there was nothing.

I couldn't tell where I was. There was nothing around me, nothing to see. Just an endless, echoing darkness. And there was a smell, that smell, floral and bitter. I pressed

my hand to my chest, searching for the wound, for the jagged holes where its fingers pressed into my skin, ripping, ripping, but I felt only the rapid pounding of my heart beneath my skin. No blood. No wound. Not here.

Not yet.

I felt a sob creep its way up my throat, threatening to burst out, and I realized I was trembling, shaking so hard I couldn't even manage to utter my friends' names, so I just mouthed them. *Lee? Tom? Maeve?*

Silent whispers to keep me company in the dark.

I was alone. I'd never been so alone. I was lost.

Then, gradually I began to see through the gloom, my vision slowly adjusting from the light of the castle to the darkness of my present surroundings, and I knew where I was. I was in Crestfall. I was in the caves.

And I wasn't alone.

It was in the corner, hands and feet on the floor as it crouched. Waiting. It looked different from the other reapers, the ones I'd seen in my memory. It had closely cropped white blond hair, and it was clothed in a tattered black shawl and pants. It looked young, its face not much older looking than my own.

I wonder who it had stolen it from.

It remained still, although its head swayed a bit, back and forth, the motion jerky and unpredictable, like it was the result of instinct more so than choice. It stared at me all the while, with its dark and empty eyes, like it was evaluating me. Sizing me up. Waiting to see what I would do next.

I tried to remain absolutely still, unable to shake the feeling that I was in the presence of a true predator. A monster who would try and rip out my heart without a second thought. A part of me thought I should call out for Lee or Tom or Maeve. They had to still be in the caves somewhere, right? A terrible thought occurred to me, and I began to panic, grasping inwardly for that little light, the star burning inside me that reflected Lee's life, and letting out a small sigh of relief when I felt it there. Bright and strong. He was alive. For now, at least.

I wanted to call out to him. However, something told me doing so would be a decidedly bad idea, partly because I wanted to avoid spooking the monster in front of me, and partly because I wanted my friends as far away from the reaper as possible.

Still, I felt Lee's name on my lips, trying to push its way out. I needed his strength now more than ever. I needed to feel his warm presence behind me, to see the light of the crystals in reflected in his green eyes, I needed—

And all of a sudden, there he was—his sharp jaw, his lightly freckled cheeks, his strong hands pressed against the ground—or rather, there *his body* was, put on by the creature as quickly and as casually as a dinner jacket. My breath came faster as it took a couple steps toward me, moving delicately on hands and feet like a spider maneuvering over its web, its black eyes absorbing the light from the crystals, sucking it from the room. At least, that's what it felt like when I looked into them. Like there was no light.

"Take—take it off," I whispered.

The creature paused and tilted its head, *Lee's* head, as if trying to figure out where I got off telling it what to do. I was wondering the same thing, but there was something about seeing the creature I feared, the creature I hated, taking the shape of the man I loved that caused anger to rise up inside me.

I was going to die. I knew that. Coming here had been a mistake—Lee had tried to tell me, to warn me, but I didn't listen. I'd been so desperate to save Cassie that I'd led all my friends to their deaths. I'd doomed Crestfall to remain in the hands of a madman forever. These realizations fell on me in waves, crashing into me over and over again the longer I stared at the reaper, and suddenly it was just too much. I'd gone through too much, lost *too much* to have the last thing I saw in this life be the twisted version of someone I loved. "Please, take it off."

The creature just looked at me, now only a few feet away, not moving, not changing, and I closed my eyes.

"*Does it hurt?*"

The voice that echoed through my mind wasn't a human one, not remotely. The words were raspy, barely above a whisper, yet they slid along my mind like a snake, uncoiling themselves to rest for a moment upon my thoughts before fading into nothing. I gasped, my eyes shooting open. "What—how did you—"

“*Does it hurt you? This form?*” The voice whispered in my mind again, and I stared at the creature wondering if I was only imagining it, but its mouth never moved. It had spoken only to my mind.

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“*Why?*”

I paused for a moment, and then answered, or at least attempted to. “The eyes...they’re wrong. I can’t—I can’t see it, what’s usually there.”

The reaper just looked at me for a moment, like it was processing what I was saying, and it tilted its head. “*You’re not ready for what you’ll find.*”

I knew I should have been scared, should have been angry and terrified, and I was, and yet, at the same time, I couldn’t help thinking that if there was one thing in Crestfall I could change, it wouldn’t be Varian, it wouldn’t be my magic, it would be all the assholes intent on speaking in god damn *riddles*.

Still, I played along, hoping I could bluff my way into figuring out whatever the hell it was talking about. “How would you know?”

“*In your mind. I see everything.*” The reaper paused, cocking its head. “*Such an odd way of remembering.*”

I had to resist the urge to cringe away as the ghoulish whisper echoed in my mind, realizing that none of my thoughts were safe anymore, were sacred. Bluffing would get me nowhere, neither would lying. Even talking felt redundant at this point. It would get what answers it wanted, *whatever* it wanted, and I was powerless to stop it.

The reaper just looked at me for a moment, nose twitching slightly like it was scenting something in the air. Then, in a breath, Lee was gone, and it was back to its original form. It slowly rose to its feet. “*Come.*”

I scrambled to my feet as it turned its back on me, making its way down the stone passageway.

I hesitated for a moment. And then, I went.

CHAPTER 20

The White Tree

The reaper's quick and smooth steps were silent as it moved along the passage, and I struggled to keep up, my own footfalls echoing loudly in the quiet space, pounding against the hard stone, the beat steady and ominous and dark. Like the drums of the orcs in the caverns of Moria, heralding the arrival of something terrible.

Something inescapable.

Yet still I walked on, knowing I didn't really have much choice in the matter. I had no idea where my friends were nor how to find them. I was with a creature who could read my thoughts, and therefore, could potentially squash any effort of mine to run away before I even attempted it. And finally, I was in a cave, under thousands and thousands of pounds of rock, making any attempt to use my magic without Lee less a way of escape and more a surefire way to commit suicide.

Still, at this point, that option might be preferable. I'd seen what they could do, these reapers. Witnessed it firsthand. I couldn't help pressing a hand to my chest, remembering the feeling of nails digging into skin, drawing blood, drawing a scream from my throat. The memory sent a shiver down my spine, my blood running cold as I pictured once more the emptiness of those eyes, the hopelessness, the fear. Both mine and, I couldn't help feeling, the reaper's, too.

Though what *it* had to be afraid of, I couldn't imagine.

I hadn't understood before. The pity in Lee's eyes whenever he talked about what had happened to me, his fear about coming here, all the time he spent trying to get me to change my mind. He knew what we'd be facing. Unlike me, he remembered, and maybe it was more than just the fact that the reapers were dangerous. Maybe he'd known, or at least suspected that coming here would trigger my memory of them. Maybe he'd wanted to spare me that, to let one silver lining of this horrible situation be that I no longer had to carry that kind of pain, that kind of trauma.

Maybe that's why he'd never told me what happened before. I'd never asked, not specifically, but he could have told me anyway. It would have made more sense, even, for the mission, that he did, so I could be better prepared.

It wasn't like Lee not to think strategically about something like that, but then again, if there was anything these past few days had taught me about Lee, it was that there wasn't anything he wouldn't do to protect me.

Even from my own memories.

And even though those memories were likely the most precious thing in the world to him. They held the girl he loved, the girl he lost. The fact that he was willing to sacrifice that for me...it meant—well, I didn't know what it meant, but I knew what it felt like.

It felt like hope.

Still, I tried to push away those thoughts, that hope, knowing that it wasn't very realistic—or private.

I eyed the reaper's back warily as it moved, wondering not for the first time in the past half hour where the hell it was taking me. Despite the distance we'd covered, the scenery had yet to change. The passage was just as dark, the crystals were just as luminous, but the longer we walked, the more I began to notice that something *was* different. The air was a bit colder, the warm mugginess of the caves replaced by a cool draft that sent a shiver down my spine. The smell, too, had gotten stronger. That strange mix of lavender and...something else, something that left an odd taste on the tip of my tongue. Foreign, yet familiar.

Not only that, the magic shifting and moving beneath my feet felt different. Weaker, even. So much so that I could barely sense it, even when I called on my emotions, on the fear and worry coursing through my veins.

I expected to feel weaker, too, knowing I had less power to draw from, but instead I felt...well, I felt the opposite. I felt strong, energetic, like I'd spent the last few weeks in a daze and was just now waking up, well-rested and ready. Though for what, I wasn't sure.

I didn't know the cause of this newfound strength, or what use it would be if the magic was so diminished here, but I was grateful for it when the sounds of a struggle

began to filter their way down the passage. The clang of a sword against rock, the grunt or gasp as a blow made contact, and then the same three words, shouted over and over in desperation and rage. “Where is she?! WHERE IS SHE?!”

I took off at a sprint and would have run over the reaper had it not also picked up its pace, gliding across the stone floor at an almost inhuman speed. I gasped for breath as I attempted to keep up, the sounds of battle getting louder and louder the further we went.

Fear and panic filled me. I knew Lee wouldn’t stop fighting until he had me back. He’d take on as many reapers as he could find if they stood between him and me—and get himself killed in the process.

Finally, the reaper turned a corner, and we emerged from the passageway into a larger space, similar to the cave my friends and I had first entered through, dimly lit by the glowing crystals.

Only this one wasn’t empty.

I noticed my friends first, lying on the ground in various positions of pain. Tom was on his side with his bow broken beside him, groaning as he clutched his stomach and tried desperately to draw a breath, like someone had hit him hard in the ribs and knocked the wind out of him. Maeve was on her back, motionless, blood dripping from a deep cut on the side of her forehead.

And Lee—

Lee was on his knees, his fingers only slightly gripping the sword in his hand, yet unable to lift its weight, the sharp edge resting limply on the ground. His back was to me, but I could see blood matting his hair as well as cuts and bruises peppering the skin of his arms and neck. His head was tilted up, refusing to submit even then to the creature hovering above him.

The reaper had dark skin and long braided hair. Its face was strong, almost regal looking, like it had stolen it from a young princess or a queen, but its black eyes were dark and empty as it raised a hand in the air, a hand that, as I watched, blurred and shifted into sharp talons like you’d see on an eagle or some other bird of prey. Curved and deadly.

My reaper stopped when we entered the room, but I didn't. I didn't stop. I didn't think. I just kept on running, sprinting toward Lee's kneeling form. I passed Tom and jumped over Maeve, until I finally reached Lee.

I didn't think. I just launched myself in front of him, wrapping myself around him, digging my face into his neck. My back was to the reaper, and I braced myself, waiting for the sharp talons to slice into my skin.

"Enough," a familiar hiss filled my mind, and I lifted up my head to see my reaper with his hand slightly raised in the air, like a conductor signaling for the music to stop.

"But the trespassers—" came another eerie whisper slithering into my thoughts, a bit higher and sharper than the first, and I knew it must have come from the reaper above me.

My reaper cut it off, this time with a harder edge to its ghoulish hiss. *"I said, enough."*

I felt the reaper behind me hesitate for a moment before moving away, and I let out a sigh of relief, leaning back slightly and looking into Lee's face for the first time since I came into the room. His face was pale and covered in sweat. There was a light purple bruise along the edge of his jaw and a cut above his eyebrow. He was breathing hard as he stared at me, eyes wide and dazed, like he was having trouble processing what had happened.

I ran my hands through his hair and lightly over his head, trying to gauge the severity of his injuries, but he paid them no mind, bringing a hand to my cheek softly, pulling my attention back to him. There were tears in his green eyes.

I furrowed my eyebrows in concern as I looked at him, worried he was perhaps even more injured than I'd originally thought. *"Does it hurt—"*

But Lee cut me off as he pulled me to him, roughly pressing his lips against mine.

I was only still for a moment before I began to kiss him back, wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing myself against him. It wasn't our first kiss. Not for him, and not even for me, but it felt like a first, the first time we'd kissed each other and known exactly who we were kissing.

Not a stranger. Not an old love. But something in between.

After only a few seconds, we pulled away, resting our foreheads against each other as we caught our breath. Lee pulled away slightly, worry knitting his brow. “Did it hurt you? I felt your fear and—”

I shook my head, turning away slightly, knowing if I stared too long in those eyes I would give in to the fear and anger and panic swirling through me and burst spontaneously into tears. “It was just a memory.”

Lee drew my gaze back to him with a hand on my cheek, his green eyes filled with sorrow—and understanding. “I’m sorry.”

I just nodded, pulling myself from Lee’s lap and standing up, offering him a hand. He took it and pulled himself up, using his sword to help him stay balanced. I noticed he was favoring his left leg over his right.

I paused for a moment, closing my eyes, seeking the magic beneath my feet and calling it forward. I felt the warmth of it flow through me, edging out the newfound chill in my bones, and I quickly funneled it into Lee, focusing on the point where our hands were intertwined.

I braced myself for the temptation, for the desire to let the magic run free that I’d felt whenever I’d tried to use the bond with Lee in Crestfall, but it never came. Maybe it was because of what I’d noticed before, how there seemed to be so little magic in this place. I found it was difficult even to channel enough to heal Lee much less bring the caves down.

I should have been relieved by this, but as I finished healing Lee, worry gnawed at me, filling my stomach. Maeve had said that Varian’s use of dark magic was destroying Crestfall’s magic, poisoning it. Was the magic so much weaker here because we were getting closer to him? Had he destroyed that much already?

My heart dropped as a sudden realization dawned on me, a new fear. Lee had said the fallen depended on magic for everything here, that it made the plants grow and glow and supported all life. Even if I did manage to defeat Varian, and that was still a big if, what if there wasn’t anything of my realm left to save?

Lee squeezed my hand in silent thanks, pulling me from my dark thoughts, and I just shot him a small smile, hoping it came out looking more reassuring than it felt. I

couldn't worry about all that now. We had bigger problems to deal with, like healing Cassie—and not getting killed in the process.

Tom was already by Maeve's side, gently probing the cut on her head. He was relatively uninjured compared to the other two and seemed to be currently in the process of trying to heal Maeve, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration as he tried to channel the sparse magic. I watched as Maeve groaned and blinked her eyes open slowly, a hiss of pain escaping her lips as she brought a hand to her head, the cut already closing beneath her palm. Gradually, her eyes focused on Tom. "Care to fill me in how we're not dead?"

Tom scowled and didn't answer her right away, apparently not wanting to give her the impression that just because he healed her she was forgiven for what happened with Cassie, so I placed a hand on Tom's shoulder and leaned over him until I was in Maeve's field of vision. She sent me a relieved smile although made sure to follow it with an eye roll. "And where exactly have you been?"

I smiled at her and then grew serious, turning toward Tom and meeting his warm brown eyes. "Tom, where's Cassie?"

Tom gestured toward the far wall, and I followed his gaze, unsure what I was looking for until I spotted the tip of a boot pointing out from the shadows. "Lee!" I called out, running over to Cassie, and he helped me to gently lift her from the corner Tom had hid her in and bring her to the center of the room.

Her skin had an almost grayish hue, and I was shocked to find her blue eyes were open, bloodshot and wild as they whirled about the room, not focusing on anything. I pressed a hand over her heart, and my breath caught as I felt just how weakly it was beating, how slowly.

I looked up at my reaper, still standing calmly by the doorway, face expressionless, the other having disappeared by the time Lee and I had broken apart. Tom and Lee had both taken up positions beside Maeve, Cassie, and I, trying to put themselves in the best position to defend us should the reaper turn violent like the other one, although they must have known deep down that if this creature decided to kill us, it would.

I held tightly to Cassie's hand, meeting the creature's dark eyes. "Please." I didn't bother to explain what I wanted, knowing it had all the answers it would need in my head.

