

I SEE YOU

Prologue

I'm drowning when the empty ship appears. Or, perhaps, ship is not the right word. It's tiny but designed like it's meant to be larger, draconian and noble with its polished wooden planks and ship's wheel rocking in the breeze. In the vast, static sea, it's the most impressive view. The boat is familiar in a way tape recorders and VCRs are to people born in the early 2000s; seeing it undulating above me sends a punch of bitter nostalgia through me.

For a moment—with water in my nose, with the sea stinging my eyes, with my clothes loose in lifeless life—I simply stare up at the vessel; even then, I almost miss the lifebuoy being thrown off the side, faded and crackly orange. It lands near me and spazzes in color like a glitch.

I blink at it in surprise, then at the boat again. I think, *there's no one on the ship. Who could have thrown it?*, but I feel distant and dazed enough that the thought sinks into mush. I grab hold of the tattered orange foam. It's surprisingly solid under my fingers, cold and slick, and as soon as I wrap my fingers around it, the boat jerks forward, and I am dragged to the surface.

Instinct takes over and I gasp for air as soon as my mouth clears the water. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to blink away the salt and the wetness. There's some sort of inscription on the buoy, but it's blurred out, a stark contrast to everything else around me.

When I finally manage to gather my wits, the boat has slowed down, making its way casually to an island that seems to be made up of odd slabs of dark brown rock, but as I drift closer, I realize that it's not made up of rocks at all but coconuts, large and round, all of them facing the same direction, their three dark holes surveying my arrival.

The water laps at the coconut skins, dragging away the brown hairs into a swirling whirlpool at the shore. I reach out, letting go of the life-saver, treading closer to the shore. There's a spot of movement on the isolated land in my

peripheral vision, black and striped grey—a creature?—, and I pivot toward it, squinting at the unexpected action. When I blink, the coconuts are rocks again and then they disappear like a mirage.

I wake up, blinking the last vestiges of the dream out of my eyes. My mom is leaning over, her hand on my shoulder. She's dressed up already, the black fabric of her dress clinging to her shoulders like tablecloth over abandoned desks. "Get up, Alex. It's time."

CHAPTER ONE

The first week of May, I was called to the principal's office, which was nerve-wracking for two reasons: first, I'd never been to the principal's office before, ever, not since first grade when I scraped my knee playing tag and spent the rest of the day sobbing my eyes out because I thought my blood was going to get contaminated and I'd die. Second, I couldn't recall the principal's name let alone why I was being called down. It was near the end of sixth hour, so I packed my Physics homework and traipsed out of the class with my backpack slung over my shoulder.

When I arrived, it was to another surprise: my mom was there. She was still wearing her scrubs, and she looked as if she'd gotten off a 24-hour shift, her black hair greasy and loose in its braid. This befuddled me for much the same reason as being called down to the office. I only see my mom in two places: at home and at work. I had to do a triple-take before slowly opening the door, and I barely formed a question before my mom yanked me into a hug. She was shaking.

That day, I was driven home early. My mom sat me down and warmed up some ramen. With the gentle hum of the microwave, she clutched my hand and told me we were going to Michigan in a week.

"I can't do that," I told her incredulously. I widened my eyes at her as if suddenly I could understand the entire situation by staring harder. "Exams are in two weeks."

She said, "I know." And then, in fractured breaths: "Your father called. It's—it's your sister."

The next weekend, I dig out my wrinkled tuxedo, and we drive to Plymouth.

It's too sunny for a funeral. The air is nauseatingly sweet, tangy like ginger coconut or as if someone had let a hundred jars of jam decompose before vanishing the evidence. Some people have brought pitch black umbrellas, and they hold them awkwardly in their laps as they squint at the brightness in their seats. It was supposed to rain today. It was supposed to be a downpour.

I wipe the sweat from my brow and scowl at the yellowing grass. Well, evidently, it did not. I don't know if I should be disappointed. The absence of a dramatic farewell to set the mood is suffocating.

The only people I recognize are my mom and dad, and they stand on opposite sides, divided with death in the middle. There's more attendees than I've expected, ranging from teachers to family to friends. A lot of them are glancing at us, gauging our reactions to base theirs on. I don't know what to give them, so I lower my eyes.

Should I be sad? Should I cry? I've read a hundred books and seen a hundred movies, and it feels like I experienced death more poignantly through those vicarious media. Here in reality, I feel excluded from the tragedy.

The only thing bothering me is the expectation of sadness and the aching in my legs. I've been standing for half an hour, and the eulogies are still churning out; the priest stands with her hands raised, chanting blessing after blessing. I don't get why she's here; we aren't even religious.

Well, I guess my mom and I aren't. Honestly, I didn't know my sister all that well.

Now she's dead.

And now I'm standing in 90 degree weather, and my suit is slowly turning darker around my neck and armpits, and really, it's an uncomfortable event even without the dead body in the room. As soon as I think that, I feel like a psychopath.

The priest finishes, and she glances at my dad, her face set in solemn lines. “May her soul rest in peace,” she nods before stepping off, switching places with him.

My dad looks like what I want to look like—like he’s affected rather than discomfited. His blonde hair is brushed back, shiny with gel, and his own suit is ironed to mannequin perfection. His eyes are bloodshot and accentuated with the dark purple bags draping under, like he’d gotten particularly slap happy with eyeshadow and aging. I don’t have to know him well to understand that the weariness is an outlier in his usual temperance.

He clears his throat and smooths the paper his speech is on. He’d hand-written it on crisp printer paper. “Hello,” he says. “Thank you for coming today. I know that—” he clears his throat again. “I know that Ingrid would’ve really appreciated this. And thank you to everybody who brought daffodils. They were her favorite flower. Well, I suppose you knew that.”

My dad quirks a smile, but it quickly falls. He continues. “As you may know, Ingrid is my only daughter. She is—was barely eighteen. She had so much to live for, so much to achieve. I remember she was so stressed about college, thought she was going to have to drop out after the first day. I told her, ‘Ingrid, if you were going to drop out, you should’ve done it in middle school. Why in the world would you wait this long?’”

There’s a scattering of laughter, but it’s dimmed and morose. Funeral laughter.

“But—but I suppose life got in the way. Or, death did.” He sighs. “I won’t go on listing all of her attributes. You already know them. She was fiery, and determined, and her stubbornness sometimes made me feel like I had no influence at all. For a long time, I was scared that she would leave, her independence taking her away. I just—I never wanted it to be like this, you know? I have—” he cuts off and laughs wetly. “I won’t lie, I have a lot of regrets. I think I will always have them. I regret not

telling her I love her every day, I regret not being there when she—when she passed away. But I am so proud of her.

“If you have a kid, I think you know that you learn from them as much as they learn from you.” He shakes his head and offers a quivering smile. “I learned that being a father does not mean being the best. It does not mean taking up the mantle of both parents, and it does not mean existence simply to provide the necessities, and for the last couple of years, I was—I think I was good. I think she thought I was, well not to brag, but I think she thought I was one of those cool parents. You know, the ones you’re not embarrassed about in public. Or, I hope I was. I hope I gave her everything I could, and I hope that she knew that I would always, always be there with her like how she’ll always be with me.”

My dad pauses, and even from a distance, I can see his eyes shining. He sniffs, smooths out the paper again, and looks out at the crowd of other sad, sad people. “Death is inevitable. When you or I experience it, I think we’ll always go through denial first. There’s no good way to really commemorate a person. They were life, they existed. How can any funeral celebrate enough? But, our loved ones will always want us to continue, to thrive, and we have to respect that. We have to remember. I know Ingrid wouldn’t want us to mourn for long, but we will always hold her in our hearts. Her drive will always be with us. Her spirit will always be with us.” He looks around. He opens his mouth, like he wants to add more but shakes his head instead. “Thank you again for coming.”

Then, the funeral’s over. People are getting up. People are leaving. My mom wipes her eyes.

“Come on, Alex. Let’s go.” She gestures at the coffin, at dad. I want to shake my head and offer to stay in the car and wait for her, but the thought makes me feel callous. I nod and follow her.

“Mitra,” my dad greets. They hug, carefully. “I—”

“Shh, I know,” my mom says. “I know, Aksel.”

She pulls him into another hug, and they stay that way for a long moment. I shift, adjusting my black tuxedo jacket and glancing at the empty chairs. Absent people at a gloomy lecture.

"Alex."

I turn, and my dad grips my shoulder. Closer, he looks worse, his green eyes swimming in superficial composure. I look away, scared that he'd catch my lack of sorrow.

"It's good to see you again."

I grunt. "Er, yeah."

"I only wish it were under different circumstances." He laughs again, even though there was nothing funny. "You've grown so tall. How old are you now?"

I admit, that hurts a little, but in a way that's not surprising. Like a kid receiving a flu shot. "Fourteen."

"Going on to eleventh grade now?"

I shift and make eye contact with his shoes. There are grass scuffs on them already, but the leather-texture is pristine. I grunt an affirmative.

"You are doing well, no?"

I shrug. "I guess."

"That's good, that's good." He pulls me into a hug, and I stand stiffly with my arms around him, trying to mimic the familiarity my mom had embraced him with. When he pulls away, he's blinking fast. "Your mom and I are going to talk. Go say good-bye to your sister. And—and I know that you still have highschool, but come down anytime to visit, okay?"

He gently pushes me away, looking even more miserable. I swallow down the urge to run, instead ungracefully making my way to the coffin. A couple of Ingrid's friends are there, I think, and they're sobbing into each other's shoulders. When I approach, one of them nods weakly at me, yet her eyes are intense, beseeching. She looks nervous, worried.

"Hey, you're Ingrid's brother, right?"

I nod. My neck feels stiff.

"I'm sorry. She must have been a great sister."

I nod again. I don't know if she would have been a great sister, but it didn't matter, anyway. I croak out a "yeah" when she doesn't look away. My response must've disappointed her because she doesn't try to speak to me again.

They leave after a moment, and then I'm alone, staring blankly at the polished wood of the coffin. Ingrid's picture is on top, surrounded by wreaths and wreaths of flowers. She's smiling crookedly, her dark hair whipping around her face like clingy spaghetti, her eyes crinkled. She had hazel eyes, I noted, like me. Somehow, I had never realized that.

Suddenly, I am hit with a wave of melancholy. I bite the insides of my cheek, wracking my brain for something to say, but I don't have anything to add on my own, only quotes from movies and the eulogies during the funeral.

For several minutes, I stand there, opening and closing my mouth. The smell of rotting coconuts is thick enough to strangle me. I say, "Er, well, hello" and then fall silent again. It's awkward, it's depressing, and I don't know what I'm doing. I'm desperately trying to come up with something substantial.

I stand there for a minute more. Then, I pat the coffin. "Um, sorry," I murmur, and then I turn back to my mom.

"You done?" she asks. I shrug and nod for what feels like the hundredth time. I imagine this is what vinyl tapes must feel if they were cognizant: spinning around and around, contained by a needle scratching across the surface, not understanding the change but perceived so by others. She squeezes my arm and then turns back to my dad. "Okay. Call or visit anytime, Aksel. We'll always be here for each other."

Neither of us call her out on that. They hug again. My dad tries to say something to me, but his voice cracks and he settles for shaking my hand. "I'm sorry," he says, and it frighteningly mirrors my interaction with Ingrid's coffin moments before.

"It's okay." The phrase tumbles out reflexively. Then, my mom and I leave. The car ride is quiet. I'm replaying the eulogies in my head, the snippets of the funeral and the beating sun while I stare out the window and watch the trees blur past. The air conditioner uselessly blows out hot air so I roll down the window, but we're driving too slow to generate any sort of breeze.

For the first time in years, I wonder—what was Ingrid like?

I had been five when my parents filed their divorce. Dad took custody of Ingrid, my mom of me. I think they had plans to swap once in a while, like some sort of planned *Parent Trap*, but then they kept rescheduling meetings, and then it came to the point where I think they both agreed it was easier to keep track of one kid.

There were reunions, but they were few and sparse in between. An hour for Christmas every three years, maybe a few days during the summer. Usually when they stopped over, they'd also planned to see other friends. It worked for years, and there were no hard feelings—actually, I don't think there were any feelings at all. I barely remember what Ingrid was like. She didn't talk to me, and I didn't talk to her.

If we hadn't been siblings, I don't think I would even know her.

If I had been more empathetic and less of a terrible human being, I would've felt more than a casual empathy. I thought the tears would catch up later, but I still feel as empty as before.

My mom sniffs, vigorously rubbing her eyes as she stops at the red light.

"What do you want to eat, Alex?" She asks, way too lightly.

"I don't care." I'm not hungry.

"Okay. Neehee's?"

"Sure."

We turn into the small restaurant we'd found only a day ago, when we had arrived in Michigan. The food is good, and it doesn't taste like ashes in my mouth. For some reason, I had hoped that it would.

When we get back to our hotel, I shuck off my suit and pull on more comfortable clothes. My mom looks out the window, white-knuckled grip on her

black dress. Her makeup is smudged, illuminated by the sun. She doesn't look like she's going to move anytime soon.

I feel restless, though. I wish the funeral had occurred during the evening. Then, I would have an excuse to immediately go to bed and sleep and wake up to another start. But it's too bright.

I step beside my mother and glance out dejectedly. It's a small town, mostly trees and roads, a nondescript place, a transition point between two washed-out cities. She wraps an arm around my shoulder and pulls me close. "Are you feeling okay?"

I resist the urge to run away because the truth is, I do feel okay. I feel fine. I feel like it's any other boring day in summer, and then that makes me feel awful. I feel like the news is announcing another celebrity's death, and I'm in the kitchen eating cereal. Maybe there's something wrong with me. I don't want my mom to see that any more than I wanted dad to.

"Um. I don't know," I say because it's a safe, ambiguous answer. "I think I'm gonna go walk around a little. I won't go far."

She clutches me for a second longer before releasing. "Be careful, okay?" Her eyes are wide and understanding. I might puke with guilt. "I know Ingrid's dead—it's hard to take in, but don't do anything reckless."

"Okay."

She's still staring out the window as I leave the room. I take a deep breath as I close the door and lean against it, staring at the opposite wall, fiddling with the hem of my shirt, half-expecting someone to jump out and shout "There's something broken with you! Get fixed, you terrible excuse of a human!"

I shake my head. "Okay, Alex. Okay. This will all be over soon."

But it won't, would it? Death is permanent. It would never be over as long as Ingrid was in a coffin. I run my hands through my hair and take a deep breath, feeling uncomprehendingly angry and disgusted with everything. The walls seem uncharacteristically ugly, painted a puke green with pictures of Elvis Presley and

other famous old singers. "It's over," I tell them. They don't answer, of course, staying inert and happy and black and white, and that makes things worse.

I check for the hotel card in my pocket before heading to the elevator and out into the streets. There's a park nearby, and I inadvertently make my way there. No one's around which makes me relax somewhat. There's a lone bench, a lopsided thing made out of stone, its left side covered in some sort of suspicious red stain. I sit on the right side, shivering as a breath of wind grazes over my skin. I look up at the hotel, considering going back to get a book or my phone, but when I think of seeing my mom, standing still and crying at the window, I stay put. "Stupid," I mutter.

"Oh my gosh, is that seriously an *A Wrinkle in Time* shirt?"

I stiffen. There had been nobody at the park, I'm sure of it, and the scary thing is, there still is nobody, at least not close enough to match the volume of the voice. I sit up straight and frantically glance around.

"Holy frick. Holy frick!"

I shoot up. What the—

Then a girl is in my face. Her smile is crooked, pushing her cheeks into lopsided apples. Her hair is tied in a loose braid, flyaway strands wrapping around her face like clingy spaghetti. Hazel eyes, faded. "You can hear me!?"

I physically feel the blood drain out of my face. My mouth falls open.

I stare my dead sister right in the eyes and scream.

CHAPTER TWO

Ingrid's open expression changes comically fast. If I hadn't been so terrified, I think I would've laughed. Unfortunately, I'm too busy stumbling back. My knees hit the bench, and I almost crumple over. My eyes are so wide, they feel like they are going to pop out of my sockets.

"Wh—wh—wh—"

"Shhhhhh!!" she whispers. She flies—she flies—closer, and my heartbeat picks up like a hummingbird that had consumed five hundred packets of skittles. I glance down then up then down again and whimper. Her body is like a gradient, opacity fading. Her feet are almost transparent.

"You're going to look insane."

I scan around, my gaze ricocheting off my surroundings. "There's no one here!" I say, and my voice comes out high and squeaky.

"Well, I'm offended."

I gape at her, aware that I'm in a tremendously odd position. I'm gripping the sides of the bench, not quite sitting, my head leaned as far away from—from—

"You're dead!"

Ingrid rolls her eyes and crosses her arms. Her mouth twists down, and she looks like an annoyed teenager dealing with an obnoxious classmate. "Yes, I am. Thanks for reminding me."

I make another sound that is utter nonsense but which I hope conveys my discombobulated horror. "How—ho—how—that's it." I look away and squeeze my eyes shut. "I'm going crazy. I'm actually a psychopath. I'm insane. What the heck?"

"I dunno, man. But yeah, I agree. Anyone wearing a shirt like that is absolutely, no doubt crazy."

I instantly feel offended. "It's a good book!"

"Yeah, sure, but why in the world does that book have merch?"

"Because—" I pause. "Why am I still talking to you?" I whisper hysterically.

"Well, don't stop now. I'm lonely. This might be the single most hilarious thing that has happened to me in months."

A chilly presence settles next to me. I don't open my eyes. I feel faint, too hot. My fingers are cramping on the side of the bench, and in the back of my mind, I desperately wish I'm not clutching the weird red stain.

I take a few deep breaths, trying to get my heart rate back to normal.

"That's right. Take your time. Breathe."

Annnnd I'm going to have a panic attack.

"Woah! Woah, that's not good, don't breathe that much!"

My shoulders suddenly feel like someone had dropped a few ice cubes on them, and I flinch violently, opening my eyes again. Ingrid has dropped into a crouch in front of me, and she's hurriedly retracting her hands from my shoulders, shock lighting up her countenance before she sets her mouth like she's going to conquer Mt. Everest. Her face is too pale, I note, like someone had washed the final layer of paint away.

My chest feels like an elephant is sitting on it, though, so I don't think too much about it.

"Hey, hey, Alex. Look at me."

I let out a squeak. I was trying not to, actually.

"Okay, bad advice, but here. Concentrate on my breathing. Or, well—doesn't matter, whatever. Look." She puts her hand on her chest and mimes the up-and-down motion of inhaling and exhaling.

She's not actually breathing. I shake the thought away. Right. Right. Concentrate. No breaking down. This isn't happening, but if it is, it would probably be a good idea to get that elephant off me.

In. Out. In. Out. In. Out. In—Ingrid's still there. Looking concerned. And alive. Which she is not.

"You're not supposed to be here," I tell her. Here, as in this human world. Here, as in the living world.

"I think we've already confirmed that," she says dryly. "Trust me, I don't know either. Only that I can't really stray far from you, for some reason. And you're the first person I can't float through, crazy, huh? And now you can see and talk to me, which is great on my part." She assays my pathetic state and shrugs. "Not so much for you."

"Are you—?" I don't finish, but she seems to understand.

"Do you really think that? Nope. I'm dead. I think I'm a ghost. Pretty cool, huh?"

She sounds way too chipper.

"Then how are you—"

"I dunno, dude. If I did, I would be punching someone in the face right about now. It's pretty crappy, you know, seeing living people while being dead yourself."

No, I didn't. I don't think she would've elaborated if I had asked, though. Also, my arms were cramping. Slowly, I let myself plop down on the warm concrete. The grains of the pavement bite into my calves. "Am I hallucinating?" I whisper.

Ingrid shrugs and sits down, too, criss-crossing her legs. "Or maybe I am? Ha."

Distantly, I realize this is probably the most I've talked with her. Or to the hallucination of her. Or to the ghost of her. I feel a headache coming, but thankfully, the feeling of fainting recedes a bit. My heart is still too loud, though, and too fast. My fingers are tingling from adrenaline. I feel like I'd just ran a marathon through a haunted house.

I furtively peek around, double-checking that I'm alone. Or—well. I shake my head, close my eyes again and then open them.

"Yep. She's still there. Your dear older sister. So, how've you been doing, Alex?"

I take a shaky breath. Then, I get up and walk away.

I hear sputtering behind me, and then the cold breeze appears next to me once again. "Okay! Rude! You know, normal people reply politely. Let's practice, shall we? If you said, 'How've you been doing, dear Ingrid?', I would reply, 'Why, I've been better, but—'"

"What do you want!?" I almost yell, whirling around to look at her. She puts her hands up and floats away.

"Nothing! Jeez. Did you not hear me? I'm stuck with you for some reason. Trust me, I want to leave just as much as you want me to, but I can't." She hesitates, her eyes flicker over my face as if searching for something. "Please don't ignore me."

For a moment, she sounds *real, emotive*, which is even more disturbing because if she's a hallucination, then I must be incredibly bonkers and masochistic. Ingrid drifts closer, and I instinctively step back.

"Come on, Alex. Here, I'll prove it to you. Ask dad about my favorite waffle place, and he'll say it's Robert's Waffles on Kennedy Center. And I always order chocolate almond ones with extra whipped cream. Ask him."

"I don't even know him." As I say that, I'm reminded again of how sad my family situation is, which would definitely become even more tragic once I'm diagnosed with schizophrenia right after my sister's death.

"Fine, fine. Um." She taps at her lip. "Okay, okay. Ask mom, then, about the toy elephant she gave me. Its name was Brenny. It had wings. I was obsessed with it when I was five or something"

"No."

"Alex, please!" Ingrid flies in front of me, her eyes pleading. "Better that I'm an actual ghost than you going crazy, right?"

I wanted to tell her that no, both were equally bad. "You know, it's super convenient that I'm the only one who sees you," I remark dryly.

Ingrid laughs. She sounds like mom when she laughs. "I know right?"

"I still think I'm imagining things."

"That's your frail sanity's fault."

I frown at her. "Fine. Fine! I'll ask mom. And if you're really a ... ghost, I'm going to ..." defenestrate myself. I smile wryly at the hotel receptionist as I push past the revolving doors and walk to the elevator, trying not to look too freaked out. In the background, muffled, Elvis Presley elevator music plays and the red digital numbers climb up.

I tap my feet restlessly and try to parse through every book and movie I've ever seen that dealt with ghosts, but I draw a blank.

"What the heck, that's weird."

I startle, but Ingrid's looking at the Elvis Presley pictures. It's the one where he's wearing a Hawaiian shirt, his hands clasped around the steering wheel of a boat. I thought she was trying to criticize his hat, but she's frowning at it, drifting closer. "Why is this ..."

I wait, but she doesn't finish. Eventually, she lets out a huff. "Whatever. The boat looks kind of similar to something. What are you waiting for?"

She was fiery, and determined, and her stubbornness sometimes made me feel like I had no influence at all. Dad's speech reverberated in my head. He made it sound so venerable. I exhale, pinching the bridge of my nose. Once again, I screw my eyes shut.

"Nope, that's getting old," Ingrid drawls.

I glare at the insides of my eyelids and reach out blindly, randomly waving the hotel card over the door handle. There's the familiar click, and I know if I had my eyes opened, I would see the blinking red dot turn green.

I picture my mom instead, sitting with her shoulders hunched, her dark hair limp around her face, something in her eyes that is a swirl of regret and guilt and pain. She's probably hurting more than dad; after all, she never really knew Ingrid, either, and Ingrid was her child. Someone she chose to have and then leave.

I grasp the handle and avoid turning to survey Ingrid's expression. I wonder how she feels about this. I must have hesitated for too long, though, because Ingrid huffs a small sound of annoyance.

"Well? Are you—"

I scowl and push the door open.

The room is dimly lit by the little knob at the edge of the bed. My mom's curled up on the small couch, her hair damp around her shoulders, the water seeping into her pale green robe. She looks like she's getting ready to go to bed,

even though the sun is still strung in the afternoon sky. The door gently clicks shut behind me, and I watch as Ingrid floats over, her ghostly shoes a few inches off the red carpet. Ingrid stops right next to her, and she stares at mom like she's never seen her before. I hold my breath as mom rubs her arm and lifts her head—but there's no indication that she has seen Ingrid.

"Back already?"

"Um." I staunchly avoid looking at the ghost in the room. "Yeah."

Slowly, I make my way toward my mom and plop down at the edge of the bed. The blanket is a fuzzy yellow, stale like an twice-baked baguette left out for too long. I pick at a loose thread, trying to form my thoughts. "Mom, I want to ... ask a question about something. About Ingrid."

I almost regret looking up. My mom looks close to tears yet again, but she hurriedly wipes her eyes and scoots forward so that she can grasp both of my hands. "Of course, Alex. I'll try to answer as best as I can."

She looks eager and scared, and though her hands are warm in mine, they're shaking imperceptibly.

"Brenny," Ingrid reminds me, and I grit my teeth, repressing the urge to stand up and shout. This whole situation feels wrong: here I am, asking about my dead sister while said dead sister floats next to us; or, here I am, asking about my dead sister while suffering from a cognitive breakdown. Yet, if mom manages to confirm the information ... well, I don't know what to do afterwards, surprise, surprise, but I would at least know that I won't have to sign myself into a mental asylum. Rather, I would have to call up some paranormal investigators and try not to get killed by an ax-wielding scam suffering from a cognitive breakdown. And, of course, jump out the nearest window.

"When, er, Ingrid was younger, did she have some sort of favorite toy?" I wince. Was that too specific? "Or something?"

If my mom is confused, she doesn't show it. She smiles, and it tremors with her hands. "Yeah. Yeah. You remember you had that giraffe stuffed animal? I bought

a similar one for your sister, but, it was an elephant. With wings, I believe. I think she called it ... Brian? Benny? I don't quite recall."

I swallow. The lump in my throat feels like a choking hazard, and I barely manage to squeeze the name out. "Brenny?"

"Yes! Brenny." She shakes her head fondly. "Your sister was quite a character. I remember she—"

"I drew on it. With a sharpie. Gave it a mustache and a unicorn horn but I couldn't—"

—drew on it and then cried for days afterward because she couldn't make it look like a dragon."

I exhale shakily and look down at my knees so my mom won't see my expression, whatever it is. Mom laughs wetly. "I think she was the rowdiest kid I knew. Well, I guess that's not saying much. You were extraordinarily well-behaved, and thank god for that."

My brain is stuttering to a halt, but I clench my mom's hands tighter. She seems to take that as a signal to continue. "I don't know if you remember, but the old house we used to have was covered in drawings. I would place a clean piece of paper in front of her, and she'd immediately sprint to the walls when I turned away. We had to paint everything over when we sold the house. I think she used to try to draw on you, too! And hmmm. We used to go to the zoo on weekends. She was obsessed with the elephants there, thought they were some sort of magical animals sent from another dimension. I don't think I helped that obsession when I bought her Brenny. I can't believe you remember that name, Alex."

Yeah. Remember that name. That, I did. On my own.

"To be honest, I don't really remember how you guys got along. You were too young. You both were too young, I think, and I think your father and I ruined it. We were already drifting apart and Ingrid was never as close to me as she was to Aksel, and you were never as close to Aksel as you were to me, so it felt like a clean divide. And now, I don't know what to feel. I loved—love her. I do love her, but we've spent

so much time apart that it feels like I never loved her enough, that all the love I feel is through Aksel and the pain of losing a child. I—I thought—”

Now, she really is crying. She drags me into a hug, and cradles the back of my head like I'm five years old again. “I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Alex. We were just so busy with our own problems, and it got to the point where we didn't care enough, and I never meant for that attitude to impart to you, too. We thought it would be easier, and we didn't want to push, but—but it's so much easier to let things go until they disappear forever. I thought we had so much more time to—to not make time. And that's what it was, wasn't it? I kept on saying I had no time, that you had no time, but we should've just tried to *make* time. I'm so sorry, Alex. I'm—” She doesn't finish, and I don't push. I bury my head in her shoulder and listen to her heaving sobs she's trying so desperately to strangle.

I haven't seen her like this since the beginning of the divorce, and it's been so long ago that sometimes it feels like a solitary nightmare.

“I'm sorry you never got to know her as a sister,” my mom whispers, and I peek over her shoulder at Ingrid. Ingrid's face is blank—not in indifference, but like when there's so much to comprehend that it's easier to not comprehend anything at all. I think my expression mirrors hers.

CHAPTER THREE

Mom falls asleep not long after that, tear tracks drying on her face. I head out, crossing over to the worn-out bench in the park again. This time, it's not so empty. There's a family near the old playground, and some teenagers are jokingly flipping over the monkey bars. It feels oddly silent, though, like everything is plunged underwater.

I stare at the passing clouds as Ingrid paces in front. She hasn't said a word since mom's confession, which is fine with me because I still can't quite wrap my

head around her whole ... not-existence. I'm not sure how to talk with her, either, so I'm waiting for her to take the lead.

Ingrid paces some more, her feet not actually touching the ground but close enough that I'm sure it would at least feel like she's alive again if she could sense the ground. She's tapping furiously at her lips, her brows furrowed before she stops and throws her head back so she's facing the sky. “Well.”

I wait, but she stands still for so long, I nearly think I didn't actually hear her.

“I didn't know mom would—” she pauses, looking confused. “Why aren't you sad?”

Her tone doesn't sound accusing, but I still tense in indignation. “I—am I supposed to?” The question comes out weaker than I want it to, but Ingrid doesn't comment.

“I dunno. Do you, though?”

I consider lying, but I think she knows the answer, anyway, without having me answer. “Not really.”

Ingrid nods. “Yeah, I figured. I don't blame you, you know. I don't think I would've been sobbing in miserable rage and cursing the heavens above if you died, no offense.”

“Should I be?” I whisper.

Ingrid tilts her head at me, and her gaze is sharper than I've ever seen it. It's weird to see her so serious, even though I haven't met her that long ago—well, kind of. “I would be worried if you didn't feel an ounce of *some* sad emotion, but I don't expect you to beat yourself over someone you didn't even know well.”

That ... that actually makes me feel better. Feel like some sort of heavy burden has been lifted. I sigh in relief. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, sure.” She raises an eyebrow.

After a short silence, she asks, “Hey, uh. What's mom like?” There's a slight hesitancy before the word *mom*, like she's trying out a new word.

I shrug. “She's. Well. Mom's mom.”

Ingrid rolls her eyes. "Riveting description."

"Well, if you're going to be stuck with me for a while, you're going to have to get to know her somewhat!" I protest. "There's no easy way to describe people."

"I mean, I guess. But I don't know how long all this is gonna last. Plus, all I've been hearing today were descriptions of me."

"Oh. Yeah." Suddenly, I feel quite awkward for her. That must've been tough. She attended her own funeral, saw people breaking in front of her, over her without any means to communicate with them. "Sorry."

She rolls her eyes again. "Yeah, you said that."

I did? Then, I remember the funeral, how I approached the coffin, and my pitiful attempt to address her picture. Oh. She was there, wasn't she? "How long have you been like this?" I ask, gesturing at her ... everything.

"I don't know. Not long after I died, I think. I suddenly appeared by you when you were packing for this trip."

Swiftly, I feel disturbed. "And you've been stuck to me."

"Yeah, pretty much."

"All the time?" I ask carefully, trying not to feel too creeped out. "Like, all the time?"

Ingrid's face screws up in horror. "No! Oh god, no! I said I can't stray far from you, not that I'm constantly—oh gross! Oh ew! No! I mean, I'm not, like, Edward Cullen creepy, jeez. I think if I were stuck to you forever like that, I would find a way to die again."

"Oh," I say, barely containing the relief. "Oh, good. Because otherwise that would be, er, really weird and I'm going to have to call the ghost-busters like right now."

"Yeah, no. Oh ew. No."

"Okay. Good."

"Yeah."

We stare at each other for a second, and then we're laughing, a little anxiously, a little hysterically. When we finally stop, there's another fidgety silence. I desperately look around for inspiration. What is it that people say to do when socializing? To ask the other person about their life? Does that work with dead people?

"You know what I regret?" Ingrid asks. "Wearing this stupid purple T-shirt. I should've dressed up. Pulled on that blouse I bought the other day. Man, that was a nice shirt. But, you know, at least I'm not wearing an *A Wrinkle in Time* shirt."

"It's a good book!" I exclaim instinctively.

"So you say. But not every good book needs a shirt. Just remember, you're not gonna be able to choose your wardrobe the time of your death. Pity, really. Makes death a thousand times worse."

I cross my arms. "Yeah, well, I happen to like this shirt. Are we seriously talking about this?"

"Why not?"

Well because you're dead, I want to say, but that's a little tactless. And, well, the dead were still people. So shouldn't they talk about the same mundane things? Do ghosts talk to each other?

Ingrid looks down at her feet and sighs so hard, I worry she would fly back. "And these shoes!" she wails, loudly. I cringe, glancing reflexively at the family close by before realizing that I'm the only one who is able to hear her. "I honestly don't know what I was thinking. Honestly!" She picks at her pants miserably. "Well, at least these pants are comfortable."

I don't comment that they're an almost obnoxious green, even slightly decolored. There are strange patterns imbued into them like someone had tried to etch hieroglyphics into the hem.

"You can feel them?"

"Shut up."

I raise my eyebrows. Somehow, all of the eulogies failed to mention any aspects other than the admirable ones. Or, perhaps Ingrid is going around the bend. Can ghosts go insane? Can she transfer the crazy juice to me? Ingrid collapses onto the ground, looking defeated. “I’m going insane,” she declares, which does not help my inner paranoia at all. “It feels surreal, really. I thought I was at least going to finish—” she glances at me quickly, almost in alarm, then continues on as if nothing had happened. “I thought talking to someone would help, but I guess I never thought it would be you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Sorry, Alex. But you’re not really a great conversationalist.”

“What! Don’t you think this is weird for me? What am I supposed to do, immediately accept this—”

From the corner of my eye, I see the family turn toward me, their expressions bewildered. I try to smile at them, but it falls flat and they look even more bothered. Groaning, I shift so they can’t see my mouth and hiss, “What am I supposed to do?”

If no one can see her except me, how am I supposed to truly confirm that she’s here at all? Perhaps I had remembered Brenny somewhere in the back of my brain, my subconscious or some Freudian whatnot, and this whole scenario is some sort of sick way of coping.

But, no. As much as I hate to admit, I don’t know Ingrid well enough to hallucinate her. Even if that isn’t the case, I don’t think I’m creative enough to imagine her.

“Just continue doing what you’ve always been doing, I guess.”

I splutter. “There’s literally a dead person following me around.”

“So?”

“So!” I grip my hair. “School is starting in a few weeks.”

“Oh. Sucks for you, dude. What classes are you going to take? Calculus or some crap like that? You really must hate yourself.”

“That’s not the point! That means I only have a few weeks to get rid of you!”

There’s something in Ingrid’s expression that makes my chest twist in ruth. I hadn’t meant for that to come out so harshly.

“Thanks for telling me how you really feel.”

I scuff my shoes. “Sorry.”

“No, I get it. Well, what do you want me to do? ‘Cause we’ve already established that I can’t roam too far from you.”

“Why? What happens when you do?”