The reaper didn't move, simply observing the five of us calmly like we were animals in a zoo. A part of me thought it was foolish to ask, to expect anything of this reaper just because it saved our lives. There was every chance it had simply wanted to kill us itself, or keep us around for some kind of torturous amusement.

Maeve shook her head, shooting nervous glances from side to side, and whispered, "This is crazy. How do we know it can even understand us?"

I shot her a confused look before quickly turning back to the reaper, not wanting to take my eyes off it for too long. "If it can speak our language, then I'm pretty sure it can understand it." Not to mention the whole reading minds thing.

I felt Maeve look at me strangely, opening her mouth to respond before the reaper finally moved, inclining his head toward the passageway at the other end of the room, and we got up. Tom pulled Cassie into his arms bridal style, and I moved to Lee, squeezing his hand tightly in mine and leading him out. He resisted at first, and I could tell that the last thing he wanted to do was to put his back to the reaper, but I insisted, tugging him forward. He didn't yet know that it was impossible to hide anything from a reaper. As impossible as it was to fight them.

Or to escape them.

Only I didn't want to escape. Not really. We'd come here for a reason.

And so, I followed that reason down the passageway, trying to resist the urge to look back at the reaper. It might not transform me into a pillar of salt, but I doubt another glimpse into its empty eyes would provide me with any measure of comfort. Besides, something told me that behind me Maeve was sending it enough suspicious glances for the both of us.

I'd expected another long walk down an endless passageway, but it was only a few steps before we reached our destination.

The cavern was wide, easily as big as a football field, and covered in those same iridescent crystals, casting a bluish purplish glow around the large space and leaving the far corners entrenched in shadow. The air was even colder here, and I watched as my breath puffed out in front of me like smoke. I expected to shiver, to want to wrap my arms around myself to keep warm, but although I noticed the cold, it didn't seem to bother me the way it should have.

Instead, I found it refreshing, each deep breath of the chilly air making me feel more alert, more awake, and I felt it again, even more strongly, that energy I had noticed as I crept along the passage, like just being here made me stronger.

Unlike the passageway, here the crystals could be found on the ground as well as just the walls, continuing inward until they came to a center, like roots spreading out from a tree.

A white tree.

Well, I guess you could call it white. The bark on the impossibly tall tree was a brilliant ivory, sparkling and shining like starlight, and occasionally glowing blue and purple in certain places where the crystals reflected off its smooth surface. The crystals didn't just spread from the tree like roots, winding their way down countless other passageways like the one we'd just traveled down. They also hung from its giant branches like shimmering leaves, dozens of feet in the air, and for a moment I wondered what they must sound like when a breeze blew through them, like a thousand wind chimes tied together. Then, I remembered we were in a cave, and they'd likely never felt the wind. The thought made me sad for some reason.

When we'd first walked in, the cavern was empty, although when I finally tore my eyes away from the tree, I realized that was no longer the case. There were large cracks in the wall, crevices barely wide enough for a human to fit inside, and from them, reapers were pouring out.

They emerged from the shadowed cracks simply as dark blobs that only became more distinctive as they descended. They clung to the walls like spiders, their movements frenzied yet controlled, crawling slowly one minute before moving down the walls so quickly it was hard to follow their progress. They were there, and then they were here.

They all looked human for the most part, or as close to it as they could, and I was surprised not to see any of them in the form of any of the other creatures I'd seen in Crestfall, both magical and not. I knew they were capable, had watched that female-looking reaper transform her hand into that of a bird with barely a thought, and yet they all seemed to prefer the human shape, or should I say fallen shape, for some reason. Although, that's where the similarities between them ended. Like I'd seen in my memory,

the reapers were an amalgam of different ages, races, and genders, the only constant being the pitch black eyes.

Fear filled me as they poured from the shadows, surrounding my friends and I on all sides. Some were standing up with their hands folded in front of them, and others were still creeping around on all fours, cocking their heads as they evaluated us carefully, a few even baring their teeth whenever one of us made eye contact.

I felt Lee's hand tighten around mine as he surveyed the few dozen reapers that had surrounded us, no doubt mentally calculating our odds of getting out of this alive. If the scowl on his face was any indication, they weren't great.

I recognized the reaper that had attacked my friends in the front, long braids swinging as it shifted its head back and forth, like a snake preparing to strike. "*Now, they must die.*" The braided reaper looked past us as she said this, and I turned to find my reaper standing in the middle of the crowd with us, Maeve inching a few feet away from him as the agitated crowd pressed us closer.

He looked unworried, despite the rising tension in the room and the anxious reapers around us. I waited for him to respond, and he eventually did, voice still calm despite the obvious agitation in the room. "*She's a silverling.*"

Many reapers let out gasps and hisses, reacting both physically and mentally to the message he'd sent to our minds. There were many protests, many questions, and they all filled my mind at once, like a thousand eerie whispers scraping against my subconscious, echoing loudly within my thoughts. I grimaced, trying to resist the urge to press my hands over my ears, knowing it would do nothing to mute the din. Out of all of it, I only managed to make out a hissed, "*But that's impossible,*" and I thought it must be the braided reaper's voice, her dark eyes wide in disbelief.

My reaper just looked at her, steady and unyielding, and I took the opportunity to turn slightly and whisper to my friends, who had made a sort of huddle together in the center of the circle, "What's a silverling?"

Silence was my only response, and I turned fully toward them, not understanding the confused looks on their faces. "Summer, what are you talking about?" Lee asked in a concerned voice.

“A silverling? The thing the reaper mentioned...why are guys looking at me like that? Is it bad?”

Lee exchanged an odd look with Tom and Maeve before turning back toward me. “Summer, the reapers didn’t say anything.”

I glanced between them and the reapers that surrounded us. “Wait, you guys didn’t—you don’t hear them...in your mind?”

Lee’s eyes widened. “They’re speaking telepathically? And you can *hear* them?”

“Yeah, I—hold on.”

The other reapers had started to whisper again, tired of my reaper’s silence, but there were still too many of them. I was only able to catch a few phrases here and there.

“It’s never happened before.”

“Why now?”

And faintly, there in the back of my mind, barely a hiss but growing louder as more and more joined in, two words. *“Kill her.”*

My stomach dropped as I felt the heavy weight of a hundred dark and empty eyes resting on me, more than one of them apparently contemplating my execution. Lee must have felt my panic as he squeezed my hand and surveyed the crowd in suspicion, trying to determine where exactly the threat was coming from. “What is it, Summer? What are they saying?”

I struggled to find my voice, the act of focusing enough to form words made almost impossible by the ghoulish cacophony inside my head. “I—they’re saying it’s impossible, that it’s never happened before—”

“What? What’s never happened before?”

“I’m not sure...but they—some of them seem to...want me dead.”

I saw Lee’s grip tighten on his sword as the rest of my friends pressed closer around me.

The riot of words was still raging in my head, but my reaper didn’t bother to answer their questions, choosing to just stand still and silent, like he was waiting for something.

Despite the unceasing noise of the reapers’ angry thoughts, I couldn’t help noticing that on the outside they seemed rather still, with only a few hisses or occasional

bared teeth to emphasize their points. It was beyond strange for me to have all their voices in my head, but I realized how much stranger it must be for my friends, standing in a cave surrounded by near silent enemies as they simply stared at you with dark and empty eyes.

I tried to follow the conversation, to grasp some idea of what they were talking about, why they wanted me dead, but I couldn't make out more than a few words and phrases. A part of me thought that they were talking about Varian, that they knew that he was looking for me, and wanted to kill me before I drew him to them. However, the other part of me couldn't help thinking that these creatures couldn't really give an f about Varian or what was happening in the rest of the realm. They were secluded here for a reason, deep in this mountain, and something told me it wasn't to seek protection from the rest of the world, but simply because the rest of the world had ceased to interest them.

"We will not act out of fear," a powerful voice hissed in my mind, louder than all the rest, and I was surprised when the declaration wasn't met with any protest, only silence. I searched the crowd, trying to determine which reaper the voice belonged to, when a young girl, maybe nine or ten, stepped away from the rest of the reapers and into the circle. Her blonde hair flowed around her shoulders in ringlets and her dark eyes stood out like black holes in her pale moon of a face. I'd thought the reapers had been chilling before, but seeing them take the form of a child was all the more disturbing, its features dainty and soft, yet somehow devoid of youth.

I was even more shocked when the rest of the reapers sank to their knees at the appearance of the young girl, and I understood all at once that she must be their leader—And the one who would decide whether we lived or died.

The little girl tilted her head as she stared at me, and I held my breath, knowing whatever she said next would seal my friends and I's fates. *"We don't yet know why they've done what they've done, nor can we foresee the consequences. She lives—"* I let out a sigh of relief, understanding nothing except the last, most important part, but the reaper wasn't done yet—*"For now."*

Well, that wiped the smile off my face.

I turned toward my friends who were looking at the little girl tensely and with suspicion, seeming only to grasp that she somehow was the one deciding our fate.

“They’re not going to kill me.”

I watched as my friends’ shoulders dropped slightly in relief, but they didn’t drop their wary gazes. They clearly were in no way ready to believe fully in the word of the little girl, but they also seemed to understand that they had little choice in the matter.

Still, I pushed the fear away, taking a step toward the little girl. “My friend—” I gestured to Cassie—

The little girl glanced at Cassie then back at me, her expression never changing. “*-is dying.*”

The words slithered across my subconscious, and I had to fight the urge to shiver. “Please.”

The little reaper tilted her head. “*We cannot save her.*”

The words echoed in my mind, bouncing against the walls and fading into nothing as I struggled to comprehend them, to accept what she was saying. I shook my head, fear and anxiety leaking into my voice. “No, he said—Pinstripe man said the white tree could—”

“*We cannot.*”

“Then, who?” I asked, my voice breaking a little as desperation flowed through me.

The reaper looked at me for a moment and tilted her head, like I was a puzzle she couldn’t quite work out. Then, I could practically feel her there, as she stared at me, walking through my thoughts, my memories, like a visitor in a museum, passing quickly by some and lingering on others. Finally, she turned toward my reaper, the only one that remained near us, the others having slunk back into their dark holes and cracks after the princess—queen—whatever she was, made her decision. “*Show her.*”

I turned back toward the reaper, but he was already moving away, moving toward the tree. I followed him, and my friends, having heard only one side of the conversation, exchanged confused and wary glances before following me.

The reaper paused beneath one of the tree’s lower branches, and as he lifted his hand upward, I half expected him to pluck one of the crystals from the branch like one

might an apple. Instead, he swirled his pale fingers around it, and all of a sudden it dissolved into something... else, like a pale shimmering dust but more substantial, gathering in the air and sparkling like a floating river full of tiny diamonds.

He drew his hand downward, and the swirling river of sparkling dust followed, its color a pale lavender in the low light of the crystals, dancing in and around his open palms, but never coming into contact with his skin. I was reminded of wisps, pushing and pulling water and fire and air all around them. This was similar, only instead of the elements, this reaper was bending magical crystal dust. I didn't know who came up with this stuff.

Suddenly, the reaper pushed his palm outward, and I watched the sparkling dust drift forward, past me, up and around my friends' gaping mouths until finally it reached its destination. Tom flinched back as the lavender mist drew near him, swirling around Cassie as she lay still in his arms. He glanced at me, and I nodded.

Reluctantly, he held Cassie a little away from his body, but still close enough, I noticed, that he could snatch her back if something happened that he didn't like. The sparkling dust drifted under her, around her, tracing its way along her body like it was assessing her condition, examining her injuries. Then, I watched as it began to lift her upwards, drawing her out of Tom's arms and into the air. Her raven hair floated gently around her neck, and her arms and legs swayed lightly, like she was floating underwater.

Eventually, she stopped rising and simply hovered, the dust still swirling about her body. I watched her eyes, waiting for them to open, waiting for her gray skin to regain its color, its life. "Is it healing her?" I asked as I stared at her, unable to keep the hope out of my voice.

The reaper turned toward me. "*The crystals cannot heal. They merely sustain.*"

My heart dropped as my hope left me, and I felt my friends' nervous gazes on me, waiting for me to translate what the reaper had said, but I ignored them. "For how long?"

"*Until you're ready.*"

"Ready? Ready for what?" I asked, fear and frustration creeping into my tone, but the reaper didn't respond.

I felt a touch on my shoulder, and I turned to find Lee looking at me with concerned eyes. "What is it, Summer? What's it saying?"

I shook my head. “The crystals aren’t healing her. They’re just keeping her alive until...”

“Until what?” Tom asked, stepping closer, gazing at Cassie with worried eyes.

“I—I’m not sure.”

I turned back toward the reaper only to find him in the process of dissolving another crystal. Or rather, many crystals. One by one, he swirled his pale hand around them, and one by one they disappeared into a shower of mist and light. All lavender, to start with, but as the reaper drew the sparkling dust towards him, some of the colors began to shift, to change.

He waved a hand, and a row of small figures emerged out of the swirling mist, made up of a gleaming silver, sparkling in the crystal light. “*There was a realm high in the clouds and deep in the woods, where lived a strong and powerful race of beings.*”

As the words fell softly upon my ears, I realized the reaper had altered the tone of his voice, making it gentler, less wild and unsettling, and I got the feeling he was doing it purely for my benefit, like he was endeavoring to convey the information in a manner his audience would be most receptive to. It was clearly important to them that I understand and accept whatever they had to say next. I just couldn't figure out why.

As I watched, the silver figures ran and danced through the air. Some were laughing, others crying. Just walking through life, it seemed. Never alone, always together. However, the longer I stared at the shimmering figures, the more I began to notice something strange about them, a kind of white light nestled within their chests, glowing and pulsating like a tiny heartbeat.

The reaper tilted his head, his hands never stilling as he bent the dust this way and that, molding the images to reflect his story. “*This realm had no magic of its own. Instead, the only magic came from within the people themselves, and with it they were able to accomplish great feats.*” I watched as one of the silver figures drew something sharp across its palm, its silver blood dripping down its hand, and summoned what looked like a mighty wave, the white light that was pulsating within its chest drifting out and over its fingers as it used it to hold the massive wave in place.

“*But one day, a number of these beings were banished from this realm, and so fell to another.*” All of a sudden, some of the silver figures began to drop, like the very

ground beneath them gave way, and fell through the air, arms and legs flailing wildly until a land of sparkling green mist rose up to catch them, and they landed, knees bent as they crouched atop this new land.

“Unlike their own realm, this one had a magic all its own, living and swirling in the very ground beneath their feet. The creatures here had no magic inside them, and instead channeled and relied on the magic of the realm, itself.”

“Crestfall,” I murmured, as I watched a golden light shimmering beneath the green ground, pressing upward. Begging to be let out. I felt my friends flick their gazes sharply to me and then back to the sparkling scene in front of them, no doubt trying to put the pieces together of what exactly they were seeing. I knew I should probably be translating for them, explaining what the reaper was saying, but it took all my concentration simply to understand what it meant for myself, how it was supposed to help me save Cassie, what role I had to play in all of it. They wouldn’t be showing it to me otherwise.

“The outlanders tried to use their magic here, but they soon realized that it was incompatible with the magic of this new land. More than that, it destroyed it.” The reaper lifted a hand, and suddenly, everywhere the silver beings spilled their blood and cast their internal silvery white magic, the green and gold of Crestfall transformed into a lifeless black, and the silver beings looked at their own palms in shock and fear.

“Their magic was like an invasive species, sucking the very life from wherever it was cast. It was...out of balance with this world, and so had to be destroyed.” The reaper flicked his wrist, and all of a sudden, a throng of creatures rose up against the silver people, fighting them and shifting forms, taking on different shapes as the silver people held them off with their own magic, the land darkening to black all around them.

“The reapers,” I whispered, as I watched one of the creatures transform rapidly from a bird to a bear, slashing out at the silver beings with impossibly sharp claws. I shifted my gaze toward my reaper as I worked to put the pieces together. “It was you. You went to war with them.”