“I just end up by your side again. It’s like—” she claps her hands together, miming crashing against something. “You know?”

“Yeah. Sure.” I pull out my phone and search up *I have a ghost following me*. Then, *paranormal investigators*, feeling like a fool.

“Hey, what’cha doing?”

“We’re going to fix this. We’re going to fix this fast so you can go to whatever ghostly afterlife there is, and I can go back to my normal life, and everything will be fine!” I pause then, a thought striking me like a moving brick wall. “Wait, if ghosts exist, does that mean some religions are—nevermind. I don’t want to know.”

I scroll through all the sites and click on the least sketchy one, then go through almost every self-proclaimed “psychic” and slowly cull out the worst ones.

“That one,” Ingrid pipes in. I frown at the aforementioned person: Daniel Harisbac. He has a shoddy website; it looks like it hasn’t been updated in a while, but his status says he’s still in business, the website is secure, and the reviews are ... not as shady as other reviews. Plus, he resides in Chicago, the only paranormal investigator who lives where I live. Which is either really lucky or a horrible coincidence that I will regret after I get beaten to death by a screwdriver.

“Why?”

“He’s bald.”

It feels like someone has just pressed two rulers to my face. I look at Ingrid with the flattest expression, and I almost close the tab and find another alleged psychic out of pure spite. In the end, I book an appointment. “We’re going as soon

as I get back home," I tell her, standing up resolutely, finally feeling in control.
"We're going to fix this. It'll be over soon."

CHAPTER FOUR

"I don't think I thought this through."

The subway somehow seems even more dreary than usual, its bare walls peeling like it was trying to rip itself clean out of the world, the graffiti lining it like a poor attempt to inject itself with color. It's early enough in the morning that there's only a few stragglers—the usual panhandlers, the usual businessmen ignoring said panhandlers. I gulp, fingering the dollar bills in my hand.

I've never gone to the subway alone. My mom had practically forbid it, but she'd been a little off-kilter since we got back from Michigan, so I managed to escape her notice with little emotional casualty. I shift, shuffling to the ticket machine. Thinking about mom floods me with concern. Sometimes, I wonder if it would've been better if Ingrid appeared to her instead of me—maybe then mom would have some peace of mind.

But Ingrid has been oddly quiet, too, and part of me feels a tad remorseful for her. Living with her for a couple of days actually isn't as bad as I thought it would be. Mostly, she kept to herself, floating quietly in the corner of the room. Sometimes, I catch her observing mom, and sometimes I catch her furrowing her eyebrows at me, and I still haven't gotten used to her presence, but it wasn't terrifying and it wasn't nearly as invasive as I anticipated.

I take a deep breath and, before my nerves could shut down my fingers, stick the dollar bill in, watching with increasing trepidation as it disappears. Quickly, I punch in the appropriate instructions and snatch the ticket right as the machine spits it out.

"I feel like this is a really bad action movie," I whisper as I make my way to wait for the next train. Ingrid shrugs beside me. She looks almost as nervous as I think I do, fidgeting in the air and tapping at her lip.

I go over the schedule in my head. It shouldn't take too long to reach Harisbac's apartment—at most ten minutes. Then, if all else goes well, we shouldn't spend more than an hour there. Accounting for unfortunate situations such as squirrel attacks or murder, the trip would last at most two hours, but only if worse comes to worse. I'll get back home at eight, and my mom would be none the wiser.

Unless you get kidnapped. I very staunchly ignore that part—not because it's not a valid fear, but because if I think any more on what I'm doing and what's happening, I might actually have to acknowledge it.

And, if all goes well, I wouldn't have to acknowledge it after today.

The train finally arrives in a thundering greeting. I shakily get on. The compartment rattles along, and I stare anxiously out the smudged windows, watching as the commercials on the walls of the tunnels flash by and imagining someone coming on, someone that I know. *I swear I don't usually do things like this, I want to say. This is really very weird and a one-time thing I don't think I'll ever be able to muster up the courage to do again.*

We get off on the California stop, and I hesitate long enough that when Ingrid follows behind me, she almost has to go through the closed doors. I check the address on my phone—not because I don't remember it, but just in case—and take a deep breath before following the designated path.

We stop in front of a modest apartment complex. It's red-bricked and there are curly vines twisting around the windows in an embrace, like they were trying to pull the building into itself, trying to claim it for their own growth. I check the address again. Take another deep breath. "Okay. Let's go."

We stand there for a few more moments before I pull my feet from the concrete and head in. There's no one to stop us, no buttons to press or keys to turn,

and it feels suspiciously and almost dangerously easy to walk right to the elevator and press the button for the third floor.

"They need to invest in better security," Ingrid mutters. I fear she'll drop straight through the elevator, but thankfully she remains by my side, floating upward with the lift. I don't even want to know how that works.

The third floor is simply a long hallway, much like the cheap hotel my mom and I stayed in, each door differentiated only by the numbers on the wooden plates beside them.

I fiddle with the pepper spray tucked into my front pocket and glance around. Well, I can always live up to my promise and jump out a window if luck decides to abandon me now. It would hurt, sure, but the third floor is better than the fourth, the fifth, the twentieth. I hold my breath as I knock on Harisbac's door, hoping desperately that I wasn't just inveigled.

For a long second, it's only Ingrid and me, and then there's the soft patter of footsteps, of the knob turning from the other side, and the door swings open. I blink in surprise. Ingrid sharply inhales, and when I peek over quickly, she has her hands over her mouth.

"Er," I say, sort of baffled by Ingrid's reaction, sort of stumped on what to do next.

The young man staring back is definitely not Daniel Harisbac. For one, he's completely hairy, like he'd stolen the hair off Harisbac and had pasted it onto himself. Though he doesn't actually have a beard, his sideburns are low enough that it gives him the appearance of having one. He's wearing shorts and a sweatshirt and looks like he'd just gotten off the train himself—except he'd been sitting on top of the vehicle rather than in it. Even his glasses are lopsided. He's tall but scrawny, and I can't help but think that I might actually be able to take him in a fight. Nothing like the stocky-looking fellow on the website. Still, I ask, "Um, Daniel Harisbac?"

His expression lightens. "Oh. Aksel Patel?"

I nod at the fake name.

"Yes, come right in. Dan!"

I glance at Ingrid. She's blinking furiously like she has something in her eyes which is ridiculous; what would she get into her eyes? Air? I want to ask her, *What is wrong with you?* or ask the dude is it *okay if I don't come inside?* or ask myself *are you stupid?* I shuffle across the threshold, my shoes half-on and half-off the prickly welcome mat.

The man smiles, looking amused and a little apologetic. "It will be better if we carried this out inside. If it helps, we can sit right at the door and leave it half-opened."

I glance at Ingrid again. She offers me a twitch of her shoulders. Very expressive and consoling. Slowly, I shuffle the rest of the way in, and the man pulls the door just closed enough that any passersby would likely not look in. The apartment is medium-sized, nicely furnished. The floor is polished wood, the designs swirling around like latte art. There are three couches in the middle of the room, each one covered with a different pattern: polka dots, stripes, mandalas.

He claps his hands together. "Well, good morning. My name's Brian. Daniel will be with us soon enough. In the meantime, would you like anything to eat? Drink?"

I shake my head mutely.

"Well, I'm going to brew a pot of tea. Make yourself at home, but please take off your shoes if you want to sit on the couch."

I nod my head mutely.

Ingrid listlessly floats off then back again. She twists her hands and taps her lips and drags her hands through her hair. It makes me want to scream at her to stop as my own skin starts to itch from her jitters.

That's when Daniel Harisbac comes down. I almost sigh in relief. Thankfully, Harisbac does not look like a serial killer any more than his picture did. He's still bald, but not quite as shiny. He looks slightly older, too, with lines around his eyes, the halfway point between his twenties and forties, where stomachs and skin start

sagging. He walks with a limp. When he approaches, I awkwardly wave, relaxing somewhat.

"Hello. Mr. Harisbac? I'm here for—"

And then he throws salt at my face.

"Dan!" Brian rushes in, hurriedly brushing the salt from my shoulders. "Would you stop doing that to every customer!"

Ingrid lets out a cough-laugh which transforms into laugh-laugh, which she executes so passionately that she sounds like she's choking. I glare at her, but she doesn't look at me, crouched down and slapping her knee as she continues churning out dying hyena noises.

"Sorry," Daniel grunts gruffly. "Precautions. Let's sit down."

They're both looking at me. I stare at him incredulously, my tentative hope plummeting down a precipitous cliff. "Precautions?"

Daniel shrugs. "You never know."

"If you want, we can sit there?" Brian offers tentatively, gesturing to my position near the door. I stare at the salt on the floor. I can feel it in my socks for some reason. A petty side of me wants to go in for the sake of spreading the salt in their home, and I have half a mind to simply ditch my efforts, but I mostly just want to sit down. My knees feel like they're about to give out from jittery apprehension.

I toe off my shoes and shuffle to the couch. Daniel and Brian sit across from me.

Brian pours Daniel a cup of tea, and he sips it gratefully before turning to look at me. His eyes are severe, sharp, and he scans over me like he's my mom when she's out grocery shopping and approaches the watermelon section. "Aksel Patel," he says.

"Yeah."

"What are you here for?"

I clear my throat and peek at Ingrid. She's perched on the arm of the couch, her legs crossed, picking at her nails. I almost want to shake her. This is as much

her problem as it is mine! "My sister. She, uh, died a while back, and then right after her funeral, she sort of appeared again. As a ghost. And apparently I'm the only one who can see her."

It sounds even more stupid saying it out loud.

Daniel and Brian exchange a glance. Daniel says, "Hm. And where is she now?"

I gesture at Ingrid, and they both turn in her direction, their lines of sight a bit off from her place.

"Do you have any idea why she is here with you? Is there anything abnormal about her presence?"

Other than everything? "Um. I don't know. She appeared after her funeral? But apparently she's been with me since, um. I think maybe a month after she, er, died. And she can't really go anywhere I'm not? Not for long, I think."

"Hm," Daniel hums again. He turns to Brian, and Brian nods before getting up and heading toward the kitchen again.

"Has this ever happened before?" I ask.

"In many ways, yes. But often different."

Well, that's not vague at all.

"Will you be able to get rid—fix this?"

"Depends," Daniel says.

I cross my arms, frustration bubbling. It isn't long before Brian returns. He carefully dumps a pile of herbs on the table, a mixture of creamy flowers and unmarred leaves, along with a wooden garlic masher. Ingrid drifts forward, curious.

"What's that?" I ask, also leaning closer.

"Ginkgo, eyebright, ashwagandha, agrimony," Daniel meticulously tears them into the masher. "Jasmine tea leaves. What is your sister's name?"

"Ingrid."

Daniel pauses. There's an odd look in his eyes. "Full name."

I hesitate. But Ingrid is dead, anyways. It's not like identity theft would hurt her that much. "... Ahlberg. I think."

Daniel sits straight up, and Brian flinches, almost dropping the cup of tea he had just picked up.

"Do you think—it was unfinished! Maybe she has to—" Brian whispers hurriedly, the words rushing out of him.

"Brian," Daniel snaps, tilting his head so he could stare straight down his nose. The expression is clear: Stop.

"What?" I demand. "What?"

I glance at Ingrid, but she pointedly does not meet my eyes.

"Nothing," Daniel says, still holding Brian's gaze.

"It seems to be something."

"What is your relationship with Ingrid? Is she your step-sister?"

"Biological," I mutter, narrowing my eyes.

"And you're sure Ahlberg is her last name?"

"Er. Yes." I feel my cheeks color. I should definitely know, but I haven't thought about dad for a long time, and things I don't repeatedly think of often go forgotten. Fortunately, neither of them push.

"Yeah, you got it right." Ingrid looks offended, though. "Even I remember your last name."

"Oh yeah?" I ask reflexively before tensing and giving a sheepish smile at Daniel and Brian. They don't seem cowed or confused, just intrigued and almost anticipatory. It's nice, talking to Ingrid directly without worrying that someone is going to call the hospital. Unless the two men are acting. I try to think positive, which pretty much takes all my energy.

"Yeah," Ingrid says. "Navuluri, right?"

I blink. "That's not fair. You've been living with me for some days."

She rolls her eyes, though she seems surprised herself. "I would've remembered it, anyway."

I scoff.

"So you're not close to your sister?" Brian asks, though he looks dubious and a little morose. He seems to have recovered from his fit of excitement from before, but I still eye him warily as I shake my head.

"Hm." Daniel finishes the paste. "Then it may be that you're not the one holding her here. Here, stand up."

He gestures beside the couch and I awkwardly shuffle over. Daniel bends over, swiping his fingers in the thick green paste and drawing a circle around me. I look at Brian, but he simply smiles encouragingly. I don't find anything encouraging about a man drawing what seems to be a summoning circle, but I swallow and stay put, keeping a close eye on the slightly ajar door.

A practiced swish of his hand, and Daniel slowly stands up. He mutters something under his breath, and his eyes turn a brilliant blue. I gape unashamedly, and think *what the heck, this isn't really a scam, what the heck*—before Daniel glances up and looks straight at Ingrid. The circle he painted is pulsing faintly, flickering the same blue of his eyes.

"Ingrid." There's recognition in his voice.

Ingrid looks like she could cry. "You can see me."

"Yes. And you wish to leave?"

Ingrid glances at me, then at the herb circle, then at the door. "Yeah. I do. But, if you can make me visible, then maybe I could finish—"

"I'm afraid it doesn't work like that," Brian interrupts softly. "Once the circle fades, only Aksel will be able to see you again. And the spell isn't mobile."

The spell, I mouth. It feels like I'm in Harry Potter. I want to start laughing, but mostly I feel a profound ease. This might work. This might work.

"Oh." Ingrid looks down. Her lips are pinched despondently. "Okay. Then send me away, I guess."

"Ingrid—" Brian starts.

"Okay" Daniel interrupts. He raises his hands. His eyes frame in blue again. The room seems tense with anticipation—and nothing happens. Daniel's eyes return to its dark brown.

"Hm." He crosses his arms and leans back. "Well. I'm sorry to say, I can't."

"What?" Ingrid asks, and she sounds way less indignant than I thought she would, so I decide to compensate.

"What?" I burst out. "What do you mean you can't? You did all that other magical stuff. Why can't you do it with this?"

Looking annoyed, Daniel beckons me out. "Alex, may you leave us alone for a bit? I need to talk to your sister."

"Wait—wait what? What do you mean—I'm not leaving until you tell me *why* you can't, I don't know, send her back to wherever or whatever!"

"It's complicated."

"Well, then *uncomplicate it!*" I whip around to face Ingrid, and she looks paler than usual, scared like she's at the edge of a rising wave, promised a terrifying enlightenment.

"Oh," she says. She's staring at the paste on the ground. "Maybe ..."

"What?" I ask again. "What do you mean 'oh'?"

"Alex, I ask that you leave us alone for a bit. And don't worry about the money. This is a free session as long as you go."

"What?" Incredulity pops in my veins, burning furiously. What kind of transaction is that? It's like, here's some moldy bread, now go without paying or we'll call the cops on you.

Daniel heaves in a breath and pinches the bridge of his nose. It's a look I'm familiar with—mom wears it whenever she has another one of her doctor assessments. I glance at Ingrid, and she also looks a little irked. I glower.

"Okay. Fine. I'm going." And it is only because I had to filch some thirty dollars from my mom to come here, and I don't want to use it if I didn't have to. "Fine."

I lift my chin, and Brian accompanies me to the door. It isn't until I'm out that I realize that I never told them my real name.

CHAPTER FIVE

When I try to go back in, I find that I can't. There's some sort of barrier, some sort of urge to turn away from the door. After a while, I give up, Ingrid comes out, and I take the train back in a daze, feeling even more confused.

"What did he say to you?" I ask her.

"Nothing."

"Well, it obviously wasn't *nothing*." I sound like a whiny child, their hands sticky with melted ice cream and other disgusting children things, but I can't help it. I feel like I should be more excited. My first encounter with something paranormal, and it leads to something like *magic*. Seeing it in real life should've exhilarated me. But Ingrid's still here with me, and that's proof that no matter how riveting something that shouldn't exist is, there are always shortcomings with it.

"How long are you going to be stuck like this?"

"I don't know!" Ingrid snaps, but she looks strained.

"Are you magic or something? Is that why they know you? Is that why you're here?" I accuse.

"Why would you think that?" She shakes her head emphatically.

"Um, well, let's see—because they recognized your name?"

"Please shush for a moment, dude! Let me think!"

"Well, maybe we'll be able to figure this out faster if you just told me what—"

Ingrid lets out a groan of frustration and throws up her arms. Then, she vanishes. I rear back, startled, glancing around the train. For a moment, hope rises. Perhaps that was it. Perhaps this whole ordeal was over. Then, a minute later, Ingrid pops back.

"Are you serious?" She hisses.

"Well, Mr. Harisbac said it wasn't my fault, so it clearly has to be something you—"

"Okay, Daniel obviously did not say it was not your fault, nor did he say it was my fault!"

"Yes, he did!" I say stubbornly.

"No! He did not! Stop blaming me!"

"Well, maybe—"

"And stop trying to get rid of me!"

My mouth falls open. "What do you mean get rid of you? This was one time! And why wouldn't I want to get rid of you? You're dead!"

"Thanks, again, for reminding me of that, Alex. I really really really appreciate that, you know!"

I clench my fists, about to shoot back a reply, but the train clammers down, slows, and stops. I offer a tight smile to an old lady as she gets on, wobbly on her feet. Ingrid and I sit in silence, stewing and glaring at each other. When the old lady walks off, I grit out, "Why won't you tell me what's going on?"

"Nothing's going on!"

I feel like we're arguing in circles. I say, "That makes you even more suspicious, you know. Just tell me what he told you!"

"It's nothing! I said it was nothing! Stop asking! Why are you so annoying!?" Ingrid yells, and then she vanishes again. I clench my hands and lean back, counting the seconds. *That was real mature*, I mouth sardonically. I barely reach two minutes before Ingrid pops back again.

She looks ready to punch something, anger twisting her brows down low, and I fear for a second that it would be me. Then, she starts laughing. It's not her hyena laugh, but slightly perplexed, like she can't quite believe what's happening.

"Haha—haha. Isn't it funny—" She floats next to me and plops down and gasps. "Isn't it funny that I had to die to have the chance to treat you like a sibling?"

"What?" I ask, feeling slightly uncomfortable. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah. I'm basically a professional. All my friends had siblings. Have siblings. They were always annoyed with each other. I didn't really understand it. I guess the Cain instinct is kicking in people's hormones or something. Maybe our genes are made to fight each other."

Great. "Why are you talking about this now?"

Ingrid becomes quiet, staring out the window. Then, she says, "There's a lady who's looking at you weird."

The next day, I try going to Daniel Harisbac's apartment again, but when I knock on the door, no one answers. I consider staying there, waiting for him to appear, but eventually I go home again. Ingrid says, "I told you so. He doesn't want you back," but she sounds as frustrated as I feel.

It's the same outcome the day after. I keep on visiting, and I keep on returning without seeing Harisbac again; it gets to the point that my mom begins to suspect my early rises, and it gets to the point that the first day of school draws nearer and nearer.

Eventually, it's six in the morning again, and I'm flopped over my bed, trying to wrestle down my vexation. I feel like screaming. I want to see Daniel and Brian because some days it feels like I dreamed it all up. I mean, I usually don't make stupid decisions, so perhaps it was a crazy daydream. Maybe my mind is actually deteriorating, and everything is fake and I'm currently sitting in a hospital bed and drooling into space. "At least tell me this won't last forever."

Ingrid glances at me. She's sitting in my rolly chair, and she has to twist around to face me. The chair doesn't follow her movements. There's something bittersweet embedded in the crease of her eyebrows. "I hope not. I don't think it will."

I want to protest over her vague answers, but I don't feel like fighting, so I roll over and haul my Calculus book over. "I'm going to study. You go do whatever."

"I still can't believe you spend your summers like this," Ingrid whimpers, but she gets up and floats away, anyway.

When dinner comes, mom's sitting at the dining table, which makes me falter in my steps a bit before I sit down as casually as possible. There are two plates of curry and dumplings, the first home-cooked meal we've had in a while. Ingrid's drifting around in the living room again, reading through the cabinet of awards my mom had earned, and then the smaller cabinet below with all the awards I've earned.

"So," my mom begins. She looks tired, even though she'd taken a week off work. "Is there anything you want to do tomorrow? Any school supplies you need to buy?"

"Any more school supplies? You guys literally have a closet full of discount school supplies," Ingrid pipes in. *We also have an entire shelf of discount cereal, and so far, we've been thriving,* I snark back in my head.

"No, I don't think so."

"Well, do you want to do anything tomorrow? It's the last Saturday before school starts."

I eat a dumpling, chewing thoughtfully. I know my mom's trying to be more involved in my life. I think she thinks that if she doesn't, I'll start to follow Ingrid's path. I don't really think there's anything wrong with her parenting before, but she looks so eager that I ask. "What do you want to do?"

"We can watch a movie. Or you can invite one of your friends over?"

I quickly shake my head. "No, that's fine. I'd rather hang out with you."

"Do you have friends?" Ingrid asks, not unkindly, tapping at her bottom lip. "I haven't seen you text or talk to any since I appeared here."

I try to glare at her as subtly as possible. I'm still a little irritated at her and I don't feel comfortable with the thought of Ingrid following me around during school. I know she'll probably be acquainted with the rest of my life soon, but I want to retain at least some semblance of privacy as long as I can.

My mom seems to perk up a bit, though, content with my answer. "Alright. Then we'll go and watch a movie, just the two of us. Is there anything you want to see?"

"What do you want to see?"

When my mom laughs and shakes her head, I instinctively smile back. It's a nice change to see her eyes crinkling in mirth rather than tears. "I don't think you'll be interested."

We end up watching another Disney remake, and for the first time, my mom buys the overpriced popcorn and drinks. It's a novel experience, really—first because we never go see movies at a cinema, and second because, well, Ingrid's there.

She doesn't say much, simply floats on by like a spectator. Occasionally, I glance over, half-expecting her to say something, considering how loquacious she was in the beginning, but she keeps her lips pursed. I try to ignore that and enjoy my time with mom. We get sticky fingers from the overfilled large icee cup, and mom constantly prompts me about my opinions like she's trying to record everything down. It's slightly weird, however nice, but I go along, though I want to tell her that she doesn't have to try so hard. Isn't it enough to care for each other without being explicit about it?

Mom tries to schedule other hangouts leading up to school, but her work overlaps, and then school starts and familial interactions are shoved into a tiny four-hour bloc.

On the bus, Ingrid sits next to me on top of the peeling green bus seat. "My gosh, I am so glad I'm not still in school. I can almost feel the sleep-deprived pain of a thousand teenagers just—" she wafts her hands at herself. "It's suffocating."

I wrinkle my nose and try to take a nap on the cold morning window, hoping that the elementary school students we share the bus with haven't defiled it yet. Again, I try to avoid thinking about how school is going to pan out this year. One, because of the obvious developments in my life. Two, it usually takes some time to

adjust to actually associate with people after a long three months of extreme isolation. Three, because starting school is always followed with short-term excitement and long-term dread.

In fact, as soon as I step off the bus, someone crashes into me, whacking their raccoon-patterned backpack into my face.

"I'm so sorry!" she says, grabbing my shoulders and leaning in close. Her eyes are dark, beady, like those on a teddy bear's, and she shoves a stuffed boat into my hands. "It's not over yet!"

Then she runs off, plunging into the crowd and disappearing. I raise an eyebrow at the plush in my hand. Well, then. The short-term excitement is truly short this year.

I glance at Ingrid, wanting to share my incredulity with someone, but her eyes are wide, and her cheeks are fading in conspicuous alarm. She looks pale even as a ghost, and she stares in the direction the girl had run off in like she expects her to come back and give me a shotgun. Before I can ask her what's wrong, I'm being hauled forward with the flow of the crowd, toward the entrance of the school. I shove the ship into my backpack, and then I attempt to search for my first hour, opting to find out later what caught Ingrid so off-guard.

First hour, unfortunately, contains no friendly faces, or in other words, no faces that mirror my own unease. There are pictures hung up everywhere and underneath them, slips of paper with the names of the locations and the names of people. The desks are arranged in a circle, the setup for a discussion. The teacher is already there, and his name is written in swirly calligraphy on the whiteboard: Mr. Cho. He's dressed up like an undercover celebrity, donning a leather jacket and round, rose-colored glasses. His feet are kicked up on his desk, and he's scrolling through his phone.

Hesitantly, I make my way to a less crowded area, sitting next to a bulky girl wearing a neon yellow snapback with arms crossed and leaning over the chair with her phone held high up. She's all compact muscles, big and imposing enough that

the two seats next to her are empty. Uncertainly, I recognize her from Chemistry two years past, though she's bulked up considerably.

"Holy crud, is she a bodybuilder?" Ingrid whispers, apparently shaken out of her stupor. Pointedly, I don't let my gaze slide to her as I wrack my mind for the "bodybuilder's" name—Jessica, I believe—just in case she tries to strike up a conversation. I pull out my pencil case and folder, jostling the stuffed ship in my backpack. Ingrid makes a strained noise beside me and then drifts away to the hundreds and hundreds of pictures on the wall.

When the bell rings, Mr. Cho clicks on his projector, and a cartoon raccoon pops up next to one bubbly word: Welcome!

He points at his name. When he speaks, his voice comes out in a sort of staccato rhythm. "There's my name, Mr. Cho, as you can see." He leans on his desk and crosses his ankles. "Everyone, get out a sheet of paper. We're going to do a personality test, which will coincidentally transition quite nicely to our first essay assignment of the year."

When he goes to the next slide, I almost groan. What is it with ships? Is today another one of those obscure, useless holidays that nobody ever celebrates? It even looks like the stuffed boat the strange girl had shoved into my hands, dusty brown on the bottom with one lone blue stripe cutting across the middle.

"I want you to number your paper one to twenty. I'm going to give you a minute or so to write down your answer to each question. It won't take long, maybe five minutes, and if you guys want, we'll share with the person next to us tomorrow. Alright, first scenario: you're stranded in the middle of the ocean, and you see a boat. How many people are on that boat?"

For a moment, I stare at the lined paper in front of me. There's a tingling in the back of my mind, a funny sense of *deja vu*. I can't shake off the feeling that I had taken this test before, but I can't place my fingers on *when* and *where*.

Mr. Cho is talking in the background, saying something about going over the syllabus later. I confidently write down zero, and then I sit back and awkwardly

stare at the ticking clock. I glance at Ingrid, who has settled in the back, hovering over a cabinet. Her brows are furrowed, and she's tapping her lips furiously. I try to catch her attention, but she stares straight forward at the board, as if in an apprehensive trance.

"We'll have a short quiz on the syllabus. It's not really a quiz, though. You'll be able to take it home and work on it with other people, but I doubt you'll need to, as the answers will be in the syllabus itself. It's due at the end of this week." Mr. Cho pauses and glances around. "Alright, next question?"

When we finish, he collects all of our sheets—on the promise that we would go over what each scenario symbolizes the next day—and then switches to another slide. There's a picture of him with a pointy hat on, making a funky face. A scattering of laughter races across the room, and Mr. Cho grins.

"Before I tell you a little bit about myself, does anyone else want to share? Anything interesting about their summer, their favorite teacher, their pet peeves, etcetera ..."

I want to scoff at that, thinking about my summer. I imagine waving my hand in the air and announcing, "*This summer, my sister died, and now she's haunting me. Crazy, right?*", and my stomach twists itself into a knot.

A boy in the back raises his hand.

Mr. Cho points at him. "Your name?"

"Jenkins. Are you going to assign seats?"

"Hmm ... no, I don't think I will. Do you want assigned seats?"

The whole crowd in the back desperately shakes their heads. I roll my eyes.

"Alright, I won't. Makes the lives of substitutes harder, though I am rarely out."

Next comment or question?" He calls on a boy named Gavin next.

"What're the pictures on the walls?"

"Ha, you're jumping ahead! I was going to mention it in my presentation about myself, but I suppose we can go over it now. Those are the places my past

students have gone to. They send me a picture, I credit them, and I keep in touch with them by living vicariously through their adventures."

"Mr. Cho, is that Plum Island?"

"I believe so! Why?"

"My sister took that picture."

The class laughs again. People are entertained awfully easily.

"Ah, yes, Serena! Tell her I say hi, yes? You know, it always cracks me up. Plum Island is also the name of an animal disease center, so when she sent me that location, I had a split-second of extreme concern. Fortunately, it's a Plum Island in Massachusetts not New York."

There's another round of questions as people become more confident in the classroom. One girl shares an anecdote about fishing during her summer in Norway, and then another simply says that he doesn't like it when people sniffle too loud with a pointed glare at his friend.

Mr. Cho glances at the clock. "Alright, one more. You, in the hat, what's your name?"

Beside me, Jessica adjusts her snapback. "Jessica."

"Nice to meet you, Jessica. Do you have any confessions to make? Any plight-ful fishing trips?"

"Oh, no, I was just wondering," Jessica says as she points to a picture on the wall. I turn to look, my brows furrowing. It's an island, taken from a distance far enough that one could only make out slight details. There's nothing inherently odd about it, but it is strangely misshapen and brown, and there's no slip of paper below it detailing the location and photographer. "What is that place?" Jessica asks.

Mr. Cho frowns, leaning close. He looks almost sheepish when he pulls back. "You know what, I'm not entirely sure. The label must've fallen off."

Suddenly, Ingrid is behind me, and it's weird because she's half-way through the empty desk beside me in her haste. She makes a strangled sound, her hands clenched together like a prayer.

CHAPTER SIX

Ingrid doesn't answer my probing inquiries about her behavior, and after a while, I give up in annoyance. At the end of two weeks, she stops glancing around and flinching at random things, and school goes on as usual. In fact, I've come to enjoy—or at least positively tolerate—her company. When Ingrid wants to, she's actually quite helpful, and she's a thousand times better than any peer editor in my class.

I even manage to strike up a friendly acquaintance with Jessica who turns out to be a surprisingly easy conversationalist, even though I'm pretty sure she thinks I'm a little out of touch, considering the amount of time I spend staring into "space," making faces, and whispering *shut up* to myself. Which is fine with me. Even without Ingrid spitting out random information, I think I'm weird, anyhow.

Case in point: the stuffed ship that girl had shoved into my hands has found its way onto a keychain, and now it hangs awkwardly off my old checkered backpack, bumping gently against my faulty water bottle like it's seeking the lake inside. It doesn't help that my bottle has a habit of leaking, and I should've replaced it months ago, but I don't want to go through the whole process of looking, purchasing, and cleaning a new bottle.

Thus, it isn't a surprise when it decides to fall apart. I have just plopped my backpack down, greeting Jessica with a nod, when the bottle topples over, the lid snaps open, and water sloshes all over the place. Quickly, I right it again, but there's barely any water in it anymore, and the damage is already done. I watch as the spilled water crawls forward, toward Mr. Cho's desk, like it had been waiting for its release. Dread pools in my stomach, and Ingrid voices my fear aloud.

"Well, I guess you're going to have to use the school water fountains, now."

Whatever expression I have on is probably distressed enough that Mr. Cho hurries over. "Are you okay?"

My cheeks feel like someone has pressed popcorn-makers into my mouth. I quickly nod my head. "Yeah. Sorry. I'm just going to, um, paper towels."

When I go to grab for the paper towels, however, I accidentally brush against the rows of pictures near the desk, and one eagerly drops to the floor like it had been waiting for all its stupid picture life to horribly humiliate me. I barely have time to even comprehend what's going to happen before I'm staring in horror as the photograph lands face-first into the augmenting water spill.

The snapshot barely touches the water for a second before I'm snatching it up and turning it over, heart pounding. There's a perfect circle around the island, a perfect mark of destruction. It looks like someone has stuffed the image into a bubble, the pale rainbow colors stretching around and forming several large oval shapes, blurring the pixels.

I think of stuffing it in my pocket and pretending the image has never existed, but before I can commit to that, Mr. Cho steps up beside me. I force myself to look up and stare him in the eyes.

"I think I dropped one of your pictures," I say weakly. He takes the photo from my hands, and I wait for him to turn red, exhale sharply through his nose, and send me to the hallway, like any other teacher whose patience has been tested. Instead, he laughs.

"Well, this picture surely has quite the bad luck, doesn't it?"

I'm quite sure someone has glued my joints into place. I clutch at the paper towels in my hand and try not to think of anything. "What?"

"It's okay, Alex. You can still make out the island, see?"

I peek at the photo, my mouth twisting down. Technically, he's right. The green palm trees are still visible, even with the melted edges around it, and the land itself hasn't blended completely with the ocean around it. Still, it's irrefutably damaged. "I guess," I say, watching tentatively as he sticks it back onto the wall.

He smiles at me, and it's the type of smile meant to calm a twitchy rabbit. "It's fine! And if you really feel bad, repay me with a picture of your own. You go traveling often?"

"Not really," I say somberly.

"Well, that's fine, too. No harm done. You can send me a random local picture, doesn't matter. Do you want help cleaning up this mess?"

"No, I can do it."

"Okay. On the other hand ..." Mr. Cho sniffs the air. "Did someone put perfume on?"

The change of subject is so abrupt, I let out a little startled laugh. I look over to Ingrid, but she's staring at the picture like she wants to burn it, so I turn to Jessica who simply gives me a shrug. I clean up the spill, filled with gratitude and a newfound respect for Mr. Cho, and the day continues.

Ingrid falls into her weird mood again, though, and she barely speaks to me. Even at night, she doesn't bother me to pull up a Netflix show for her to watch, and it feels almost unnatural to close the lights without the faint shimmering outline of a ghost nearby and the murmur of a drama coming from my laptop.

Once I think that, I shake my head in disbelief and close my eyes.

When I open them again, I'm knee-deep in water and the sun is parsing through the waves like a light show. I squint up and almost shout in surprise.

There's an island. Palm trees. And a putrid sort of perfume.

It looks like a massacre has happened, like a coconut genocide. The fruits are strewn all over the place, their hard shells cracked open in jagged pieces, the white flesh tumbling out and blackening. The pungent smell permeates the place like a heavy twine blanket, and when I lean closer, I see that there are maggots twitching inside the remains of the coconuts, their white bodies emphasizing the black of the rot and the flies.

I step back and drag my wet shirt over my nose, trying not to gag, but instead of meeting the careful restraint of the ocean, the back of my thighs hit something

solid. I turn and let out a huff, reaching up to block the sun as I scrutinize the boat. It's muddy brown on the bottom, cut across by a saturated blue line. It looks like the plushie that girl had given me, I realize with a start.

Oh. It's a dream.

I blink, and I'm suddenly on top of the boat, my hands gripping the ship's wheel. It's almost peaceful, now, a breeze tossing my hair, whipping the drying sea salt from my neck. To my relief, the boat's churning backward, paddling away automatically from the island. I shut my eyes and breathe in deeply, trying to clear the smell of rotting fruit away.

Eventually, I get far enough from the island that the murdered forms fade into indistinction. There's still something off about it, though, like the island's bleeding through its confined shapes, licking at the lines of abstractness. When the sun shines just right, it looks like there's an invisible dome over it, pocked with holes ...