The reaper waved his hand, and the battle continued to wage between the creatures, growing in intensity. *“Although the magic of the outlanders was formidable, so were we—”* I noticed there was no pride in the claim, like it was just a statement of fact—

“We were too evenly matched, and after a century of fighting, we were both dying out. Destroying each other. Destroying the realm. Something had to change.”

I tilted my head, watching as the battling figures began to slow, to step back. “So you brokered peace.”

“*Not us,*” the reaper hissed, and as he spoke, the sparkling dust reapers disappeared, and only the silver beings remained. “*The outlanders had tried to wield Crestfall’s magic before, but although they were able to channel great amounts of it, and although it was significantly less powerful than their own magic, they found it was impossible for them to control it.*” One of the silver figures placed a hand on the ground, seemingly calling forth the shimmering gold magic, and as it did, the magic burst outward, swirling fearfully and forcefully around the silver being and striking down the others closest to it, until the silver being finally wrenched its palm from the ground.

My heart seemed to skip a beat as I watched it, as I was overcome with what felt like a terrible sense of Deja vu, resting like a stone in the pit of my stomach.

“They realized that in order to wield Crestfall’s magic and end the war, they would have to give up what made them different, that part of them that was still connected to their native realm. The part of them that allowed them to access the magic that lived within them.”

The reaper lifted his hand, and a sparkling tree sprung up from the dust. Ordinary looking, with a brown trunk and simple green leaves. “*The outlanders knew this was the only home they had left, knew they couldn’t fight forever, so they made a choice. A sacrifice.*”

Then, I watched as one by one, the silver beings pressed their hands against the trunk of the tree, and as they did so, began to change. The silverness of their skin transformed into a soft gold, the same gold as the magic swirling within the land at their feet, but I noticed there was still the light inside their chests, the whisper of their native magic. A magic, I realized, they had forever given up their ability to access. Always within reach, yet untouchable.

And they weren’t the only ones to change.

As each silver being touched the bark of the tree, the tree itself began to transform, touched as it was by so much of the foreign magic. The brown of the bark

transformed into a glistening ivory, the green leaves into sparkling, iridescent crystals until we were looking at a miniature version of the massive tree that stood before us.

“The war ended, and they offered us a gift of peace,” the reaper’s voice whispered in my mind.

My eyes widened as I looked between the image and the real life version before me. “The tree.” Then, I furrowed my eyebrows in confusion. “But why would you want—”

“We had no desire to accept the gift,” the reaper hissed. *“It was the magic from their world that had almost destroyed our own, but they were insistent, saying that their weakened state no longer made them fit to protect it, and if it ever were to fall in the wrong hands... We tried to destroy it, but found it would not die.”*

“So, you protect it even though you hate it?” I asked softly, staring at the tree.

The reaper tilted his head, a strange look drifting over his face. *“It is balance.”*

The reaper suddenly dropped his hands and the sparkling dust fell, dissolving so quickly as it did that not a single speck reached the cave floor before it disappeared.

“And these people,” I asked the reaper, my voice hesitant, like I wasn’t quite sure I wanted the answer. “What were they called?”

“Before their transformation, we called them silverlings. Afterwards, they were known simply as the fallen.”

“The fallen,” I repeated softly, trying to process what he’d said, what it all meant. I’d thought they—my people were called that because they lived in Crestfall, not because they *literally* fell from another realm.

Lee ran a hand through his hair, his tone awed and a bit unsettled. “I knew there were some legends about where we came from, rumors that we had actually fallen from another realm, but I never knew—I didn’t believe—”

“We *still* don’t know,” Maeve cut in. “Just because this reaper painted it in the air with pretty sparkles doesn’t mean it’s the truth—”

“It’s the truth,” I interrupted her, shooting a glance at the reaper. “They have no reason to lie.”

I kept staring at the reaper, knowing he could hear the question swirling around in my mind, wanting him to answer it, to make it so I didn’t have to ask. “Earlier, you—you

said *I* was a silverling.” I heard my friends soft gasps at this new information. The reaper, however, didn’t respond, perhaps waiting for a question. “This magic inside—inside the silverlings, inside all the fallen, that only the silverlings can access...does it have a name?”

There were too many similarities. A magic that destroyed other magic. A magic capable of unimaginable power.

A magic that was paid for in blood.

The reaper was silent, just staring at me. Perhaps because he saw I already had the answer in my mind.

“Dark magic,” I said softly, like saying it any louder would somehow make it more true, more painfully obvious. My friends jerked their gazes toward me, and I didn’t need to turn to see what I’d find on their faces. Disbelief. Horror. Fear. They were the same emotions battling for a place on my features.

Lee grabbed hold of my hand, no doubt sensing the panic and disgust swirling inside me. “No, Summer. You’re not like him. You can’t be like him—”

I ripped my hand from his, the tears falling freely down my cheeks now. “But I am like him, Lee. Remember before? With Cassie?” I watched his face fall, his eyes darkening as he thought back to the raging wind, the lifeless ground, the changed eyes. “We’re the same,” I said, a bit numbly.

“*Varian is no silverling,*” the reaper’s soft hiss filled my mind, the harsh and dissonant tone startling me for a moment before I realized the reaper must have decided to switch back to his true voice once his story had ended.

I whipped back toward him. “What? But you said—”

“Over the centuries, there have been those who have found a way around their...disability and have managed to access the magic inside them. It was discovered that if one used the blood of another, the life of another, they could access the silverling magic. At great cost. The magic was never meant to be used in this manner, rendering the one who cast it...changed. Their physical appearance, their emotions, their personality. Twisted beyond repair.”

I blinked at him, trying to process this information, to understand. All this time, we’d thought that dark magic was a perversion of Crestfall magic, but the truth was, it

was actually a perversion of the silverling magic, a magic all of the fallen held inside of them, a remnant of their native realm. Varian—all those other legends my friends had told me of evil sorcerers— they likely had no idea what kind of magic they were really using, believing only what the rest of my friends did, what they’d told me and what I suspected they’d been told for centuries: If you use the lifeblood of another, you can do impossible things, things that seemed to go against the natural order of things.

All I’d been warned about the moral laws of magic, about how using it to do certain things would destroy one’s soul. Right and wrong. Good and evil. The truth was, it wasn’t about what you did, but *how* you managed to do it. Dark magic was simply one side of a coin, black as the eyes of the one who casted it, and the other...

The other was a bright, shining silver.

A kind of excitement began to creep into me, although it was only able to filter slightly through the worry and fear. If this reaper was right, then I had a magic inside me stronger than any Crestfall magic I’d wielded before, a magic that I could access, that I could control, and that maybe, just maybe, was strong enough to allow me to do what I’d been brought here by my friends to do. I was an anomaly in the bloodline. Something that should never have been...unless it had happened for a reason. Maybe it really was like what Lee had said. Maybe—

Maybe I was born for this.

The reaper raised a hand and then lowered it, and so Cassie’s suspended form began to drift down, only stopping when she was about eye level in front of me. “*There is a poison running in her veins that is stronger than any we’ve seen before,*” he hissed in my mind. “*You will use the tree to heal her as only you can access its magic.*”

I glanced at Cassie, at her colorless complexion and sunken cheeks, wanting nothing more than to restore her strength, to make her whole and healthy again, but there was still...something else. Something that didn’t quite make sense. “But why do I need to use the tree? If I can access my own magic, why not just use it?”

The reaper just stared at me, expressionless as always, and I got the feeling this was a question he hadn’t wanted me to ask. “*You’re still needed.*”

I furrowed my eyebrows. “I’m still—what does that—”

And then it hit me, crashing over me like a wave in the middle of a storm. There was something to the reaper's story that hadn't sat right with me, something that didn't quite add up. The silverlings' magic was powerful, much more powerful than Crestfall magic, and yet, they were willing to just *give it up*? For what? *Peace*? The good of the realm?

Some might. Perhaps even many would consider it, but this was a people at war, a people that had no guarantee that the monsters they were fighting would honor their word, that by sacrificing their magic they wouldn't just be playing right into the reapers' hands, leaving themselves practically defenseless.

Easy prey to a creature that was every predator your mind could imagine.

No, there had to be something else. Some other reason they were willing to give up the thing that made them who they were, that protected them and connected them.

Some cost.

I already knew the cost of *misusing* the silverling magic. I'd witnessed it firsthand, forced to watch as it stripped a man of all that was good inside him, as it turned his skin to ash and his eyes to an impossible black. Not empty, like a reaper's, but full of all the pain and agony of what he had lost.

But what if here, on Crestfall, there was a cost that came from simply *using* the foreign magic? What if the silverlings gave up their ability to access their magic not in an effort to save the realm or end the war, but to save themselves?

My mind reeled as I weighed that question, as I wondered if the answer was what I thought it was, what I feared it was, and what the consequences of that might be.

I could feel my friends' eyes on me, especially Lee's, knew he was currently experiencing all the pain and anger and fear that was currently flowing through my veins as a final realization settled over me, the one I'd been running from and toward all along.

The reapers had no reason to care whether or not I lived or died. In fact, if I really was a silverling, a recurrence of their greatest enemy, they actually had much more reason to want me dead. If using my magic to heal Cassie hurt me or even killed me, why should they care? Why even teach me about this magic at all, show me what I was capable of, unless...

You're still needed.

The only thing the reapers cared about was balance. They'd gone to war over it. Protected an artifact of their enemy because of it. And right now, there was one that was threatening to destroy all they had worked for, wielding a magic that they had spent a century fighting to destroy, poisoning their realm from the inside out.

Throwing it out of balance.

But then they found one with the power to stop this invasion, this corruption. The only one able to access the immense power required to stop Varian.

You're still needed.

The reapers wanted me to use the tree to heal Cassie rather than my own magic because they needed me to wait, to use my own magic, and pay the price, only at the right moment. Only when Varian was before me.

When I was no longer needed.

Pain and grief and fear filled me, coupled with an odd sense of numbness. Like I had taken a step outside my body and all these revelations, all these truths were occurring to another girl, dawning on her as I simply watched from afar.

All this time I'd been wondering whether giving into Varian, whether dying was the only way to save my people, my realm, and for a while there, I'd managed to convince myself, to let myself *be* convinced, that it wasn't. That letting Varian win wasn't going to save anyone. That I had power enough to stop him on my own, a power no one else could wield. And I was right. I did have the power to stop him, to defeat him without giving him what he wanted, but now—now I understood that in the end, the cost would be the same.

My life.

I shook my head, coming back into myself, trying to shake off the dark thoughts, the doubt, aware that I was being watched. Just because the reapers seemed to think I would need to use my silverling magic to defeat Varian, didn't necessarily mean I would. I still had my friends, my connection to the Crestfall magic. We would find a way to defeat Varian the way we'd always planned. Together.

We had to.

I glanced toward the tree. Based on what I understood, if I accessed the magic left inside *it* by the silverlings, rather than the magic inside *me*, and used that magic to

help heal Cassie, I wouldn't have to pay the cost. Whatever that cost may be. Whatever the silverlings had been so frightened of that they'd given up their ability to use their magic. I assumed it was death, or some kind of significant injury, but I couldn't know for sure.

Hopefully I never would.

"What do I do?" I asked the reaper, ignoring Lee's questioning eyes on me. I would heal Cassie, and then I would answer their questions. I needed more information, needed to know the worst before I gave them hope or took it away. Needed to know how much I should tell them—

And exactly how much of it would have to be a lie.

The reaper raised a hand, gesturing to the tree. *"Place your hand upon the tree, and channel the magic within it into the girl. She will be healed."*

I took a small step toward the tree. "And the silverling magic? Won't using it hurt Crestfall's magic?"

"The tree's very presence has greatly diminished the magic that can exist here. There isn't enough left to destroy."

I reached for the magic beneath me, and I realized he was right. There was nothing, not even a whisper of the magic that was usually humming beneath my feet, begging to be set free. I'd thought the lack of magic here had been because of Varian, but turned out, it was actually the tree that had sapped these caves of their magic. Although, I guess, in a way, the cause was the same.

Foreign magic. One born of light, the other of darkness, yet both a poison to this land.

I slowly began making my way over to the base of the tree, noticing out of the corner of my eye that the reaper had a hand stretched outward and was guiding the dust around Cassie, pushing her forward so that she was floating after me.

I stepped carefully, trying to avoid tripping over the roots or smashing any of the delicate looking crystals, until finally the trunk of the massive tree was within reaching distance. I turned to find Cassie's still form beside me, and I gently reached out and clasped her hand in mine, wishing now more than ever that she was safe and awake, poised to deliver some sassy remark about what all this magic dust was doing to her hair,

or that she would squeeze my hand and tell me I could do this, tell me that she believed in me, and trusted me to save her. Then, I remembered how quickly she'd stepped forward in front of the pixies, pretending to be me. No hesitation or doubt.

And in a way, I guess she already had.

I took a deep breath and reached forward with my other hand toward the glistening ivory bark of the tree. This close, I was surprised to find that the tree seemed to have a certain...noise to it. A faint whisper. Almost like it was literally *humming* with power, with magic.

I hesitated, my fingers inches from the white bark. Somehow, this felt even scarier than jumping down a dark hole into an unknown land, than facing down mermaids and ogres, than telling someone you loved them or watching your friends get hurt because of you. It felt like another choice, another step forward that once taken, could never be taken back. Yet another point of no return. Perhaps the final one. Perhaps this was really it, the choice that would cut me off forever from the girl I once was, the life I once knew. That's what it felt like, discovering this new power.

It felt like saying goodbye.

I quickly pressed my hand against the tree and gasped as a feeling of cold washed over me, like my veins had been filled with ice water. I felt the magic in the tree flow through me, and I tried to concentrate on pushing it toward Cassie, toward imagining her healed and healthy, only this magic felt different than what I'd experienced before. It wasn't all warmth and sunshine like Crestfall's magic. Instead, it was cold and crisp against my skin, like wintry moonlight.

Not only that, there was something...personal about it. Something intimate. For once, I wasn't channeling the magic of a land, but of a person. A thousand people. Like they'd each left a sliver of their soul, of who they were, buried within the tree. What I'd thought was a hum was in fact what sounded like the far away cry of a thousand voices, their words unintelligible, but their meaning clear.

Grief.

They were in mourning, grieving for what they had to give up. This is what characterized their last moments with their hands pressed against the tree, and this is what

was absorbed along with their power, what lived on inside the tree even centuries after they'd taken their hands away.

Tears filled my eyes at the feeling of such grief, such loss, the droplets clouding my vision. I tried to blink the tears away, only when my vision cleared, I was no longer in a cave staring at the trunk of a white tree. I was outside, in the middle of what looked like a wide meadow full of pale blue flowers. The sky was dark as thunder crashed, and the wind raged, ripping the petals from the flowers. Then, I saw them.

They're skin was smooth and covered in silver markings, tattoos that traced along their arms, legs, and hands and crept halfway up their necks. The design was hard to make out, but it seemed to be floral, like a garden had been painted on their skin, the silver shimmering slightly in the glow of the lightning that flashed behind them, like the markings had a life of their own. Their clothing was sparse, prioritizing freedom of movement over physical protection, and the fabric was dyed in various shades of white, blue, and purple.

Other than that, the people looked almost normal, their features and proportions human-like if a bit unnaturally beautiful, much more normal than the creatures they were currently fighting.

The reapers in the meadow took many different shapes. There was what looked like something resembling a white tiger, only with green stripes and abnormally large canines, that was currently slashing at one of the silverlings in the far corner of the field. There were reapers who seemed never to stay in one shape for more than a moment, transforming from wisp, to worlen, to hawk every few seconds, dodging the slash of swords and blasts of silver magic that were continuously thrown at them. Some were as I saw them in the caves, crawling swiftly on all fours and jabbing with transformed teeth or claws.