I tilt my head, eyes fixated on the spot, trying not to miss the moment. Anxiety putters across my skin, souring in my stomach. There's something wrong with the island, I think, and it isn't the decaying coconuts.

The sun flickers from behind the clouds again, and the dome appears like a glitch, split-second and blurred. I lean forward, grasping the rails, watching as the dome spazzes again. And again. And again. On the tenth round, it feels like someone has dropped a stone inside me as I finally piece together what I'm seeing.

The placement of the tattered dome, the shapes of the holes—well, they look frightenedly like faces, eyes drooping down, mouths gaping silently. It reminds me of *The Scream* painting, but stitched messily on a net and tossed into a blender. When I glance down, I notice that there is no longer a spray of foam following the ship—it has stopped moving. Instead, there are flecks of brown, spinning in the gray-blue, darkening and darkening.

My breath catches in my throat; I hastily stumble away, gripping onto the wheel again as if it would somehow transport me somewhere else. When I look to

the front, the island is gone. I frown in confusion, suddenly registering the complete silence, a vacuum. A shadow falls over me, and at first I think it's the sun hiding behind the clouds again, but then I register the shimmer, the melting effect of a disfigured face. I glance up, rocks in my throat, and then I slam into consciousness.

I release a shutter of air. My heart is pounding so hard, I feel light-headed. There's something on my face, pressing against my cheeks. Keeping my eyes close, I try to brush it away, but I hit something solid. And not my blanket nor my own body. Carefully, I slit my eyes open.

It takes a moment for my sleep-addled brain to register exactly what is staring at me. It's a raccoon, its beady black eyes wide, its hands on my cheeks like a possessed teddy bear.

I stay very very still for a beat. Slowly, I pinch the inside of my arm. Hard. When I look off to the side, Ingrid's hovering over me, stiff with fright. She looks dead in the night, like someone had sucked all of the lively pallor out. I never thought that ghosts could look more dead. She's staring at the raccoon, which means that it's really there ...

The next second is so hectic, I think I black out during it. With a shout, I chuck off my blankets and scuttle back, sliding over my mattress and tumbling onto the floor. I claw over to my phone, my mind a rush of *what the heck, what the frick, what the flip?* As if sensing danger, the raccoon scampers away toward my door, pawing at the knob with its hands.

"What the freaking *what*?" I yelp as the raccoon turns the doorknob and runs out of my room?

I jump to my feet, fumbling with my phone and dropping it on the ground before almost tripping over my blankets. I rush past Ingrid and out my bedroom, whipping around, trying to spot the creature. Quickly, I sprint into the living room, flicking on the lights. I grab for the wooden sword my grandpa had carved me when I was seven, wielding it like a baseball bat and creeping forward.

I don't find it anywhere, and alarm creeps into my head. I suck in a deep breath and rush to my room again. Ingrid is still suspended in place.

"I'm calling critter control, or whatever they're called," I tell her. I feel so awake, it's absurd; maybe I'm still dreaming. I throw open my laptop, intent on searching up a number when Ingrid speaks.

"It's gone."

"Yeah, I know, which is really concerning."

"No. I mean, it's not here anymore. Not in your home."

I pause and turn around. "How do you know? Is this some sort of ghost thing?"

Ingrid's very very pale. If she had been alive, I would've asked if she would like to sit down.

"Alex," she says slowly, almost as if she's trying to stall the answer. "Do you smell anything weird? Off?"

"You're asking me what I smell? There was a raccoon in my bed!"

"Alex! Please!"

I frown but nevertheless give a prim sniff. It's then that I notice that I do smell something. In fact, it's quite recognizable, but not as potent as I remember it to be. "I smell coconut. Like, really sweet, too ripe coconuts."

I pause, hesitation gripping my heart. Then I laugh shakily. "Huh. It's funny cause I was having a dream about—"

Ingrid doesn't wait for me to finish before she's trying to grab my phone from the ground.

I stand up in surprise. "What?" I try to ask.

"Pick up the phone, call Daniel Harisbac."

I frown, startled. "What?"

"Just do it!"

"I don't know his number—"

She surprises me by rattling it off. Feeling quite off-kilter, I tap it in and wait as my phone rings. “Tell him I don’t care what he says, we need to talk to dad. Now.”

“They’re not answering.”

Ingrid curses. “Email them.” Then, she swears. “They don’t use email. Arrg!”

“What for? You still haven’t told me what’s going on!”

“Contact them, first! This is important. Crucial. Do you hear me?”

“What do you even want me to tell them?”

“The gleaners. They’re here. But you wouldn’t understand ...” she clenches her hands and whirls around, facing me with her legs shoulder-width apart. “Call dad. Tell him you want to meet up. Now.”

“What? No!”

“I’m serious, Alex! Call him!”

“I’m not gonna meet up with him!”

“Why not? I thought you wanted to get closer with him, mend your relationship and all that?”

My ears burn. “Because I have school! I’ll wait until break or something. Why won’t you tell me what’s going on?”

“When’s your next break?” She asks instead. I grit my teeth at her evasion.

“Next month.”

“We can’t wait until next month! This could be—”

“Crucial, yeah, you said that. Is it life-threatening? Does it pertain to me?”

She hesitates, and that’s enough for me. “Then we’re waiting until next month.”

“Next month!”

“Yes, next month—”

“Alex?” my mom calls. She appears at my doorway, her hair a mess, a furrow between her brows. “What are you doing?”

I freeze. Quickly, I wave my phone around and sheepishly smile at her. “Er. Calling someone. A classmate. Group project.”

She raises an eyebrow. “At three in the morning?”

“Er. It was urgent. Due today, and they haven’t even done their part. Also, um, I think there’s a raccoon in the house?”

“What? Why would you think that?” my mom asks, her eyebrows raising in astonishment.

“It was on my bed and then it—” I stop, realizing how silly I sound.

My mom sighs and pinches her nose. “Okay. Okay. Do you mind if you keep it down? I have work today. And please go to sleep as early as you can.”

Guilt sinks into my chest. My mom has just seemed to catch up on her sleep, the dark bags under her eyes slowly fading away. I don’t want to disrupt her progress, especially with her ungodly work shift that makes her get up before the sun even rises. “Okay. Sorry. I’ll keep quiet.”

Ingrid grunts. “I’m not going to.”

I resist the urge to hiss shut up. “In fact, I’ll go to sleep now. I think we worked it out. The group project, that is. Um, I think the raccoon left or something.”

“We have not,” Ingrid snarls.

“Good.” Mom hugs me, carding her finger through my hair and dropping a kiss on my forehead. “I love you, but remember, no one’s going to wake you up if you miss the bus.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Alright.” She yawns. “Good night. Or, morning.”

She closes the door, and Ingrid immediately whirls around at me. “We can’t wait—”

“Next month,” I assert, making my way purposefully to my bed, feeling very collected indeed especially after the recent events, and pulling my blanket up to my ears. “I’m going to sleep now, so please shush your mouth.”

Ingrid says something else, but I squeeze my eyes shut and ignore her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Unfortunately, everything seems to fall apart after that incident. My backpack—which has survived six years with minimal injuries—rips on a chair leg and spills all my folders onto the dirty ground, taking the chair with it. Then, my door stops working, and I almost lock myself in my bedroom, which leads to my mom dismantling the knob from my door entirely. If that isn't enough, I barely reach a week before the raccoon pops up again.

"You!" I shout, advancing toward it. It's clinging onto our trash can, and it freezes and whips around like a child caught cheating on a 5-point quiz. Part of me realizes that I could be very much yelling at a random raccoon, but I'm frazzled and tired, and Ingrid's temper has riled me up for the past few days. "What were you doing in my room? And how did you even get in there!?"

It falls onto its four stubby legs and stares at me. I stop a good distance away, narrowing my eyes. I wave my arm at it. "Get away! Go! I'm trying to get to my garbage can!"

It flicks its ears at me, almost sassily, and lets out a short chitter. I splutter then yelp as it launches forward.

"Holy—oh my god," I shriek, and I'm suddenly undeniably sure that it is the same raccoon that was in my room as it stands on its hind legs, black eyes peering astutely into my own. Then, as quick as it had come, it scurries off, tail whipping back and forth. I watch, open-mouthed, as it leaves.

"You know, if you had just called dad, this probably wouldn't have happened," Ingrid says. I almost scream again, but I catch myself last-second and school my expression into what I hope portrays my complete vexation.

"What are you doing here?"

"I told you, I can't stray far from you!"

"Yeah, well, you've practically disappeared this whole week, so clearly you can stray far enough."

Ingrid scowls at me. "And if it was up to me, I would've stayed away. I need to do—research, but clearly you're not listening."

"Are you blaming me?" I huff, grabbing hold of the trash can. "And stop talking to me now. I'm going to look crazy."

"It's the 21st century, dude. No one's going to care as long as you have an earbud in or something. And, you know, you should probably stop scaring away the raccoon. It'll help you. Probably."

"What do you mean it'll help me? Help me get rabies?" I demand before I can help it. I glower at my shoes as the words come out. Nowadays, I find that I don't like talking to Ingrid much because everytime we do, we always start arguing. I don't think I've fought with someone this much in my lifetime. Frankly, it's tiring. I very much like it better when I'm stuck in my room alone doing nothing.

"I mean that if you're going to be so stubborn, then you should probably stick with the raccoon for a month."

That makes no sense. I let out a groan of exasperation. "Is this about your whammy-mammy magic thing? Look, if you're not going to give me a direct answer, then I'm not going to follow you on anything. You're a ghost! Shouldn't we be trying to figure that out first?"

"If I tell you, and it turns out that I'm wrong, then it's gonna be more trouble than it needs to be. And what do you think I'm doing? Taking leisurely walks around the city?"

I close my mouth. Actually, that is what I had thought she was doing. "Fine. How are you even trying to figure this out?"

"For one, Daniel—"

"Daniel Harisbac?"

"Yes. Who else? He's looking for the reason right now."

"Then why didn't he answer the phone?"

"Because he's away!"

"Then why'd you tell me to—"

Ingrid throws her head back, clutches her hair, and screams. "I hate being dead!"

It's silent, and then she's laughing, the kind of laughing you would hear from a person released from prison only to find out that they were going back. "I am so stressed, Alex. So stressed. Living wasn't this stressful! School wasn't this stressful! Frick, even the mission—well."

She takes a deep breath and when she exhales, she slumps down. "Look, I'm sorry, I've been a complete arse lately. There are things going on that you don't know, and I don't know, and I have to try to figure it out without the ability to touch anything and being tied to you 24/7 which I know is not your fault, but I just—" she spreads her hands as if to say *look, I have nothing except my strange ghostly fingers*. "And it'll be grand if you can please listen to what I'm saying for once. You're the only one I can talk to, and something's going on that may or may not impact you, and if you want to get out of this predicament as much as I do, then please just try to do as I say."

I cross my arms, a snarky reply tipping from my tongue, but then I try to think from her perspective, and pity impales me. Even to someone who doesn't interact with people much, I still can't imagine living unnoticed by everyone. I may seem slightly mad talking to myself, but maybe Ingrid is going mad, living and unliving as she is. "... Fine. But I still have school, so if nothing bizarre happens, I'm going to wait until Thanksgiving Break. It's only, like, two or three more weeks."

Ingrid looks as if she's about to protest, but then she shakes her head. "Fine. You'll have to tell me if you start to smell the coconuts again. And if the raccoon returns."

I scrunch my nose. "Wait, the raccoon has something to do with this? Why?"

Ingrid suddenly looks like my mom when she's trying not to snap before she's had her coffee. "Alex."

"Fine. I'll call dad if the raccoon appears again."

Spoiler alert: the raccoon appears again the next week. It's perching almost politely in front of the door, innocent and sweet-looking. I glance, bewildered, from it to the doorbell, then say softly and emotionally: "What. The."

"So are you going to call dad?" Ingrid asks.

"Who's at the door?" my mom calls.

"Um. Nothing!" I reply, a little perturbed. Then, to the raccoon I swish my hands at it. "Shoo! Scat! Go!"

"Stop it!" Ingrid says, placing her hand on my arm. I shiver at the coolness, and she quickly retracts. "Remember what I said about the raccoon? It's friendly!" Then, she mutters under her breath. "I think." Which is an extremely persuasive tactic.

The raccoon proceeds to bare its teeth and hiss. I attempt to close the door on it, but Ingrid pushes my arm. "Bro, stop."

"What do you want me to do? Let it in?"

Ingrid gets a very odd look on her face.

Spoiler alert: the raccoon gets into the house.

"Um, hey mom," I say, carefully. "Don't freak out."

My mom half-turns from her place at the stove, spatula raised. "What is it—oh my gosh!"

"Don't freak out!"

"What is that?"

"A dog!" I glare desperately at the raccoon who licks its hands and chitters on the couch very much not like a dog.

"Alexander, that is *clearly* a raccoon!" Then, she gets an odd look, a different one than Ingrid's but still an expression that makes me want to flee. "Wait a second. Just a few days ago, you were up in the middle of the night talking about some raccoon!"

"I—er—"

"Tell her that it followed you home when you fed it your apple slices."

I rapidly repeat Ingrid's advice, and then tack on an unconvincing, "Um, and I—I—it looked lonely."

Suddenly, my mom looks quite morose. Still baffled and a little cross, but sad. It abruptly comes to me that she probably thinks this is some coping mechanism, some sort of angst-filled teenage action begotten from a one-sided tragedy.

"Oh, Alex," she says, wrapping her arms around me. "Fine. We can keep it."

Wait what.

"But after taking it to the vet. I don't know how you befriended it, but it does look rather ... well-behaved." She shoots the raccoon a dubious look. The raccoon, thankfully, does not make any sudden movements. "No matter. I have always wanted an, er, exotic pet. Has it been in our house for this whole week? I figure if it has, and I've never noticed, it must not be that bad. Though, we'd have to wash everything now, just in case. Does it have a name?"

Wait, I never said I wanted to keep it? Ingrid looks quite happy with the turnout, though, grinning and lifting two thumbs up. "Um. Thanks, mom. It's called, um." I give Ingrid an imploring look, but she shrugs. "Ralph. Ralph the Raccoon."

"You named the raccoon Ralph?"

"No, I named it Ralph the Raccoon."

"... You named the raccoon Ralph the Raccoon."

"... Ralph for short." I shake my head, trying to get to the point and feeling rather flustered and annoyed by the fact that once again Ingrid is directing a conversation that she has no part in. I have half a mind to simply ignore everything she tells me to do, but I'm also curious. Sometimes, the situation's so strange, that even when I want to get out, another part wants to see the train derail. "Also, uh. Is it okay if I visit dad? Maybe this weekend? I need to, uh."

If possible, my mom softens even more. Her eyes shine, and she chokes out, "Of course. Do you want me to tell him? I can take work off—"

Behind her, Ingrid shakes her head viciously, and I find myself mimicking her. "No, that's fine! I'll take the train. I've taken the train before. And I'm fourteen, now, so I can go alone."

Mom hesitates.

"Please? I want it to be, uh, one-on-one. I have some questions."

I can tell she's struggling. She's already taken so much time off work and, as a pretty high-end doctor, she can't really spare more days. Finally, she inhales and nods her head. "Okay. Do you want to leave early this week? I can call the school."

I glance at Ingrid, slightly surprised at her lenience, though I suppose I shouldn't be. Perhaps letting me miss school to see dad is mom's way of trying to mend her past mistakes with Ingrid.

"Yeah, actually. That'll be great. I'll just pick up school assignments tomorrow, and then I'll come back next Monday."

That'll give me four days with dad. It should be plenty of time to do whatever Ingrid wants to do. Hopefully. And, if she doesn't keep me in the loop with things, I'll simply ask to leave early, and that'll teach her. Maybe.

"Alright. Alright, then. Let's—let's get that raccoon checked out, now, why don't we? Will it be safe at home when you're visiting your dad?" She peers at it warily. "Are you able to pick it up?"

"It should be well-behaved if it's what I think it is," Ingrid offers.

"Um, yeah!" I say, way too confidently, trying not to dwell on what I think it is, which implies that it could not be a raccoon. "Yeah, totally. Let's, ah. Um. Ralph shouldn't need too much supervision. Um. You can go ahead and get the car started or something, I just need to grab something."

"Are you leaving it on the couch?" Mom asks nervously. "Actually, please don't pick it up with your bare hands."

"I'll, um." I painstakingly approach the raccoon, dragging my sweater over my hands and practically begging it to comply, though I have no reason to believe it would. I stretch out my arms and think c'mon, Ralph, I'm conscious and fully consenting to cuddles. Also, don't kill me or infect me with rabies. Ralph twitches then calmly crawls into my arms. I let out a breath of astonishment, and carefully position him—her—whatever—more comfortably. Ralph's surprisingly soft, a warm creature, a living thing.

I turn to look at my mom, beaming with delight, promptly struck dumb with affection. Which is silly, I know. If humans were as lenient toward each other as they were to animals, the world would likely be a better place.“Ralph’s cool!”

For a moment I stand there stupidly grinning at the raccoon.

“Were you going to do something?” My mom asks hesitantly.

“What? Oh. Um. No, let’s go see the vet.”

Fortunately, Ralph—who turns out to be female, but I’d grown rather fond of her name—doesn’t have any sort of disease and is a perfectly healthy raccoon, which I probably should’ve thought of before I picked her up.

My mom keeps on uneasily glancing at Ralph on the ride back home, though, likely fearing her four days alone with a raccoon and expecting her to claw my face off, so I assure her that Ralph can survive on her own for the next four days, outside of our home. “You can just leave some apple slices near the trash can.”

The next day during first hour while I wait for Mr. Cho to search for his worksheet for my absence, I study the pictures on the wall, trying to find the photo I’d destroyed. When I awkwardly ask where the picture of the island is, Mr. Cho tilts his head in confusion.

“Which one? Plum Island? Are you planning to go there?”

I almost smile, bewildered giddiness flooding my system as I turn to Ingrid, who’s browsing his bookcase. I think, Visiting dad better answer all of this and ohmygosh ohmygosh this is crazy cool and freaky. “Nevermind.”

On the train, I place my bag courteously on the chair next to mine and pull out my homework. I take Ingrid’s advice and stick some earbuds in, keeping my eyes on my Calculus homework as I talk to her.

“This has something to do with magic, right?” I ask eagerly as I solve the derivative. “Raccoon, Daniel, the picture, your obsession with the coconut smell—”

Ingrid whips around sharply. “Do you smell it?”

“No, no. Haven’t for a long while. Is it because of Ralph? Is she, like, a familiar or something? Is the coconut smell a bad omen? Has she been protecting me?”

“I think you’ve been reading too much fantasy. Also, it’s x to the fifth, not x to the fourth.”

Disgruntled, I pencil in a five over the four. “But you didn’t say no! Ingrid, is this like Harry Potter? Percy Jackson? Am I—are you—”

“You already know that I can’t answer it. Wait until dad.”

“But why? Is he like Daniel Harisbac?”

“I dunno,” Ingrid proclaims, which is her way of expressing that she doesn’t feel like explaining.

I bristle, but I don’t feel like arguing, and I have three days worth of math homework to get through, so I diligently return back to deriving while I add another question to my mental *Weird Things Ingrid Won’t Tell Me But Hopefully Someone Will* list.

I have to admit, some part of me is excited about this whole situation. It’s like plunging head-first into a fantasy and watching the world bloom, zoomed in with the magnifying glass of a mystery novel. At the same time, though, I find the nerves jumping inside me are catalyzed by the thought of talking to dad more so than the thought of delving into the implications of magic.

I’ve been reading about magic my whole life, been able to escape to books whenever I felt like it. There’s something viscerally customary about it. Conversing with dad, though? Unknown territory.

Two-thirds of the way through the trip, as I’m taking a break from my homework and munching on the falafel sandwich my mom had packed, Ingrid places her foot on the back of the chair in front of us resolutely.

“Let’s play a game.”

“What?”

“I spy something red.”

I screw up my mouth. I want to say that I’m too old to be playing something as silly as I Spy, but Ingrid has spent two hours watching me do my homework and

occasionally making helpful comments, so I look out the window and snort at the obscene number of American flags around a plaza. "Is it the flag?"

"No. Close."

"The pizza hut."

"Aw, we passed it. Too slow, too bad. It was the lone red car in the parking lot."

"Okay then, I spy something green."

"Don't tell me it's a tree."

I try to muscle down my twitching lips, but Ingrid catches it anyway. She sighs loudly. "Are you serious?"

"Trees are cool."

"Oh man, this reminds me of your A Wrinkle in Time shirt."

I look at her, startled, and clumsily meet the gaze of the middle-aged woman sitting across from me. Embarrassed, I shove the rest of my sandwich in my mouth and very deliberately adjust my earbuds as I make my way toward the trash bin.

"You remember that?"

It occurs to me that Ingrid has been with me for around two months already. Or, at least based on what she had said, two months since I could see her. I don't recall when her presence has become so common.

"Duh. I spy something brown and pointy."

"My pencil."

Ingrid laughs in surprise. "Yeah, that's it. Good job, I guess."

The train rumbles and chugga-chugga-chuggas into a stop. The announcement crackles to life and a dull, polite voice comes on: "Good morning. We hope you've been comfortable with your trip thus far, but unfortunately, we'll be experiencing a delay due to another passing train. We expect this will last at most an hour. We apologize for any inconveniences and thank you for your cooperation."

"Great," I grumble. "An hour delay." If humans functioned like trains ...
actually, the world would look a lot like a bunch of Alex's.

"What fun. You should probably tell dad."

Yeah, I should. I turn on my phone and scroll to the very bottom of my contacts, then I stare at the name Dad. The last I texted him was from a year ago, and it had been him asking how I was and me replying "good" as if he were my Spanish teacher going around the classroom asking *cómo estás?* and everyone was replying *bien* because what else were we supposed to say? Once, I had said *mal*, and then I had to struggle through the follow-up questions.

"You're nervous, aren't you?"

"No," I protest. I pause and twitchily doodle a circle on my Biology homework. "Or, just a little."

"Do you ever take a break?" Ingrid asks, moving to drag the worksheet out of the path of my pencil. We both watch as her hand phases through. Ingrid's eye twitches, and she leans back in the air.

"I do take breaks," I protest.

"Yeah, by reading, which isn't really a break."

"Well, then my definition of a break is different from yours, clearly," I conclude haughtily. "Would you stop judging what I do?"

"I'm not," Ingrid claims. "I'm saying, relax. He's just dad."

"Easy for you to say," I grumble. "You've lived with him your whole life. The most I've talked to him was at your fun—" I cut myself off and wave my hand, trying to gauge her reaction. For all I know, her funeral might be an uncomfortable topic for her. It is for me.

"So? It'll be fine, you'll see. He's a big dork."

I wince. "For you. To me, he's like. A stranger or something. An absent uncle twice-removed and then removed again. Removed thrice and then moved to an obscure country like Laos. How would you feel, talking to mom?"

"I'd be fine."

"Talking to mom without knowing her vicariously through me?"

Ingrid's mouth spazzes. "Look, anyone who once walked out without his pants to get the mail should not be making little thirteen year—"

"I'm fourteen!"

"—old boys quake with fear."

"I'm not scared!" I blink, then crack a smile. "Wait, seriously? Did anyone see him?"

"What do you think? It was a sunny day, perfect day to go out on a walk. He couldn't face the neighborhood for, like, a whole month afterward." She nudges me. "C'mon, bro. Nothing to be nervous about."

"I'm not nervous," I tell her, but I take a deep breath and go through five renditions of the same message and twenty stages of grief before I hit send.

"Hey, let's play another game."

"I have homework," I remind her, and Ingrid groans so loud, I'm surprised she doesn't violate all the known laws of ghost-dom and project her voice to the entire car.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Michigan doesn't possess the same quiet loudness Chicago does. The AmTrak building is small, crumbly, like an oatmeal cookie next to a mountain of shaved ice that was the building I'd left from. The roads are gray and pot-holed, and there are sparse cars. It looks like a slower, sleepier version of my city. It's face-value: exactly what you see is what you get.

"There he is!" Ingrid exclaims excitedly, practically bounding off. "Do you see him?"

He walked out of his house with no pants before, I remind myself when I start to tense. Hurriedly, I follow Ingrid's glinting shape. Dad looks more put-together than he did at the funeral, even though he's dressed like he's preparing to fall asleep any moment, and his face looks like it's trying its hardest not to sag off. Looking at

him, all my nerves shrivel with pity. I skirt around a reuniting couple and try not to let his appearance throw me off.

"Oh, dad," Ingrid whispers in front of him. "You look horrible."

My heart clenches, and I'm filled with some sort of pity as his gaze flickers right over her and lands on me. Immediately, his expression changes, and he musters up a grin. I try to return a smile, but I'm pretty sure it became more of a grimace.

"Alex!" He hustles forward, and Ingrid launches herself out of his way. He gives me a stilted pat on the shoulder. "How are you?"

"Good." I wince. This is turning out rather like our text conversation from a year before. I struggle out an, "And you?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Are you hungry? We can go somewhere to eat. Or, if you don't mind, dinner'll be at six. Florence's preparing salmon and rice. Would that be okay?"

Florence? I determinedly don't look at Ingrid for help. If she hadn't spoken now, she's probably recovering from seeing dad for the first time since the funeral. "Yeah. That's fine. Actually, can we—I need to—" I wrack my brain. "Robert's Waffles!"

"What?" dad croaks out.

Robert's Waffles, are you serious, Alex? Why didn't you just say something like McDonald's or Taco Bell? Too late now. I dig my fingers into the straps of my backpack. "Um. Can we go there? I've heard a lot of good things about their, er, waffles. And they don't have that place in Chicago."

"Oh." Dad's blinking rapidly. "Yeah, of course. Wow, that's crazy. Robert's Waffles is—was Ingrid's favorite place to eat-out."

I know, I think miserably. "Oh," I mumble out loud.

"Well, I haven't been there in a while. What are you thinking of getting?" I shrug. "Some waffles or something."

He chuckles, and his eyes crinkle up. It fits a little ungracefully on his tired face, but he looks more like the rare pictures of him my mom still has in our home, pressed in the back of a photo album.

The car ride there is stifled in silence, and even Ingrid looks morose as her gaze flickers from the roads, the landscapes to her dad. Our dad.

Robert's Waffles looks like a living room, complete with a fireplace, rustic and bathed in golden light even with the overcast sky, yet I feel as if I'm stepping into a morgue. Fortunately, there's enough people—living ones that do not only appear to one individual—to cover up conversations. We take a seat, and a waiter immediately passes us a menu, a grin, and a greeting.

"I'm going to get the chocolate almond waffles," I enunciate, and immediately regret it when dad presses his lips together like a silent sob.

"What are you doing?" Ingrid asks sharply. "Are you seriously going to tell him now?"

Well, when else? I tap nervously on the polished wooden tables as I watch dad order, then as he tries to form a conversational topic. I cut in before he can change the subject or ignore what I had just done. "Those were Ingrid's favorite, right?"

Dad lets out a shaky sigh. "Yes. How did you know?"

"I just ..." The words are at the tip of my tongue, scrambling in my mouth. I sit up straight, square my shoulders, and blurt out the secret. "Ingrid's here. Well, not alive here, but she's been haunting me for two months, and she told me to come see you because a person named Daniel Harisbac isn't answering his phone and doesn't have an email." Or hair.

"Here you go," the waiter says, sliding our orders in front of us. I screw up my nose at the waffles. They're sloppy and sugary, and usually I don't eat sweet stuff, but I jab my fork into a square and jitter my legs as I wait for dad's reply.

"Alex, you can't just—" Ingrid grits out, but her eyes are fixated on dad's reaction, and there's something like tentative desperation in them.

I quickly tack on, "I'm not lying. Ask me things. How else would I have known about this? And—and there's also Brenny, her stuffed elephant with wings or something. And I know that she's—"

"Alex, stop," dad snaps. His lips are white, pulled taut across his face. "I get that you've—that Ingrid and you—this is not the time to bring up her memory like that. How did you get the name Daniel Harisbac?"

I blink then scowl. For some reason, I've never really thought about him doubting the confession. When Ingrid had instructed me to tell him, she'd said it with so much conviction, that somehow the thought of postponed answers had never crossed my mind. Indignance rises like a bellowing wave. "I'm serious! I was trying to get rid of her, and we found Mr. Harisbac, who used, like, magic or something. Ingrid said you'd tell me what's happening!"

"I never said that—"

"And why would I come all this way to lie? I have school. Weird things are happening, though, and Ingrid said to come cause she says you'll be able to fix things."

"That's not possible," dad says firmly. But his hands are shaking, and he puts down his fork. "Ghosts aren't real, Alex. Are you feeling well? Should I call your mom?"

"No!" I retort. I feel like I'm being wrung out, this twisting feeling of frustration squeezing into my chest. "Ingrid said you'd be able to help!"

"Tell him about the coconuts, Alex. And the raccoon."

"Ingrid says to tell you that I've been smelling rotten coconuts, and now I have a raccoon named Ralph."

Perhaps I could've phrased that differently, but that seems to hit dad hard. He sucks in a deep breath and leans back. His eyes are so wide, I almost fear they'll swallow his entire face. "Ingrid's here?"

"Yes. That's what I've been saying. She said you look horrible, by the way."

He lets out a laugh, disbelieving. And then another chortle, longer. He grips his hair, runs his hand across his face. Then his eyebrows shoot up and he lurches forward. "You said you've been smelling coconuts?"

"Yes. What is it about coconuts?"

"Do you smell it now?" he asks urgently.

"No," I say curtly. "What does it mean?"

"I—" His eyebrows curve up, his expression falling into hesitance. "I can't tell you right now."

"Why not?" I spit out. I stab at my waffles, mushing them into the white plate. Beside me, Ingrid winces.

"I have to correspond with higher-ups, first. Ingrid, is she—"

"Yes, she's still here," I growl, feeling rather irritated as I press the chocolate waffles into pulp. Of course. Higher-ups. Dad grasps my forearm, and when I meet his eyes, they seem bloodshot again, but full of hope. He's trembling so hard, it feels like a compact drying machine has latched onto my arm.

"Can she—" he licks his lips. "Can she hear us?"

"Yeah, I can hear you, dad," Ingrid whispers, quivering. "I'm alright."

I repeat what she said and gesture to where she is, perched to the left of me. I'm slightly rattled when he squeezes his eyes closed, his breath catching on the start of a sob. I scan the restaurant, hoping that no one is paying us any mind. There is no reason to act like she has come back; she's still dead.

"How—why—is she here?"

"I don't know. I was going to ask you."

"You said you went to Daniel? Why didn't he tell me?"

I shrug again.

Dad runs his hand across his face again. Laughs again. His very posture is of disbelief and hope, and I keep my eyes on his untouched waffles, regretting ever thinking that talking in a public place—no matter the connection to Ingrid—was a

good idea. The conversation feels too vulnerable, like a beating heart left out in the mud.

"Ingrid," he says. "Is she—are you doing well?"

He's looking slightly off, but Ingrid holds herself like she might evaporate. She reaches over and places her hand on top of her dad's. She talks to me but continues searching his face, like she could somehow telepathically send him a message. "Tell him yeah, I'm doing fine. Well, as good as I can." Ingrid inhales deeply. "But also, we need to focus on what's happening to you. Tell him that. We should go somewhere else, preferably without anybody around."

At this, she sends me a pointed look, and I scowl at her. "I wanted to convince him that—"

"I know. But I think we're going to cause a scene if we stay any longer."

When I turn back to dad, he's glancing from me to the spot where Ingrid sits, his eyes sloping into an emotion I don't have a chance to parse through before he's smoothing over into careful expectancy.

It isn't long before we pack up and head to his car again, our waffles deposited into a happy compostable take-out container. On the way to his house, I try to explain everything that I remember after Ingrid's funeral, watching him warily. I'm almost surprised when we don't pull over once on the trip.

"You didn't tell anyone besides Daniel?" Dad asks, switching on his blinker.

Heat rises to my cheeks and I cross my arms. "No." And then I think, there's no one to really tell. And really, there isn't. I didn't want my mom to worry more about me, and I know she would've never accepted the tidbit about ghosts with the explanation of coconuts and raccoons as readily as dad did. Moreover, Ingrid had seemed like she'd wanted to keep it secret, and I didn't have anything to gain from blabbing about her presence except for, perhaps, a trip to the hospital.

We turn into a small neighborhood, clean and quaint and empty of people on the sidewalk, and arrive at a red-bricked house with honey-colored leaves littering the lawn. I politely refuse dad's help at carrying my bags, and then I stiffen in

astonishment and almost drop both of them when I see what's waiting on the steps.
"Ralph?"

Sure enough, there's a raccoon on the steps, her grey and black coat matted with dirt. She looks cross, and if raccoons were able to, I wouldn't have been surprised if she crossed her arms. She chitters and twists in a circle, impatiently tapping her hands on the door.

Dad wheezes as if someone had wrangled him out. "That's the raccoon?"

I crouch down and hold out my arms, stifling the feeling of prideful joy when Ralph climbs into them. There's something about holding a raccoon that makes me feel like I could walk anywhere and immediately be dubbed the coolest person. "Yeah. I don't know how she got here, though."

"She—" He shakes his head, then takes out his keys. "Okay."

The inside of his house corresponds to the outside. It's messy in a homely way, with jackets and chairs and other knick-knacks scattered about. I pause a little when I realize that there are articles of clothing, of possessions like toys and pillows and coverings, that unmistakably do not belong to dad.

"Aksel?" Someone calls. Their voice is mellow like a rippling creek.

"Yeah, we're here."

A woman walks out from the hall. She's slightly on the shorter side and built like she spends her days in the garden, or under an automobile. Her brown hair is twisted into a loose braid, her eyes a deep sepia, which immediately shift to Ralph in my arms. Instead of screaming, though, she simply raises an eyebrow. "You never said that we would have two guests."

"Yes, well. Something has come up. Alex, this is Florence, by the way, my, er, girlfriend." Then, to Florence only. "I have to visit the Magister."

"Aksel," Florence says, surprise coloring her voice as her gaze flits to me.

"Magister?" I ask, my mind still stuck on the girlfriend part.

"I know. It's complicated. It has something to do with Ingrid. She's—" he glances at me like he's trying to gauge a reaction. Whatever he finds, I'm not certain, but he resolutely tells Florence: "I'll tell you later. Is Maia home?"

"She's with Clary, but she should be back soon. Are you going now?"

Dad ponders this for a second then nods. "I'll be back before dinner." He sheepishly hands her the waffle containers. "The top one is Alex's. Would you put that in the fridge?"

"No, I won't." Florence rolls her eyes but smiles fondly when dad gives her a kiss on the cheek. I look away from the display, frowning.

"I'll see you soon, Alex. I promise we'll figure this out," he says to me next, placing his hands on my shoulder. He hesitates for a moment, scanning around me, and I know he wants to talk to Ingrid again, but he simply pats my shoulder and races up the stairs.

Then, it's just Florence and me. She smiles, and it's friendly enough, but I'm still tense. It feels like I'd just entered a hotel, and the receptionist is a teacher I never thought I would see again.