And everywhere, there were bodies, both reaper and silverling alike, littering the broken, blackened meadow.

I watched as the silverling closest to me, a girl with light brown skin and gray eyes who looked to be about my age, pulled her hands toward her chest in a smooth motion, almost like she was praying, before throwing them out before her, her gray eyes

turning a shining, iridescent silver. From her hands spilled a silvery light, knocking the reaper nearest to her straight to the ground as it let out a howl of pain. It didn't rise again.

The girl let her hands drop, the silver clearing from her eyes as she fought to catch her breath. There was something...different about her. Something that had changed even since I first saw her. Her face looked sharper, like her skin was pulled more tightly across her features, and she seemed a bit more...tired, almost. Worn.

I watched as she dropped to the side of a male silverling with blonde hair, young and strong-looking but with a fist sized hole gauged in the center of his stomach, so deep I could see his insides threatening to spill out, and I had to force down my nausea at the sight. The girl's eyes filled with tears, and she screamed something I couldn't hear over the sounds of battle, his name maybe. He looked at her with dazed eyes, his chest barely rising and falling, and lifted his hand slightly toward her.

The girl quickly took hold of it, and I watched as her eyes turned silver once more, the land beneath her and the boy turning black as she pulled the silvery light from within her, allowing it to wash over them both. I watched as the wound in his stomach began to knit itself together, the life returning to his pale cheeks.

But something was wrong.

As the girl called forth her magic, much more than she had needed to kill the reaper it seemed, she began to...change. Wrinkles appeared next to her eyes and around her mouth, streaks of gray emerged in her dark hair. By the time she had finished, and the man was fully healed, she looked more like a woman of fifty than a girl of twenty-five.

The blonde man looked up at her, his grateful smile transforming into confusion and fear as he took in her appearance, the same look reflected in the girl's face as the silver of her eyes faded, and she looked down at her hands, more weathered and wrinkled than they had been before, and held a strand of silver hair in front of her face.

Her scream was lost in the sounds of battle.

I gasped as the scene changed, the destroyed meadow replaced with a green forest, similar to the one my friends and I had passed through together on our way to the mountain. There, the silverlings stood. Hundreds of them gathered together. Some were young-looking, in their early twenties, but most of them seemed to be well older, in their forties and fifties and sixties at least. There were no children.

I watched as the first silverling, an Asian woman who looked about thirty, approached the tree which they had all gathered in front of.

Whether or not that was her actual age, I didn't know.

I watched as she stretched a hand out toward it, tears streaming down her face as she did, her mouth tightly closed like she was trying not to let out a sob. The second her hand touched the bark, her eyes closed and she let out a pained gasp, the silver markings visible on her arms and chest shining brightly—

And then, they were gone, leaving her skin empty.

I blinked and the scene disappeared, and a white tree, this white tree, filled my vision once more. I ripped my hand from the tree and turned toward Cassie, trying to catch my breath as the coolness of the magic faded from within me, to process all that I had seen, but needing first to know that it had worked, that she was okay.

Cassie's cheeks were pink once more, her chest rising and falling normally as she took deep, even breaths. She looked...healthy. Perfectly fine, like she'd simply fallen asleep while floating in the air. I half expected her to start snoring.

I smiled, relieved, before remembering once more what I'd seen. I pressed a hand to my face, to my hair, straining to detect any wrinkles, any strands of white. It all felt the same, but fear still flowed through me. I had to be sure.

I looked down at my hands, trying to see if they seemed older, more wrinkly, and I gasped. They were still young, still unwrinkled.

And they were also covered in silver tattoos.

I dazedly traced the markings on my skin, creeping up my arms until they disappeared under the sleeve of my top. The outlines of all kinds of vines and flowers: roses, lilies, sunflowers wrapping around my hands and arms and glistening softly in the dim light of the crystals.

"Summer?"

I looked up from my skin at the sound of Lee's voice, noticing for the first time the audience of reapers that had materialized during Cassie's healing, all of them apparently eager to see the thing they'd been guarding work its magic. Literally.

I tore my gaze from them to look at Lee, half-expecting to see fear in his eyes, uneasiness. After all, I was something different now, something *other*, something that

was decidedly different than the girl he fell in love with. Instead, I saw something like awe on his features, his mouth slightly open like he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing, but he didn't look afraid. Just..intrigued. And I found I loved him all the more for it.

“Uh–Summer?” Cassie’s voice drew my attention towards her, and I saw she was lying on the ground now, the crystal dust having disappeared sometime in the last few minutes. She had a hand pressed to her head as she squinted at me, like she’d just woken up and was trying to figure out if she was still dreaming. “Did you get a tattoo?”

CHAPTER 21

The Cost of Silver

“Tell it to me, again.”

I sighed, not really thrilled with the idea of having to repeat it all again, wanting nothing more than to be away from these stuffy caves and creepy, black-eyed monsters and on our way, even if what we were on our way to was in fact yet another monster.

Varian was many horrible, frightening things...but at least he only had one face.

But Lee was insistent, wanting to know every detail of what he'd missed since we'd gone into the caves, since I found out I could access the telepathic link of an ancient race of shapeshifters, touched a magical white tree, and spontaneously developed some rather interesting tattoos.

Oh, and just so happened to discover that I was a silverling, a fallen who just so happened to have retained the ability to access their inner magic, therefore leaving me with more in common with my ancient ancestors than anyone that surrounded me today. On the one hand, this new information was a welcome revelation, providing the answer to many of our long-held questions: Why could I channel so much more of the Crestfall magic than anyone else? Why did I have such difficulty controlling it? How could I summon dark magic, or at least what we *thought* had been dark magic, using only my blood?

I was a silverling, meaning I was just like those silver figures in the reaper's story, before they touched the white tree, and like those silver figures, our ancestors, I could channel great amounts of the Crestfall magic, but I couldn't control it like my friends because I hadn't yet given up what made me a silverling: my ability to access my inner magic, something I could do simply by spilling my own blood.

I had almost done it once before, when I had been trying to heal Cassie, before Lee snapped me out of it. I hadn't even known what I was doing then, what kind of magic I was really using, and I hadn't known the cost, the price of using the silverling magic here on Crestfall. It wasn't one's soul or mind or the good that lived inside them. No, that

was the price of using *another* person's lifeblood to access one's inner magic, the price Varian paid when he tried to bring his son back from the dead using the blood of his wife.

Instead, the cost was simply life. Time. Stolen away bit by bit when a silverling used their inner magic here on Crestfall. The stronger the magic, the greater the cost.

I found I had to fight the desire to keep repeating the explanation to myself over and over in my mind, trying to make it sink in fully, to comprehend my role in all of it. Still, no matter how many times I thought the words, *I am a silverling*, they still seemed to come almost as a surprise each time, like I'd been under the impression they applied to someone else. Someone much more important, much more special than I was.

And yet, the term also felt...right in some way. The truth about who and what I was...for once it finally felt right. Hard to believe, maybe. Terrifying, definitely. But for perhaps the first time since arriving at Crestfall, I was finally certain of something about myself. It wasn't something I had been told, but rather had discovered for myself, hand pressed against the white tree, connected to all those who had done so before me, who had been like me. I realized, then, that I wasn't actually a freak or a failure, unable to control what I was meant to, to be the person I was meant to be. I failed at being a fallen not because I was defective or weak, but because I was actually something else. Something more.

Still, I forced myself to turn my attention to my friends who seemed to have even more questions about what all went down than I did. Lee wasn't the only one who was curious. In fact, all four of my friends were currently staring at me expectantly, forming a close semicircle around me as I leaned against the cave wall, trying to ignore the crystals that were digging slightly into my back.

After everything had gone down, my friends had dragged me to the far corner of the cave in an attempt to gain some semblance of privacy from the reapers, only realizing later, after I'd clued them in on the reapers' disturbing telepathic abilities, just how futile their efforts at secrecy really were.

In the end though it didn't matter. After Cassie had been healed, the crowd of reapers had dispersed, creeping back into their holes. Even my reaper, the one I'd first encountered in the caves, had disappeared, possibly to allow us time to adjust and deal with what happened, but probably because he simply didn't have anything more to say.

I, however, apparently had a lot of explaining to do.

Lee, Tom, and Maeve all wanted to know what exactly the reaper had said during his sparkly dust show, apparently having had trouble putting all the pieces together with only the illustrations to guide them. Oddly enough, the one who should have had the most questions was strangely silent, Cassie choosing instead to simply listen as the others interrogated me.

The magic of the tree had worked, and the poison that had been flowing through her veins was gone, but that didn't keep her from leaning slightly against Tom, like she was afraid she might lose her balance, her gaze heavy as she rested it upon me, like it was full of all the things she wasn't saying, all the questions she wasn't asking. I didn't question it, given what she'd been through, trapped for almost an entire day in the throes of some unimaginable agony. I didn't know how much she really remembered about that time, and if I was being honest, a part of me didn't want to know.

Cassie had been so brave, so accepting of everything up to this point, taking the impossible in stride and simply shaking off the strangeness of Crestfall and all she encountered, but I could tell it was weighing on her now, the foreignness of this place, of these threats. Cassie was strong, one of the strongest people I knew, but as I returned her gaze I could see it, reflected in her steel blue irises: homesickness, longing for the familiar, for everything she'd left behind when she'd come to find me.

I promised myself to talk to her about it later, but right now I had other people in want of my full attention. Lee was looking at me intensely, his gaze never wavering from my face, but I felt Tom's and Maeve's drop every once and awhile to the markings on my arms, the silvery sheen drawing their gazes back to them over and over again, like a moth to a flame. They had dimmed slightly since they first appeared, and now they were only just visible upon my skin.

I turned my gaze toward Lee, knowing he wouldn't let any of this drop until he felt he understood fully what had happened. "The reaper said that because I was a silverling, I could access the magic that lives inside the tree and use it to heal Cassie."

"And you couldn't use your own magic because..." Lee probed, not for the first time, like he sensed I was holding something back, and for once I was glad he could read my emotions. Better that than my truthfulness.

Or lack thereof.

I shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. “He didn’t say, but I’m assuming it’s because the silverling magic just takes a lot out of you to use. Makes you weaker. They probably just want me to be in tip top shape when we face Varian. I think they hate him even more than we do.”

Lee just looked at me for a moment, like he was processing what I’d said, and then finally nodded. I let out a little internal sigh of relief. There we go. It wasn’t a lie, not really, but it wasn’t quite the truth either.

The silverling magic did take a lot out of you, made you weaker, only what it took just so happened to be life, rather than energy. Years of it. Gone in a single moment. The more magic, the more years, at least that’s what it seemed like in the vision. Disabling a reaper might cost you a few years, but saving someone’s life?

A lifetime.

Besides, if it was a lie, it was a necessary one. Lee had already lost me so many times, I’m not sure what he’d do if he knew about the truth, the real consequences of using the silverling magic.

Actually, that’s another lie. The truth was, I knew *exactly* what Lee’d do, what he’d say, because he’d already said it. The last time I suggested sacrificing myself, Lee didn’t even pause to consider it. Not to mention the little fact of what had happened earlier in the caves, how I’d promised that I wouldn’t let myself die in order to save the kingdom, that I’d find some other way.

And I would.

Lee would never have to know the true cost of using the silverling magic because I was determined that I wouldn’t *have* to use it. Maybe it was the new place Lee and I had gotten to, or watching someone I loved take a poison dart for me, or getting my memory back and learning how close I’d been to death before, but I’d suddenly become much more attached to the idea of living. I felt like I was just now finding my way here, my place, and I was in no hurry to give it all up just because some shapeshifters thought it was my fate to do so.

Besides, Luna was still two days away. So long as I got there before then, I had a chance. We had time.

We had time.

Lee ran a hand through his hair. “It’s probably for the best, anyway. I know the reapers said Varian wasn’t supposed to use the silverling magic that way, that it was dark only because it was paid for with the life of someone else, but...still. You should avoid using it, even if it is stronger than Crestfall magic.” Lee grabbed my hand, sending me a reassuring smile. “Our magic together will be enough.”

I tried to smile back, to project back the same confidence he was giving me, but I wasn’t sure how well I succeeded. I knew it was hard for him, for all of them, to hear that what they’d been told their whole lives was a lie, that the thing they’d feared most coursed through their very veins, that it wasn’t evil, just had the propensity to be misused by evil people. I could tell they believed me, believed the reaper, but I could also tell that they couldn’t quite shake the feeling that this kind of magic, of power, was taboo. Shameful. Dangerous.

And in a way, they were right.

This magic was dangerous, but I was determined never to let them, to let Lee know just how much.

And yet, I also knew—they must have, too—that the revelation of my silverling heritage had more consequences than we perhaps had first understood. If dark magic really was just some twisted form of silverling magic, and it was the only kind that could be used during the Luna Infinita, then that meant there was every chance that I could access my silverling magic during that time, too. That on that day, I might be the only one with the power to stand against Varian, with any power at all. If we didn’t defeat him before then...then using Crestfall magic wouldn’t be an option, and I’d be forced to make a choice. My life or the kingdom. And if it came to that, I knew what I’d choose. At least, I think I did.

But it didn’t matter because it wasn’t going to come to that. I wouldn’t let it.

I felt eyes on me and turned to see Cassie giving me a strange look, one I couldn’t quite identify. Before I could ask her about it, Maeve spoke softly, staring off into the distance with a contemplative look, like she was reliving days long past. “So, that’s why they attacked you that day. They hadn’t seen a true silverling in centuries, only to come

suddenly face to face with one at the palace—” Maeve paused, dropping her gaze once more to the markings on my arms— “Their ancient enemy. Reincarnated.”

I remembered standing in front of the reaper, frozen in fear as it drew toward me. The fear on its face as it looked at me, the confusion...it all made sense. I’d thought it was simply my own terror reflected back at me, but the truth was, the reaper had just as much reason to be afraid of me as I was of it. It had been overwhelmed by instincts it couldn’t control, forced backwards to a time of war and bloodshed, and it was because of me. I was the cause of it all, the spark that had set fire to a flame that was burning it from the inside, drowning it in memories of a past it wanted to forget, but had been forced to remember.

It was a feeling I could relate to.

Tom suddenly clapped his hands, rubbing them together and blowing into them. “Well, I don’t know about you guys, but I would love to get the heck out of this freezing hell hole and back into some fresh air.”

I smiled at him, in complete agreement, although I really didn’t mind the cold. I liked the way it felt on my skin, in my lungs as I breathed it in. It felt familiar, like...home, almost.

The problem was, there were three tunnels leading out from where we were. All lit with glowing crystals and all looking exactly the same. Tom nudged me with his elbow. “Hey, Summer. Any chance of getting your reaper friends to tell us the best way out of here?”

I rolled my eyes at him. “I wouldn’t exactly call them my friends. Why don’t—”

“Why don’t you three check out the tunnels—” Cassie interrupted, stepping away from Tom, and looping one her arms through mine— “and see if you can tell which one leads out of here. Summer and I need to have a little chat.”

I shot her a surprised look, the sound of her voice coming almost as a shock after so many minutes of silence. Lee and Maeve exchanged quick looks with one another before slowly nodding and turning to walk toward different tunnels, but Tom hesitated, his gaze lingering on Cassie like he was trying to make sure she'd be alright alone, that she didn’t need him. Cassie just shot him a small smile and nodded, and Tom smiled back, turning toward the final tunnel and squeezing her hand gently before he left.

We watched the three of them disappear into the dark, and once they were out of earshot I turned toward Cassie. “I know what you’re going to say Cassie, and I’m sorry. I’m sorry you had to go through something so awful, sorry I dragged you into this mess, and I promise, I’m going to find a way to keep you sa—”

Cassie raised her hand, cutting me off. “I saw it.”

“What?”