"How about you leave your stuff there? Let's clean up that raccoon of yours."

"Do you regularly have raccoons in your house?" I ask, slightly put-off by her lackadaisical reaction.

She laughs. "No. But we've seen weirder things. Plus, you never know about animals. They represent a great many things. Who knows, this could be your talisman."

I follow her to the kitchen and stand awkwardly as she puts away the waffles, and then I follow her to the bathroom and stand awkwardly as she instructs me to set Ralph in the sink.

"You better finish your waffles, Alex," Ingrid chirps, oddly peppy as I turn on the faucet. "I will not have you wasting those."

I send her a quick glare. *The waffles are way too sweet.*

"The raccoon looks like it's enjoying that." Florence remarks as she hands me the soap. Ralph is docile under the water, her eyes closing as she flops down.

"Thank goodness."

"Her name is Ralph," I correct, massaging the dirt out of her fur. "What's a Magister?"

"A very important lady," Florence answers without missing a beat. "Would you happen to know why your dad's visiting her?"

I hesitate, and Florence smiles at me. "I imagine we'll all be getting answers soon enough. Careful with her eyes—don't let the soap get in."

We continue cleaning Ralph as Florence tells a story about a cat she used to have, which she notes was never as well-behaved as a raccoon.

"Ralph's special," I tell her, and immediately feel quite puerile afterward.

She nods seriously, though. "I think she is."

I keep on waiting for the sound of the garage door opening, or the front door swinging to announce dad's departure to meet with the Magister, whoever she is, but the only noise I hear is us scrubbing Ralph down. When we finish, Ralph is fluffy and smells like lavender hand soap, and she sticks her tail up like a princess prancing to a ball.

Florence leaves to prepare for dinner, and I wander around with Ralph until I find Ingrid, who had floated off in the middle of cleaning, hovering at a wall plastered with picture frames.

There's numerous ones with Ingrid and dad, and then multiple more of them with Florence and a girl. It's a snapshot of a timeline that I've never thought about before. It's strange to see Ingrid look so corporeal.

"They were planning to marry, you know. Florence and my dad. In July." The a month after I died left unsaid.

"I didn't know that."

"Really? I thought we sent you guys an invitation?"

I shrug, then pause mid-way, the edges of a memory niggling in the back of my mind. "Oh. Maybe."

There's a quiet sort of nostalgia as we look over the wall of pictures. It reminds me of Mr. Cho's classroom full of places he'd never been to. I watch as Ralph idly patters over to the front door and places her hands on the slim window beside it.

"Why weren't they at your funeral?"

"They were," Ingrid says, turning to me. "You didn't notice? They sat pretty close to you and mom. Though, they had to leave early because Maia wouldn't stop sobbing."

"Maia?" I point at one of the pictures with the girl in it. She's beaming next to Ingrid, who squishes her chin on her head. Her hair is in two pigtails, and there's a gap between her front teeth. If I tilt my head, I can see the resemblance she has to Florence: the facial structure, the nose. "Is she Florence's daughter?" I ask, just to make sure.

Suddenly, there's a shriek outside, and Ralph jolts and scampers over to me right before the door flings open and the girl in the pictures, no older than twelve, stomps in. "Mom! There's a raccoon in the house!"

Then, her gaze lands on me, and she freezes. "Who're you?"

Luckily, Florence comes running in. "Maia! Remember what we told you? This is Alex." She pauses when she sees what I'm looking at. "He's Ingrid's brother. Your brother, now."

Your brother? I want to hold up my hands and back away, and protest, Woah. Isn't this moving a little too fast?

Maia doesn't look too pleased, either. She screws up her face. She turns red. "I don't want a brother!" She nearly screams, and then she whirls up the stairs in a mess of purple and red.

Florence sighs and puts down her hands. When she looks at me, she seems tired. "Sorry about that. I shouldn't have said that. Maia's still ... well, we all miss Ingrid. It's a painful subject."

"Um. It's okay," I say quietly as Ingrid twitches next to me. She looks a little devastated, too, and she keeps on glancing up toward the stairs, but she doesn't move. I take a peek at the pictures again, focusing on the one with all four of them: Ingrid, dad, Florence, and Maia. They're wearing matching shirts and holding up ice cream cones.

It's ... weird. And that makes it even weirder because I haven't seen dad for so long, and I think some part of me knew that he'd have a life outside of me, my mom, and Ingrid, but another part kind of expected him to. I don't know. Not move on? Which is inane, but all I've known about him was when he was still with my mom, and so that was the scenario I painted. Not another family.

"Are you still hungry?" Florence asks. "I'm gonna start cooking in around three hours, but if you are, there are some snacks in the cupboard. And your waffle is in the fridge, of course."

"No, I'm good. Thanks."

"Alright. You can go out, if you want? We have an apple tree in the backyard." Then, she looks up. "Oh, Aksel. That didn't take too long"

I furrow my brows in confusion, but sure enough, dad's climbing down the staircase, his shoes dangling from his hand. "Was that Maia I heard?"

"She just came back. I think she needs a little time to herself, though. What did Omobolanle say?"

He lets out a sigh and rubs at his eyes. "In a moment. I actually need Alex now."

"When did you come back?" I ask at the same time Florence exclaims, "She asked for him?"

My dad nods. "Sorry, Alex. We'll be heading there soon, but before that, there's something I need to tell you about this family."

CHAPTER NINE

Magic exists.

Of course, I had expected that. After Harisbac's eyes glowed neon blue in a dusty apartment building, I couldn't have *not* expected that. But the revelation is a spout to a plethora of answers, and anticipation turns my blood into a zingy mess.

Dad spends a couple minutes expounding on that—there are various types of abilities and specializations, but magic is a sort of human umbrella term that summarizes it easily enough.

"And you have it?" I ask breathlessly.

"Well, yes. Not very flashy." Then, he demonstrates by turning the sleeve of his wool jacket into leather, his fingers trailing green sparks. "I can only convert certain types of fabric into other types."

I snatch the sleeve out of his hands and nearly press it into my eyes. "How does that work!?"

"Er—"

"There's nothing really to explain about it," Florence adds. "It's more of a feeling. Of course, one needs to be slightly knowledgeable about it, but ... Aksel, are you sure she said that you could share this?"

"Yes," dad says firmly. "It's a complicated situation, and we have to leave soon. I promise I'll be back quickly. She just wants to see Alex in person. We're lucky that today is a slow day. Otherwise, we might've been waiting for hours."

"Wait." I loosen my grip on his jacket. "If you have it, did Ingrid ..." I trail off as he nods, then I flip to Ingrid, miffed.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well, I wasn't sure if this involved you! Plus, if I had told you, and it turned out to be nothing, then people'll have to go through the whole process of wiping your memory."

"Why would they do that?"

Ingrid looks at me like I'm stupid. "Because you're not magic?"

"Why would that matter?"

She scoffs. "Alex, the magic community is small. Tiny. Infinitesimal compared to the world population. With how unstable it is now, how would you think it would fare if word got out about us and someone decided to exploit us?"

"But I'm your brother!"

"So?"

"So I'm your family! We deserve to know!"

"Everyone deserves something, but that doesn't mean they'll get it."

"Alex?" Florence asks, and it occurs to me that she doesn't know yet. It also occurs to me that she must be magic, too, and I gape at her in another light. She's staring at the place that I'd been looking at when I was talking to Ingrid, though, her eyebrows scrunched up, her eyes flickering from me to my dad, piecing it together. "Wait. Is Ingrid—"

"Yes," my dad says grimly. He checks his watch. "I'll tell you all of it later. We have to go, now."

I look at Ralph, who's curled up on my lap. "What about Ralph? Is he magic, too?"

There's an odd look on his face now. "I'm not sure. Florence, would it be okay if the raccoon stays here?"

Florence waves her hand distractedly, her eyes still focused on Ingrid's space. "Ingrid? She's here? Right now? How?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out." Dad and her share a long look, wrought in the same pain he'd shown at Robert's Waffles. "Now, let's go. We shouldn't keep Omobolanle waiting."

"Don't worry, Florence," Ingrid whispers as Florence's eyes sweep around like she's waiting for Ingrid to pop out of nowhere.

To my confusion, dad starts heading upstairs, beckoning me to follow. I scurry after him after giving Florence a quick look of what I hope was encouragement.

"I thought we were going to the ... magic world or whatever?"

"Yes. It can only be accessed through homes, though. Hold on, I'm going to talk to Maia for a sec." He opens a door, and I catch a glimpse of yellow walls and a large pink owl toy and half-hear their quick mumbled conversation before dad soundlessly closes the door again and makes his way to a nondescript corner, tucked next to a door. He waves his hand, and the wall shifts, the blue hues of the wall twisting like dropping a stone into a lake. A locker the size of a door pushes itself out, its edges sparkling gold.

I eagerly watch him spin in a combo, trying to commit it to memory: 15 7 59. "But what if you don't have a home? How would you go?"

"Well, most people chose to stay in the magic world, but those who don't, well. Home is a very broad term. I've heard that some people can use other people to transport themselves. And it's not always a door, you see." He turns to me and grins. Excitement races across my heart. "Brace yourself."

I nearly black out in giddiness when I step over the threshold and a whole city unfolds in front of my eyes. There's nothing inherently amazing about it, even with plenty of more magical aspects, like the weird colorful birds, the towering mesh of nature and nurture of landscape, the eccentric colors. There are probably plenty of places that could be considered more beautiful, more peaceful, more awesome in its unique tremendousness. Yet, there is something, like staring at a painting for hours and suddenly understanding the masterpiece of it all. Like reading a book and realizing that the plot and characters are exactly what you wished for. Like forgetting something and then having it come back in a deluge of majestic greatness. Like stepping from one house into another.

The cobblestones are worn under our feet, stained and chafed with history. When I squint around, it seems to be surrounded by a sort of transparent hue, like the entire place was a prism filtering sunlight through. The gossamer rainbow lines zinged all over the place, writhing languidly, wending like an omnipresent river.

Before I can tip over tilting my head back and trying to take all of it in, dad pushes gently at my back. "C'mon."

We pick our way through the streets, and I try not to gape at everything I see, however normal they appear. It isn't long before my dad stops at what looks like a well-kept sewer, polished mahogany in color and surrounded artistically by tufts of verdant tufts. He steps on and gestures for me to do the same before tapping four corners. "The Tower," he articulates.

Immediately, a wall of translucent film shoots up. There's a sound like a sigh, a feeling like a gentle push on a ferris wheel, and the world blurs for a second before reconciling itself. When the film falls, we're standing at the end of a short, almost decorative bridge, its railings etched with swirling designs. In front is a twisting copper-gold building, cobbled with pulsing circles of purple. Ingrid materializes a few seconds afterward, her face alight with a nostalgic grin. I can barely perceive the entrance, but dad strides forward purposefully, pressing his hand on one of the circles and sliding open a door.

The inside is more commonplace. There's a floral smell to the place but flowers you would see garnishing a plate of warm food rather than a bouquet. There are a few people lounging around.

At the receptionist's table, there is a convoluted machine that spouts steam, and I have to resist swiping my hands through. The receptionist has a face that portrays indefinite boredom, his blue eyes drooping. Still, he offers a practiced smile, his canines slightly pointier than an average human's, and gives us a salute. "Ta, Aksel, again. She's conversing with Lily, shouldn't take too long."

"Is Lily having trouble with her daughters again?"

"Don't all parents have trouble with pyromaniacs?" He leans forward, then, peering into my eyes. "Who's that with you?"

I catch myself before I can do something suspicious like freeze up. Ingrid's voice comes to mind: They'll wipe you. I scramble for a reply, an excuse, but dad places a hand on my shoulder and says, "He's my son."

Oh. Right. Yeah, that's the obvious reply. The receptionist looks slightly apologetic as he backs off, abashedly handing a card to dad. "Right. Sorry."

"It's fine, Kshmert." But once dad takes the card, we don't spend any more time dawdling. To my surprise, there's an elevator as we turn the corner, and dad inserts the card. The doors slide open and we shuffle in. There's no buttons, curiously, but neither dad nor Ingrid seem concerned, so I resort to being amazed at the sheer luxury of the elevator itself, one plucked out of the same grandeur as the fancy malls in Dubai. Gold lines run up and down, glittering in and out of focus as the elevator climbs up.

"I didn't know Kshmert was still working here. Honestly, I thought he would've died out of apathy before he could reach twenty," Ingrid remarks blithely, bumping into the ceiling and then down to the floor like a deflating balloon. Everytime she comes down, there's a waft of cold air, like an invisible window that has been left open in the summer morning.

I nod listlessly before realizing the only person with me already knows about Ingrid, so I clear my throat. "Did you know him well or something? Why did he have pointy teeth?"

"Who, Kshmert?" Dad asks.

I blink and awkwardly gesture at Ingrid. He grins so wide, it takes up almost half his face. "Yes, Ingrid! Has she been telling you about this place? We've been here too many times to count. Kshmert was one of her friends! You should ask Ingrid about this building. I haven't explored it much, but she has because—" He suddenly cuts off, his words tumbling off a steep cliff. There's a silence, and then he clears his throat. "Has Ingrid—does she—is she happy right now? Do you feel alright, Ingrid? I know this must be hard for the both of you."

"Um. I'm okay." I glance at Ingrid, and she offers a jerky nod in my direction. I half-expect her to expound, but she doesn't, her mouth twisted in—frustration? Sadness? Anger? "Uh. Ingrid's fine too. Yeah."

The elevator smoothly levels off, and the doors slide open.

We step out to a waiting room. It's luxuriously furnished, haphazard like a cramped apartment. Gaudy purple and red clash with watercolor blues and greens, and sunlight filters in unreserved from the floor-to-ceiling windows. There are two doors facing each other, one of them grand and large, curved like an ornate archaic object instead of an entrance. The other is more modest, a simple polished wooden mauve. Dad takes a seat on one of the cushy couches.

"Is Omabowle—"

"Omobolanle," he corrects gently.

"Yeah. What does she do? How long until we speak with her?"

"Well, I guess you can call her our leader. But it doesn't have the same implications as a leader in your world. Do you know what Magister means?"

Ingrid tells me, "It's something about being a scholar. A professor of some sort", so I abort my attempt at shaking my head and nod instead.

"We call her that, but really, the closest definition should be princeps. First among equals. There's not a very strict ruling."

Ingrid adds, "It's sort of like a school. There's authority, but it ultimately does not stretch to our personal lives unless we wish it to. Omobolanle is like a counselor, maybe."

"Why her, then? Did you choose her?"

"In a way. There are some rituals to determine the next Magister. It's all to guarantee capability and compatibility, but the people also have a vote. Her affinity toward clairvoyance helps her position, too, since she has to proctor assigning people with their ... lifetime task."

Again, dad's eyes cloud over, voice stutters, and again, Ingrid clenches up. "Lifetime task?" I repeat. The mauve door opens, then, and a woman walks out, her hair in tight blue curls. She nods tiredly toward dad.

"Aksel. How are you?"

"I'm good. How are the kids?"

She quietly screams, and then holds up a vial of a thick liquid, texture the same as sandpaper. "To fire-proof literally everything. Omobolanle's free, if you wish to talk to her." She curiously tilts her head at me but simply bids my dad a farewell before walking out.

My dad takes a deep breath, and then we stride toward the half-opened door. The woman behind the desk is tall, solid. She's wearing a heavy turbine, as colorful as the waiting room, and her silver and gold hair peek out beneath the cloth. Her green eyes are wide, her nose bulbous, her chin an exaggerated curve. When she smiles, she shows all of her teeth. "Hello!" Her voice booms in the office space. "You must be Alex. My name is Omobolanle. Now, your dad has informed me somewhat of your situation. I trust your sister is in this room with us?"

I barely nod before she leans over and grasps my hands, turning them over so both palms face her. "This is a curious situation. Most unprecedented! Well, I haven't heard of an accidental ghost since a century ago, and that was just a misconception. Now, I have sent Mr. Harisbac a message. I believe you've met him, yes?"

Again, she plows on before I have a chance to react. "He knows more about necromancy and spirits than I do. Odd, odd. And your sister has no idea about why she is here? Tied to you, I believe?" She's frowning, and her brows are as exaggerated as the rest of her. I almost find it hard to take her seriously. "Odd, odd," she mutters again, turning my palms this way and that, and then holding my gaze for an uncomfortable amount of time. Suddenly, she stands up, and she towers so high, her turbine almost touches the ceiling. "Come. Tell me about your and Ingrid's experience so far, please. Do not leave any details out."

While I stutter through the story, we make our way across, to the ornate double doors. Omobolanle throws them open with gusto, and I cautiously shuffle in behind them. The room is huge, spanning the length of a football field. It's high and vaulted, and even inside, it feels like I'm standing at the edge of an entrance. Across the expanse is a towering podium, like the inside of a courtroom. Yet, the

magnitude pales in comparison to the overwhelming and ensnaring whips of light. It looks like someone had accidentally spilled silly string all over, or perhaps some sort of concentrated oil, or a thousand luminescent siphonophores. They almost look alive, but they're also clearly embedded within the room. I stretch out my fingers to touch them, but they glide over me like invisible hallucinations.

For perhaps the first ten minutes, Omobolanle makes me stand in random spaces—between the gilded circles on the ground, next to the podium, on the podium—and the only sound is the clicking of our shoes and the resounding enormity of the room itself. Then, her shoulders set, and she stills in a thoughtful pout.

"I know this is quite a violation of the rules of our community, but I believe this would be an exception, don't you agree, Aksel?"

My dad twists his fingers. "Yes. Omobolanle, we won't have to wipe him, right?"

"Hmm," Omobolanle replies, which isn't encouraging at all. "Perhaps, perhaps. Alex, tell me, how long has the raccoon been with you? I don't mean physically, but perhaps even just with graphics. A picture, perhaps! Anything that even symbolizes a raccoon."

I think for a moment. "I think the first day of school. So, like, two months ago."

"And the smell of, as you put it, rotten coconuts?"

I'm about to say the first day of school again before I realize that it wasn't true. "Ingrid's funeral."

"And has the raccoon been with you at any of those times you smelled the coconuts?"

I think of the dream of the twisting island and of waking up to paws on my cheeks. I feel rather defensive all of a sudden. "Yeah. Why? Ingrid mentioned something about the smell. Something about—er. Gleaners or something. I'm

assuming it's something bad, but Ralph wouldn't—" I don't finish because I'm not even sure what I'm talking about, just that Ralph wouldn't.

"I'm not accusing your raccoon of anything. I'm just trying to think of intent. She will play some important role, as I garnered from you, but as of now, it is a rather hazy outlook. However, any ties with the gleaners are, as you have deduced, quite bad."

"Why?" I demand. I swat at the air in front of me. The room seems too bright, the flashing colors an unwelcome headache. I blink—squeezing my eyes shut to clear out the burning. "What do they do?"

The Magister peers at me inquisitively, eyes huge and unblinking. "Are you quite alright? This room may be a little too potent for regular humans, and we have spent more time in here than most."

I vigorously shake my head. "No, I'm fine. Just, what are all those bright lights? Those glittering lines? They're kind of distracting."

Ingrid's breath hitches. My dad whips around, his mouth dropping open. Omobolanle leans forward, a glint in her eyes. The silence is almost deafening. "What did you say, young Mr. Ahlberg?"

"Navuluri," I correct. I glance at dad, but he's stark pale. "Um. I asked what the glittering line things are?"

She smiles then, a slow sort of comprehension, or perhaps validation, spreading across her expressive countenance.

My dad shakes his head. His voice is hard and cold. "No. It can't be. He would've manifested it. I tested both of them."

"Perhaps you tested them wrong. Your son seems to have the Sight! And where Ingrid has failed, Alex may pick it up. The mission would be intended for someone of your blood's Sighted ones, and it isn't unheard of for a sibling to pick off where one ended. Perhaps it wasn't Ingrid to begin with. You wouldn't mind giving up this magic, would you?"

The last question is directed toward me. I furrow my brows, confusion sweeping through. “What?”

“No.” My dad’s voice is firm, and he stops twiddling his fingers. He’s about a good half-foot shorter than Omobolanle, shorter if one counts her turban, but he stalks up to her like a giant.

“Aksel—”

“No! He’s fourteen! You’ll just be using him as a stopgap. You know there’s little to no chance that he’d be able to succeed in this! And I won’t—” his voice breaks, but he persists through. “I won’t let him. I can’t.”

“It is not up to you to decide, and you know it. Moreover, tomorrow is Friday, which is the day when the checkpoint appears—”

“I said no!” My dad yells. I instinctively step back, grasping for Ingrid’s reaction, but she’s staring at me like she’s trying to grasp my reaction.

“Aksel, may I ask you to please exercise the appropriate behavior.” It’s odd to hear Omobolanle’s voice so stable after only meeting her mere minutes ago.

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“Omobolanle—” My dad begins to say, his words a javelin. Omobolanle remains unfazed, but she cuts a glare at him.

“Please, let your son speak.”

Dad grips his hands together, his jaw working vehemently, but he clenches his jaw when he glances at me, and offers a strangled nod at her.

“The Sight, Mr. Navuluri—”

“Alex,” I cut in. The formality makes me nervous.

“Alex. You have the Sight.”

“The squiggly lines?”

“Yes. It is one type of our magic. The ability to see the magic within the objects or emotions or anything we imbue it with.”

“But—what? What does this have to do with—?”

“Alex, do you know who your sister is? To this community? This magical world, as you may think of it as?”

I barely even know what she was to herself, to her family. I shake my head.

Omobolanle swirls her hand, a fluid line like an old Disney animation. “Magic is an ecosystem. It is a connection. We rely heavily on one another, and to strengthen ourselves is to strengthen those around us. It is everything and everyone, and any disruptions may cause a massive blip. And it did.”

CHAPTER TEN

“Every person is assigned a mission, so to say, a once-in-a-lifetime task, according to the person’s abilities, goals, beliefs, attuned to their capabilities and needs. Originally, it was enacted for people to prove themselves, both to their families and to their own magic in a year, starting from the beginning of January to the end of December. It was to connect and tie, to bind and embrace, and then, as a side-effect, to boost their honor and their pride.

Some people had taken “once-in-a-lifetime” and “honor” too seriously, though. The initial motive was twisted and corrupted, so the tasks were made to be crucial instead of conducive, a decree rather than a choice. Those who failed to complete it in the one-year timeframe were shunned, abandoned, not even afforded a second chance. And then, as their ostracization deepened, efforts were made to take their magic away and transfer it to the rest of their family members.

They were untethered and forced into something they could not assimilate with. You have to understand, magic is molded intrinsically into your being, tied to your soul. When it’s pulled out, it is displaced—forever. The old families thought they were empowering themselves, but they were actually fool-hardedly trying to enlarge a jigsaw puzzle that had already ended. And when that generation died, the displaced magic had nowhere to go except the memory of a bitter last moment.”

Omobolanle pauses, waiting. I think over the pieces of information and tap at my lips. “The gleaners. The gleaners?”

"Yes. When we finally realized the repercussions and eradicated the practice, the stolen magic had formed a mind of their own, a mass of miserable poltergeists, a wailing mess of vengeful bitterness. The practice had ended, but it continued with the gleaners themselves.

The tasks still continue, but many choose not to participate, as the risk of being taken by the gleaners is ... it's not high, but it is a possibility. And people are afraid. In doing so, we are slowly weakening ourselves."

"And there's no way to reverse the gleaners' creation?"

"No. It'll be like trying to make a log out of its ashes. The only way we can move on is if we destroy it, and the only way to destroy something this poignant is the Many-Eyed."

At this, Ingrid lets out a grand sigh, a heaving breath. She slumps onto the podium. "That guy vexes me."

"Who's he?"

"Some call them Argus, some Osiris, some Indra. Most just refer to them as Many-Eyed. Many-Eyed is a famous legend, a renowned giver and taker." She leads me to the podium. There is an extravagant carving of them on the curve of the stand, a figure pockmarked with eyes, surrounded by a plethora of animals. "They were a vocal fairy tale. A genie in a bottle, gifting wishes with a balanced gift, and then Ingrid was assigned her task. After that, they weren't so mythical."

Usually the missions are personal, as they are tied to the family. Perhaps reclaiming an old heirloom, or something as simple and easy as nurturing an animal or a plant. One of your sister's choices was approaching Many-Eyed, asking for their aid."

"Why that? Why her?" I ask. Then, to Ingrid, "Why'd you get stuck with this?"

"I didn't," she said, and there's a hard look in her eyes, a clench in her jaw as if she were readying for a fight. She keeps her gaze firmly on the carving of the Many-Eyed dude. "I chose it."

"In theory, Ingrid had been the perfect candidate. Having the Sight was magic, but it isn't an incumbent limb. It's a simple thing, like having 20/20 vision or double-joints. Cool, but ultimately, not very useful. So, if Many-Eyed were to take some part of her, she only had to give up one small aspect. A small price to pay to end the gleaners."

"How does that make sense? Taking her magic. Wouldn't that be the same as the gleaners?"

"And that is exactly why we theorized Many-Eyed would do that. Because it is something so similar to the gleaners, it would make sense that to end it, they would need an act of similar balance. As it was in the tales."

"In the tales," I repeat, dully.

"Yes. Well, you see why this mission was so startling. All we know about Many-Eyed are the stories. And stories, especially ones you've thought fictional, are not evidence. Ingrid had been close. She devoted much time to this, but in the end ..."

I stare at the whirling designs on the ground, the twisting lines of magic. Thumb to my chin. Ruminating, ruminating, a jolt of something just shy of trepidation piercing my thoughts. "She didn't die from a car crash, did she? It was the gleaners." And then, a shock of realization. "And you want me to take over. Because I have the Sight somehow, and I'm related to her."

"Yes," Omobolanle says calmly. "Do you think you can do it?"

"No," my dad mutters, shaking his head. "He can't."

"I'm a little offended on your behalf," Ingrid informs me.

"He might as well have to. There's a mark on him, already. He is bound to this task, and if he doesn't finish it this year, then he may suffer the same fate as his sister."

"Don't! Ingrid would not have—this is impossible. It doesn't make sense. Alex can't—he doesn't have the Sight. He's too young!"

"Well, it appears he does have the sight. It isn't unheard of for someone of his age to begin their task. What do you think, Alex?"

"Well I—" I pause and try to scrutinize Ingrid's expression. She doesn't look as terrified as dad or as sure as the Magister, but there's something in the set of her brow, her challenging *I chose it*. I think about her funeral, the hundreds of unfamiliar faces. The look on the receptionist's face when dad said that I was his son, a mix between bewilderment and morose. It occurs to me that more people might've been affected by Ingrid's death than I first thought. I meekly ask, "What do I have to do?"

"Fridays are the openings. Ingrid has already completed much of her task. She will advise you."

"Are you serious?" Dad demands, face turning a gradient of red.

"Aksel, we are in a strict time frame. But if all goes well, you need not worry! I have seen auspicious happenings in your son's future, and although we cannot rely on that whole-heartedly, it means that this may be our only chance!"

"I have school? Would that interfere?"

Dad talks over me, as if he could extinguish my tentative question. "And that time frame was over when Ingrid—died." His voice cracks over the last word. Ingrid winces sharply. It feels almost rude for her to be here, listening to us speak and not being able to contribute.

"Yet, somehow, she returned. There must be a reason for it."

"And have you entertained the idea it isn't to lead my son into a perilous death!?" He straightens up to his full height, but Omobolanle still towers over. "I'll do it for him."

"You can't. Mr. Ahlberg, you may not sense it, but I do. He has already been assigned this task. Whatever force ties Ingrid to him also ties her task to him. He *has* to complete it."

"You're just thinking of getting rid of the gleaners! I can't—I can't—Mitra won't allow this, so I can't. Tell me, when did he go through the necessary policies to transfer the task to him?"

"What would happen if I don't do it?" I ask Ingrid.

"Nothing you have to concern yourself with," my dad replies.

"Well, it won't be the end of the world. But it would be bad," Ingrid offers, glancing at me hesitantly. "We have until the end of this year to complete it, so you still have some time to decide to go through."

"What will happen to you? Or the rest of this world?"

"I don't know. It's certainly not safe for me to remain. The gleaners have already found me once."

"What is she saying?" Dad asks, looking desperately between me and the empty space to the left of Ingrid.

I pick at the hem of my sleeve. My heart beats against my chest, staccato. Books, fantasy. I've been reading them my whole life. Wouldn't this be an adventure? An experiment? "I'll do it."

"Alex—"

"I don't actually get this whole magic thing yet—" And I pity everybody if this is how they greet every newcomer. "—but so far, the consequences seem bigger if I don't do it. Plus, it seems fun."

Ingrid, dad, and Omobolanle all wince in unison.

"Uh, actually—" Ingrid starts.

"It's an important task—" Omobolanle corrects.

"This is not *fun*. It may very well be a life or death situation!" Dad snaps. He tries to address Ingrid next. "Please, tell your brother this is not some sort of adventure. It can—"

"Aksel, your son is already in a life or death situation. For some reason—and no, we do not know why, but it is there—his soul is connected to this task. And if he doesn't complete it, the gleaners may take both your children."

"Then figure out a way to sever the connection."

Omobolanle crosses her bejeweled hands, lifts her head. "I cannot do that."

She continues hurriedly. "For the sake of the entire magical community. We don't know when a chance to rectify everything will come up again, and at so little a price. Ingrid was so close, and I owe her my gratitude."

"She's dead, that's how important your gratitude to me is."

"Ingrid, may you take your brother to the library? Fill him in on what he has to do, if he wishes?"

"Alex, stay right where you are."

The adults glare at each other, so I look over to Ingrid who hovers to her feet.

"C'mon, bro-dude. Let's go to the library."

I peek over at dad, and then at Ingrid floating at the door. Carefully, I make my way to her and drag open the embossed doors. We get in the elevator again, and Ingrid presses the button with the number eight on it before I actually do it as she snarls in annoyance at her ghostly fingers. The ride up, Ingrid keeps shooting me furrowed glances, her mouth turned down in concern. "Uh. Are you sure you're good, Alex?"

"Hmm? What? Yeah. Why?"

"Well, normally, I feel like if people found out about magical crap and missions, they would be freaking out."

The elevator dings, and the hallway we enter next is just as grand as all the others. I tap my fingers against my thigh. "Um. I guess. Maybe I used it all up freaking out about you as a ghost. Plus, there was Daniel Harisbac. I kinda expected something would come up sooner or later."

"You do know I died on this task, right?"

I swallow. Actually, I was trying to de-know that piece of information. "How?"

"Oh, you know. I was like, blam blam, ahahaha—" And then she makes a sound deep from her throat, like a tortured cow. Ingrid pauses, a smile twitching. "That was the sound of me dying."

"Great." I stare at the peacefully gurgling fountain we pass. There are transparent turquoise squiggles trembling off of it. The Sight, Omobolanle had called it. If Daniel Harisbac openly practiced magic outside the actual magic world, then shouldn't others have, too? How come I've never seen it before?

"We thought gleaners only took people if they don't complete their mission."

"Wait but if the gleaners only take you if you don't complete your mission, and you started in January, then why'd you—"

"Die in June?" Ingrid smiles, but it's sharp and bitter. "Yeah. That was new for me, too. Apparently they're evolving from horrible to incorrigible."

"Would that ... happen to me, too?" I ask nervously. "Is that what Ralph is for?"

Ingrid frowns thoughtfully. "I have no idea, Alex. And, I'll be a little wary of Ralph, to be honest."

"But you were the one who made me take her in."

"I didn't make you do anything. I'm just saying to keep an eye on her." She glances at me sideways. "Anyways, I've done most of the research for this task, so the hard part's mostly finished."

"You think that's the hard part?" I complain.

Ingrid leads me to one of the towering doors and gestures at me. "After you." I roll my eyes. "Yeah because you really can't touch it, anyways."

"Hey, mister. Show some respect to your elders."

"You're like, four years older!"

"That's right. And I've been dead longer, so who has the most experience here? Me."

I wrinkle my nose, and she does it back at me, grinning. "You're annoying."

Ingrid gasps dramatically, and I bite back a laugh at her antics. "Right back at you."

"And that was a horrible comeback."

"Yes. Now are you going to open the doors or what?"

I almost don't want to, but I grudgingly grasp the curved handles. Before I can push, the door drifts open on its own, silent and majestic. My mouth drops at the sheer magnitude on the other side.

Honestly, I shouldn't have been surprised, but *holy crap*. The ceiling curves inward, domed, glass so clear that I can make up the veins in the leaves that hang from the tall tree outside. Rows and rows of books stacked neatly all around, computers and couches spread strategically, fitted into the open spaces, in the middle of the navy and violet circular swirls of the carpet. It's almost more impressive than Omobolanle's whatever room. I glance back, just to make sure that we hadn't stepped into a portal, and then take another step toward the closest mahogany bookshelf.

"This is so cool," I gush. "All the libraries close to our house are all, like, decrepit and whatnot."

"You're such a nerd."

"Stop being so rude. Treat your juniors with respect."

"Seriously?"

I ignore her, squinting at the hieroglyphs on a slim red book. "What does that say?"

"No idea." she steers me away. "And also not important. We're going to the back. That's where the books we need are."

"Are they also going to be in a weird language?" I whisper, craning my head to look back as we pass by several people. One of them has some sort of horns sticking from the sides of her nose, her eyes glowing a strange pink.

"No. They have multiple translations of the story, thank goodness."

"Story?"

Ingrid sighs. "Did you listen to the Magister at all? Many-Eyed is a legend. A very real legend, as you're about to figure out. I will show you my notes, but they're back home. It'll probably be easier to go through them than several books."

"Why don't you just tell me?"

"Okay, Mr. Taking-The-Easy-Way." She gives me a light push. "I will. Just thought that you'd like looking at the actual sources, just in case. I'm going to, anyways. Here we are."

I tilt my head back. "Where?"

"Literally right in front of your face."

I flush. Right. *The Anthology of the Many-Eyed One*. "I see how that can be obvious."

Ingrid floats up and down, muttering the labels of the books under her breath. "Get this one, too."

"What about that one?" I point at a picture book. It's bright yellow and ridiculously skinny next to the anthology.

She shrugs. "It's probably not that important."

"That's what they all say." I grab the picture book and add it onto the pile.

"Shush. Let's go check them out. And then we can explore your nerdiest dreams around the library."

I curiously peer at a hovering ball near the librarian as she takes my books, mouth pinching as she reads the titles. She looks young, which is odd because I'd always thought librarians in fantasy worlds were crotchety old ladies. Or perhaps she is ...

"Yeah, this may be a sore topic. Whoops." Ingrid smiles sheepishly at me, then turns morosely to the librarian. "Oh, Chenna."

"What is—"

"Pardon?"

I send Chenna a panicked smile. "Nothing. Sorry."

"Is there a reason why you're checking out books on this? You don't look like you're old enough for a task."

"Uh—no." Well, kinda. "Yeah kinda." Wait, was I supposed to keep this whole thing a secret? "No."

Ingrid snorts, and I fight down the urge to give her a stink eye.

Chenna narrows her eyes. She brushes a thumb over the spine of the thick anthology book, and I watch in awe as gold shrivels the air around her hand. “I haven’t seen you here before.”