Cassie crossed her arms as she looked at me. “The visions. Everything you saw when you touched that tree...I saw it, too.”

I tried to think of something to say, but I was too stunned, and all that came out of my mouth was a mumbled, “Oh.”

“You lied. When Lee asked you about the magic, you lied. Why?”

I threw my hands in the air. “You *know* why, Cassie. You know what he’d say—”

“He’d tell you not to do it,” Cassie said simply, her tone indecipherable.

“And I won’t, I promise. So long as we get there before the Luna, and with Lee’s help, the Crestfall magic will be enough. It has to be.”

Cassie raised an eyebrow at me. “But doesn’t that have its own...drawbacks?”

I looked at her, eyes wide. “How did you—”

Cassie shook her head, her eyes losing focus a bit, like she was remembering something. “There was this look in your eyes when you created the force field. Something like pain, but also...pleasure. Like you were enjoying what you were doing, yet were trying to fight it. Like you weren’t quite you. And Lee...the poor guy could barely open his eyes. You two were fighting something, something inside...”

I just looked at her for a moment, remembering the way it had felt to wield that much Crestfall magic...how sweet, how *seductive* it felt. It was true that using the bond to help me wield the Crestfall magic had its own risks, its own temptations, but we would find a way to fight through them, Lee and I. We’d done it before and we’d do it again. Still, that did little to make the thought of using that magic any less frightening, but what alternatives did I have? Not use the bond at all, and lose complete control of the Crestfall magic? Use my own silverling magic, more powerful than Crestfall’s, yet paid for in years of my life?

I let out a small laugh, trying to lighten the mood, although there was very little humor in it. “At least it won’t give me wrinkles.”

Cassie didn’t smile back, her face like a mask behind which she was hiding what she truly felt. Anger, sadness, frustration, fear. Maybe all four, I couldn’t tell. Still, the longer I looked at that mask, the more certain cracks began to show, the truth filtering through the veil like moonlight through a curtain. I narrowed my eyes at her. “Is this why you’ve been so quiet, why you haven’t asked about what happened to you—”

“I know what happened to me,” Cassie said, her voice rising, the mask lifting slightly. “I made a choice to take that poison dart, and yes, part of me believed you’d work your Summer magic—pun unintended— and find a way to save me, but the truth is, even if you hadn’t, it still would have been the right choice.”

I shook my head. “Cassie—”

Cassie held up a hand, cutting me off, her voice not quite angry, but not calm either. Desperate. “And it’s not just because you’re my best friend. I see what you mean to this place, Summer. To these people. And more than that, I’ve seen what it means to you. You belong here. Now more than ever.”

I looked down, my eyes catching on the silver markings on my hands. “I’m not sure where I belong, anymore.”

Cassie grabbed one of my hands, squeezing it, drawing my gaze back to hers. Her eyes were softer now, shining slightly with tears that had yet to fall. “It doesn’t matter. Even if you decide that, once this is all over, you’ll come back to Earth, it won’t change how you feel about this place. What you’ll do to protect it. And I don’t think I can watch you do it, Summer. What happened to that girl—” Cassie’s voice broke off as the tears spilled out from her eyes, falling softly down her cheeks.

I grabbed both her hands, drawing her close to me. “--*Won’t* happen to me. It won’t come to that Cassie, I promise.”

Cassie nodded, wiping her eyes, and I pulled her into a tight hug, only slightly surprised when she didn’t resist. “It better not,” Cassie threatened, her voice muffled against my shoulder, “because no way am I going to take care of you when you’re all old and senile.” I let out an indignant gasp as I pulled away, but Cassie just shrugged her shoulders. “You’re going straight to the nursing home, I’m afraid.”

I rolled my eyes, punching her softly in the shoulder. “You’re a real bitch, you know that?”

“Wow, and to think, I thought the act of saving each other's lives would have brought you two closer together.”

I turned toward Lee’s voice with a smile, and Cassie rolled her eyes. “Perhaps thinking isn’t exactly your strong suit. I’d stick to more physical pursuits, sword boy.”

Cassie flipped her hair and turned her back on him, and Lee just looked at her with wide eyes before turning toward me with raised eyebrows. *Sword boy*? He mouthed, and I just shrugged my shoulders at him.

I noticed the broken bow in his hands. He held it up slightly. “Found it in the passage we first came through. Only thing the reapers’ didn’t confiscate, I’m afraid. He can always mend it when we get out of here.” Lee looked up at me, his green eyes hopeful, and maybe a little desperate. “You are ready to get out of here, aren’t you?”

I laughed, then kissed him on the cheek, surprised by how natural the action felt. “Very.”

We made our way toward the tunnel on the far left that Lee said led the way out, catching up with Tom and Maeve who stood in front of it stiffly, not quite looking at one another.

I took a step to follow them into the tunnel, but then I paused, turning around to look back the way we’d come, eyes lingering on the shining white tree, on its ivory bark and twinkling crystal leaves, and I felt it rise up once more inside my mind, the thought that had been bothering me since I’d first pulled my hand from the tree.

What if I put it back?

Why *not* give it all up? Why not make the same choice my ancestors did? I pictured it, walking up to the tree, pressing my hand against it, feeling the silver tattoos fall from my skin like a weight off my shoulders. I wouldn’t be a silverling anymore. I would just be a fallen.

I could be just like my friends. I wouldn’t be able to channel nearly as much Crestfall magic as I could now, but what I could channel, I could control. *Really* control, without all the temptation or the fear that came from using the bond.

I would be weaker, less powerful, but the plan could continue on as usual. Nothing had to change.

Only the thing was, me being like everyone else? That was never the plan. My friends needed me, my *kingdom* needed me to stop Varian, not because I was a princess, but because I was the only one with the power to do it. The only one strong enough. No matter how much I might want it, my people didn't need me to be like everyone else.

They needed me to be more.

I was Crestfall's great hope, their champion, and I couldn't be if I gave up what made me special.

Still, something *had* changed. I now knew that what I'd thought was special about me, my great affinity for Crestfall magic, was actually only the tip of the iceberg. A side effect of my real power, my real heritage. I was a silverling. I had a magic inside me more powerful than any magic I could channel from the land, from Crestfall, itself. It was the same magic Varian used, or *misused*, as it were, and if all else failed, it might be the only thing capable of defeating him.

Hopefully, everything would go like it was supposed to. We would defeat Varian before the Luna, before he was too powerful, and I would use Crestfall magic to do it. I wouldn't ever need to touch the magic inside me, wouldn't ever have to trade years of my life in exchange for using it.

But what if something went wrong?

What if we lost, the same way we had lost before? What if, in the end, the only thing holding the destruction of Crestfall, of my friends at bay, was me? My silverling magic.

It was my failsafe. My last resort. Just in case the worst were to happen. A way to save my kingdom, if not myself.

Placing my hand on the tree again, giving up what made me a silverling, meant giving up that failsafe. It meant leaving my friends in danger.

But it also meant taking the weight of the choice, the *power* to choose off the table, off my shoulders. I wouldn't have to worry about dying in order to save my people, about having to choose between my life and a kingdom I could barely remember.

Only the truth was, if I gave up my magic, I had already made my choice. I had put my life above that of my friends, that of my subjects, and not because dying would mean giving Varian what he wanted, but because it would mean losing forever what *I* most wanted.

And if I did that, well...if I did that, then I wouldn't need to take someone's life and perform dark magic to lose my soul. To lose what made me, me.

It would already be lost.

I turned from the tree and walked into the darkness of the tunnel, my steps feeling just a bit lighter than they'd been before.

I hurried to catch up with the others and saw Lee was in the front, sword drawn as he led the way down the dim, crystal-lit tunnel, apparently not quite ready to trust that the telepathic shapeshifters wouldn't suddenly attack again. I noticed Maeve a few feet away from me, wringing her hands together as she walked beside Cassie, their heads bent slightly together in hushed conversation. The sight was shocking for more than one reason, the first being that I didn't think I'd ever seen Maeve look nervous before.

I saw Tom slide up to me out of my peripheral vision, and I tore my gaze away from the pair, nodding my head to the object in his hands. "Sorry about your bow."

Tom shrugged. "It's nothing that can't be fixed once we get out of these damned tunnels and somewhere I can actually feel the magic beneath my feet again." Tom glanced at me, raising his eyebrows. "Speaking of magic, I see all my good work has been undone."

I smiled, fingering a tendril of my auburn hair, the magic of the tree having eaten away any of the lingering Crestfall magic Tom had performed on me when we first arrived. "Looks like it."

Tom sighed, throwing an arm around me. "I guess you look okay like this, too."

I snorted. "How kind of you to say."

Tom's gaze shifted away from me, and I followed it as it landed on the pair I'd just been observing a moment ago. Maeve was moving her hands about as she walked, like she was explaining something, and Cassie was just listening, her arms crossed in front of her. I leaned my head on Tom's shoulder. "You know you're going to have to forgive her."

“Maybe I already have.”

I turned toward him, surprised. “Then why have you been so—”

“Dickish?” Tom cut me off, raising his eyebrows.

I shrugged. “I was going to say angry, but yeah. Dickish works.”

Tom smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I was angry. I still am, if I’m being honest, but the truth is, it’s about more than just what Maeve was willing to do to Cassie...it was about what she was willing to do to me.”

“What do you mean?”

Tom shifted his gaze to the cave floor, but I felt his arm around my shoulders tighten slightly. “She was going to kill her, Summer. Even though she knew what she meant to me. Even though she knew how much I’d already lost—”

Tom’s voice broke off, anger stealing his words for a moment before he took a deep breath and found them again. “Losing my parents...it was the hardest thing I’ve ever gone through. I felt like I’d lost a part of me, and that I would never be as happy as I was when they were alive. I’m twenty-three years old, and yet it felt like the best part of my life was already over.”

I wrapped my arm around his waist. “I’m sorry, Tom. I didn’t know. You always seem so...” I trailed off. Cheerful? Silly? None of them seemed quite right. Looking back, I realized the only thing Tom had always been was a friend. Something that was hard enough to do in the best of times.

Tom looked up, blinking hard, like he was trying to keep any tears from falling. “What’s the alternative? Give in to the grief? Let it consume me? Besides, do you have any idea what it was like traveling with those two before we found you? If I didn’t smile, no one would.” Tom laughed, but his smile quickly faded. “But it was more a reflex than anything, just my way of trying to get through each day until...”

Tom looked up, and I followed his gaze where it rested on Cassie. “You care about her that much?”

Tom smiled a half smile, and it was like I could see my friend reflected in his eyes. I had thought their mutual flirtation hadn’t really meant anything serious to either of them, that it was built on attraction and little else, but I could see now that even though it was Cassie’s beauty that had initially caught Tom’s eye, it was her toughness, her

willingness to sacrifice herself for the people she loved that made it so he couldn't look away. That made it so he didn't want to. "How could I not?"

I glanced at Cassie and Maeve, at the lingering tension between them. My friend was many things, but she wasn't always careful. Not when it came to the feelings of others. "She might break your heart, you know."

Tom shook his head. "Already broken," he said, but he was still smiling, and for a moment, I couldn't figure out why. Then, I realized that it might be because he felt he was staring at the one thing capable of fixing it.

Still, I couldn't help but feel a thread of worry snake through me as I looked at him, at his joy at finding something he cared about so much, something he loved, because I knew there was a consequence to that joy: the kind of fear that only came from finding something you couldn't bear to lose.

"And Maeve...?" I prodded, digging my elbow slightly into his stomach.

I watched as Tom's soft brown eyes grew a little harder as he slipped his arm off my shoulder. "Maeve knew how much I'd lost. She understood what it was like better than anyone, and yet she still—"

"She did what she thought was right."

Tom sighed, and it was like I could see the last wisp of his anger fade away. "I know."

Just then, we watched as Maeve's hands suddenly fell, her mouth closing as she finished whatever speech or apology she had been saying. She looked down, her shoulders tense like she was bracing herself for something. Anger. Disgust. I, too, couldn't help but hold my breath, waiting for Cassie's reaction.

We didn't have to wait long.

Cassie grabbed Maeve's hand, giving it a squeeze. For a moment, Maeve couldn't seem to do anything but look down at their enclosed hands in shock, until finally she smiled, silent tears slipping down her cheeks.

I glanced at Tom, worried about what his reaction to all this would be, only to find him smiling softly at the pair, like he wasn't surprised in the slightest.

Just then, Cassie looked over at us, narrowing her eyes at Tom and crooking her finger at him. Tom sighed and quickened his pace until he had caught up to the pair of

them. For a moment, Cassie walked between them as she said something I couldn't quite make out, before she suddenly stepped back and made a gesture that seemed to say *get on with it, then*.

For a moment, Maeve and Tom simply looked at each other before Tom stopped, taking a step forward and wrapping his arms around Maeve.

I kept walking, not wanting to intrude on their moment, but right before I passed them, I saw Maeve throw her arms around Tom out of the corner of my eye, squeezing him perhaps even more tightly than he was squeezing her, her face buried into his neck.

I quickened my pace until I caught up with Lee, unable to keep the smile off my face. He shot me a look, sword still held steadily out in front of him. "Care to share why you're so smiley?"

I sighed dramatically. "Young love, what else?"

Lee shot a quick glance over his shoulder and nodded. "I see. *Speaking* of young love, I've been wondering about our bond."

"What about it?"

"Well, based on what the reaper said about the silverlings trying to figure out a way to control the Crestfall magic without giving up their ability to access their own inner magic... I think the bond might have been one of their solutions."

I nodded slowly. "You think the silverlings created the bond so they could better control the Crestfall magic?"

Lee nodded. "Yes, only it didn't exactly work how they wanted it to. There was a cost, something they hadn't foreseen."

The image of Isabelle's limp body passed through my mind, of the silverling girl's dark hair flashing white. "There's always a cost," I said gravely.

"Exactly. No being can be all powerful, and that's why I think whenever you try to use the bond to channel Crestfall magic, you feel the desire to let it out, set it loose, why you lose control over yourself even as you gain control over the magic."

I thought of the silverlings, how they had to give up a part of themselves in order to embrace something different, had to relinquish their own magic in order to master a different kind.

"Balance," I said softly.

“Balance,” Lee repeated, nodding.

I turned toward him. “But you’re not a silverling, and you still feel those same urges, the temptation to set the magic loose.”

Lee reached up his free hand and held it over his heart. “I feel what you feel, Summer. Nothing more, nothing less.”

My heart fluttered in my chest at his words, and I shook my head, trying to focus on the topic at hand and not on how the sound of Lee’s voice made me feel all gooey inside. “So, all the fallen couples that have bonded since the silverlings...”

“They didn’t have to deal with the urges, I don’t think,” Lee finished for me. “Also, they didn’t have to feel each other’s emotions or sense where the other person was or—” Lee paused. He knew there was some other consequence of the bond, something I wasn’t telling him, and I mentally added *lie detection* to his little list, but I didn’t say it out loud.

Eventually, Lee continued, “I don’t think there’s ever been a bond between a silverling and a fallen before, and that’s why there were all these...side effects that we didn’t see coming.”

I shot him a small smile. “I guess that makes us one of a kind, huh?”

Lee just shook his head, his green gaze never wavering from mine. “That’s not what makes us one of a kind.”

My heart began to flutter again, and my whole body felt warmer, like I’d stepped out into the sun, and it took me a moment to realize we actually had, the tunnel having let out into a forest full of trees with pink blossoms, the pale petals shining with dew in the early morning sun. I felt like I’d just walked into a map from Candyland.

I could hear the other’s letting out relieved sighs as we left the dark creepiness of the caves behind, but I didn’t look at them, choosing instead to keep my gaze resting on Lee.

He was looking at me, too, green eyes shining with an emotion I couldn’t quite name, and in that moment, I didn’t want any more secrets between us, any more lies...at least, not any that weren’t absolutely essential. I couldn’t tell him about the cost of silverling magic, not yet, but I could tell him about the bond, about the fact I could tell whenever he was lying. I didn’t know why Rose had chosen to keep it a secret from him,

but after everything that had happened these past few days, I realized that not only did I love him, I also trusted him. Completely. And I wanted him to know the truth.

“Listen, Lee. There’s something I—”

“What’s that?” Tom said, looking toward something about thirty feet away from us, a dark unfamiliar shape resting on the forest floor.

I narrowed my eyes at it as I stepped closer, trying to figure out what exactly it was. “It looks like a…”

“Like a body,” Cassie gasped, eyes wide in alarm.

I moved a few steps forward, and Lee held a hand out in front of me protectively. “Summer, stay behind me. It could be a trap.”

But I didn’t listen to him, I couldn’t even hear him over the blood roaring in my ears. I stumbled forward a few steps as the body began to become clearer in front of me, little details registering in my mind one at a time.

I knew that blonde hair, recognized it even despite the blood covering it, dying it red in some places, and I remembered how I’d cut it one time with a pair of kitchen scissors when it had gotten too long.

I knew that shirt, seeing past the holes and the tears to the band logo underneath. I’d gotten it for him on his last birthday, the night we went to see that concert in the park.

I knew those hands, scarred from guitar strings, the fingertips perpetually stained with blue ink, knew how they’d felt against my own that time he had to physically drag me to class.

All the features, all the little details were as familiar to me as home, even though home was miles away, realms away. I could still recognize it when I saw it.

It was Max.

CHAPTER 22

The Max of it All

I rushed towards Max, kneeling down beside him as I shook his shoulders. “Max!” I shouted desperately. His tan skin seemed unnaturally pale, and his face was covered in various cuts and bruises.

“No,” I heard Cassie whisper before she suddenly appeared on Max’s other side, her hands fluttering over his still body, like she was unsure where she should touch him, how she could help. I continued shaking him, continued shouting his name, but there was no reply. Cassie met my gaze above his body, eyes wide and filled with tears. “Is he—is he—”

Suddenly, there was a gasp, followed by some heavy coughing, and Cassie and I looked down to see Max’s eyes wide open, at least the one that wasn’t swollen shut, bloodshot and wild as his gaze swung between Cassie and me, but alive, nonetheless. “Max!” I said as his gaze landed on me, taking his hand in my own as relief washed over me, the tears that had been gathering in my eyes finally spilling over my cheeks. “Max, it’s okay. We’re here. It’s okay.”

Max was still coughing, his lips cracked and dry. He looked up at me, mouthing something, but his voice was just a dry rasp. Unintelligible. He tried again, putting a little more force behind it. “Summer,” he rasped.

“I’m here,” I said reassuringly, before looking up at Cassie. “There’s a river nearby. Quick, go get him some water.”

Cassie nodded and took off toward the sound of rushing water I’d noticed when we first exited the caves, Tom following swiftly after her. I held out my hand to Lee, my other hand still clasped in Max’s, not looking away from him as I said, “Okay, okay now we need to heal him.”

I waited to feel Lee’s reassuring grip in my own, waited for him to grab my hand and help me take care of my friend, but he never did. I looked up from Max, only to find

Lee and Maeve standing a few feet away from us, their weapons drawn and their expressions wary. “Lee, what are you doing? We need to—”

“Summer, back away from him,” Lee said seriously, eyeing Max’s prone form like it was a snake he was worried might strike at any moment.

I shot him an incredulous look. “Back awa—what’s wrong with you? He *needs* our help.”

Lee’s gaze shot around the pink forest, his grip tightening on his sword. “It could still be a trap, Summer. *He* could be a trap.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but then I remembered Cassie. I remembered the game the pixies had played, using my love for my friends to manipulate me. To catch me off guard. I looked down at Max, trying to find any evidence of deceit in his eyes, but they were just as clear as always, just as open. Still, I couldn’t help but shift away from him a bit.

You didn’t always know when you were being used.

Just then, Cassie returned with Tom, her hands clutching a canteen that had been hanging around Tom’s waist. She knelt down beside Max, and after a moment’s hesitation, I helped him sit up, giving him the canteen which he drank from greedily. Cassie looked at his cuts and bruises, his still swollen face, and then back up at me. “Why haven’t you healed him?”

I shot a searching glance at Lee, not quite sure what to say or do in this situation. Max had been a fixture of my old life, and it didn’t feel right to question him, to think that he might be dangerous, but I also knew I was in a different life now, a different world. One with vastly different rules. And dangers.

Lee ignored Cassie, his attention shifting to Max as he finished off the last of the water in the canteen. “How did you get here?”

Max shifted a hand to the ground, using it to push himself up to a sitting position. His longish blonde hair was a wild mess of bloody tangles, his clothes ripped and torn. His expression wasn’t panicked, like I might have expected, just solemn, and maybe a little pissed. He clearly did not enjoy being interrogated after only just becoming conscious. “I don’t have to tell you anything.”

I leaned back, shocked a little by the venom in his tone. I'd never heard Max speak like that to anyone, but then again, he *was* under the impression that Lee was responsible for knocking him out *and* stealing his date. It's no wonder he still harbored some hard feelings toward the guy.

I squeezed his hand, pulling his attention back to me. "Please, Max. We're just trying to understand how you ended up here. It's...not exactly a good time for a visit."

Max scoffed. "You're telling me. The second I followed Cassie into that hole I've been fighting for my life."

Cassie leaned back in surprise. "You followed me?"

"Of course. I knew Summer would leave you some kind of message, some information about where she was going, and I was right." Max turned toward me, reaching up his free hand to rest on my cheek. "I had to make sure you were okay."

I forced a smile at him, trying to nonchalantly remove his hand from my cheek. Apparently, Lee wasn't the only one Max was still harboring some... *feelings* for, and the last thing I wanted to do was lead him on.

I shot Lee a nervous glance, worried Max's show of affection might make him angry, but his eyes were hard, his face unreadable. And yet, I couldn't help noticing how strained his jaw looked, like he was clenching it. Hard. "So, you've been what?" Lee asked, "Wandering around Crestfall alone for the past week?"

Max's gaze hardened, clearly not keen on answering anymore of Lee's questions, but I watched as his eyebrows drew together, his tone confused as he asked, "Week? I only got here yesterday."

Cassie tilted her head. "But if you followed me, then how—"

"Time passes differently here than it does on Earth," I said. "Although it's not always clear *how* differently."

Cassie raised an eyebrow. "Meaning?"

"Meaning an hour spent on Earth could mean a day in Crestfall, or a month, or a minute. You can't know until you cross back over."

Cassie looked at me with wide eyes. "And you didn't think that was information that would be good for me to know *before* now?"

I threw my hands up. “Well, considering the fact that you’ve spent half the time we’ve been together *unconscious*, there wasn’t exactly a good opportunity to—”

“*Okay*, so you followed her through the portal,” Lee said loudly, interrupting our bickering. “Then, what happened?”

“Well, I came out under this massive tree and walked through this meadow. At least, I think it might have been a meadow once. All the ground was upturned and the flowers broken, like some sort of fight or something had taken place there. That’s when they found me,” Max said grimly, eyes darkening.

“Who found you?” Lee asked.

Max shook his head. “I don’t know. They were like these—these creatures made up of shadow. Like the ones I heard had attacked the school. And there was someone leading them, a man. He said he’d felt it when I crossed through the portal or something.”

I locked eyes with Lee over Max’s head, like the same thought had occurred to us at the same time. “The tracker,” Lee said grimly, and my stomach dropped. No matter what we did to escape, to hide our trail, it seemed like we would never be free of him.

Max shook his head. “I don’t know what he was. I tried to run, and the creatures roughed me up a bit, but the man—the tracker, I guess—made them stop. Told them to take me back somewhere. Then, he disappeared, and the creatures took me through a forest, made me walk for miles until we reached a town, and then finally, we ended up at a castle.”

“Varian captured you? You were *in* the castle?” Tom said, eyes wide in alarm as he moved slightly closer to Cassie, casting his gaze about the pink forest like he thought a pack of ashers might emerge at any second.

“I don’t know who Varian is, but he might have been the one they were taking me to when I escaped. I heard them mention—”

“*No one* escapes Varian,” Maeve snarled, stepping forward and raising one of her knives so quickly, I didn’t even see it when it moved. I only saw where it ended up.

Pressed against Max’s throat.

Max’s eyes widened in fear as he looked down at the knife digging into his neck, before turning his pleading gaze towards me. “Maeve, please,” I said cautiously, noticing

how dark her eyes had gotten, how full of anger they were. Anger and sorrow. “I’m not saying we need to trust him, yet. Just please, let him go.”

Maeve’s chest heaved as she stared Max down, but after a moment she turned her gaze to me, and whatever she saw there was apparently enough, just enough, for her to remove her knife and step back.

Max sagged forward, reaching up a hand to his throat as he took a deep breath. He met my gaze, and I nodded at him, wanting to place my hand on his shoulder yet resisting the urge. I wanted to believe him, I really did, but Maeve was right. No one escaped Varian. “It’s okay, Max. Just tell them how you escaped.”

Max sat up again, shooting Maeve a wary glance before continuing. “Well, right when they were leading me past the gate, this sort of alarm went off. There was all this commotion and people were shouting something about there being a sighting or something near Graves Peak, wherever that is. The people that were guarding me were distracted, so I just slipped away during the chaos and started running. And I didn’t stop. Not for anything. I must have passed out at some point, and that’s when I found you or rather, you found me.” Max looked up at me with a somewhat adoring gaze, and I forced another smile before quickly looking away.

Okay, so it seemed like things were going to get awkward, fast, if I didn’t do something to set Max straight on our romantic situation—or lack thereof—but first I had to deal with my friends, who were currently looking at Max like he was a faulty grenade that might explode at any moment. “We believe you,” I said at the same time as Lee said, “Sounds like bullshit to me.”

Lee shot me a look, and I shot him one right back. I heard Tom whisper quietly to Maeve. “Uh-oh, mommy and daddy are fighting again.”

I ignored them, standing up and moving toward Lee. “Lee, can I talk to you for a second?” Not waiting for him to respond, I grabbed Lee’s hand and led him a little ways down the path, making sure we were out of earshot before I turned toward him.

Lee squared his shoulders and crossed his arms, like he was bracing himself for a fight. “Summer, I know he’s your friend, but you can’t be sure he’s telling—”

“I’m not sure.”

“You—oh.” Lee’s arms fell loosely to his sides as he shot me a confused glance.
“But you said—”

“I don’t think Max would intentionally betray us—well, betray me. He kind of hates you I think, but still, he wouldn’t hurt me. Not on purpose.”

“But...?”

“But that doesn’t mean Varian wouldn’t try to use him to hurt me, if that’s—that’s even him at all.” After all, if Varian could alter memories, who’s to say he couldn’t alter faces? Max could still be at home on Earth, and this—this could be one of Varian’s cronies simply wearing his face, a possibility that seemed a lot less far-fetched now, in light of recent events, than it might have been two days ago.

“Exactly, we can’t trust him, Summer.”

“And I agree, Lee. We can’t trust him, at least not yet, not until he proves himself, his story in some way, but, still...we can’t just leave him behind.”

“Summer, what are you talking about? We *just* established the man was not to be trusted.”

“I know, Lee, okay, I know, but *you* know as well as I do that this place—this realm—it will eat him alive if we don’t help him. Look at him, he won’t last another day.”

Lee glanced at Max over my shoulder, no doubt taking in his smashed face and bloody clothes, and shook his head. “So what do you suppose we do? Wrap him in bubble wrap, bring him along, and hope he’s not a bomb set blow up in our faces the second we reach the waterfall?”

I grabbed Lee’s hands, holding them between us as I leaned toward him. “No, but— isn’t there *something* we could do to know for sure if he’s really Max, if he’s really dangerous? Some way of—I don’t know—checking to see if there’s any spells on him or something?” Lee didn’t say anything to this, just stared at Max over my shoulder like he could somehow make him confess to whatever evil he was plotting if he only glared at him long enough.

I squeezed his hands. “Please, Lee. It’s my fault he’s hurt. If anything happened to him, I couldn’t—” I looked away from him, not wanting to say the words, to think about another one of my friends suffering because of who I was, who they were to me.

Lee sighed, leaning his forehead against mine in both exasperation and defeat. “There *is* a nullification rite.”

I leaned back, raising an eyebrow at him. “A nullification rite?”

“Yeah, it removes all spells and enchantments from a person you perform it on. That way if Varian’s done any magic on Mr. Human over there, put him under a spell or put a tracker on him or modified his appearance or whatever, it’ll all be washed away.”

I beamed at him, turning to head back toward the group. “Okay, great. Let’s do it—”

Lee grabbed my arm, drawing me back to his solemn gaze. “Summer, it’s still magic. If we do this, there’s every chance the tracker will know where we are, again. There’s a chance we lost him in the mountains, but if we do this, he’ll be right back on our trail.”

I glanced at Max over my shoulder. “Well, if you’re right about Max, then he already knows. At least this way, he won’t be able to track us any further.”

Lee hesitated for a moment, thinking about it, and then wrapped his arms around me. “Whatever you say, princess.”

I smiled at him. “Hey, you know I rather like this side of you. You know, the one where you just go along with everything I say?”

Lee let out an exasperated sigh, although I thought I saw something in his eyes as he looked at me, something like pride. “Well, it’s not hard when you’re actually saying something sensible for once. Well, almost sensible. I still think we should let Maeve do what she wants with the guy.”

“You’re just saying that because I went on a date with him.”

“Almost. You *almost* went on a date with him, and no, I’m saying it because he could be a very dangerous pawn in Varian’s game to destroy you...And yeah, maybe because of the other thing, too.”

“I thought so, and don’t worry, I’ll keep a close eye on him,” I said, kissing Lee swiftly on the lips. I’d wanted to make it a quick kiss, but Lee’s hand drifted toward the back of my head, deepening the kiss, not letting me pull away.

Not that I wanted to.

Finally, there was a throat clearing, followed by more whispering. “Ugh, I think I prefer the fighting,” Maeve said, and Lee pulled back, pausing to place one more kiss on my lips before he did.

I’m not sure what look I had on my face, but I must have seemed pretty dazed given the satisfied smirk Lee was wearing when he pulled away, although I bet that had more to do with the look on Max’s face than it did with mine. I didn’t need to turn around to know what I would find there: anger, hurt, and maybe a little betrayal.

But it had to be done. I was with Lee now, and the sooner Max understood that, the sooner we could all move on from his little crush and be friends again.

Lee and I walked back toward the others. “Okay, guys. We need to get to—” he eyed Max warily— “the place we’re going by sundown, so we’ll need to move quickly. We only have one canteen left, so drink your fill of water now in case we don’t have the opportunity to refill it on the way. We’ll eat when we arrive there. Until then, the berries from these trees are safe...I think.”

Maeve crossed her arms. “Umm—that didn’t sound very reassuring.”

Lee raised an eyebrow at her. “Then, don’t eat them. Oh, and heal the human, please. Looks like we’re bringing him along.”

Maeve’s eyes widened. “What? Lee we can’t—”

“We’ll do a nullification rite, Maeve. Make sure he’s clean.” Lee leaned forward, placing a hand on Maeve’s arm. “Trust me.”

Maeve just looked at him for a moment, returning his steady gaze, before finally cursing and dragging a frightened-looking Max toward the river. “Fine, but if we’re doing this, then I’m doing the damn rite myself. If there’s any spell on the human, I’ll find it.”

I opened my mouth as the two disappeared from sight, unable to decide if I should intervene, but the fact of the matter was I had no idea how to do the nullification thingy Lee had been talking about. Besides, I was sure Maeve wouldn’t actually hurt him. Well, pretty sure.