“Haha!” I laugh in response. Ingrid laughs at me. Chenna looks unimpressed, though, so I wave in a random direction. Well, Ingrid seems to know her, right? Did Ingrid know everybody? “I’m Ingrid’s brother. This is a—er—rare visit. I was meeting with Omobolanle.” I carefully enunciate her name.

“Really?” Chenna asks harshly, clutching both books to herself. “This isn’t the time to joke about Ingrid.”

“I’m not! Can I have the books?”

“I’m calling Omobolanle.”

“What why?” I tap my lip nervously, thinking about her and my dad, locked in an argument. “I don’t think you should do that.”

“Dude, you’re not acting very innocent.” Ingrid cackles. I wait for some kind of advice, but she keeps on chuckling.

“Why not?” Chenna demands, and then very pointedly grasps the floating orb next to her and tugs it down. “Message to Omob—”

“That won’t be necessary.”

My dad puts a hand on my shoulder, and Chenna’s eyes widen. “Mr. Ahlberg! I—”

“It’s fine. He is Ingrid’s brother. May we check those books out?”

“I—oh. Yeah. Sorry. I didn’t know. Um, why—nevermind. Have a good day, Mr. Ahlberg and ...”

“Alex.”

“Yes. Sorry.”

Dad takes the books for me, tucking them underneath his arm, his expression stony. He doesn’t tell me that I don’t need them, though, so I assume he lost the argument.

“What should I tell mom?” I tentatively question.

Dad grits his teeth. “You can’t. I’ll talk with Omobolanle more on that. Just, Alex, you—” he sucks in a deep breath then shakes his head. “Come on. Let’s go. You’re going to have to get all the sleep you need. We’re disembarking at seven in the morning tomorrow.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dinner is—tense. Nice, and the food is good but wound so tight, it feels like one wrong movement might uncoil a rope with an anvil tied loosely to it. Maia pouts at her asparagus, dad scowls at his fish. Even Ralph seems bothered, twitchily licking at her fish bones on the ground.

When we finish, dad shoos me and Maia out of the kitchen. “How about you guys play with, er, Ralph? I need to talk with Florence.”

Maia’s face twists as if she’d just downed twelve glasses of pure lemon juice. She moodily dumps her plate in the sink, then stalks off. “I don’t want to play with the raccoon.”

“Her name is Ralph.”

“Why would you name her Ralph?”

“Alliteration.”

“Oh my monkey doodles,” Ingrid sighs as Maia looks down her nose as if I were stupid, then runs up the stairs and slams her door closed. I scoop Ralph into my arms, and Ingrid purses her lips at my movement. “Well, fine. I didn’t want to spend any more time with you, either. Not you, Ralph. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Maybe.” Ingrid shrugs when I narrow my eyes at her. “I’m just saying. The raccoon—oh, fine, Ralph’s related to this somehow. She was ... well, I saw her around during my task. Never really thought much about it. In fact, she was sometimes pretty useful. Lead me straight to the jet, but ...”

I wait for her to elaborate, but Ingrid simply taps at her bottom lip, a shadow crossing across her face. “Nevermind.”

Florence had moved my things into the guest room, so I unpack quickly before pulling the anthology to me and flipping to the first page. Alarm immediately swallows me whole. The font is so tiny and cramped, the page looks more like a rectangular swath of black of some abstract modern art. To my dismay, the rest of the eight-hundred or so pages are the same. "How—"

"Dude, didn't I tell you that I have some notes?"

"Oh. Uh. Where?"

Exasperatedly, Ingrid leads me to her room. I look around before pulling the door open, feeling like a robber. Downstairs, my dad's and Florence's voices are jabberwocky, but their worried tones make me feel contrite for nothing. I slip into Ingrid's room.

It looks ... well, not that much different. Somehow, I'd been expecting an air of deadness, like one would get from an abandoned theater. Or perhaps I wanted to see some other sort of magical device, an indication of her other life. Instead, it's normal, the bed unmade, computer and papers littered on her desk, walls painted a deep green and purple. It's like the room is still waiting for someone to inhabit it.

I shuffle over to the papers on her desk, reading over the first few lines.

"Biology???"

"Yeah. I was planning to major in the medical field."

I'm a little taken aback. There's an odd sense of misplaced *deja vu* as I remember dad talking at her funeral, saying something about college. "But why? You had a whole magic world."

"Yeah, I guess. But, I didn't really care for it. I mean, you have the Sight now or whatever. You can't say that it's that cool. And, I was prepared for it to be taken away with my task. I wanted to have some sort of safety net."

"You couldn't have stayed there? You'd probably be lauded as some sort of hero."

"Sure, and that would be nice, but. I don't know, Alex. I never really cared much for magic. I mean, I could've always visited, anyways. It's like ... everyone can

see and experience magic, even if they can't do it, which is basically my magic. I lived my whole life with it, so it's not as great as it is to you."

Her handwriting is messy, a hybrid of cursive and random squiggles, but there are pages and pages of in-depth analysis. It feels like someone had tilted my view on Ingrid three degrees to the left, slotted something new into place. I couldn't dream of giving up something as spectacular as magic, but I guess I'd never undergone what Ingrid had. Ingrid and my dad and Florence and possibly Maia.

"Here, take this green notebook. To your left, under *A Tale of Two Cities*."

"And you call me a nerd," I mumble as I do as she says before slinking out of the room. I grip the door handle and take one last look inside—this room, dusted and breathing, waiting for an occupant that will never come back.

It occurs to me that the ever-lasting feeling inside me, this uncomfortable twist in my chest was probably guilt. Guilt over having a chance to see someone who had died when all her loved ones couldn't.

I close the door quietly, and Ingrid lets out a silent puff of air. When she skims past me, she feels colder than normal.

Safely back in the guest room, Ingrid turns with her arms akimbo. "So, first things first. Do you know how to work around a boat? Or a ship?"

I whip around. "Wait, I have to drive a boat?"

"I believe the correct verb is steer."

"Ingrid!"

"Chill, dude! Don't worry! I'll help. And dad'll, too."

"I thought I was supposed to do it alone?"

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean you can't ask for help and use your resources. You just have to complete the actual tasks on your own. Actually, do you have any fighting skills I don't know about? Or, like, stamina?"

"Stamina? Trepidation clogs my throat."

"Ehh—it'll be easier to explain once you get there. You won't remember all of what I tell you now. Just read over the notebook so you get the gist of it."

"Why don't you just tell me the important bits?"

"Dude, just read. I need to do something else."

"What—"

She disappears before I can finish my question, and I grumble in irritation.

Sometimes, I'm glad I only managed to spend time with her now. I don't know how I would've survived her for any longer. Still, I flick through the notebook, once to check the length—the entire thing is filled—then I start on the first page. Trying to decipher her handwriting doesn't feel much better than looking at the block of text in the anthology.

Apparently, the first checkpoint is an island in the middle of nowhere. It only appears every Friday. There's a time frame from the beginning of the day until eleven-eleven in the morning

"Eleven-eleven," I repeat, deadpan to the empty room. I jot a star next to the note. "That has to stand for something. Make a wish or something."

So, there's talk about some sort of syrup that makes you hallucinate or something, leading you to a key, which is supposedly intended to unlock Many-Eyed's abode, which is—well, isn't it breaking-and-entering? But before that, you had to follow some sort of path or something to an airplane or something and then say something.

It reads like a fictional story, but I find myself unable to comprehend it as easily. Or maybe it's Ingrid's egregious handwriting and seemingly random note-taking. I peer at the huge books and wonder if I'd get more out of cramming eight-hundred pages in three hours.

Ingrid pops in periodically, looking slightly troubled. She answers my questions ("Is this a g? Or an s? Or a 5? And what's this entire paragraph?"), instructs me to mark up certain places ("And tear out that map. You'd need that."), then disappears again. I wonder if she's eavesdropping on dad's and Florence's conversation.

It's in between one of her short check-ins that the bedroom door is flung open. Maia stands there, her feet shoulder-width apart, her arms crossed like she's preparing to launch herself into a fight.

"What're you doing?"

I know it's a question, but it lacks the inflection at the end. Picking a fight with an eleven year old isn't really on my bucket list, though, so I answer her curtly. "Reading."

"Those are Ingrid's books."

"Um. No. I got them from the library."

All of a sudden, Maia slumps and bows her head. She clenches her fists, but her voice shakes. "Is she really here? As a ghost?"

I hesitate, wondering how much I'm supposed to tell her. Her eyes are wide and shiny, though, so I hurriedly say, "Yes. She's here."

"Can she hear me?"

"Yeah. I mean, she's not in this room right now, but she's in the house."

Probably.

Maia slumps over and collapses on the bed, keeping her gaze on the floor. "I miss her."

"Er." I look at Ingrid's notebook, and the pervading feeling washes over me again. It feels like I'm sitting on a beach—a sunny, perfect day—but the tides keep on lapping my sandcastles away. "I'm sorry. She misses you, too."

"I wish I could see her. Why can you?"

"I don't know. I also have to complete her task, too, and face possible death, so I'm not too happy." I aim a smile at her, but she doesn't laugh.

"That's not fair." She pauses then sighs as if she were eighty-five instead of ten. I don't know if she's saying it's unfair that only I can see Ingrid or that I'm facing imminent death. "Mom says I was acting rude. Sorry, I guess."

"Um. That's fine. Ingrid's kinda rude, too."

"No, she isn't."

Well. Apparently Ingrid has favorites or something. "Good for you, I guess."

Maia bites her lip and peeks briefly at Ralph, who had been circling around my chair before making her way toward Maia, lifting her hands delicately like she's on a catwalk. Maia brings her legs onto the bed and scoots back, mouth twisting down. I almost think she's going to get up and leave just to escape Ralph, but she resolutely turns toward me. "Can you—can you tell her that I miss her?"

I tap at my lip. "You can tell her yourself when Ingrid pops back in again."

"You're tapping your lip."

My actions stop. Huh. I was. When did I start doing that?

"Ingrid does that."

My thoughts stop. Huh. She does.

"It's okay. Thanks for the offer, but ... I don't want to. I really do miss her, and I wish she never—died. And I know that she's here or whatever, but she's not. If she were, then we would be able to see her, not just you. And all the stories about ghosts I've read—they always have to go back to—to death. So I don't want to—to think that somehow we can bring her fully back. But I want her to know that I do think about her. And that I love her. And I wish that she had—" Maia breaks off and furiously scrubs at her face before lifting her head and glaring at me. "You don't think I'm too cynical, do you?"

"Um."

"I know dad and mom really want this to mean something. If it makes you feel any better, you've brought them a lot of hope."

That actually makes me feel a lot worse.

"But I just don't buy it. It'll be great if she is somehow brought back, but I don't want mom and dad to get their hopes crushed. So you better not make any promises without knowing that you're certain about it." She takes a deep breath. "And you better not die. I don't want dad to go through that again."

"I mean, I don't want to die, either."

Maia stares at me for a long moment, her gaze a gigantic drill penetrating my head. Then, she gets up and leaves without another word, leaving the door opened. I try to concentrate on Ingrid's notes again, but I can't focus, and her commentaries are all over the place. Annoyed, I shove it away and grab at the picture book.

The picture book is ... short. Really short. It also shoots at the target of Ingrid's accounts and misses by a mile. Instead of having a fight scene, it depicts a long walk, children tales of not straying from the path, of keeping true to oneself and one's wishes and not giving up. There's a cheery main character, skipping easily across a planet and she arrives unscathed at Many-Eyed's house.

Please actually be like this.

I'm forced to go back to deciphering Ingrid's notes.

Ingrid appears a few moments later, and she raises an eyebrow at the page I'm on and then at the door. "Still on that? Did you go on a little adventure or something?"

I skim my thumb over the wire edges of the notebook. "Your sister came in."

"Maia?" Ingrid shakes her head. "Wait, don't answer that. Is she—is she doing okay? What did she say?"

"She misses you."

Ingrid sighs. "Oh. Yeah."

"But she doesn't want to talk to you."

"Yeah. That's—that's probably smart. I don't know how long I'll be here." Her voice sounds like she's dragging it through mud, though.

"You guys have magic, right? Can't someone bring back the dead or something?"

"It's not as simple as that."

We watch as Ralph climbs onto my lap, and I brush a hand through her fur. I'm really glad she wasn't carrying a strange disease with her. It's odd how behaved she is, but I can't think of her as malevolent, even though Ingrid still remains wary of her presence. "How come? Is it because of the magic ecosystem balance thing?"

"Yeah. Like that. I don't think anyone's been brought back from the dead. I haven't heard of anyone being turned into a ghost, either."

"You can be the first," I offer. Ingrid shakes her head again and takes a seat on the bed, close to where Maia had sat.

"I don't know, Alex." She taps at her lips, and I look away. "Why don't you try to finish my notes? And go to sleep early. You have a big day ahead of you, little bro."

CHAPTER TWELVE

I wake up before five the next day, nearly an hour before I'm supposed to, Ralph's weight heavy on my chest. She's slumbering fitfully, twitching at odd intervals. Ingrid's hovering in front of my laptop, her ghostly shape lit up by the light. An episode of a popular TV show plays softly.

When I sit up, Ralph blinks her dark eyes open and then climbs up onto my shoulders when I sit up, her bushy tail wacking me in the face. Ingrid turns at the creaking of the bed and then glances at the time.

"I'm awake," I tell her, scooting onto the floor.

"I can see that. Are you going to finish your waffles?"

Downstairs and dressed, I stick Robert's waffles into the microwave and stop it before it can hit zero. Ralph sticks so close to my feet that I almost trip over her five times. "Just so you know, this is really sweet."

My effort to remain quiet, however, doesn't seem to matter as halfway through forcing the waffles down my throat, dad comes down. He looks scruffy though he's clean-shaven now, and he rubs his eyes when he sees me.

"You're up early."

I shrug. "So are you."

"Do you want anything to eat?"

"No. I have ... this." I make a face at the waffles, and dad offers a strained smile, amused but melancholic. There's always some sort of sadness tinged with his

expressions whenever he looks at me. He glances around, and I point at Ingrid. "She's here, by the way."

"Oh. Good morning to the two of you. You don't have to finish that if you don't like it, Alex. Ingrid was influenced by my sweet tooth—I know your mom always preferred savory meals. I can heat the leftovers for you, and I'll finish those waffles?"

"Tell him that I still hold that against him. I had high cholesterol for half my childhood."

Dad grins when I relay the message, and he and Ingrid banter around as he dumps the leftovers into a pan. I try to emulate Ingrid's tone of voice and facial expressions when I speak for her, hoping that I can somehow bridge the communication gap. Ingrid looks happy when she talks with dad, but there's always a stilt to her words as if she's trying to ignore the glaring difference between what it was like before versus now.

"Are we going to leave early, then?" I ask as I stab at the rice. "Since we're both up?"

I can tell from the pinch in dad's mouth that he probably wants to avoid it as long as he can, but finally he nods. "Yes. Did Ingrid fill you in on everything? I'll be guiding you to the island, but you'll have to get on yourself."

"Did you help Ingrid with this, too?"

"No. She wanted to do the entire thing herself." He shakes his head and turns in Ingrid's direction. "Did you tell him about learning how to sail? Ha! She fell off the boat everytime she tried to move because she was too eager."

"Okay, dad. Bring up those times and embarrass me, wouldya."

We finish breakfast, and dad goes to dress up as I wait at the corner of the hall with Ralph, who hasn't left my side once since the morning. I lean close to where the locker-door should appear and notice the tiny rainbow zigzags shivering around the entrance. It reminds me of squinting at a light and seeing floaters.

"We'll be staying a little longer here. Daniel's arriving at noon, and he should have some more information on Ingrid's presence. If you finish early, we can visit more places. There's a museum that has just opened up?" Dad says as we enter the locker. Ralph clings tightly to my shoulders as we take a different path now, heading away from the town, claws digging into my skin. In the distance, there's the splash of waves lapping at the shore.

"Can we?" I ask excitedly, tearing my gaze away from a woman tending her plants, cradling her fingers around her flowers and coaxing them into a full bloom. I try to get Ralph to loosen up. She had been weirdly clingy, but dad didn't see a problem with bringing her, so here we are.

Dad smiles. "Of course. I only wish I could've taken you here on different terms." He glances in the direction of Omobolanle's building and his gaze sours, but he quickly checks the time and shakes his head like he's ridding himself of the desire to storm away and argue with the Magister again. "Do you have the map?"

I hand him the page that I had torn out of Ingrid's notes yesterday.

At the shore, there are a cluster of modest boats, colorful and bright in the rising sun. There is a scattering of people already awake, and they wave jovially at dad. Our boat is ... not as majestic as I imagined. Although it's made to look impressive, it's small, probably only able to hold five people at once. The size makes it easier for dad to wound the ropes around, though. He tries to teach me as he pushes back from the docks, but I almost topple over in a humiliating imitation of Ingrid's stories of her first attempts at sailing.

Ingrid breathes in deeply, or at least mimics the motion. The boat is fast, faster than I thought possible without an engine, skimming over the smooth water like the sea had been paved. Ralph paces around back and forth before settling into my lap. "This brings back memories. Alex, hold that rope."

"This is a good fishing boat!" Dad yells over the wind. "I can take you fishing sometime."

"Today?"

He squints into the sea spray. There's a troubled crease between his eyebrows that has been deepening throughout our ride. He splays the map open with one hand and looks away, searching for something. "We'll see."

Anticipation builds in my stomach the longer we spend on the water. The water is clear and bright, almost unnatural-looking turquoise. Slabs of smooth, spotted rocks line the floor in the beginning before tunneling into darkness as we continue, long after the docks disappear and it's just a huge expanse of ocean. Dark blue ripples dance across its surface, even when it's still. It's early enough that there's no one out yet, so it's just me, dad, Ingrid, Ralph, the boat, and the sound of water sluicing around us.

"Are we close yet?" I shout at Ingrid. The sun paints the turquoise with spots of orange and yellow, glistening off the shiny fish that jump up at random intervals. The light filters through Ingrid as she shakes her head.

"Close, though." She says something else, but it's lost to the wind. I open my mouth to ask her to repeat it again, but my attention is snatched away by a large shape in the water. I almost scream, but dad turns around and smiles, gesturing excitedly at it.

"It's a leopard whale!" He yells. His shoulders loosen a minuscule amount. "Auspicious sighting. They're believed to bring good luck."

It disappears when I peer over again, though, which makes me worry a little. Just as my anticipation starts to curdle into antsiness, a spot appears in the distance. As we get closer, I begin to make out the swaying palm trees, the dark brown rocks, stacked up into land.

I squint at the island, blood pumping vigorously as recognition brims at the edge of my mind. "Wait a second. I know this island." I'd spilled water on a photograph of it before and ... something else, something I felt like I'd seen before Mr. Cho.

"What do you mean?" Dad asks. His hand tightens again on the steering wheel.

"My teacher had pictures of places his students visited, and one of them was this picture. I accidentally spilled water over it one day, and then it kind of disappeared the next."

"That's ... that's troublesome." Dad frowns. "Did Ingrid say anything about it?"

"No." I keek at her imploringly. "Does it mean anything?"

Ingrid frowns at the round rocks. "I don't think—wait, don't dock!"

"What?"

Too late. I meet dad's eyes just as the boat disappears underneath my feet.

I flail my arms, shock slamming into me like a bulldozer right before I plunge into the cool water. My scream dissolves into bubbles, and I scramble to push myself up, but my hands beat uselessly around me. I feel like I'm flying—except I can't fly.

So much for leopard whale luck.

I'm about to choke on a lungful of water before cold arms encircle my chest, and then I'm being hauled out and onto the cold shore. What I've mistaken for rocks are actually coconuts, the hard fruit digging into my back, their scratchy hairs sticking to soaked skin. I keep my grip tight around my stomach, gasping for breath.

Ingrid's laughing beside me. "Oh my god! This is giving me major déjà vu. You're lucky that I'm here, bro. When I did this, I was, like, flailing like a crazy woman."

"Why didn't you warn me!"

"I did!" And then she bursts out into cackles again.

Dismay pools inside me. "Stop laughing! How am I supposed to get back?" Panic rises as I glance around. Ralph is sitting on a slab of rock, looking grumpy and wet. Ingrid's hovering above me. "Where's dad?"

"It's okay, don't worry. He's probably back at the docks again." She flicks my arm. "Dude, you are so lucky. Oh my god. I had to swim a mile to the nearest island the first time I came here."

"The boat's gone! I can't swim!"

"Oh. Sorry. It's okay, Alex! We'll figure something out. I'll pull you or something. Pshaw!" She lets out another giggle. "Though these coconuts are definitely new. Weird."

I stare at her, indignance displacing my adrenaline. Ralph starts to climb onto me again, but I dislodge her sharp claws from my shirt. "I almost died! And you're laughing!?"

"Sorry, sorry. I swear you're not going to die here. It's just funny. Brings me back to when I was doing this task. Seriously, relax, dude. Dad'll probably sail back here to pick you up."

"Why'd the boat disappear?"

"Didn't you read my notebook?"

"Yes. And nowhere did it say that the boat. Will disappear!" My voice rises in disbelief as Ingrid tilts her head nonchalantly.

"Oh. I guess I didn't write it in, then. But I did tell you."

"When?"

"Maybe you didn't hear me. Anyways, be like Ralph. She's completely calm."

Ralph bats at a fallen coconut, which rolls into the water with a plop. Ingrid narrows her eyes at her, then at the coconuts. "Huh. The island changed. It used to be, like, rectangular slabs of stone that made up the land. Just like the anthology said."

I gesture at Ralph. "Why didn't she disappear with dad?"

Ingrid cocks her head. "Dunno. Weird, huh. Was the same for me, except she was already on the island." She leans in close to Ralph so they're eye to eye.

Surprisingly, Ralph meets her gaze. "What is up with you?"

I stare at Ralph, too, almost expecting her to answer. She paws onto my head instead and curls up into my hair. Ingrid scrunches her nose at her. "Hmm. Anyways, get up. Time's wasting."

When we were sailing here, it was breezy. Now, it's completely still, like the inside of an air-conditioned building instead of on an island. It's like the magical

town we'd arrived in when stepping into the locker-door—brimming with colorful lines of magic. There's a forest of coconut trees, too, which I warily eye. "I feel like I've been here before."

And it does feel like it. The almost-drowning, too, had felt familiar, even though I've never been in a swimming pool or any large bodies of water in my life before today. Maybe it's tied with the photograph in Mr. Cho's room?

I follow Ingrid deeper into the island, but she stops at a tree before too long and crosses her arms. "That's ... huh. It's not here."

"What? The syrup tree? I thought we were going to have to walk further than that."

"Well, it was here last time. Hey." She points at me suddenly, and I jump, startled.

"... what?"

She waves a hand around. "Do you see any abnormalities with the magic? A golden-green line? Should lead to a tree leaking syrup?"

"Oh! Right." I vaguely recall reading something like that in her notes. It had taken me way too much time to decipher exactly what she was writing, much less what it was saying. I squint at the trees around me, at the rocky path. "Shouldn't you know?"

"The location changed. I wouldn't know. I can't see the magic anymore."

"Oh." I perk up at a flash of gold. "I think I see it!"

"Good job. You have eyes."

With Ingrid, I've learned that sometimes, I just have to ignore her comments.

Unlike the boat, the island is as big as I had thought it would be. I keep my eyes on the sliver of the golden-green line, smooth where the other colors squiggle, stable where the others are restless. It isn't directing us on the most efficient path, though I guess I should've suspected that.

Ralph jumps over a boulder like a monkey with superpowers, walking on the terrain with ease. I huff out a breath, and bend down to catch that breath again. My wet clothes cling uncomfortably to my skin.

"Are we there yet?" Ingrid complains, phasing through a leaf.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that? Why don't you tell me what's going to happen?"

"I told you, the location changed. And even it were the same, shouldn't you have read that? I'm certain I put that in."

"Yeah, but you also said that you were going to tell me."

"Well, once you reach the tree, you're gonna have to swallow some of that syrup and hallucinate and get the key."

Alright then. I thought I had read that part wrong in her notes, but apparently not. "Sure. Why not. How do I get the key?"

She makes an obscure hand gesture. "Hard to explain. You'll know when you're hallucinating." Then she gives me a haughty stare. "Dude, do you even exercise at all?"

"I eat healthy," I protest.

"Good job," Ingrid says drily. "I wish I had your ethic." The *clearly your diet isn't helping you climb rocks* goes unsaid, but I hear it loud and clear in my own head, complete with Ingrid's snarky tone. Ralph makes a noise—and if she were human, I would've called it exasperated—and suddenly sprints off, her bushy tail disappearing into the foliage as she scampers up the rocks.

"Wait! Ralph, stop!" I clamber for purchase on the rocks, pulling myself onto two before my fuel depletes. "Can't you—can't you, like, float me up there?"

Ingrid rolls her eyes. "Ralph'll be fine. And no, I—" she pauses. "Huh. Maybe."

She grips me by the arms, grunts, and hovers up. Reflexively, I kick at the air when my feet leave it, and Ingrid dips down suddenly, cursing creatively. "Do you want my help or not?"

"Sorry. Um. Can you actually carry me the rest of the way?"

I can almost hear her rolling her eyes. "Point me the way, your highness."

From then on, getting to the tree is laughably easy, even if Ingrid probably whacks my feet purposefully against some branches a couple of times.

The tree is surrounded by the golden-green filaments, and unlike the other trees, doesn't have round coconuts growing from its branches. Instead, its bark is shiny with sap.

Ralph tilts her head up as we land, as if she were a queen surveying peasants before circling the tree again.

"How'd you get here so fast, girl?" I ask, strolling up to the tree and peering at the viscous silver liquid running down its spine. "And how'd you know where to go ..."

She meets my gaze unblinkingly. I purse my lips, then shrug. Eh. Magic world, magic syrup, possibly magic raccoon. I'll try to think about it later after I ... induce a hallucination of a key to break into a mythical dude's house so that I can make a wish. Ingrid pats the tree bark.

"This is the easy part. It's after this that it gets ..." she wrinkles her nose. "Annoying."

I purse my lips at the rivulets of syrup. It looks like mercury. "Are you sure I have to put this stuff into my mouth?"

"Chill, dude. I'm still alive—well. I mean, I didn't die for that."

"So this is somehow going to transport me to a bunch of scenarios, and I just have to have the patience to go through all of them? And take my time?"

"Yep. Almost failed this, but my sheer coolness powered me through." She patted my shoulder. "It's boring. And long. But there are some cool animals. You do have to run and there is a sort of dragon thing you have to get past, but you probably won't get there until tomorrow since we arrived here so late. And, you have to focus on getting to the end, or you'll have to spend even longer there."

Ingrid surveys the area. "You might want to get comfy, though. I wasn't kidding when I said it's long—this is probably the most time-consuming portion.

Well, after all the research. Actually, I wouldn't really know of the third part cause I die—"

I don't know what my expression looks like, but Ingrid smiles at me nervously and sits down beside me. "You'll be fine. I've been telling you, the task isn't very taxing overall, especially since you have me. I've gone through all of this, remember? And I sure didn't have the luxury of a guide. If I can do it, you definitely can."

I take a deep breath and tell myself that the most dangerous part is not finishing it. I settle down on a dry piece of land and scoop up some of the silver goop. It feels like syrup, sticky and gummy on my fingers. Ralph makes her way toward me again, curling up beside my arm. With the hand not covered in goop, I anxiously ruffle her fur before taking another deep breath, bracing myself, and licking the sap off my fingers.

I have a split second to enjoy the taste—tropical, sweet, but not too sweet, and warm on my tongue, before dark spots swim across my vision, entangling with the other magical zigzags, and I fall into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When I open my eyes again, the syrup tree is gone, and so is the rest of the island. The air is viscous, almost solid, though it isn't harder to breathe. It's raining, and it takes an embarrassing amount of time for me to notice that it's dropping into the sky, muddling the clouds. It's completely silent, exactly as recorded in Ingrid's notes.

"Wow. I can't believe that worked." I glance around, wracking my brain for what Ingrid's notes said next, but I have never been good at cramming, and all thoughts flee me, replaced by the illustrations in the picture book. I take a step forward and then almost yelp in surprise when green spreads from the ground, the backward rain petering out until I'm standing in a familiar small town—the one the locker-door leads to.

"I don't think I can do this."

I whip around at the voice, and then I really do shout in surprise when a boy—no older than Ingrid—walks through me. I glance down, my mouth dropping: my hands are pale, ghostly blue, and I can see the flowers through them. I can feel my feet, but I can't see them. Fear twists deep into my chest. "What the—am I—"

"Nonsense! You're of age. All your friends have completed their tasks."

"I guess. But—" The boy's tall, his face square, his shoulders broad. He's nervously fiddling with some marbles in his hands, and I watch in amazement as they turn invisible, one by one, as they touch his fingers.

"And you've done so well in school! You're a bright boy, Lukstid. I know you'll make our family proud." The boy's dad cuts in. He pauses, surveying his son. "And you better beat Sezia's boy. I don't know how he managed to get through his task."

"Yeah." Lukstid—and what kind of name is that—weakly smiles. They make their way to the transportation sewers.

"I'm not dead," I tell myself. "Hallucination, remember?"

But it's nothing like how the picture book or Ingrid's notes had accounted. I glance at Lukstid and his dad, curious. Perhaps I'm meant to follow them. They're already stepping onto the sewer. Alarmed, I rush forward. "Wait—" I'm cut off as something pulls in my stomach, like a string connected to my navel, and although I'm not standing on the sewer, I travel with the son and father anyways. I blink in shock. Is this how Ingrid feels?

"Hey wait. This is Omobolanle's tower," I mutter, floating closer and marveling at the fact that I could float as well as the building itself, impressive even at a second glance. I recognize the bridge and the hexagonal shapes. The plants around, though, are different, smaller, and the area is teeming with people, many of them around Lukstid's age.

"Ah! Michael and Lukstid! Are you here for—" A woman walks forward, her steps accentuated by loud click-clacks. She grins brightly, and her white teeth have stones embedded into them.

"Yes. Hello, Sezia. What are you doing here?"

"Well, as you know, Hyan completed his task just last week, figuring out that remote little island and all. This world is just full of surprises, isn't it? Now, it's my daughter's turn!" She exaggeratedly shivers. "Oh, after Hyan's task, I just cannot fathom Hulia's! If it is half as eventful as his, I may have to throw an even bigger party."

"Yes. How great. The neighbors definitely need another party. Now, if you'll excuse me, we have an appointment with the Magister ..."

"Say hi to Hyan for me." Lukstid grins apologetically.

Instead of Omobolanle who meets them, though, there's a short man with a neatly combed lampshade mustache—Shuhuong, he's called—holding a huge book and several scrolls of paper. He leads Lukstid to the grand room next to his office, and they enter silently. When the heavy doors slam shut, he makes his way to the podium.

Lukstid takes a seat on the gold cushion on the floor in front of it. He shifts and pulls at his sleeves.

"Lukstid."

"Yes?" Lukstid sits straight up, his eyes wide. It's as if someone had attached strings to every part of his body so that every twitch would trigger an equal reaction somewhere else.

Shuhuong's voice is soft. "If you do not feel ready, do not let your father push you to do this."

"But I have to. And I want to. Most people my age have already done so."

"Everybody moves at their own pace. It's not a crime to wait a few more years."

"But I—Hyen did his, already, and he's two years younger."

"And there have been people older than you who have successfully completed their tasks. This is yours, not anybody else's. You get to decide when you are ready and when you are not."

Lukstid seems to hesitate before he shakes his head. "No. I'm ready. I'll do it this year."

The Magister bites his lip, something sad in his eyes. But he rolls out his scrolls and he puts out five bowls of water. As he starts chanting, a rainbow of light ticking over his fingers, I look over to Lukstid, instead. The waters are reflected in his eyes, making them appear too shiny and too large. When I look away, he's standing in front of his father again, crying, his hands trembling.

"Dad, I—"

"You failed."

"No. I mean yes. But it was an experience. I—I learned how to turn—"

"Lukstid, I am disappointed." Michael clenched his fists and looked away from his son. "I have worked and worked for the stature this family has now, and you could not even do one thing. *One thing* that was *meant* for you! That you chose!"

"I know. I know, dad. I'm sorry. But, just listen! Shuhuang said that—"

"Do not! Make excuses. I'm confused, Lukstid. What happened? Your ability is strong, your teachers have praised you on your intelligence, and—" He stares his son in the eyes. "Tell me why this happened."

"I don't know. I just ran out of time."

"You had one year."

"I know. I was almost done with it, but I—" He paused. "But don't we get a second chance? To try again?"

"Did Hyun get a second chance? Hulia?"

"But—"

"Our spirits are connected in this world, and you have marred it." Michael's shoulders relax and he closes his eyes. When he opens them again, there's a resolute acceptance to it, a different sort of sadness than Shuhuang's. "But you can redeem yourself."

Lukstid relaxes, too. He matches his dad's posture. "How?"

"There has been this new technique! You can transfer your energy to your family so we can encourage our own abilities, so that even when you fail at your task, you can still benefit our community."

"What is it?"

"Come."

"No," I groan, swinging out an arm to stop Lukstid from following his dad, though I know it's in vain. "Oh, no."

Is this the story of the gleaners? Why is the island showing me this? I thought the vision is supposed to challenge me or something. That's what Ingrid said. I already know this—Omobolanle told me. What was I supposed to do with this information? Was I supposed to do anything at all with it?"

Before the door closes behind Lukstid, he dissolves, his fingers whispering into translucence—like a ghost's. As soon as there's a click sound, the scene resets—but this time, Michael stands across a girl. She has the same stretched-out stature as Lukstid, the same broad shoulders. She's looking down, though, her hair covering her face.

Michael puts a hand on his daughter's shoulder. "Your brother has failed, but you have to succeed. Do you understand?"

When the girl looks up, at first, she's a mesh of features, twisting and fleeting. There's a red outline around her eyes, drooping and stretching like a miserable theater mask. Before I can step back in alarm, her face settles, it takes a while for me to recognize her. It's Ingrid. She looks so ... solid. Colorful. Her scraggly hair is pulled into a messy ponytail, her brows severe over her eyes in a fierce scowl. "I'll be doing it again," she says, and when I look into her eyes, I see her own face reflected back.

I frown, looking over my shoulder, uneasiness creeping up my spine. "What do you mean?"

"This is my magic," she tells me. "It has always been mine."

A light appears in the corner of the room, and when it hits my eyes, I blink awake. Ralph stares back at me, and I groan and push her away. "You know, this is hitting major *deja vu* points."

Black spots swim across my vision as I sit up, eyeing the syrup tree, confused and dizzy. Ingrid raises an eyebrow when I meet her gaze. She's curled up on a low tree branch, her arms crossed, her skin transparent. It's such a sharp contrast with the Ingrid in the vision that I have to do a double take.

"So?" she asks. "Wasn't so bad, right?"

I clear my throat, which is oddly dry. "You were wrong. There were no dragons or whatnot."

"I said that was probably going to happen tomorrow. But you got the quicksand, right? I'm a little surprised you managed to move fast enough to not be caught in that."

"No, I didn't."

Ingrid frowns and sits up, adjusting her position on the tree branch. "Wait, what? Then how about the huge tree you had to climb? Or the city you had to cross?"

"I kinda saw ... I don't know how to explain it." And it would be *weird* to explain it. I had wanted some answers, but it appears that, like the coconuts, like the location of the syrup tree, the vision I saw was not the same as hers.

"What? Did you do nothing?"

"I—" I sneeze suddenly and scowl down at my clothes. Right. I had dropped into the ocean. "Ugh, if I get sick..."

She rolls her eyes and floats down beside me. "You won't get sick."

"I hate being sick." I trip over a coconut but catch myself before I can face-plant onto the hard fruit. Ralph turns her furry head and makes a funky sound at me—sounding suspiciously like laughter—before hopping nimbly forward.

"Well, I hate being dead."

"But you can't get sick when you're dead."

"And you can't be dead if you get sick. Now, we should get moving if you don't want to plunge into the water a second time."

"Wait, what? Why?"

"The island disappears at eleven-eleven, remember?"

"Oh. Right. Make a wish."

Ingrid wrinkles her nose like she has a personal vendetta against wishes. She tries to shove away a branch, and her hand turns green as it phases through the leaves. "Ugh. Yeah. By the way, I'm sorry I haven't been very helpful. This island, your vision—it's different than what I had."

"Yeah."

"Seems easier. Who knows, maybe Many-Eyed is taking pity on us, that stinker."

I don't know if it's acceptable for her to insult a legendary figure we're supposed to get a favor from. "How long was I in the vision for?"

"Well, from my past experiences, the vision ends like ten-ish minutes before the island disappears. So it should be eleven in the morning, and we got here at around seven, so..."

"So, I was in there for, like, four hours. And I'm still not at the key?"

"Nope. At this rate, if dad keeps on escorting you there at seven, then we'll likely have to make two more trips to finish the dream and get the key."

"But we only have a month left, and that's not even accounting for the fact that we can only access the island on Friday." I frown, turning slowly to Ingrid, an idea forming.

She tilts her head then grins widely. "Are you thinking what I think you're thinking?"

"Perhaps—oh, thank goodness!"

Peeking behind the rows and rows of coconut trees, I can make out the sail of dad's boat. Relief floods my system, but as soon as I step forward eagerly, the coconut ground disappears beneath my feet, and I fall into the water.

For the second time, the cold liquid plunges into my system, and I have half a mind to scream in annoyance before Ingrid picks me up like a sopping cat and drops me unceremoniously onto the boat, cackling like crazy again.

"Are you serious?" I shout.

"That's what you get for being such a slow walker, Al!" Ingrid shrieks.

"Are you serious?" I repeat.

"Alex! Are you okay?" My dad hurries over, grasping my shoulder. "You're going to need a change of clothes. How was it? What happened? Are you hurt?"

I smile awkwardly. He's worse than mom. "No, it's fine. The change of clothes would be great, though."

"Alright. Hyan island's close by. We can stop there. Are you sure it was fine?"

I forget to reply for a moment. *Hyan Island?* That had been the name of that son, the one Lukstid's dad wanted Lukstid to surpass or something. "Er. Yeah, just visions and stuff. Hyan island?" I ask tentatively.

"Yeah. Was founded fifty years or so ago. It's a relatively new settlement."

Ingrid leans onto the steering wheel.

"An island close by—"

"Right," I squeak, interrupting dad. "Um, what about Daniel Harisbac?"

"We'll be meeting him back at town. He won't be arriving for another hour. We can go sightsee some things if you're feeling up to it?"

"Yeah, that would be great!" I try to summon the excitement of this morning, but I can't stop thinking of Lukstid and his dad, of the daughter's face, twisting and twisting with a n undercurrent of red. My dad grins, though, and Ingrid smiles at our dad smiling, so I try to relax. "But, um. Can you teach me how to steer a boat?"

The island is almost like an amusement park. It's loud and crass where the mainland is sophisticated and calm. It's tourists instead of settled families, and even the magic is more neon and haphazard.

I buy a change of clothes—as normal an outfit as I could find, but it still has dancing pink flamingos on the shorts—and even try one of the island's famous ice

creams, which tastes like hot cheeto chicken for some reason. Ralph seems to like it, though, so I give the rest of it to her and hope I'm not committing some animal cruelty crime.

I'm still trying to smack the taste of the ice cream out of my mouth when we arrive at Omobolanle's office again. This time, we go straight to the large room beside her office. Daniel Harisbac is there, and, surprisingly, Florence.

I give Harisbac a stink eye. Last time I saw him, he had refused me answers and shut me out of his apartment. Still, I wait while he and dad greet each other like old friends before bombarding him.

"Did you figure anything out about Ingrid?" I ask, trying to stuff as much pettiness into my voice as possible.

Harisbac shakes his head, looking a little disgruntled. Somehow, he looks a bit balder. I wonder if Brian looks hairier now. "I know you two are connected, but it's hard to say how connected you are."

"How is figuring out how connected we are important?"

"It's difficult to explain."

I took that as: I don't feel like explaining. Which. Fine. I probably wouldn't have understood, either.

"Then why are you here? Couldn't you have written that in a letter or something?" I crankily cross my arms, trying to portray extreme teenage angst which I have learned from Ingrid.

Daniel doesn't seem to appreciate my efforts. "If it's possible, I do wish to try something out, for the benefit of you two in case any harm befalls you or her."

Dad clasps his hands in front of him. "And can you—"

He doesn't finish, but Harisbac seems to understand. He gives a curt nod. "Stand back. Ingrid—she is in this room, yes?"

I nod affirmative. Understanding dawns on me as I watch Harisbac smear a circle around Ingrid across the polished floors. His eyes glow the startling blue, and this time, if I look closely enough, I catch a glimpse of tiny filaments of that same

blue connecting Ingrid to the circle. Standing with his arms raised, with the magic flowing out of him—it reminds me of Shuhuong standing in front of Lukstdi.

When the chanting stops, dad's staring directly at his daughter again.

Florence clasps a hand across her mouth.

"Ingrid," he breathes.

"Dad." Her voice shatters. "Mom. Hey."

Her face twists up as if she were about to cry, and Omobolanle gestures at me and Harisbac to the exit.

"We'll give you some time," she whispers, closing the door softly behind her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Did you go somewhere cool?" Jessica asks as she hands me her notes for the days I missed.

I pause, snapping a picture and tucking my phone back into my pocket. I purse my lips at my backpack. The stuffed boat the girl had given me had been gone when I came back from my trip to Michigan. I ... didn't really know what to think about that. "Yeah. You can say that."

She looks at me like *okay, weirdo*. Mr. Cho fusses with his projector. The morning bell rings, long and loud. Returning to school feels a lot like regressing to a job of painting walls after a paintball fight. Jessica shuffles her notes into her folder again, meticulously arranging them into date order. "You're lucky your parents would let you take days off of school, especially with Thanksgiving Break so near. Mine would probably murder all my teachers before they let me."

"Well, now I'm concerned." Mr. Cho smiles, and Jessica shoots him a thumbs up.

"Don't worry, Mr. Cho. I'll try to let them spare you."

Ingrid pops up next to me, and I barely even flinch at her sudden appearance. I send her a subtle glare, hoping I can convey *Would you stop doing that?* with my expression alone.

"Maybe spare me from Alex, instead. Something wrong there?"

Heat crawls up to my cheeks, and I whip around. Perhaps I wasn't as subtle as I thought. "I—um. Just. First hour."

Back in Mr. Cho's classroom, I'm reminded of the island picture. Ingrid—my repository of knowledge about magical stuff—didn't quite understand it, either, and last time I asked Mr. Cho, he didn't remember it. I turn to Jessica. "Hey, um. Weird question. You know that island picture Mr. Cho had in the beginning of the year?"

"What?"

I pinch my mouth together and try to study her expression, but she's giving me the *okay, weirdo* look again. "Nevermind."

The day passes absurdly normally. I half-expect to see the girl who had run up to me on the first day of school to come up again and shove another stuffed ship in my hands, but nothing happens. I find myself glancing continuously at the clock, waiting for school to be over—but when it finally ends, my heart still pounds in anticipation.

Mom's still at work when I get back home, which is just as well. Mom didn't look too happy to see Ralph again when I had come back with her in my arms, and she probably would be less happy if she sees what Ralph had done to her new daffodil and basil plant.

"And you were so well-behaved," I mutter, tugging her away from its leaves. She bares her teeth at me, stained green from the leaves before running off to paw at the door. I frown as I let her out, watching as her bushy striped tail disappears. "Where does she go? Do you ever follow her?"

"I tried, once. Sometimes, she just goes to a trash can, or murders someone's garden. Other times, she takes too long, and I'm back at your side again." Ingrid shrugs. "Honestly, Alex. Why would you adopt a raccoon."

"You told me to!"

"I don't think I did." She sighs heavily and throws herself onto the couch—or, hovering several centimeters above it. She lowers her head onto her chest and picks

at her purple shirt. "Seriously, why did I wear this? You would think being dead comes with, like, wardrobe benefits or something."

"No, actually. I would not think that." I shuffle over to my suitcase—I hadn't had the chance to unpack it last night—and drag out the three books on Many-Eyed, setting them carefully on my lap. "How did you know Daniel Harisbac, by the way?"

"Well, he's one of the few peeps who deal with spirit magic and all that. Also, he's mom's—Florence's—brother."

I am startled. "Wait, what? They don't look anything alike!"

"Are you just saying that because he's bald?"

"No!" I protest and turn to the books, snatching the picture book off the top and flipping idly through it again. Ingrid scoffs beside me, and the cartoon girl stares into my soul. My thoughts wander toward Lukstid again, at him disappearing as he walked out the door, at his sister turning into Ingrid and saying, *This is my magic, it has always been mine.*

"Hey, Ingrid." I stare down at the girl in the picture book. She's clasping her hands together, face turned toward a glowing house, smiling beatifically. *And the girl exclaimed in wonder, for her true wish had come true!*

"Hmm?"

"How come I can't see magic around you.?"

"I dunno, Al." She waves her hand across her eyes. "I don't have the Sight anymore. Maybe it's 'cause I'm dead?"

"But shouldn't I see some sort of sparky colors or whatnot because you're dead?"

"Dude, I really do not have all the answers to your magic questions."

"Why not?"

"Do you know how phones work? No."

Part of me wants to say I do, just to be contradictory. I shut the picture book and fiddle with the edges—laminated and shiny compared to the thick weariness of

the anthology, which I have been studiously avoiding. I may like reading about fantasy, but I don't like point five spaced, size eight writing. "What happens after the visions?"

After Ingrid, dad, and Florence had a teary reunion, Daniel Harisbac had performed some sort of ritual intended to "isolate Ingrid's connection." We'd tested it out last night, though, and it hadn't exactly worked—apparently, the time and distance Ingrid can spend away from me is still the same. Ingrid looks like she wants to test that out again, she looks so averse to the question.

"Ugh. I hate even thinking about it. If you're lucky, that part will be different for you."

"What?" I ask nervously. "What is it?"

"Well, if you had looked in my notes—"

"Ingrid, I honestly cannot understand half of your notes."

"Fine, fine. Well, once you get the key, the island shifts a little, and, for me, this spaceship-looking thing appears. Well, I had to follow the magic lines to it. Then, I broke into the spaceship, and there's this sign tucked in the consoles that's all like *Where do you wish to go?*" She changes her voice for that part. It sounds like something she'd repeated a thousand times, like a shameful curse and a broken promise. "But apparently just saying *I wish to go where Many-Eyed is* doesn't work, no matter how many times or many ways you say it."

She looks so put-out, I force out a laugh, trying to break the tension. "Make a wish. Pfft. Maybe you had to make it right when the island disappears cause, yanno, eleven-eleven and all that."

She grumbles. "You think I didn't try that? The only wish that was granted was—" She pauses, an odd look crossing her eyes as she glances at me, a realization and a remembrance.

"What—"

There's a scuffle at the door, and I hurriedly shove the books back into my bag as my mom comes in, toeing off her shoes. Almost immediately, she glances around, her eyes narrowed. "Is the raccoon—?"

I shake my head, and her shoulders slump with relief.

"You know, we don't have to keep her. I think Ralph knows how to survive on her own."

"No, it's fine! If I can handle contagious patients, I can definitely handle one ... pet."

Honestly, I don't think Ralph would like that label, but I smile at her anyways.

"How was school?"

"Fine. How was work?"

"Fine." She mimics my tone teasingly before collapsing on the couch beside me, almost sitting right through Ingrid. "I didn't get to ask yesterday—how was your trip to your dad's house?"

"It was good! He, er, took me fishing."

"Really? I didn't know there was a lake close to his house."

"Um, yeah, me neither!" I fiddle with my backpack zipper. "Would it be okay if this becomes, like, a thing? Like, can I visit him every Friday?"

"Of course! If you're going to make this a habitual thing, though, we should probably get you a membership for the train." She answers eagerly. It's just two words, but sometimes my mom can make the simplest things sound like she's traveled miles for it and has the experience to back it up.

"Really?" I hesitate. "Are you—?"

Her expression doesn't change, but she shakes her head. "No. I'm really proud that you're taking the time to get to know Ak—your dad. But I do have work, and we did part on comfortable terms. Maybe one day, but not today."

"But ... we're not going to spend Thanksgiving together?"

"I've had you for eight years. We can spare one holiday that we barely celebrate. Plus, you can come home on the weekend and we can spend your birthday together."

"Oh. Oh yeah!"

"Your birthday's next week?" Ingrid blurts. "No one told me that!"

That's cause no one can except me I think before realizing that technically, she could've learned it when she was still alive. It's almost uncomfortable to admit, but a lot of the times, I forget Ingrid was anything but dead—which is stupid and sad. I've seen her room, seen the impact she'd left, but I've only ever really seen her interact with me and look pale and sift through solid mass. It's like meeting someone in one environment, and that's all you characterize them as before seeing them in another place, or like thinking in absolutes.

"Do you have any plans? Any friends you want to invite over?"

I start to say no but draw up short. "Maybe. I have a friend, Jessica. She's in my first hour. I mean, we're not that close, but I think you'll like her? And maybe we can ... I don't know. There's a science museum that's opening up, we can go there." I think of Jessica maneuvering her way into the door, her snapback backward, and shaking my mom's hand like a business partner and almost take it all back, but mom looks ecstatic and Ingrid's grinning like she's just witnessed a puppy do a backflip, so I smile awkwardly instead.

"Is this the most you've purposefully gone out without an ulterior motive? Are you taking a break from your boring lifestyle, my padawan?" Ingrid dramatically booms, flipping into the air. "We are going to get you an ice cream cake. Have you tasted an ice cream cake before?"

I want to tell her that yes, I have tasted ice cream cakes before, and yes, I have gone out just to hang out before. Just because I stay inside most of the time doesn't mean that I'm a recluse.

"So it's decided! I already asked for a leave on your birthday, so we have the whole day. I'm excited to meet your friend!" Mom pats me on the head before going to take a shower, reminding me to finish my homework.

"By the way, when's your birthday?" I ask Ingrid once I hear the bathroom door shut and shower start.

"Oh, it passed already. Can you guess when?"

I ponder that for a moment, inexplicably determined to one-up her. "Is it ... March?"

"Nope."

I scowl. "Fine, February."

"Ding ding! Feb the fifth, my brodute."

"Oh. Happy belated birthday, I guess." I lug out my Calculus textbook and slam it on the table, but I only get through two questions before I'm swamped back into thinking about my—or maybe it's still Ingrid's?—task. "What do you think this Many-Eyed dude looks like?"

"Probably has many eyes."

"Nooo, really?" I erase a 5, triumphantly pleased that my 5's didn't look like my g's didn't look like my s's didn't look like my 6's. "So, for next Friday ... you said that the island appears at the start of the day, right? So ..."

"You're thinking of sneaking out," Ingrid finishes giddily. "Yes. Let's do that."

"Well, no. Would your dad mind if we do?"

Ingrid taps her lips, flies around the room a couple of times, and finally tilts her head back and forth like a sideways nod. "Ehhh ... honestly? I don't think so. He was a little crabby about me messing up my sleep schedule to figure out how long the island stays for, and now that I'm kinda dead from this and you're a novice ..."

"But shouldn't he understand the time crunch?"

"Well, if you want to tell him, go ahead. But if I were you, I would just do it. Plus, you know how to steer the boat now. It's easy swimming once you get past that part."

That was one way to put it. Also, I can't swim, so Ingrid's reassurance smacks me in the face instead of pouring me hot tea.

"So you smell rotten coconuts?"

"No. Haven't in a while."

"Hmmm. Interesting." Ingrid glances at the basil and daffodil plants, and I follow her gaze, a tinge worried. I'd tried my best to fix up both of them, but the basil's missing a suspicious amount of leaves, and some of the daffodils are lopsided, their faces crowned and their beards chopped off.

"By the way, why the rotten coconut smell? I've smelled bad coconuts before, and it's more of a taste than a stench."

"Do you know how phones work?"

I grumble at question number three. Sometimes, Ingrid gives me strong Jessica vibes, like an annoyingly judgemental person who, impossibly, doesn't strike too many nerves, and who I wouldn't trade for the world. Well, actually maybe the world was too extreme ... who I wouldn't trade for a signed copy of *A Wrinkle in Time*.

Or maybe I'm just a pushover. "Okay, fine, I get it."

As if proving my point, something scratches at the door, and I immediately rush toward it. Ralph sits haughtily on the other side, and she tilts her tail up as she walks in, curling up neatly onto the couch in the spot where I had been sitting. "Didn't I tell you not to scratch at the door?" I ask, moving my work to the other side. Ralph doesn't answer, and I sigh. "I hate when I realize something about myself."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Alex! And Ingrid?"

Dad looks happier. His shoulders are pulled back, and his hands hang at his sides with purpose rather than burdensome weights dragging his body down. He pulls me into a hug and then mock hugs the air where Ingrid is. Both of them beam manically at each other, even though Ingrid's the only one who can see the other person. A few people send us some sideways glances, but I pay them no mind—I'd gotten good at that with Ingrid around.

"How have you been doing? Nothing bothering you? No gleaners?"

"No. Haven't, er, smelled them in a long while."

"Good, good! And Ingrid?"

I glance at my sister, who's staring deep into a cat's eyes a few feet away.

"Yeah, she's been good, too. I think."

"I'll hold that for you." Dad chuckles as he takes the cheap portable kennel from me. Ralph scritches at the plastic bars—it had taken a lot of work to convince the train lady checking us in that Ralph was just a rare breed of raccoon dogs from Japan, and by the end, I think she let me bring Ralph only because it wasn't worth the fight. I try to nudge a few crackers in between the bars, but she hisses at me in annoyance and bats harmlessly at my hand.

"What do you even like to eat, buddy?" I ask, biting the insides of my mouth. If she wasn't still as fit (for a raccoon. Maybe) as ever, I would've worried about her picky eating. The only thing she seems to take a liking to are mom's plants—especially the ones with flowers—and since those are untouchable unless I want my mom to lose her patience and actually kick Ralph onto the streets, there hasn't been much I can give Ralph.

"Have you tried any insects or eggs or berries?" Dad asks, jostling carefully through the crowd.

"She doesn't really like insects or eggs, either. I think she might be vegan," I joke before the joke turns into a not-joke midway through the time it took for my thoughts to turn into spoken words. I give Ralph a suspicious glance. Can raccoons be vegan? Even if they aren't, I wouldn't be surprised if Ralph is. It's like everyday, I

discover something strange about her. I feel like one day I'm going to wake up and realize that she's actually a reincarnated goddess, or better yet, Many-Eyed themself.

That idea is so bizarre, I almost stop in my tracks and consider it.

"Alex?"

"Huh? Oh." I hand my dad my small suitcase and backpack, and he puts them in the trunk.

"Are you tired?"

I grasp at this opportunity. "Yes! Extremely. Is it okay if I can just take a nap? For the rest of the day? There was a calculus assessment today, and I stayed up the whole night studying for it yesterday." There *was* a calculus quiz today, technically. It just didn't count for a grade, so I didn't really spend much time looking over the material. "And I don't want to be dead-tired tomorrow. Cause. The task."

Dad gives me a disappointed stare, which he must've taken years to master because it's worse than mom's. "All-nighters are bad for your health, Alex. Ingrid was like this, too, sometimes, and she always regretted it afterward." His tone is a little darker for the next part. "And don't concern yourself too much with the task. I'm working with Daniel and Omobolanle to figure out why you're tied to it when you didn't even have a choice."

"Oh. Okay." The possibility that I won't be finishing it, however, makes me feel slightly indignant. I probably dedicated more of my time trying to decipher a few pages of the anthology than actually studying for my calc quiz. Plus, the task felt like a leeway into the magic world, a shot at something extraordinary as well as an obligation to Ingrid.

"You're back," Maia says when dad and I enter the house. Seemingly unconsciously, her eyes flick to the side before she clenches her fists and stares me determinedly in the eyes. "Is this going to be a thing now?"

"I guess." In my peripheral vision, Ingrid droops down. Maia hadn't been there when Daniel Harisbac had manifested Ingrid for dad and Florence to see, and Ingrid

pretends that she's fine with it, understands where Maia's coming from, but she looks confused and hurt for a split second.

Not knowing how to address either of them, I let out Ralph who immediately tries to attack the spider plant at the door. Dad's a little braver.

"If you want, we can talk to your sister tomorrow. Alex is going to take a nap."

"I said I didn't want to, dad."

"But she's back. You wished multiple times for her to—"

"If you don't give me concrete evidence of Ingrid's permanent return, I'm not going!" Maia grits out, but her voice trembles, and she keeps on glancing at me like she's waiting for Ingrid to possess my body and ask Maia *why*. "I'm going to Clary's house, please."

For a second, my dad seems to want to argue, but he sighs. "Go ahead. Alex, your room's the same as last time."

"Thanks," I choke out awkwardly and lug my stuff up. With the door closed, I set my alarm for one in the morning. "I don't think she means that, Ingrid."

"No, she does. Maia's always been practical." She heaves out a sigh. "I get it. I really do. Stop looking at me like that. I just—it would be nice to speak with her again."

Ingrid shakes her head as if she could dislodge her emotions. "Nevermind. Get your rest, Al. I won't hesitate on siking Ralph on you if you don't wake up on time."

I sleep throughout the day, and then—when everyone, even Ralph, has gone to bed for a considerable amount of time—I creep out and toward the space where the locker-door is. Then, with a sledgehammer of alarm, I notice something. "Hold on, can I actually access this thing?"

"And you ask now?" Ingrid rolls her eyes then shrugs. "You should be able to because you're family. Just imagine pulling the magic world to you."

"How?"

She mimics the same motion dad did, and I huff out a breath, glancing cautiously at his and Florence's room. I can hear soft snores coming from within, and the noise mollifies me somewhat. "Okay," I breathe. "Okay, okay."

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to remember every little detail of the little town, of the flashing lines of magic running through the cobblestones. I wave my hand, feeling slightly silly, and imagine the blue squiggles churning into motion, of the locker-door and its gilded edges.

I nearly collapse in relief when I open my eyes and see the entrance sparkling in front of me. Stepping forward feels like entering a crime scene or waiting for the gunshot in a track race. I quickly enter in the combination, my fingers trembling with anticipation. When I try to tug it open, though, it doesn't budge. Frowning, I spin in the numbers again. Then I close my eyes and picture the locker-door swinging open, but it still doesn't work "Ingrid."

"What?"

"I can't open it."

"15 7 59?"

"I know," I hiss.

"Wait, are you skipping the third number before entering it?"

"What?"

"Yeah, do that. Wait, no—here wait." She puts her hand over mine—and it's freezing as always—and I scowl as we enter it in tandem.

"That's what I did—" I blink in shock as the door falls open. "Okay, that makes no sense."

"Maybe I just have the magic touch." Ingrid smirks smugly, wiggling her fingers at me. The little town is dark, the cobblestone path quiet. Still, magic zings through periodically like a train that never stops. I hear another snore, rumbling comfortably on the silence.

"C'mon, bro. You can do this. If you want, you can hold my hand or something." Ingrid grins at me. I scrunch my nose back.

"I am not holding your hand."

"Suit yourself, baby bro."

"You are four years older!"

"Exactly. What a baby you are."

I harrumph, but the bickering eases me somewhat, and I step through. The exit vanishes behind me, and I inhale deeply in an attempt to calm my racing heart, as if somehow the extra air would push out any other misgivings. It feels like meeting Daniel Harisbac clandestinely again, except this time, I have little knowledge of my surroundings.

Ingrid takes the lead, and I twitchily follow closely behind her, jumping at the dark shapes that turn out to be trees or the jangling of keys that turns out to just be the zipper of my windbreaker. Half of me expects to hear my dad's voice, ringing with disappointment, or perhaps a magical creature that only comes out at night and feasts on teenagers. I almost reconsider the offer of holding Ingrid's hand, but the thought of that alone makes me want to wilt in embarrassment.

"We're here," Ingrid whispers even though she doesn't have to. She floats over to one of the boats, which had looked so unique buoyed in the middle of nowhere, but now surrounded by a dozen other boats, barely snatches my gaze.

"I didn't say this before, but this boat is really weird."

Ingrid snorts.

"No, really. Like, I searched up how to steer a sailboat, but most of the sailboats have rudders and stuff, but this just has a wheel."

"Do you know how a phone works?"

I slit my eyelids so that I'm staring at Ingrid with a sliver of my sight. "You seriously need to get another saying."

"It gets its point across. Put your feet right here, dude. You're going to topple the boat."

We push off with minimal damage and too much panicking on my part. By the time we're sailing through the quiet waters, hearing the waves slosh at the hull,

I feel like I've brushed past several self-induced heart attacks. "You know, before you appeared, I've never sneaked out before. You're a really, really bad influence."

"Aww. Only the best for my little bro."

"Stop—" I let out a huff of frustration. "You are—"

"Steer left. Did you bring the map with you?"

"Oh. Right. I don't really get it, though."

"What am I, beef jerky? Here to only sit and be ridiculously expensive?"

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Yeah, yeah." Ingrid flits over to starboard, and the moon slices through her.

She looks a little more transparent than usual in the night, like the backdrop of darkness is hiding her in its shadows.

The ride feels shorter than usual, and before long, we catch a glimpse of the island, coruscant by the light of the night sky. I carefully halt the boat. Ingrid looks dubiously at the distance between the shore and the boat.

"I can't swim," I remind her.

"Then why did you stop so far away?" she grabs me under the armpits though like she's handling Ralph on a particularly rowdy day and flies us toward the island, anyway, dropping me onto the coconuts.

From there on, we hike through the island like the first time. I don't know if it's the darkness or the context of the situation, but I'm jumpy and rattled at each snap of a branch. I find myself missing Ralph, who isn't a ghost.

We reach the syrup tree. The mercury sap running down the bark is almost luminescent, rivalling the light of the moon without the sun's torch to outshine.

"How long did it take for you to get through your visions?" I ask as I swipe a glob off the tree.

"Hmmuhhh. Maybe twelve hours, give or take?"

If all goes well, I can be a day ahead to complete the task. I nod breathlessly—it feels like someone is seizing my chest, twisting my stomach into my intestines. It feels like sitting down, a minute before the teacher passes out a test

I'm not sure if I studied enough for. Before I can lose my nerve, I lick the sap from my fingers and try to relax as spots overtake my vision.

I land in what looks like a classroom. The teacher's strolling around from group to group, her hand clasped behind her back.

"What can you do?" There's a boy sitting in front of me. He looks vaguely familiar—indefinite boredom, his blue eyes drooping. When he speaks, his teeth point sharp from his mouth.

I start a little, looking from side to side, almost replying before someone beats me to it.

"I'm guessing you're like a vampire." Ingrid looks younger than her ghostly self—more Maia's age instead of eighteen.

"A what?"

"Cause your teeth."

The boy lifts a hand to his teeth, frowning. "What does that have to do with anything?"

Ingrid grins like she's about to grab the markers in the middle of the desk and start painting fake bloodstains on his face. "Nothing. I guess I can see stuff that most people can't see."

"Like what?" His impassive facade doesn't twitch, but there's interest permeating his voice.

"Like, lines and stuff. When people use their abilities, I can ... it's hard to explain. I guess it's really rare, but there's not much to it but a cool light show." She goes on before the boy can comment on her magic. "And you?"

"I can shapeshift into huge sea creatures," he says, all lackadaisical, like one may say I know how to play the violin. "It's not very useful for me, though. I would rather not step into any large bodies of water. You were talking about vampires. What are those? Are they something from the—" He gestures outside as if to imply an outside outside of the outside.

"Yep. Have you ever been?"

"No, but I want to. I'm thinking of visiting when I'm grown up. My parents don't want me straying too far. They're both close advisors to the Magister, so." He pauses and glances at the teacher, then at the whiteboard where a list of icebreaker questions are written out. "What do you want to do when you grow up?" He asks, haltingly and obviously recited from the board.

"I'm thinking of completing a task, and then, who knows. I dunno if I want to stay in this world, though."

The boy tilts his head. "Why?"

Ingrid grabs a marker and starts scribbling at a corner of the desk. She wipes the blue off, and it smears across the smooth gray and her finger. When she answers, it's honest and sure and nothing like any icebreaker response should be. "Everybody seems content with what they have here right now. Nobody's really looking to change or challenge themselves, to be honest. It's like a ... dying utopia that has accepted its death. And well, my ability's kinda useless here. Why do you want to leave?"

The boy fidgets, but he doesn't get a chance to reply before the scene shifts, and four bowls of water appear, spaced perfectly apart. Magic sparks inside them like they're holding colored lightning before words slink out above them, each of them in tune with the other like a single puppet.

Omobolanle gasps. She's on the podium, her arms raised similarly to Shuhuong's when he was supervising Lukstid's task. I follow her gaze to the leftmost text, but I barely read the first line before I fill in the rest—it feels like a memory, or watching a movie and implicitly understanding what is being shown.

"Ingrid!"

I reply involuntarily. There's a still sort of anticipation coasting inside me. "Is this—?"

Omobolanle and I both gape at the proffered task. The Magister seems to be trying to curb her fascination, but her eyes drift toward the leftmost choice everytime she pulls her gaze to the front. "You do not have to take it," she finally

breathes out, meeting my eyes. "It does not have to be your duty, or anyone's. We have messed up thoroughly in the past, and we need to face our repercussions head on."

"But if I do this, you can start anew. People won't have to suffer from past mistakes." I'm transfixed with the task. Something inside me timidly advises me to read the other choices, to think it through before I impulsively jump at something so unknown. "Do you get what this means? It's proof! It's proof that Many-Eyed really is out there. I can—I can help everyone."

"Ingrid, it is not a single person's job—"

"But it can be!" I eagerly tear my gaze from the task to look at Omobolanle head-on. "Wouldn't that be for the best?"

"It is not—"

I don't wait for Omobolanle to finish, swiping at the bowl and lifting it to my chin. "I'm choosing this."

"Have you read the others?"

"Yes," I say primly, quickly doing just that. They're ordinarily gray next to the one I'm holding, simple tasks that can be performed by someone else. The bowl in my hands is heavy with purpose—it's something I've been waiting for, something that will—maybe—slot a justification of belonging that I've been missing for so long. "I'm sure I want this. Please. It wouldn't have been one of my choices if I couldn't have handled it."

Omobolanle hesitates. She seems to freeze with all her being, her expressiveness screeching to a painful halt, stretched between care and want. And I can tell she wants this. Finally, she lets out a breath. "Very well."

She slashes her arms down, the lightning zings forward with the touch of a new-born baby, and I grin, so triumphant, I feel like I'm going to fall—and then I do. I'm pressed on my back, and Omobolanle's gone. Fear shivers through me, fear and the vestige of frustration. I want to call for help, but my mouth is already opened wide in gasping breaths.

A light appears, bright enough to blind, and I at first I think the sun has cut through the roof above me, but then I see the outlines of eyes—hundreds or thousands—blinking in unison, irises gold, pupils gold, stoic and sorrowful, delighted and poignant.

"Many-Eyed. I've found you."

"Is that what you wish?" he asks—but it isn't really speaking, not with which you can use your ears to hear. His voice thrums through me, the vibrations forming words that are not words.

Take me to Many-Eyed, I think. Take me to Many-Eyed, and I don't want to die. Some part of me wonders if I'm hallucinating. I must be, right? Nothing about this makes sense. It's only June, and I'm so close to success. It's only June, and I've completed so much. It doesn't make sense. "I wanted to help. Why?"

"Is that what you wish?"

I want to see dad again. I promised Maia I would take her to her piano lessons today. Florence was depending on me to wash the dishes. I want to see mom again. I wonder how my brother is doing; we haven't spoken—really spoken—in years, haven't we? How are they doing? "Take me to Many-Eyed," I choke out. I feel almost delirious, like I'm looping back a video clip. "I want to help."

"Is that what you wish?"

My vision is filled with gaping red—like diluted blood and wailing souls—and there's something like slipping into a volcano and having my skin stripped off, but it's inside me, and I start to think about all of the people I wish I have seen and things that I want to do. I have a brother, not just a dad and a step-mom and a step-sister. I would tell them that I love them, but what would I say to him? "Take me to—"

I'm lying on my back. The rain is falling back into the clouds, and it's silent and viscous and fresh. I sit up. My hands are shaking. I scarcely register the herd of strange-looking creatures beside me—black and white, like an anteater who wanted to be a panda. One of them nudges my head.

There's a key next to me. The bottom half is old and rusted, the top polished and shining. The animal nudges my head again, grumbling deep within its throat. I grab the key.

I wake up.

The smell of rotten coconuts.

Ingrid's eyes are blown wide—she's screaming my name. There's something around her, this mass of diluted-red shapes—if I look closely, they look like faces—and I scramble forward, shouting her own name like somehow responding would make her reach further. I brush the tips of her fingers—they're ice-cold, more so than usual, and it feels like dipping my hands in an ocean of dry ice—but she's swallowed up before I can grasp onto anything.

I shoot up, and my heart is pounding so hard it almost hurts. Utter despair floods my system, an entire mess of unwarranted betrayal before the shock can kick in. "Ingrid!"

I turn around in a desperate circle like maybe she'll be spit out. "Ingrid!?"

The key is warm in my hands. I sprint for the boat.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The stench clings to me as I scrabble onto the boat. There's a stuffy feeling, like I have steel wool inside of me. I want to fall onto the deck and scream, and the strange sense of betrayal, of unrepenting fear swells inside me. The island disappears, the sun is shining, and I'm shaking so hard, it takes me three times to ready the boat. My push-off is slanted, and panic bubbles inside my throat like scalding water, another ingredient in the whole mess of emotions I can't sort out.

"Ingrid?" I call out, just in case. "Ingrid?"

Somehow, I manage to steer myself back to the mainland, and by that time, I feel like I'm choking, I'm so terrified. She's never been away for this long. There's another bout of fear and guilt. I feel like I'm swallowing them whole.

I jump off the boat before it can dock, and I rush forward, the teeth of the key in my hands digging into my skin like it's going to bite my hand clean off. To the tower, to the tower, to Omobolanle and Daniel Harisbac, oh god, oh god, oh god. Someone catches my sleeve, and I almost fall to the ground.