When everyone had drunk from the river and eaten some of the berries, we headed out into the pink forest in the usual formation: Lee covering the front with Tom

and Cassie a little ways behind him, Maeve covering the back, and Max and I in the middle. Lee *had* given me babysitting duty, after all.

The pink of the trees glinted in the afternoon sun, and I soon realized their thin branches were actually adorned with petals rather than leaves. They littered the forest floor, and I wondered what sound they would make when we stepped on them. I expected something similar to the crunching of stiff leaves, but instead, the soft petals seemed to render each footfall silent as a snowfall. Even mine.

It was a rather surreal experience, walking in a soundless forest, surrounded by pink petals and bright light. All the other forests in Crestfall had been so dark, so dreary, yet this one seemed to almost sparkle in the morning sunlight.

However, the longer we walked, the more the silence seemed to grow, and it began to feel more ominous than peaceful. The forest was beautiful, but utterly empty, like all traces of wildlife had been sucked from it. That's when I noticed the dark spots on the ground, scorched black standing out from beneath the pink petals. Only unlike the other forest, these weren't patches so much as jagged lines. Scars that stretched continuously outward, like they were pointing to somewhere. Or someone.

My steps might have been silent, but they were heavy, my shoulders sagging and my eyes drooping a bit as we went along. I realized suddenly that we hadn't slept at all last night, too busy climbing mountains and healing friends to make the time.

Max had been oddly silent since we set out, simply tugging on his wet clothes and occasionally wringing out his hair as we went along. He'd returned from the river soaking wet, something I'd thought was simply part of the nullification rite until I caught Maeve's satisfied smirk, and since then had little to say to me besides the fact that my new friends were apparently the worst.

I'd expected him to have a million questions about this place, about the magic that had healed him, even about my newfound tattoos, but instead he simply faced forward, his head tilted and his brow furrowed, like he was trying to solve a difficult math problem in his head. Maybe he was still mad at me about the kiss, or maybe he was just too overwhelmed by everything, all the strangeness that surrounded him. Either way I was grateful for the silence, too tired and hungry to give him the rundown of everything

that had happened since I'd gotten here. I could hardly believe it myself, much less find a way to put it into words.

I knew I should be anxious, afraid, as we took these final steps on our journey. I knew that once we made it to the waterfall, to where the rest of the guard was waiting, everything would happen very quickly. It had to. Luna was in two days, and we had to strike before then, defeat Varian before he became too powerful, before we became utterly powerless—well, most of us—and yet, for some reason, I found I couldn't quite summon the fear, couldn't quite make my mind linger on the battle to come. Maybe it was the lack of sleep, or maybe it was because, despite all I had gone through, I still couldn't quite picture it. Me, riding into battle. Squaring up against a dark sorcerer. Saving a realm.

And so, instead, I thought about the after. *After* the battle was won, *after* Varian had been defeated...what was I going to do then? Cassie had mentioned going home, but could I really do that? Leave this fantastical world behind after I'd gone through all this trouble to save it? Leave Maeve and Tom and...Lee? My heart clenched painfully at the thought. But what if I stayed? What if I embraced this whole princess thing and never looked back...? How could I, if doing so meant leaving behind Cassie and Max?

There was no perfect choice. Either way, something was gained and something—someone—was lost.

And yet, I couldn't quite make myself feel gloomy about it because there was one thing I knew I would gain either way, something I didn't have to lose. I pictured my mother's warm smile, conjured my father's contagious laugh. I couldn't help but smile as I thought of them, my family, excitement flowing through my tired muscles at the thought of getting to see them so soon.

Maybe they were the key to all this, the way I could walk somewhere between college student and princess. I could be with them in Crestfall for part of the time. They could teach me—or re-teach me, as it were—how to rule, how to be a princess, and they could be here when I visited Earth, watch over the kingdom until I was ready...so I wouldn't have to choose.

I remembered that first memory of my mother. The way it felt when she brushed my hair, the way it felt to have someone take care of me, to feel they loved me no matter

what, that they always would. If it wasn't for that memory, I might never have taken the leap to come here, might never have gotten this far.

And I realized then, if my parents wanted me to stay, and stay forever, then I would. They had always been the ultimate reward, the light at the end of this dark and perilous journey, the one thing that would make me choose, if I had to, to leave the old me, the old Summer behind. Much as I would like to live somewhere between, to straddle both the worlds I felt I belonged to, I would choose one world, their world, in a heartbeat if that's what they wanted me to do.

They were my family, a family I felt like I'd been waiting my entire life to know, and nothing could ever replace that. Replace them.

"What's that all about?" Max asked, his voice breaking into my deep thoughts.

I followed his gaze to where it landed on Cassie and Tom, specifically to their clasped hands, swinging slightly between the two of them as they smiled at one another, whispering about something I couldn't hear. "I'm not sure," I said. Whether it was a sign that Cassie had made her choice, or that she was simply just being her usual flirty self, I wasn't sure, but there was something about the way she was looking at Tom, like she was doing her best to try and school her smile, to hide her adoring gaze, and yet, couldn't quite manage it. I guess finding out a guy had defended your life and carried you up a mountain had a way of changing the way you looked at him.

I couldn't help but smile at her, at them, but when I turned back towards Max, I noticed he had something like a troubled expression on his face. "What?" I asked him.

Max shook his head, his blonde hair, still a little damp after washing the blood from it in the river, fell into his eyes as he leaned towards me. "What makes you think we can trust these people, Summer? I don't know if you noticed, but this was the *second* time they threatened to kill me in as many days."

"Max, I know it seems quick to you, but I've spent the last week with these people. They've saved my life more times than I can count. They told me about my place here, my family—"

"Family?" Max interrupted, his steps pausing for a moment before he seemed to remember himself and continued walking.

I didn't blame him for being surprised. He'd only known me as little orphan Summer, having to call him to learn how to change a tire, to help me with all the little things I'd never had a parent to teach me about. "Yeah, I actually have a family here, Max. Parents who are waiting for me, who have been this whole time. Can you believe it? I have a family." The last bit came out a bit softer than I'd intended, and I knew I likely had a silly smile on my face as I let myself get lost in the words, in the hope they represented. Hope I thought I'd given up for good a long time ago.

Max looked at me for a moment, like he was processing what I'd said as well as what it meant for me, for my place here, until he finally sighed, and said, "I see. Well, can you at least tell me where your *boyfriend's* taking us? Back to the portal, right?"

I decided to ignore the slightly repulsed way in which he said, *boyfriend*, like he thought being with Lee was going to give me cooties or something, and answered him, all the while bracing myself for his inevitably poor reaction. "We're not going to the portal, Max. We're going to fight...him."

"Him...who?"

I raised my eyebrows, waiting for him to put the pieces together, and I watched as his blue eyes widened in horror. Max stopped walking and forced me to stop beside him, grabbing my arm and squeezing it tightly, almost to the point of pain. "No, Summer. You can't."

I tried to shake my arm free, but Max didn't budge. "You don't understand, Max—"

Max shook his head, his voice coming out sharper, more desperate than I'd perhaps ever heard it. "No, *you* don't understand, Summer. I saw the town, the castle, the monsters he has at his disposal. You don't stand a chance."

I narrowed my eyes at him, yanking hard on my arm until he let it go. I didn't want to yell at him. I knew he'd been through a lot, that he was only looking out for me, the way he always did, but that didn't mean I was about to let him man-handle me or talk to me like I was a child. The Summer he'd known might have put up with it, but this Summer had survived enough dangerous situations without his help to find his attempts at protection to be nothing more than feeble and unnecessary. "Wow, thanks for the pep

talk, but we're stronger than you think—I'm stronger than you think. And when we meet up with the others—"

"Others?" Max asked, cutting me off, a strange look passing over his features.

"Yes, they're waiting for us at this waterfall. Somewhere hidden where Varian won't find us."

"How many?" Max asked quickly, his eyes suddenly harder than before.

"I'm...not sure, why?" I asked, narrowing my eyes at him, not liking—or understanding—his brusque tone.

Max hesitated for a moment before throwing his hands in the air, gesturing at the scenery around him. "Why? Because this—this place...I'm not sure what these guys told you, why you feel you have to save it, but trust me, it can't be saved. This Varian guy, he's in complete control."

I shook my head. "Max, you don't get it. It's not just some place to me. I'm the—"

But Max continued, ignoring me as he ranted, like a well had burst within him, and he couldn't keep it in anymore. "I mean they don't even know where their king and queen are, much less—"

I grabbed his arm, cutting him off. "Wait, what? What are you talking about?"

Max just looked at me, his blue gaze solemn and serious. "I overheard...in the town. The king and queen...they've been missing for over a year. Presumed dead."

I froze. My parents? *Missing*?

No, *no* it couldn't be.

I tried to land on some proof, something to tell Max that would erase what he had said, what he seemed to really believe was true, but my thoughts were all disjointed, scattered and broken apart like a puzzle like that had been reduced to its pieces.

Lee.

That's right. Lee—Lee wouldn't have lied to me, but then I remembered his face that day in the arcade when I'd mentioned my parents. I remembered how he'd told Tom to come and talk to me, remembered how panicked he was in the worlen camp when I'd told him I remembered something about my parents.

How the word *lie* had rang in my head when he told me it was nothing.

No, Lee promised he wouldn't—he, he gave me his *word*.

I tried to summon my mother's smile, my father's laugh, the certainty and hope I'd felt only a moment ago, but the longer I held the picture in my mind, the more it began to change, to fall apart in front of my eyes, my mother's smile drooping, her expression shifting to something like panic, like terror. And my father's laugh—I couldn't—it didn't sound like laughter anymore.

It sounded like a scream.

I thought I heard Max saying my name, but I couldn't hear him over the war that was currently being waged in my mind. On one side stood the part of me that was in love with Lee, that trusted him more than anything, and on the other was the part of me that knew better than to put my faith in someone I'd only just met, someone who needed something *from* me as much as he claimed to need me.

But this was *Lee* I was talking about. This was the man who I'd given my first kiss to. Who had saved me more times than I could count. My eyes fell on him, walking a few feet ahead with his back towards me, on the hair I'd seen him run his hands through over and over, the arms that had held me when I felt most alone and afraid, and the sword he had used to defend me, to fight for me, steady in his hand.

As if he felt my eyes on him, I watched as Lee turned slightly, his green gaze scanning the pink forest. I watched as a confused look drifted over his face, his left hand absentmindedly coming to rest over his heart like he couldn't quite understand where it was coming from, the pain he was feeling there, the heartbreak, the betrayal.

I just stared at him, not bothering to keep the tears from falling, and as I did the wind suddenly picked up, ruffling my hair, and I noticed a small slip of paper, drifting about in the breeze. It fluttered toward me, and I snatched it out of the air, slowly unfolding it.

The paper was soft and had an almost silver shine to it, and there were words emblazoned on it in dark blue ink, the handwriting beautiful yet strange, like something between cursive and print. I read the note, and as I did, I felt it when Lee's gaze finally came to rest on me, a question in his green eyes, but I couldn't really see him, couldn't see anything past the three words scrawled on the silver paper.

Don't trust him.

CHAPTER 23

Lies We Tell

I walked towards Lee with my fist at my side, the crumpled note clenched tightly against my palm. “You told me they were safe,” I said, softly at first, but as I watched the confusion in Lee’s eyes shift to something else, something like understanding, like dread, my anger grew, my voice rising with it. “You told me they were *waiting* for me.”

Lee held up his hand, shaking his head. “Summer, please. It’s not—”

“How could you not tell me?” I demanded, stepping closer to him, forcing him to look at me. “How could you not tell me they were missing? That they were *presumed dead*?” I heard Cassie gasp at this, but I didn’t turn toward her, didn’t tear my eyes away from Lee. “How could you stand there and let me believe I had a family? How could—”

Lee stepped toward me, cutting me off, the volume of his voice rising to match my own. “Because you wouldn’t have come!” I just looked at him as he ran his hand through his brown hair, the image slightly blurry as I fought to keep the tears welling in my eyes from falling. “You didn’t see your face when you were talking about that first memory, the way you talked about your mom... You were already so hesitant, Summer. I thought—”

“Thought what?” I shouted as the first of the tears fell. I wiped roughly at my cheeks, trying to hold on to my anger, not wanting to give into the sadness yet, the grief. “Thought you could use the idea of my parents to get me to come along on your stupid quest? Thought you could trick me into—”

“I thought that your memories would come back!” Lee shouted, eyes wide and desperate, pleading with me to understand. “And that when they did, it wouldn’t matter because...because you would be you again.”

You would be you again. The words seemed to fall over me like shattered glass, digging into my skin and drawing blood. I knew what they meant. Lee had thought that he wouldn’t have to deal with Summer forever. He thought that Rose, his Rose, would

come back to him, and everything he'd told me, all the lies would be forgotten the second she returned, the second *I* remembered. Only I never did.

"And when they didn't?" I asked, trying to stay calm, to force myself to hear his explanation, his excuse.

"We had already come so far. You already had so much to worry about, so much pressure, I just wanted—"

I stepped closer, jabbing a finger into Lee's chest. "You manipulated me, Lee. You used me, used what we had to—" I cut myself as a sob welled in my throat, turning away and taking a deep breath before continuing. "And what was supposed to happen after? When all this was over, and I found out the truth?" I waited for Lee to respond, but he was silent. Maybe because he didn't want to say the words, or maybe because he knew I already had the answer. "I guess it wouldn't have mattered, then. You would already have gotten what you needed from me."

"Summer, wait—" Lee said, grabbing my hand as I turned away from him, but I jerked out of his grip.

"I trusted you!" I shouted as the tears streamed down my face, turning to look not only at him, but at all of them. My friends, only I guessed they were never really mine after all. It seemed their loyalty—like Lee's—extended only to the girl I once was. To Rose. "I trusted all of you, and you let me believe—let me *hope* for something I would never have."

Tom just stared at me with a repentant look on his face before he looked away, but Maeve...Maeve never broke my gaze, her eyes full of apology...but not regret. She was sorry for what she'd done, I could see that, but I also saw that she believed it was the right thing to do, nonetheless.

Cassie stepped forward from Tom's side, her expression unsure as she looked between my friends and I. "Summer, maybe—maybe you should hear them out."

"You were right, Cassie," I said, almost dazedly as I looked at her, remembering the skepticism on her face when I'd told her about my father, the doubt I'd fought to push down, to ignore. "That night with the Worlen—you were right about my parents. About there being something else going on."

"I know, but Summer—"

“What, are you actually defending them now?”

Cassie threw her hands in the air. “No, of course not—Okay, look, what they did was wrong, but they were lying in order to protect *you*, in order to protect the realm—” Cassie paused, shooting me a meaningful look— “You and I both know how difficult that can be.”

Cassie looked at me, her eyes understanding yet firm. She wanted me to tell him, to tell them all about what I’d seen when I touched the tree, the cost of the silverling magic. She thought it was the same, that I had no right to be angry with them for doing what I’d done myself: lie to protect the people I loved.

But she was wrong, because that stuff with the tree? That was *my* secret to share, my lie to tell. Lee hadn’t lied to me about himself, about a risk he was taking. He’d lied to me about *my* family, and he did it so *I* would be the one willing to take a risk, to leave my old life behind and try and embrace this new one.

What better way to win over an orphan than to tell them they’re not alone, after all?

“What are you talking about?” Lee asked, his tone suspicious as he gazed between Cassie and I.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said coolly, keeping my eyes on Cassie, daring her to spill the secret herself. She was silent, but as she crossed her arms I could tell she thought I was making a mistake, thought I was overreacting and hell maybe I was, but she was my friend, she was supposed to be on my side even when I was wrong. “Fine, take your new boyfriend’s side for all I care.”

I turned my back on her, but not before seeing the hurt my words had caused as they hit home. I shook my head, trying to ignore the way that same hurt seemed to echo in my own chest. I wasn’t angry at Cassie. At least, I didn’t think I was. It was all just blurring together: the grief of losing my parents, the anger at being lied to, the fear of what I was going to do now that I was alone, *really* alone in a way I hadn’t felt in a long time.

Lee grabbed my hand again, and I let him this time, too many emotions and feelings pulling at me to bother resisting. He drew me closer to him even as I leaned away, trying to hold myself, to hold my heart at a distance. Still, this close I could see the

tears in Lee's eyes, could see the pain and regret painted across his handsome features. "Summer, please. Just listen to me, okay? I'm sorry I lied. I'm sorry you had to hear about your parents from someone else, but they could still be alive. They could still be waiting for you."

I looked at Lee, trying to see past the sorrow and desperation, past my own pain reflected in his eyes. "Do you honestly believe that?"

Lee hesitated for a moment, only a moment, before he answered, but it was enough. "Yes," he said finally, but it was too late. I already knew the truth, knew it even before the bond did, before the power that tied Lee and I together revealed the secret he felt he couldn't share.

Lie.

I closed my eyes as the word sank in deep, lodging itself somewhere near my heart, making every breath painful. I pulled my hand from his gently, stepping away as I wiped the last of the tears from my eyes. "It's over, Lee. I'll stop Varian. I'll save the kingdom, but whatever we had, whatever was between us...it's over."

I turned from him, but Lee moved in front of me, coming in close, his movements desperate and determined. "No, no Summer, please. Don't do this. I love you."

I sucked in a breath at the words, the ones I'd said to him that night in the woods when I was begging him to let me go, the ones he'd never been able to say to me—until now.

Only now, I was the one who needed to let go.

I stared into his forest green eyes, the orange flames bright with desperation and fear—with love, or so he claimed—and I waited. I waited for the truth to spring up in my mind, for the lie to be revealed, but...the word never came. My mind was empty. Silent.

I shook my head and stepped away from Lee, fighting down a shiver as the warmth of his body was replaced by cool air, a cold wind passing between us, and I remembered the mysterious note in my pocket, the advice I was determined to take. It didn't matter what the bond said.

Just because someone believed what they were saying, didn't make it true.

"Not me, Lee. Not enough."

I watched as Lee's face fell, as the last bit of hope lingering in his eyes was extinguished. He turned his head and nodded once, his jaw clenching as he did, before facing forward once more and continuing through the forest, his pace quicker than before, like he was trying to put as much distance between him and our conversation as possible.

The other three followed after him, Cassie lingering a bit before she did, trying to catch my eye, but I avoided her gaze. I couldn't look at her. I knew that once I did there would be nothing to stop the floodgates from opening up, and there was every chance I would sob all the way to the waterfall.

Silence descended once more upon the quiet forest as Max finally came up to my side, and together we set out after the others. I remained facing forward, but I could see him out of the corner of my eye, watching as he opened and closed his mouth again and again, like he couldn't quite decide what the right thing to say was. "Summer," he finally said, his tone apologetic, but I just raised my hand, cutting him off. "Not now, Max, okay? Please."

Max hesitated for a moment, and then nodded, turning away from me to look down at the forest floor, and I felt a surge of guilt pass through me. It wasn't Max's fault that he'd accidentally revealed the truth about my parents. He hadn't even known that I was the princess. I'm sure he had a million questions about it, about all of it, but I just couldn't deal with it right now.

I felt almost numb, not even noticing the hunger or the tiredness anymore. Not only that, I felt...unmoored, like I'd lost the one thing that had been grounding me to this place, to the life I'd built here. Not my parents. The truth was, they always felt a bit too good to be true, like a dream, one I knew better than to believe in.

And yet, for a while, I did believe in it—I believed in *him*—and without him, everything just felt...unstable. Precarious. Like my place in this world was balanced on the edge of a knife.

Through all this, Lee had been the one person I could really depend on. The one person who made me feel like I could accomplish anything, *do* anything, even save a kingdom I couldn't remember with people I'd never met.

Without meaning to, I reached for the bond, looking inward for that little star, that little piece of Lee's soul that I would always carry inside me, and in that moment, I

realized I would give anything to switch powers with him, to feel what he was feeling. To know if his heart felt like it was cracking and splintering into a million tiny pieces. To know if he felt guilty about what he'd done. To know if he would do it again.

Maybe that's what Rose had seen in him, why she felt like she couldn't trust him enough to tell him that he would never have any secrets from her. Maybe she knew that he would always put something else above her, some sense of duty or honor.

Or maybe she just always wanted to be sure that when he said *I love you*, he meant it. Or at least, that he thought he did.

The worst part was, I understood why he did it. Lee had a responsibility to the people he left behind, to the kingdom that still needed saving, one that took priority over any feelings he might have for me. Still, I knew it must have been a difficult choice for him to make. Looking back, I could practically hear it in his voice, all the times he'd almost told me.

And yet, that didn't change the fact that he'd still made that choice, not just when we first met, but over and over again, even when it became clear that the girl he'd been searching for wasn't the girl he'd found. He'd lied to me, *used* me, *manipulated* me—

No wonder he'd wanted so badly for me to get my memories back. With Rose, it would have been so much simpler, so much easier. She was someone he wouldn't have to lie to or manipulate into doing the right thing, someone who could understand putting one's duty to their kingdom above their heart. My mind went to my visions of the silverlings, of the look on Lee's face when I told him there was nothing to fear from the silverling magic, like he didn't quite believe me, but he wanted to so badly.

Then again, maybe I could understand after all.

My mind shifted to my parents, to the gaping hole in my chest, the one that had always been there, but had been filled up for a little awhile with the hope of having a family again. I tried to tell myself that there was still hope, that missing didn't mean dead, but it felt like a drop in a bucket compared to what I'd had before. What I'd lost. Still, I couldn't help but cling to that little drop of hope with all my strength, afraid that once it slipped away there would be nothing left to hold on to. The hole would be empty once more.

I jumped a little when Max touched my shoulder lightly, drawing my gaze to him, his blue eyes full of regret. “Summer...I’m sorry. I didn’t think—I didn’t know they were your parents.”

I shook my head, trying to send him a small smile, but I felt it fade almost as soon as it appeared. “It’s okay, Max. I don’t blame you.”

I looked up, my eyes drawn to the ones I *did* blame, or at least, was trying to. There was still a part of me that couldn’t quite give in fully to the anger. I’d had to make enough impossible choices myself, recently. Cassie was right. I knew how difficult it could be.

Max followed my gaze, his soft eyes growing harder once more, jaw clenching as he glared at my friends’ backs, lingering on Lee’s stiff form. “How could they have kept that from you—could have given you *hope* knowing that—” Max broke off, his anger stealing his words.

“I guess they didn’t know. Not really. They were just doing what they thought was right.” Despite them being my own, I was still surprised by the words as they left my mouth. I was defending them, again. I— I couldn’t help it. I wanted to, I *needed* to, because if Max was right, and they really didn’t care...then, what exactly was I fighting for?

Max shook his head. “For *them*, Summer. They did what was right for *them*. They don’t care about you.”

“No, that’s not true. What they did was wrong, but they’re still my friends.” The words sounded empty even to my own ears, like the kind of lies little girls tell themselves in the dark.

“Why? Because they *told* you they were? Think about it, Summer. These people,” he said, gesturing toward Maeve and Tom and Lee, “they don’t care about what happens to you. If they did, they never would have taken you from Earth, somewhere you were safe. Somewhere you were *happy*. They never would have brought you to this place. Put you in all this danger.”

I shook my head. “They—they rescued me,” I protested, hating how weak my voice sounded as I tried to fight the certainty in Max’s voice. I remembered that day, the way Lee had saved me from the ashers, the way he’d looked at me like I was the only girl

in the world, the way just being with him had felt like home. That, all that, couldn't be a lie. It just couldn't.

But Max was right. I *had* been happy on earth. Safe. Sure, Varian had intended to kill me at some point, to sacrifice me in order to save his family, but my friends hadn't known that. They hadn't known what his endgame was, but it didn't matter. They didn't care about it, my life there, my world. They just needed me to come fix theirs.

"They used you, Summer. They're still using you."

I shook my head as tears welled in my eyes, threatening to spill over onto my cheeks. "No," I said, quickening my pace, trying to put some distance between myself and Max's words. And all the truth in them.

But Max kept pace with me, not letting me run away from this. "Tell me. What reason do you have to believe that you're anything more than just a pawn to them? Some proof, something you *know* to be true."

"They told me—"

Max grabbed my arm, forcing me to stop, to look at him. "Exactly, Summer! You only know what you've been told by them. You only know *exactly* what they want you to, what would make you want to come here and fight their battles for them. Think about it, Summer. They lied about your parents in order to get you here. What else have they lied about?"

Max just looked at me, resolve and something like...pity in his gaze, and suddenly, I was back there again, standing in a study room littered with the ash of monsters, having just been healed by magic, and yet refusing to believe that I was who they said I was, that any of it could really be possible. Lee had looked at me the same way Max was right now, like he was waiting, waiting for me to see the truth in his words, waiting for the denial to be replaced by acceptance. Acceptance and grief.

Max was right. I knew Varian was out there, had seen first-hand the damage he had done to the realm, even knew the part I needed to play in saving it, but everything else...

All the shared smiles and comforting touches. All the kisses and declarations and promises and reminiscing about times I couldn't remember. All of that, everything they'd told me about our friendship, our love...that could all be a lie. None of it was real, not for

certain. Maybe they were just using me, manipulating my emotions. What better way to get someone to fight for you than to tell them you loved them, to make them think you cared, that you would be there for them even after it was all over?

Yes, they hadn't wanted me to die, had protected me at every turn, but how much of that was about me, and how much was about saving the kingdom? The truth was, they didn't have to care about me in order to want to keep me alive. It was their duty to do so, their responsibility, not to mention their only hope of saving their home.

Maybe they were just like the reapers. They needed me to stop their enemy, to fight their battles, but in the end, they didn't care what it cost me. Maybe if I did what Cassie wanted, if I told them about what would happen if I was forced to use my silverling magic...they wouldn't even care.

And even if I survived the battle to come, that *after* I'd been dreaming about, the new life that I was fighting for just as much as the kingdom itself...Maybe that was the biggest lie of all. Maybe once my friends didn't *need* me anymore...

They wouldn't want me anymore.

The thought made my heart squeeze in my chest, an empty, echoing kind of ache that was as familiar as it was painful. Loneliness—the kind that made you feel like you'd been disconnected from everything you've ever known, like you were stranded, scared, with no way of getting back home. The kind I hadn't felt since before...since before I'd thought I'd found a new home.

But now, all of a sudden the friends I had made felt like strangers once more. Tom, Maeve, Lee—I didn't know them. I didn't know them, and I—I didn't know me. I didn't know if any of what I was feeling for them was real. What was the truth and what was a lie.

Ever since I'd stepped foot in Crestfall, I had depended solely on the word of my friends, on what they promised me was true. I *knew* nothing because I had *discovered* nothing for myself. Nothing besides the fact that I was a silverling, that I could wield magic, two magics, neither of which I really understood. Nothing else was real, was certain. Nothing else could be trusted.

My gaze slid toward Max, and even his friendly eyes seemed changed in the light of this new discovery. He was right. I couldn't trust them.

I couldn't trust anyone.

I was alone.

Pretty soon the sound of running water began to trickle into my thoughts, and I realized the flat terrain we'd been walking across had turned into a gradual incline, and not only that, but the higher we walked, the more the forest around us began to change. I watched as the light pink trees began to be steadily succeeded by those with darker petals, the phenomenon continuing as the trees that surrounded us shifted from light pink to dark pink to red to purple to blue and finally to green, like the forest was a palette whose paint had bled together, the effect dazzling and surreal.

It also seemed the higher we climbed up the ridge, the more life seemed to be imbued into the woods around us. Gone were the black marks, the scorched earth, like we were entering an oasis of sorts, a refuge from the ravages of dark magic. I listened as birds twittered and chirped, fluttering upon the branches of the highest trees. Their song was long and melodic, more complex than normal birdsong, like the birds themselves were composers and their voices were their instruments.

However, the higher we climbed, the more the sound of rushing water began to overwhelm even that of the birds until we finally crested a hill and saw it. It was tall, about eighty feet high and twenty feet wide, the water cascading smoothly and steadily over a tall ridge, like a sheet of glass had been placed against the hill side. I followed my friends over the moss covered rocks, Max behind me, scrambling up the tall boulders with surprising ease.

As I pulled myself up on top of the last rock, located about midway up the waterfall, right in front of the sheet of falling water, I couldn't help but smile as a spray of mist drifted across my face, the feeling refreshing and delightfully familiar, unlike so many things about this realm.

The suns were just beginning to set, and from this height I could see it, how the stars were just now becoming visible high above the setting suns, like day and night had been pressed together. And below them were the valleys and meadows I had seen only once before, my heart squeezing uncomfortably as I was pulled back to the first time I'd been here, the only time I could remember. Lee's lips on mine, so young and hopeful and happy. As if hearing my thoughts, I felt someone's eyes on me, and I turned to find Lee a

few steps away, his eyes full of all the pain and longing swirling within me. Whether it was mine or his, I didn't know.

"So, where is everyone?" I asked Lee, not bothering to keep the irritation out of my voice, because the truth was, I wasn't just in pain, I was *angry*. I'd allowed myself to believe in him, to believe in us, and he'd taken advantage of that. Of me. And now, even the good memories were tainted with his deceit. Still, I shook my head, determined to focus on the task at hand. I'd peeked behind the waterfall when we were climbing up, expecting to find some hidden cave or something, but there was nothing but slick black rock.

"There likely...won't be many," Lee said, looking down slightly. "It's been so long—there's no telling how much of the guard has survived, much less how many are able to fight."

My heart fell at his words, panic filling me suddenly as if all the fear I'd been putting off on the walk here was descending on me at once, so quickly and so intensely it felt like I couldn't breathe. I couldn't do this alone. I needed more people. I needed *help*. Fear constricted my heart, and I fought to push it down, to push it away.

Suddenly, a warm hand slipped into my own, and I turned to find Cassie at my side. She squeezed my hand, giving me a reassuring smile, and I just looked at her, hot tears pricking my eyes. Even after what I'd said to her, Cassie was here. She was with me, the only one, other than Max, that I could really trust. I closed my eyes, breathing deeply before turning back toward Lee, only I was surprised to find him with his hand halfway extended, like he'd begun to try and comfort me before Cassie had gotten there first, or before he'd thought better of it.

Lee quickly turned back toward the sheet of water, simply staring at it for a moment, and it wasn't long until Max raised his hand, countless water droplets shining in his blonde hair. "Am I missing something here? It's just a waterfall."

Lee didn't even turn to face him. Instead, he pressed his hand directly against the wall of water, not breaking the path. Just barely skimming the surface. "*Lunasol*," he whispered softly, and suddenly, magically, the cascade of water began to part, pulling apart on either side of his palm, like someone had taken a knife and cut a slit within the water itself.

I peered into the watery gap, still expecting to see nothing but hard rock behind it. Instead, there was a warm glow, homey almost, like fires were burning from within.

Suddenly, without looking back, Lee stepped off the rock and into the little pocket of light, and I gasped as I watched him disappear entirely into the glow. I drifted closer, the others stepping aside for me. I stepped up to the edge of the rock, my toes just peeking over the edge, and peered into the glowing portal, trying to catch a glimpse of what was waiting for me inside, but I couldn't see anything past the glow, like I was looking into a star.

All at once, the entrance glowed brighter, and I realized the suns had set, the night falling down all around us. The last night I would perhaps ever see.

I wanted to look back, to gaze at the sky once more, at the constellations I'd drawn with Lee and the planets we'd wished on. Instead, I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and stepped forward.

Into the star.