"Where do you think you're going, Alexander?" My dad demands. "I can't believe—"

"Ingrid!" I cry, clutching at his arm. I imagine the gaping mouths again, lined in crimson, wailing in agony, whirling around Ingrid and consuming her. My tongue feels bloated, my throat too dry. Forcing the words out feels like speaking another language. "She was taken!"

My dad pales. "What?"

"The gleaners!" I yank away from him, struggling to focus, focus, focus you need to get to Daniel Harisbac but what if he's gone again what if—" "I need to—"

"The gleaners?" My dad grabs my shoulders. His eyes are huge and scared. The blue of his eyes are almost drowned by the white. I hastily nod, and he grabs my arm and drags me onward. We burst into the Magister's building, and K'shmert startles, his disinterested expression sharpening. He was the boy in the vision, the one who Ingrid was talking to, I realize randomly.

"Mr. Ahl—"

"I need to talk to the Magister. Now!"

I heave and then almost gag. I can't seem to get rid of the rotten coconut odor. I try to distract myself, but even the riveting magic lines seemed to have dulled.

"Daniel!" my dad roars as we exit the elevator. "Omobolanle!"

We slam into the room next to Omobolanle's office. Daniel's crouching over a huge book. Next to him, Brian is carefully pushing away another stack of books, and Omobolanle stands over them in careful supervision. All three look up at our entrance.

"What is—"

"Aksel! Please—"

"The gleaners!" I gasp out again. "They took Ingrid!"

That seems to snap them into action. Daniel straightens. "Brian, get me the—" "Got it."

"Alex, stand here."

I don't even ask any questions as he paints a circle around me. He's chanting under his breath, and it sounds almost guttural, like the creatures in the vision. Everything's reminding me of the vision, the island, the rotten coconuts, and I keep on replaying Ingrid's face in my mind, and there are feelings that don't feel like mine, that feel like a parasite's leeching off and ...

The thought punches me in the gut, then. "I think it's in me!" I feel like throwing up. "The gleaners!"

"I know," Daniel snaps. "What do you think I'm trying to do, boy? Stay still!"

The fetidness slowly fades, but it still feels like it has dug deep into my skin and burrowed into my tastebuds. Brian arrives with a stash of herbs and vials of liquids, and Daniel draws another circle, his fingers steady, his voice sure.

I feel light-headed. I don't know how long I stood in the circle for, but by the end, my legs are sore, and my feet ache. Daniel stands up shakily. He wipes away the circle around me and lets out a slow breath.

"Well?" My dad asks.

"It's too soon to tell. If it worked, she should appear next to Alex next week. You're lucky they're so intrinsically connected. It's like her spirit is tied to Alex's. I was able to use that to lead me to her. Meanwhile, you should wear this." His voice is raspy. He hands me a corded necklace, a plain-looking pebble at the end of it, inscribed with intricate shapes. I slip it over my head obediently. "What happened? How was she taken?"

They both look at me. I stare at my feet. Shame curls tight, unwounds sharply. Jumping into a boiling pot of oil sounds less painful than recounting what I had done. I spit out the tale in halts. "I'm sorry," I say. My face feels hot,

uncomfortable. My words shutter in the air. I press the heels of my hands into my eyes, and my face is wet for some reason, and my lips taste salty.

"Alex," my dad says, searching for words. He doesn't finish, though, so he must've not found any.

Going back to dad's home feels like trespassing. I can't bring myself to face Florence and Maia, so I head immediately to my room and lock myself in, only getting up when Ralph scratches at the door.

"Hey, Ralph," I whisper. Talking any louder makes me want to rip my vocal chords out. "I messed up."

Ralph's ears droop, and she grabs at my ankles lightly. I pick her up before gently closing the door again. "I really, really messed up. What if it doesn't work?"

The key is still in my hands. I'd forgotten about it. Its imprints are carved into my hand. Ralph paws softly at my grip until I'm able to loosen up. I leave the key on the floor beside me and rest my head on the bed. I try to calm myself, rhythmically brushing my hand through Ralph's fur.

I suddenly wish that Ralph could talk. I want some sort of reassurance from someone who didn't understand the entire implications of what just happened. I grab at my phone and shakily enter in my mom's number.

"Hello?"

"Mom." Something about her voice makes me want to cry again. It never occurred to me how similar she and Ingrid sounds.

"Hey, sweetie. I'm at work, so I won't be able to stay for long." For a moment, it's just me and her breathing. There's a crackle in the background, some people chattering. "What's wrong?"

There's a chip on the corner of the door., a gaping wound of wood against the white paint. "Um. I think I really upset dad." My voice cracks, and I feel too miserable to be embarrassed.

"Oh, no. I'm sure that's not the case. What happened?"

I might've put his daughter in danger. I didn't save her. I brought his hopes up and I couldn't keep it.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Are you sure he's mad? Sometimes, us parents may seem angry, but we're really just concerned."

"No, I know he is. I—I didn't listen to him, and I hurt someone."

"Are they okay?"

"I don't know."

"Are you sure it's your fault?"

Yes. I know it's unfair to expect advice when I won't even give her the full story, but some part of me wants her to just innately grasp my feelings, to foster a perfect generalization that would make me feel better. I clench Ralph's fur in my hands, probably too tightly, but she doesn't shrug me off. "I—I lost something of Ingrid's."

"Oh. Oh, Alex."

My eyes tear up. I try to swallow it back in, but gulping seems to fuel the sob even more. "Yeah. I didn't mean to."

"Sometimes lost things are lost things. It doesn't do us any good if we hold onto everything."

"But this was important."

"As is everything we have one time in our lives. That doesn't mean it will or should stay forever."

"But it's—" important to me. I don't want to let her go. She's a living thing—was a living thing—and she could've been so significant before. And—and that vision. I don't know how accurate it was, but I had experienced what she felt. Her last moments. "Mom, what if I don't get her back?"

We breathe for a moment. Then, she says, "Do you think Ingrid would want it back?"

I let out a laugh at that. "Yes. Yeah. Like, definitely."

"Alex, sometimes—" she hesitates. "Sometimes, we can't control who or what we lose. We can't drag ourselves down with it, and you can't bring it back perfectly the way it was. Your dad may seem angry now, but he'll—and you'll—have to learn that no matter how much it hurts in the present, we can't live in the past forever. The world's not going to wait for us. And sometimes, losing things pushes us to tend to other marvels, things we didn't even think about before. Talk to your dad, Alex. I'm sure it's not what you think. If it gets really bad, at least you're coming home tomorrow."

Tomorrow. I imagine going to bed the next day, and Ingrid hasn't returned. "I messed up, mom."

"Talk to him, okay? Understanding others is usually the key to letting go." There's another crackle in the background. She needs to go soon.

"Okay," I choke out.

"Good. I love you. See you tomorrow."

"Yeah."

She stays on for a few more seconds before hanging up. I stare at the blank screen, the key on the ground, Ralph silent on my lap. I can't make myself move. I don't know how I'm going to face anybody tomorrow, let alone get up and speak to dad today.

"I'll talk to him if Ingrid appears," I promise Ralph. She chitters lowly. Ingrid had said that her Sight was useless—I empathize with that now. I can't do anything but wait. There's no way to fast-forward or skip, no way to flip to the end to check for a happy ending. It's watching a light show with no end.

Dad, Florence, and Maia send me off. Dad looks like he's trying to find the correct map for his words to follow, but they keep on lunging off a cliff instead. I feel empty and at the same time strangely normal, like I had finally walked past a mannequin and mistook its presence for a living human's.

Florence gives me a hug. Maia keeps on glaring at everything, like she's screaming with her eyes: *What did I tell you? It's only been a week since we figured out, and Ingrid's gone again.*

The train ride is a vast silence. I keep my eyes outside, watching the forests and the stores and the profuse number of American flags speed by.

Going home feels like letting myself sink back into passive stagnancy. I haven't accomplished anything worthwhile, but I've left a mess behind. The key from the island rests heavily in my backpack, stuffed to the very bottom, piled down with extra clothes and homework and my laptop like I could snuff the extraordinary out with enough layers. I don't know if it's my constant awareness of it, but it's a spot of warmth against my back like a gentle and insistent push with no arms.

Mom greets me with a hug, her eyebrows furrowed as she pulls back, searching. I half-expect her to read the whole situation from my face. "Did you talk to your dad?"

I shake my head mutely.

"Alex—"

She doesn't even wrinkle her nose when I let Ralph out. "I'm going to my room."

It isn't until I collapse on the bed that I realize what's been bothering me about my reaction. If I had taken my feelings at Ingrid's funeral and flipped it to the opposite end, I would probably hit pretty close to the mark. Yet, my shame and daze feels a lot the same. It's odd how completely different emotions can yield the same reaction.

There's a calendar hung next to my clock. I count the Friday's—one, two, three, four, five more left. Ingrid had been taken by the gleaners on the third portion of the task—what if there are more? What if I don't have time?

What if she never returns?

I snatch Ingrid's notebook from my desk and then the two other books on Many-Eyed. That night, I really do stay up. I'm scared that if I close my eyes, my

dreams will twist into a fantasy that I want to escape. Mom's at work early the next day, so I spend my whole day slumped on the couch, keeping an eye on the time, trying to count down the twenty-four hours.

I watch as the little hand ticks past twelve. As the big hand follows the minutes slowly and slowly and slowly. I slip in and out in a tired haze until the clock and its blank face is the only thing that swims in and out of my vision.

If Ingrid were here ... I scowl. When had I become so aware of her presence? When had I begun to enjoy her presence? I'd survived fourteen years without her, would've gone on with my life without a care if her death didn't break a dam.

Get some sleep, dude. It's not good to mope around. Your birthday's tomorrow. Don't ruin it. My pep talk sounds like her voice in my head. Aggressively, I flop onto the couch and squeeze my eyes shut. I feel Ralph curl up on my stomach, and I focus on her weight. *Go to sleep. Go to sleep. Stop moping around.*

In my dreams, I'm watching Ingrid being taken again, except this time, she spins around and around, and her mouth and eyes stretch red and taut until she's a gleaner herself. My mom sets her hands on my shoulders and looks at me head-on. Her skin is marked with blinking eyes, thousands and thousands of them. She says, "You have to understand, sometimes, to let it go," and her voice reverberates in my bones like she'd pulled the words right out of my marrow.

I wake up on the floor. The little hand is barely past three.

The next day, I stare at my reflection for a good five minutes. The bags under my eyes could've been designer. I look like I've been hit by several small trucks. When I force my mouth into a grin, I worry I would be sent into an asylum.

"Happy birthday, Alex," mom sings as I slump my way to the kitchen. She hands me a jacket, her gaze sweeping over me. "Lighten up! We're going to your favorite restaurant."

I grunt and bat at the jacket sleeves, getting my arm in on the third try. I give her a small smile to appease her and try to sum up some energy. "Oh. Great!"

"We'll be back before we have to go to the science museum and meet up with your friend. What was her name again?"

"Jessica." I almost want to ask if I can just stay home and sleep, but it wouldn't be fair to cancel on the day. We'd already bought the tickets, too. It would be a waste to not use them just because of me.

Mom seems to catch on, though. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Yeah! I'm fine!" I force myself to stand straighter, and then catch myself expecting one of Ingrid's snarky replies. Maybe she would say something like, *If you were any worse at lying, you'll make a world record.* Something stupid and nonsensical. It takes the force of an ocean for my expression not to drop. "I'm just a little tired. Didn't get much sleep."

"If you want, I can get the food, and you can lie in a bit."

If possible, I feel even worse with her easy accommodation. I don't want her to think I don't want to spend time with her. "No, that's fine! Let's go!"

"I'm serious. If you're—"

I march to the door and yank it open, breezing on a smile and praying with all my heart that it looks better than the one I had given myself in the mirror that morning. "I'm good. Thanks, mom."

The food is great, as always, warm and flavorful. The restaurant's atmosphere is a little more posh than Robert's Waffles—the bulbs hanging from the ceiling lit, adding a slated feel to the sparse natural light, the walls painted a sophisticated charcoal gray—which is good because I don't want any reminders of dad. Mom complains a bit about the interns—always skipping the necessary readings to gossip, using their phones to play games instead of understanding some sort of medical app. I complain a bit about my classmates—always skipping the necessary readings to gossip, using their phones to play games instead of working on a group project.

It's a bonding experience, complaining about other people.

When we arrive at the science museum, I feel slightly better, like someone had chucked me into the ocean after setting me on fire. I've almost completely cleared my head of Michigan and the people and places in Michigan, even if I still can't brush off Ingrid's absence.

Jessica meets us, dressed in her usual getup and intimidating everyone with her girth. She turns her cap forward so she's actually wearing it the right way, though, and she greets mom politely like she doesn't impersonate all her teachers in the rudest ways at lunch. She hands me a small gift bag and a punch in the arm. "Happy birthday and all that. Nice necklace."

I try very hard to not think about why I had the necklace in the first place. "Thanks. And also for the lava lamp."

She grins. "It was on sale, but it was also the most expensive lamp on sale."

I like to think I put up a good front through the rest of the trip. We go through all of the interactive experiments and stop to read and forget all of the panels about the solar system. Mom and Jessica have a friendly debate about Pluto and almost destroy the Marsville exhibit. I even start to enjoy myself even when it becomes apparent halfway through that the museum is primarily targeted toward little kids.

When mom goes to pick up the cake, though, Jessica crosses her arms, muscles bulging. If I hadn't known her, I would've closed my eyes and wished for a painless death.

"What's got you into a mood, kid?"

"I'm fifteen," I protest, feeling a little ditzy the way I always feel on my birthday. Like, woah, I am actually a year older after a year, how weird is that? The feeling is quickly squashed as Jessica continues to stare me down. I realize that she's still two years older than me, however mature I feel now. I break eye contact. "Why does everyone keep on asking that?"

"First, you look like crap," she begins in that no-nonsense way that allows her to connect so easily with mom and reminds me so much of Ingrid.

"I'm sorry," I apologize miserably.

"Don't be. Feel whatever you want. It's your birthday. I'm just saying, if you want some alone time, just ask for it."

"But I asked you to come all this way, and I'm not even being a good friend."

Jessica rolls her eyes. "Alex, if I didn't want to come, I wouldn't have."

"Oh." That's nice.

"But I'm worried about you. What happened?"

I'm in the middle of coming up with an excuse before my tongue captures the truth and spits it out for me. "My sister died this year."

Jessica freezes, likely not expecting a whole deluge of tragedy when she asked. She doesn't stumble out an Oh, great, sorry for asking now can we go back to a more lighthearted topic? though. "I'm sorry. Were you close? To her?"

The words flood out of my mouth like a tsunami. "Kind of. For most of my life, we didn't really talk after my dad and mom had a divorce. But before she ... died, we started hanging out more. And now it's weird. Not having her around." I take a deep breath and spew out more, half-wondering if I should just stop. "At her funeral, I didn't know what to think. I didn't know her that well. I didn't understand why I couldn't, like, mourn for her. I thought the guilt of it was going to follow me forever. But now I miss her. And I—I feel like that's worse somehow."

Jessica's silent for a moment, and I'm struggling to apologize again and hide my face or maybe jump out a window and into traffic, but she inhales deeply. "My nana passed away some years ago. I felt the same way, to be honest. I think at first it was a shock because even when I knew she was going to go away someday, it still hurts in a syncopated way. And ..." She purses her lips. "Wow, this is getting way more emotional than I signed up for."

I wince. "Sorry."

She shakes her hands. "No, no. Wow. This whole year, huh. Um. Well, my nana used to say something like, the good things always come after the worst suffering or something. I dunno. But, I think ... it's not wrong to not be able to empathize as

much in the beginning, especially if you didn't know her that well. And it's not wrong to feel it now. To miss a thing that could've been." She scrutinizes her fingernails, chipped with blue nail polish. "You don't have to reply if it's too personal, but is that where you've been going on Fridays? To visit your dad?"

"Yeah."

"Oh. Well, anyways. It's never going to be over, you know. Like, even if you didn't know her well, I think you're the type of person to constantly wonder what could've been. I guess ... just remember the good times. And focus on bettering yourself now and reconnecting? I don't know. Obviously don't pummel yourself for something you didn't know would happen. And it's good to talk to other people, of course. Maybe you'll feel better with some closure from other people who knew her better? And sometimes, it's better to feel something than nothing, even if it hurts more. That means you can address the emotion itself. With nothing, you can't really start anywhere."

"I guess."

"And, er. Don't let other people's expectations make you think they're your expectations, and don't let them, like, exacerbate it either, especially if it's something you can't control." She glances up, cringing. "Sorry if that was a little cliche. I'm not a professional therapist, don't take my stuff to heart."

"No. I think I feel better. Thanks, Jessica."

"You're welcome. You bought chocolate ice cream cake, right?"

I laugh at the change in subject, nodding affirmative.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I need to talk with dad." In the corner of the room, the lava lamp Jessica had given me pulses gently next to mom's plants. Ralph hisses at it, stalking suspiciously around the lamp. "Didn't you say I should?"

"Well, yes. I did. You don't have to do anything right away, though."

"No, I'm sure." I coax Ralph into the kennel and stand up, hoping I look a year older. "I think. I think it would be good."

"Alright, sweetie. Don't be afraid to come back early if you want to, though."

I flush. "I'll be fine. And don't call me sweetie!"

"Okay, sweetums."

"Mom!"

The train ride feels odd without Ingrid criticizing my calculus, and I have to use Slader more often than not, but I actually manage to finish all of my homework. Maybe because Ingrid isn't around to criticize my calculus or drag me into a game of counting flags or birds or signs.

I'm ready to stalk up to dad, mission in mind, but I'm slightly thrown off when Florence meets me instead. "Your dad's at work today."

"Oh." Right. That was a thing adults do. "When's he coming back?"

"Soon. He was thinking of taking you on a fishing trip later on today. Would that be okay?"

"Definitely!" Perfect. He can't escape.

"Has—" Florence starts the car. "Has Ingrid—?"

"No." Don't let other people's expectations exacerbate or make you think they're your expectations I think vigorously, shoving the guilt down so far that it chokes on its feet. "Daniel said she should pop up in a week. We still have one more day."

We have a pit stop to pick up Maia from her piano lessons. She stalks into the car, her hair done up in a sloppy bun and wearing dress pants like she'd tried to take a dip into adulthood before realizing the clothes didn't fit yet.

She whips around to me as soon as she climbs into the car, and I brace myself unthinkingly when she thrusts her fist at me before realizing she's trying to hand me a beaded necklace. It's lopsided and a little too colorful for my taste, but I take it anyway. "It matches your talisman necklace. And it isn't as boring."

"Oh." I say, surprised. I quickly loop it over my head under her watchful gaze. "Thanks."

"Dad said it was your birthday last week."

"He remembered!?" I blurt out.

"Of course he did," Florence says from the driver's seat, her voice a little tight.

"We bought you a gift."

"That's ... cool."

"Does he usually not remember?" She tries to sound light, but it works as well as hiding a tiger behind a bunny.

"Well, no. He sends gifts, but I don't think he ever took into account the time it takes to mail it, so it always arrives late."

Florence's brows pinch, but she relaxes. "I'll have to talk to him about that. Or, next time, we can go visit you in Chicago! Wouldn't that be fun, Maia? We've only been to Chicago once. I don't think it's fair that Alex is always coming to us."

"Well. That's because of the task," I say weakly, but Florence tenses again—the same way dad does when I brought up the task around him—so I quickly change the topic. "When's your birthday, Maia?"

"June," she replies grumpily, then smacks herself in the forehead. "Wait, no. I meant to ask you what I looked like."

"What?"

"Do I look like a June birthday to you?"

"Um." I stare at her burning eyes, the ferocious way of holding herself so that it looks like she's ready to punch someone at a moment's notice. "Sure."

Maia grins like I had somehow passed a test. She whips out a gameboy, which I thought had died out decades ago. "Cool. Do you want to make a character for yourself?"

There's surprisingly a lot to learn about a kid during a twenty-minute car ride simply building characters for a game.

As I struggle to haul Ralph and my suitcase out once we reach their house, Maia tsks impatiently, practically shoves me aside, grabs my things, her arms bent like a backward flex, and marches to the door. Bewildered, I glance at Florence, who

simply smiles at me—maybe she means it to be commiserating, but I really don't know what to think of that.

Florence is right, though. It doesn't take too long for dad to arrive, and by that time, I'm almost glad. There's dealing with Ingrid, and then there's dealing with Maia who acts like a young Ingrid—in other words, with less restraint and more malicious chaos—, and it's almost traumatizing. In a good way if I tilt my head and spin around ten times. But maybe I'm merely glad that she doesn't seem to want to defenestrate me.

Dad steps through the door, greeting the three of us in turn. I wait for some sort of sign of his distress, but he simply smiles. "I take it that Maia told you about your gift. Do you want to open it now, Alex?"

"Actually, I didn't. It was mom!" Maia protests, adding a huge pimple to one of her characters and snickering like she'd just performed world domination. I feel like I'm the only one who's slightly concerned.

"Later. Can we go fishing now?"

He seems slightly taken back. "Yeah. Yeah, definitely. Let me just chance and grab a quick bite, and we can go on as usual."

I peruse his entire response, trying to pinpoint some inflection that would reveal any anger, any distaste, however unconscious. I wait for a trigger, one word that conveys an entire accusation, and I'm almost disappointed when I don't find any. He's addressing me like nothing has happened.

I clench my fists.

Going through the locker-door, watching the familiar town unfold like a flower blooming hasn't lost its charm, but there's something different.

I hadn't been imagining it the first time—the magic lines are duller, almost completely faded. But looking around, nothing seems like it has changed—the people go about as usual, the sparks of magic flouncing visibly when someone cups a plant into bloom, stretches out their arm like noodles. So, if the setting hasn't changed, then maybe I have.

I crunch down on the spark of some realization—the ones that are as mind-numbing as being asked to interpret a poem written in the middle ages. I have to focus on my first objective. I narrow my eyes at dad. He's talking casually, lightly. There's nothing off about him, not like the first time I visited him.

He hands me a life jacket, makes a joke about bringing it the first time, pushes a fishing rod onto the boat—a different one than the one we used to get to the island, which is great, because if I see that boat again I might just jump off in guilt—and then plops a net into my arms. I let out an oof and almost topple onto the ground.

"Sorry! Usually Maia's able to grab it easily. Did I catch you off guard?"

"Yeah," I squeak, chucking the net into the boat and watching despondently at the dramatic rocking. *Your daughter probably isn't an example of average strength. She probably got into a radioactive accident,* I think before a better explanation kicks me in the head and calls me stupid. "Does Maia have super strength or something?"

Dad looks at me, baffled. "No. Where'd you get that idea from."

I do not gape. I do not gape. I brush it off suavely and totter onto the boat like a professional tight-rope walker. "No reason. Nevermind."

We cruise off, veering onto a different path than the one we used to get to the coconut island. This boat actually has an engine, so it doesn't take long for land to shrink into a squashable colorful dot.

I suck in the wind, almost hack up my lungs, and glare deep into the water. It's just dad and me. I should say something. I have to say something or I'll combust. Nevertheless, the opposite holds true, too—if I do say something, I might just swallow a dynamite. Dad tosses me the net, and for once, there are crow-feet wrinkles rather than tired wrinkles.

I help him loop the net around some poles, rocks, small outcrops, and then try to purchase that map for words that dad had failed to find last time I saw him. Finally, he shuts off the engine. It's quiet, almost as still as the backward-falling rain in the vision. Quiet in the way looking down from Mount Everest might feel.

"Here." Dad lugs up the fishing pole and starts spinning the ... spinny thing. He brings the rod over his shoulder then flings it out. "This requires more patience and time. We can get the fish from the nets tomorrow, but it's always fun to try the more time-consuming way."

He hands the fishing pole to me—which is heavier than I expected or maybe I'm extremely weak—and I give it a few half-hearted spins. The rod is red and black, and the line sinks into the depths of the sea and vanishes like it had never existed. Weird that some things happen that people would never be able to experience first-hand. "Why have we been using that other boat if we could've just used this one? It's faster."

He laughs a little, but in that stilted way he always does when talking about the task. "I'm not too sure myself, but Ingrid always insisted on that one. I suppose it may be something she researched upon. Careful there. If you hold the pole like that, you might lose your grip."

The mood doesn't feel right to bring up a subject that clearly puts him off, but I'm afraid I'll never get the chance if I don't do it. Right now. Right now.

"My dad used to say—"

I interrupt him. "Are you angry?"

He seems to be expecting this, which makes his lackadaisical attitude seem worse. Dad shifts, and the boat rocks gently beneath us. "I was a little, yes. You left in the middle of the night with only a note. That was irresponsible of you."

Right. I know that. He doesn't say, *What would your mother think*, which I appreciate, but he's avoiding a particular topic. "Sorry. But I'm asking about Ingrid. If she doesn't—" I feel like I'm gagging on my thoughts. The fishing rod jerks a bit in my hands, and I take the out gratefully. "I think I feel a fish."

It's not a fish. There's nothing on the hook but the fake fish used as bait. I fling the line messily into the sea again, a little surprised when I don't manage to hit myself or my dad.

"I'm sorry if I made you feel that I was angry at you for that. Ingrid's task ... Ingrid herself. This whole situation." He runs a hand over his face. His tired wrinkles are back again. "You should never feel responsible for any of it. If she doesn't return—"

"What if I ask for her back? When I meet Many-Eyed? They grant wishes, right?"

There's some sort of hope flitting in his countenance before he frowns and shakes his head resolutely. "Alex, no. You *will not* have the responsibility to do that. It would be selfish. I *have been* selfish."

"But Many-Eyed grants wishes—what if I wish for both? For the gleaners to disappear and for Ingrid to come back alive?"

"It pains me to acknowledge that you have to finish the task in any way, but when or if you get to that point, please focus on the task that Ingrid had. I—" He clenches one of the extra nets in his hands. "If it compromises you in any way, please stick with the original goal. I should've accepted Ingrid's death months ago. I'm not going to get my hopes up just to lose her again. Maia—she had the right idea." He laughs.

I stand up and almost lose my balance, but I'm filled with too much sudden anger. With Maia, she had almost sounded mature when she listed her reasons for not interacting with Ingrid. But dad—he doesn't even seem to feel much remorse. I know how much Ingrid means to him, how much he means to Ingrid. "So you're just giving up on her?"

"No. Of course not, no!"

"Then why?" I demand. "Why don't you look—sad or something? I—I thought that—" I angrily spin the line. "Did her having magic make up her entire worth to you or something? So when she's—she's a ghost, or gone, you suddenly turn to the next best thing, which is me because I suddenly have these—this magical crap Sight thing? So you've replaced her or—or—"

Dad's mouth drops open, and mine do too. The words burn like acid in the air. It corrodes my throat like gargling salt water, swallowing Listerine.

"What?" he breathes. "Alex, do you—do you think I left you and your mom because you didn't have magic?"

Well, no, but now that you've put it into words, it appears the logical conclusion, doesn't it? I keep my gaze on the red part of the fishing rod. I want him to laugh it off as a joke, want him to release the tension that clogs the wind. But I also desperately hope he'll talk. I swallow.

"No. God, no, Alex. I loved your mom because she was passionate and intelligent, and she was an anchor in my life when I first traveled outside this world." He waves his hand at the ocean, at the town in the distance, at the net in his hands which morphs into twine and then back again to its dirty steel color with a touch of his fingers. "And I love you because you're my son, and I should've remembered my duty to you even after the divorce. Your mom and I—we drifted apart before I knew Ingrid had any magical affinity, do you understand? And even if I had figured it out earlier, I will never leave you or anybody I love just because they don't share a characteristic of one aspect of my life."

"But you did leave. And we didn't keep in contact." I know it's wrong to place the blame on him. It's all of our faults. Mom didn't keep in touch with dad didn't keep in touch with me didn't keep in touch with Ingrid. In the distance, a fish jumps out from the sea, spraying water. I wonder if it'll be one of the unfortunate souls to get caught in the nets we'd just set up.

"I know. I know. And I am so sorry. I know I've had my mistakes, and I will never be perfect. But we're rectifying that, aren't we? I want to get to know you again, Alex. And—and I should've let go of Ingrid before I let any burden of her against you befall you."

I clench my jaw together. "You shouldn't have to let her go," I whisper. Then louder, I repeat it.

Dad gives me a look that creases his whole face. The setting sun casts his face into abstract light. "Alex, Ingrid's dead. The only reason why she's here at all is because of you."

"Good. Great! And once we get rid of the gleaners, she'll always be here."

"Do you really think she wants that?" His voice is soft, which only irks me more.

"Yes," I snap, but the affirmation feels as dull as the magic lines, as the fishing line disappearing into the dark depths. "How do you know, anyways?"

"Daniel, Omobolanle, and I have all been looking into this. Ghosts are so rare here because they represent imbalance in our magic. The only thing that comes close to them are gleaners themselves."

He sighs when I stew in silence, my knuckles whitening over the fishing pole.

"Do you want to go back?"

My eyes burn, but if I blink, if I move, if I think beyond the stagnancy of my body, I might have to accept something I haven't thought of since Daniel Harisbac was unable to exorcise Ingrid the first time.

Dad starts the engine. We go back home.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I might as well have gone to Hyan Island and bought another pair of flamingo pants the next day. Even going through Ingrid's notes and part of the anthology as well as reading through the picture book an obscene amount of times for a fifteen year old, I depart the sailing boat blind with no goal. Ingrid had had months to research, years to understand how magic works. I've only had three weeks.

I stand in the clearing, Ralph in one hand, key in the other, wondering why I hadn't taken the task more seriously, but knowing it was because everything had seemed so much simpler because I was sure that Ingrid would never have been taken.

The magic lines that had been so neon and overwhelming just a week ago are as gossamer as the ones in town.

"Hey, bud." I set Ralph down. "Do you know where to go?"

Ralph chitters and gnaws at a coconut hair. I sigh and glance back at the boat. My dad is a shadow under the sunlight. "Okay, then."

For hours, we walk around the island. It never hit me how big it is—bigger than Hyan island, dense with trees and coconuts. I sneer at the hard fruits underneath my feet, squint at the magic lines.

Halfway through trying to untangle myself from some leaves—I don't even know how that happened but apparently traipsing the wild isn't one of my skills—Ralph perks up. She sends me a look, which would've unnerved me a month ago, but I grin now.

"What is it? Did you find something?" I tear at the palm leaves around my arms, fumbling with the stems. I swear Ralph rolls her eyes at me, but she aids me in my endeavors to escape from the vile palm trees, so I forgive her. We scamper forward, and I hit myself five times on overhanging branches.

"Ralph, where are we—holy bovine."

We burst into a clearing. My mouth drops open, my words fall off a cliff. It looks like a rocket, except squashed down, shrank down, and made with twisting branches and moss. I lean in close to one of the wings, thinly carved with wood and slivered down artfully. In the back of my mind, I hear Ingrid's voice: *the island shifts a little, and, for me, this spaceship-looking thing appears*. I turn to Ralph, gaping. "Does this actually work?"

I round the vessel—there's a ramp. I glance at Ralph. She looks at me, then confidently struts in. The insides light up, sparkling lights like bloated fireflies drifting delicately on an invisible breeze, and despite the materials making up the rocket, there's a modern-looking console and spacious windows depicting the outside.

Ralph hops onto the console and nudges a panel across. "Hold on, wait—"

Too late. She scratches over it, and the panel comes loose. I'm about to panic and scream, scared that she'd doomed us all by crippling the transportation to Many-Eyed before I notice the slip of paper inside.

Ralph widens her eyes at me like she has eyebrows to raise.

"Okay, okay. Thanks, Ralph. I'll allow you to nibble on mom's basil when we get back, promise." I cautiously pick up the slip of paper, fingers light, nervous that if I use any more force, it will crumble in my hands like some sort of parody of *Endgame*.

In choppy script, all caps: *Where do you wish to go?*

"Just like Ingrid said," I breathe. I glance at the consoles. "To Many-Eyed. I wish to go to Many-Eyed."

I wait in silent anticipation. Ralph hops down besides me.

Nothing happens.

"I wish to go to Many-Eyed," I repeat, and then hesitantly slam a few green buttons. "Please."

The rocket jerks, shudders. A shiver of excitement zaps through me, and I think *Holy crap it's happening*, but then the floor disappears from under me and I drop into the water, spluttering and flailing.

Time's up.

Ralph grabs my shirt sleeve with her teeth and practically drags me to dad's boat, where I grasp onto the lifesuit he throws at me.

"How did it go?" Dad worries, handing me a change of clothes.

"Fine. I didn't get through much, though, and we only have four more chances." I snatch them from his hands, slightly grateful, slightly frustrated from the other night. I glance around expectantly, waiting for Ingrid to appear. It's been a week, exactly, but I don't see anything.

"What ... is there anything you want to do now?"

I shake my head and pull the dry shirt over. Ralph immediately begins to chew on my wet one. I frown at her, but she keeps eye contact as she grabs a fistful and sticks more into her mouth.

"We might have to visit Omobolanle and Daniel. They want to check on your progress."

I know *might have* translates to *have to*, so I fall to the floor and cross my legs, watching as distance vanishes into distance, waiting for a ghostly shape to pop up but tired enough from thinking that I can't register much beyond a faint emptiness. "Right."

Omobolanle is missing her turban today, and her gold and silver dreadlocks are spun in an intricate whorl around her head. "The thing I do not understand," she says, transfixed with my palm. I have a sudden urge to scratch at my hand, but I keep still. "Is that instead of taking your magic, the gleaners possessed you. That is not something that they do."

I replay Ingrid's disappearance in my head, and then Daniel Harisbac's clinical efficiency. Had his eyes been dimmer than the first time? Like someone had pulled a veil over his eyes. Or maybe *my* eyes. Is my ability to see magic the reason why I can see Ingrid? Or is Ingrid the reason why I can see magic?

I turn to Harisbac, almost accusing him, gripping the side of my chair with the hand Omobolanle is currently not studying. "She isn't here. It's been a week."

He and dad exchange a look. Daniel taps the talisman necklace before handing it back to me. "The protection's still there. It should keep to the end of this year, so you don't have to worry too much about any other possessions."

"Ingrid's not here."

"Yes, I know. I estimated a week, give or take. Have some patience."

"But if she doesn't—then how—"

My dad kneels so we're at height level. "Alex, I promise you. The adults in this room will help you as much as possible with this task."

"But she didn't even ..." I bite the inside of my mouth and glare at my shoes. They're all scuffed over, more dirtied in a month than most other shoes I've had for a year.

Dad hesitantly pulls me into a one-armed hug. "I'm sorry. We'll get through this together."

I squeeze my eyes shut and count to ten. "I have to go look over some stuff. Can we go home?"

"Of course. Omobolanle?"

She lets go of my hand, gives me a look saturated with sympathy. "I truly am sorry, Alex, when I say I never intended for any harm to your sister or you. But I know you will succeed."

"Why? How? What do you even see?"

She taps my wrist. "I see your feelings, and I see future auras. If you continue on, no matter how many obstacles, I know we'll all be proud of the fruition of your efforts. There will, of course, be a great loss ... but I can sense great triumphs, too ..." She shakes her head. "There is something odd about your endeavors for this task!"

I spend the rest of the day holed up in the guest room, trying to parse through the anthology. Everytime I flip a page, anxiety strikes me like a whip as I'm constantly reminded of how much more I have to get through, how much time is left in the day.

It's late at night, and Ralph is breathing softly on my pillow. Clipped onto the page is the present dad and Florence had given me. They said it's called a Book Adapter, able to make the words glow when I'm reading in the dark, or read aloud to me, or find a certain word. I've been saying coordinates at it half a dozen times, checking every thirty minutes as if somehow time would change an already permanent print, when a faint shimmer of ghostly light and a brush of coolness settles behind me.

"Hey, Al."

I scrunch my face and try to reign in the spew of relief that I'm likely gorging into a wound. I turn around, keeping my head tucked down. I can see Ingrid's non-existent feet, the opacity gradient. She looks clearer than normal—like a glass of water rather than a smudged cuvette. Ralph patters by and nudges her face into my ankles. Ingrid embraces both of us.

"I think I know what the raccoon is now," she says across my head. "She's a protector."

I peek at Ralph over her shoulder. "Yeah. That makes sense."

The Many-Eyed legends and Ingrid's notebooks set in front of us might as well have been ticking bombs—except we're still not sure if they're full of confetti or explosions, and neither of us want to ruin the surprise.

"So. What happened when I was gone?" She asks, pulling away.

"Nothing." I simmer mildly at her flippant tone, waiting for her to say something about what she'd gone through without a joke. It feels insulting. What had she been doing when I was—was waiting? "Did you get the key?"

"When you died," I spit out, trying to get some reaction out of her. "Did you see Many-Eyed?"

"What? No. I don't think so. Why?"

I glower at the book in my hands. "Not when you were taken. When you died."

"Yeah, I know," annoyance is an undercurrent of her voice. Annoyance is an implosion of my entire body. So was anything in that vision real? Was I just making things up? Ingrid seems to take my consternation as something else, though, because she rubs her eyes and lets out a sigh so heavy it feels like it can be bottled and weighed.

"I'm sorry for pulling you into this. I—I think part of me wanted the glory. Postmortem fame, except I didn't think I would actually, you know. I won't blame you if you don't do it. It's not really your fight, and well, if the gleaners didn't target you the first time, they probably shouldn't target you the next time."

"They did."

"What?"

"They did attack me. Harisbac had to do his wonky magic to pull them out of—of me." I spit out the words quickly, like I could make myself forget it just as fast. I don't think I will ever look at coconuts the same after this.

"They possessed you?" Ingrid asks, bewildered. "I ... I didn't know they could do that."

"Yeah. Well. Whatever." I accidentally rip a page from the force of turning it. "I'm going to finish it."

"Alex—"

"No. I'm going to. If I don't, then this would've all been for nothing. It would've just been a colossal waste." You'd have died for nothing. I don't know how accurate the visions were, but the potency of Ingrid's determination is a permanent stamp across me. I will finish her task.

She's quiet for a moment before she shoots up from the bed. If she had been solid, she would've probably thrown me off, disrupted the blankets. Instead, all I feel is a cool puff of air. She's quiet for a long time, and when I check to see what she's doing, her gaze is directed at the calendar on the wall.

"I missed your birthday, didn't I, Al?"

"Yeah. It's fine, though. I had fun. There's always next year."

"... maybe. Yeah," she acquiesces, but there's a furrow between her brows as if she's never thought about it before. "Happy belated birthday, anyways. You're fifteen now, right? I'll have you know, I would've bought you more *A Wrinkle in Time* merch."

"Thanks," I say drily, and I won't admit, I feel sort of touched. For reasons I can't explain. Hurriedly, I tap the book and broach the bothersome topic that had been scratching under my skin. "I got to the rocket."

"Ugh." Ingrid rolls her eyes. "Ugh."

"What do I do?"

"Well, I had hoped that that part would've changed. I really don't think I'll be much help with this. Ugh. What time is it?"

I squirm. "Uh, one," I admit.

She narrows her eyes. "Yeah, we're talking about this tomorrow. You're leaving Sunday morning as always, yes? Yes. Now go to bed, chop chop my little grasshopper." Ingrid tries to tug the book from my fingers, and when I don't let go, she presses her fingers together and jabs at my hands. "Go. To. Sleep."

"Ok, fine, mom."

"Thank you. I'm taking that as a compliment, you insomniac grandpa."

I scrub my tired eyes and lazily set the book onto the floor, too lazy to get up. Carefully, I scootch Ralph a little and flop back. "Don't you want to watch something?" I ask Ingrid.

She shakes her head, and I almost miss the movement as her head blends in with the fuzzy darkness and my slipping eyes. "I'll survive."

But you hate nights. The words reverberate inside my brain, but vanish in a sleepy haze. You said it was the loneliest before.

The next morning, I cut my potatoes in quarters, and then try to sensitively and casually bring up Ingrid's return. "So. Ingrid's here again."

Maia, who had been shoveling eggs and potato into her mouth vigorously like she was training to be a competitive eater, chokes. Dad freezes in bringing his eggs to his mouth. Florence's breath hitches, and in the silence, it sounds like a dramatic gasp. Slowly, dad puts his fork down. "Good morning, Ingrid. How are you?"

"She says she feels fine. Daniel can make her visible again today?"

"That ... that would be nice, yes. Is she up for it?"

Ingrid nods, and I relay the message. Dad goes to notify Harisbac of our arrival, and after cleaning up, Florence opens up the locker-door, and we—including Ralph—step in.

"Hey, wait." Maia strolls up, dressed for what looks like a tea party that would end in murder. "I'm coming."

My eyes widen in surprise. "You're coming?"

She nods, then jabs an accusatory finger at me even as she defends herself as if she were a politician who had been criticized for hypocrisy. "I just need to tell her something. Nothing else."

Ingrid offers her a shaky smile as Maia stomps in, none the wiser. It's drizzling somewhat, light little sprinkles scattering across the cobblestones. We head toward the shore and stop by a quaint little house overlooking the docks. I opt to stay outside as Ingrid follows her family in.

There's a garden at the back of the house, and it's overgrown and unattended enough that I don't feel too bad when Ralph immediately starts chewing on the plants. There's a jut over it, too, which allows me to take out the anthology and pick up where I left off last night without the pages being spotted with rain. When dad, Florence, Maia, and Ingrid finally step out again, the rain has stopped, and the sun burns a bright hole into the sky.

"We're going to pick up some chia tomato leaves and some other groceries here," dad informs me, smiling in that particular way that he had been since knowing about Ingrid's ghost-ness. Part of me wants to bring up the argument during the fishing trip again, but I press my lips together. "You can stay at Daniel's, though, if you want."

Chia tomato leaves? I flip at the anthology. "Yeah ... actually, is it okay if I stay here?"

"That's fine. We won't be long."

Ingrid floats over to me, raising an eyebrow at Ralph's consumption of Harisbac's garden. She taps her lip, pacing left and right and back and forth. I give into my curiosity after reading the same word ten times. "How was the talk? With Maia and stuff?"

She floats around a few more times before collapsing beside me, exhaling slowly as she tilts her head back, almost going through the wall. "It was fine. Nice. She was trying to clear up some misunderstandings, even if there weren't any. Not

that I'm mad at her. I get it. When I do go, I don't want Maia to go through all that again, and holding onto me won't do her good. It's nice to get a goodbye, though. I do miss her."

Her hand phases through a stray twig on the ground, and she makes a face. "Yeah. Well. That's that. You should hang out with her more. I think you'll get along like a truck on fire."

"That's. Nice. I've always wanted to get along with someone like a conflagrant vehicle."

Ingrid chuckles and shoves me. "Anyways. Find anything interesting?"

"For the rocket thing, it said something like where do you wish to go, right?"

"Yeah. I've tried all of the different ways you can phrase 'take me to Many-Eyed', trust me. I've even tried finding a map or something, but that was useless."

"What if we use coordinates?"

Ingrid's wags a finger at me. "Yes. That's what I was thinking. We're one whole genius. Except you won't find coordinates in that book, and the only—" She pauses then sits up, furrowing her eyebrows at me. Then she suddenly smacks her forehead. "Oh. My. God. I'm *incredibly, magnificently, marvelously, beautifully stupid.*"

"Uh." I try to share a confused glance with Ralph, but she's too busy munching away. "Okay?"

"I did find the coordinates before! But I thought it was kinda a hoax because the longitude and latitude numbers were, like, really really funky. And there were three degrees. Oh my god."

"So ... it is in this book?"

"Nope. Close that stinky thing. Gosh, were you seriously going to read all eight hundred pages or something?"

"Well, what else was I supposed to do?"

"We're going to get those coordinates."

"Okay ..." I say slowly, packing the anthology away. "Should we go to the library now?"

"What?" Ingrid frowns and shakes her head. "Nah, not Omobolanle's library. We're going to Hyan Island again, and since last time we tried to do things solo, bad crap happened, I suggest we wait for dad's return." She pauses, tapping her lips again. "In the meantime, ask Daniel and Brian for the hot cheeto pocky, would you?"

"Why?"

She shrugs. "I'm curious on how it tastes."

"You can't eat."

"Yeah, that's why I said you ask for it. And tell me how it tastes."

I huff in annoyance, but a shiver of excitement runs along my spine. If coordinates work, then maybe—just maybe—I would be able to finish the task next week.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Hyau Island, apparently, houses a very comprehensive underground library. Unlike Omobolanle's library, there's apparently a one-person-only limit, so I go down myself. The stairs gradually lengthen into platforms, the bookcases jutting out of the dirt. It's moist and damp down here, but the books are dry and sharp and there are no fungi or moss infestations. Under Omobolanle's permission and under the watchful eye of the librarian, I silently prowl the bookcases.

The librarian this time is old and crotchety. His eyes are also entirely white, glowing softly in the dim light, so every time I parse through a book, it feels like I'm about to get murdered. I hope dad, Florence, and Maia are enjoying their cheeto chicken ice creams while adrenaline blasts through my veins as I try to calmly walk in the sight of the librarian. I find myself desperately wishing for Chenna back, even though she'd wanted me arrested or something.

"Do you remember where the book was?" I mumble out of the side of my mouth.

Ingrid shakes her head. "It's not a book. I'm pretty sure it was a scroll."

I patiently wait for her response, but patience has a time limit when faced with old, glowing white-eyed people, so I snap, "Where?"

"Shh! I'm trying to remember. Can't you just ask Mr. Flishle?"

"That's his name? Doesn't matter. No. I'm not going to be killed for coordinates. Do you see how he's looking at me?" We both glance in his direction, and I immediately whip around and whimper. "See?"

"He's not going to kill you. He's a sweet guy, really." But even Ingrid sounds slightly unsure.

"Really."

"Shush and let me think!"

I nervously pitter around, scared that if I stop moving, Mr. Flishle might take it as a sign of weakness and stab me with his ornate desk lamp. There's entire bookshelves dedicated to past tasks; etched into one of them is a carving of who I assume is Hyan. There's also a promising amount of scrolls in that aisle, zinging the pale silver magic lines, more concentrated than the rest of the room, so I shuffle in.

"This looks promising," I whisper to Ingrid, pinching at the parchment. "There must have been at least one person who visited Many-Eyed before, right? Maybe they completed it as a task or something."

"Many-Eyed task," said a voice from behind me, the incarnation of creaky stairs in the middle of the night.

I do not squeal or yelp or scream "Baleflerguah!", okay?

Mr. Flishle does not blink at my nonreaction, my completely stoic countenance. He says, "You are completing Ingrid's mission."

I send an anxious peek at Ingrid, who looks as surprised as I am that Mr. Flishle knows her name. I carefully nod my head—or I think I did. Maybe I just spazzed out in front of him.

He surveys me with his white eyes then nods. "Good. The gleaners ... they have been miserable for far too long."

My shock rips into my fear, and I frown. "What?"

He glowers at me, wrinkles folding over and over like some sort of ominous domino effect. "Don't tell me that you have only parsed over *how* to complete the mission, and not *why*."

"I do know why," I protest. "To get rid of the gleaners."

"Why?"

"Because they're killing people."

"Why?"

"Because—because—they're not finishing their task or something"

Mr. Flishle gives me a look, and even though he has no pupils—or maybe because he has no pupils—he seems to convey how foolhardy he thinks I am. "I suppose that is one answer. Do you know the other?"

I stare at the musty ground as I attempt to scrounge around in my brain. Memories of the vision come up, something I've been trying to ignore since Ingrid was taken. There had been something about the gleaners ... and Omobolanle mentioned it, too, didn't she? "They're ... the gleaners, they're the magic? Of past people. Uh, magic is an environment. Uh. They're tied to the spirit inextricably."

"That is another part, yes, however inchoate your thinking is."

"What do you want me to get from this? That the gleaners are good or something? But then why? Why do the gleaners take people?"

"There's something about the last impression of a death," Mr. Flishle muses sotto voce. His voice is skeletal fingers along my neck. "That stays with someone forever. They are lonely and betrayed and innocently vengeful, so they learn to mimic the methods of their deaths upon others." He gives me a hard stare. "They are not exempt from wrong, but do know they do not know that it is wrong because they are mindless creatures living off their misery."

Ingrid's complexion is somehow more transparent, paler than normal. She gazes at Mr. Flishle, wide-eyed like cats in the dark. Mr. Flishle's gaze flicks to her for an odd moment before he looks back at me.

"I wish you all the luck in succeeding because not only do the children of this world need to live without the fear of failure, but the gleaners need to continue on without the imprint of misery, which grows each time they claim another as their own."

I fiddle with the scroll in my hands before placing it carefully back, stiff and robotic. It takes my entire body system to not flinch when I meet his blank eyes again. He raises an eyebrow.

"So. What is it that you are looking for?"

"Um. Coordinates. Possible ones. To Many-Eyed."

Mr. Flishle scoffs and crooks a finger. He almost sounds amused, if his voice wasn't so gravelly like bones scraping across each other. "Then you will not find it here. Come."

I tentatively follow him, hopping from platform to platform, worried that I'll slip and tumble down. Though Mr. Flishle looks like he's prime for death, he's sprightly and surprisingly deft in his loopy and decisive movements. I'm slightly ashamed to admit that by the time I'm panting a little with the rapidness of my heart, he stands collected. Not in the collected way that some teachers like to portray themselves as, trying to relax into an elusive role, but like he's actively holding himself together with a practiced and confident poise, turning over every stature in his hands and selecting the finest.

"The legends."

"I think I remember this!" Ingrid exclaims, drifting forward, her hands hovering above the spines of the binded, curled, bunched paper. This entire place exudes the complete opposite energy of Omobolanle's library, in color, approachability, and esoteric importance. Omobolanle's library is a colorful slice of life, this is a black and white vintage about the fragility of living.

Feeling more capable now that I'd already asked a question, I gesture at the scrolls Ingrid's peeking at. "Are there any on Many-Eyed's coordinates? Like, the specific place that Many-Eyed lives?"

Mr. Flishle tilts his head like his neck was severed by a sloth. "Coordinates?" "Latitude. Longitude."

"I'm not very aware of those words, but you will never be able to get Many-Eyed's exact location."

"Well, I'll take an estimation," I grumble, carefully pulling out the scroll Ingrid is pointing at and unraveling it for her to look at. "Do you have any information regarding Many-Eyed that I can use?"

Mr. Flishle adjusts his suit. "I regret to say that my—and any—knowledge on Many-Eyed is quite limited." He eyes the scroll with the air of a parent supervising a five year-old who's holding a very expensive vase. "Anything that I do know contradicts and will only confuse you on your task. However, there is one theme that always prevails."

He doesn't say anything for a long time, and for a second, I think that maybe I simply didn't hear him. When he talks, after all, his lips barely move.

Ingrid makes a squeak of excitement near my ear. She points triumphantly at the scroll in my hands. "Yeah, this is the one! First try, high five!"

Mr. Flishle rests his pointer and middle finger on his chest. He could've been looking at me or at the ceiling for all I know. When he talks again, his voice is a whisper in the dark, yet it still sounds louder than Ingrid's exclamation a few seconds ago. "Make a wish. Know the reason."

The walk up turns my legs into static electricity of soreness. I brush sweat off my brows as Mr. Flishle guides me to the exit and the blinding sun. I squint at the brightness, clutching the scroll gently, and miss my dad getting up from the ground as the door to the library slams shut.

"I'm not going to lie, Alex. Flishle creeps me out."

I whip around, startled. Maia has her legs splayed out, Ralph in the middle ... Ralph in the middle with a sparkly pink cowboy hat on. Florence, who had been lying flat-back on the floor with sunglasses on, immediately sits up. I look at each of them. "You guys waited for me?"

"Of course," dad says. Then he glances at Ralph's new hat. "Well, Florence and Maia went and bought some things. Would you like an ice cream?"

I eye the bright green and red packaging warily. "What flavor?"

"It's gorgi flavor." He gives me a sheepish shrug. "Though you probably don't have that outside. It's similar to mint? Kind of. I think you'll like it. I promise it's not too sweet."

The ice cream is shaped like an arrow, but when I lick it, the thick cream is soft. It's tangy and a little spicy, and the general consensus is *what is this on my tongue* but in an ambivalent enough way that I continue eating it. Maia shakes her ice cream cone of cheeto chicken flavor—and I recognize it as the sweet kind, so I can only imagine what her taste buds are going through—and points at the tallest ride.

"Let's go." She looks a bit happier after talking to Ingrid, a pep in her steps so unlike her usual stomping, like ten Ralphs worth of weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

I almost feel bad when I shoot dad a desperate look. "Actually, uh. I think I need to look over some stuff some more. Also, I need to put this scroll somewhere safe."

"I can hold it for you, and you can go with Maia and Florence. You've been working hard these past few weeks." Dad offers a hand. I pinch my lips and stare at his fingers, trying to work out the best way to refuse.

"Dude, just accept, oh my god." Ingrid bops me on the head.

Florence gives me a sympathetic look. "It'll be fun. I can also hold the scroll. We'll get back before five, so you'll have plenty of time to look over other things." Then she frowns. "Unless you haven't finished your homework?"

"Ye-ow!" I glare at Ingrid, who makes a face back at me.

"Just go, bro. Do you not have a fun bone in your body?"

"Fine. I'll go!" I shove the scroll into dad's hands and grit out an aggressive "Thanks."

Dad grins beatifully as if I had just gifted him a basket of baby owls. "Have fun, Alex!"

Maia, I learn, is sadistic, quite possibly a masochist, and definitely was not influenced to be a good person (I blame Ingrid). She takes us on the most spinny rides first, and screams me deaf throughout the entire duration, so loud that it feels like the sound waves themselves would cause me to puke up the ice cream and undigested breakfast. Ingrid cackles loudly, her laughs fading in and out within Maia's yelling.

Florence, I learn, quite possibly has a rock as a stomach. It's almost scary, to be honest. On every ride, she sits still and poised, smiling slightly wistfully as if she were sitting by a window on a peaceful, grounded day. Dad politely shakes his hands when Maia tries to force him on a ride.

"I have to hold Alex's things, and someone has to look after Ralph," he says, which I translate to, *I would rather look after this rabid raccoon than go within a meter of your screaming*. I barely have time to send him a scowl, which I hope conveys my message of how hypocritical he is, before Maia is dragging me to another death ride, wobbling on her legs.

By the time we're back on the boat again and heading back to the checkpoint to home, only Florence and dad are unaffected. I press my hands to my eyes.

"Why would you."

Maia groans in response.

Ingrid laughs at us.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"What the heck!" I hiss, slamming the paper on the lunch table. Jessica raises an eyebrow at the score circled neatly in red on top of the essay I'd written, and then at the letter—the second letter of the alphabet—written next to it.

"What? That's not bad." She takes a bite of her tamale.

"That's what I've been saying," Ingrid groans.

"But this is the first time I've gotten a B in his class." I desperately flip through the essay. "And I thought it wasn't even that bad!"

Jessica adjusts her hat and crosses her arms, muscles bulging. "Yeah. It wasn't bad, and so you got a wasn't bad score. It's not going to bring your grade down that much."

"Yeah, but ..." I wrinkle my nose at the score and then shove it back in my folder, desperate for the acknowledgement to disappear. I stare blankly in despair at my lunch. "I don't deserve that."

Both Jessica and Ingrid scoff in response, and I glower at them.

"By the way, nice necklaces," Jessica compliments. My face feels warm enough to be a microwave.

The rest of the day goes as smoothly as the beginning half—that is to say, horribly, tragically horrible. The calculus test is fraught with confusion and the panic of last-minute scribbling. I come out of Spanish embarrassed and frustrated, as Ms. Martin seems to only call on me for answers I don't know. By the time I get home, my heart is pounding erratically, my mind is working overtime trying to imagine different scenarios, and it feels like I had plunged into sickly molasses.

"Go away, Ralph," I push at her crankily. "I'm not in the mood. Go eat mom's daffodils or something."

She makes a little snorting sound before scampering off. I fling my arm over my face and glare into the darkness of my arm, counting down the minutes before sitting up and flinging myself to my backpack. Ingrid's cool presence manifests behind me as I throw out my folders and binders.

"What are you doing now?"

"What does it look like?"

She knuckles my head and I slap at her hand. "Bro, all you do is study and read. You're not giving yourself time to relax."

"What do you mean? I went to a carnival three days ago. I went fishing with dad. I had a birthday party. I explored the—the magic world!" I fold the essay in half

so that I wouldn't be able to look at the score, but working on another essay outline fills me with the shame and indignance of seeing the score of my past essay. I'm ridiculously close to tearing out my own hair in hopes that I would be able to tear out the memory. The lead of the mechanical pencil snaps, and I exhale loudly.

"Oh, good job. What have you been doing before reconciling with dad and mom?"

That makes me pause. "What do you mean reconcile with mom?"

Ingrid purses her lips and raises her eyebrow, eyes widening. She hesitates, seemingly trying to gather her thoughts. "Er, well. You said so yourself one time that you guys didn't used to hang out as much as you do now."

"So? It's cause she's busy with work! Reconcile's an inappropriate word for that." I bristle.

"Okay, okay! I'm not saying you guys don't care for each other! I mean, it's very obvious you guys do. I'm just saying, it's good to actually spend time with each other. Which you're doing now! Which is good!"

She's clearly trying to mollify me, but I'm sour enough, and hating the feeling, that I let it go. Ingrid goes to do whatever, and I manage to grit through the essay outline and my other homework, finishing two hours after and still feeling rather vexed at the world.

Eventually, I throw myself on the bed, try to read ahead in Biology, quit, try to read the anthology again, quit, then grab a random book from my cabinet.

"I think you need to sleep."

Pinching my lips together, I aim my most severe scowl at Ingrid. "I'm not tired."

"Oh, please."

I angrily flip a page of my book, something I had started months ago and had deemed too boring to finish. I skim over the words and toss them from my mind as soon as I process their individual meaning.

"Get up, Al!"

"Why?" I boondoggle. "You said I should take a break. This is me taking a break."

"We're going to go hunt down some fairies." She smiles sheepishly at my unimpressed look. "Okay, not really. Let's do something. There's too much bad energy around here. It's like I'm swallowing a bog."

Isn't it funny how just a few days prior, I had been drowning in empty regret? Now, with her here again, I don't want to agree to her whims.

"Seriously, bro. Get up. We're gonna knock you into shape so you're not panting after three minutes of walking. Ouch, sick burn, ooohhh." She pauses. "Also, I refuse to carry you again."

Good! I want to announce. Flying's great, but I don't want to be carried by you, either! I cling to my blankets and my book. "No. I want to finish this."

"Get up."

"No."

She drags me by the legs off my bed, but I stubbornly lie on the ground. "Hey, I want to watch something."

"No. What?" I say to the carpet.

"Just Dance."

I slink up, throw open my laptop, and click the first video I see. Then I scoot into my mom's room and set it there, far away from my room. "There you go."

"Wait, Alex! You can't just leave me alone!"

"But I am."

"Nope. You're doing this with me. Didn't you miss me? I was stuck with a nothingness, a blank slate, and as I woke up, I saw my baby brother's scrunchy face, only to be rejected because he is a curmudgeonly old man."

I ignore the rising bubbles of amusement. She's doing this on purpose! Trying to cheer me up. Screw that. "No. I'm busy. I want to finish this book today."

"And you also have a biology test to study for, and you also need sleep, so you're at the same level of productivity as you would be dancing. Maybe more,

cause, yanno, heart health and all that. C'mon, dude!" And then she starts head-banging to "Rasputin." "I bet you're just scared. You know you can't dance as well as me."

I stare at her, open-mouthed and slightly repulsed. "That is not dancing."

"I'm going to train you for your birthday next year. You're going to be all warmed up to have fun."

"Are you sure you're eighteen? Because sometimes I feel like I should be the older sibling." When I try to quit her presence, though, she lunges forward and drags me back.

"Yeah, more like you should be the grandpa. You're gonna burn out if you just read and study, and then you're going to spend your days staring out the window and crying about how sad and unmotivated you are. Let's dance!" Not waiting for my unearthly shrieks of distress, she grabs my arms and shakes them back and forth, almost toppling both of us onto the ground.

"Stop it!" I wail. "This. Is. Not dancing!"

"Turn the volume up!" Ingrid cheers, yanking my hand forward. I curl my fingers into fists, but she taps them against the keyboard, anyways, and then "Rhasputin" is blaring so loud, I can hear the underlying sound waves.

"Yeah yea Rasputin something something something something something!" She screams to the ceiling. The ceiling does not react because only I can hear her banshee calls. She twirls me around, then twirls around herself, flinging us right and left, back and forward. More than once, I trip over my feet, but she jerks me up before I can fall face-first on the ground and never get up again.

"Come on, Alex! Ra ra Rasputin—"

"YaaaAAHH!" I finish as she spins us around and around. Ingrid makes a movement like she's stomping her feet. The multicolored shape of the Just Dance person is doing a completely different move. Or perhaps they're doing the same move, but Ingrid has none of the experience of a digitalized dancer, so she just looks like she's performing a messed-up version of the chicken dance. Sweat drips

down into my eyes, my heart rattles in time with my erratic panting. I never knew jumping around could be so tiring.

Eventually, "Rasputin" ends, but Ingrid hurriedly uses my hand to click the next Just Dance routine, and then we're doing the same random dance to "Airplanes" and "Starships" and "Tik Tok". I think a Kidz Bop song starts playing, too, but she quickly skips that one. Ralph wanders halfway through our third song, and she stops at the entrance for a moment like she's contemplating ever approaching me. She's stained green around her mouth, and there are white petals meshed with her fur. Horrifyingly enough, I find myself laughing.

"Come on, Ralph!" I mock Ingrid's voice, purposefully pitching it several octaves higher. I shake my hands above my head like I'm being electrified. Unlike the voice, I think my moves are a pretty good imitation of Ingrid's manners. "Let's dance!"

"What is going on?"

I freeze and whip around wide-eyed to see my mom behind Ralph. Her eyebrows are raised, and there's a mixture of amusement and surprise etched into her expression. I quickly drop my arms and launch myself at my laptop, hitting the volume button so fast that my hand cramps a little. Eventually, I slam the pause button and turn to face my mom again, trying to catch my breath.

"Uh. Hi. Mom." I glance at the time in a strained effort to pretend nothing had happened. "You're home early."

Her lips twitch as she looks around the room. "It was a slow day. What were you doing?"

"Nothing!" Hastily, I close all my tabs, even though none of them were affiliated with Just Dance. Ralph slinks away like the traitor she is. Ingrid's muffling her giggles under her hand like the conniving back-stabber she is. "Um. You can go shower. And I'll clean Ralph up. Uh. You have no work tomorrow, right?"

Mom's eyes are still crinkling in mirth. "Yeah. Why?"

"We can go to the Bean or something after school?"

"Oh. Oh, of course!" Her eyes are glittering. "But put school first, okay?"

"I know! I don't have any more tests this week." I pointedly do not look at Ingrid. She probably thinks I'm doing this because of her comment earlier on, but I'm not. And I'm also not doing so because she thinks I need a break or that I'm going to burn out. I simply wanted a change in my static life.

Still, it doesn't stop Ingrid from shooting me two thumbs up as I make my way to my room. I frown at her. "It's not because we have to reconcile or anything."

"I know. You're right, that was a bad word to use." She's silent for a moment before snorting. "Oh my god, your face."

"What do you mean my face?" Indignantly, I haul Ralph into the sink and brush off her fur. She practically melts under the warm water and I deftly scrub her clean. To Ralph, I tell her, "I didn't actually mean for you to go eat mom's plants. You're lucky she didn't look too closely at you. I hope you didn't make a mess."

"Uh. Hi Mom," Ingrid mocks, pitching her voice several octaves higher.
"You're home early."

"I do not sound like that."

"Ha, you're right. It's more like, 'Uh! Hi! Mom!'" She breaks into hysterical laughter halfway through her attempt to raise her voice even higher, flickering sporadically. I valiantly attempt to shove down the smile pushing at the corners of my mouth.

"Oh my god, you look like you're holding a frog in your mouth! Just smile, Al! Aim that grin at all the girls and boys."

"Stop that!" I wrinkle my nose, picking Ralph up and letting her shake her feet to get rid of the excess water before placing her on her special towel. "Something smells weird."

"Yeah, bromandude. That's called your sweat. Happens when you exercise."

I shake my head. "No. I know what sweat smells like, Ingrid. This is ..."

Fear seizes my heart and I grasp Ingrid's arm tightly, one hand rising to the talisman around my throat. Ralph sits up suddenly and she twists back and forth, her ears flicking.

Ingrid catches on quick, and we both hold still. Like somehow it would deter the gleaners, I hold my breath, moving only my eyes as I try to catch a glimpse of the gaping red eyes and mouths. If Ingrid were alive, her arm would most likely be turning purple with how forceful my clutch is.

Ralph puffs up her tail, and her hair raises. She crouches lowly and hops in front of me and Ingrid, growling low in her throat, facing an invisible something head-on. I'm not sure how long we stay that way—Ingrid and me frozen stiff, Ralph with her head lowered and ears pulled back—but eventually, the distinct smell fades, and Ralph relaxes. She jumps on top of the towel again and looks impatiently at me. When I don't move, she makes a sharp, chirruping sound.

Shakily, I pick up the edges of the towel and start drying her.

"See?" Ingrid whispers. "Protector. Now do you believe me?"

"I never said I didn't," I whisper back. Ralph rolls over, and I indulge her in a belly scratch. She nimbly leaps off the table and squirrels over to my room, where she most likely begins monopolizing my pillow. "I should call dad, shouldn't I?"

"Probably."

"... I'm going to go brush my teeth first."

The phone call goes as expected with dad's usual soft voice hardening in concern. It doesn't take much to infer that he wants Daniel to check on me and Ingrid again, and so I approach mom, hoping I can convey my apology.

"Hey, uh, mom. Is it okay if I go to dad's early, actually? I know I said that we should go to the Bean tomorrow, but something came up."

Unsurprisingly, she furrows her brow. "I know that I said I was glad you were reaching out to your dad, but what is going on? And don't say nothing. Some weeks you come back like the whole world is on your shoulders."

When I don't say anything, she grasps my hands gently. "Alex, is this about Ingrid?"

Startled, I blink up. She seems to take that as an affirmation because she sighs and wraps her arms around me, resting her cheek against my head. "You don't have to replace or live up to her presence, Alex. Your dad and anybody who was part of Ingrid's life should know that. You're two different people."

"I know that," I object. "It's ... something else. It's complicated."

"Is it about that thing of Ingrid's you lost?"

I start again and then chuckle. "Ah, no. Well, kinda. It's complicated, mom. You probably don't want to know."

"If it's bothering you, of course I want to know. Do I have to have a talk with your dad?"

"No! It's fine, I swear. I just ... I just have a question I think he can help me with."

She shifts and then meets my eyes. "You know I'll always be here for you."

"I know, mom. It's just ... this thing that's happening. It'll be over soon, though, I promise."

She searches my face for a few seconds more before sighing. "Alright. I won't push. But if this, whatever it is, gets worse, you come right to me, okay? And I'll deal with it."

I slump in relief and swallow back the urge to confess everything. "Yeah, of course. Thanks, mom. I love you."

"And I love you too. Do you want me to drive you to school early tomorrow so that we can pick up your homework?"

"No, I think that's fine. Most of the schedules are posted online, now."

"Alright." She straightens up. "Alright."

"I'm sorry," Ingrid mutters. "I'm sorry."

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Daniel opens his eyes, and they flicker as neon blue as ever. He blinks the wisps away and shakes out his hand. Excess magic jumps from them like tiny fire sparks as he hands me back the corded necklace. I loop it around my neck so that it sits snugly against Maia's gift. "The talisman is still working. It will expire in a month, though. We'll see about the next one if it comes to it."

Translation: if you fail this task, the gleaners may target you and Ingrid like rabid wolves hunting a trail. I try to calm the frantic beat of my adrenaline. I still have four more trips.

"Are you sure he's safe?" Dad asks worriedly.

"I'm fine. I have Ralph." I pick up said raccoon and hold her up like Simba. "Even Ingrid says she's good luck. Probably better than that leopard-whale shark thing we saw that one time."

Intelligently, dad gives me a chary look. I shrug and place Ralph down again. That's reasonable—I wouldn't have trusted me or Ingrid, either. Brian carefully sets a tray of tea down and then relaxes across from us.

"Should I schedule a meeting with Omobolanle for you guys?"

"That would be apt." Daniel nods. "There's something she thinks she's found out."

"If it's not about getting Alex out of this whole thing, then I don't want to hear about it," dad remarks grimly.

Brian pats him on the shoulder and hands him a steaming cup of tea. I eye his mass of hair, thoroughly contemplating my theory that his and Daniel's facial hair are connected. It's the only explanation I can extrapolate because everytime I think Daniel gets balder, Brian gets hairier. "I think you're going to want to hear about it, anyways. I believe Maia's coming home in a few hours, so better get going now."

The wait for Omobolanle is longer than I'm used to, and probably also the standard waiting time. Dad, Daniel, and I sit on a plush couch in the waiting room like the start of a bad joke. Ingrid twiddles around and reports periodically about the gossip in the room.

"That dude over there—don't stare! Peek carefully. He's had a potions accident and shrank his—" She coughs into chortles, then briskly jabs a finger at another patient. "Anyways. Oh god, I do feel bad for Lily. Do you recognize her? She's the one that—"

"Aksel, Daniel!" Omobolanle strolls out. She bows her head apologetically to the other patients. "do apologize. This is a rather serious matter! May you all wait a little longer? You can refer to Kalis, too. He's just a floor under."

Grumpy mutters of consent fizzle around the room, and Omobolanle steers us into her office, gently closing the door. "Sit, sit. There are some cookies there, if you want!"

As we all get comfortable—as comfortable as we can amid a spacious office made un-spacious because of all of the knick-knacks and people—, Omobolanle adjusts her turbine with the grace of a butterfly, then clasps her hands together, her long blue nails clicking quietly against each other. "Well, good afternoon. You're here early, Alex. How are you?"

I nod and take a cookie, watching the crumbs fall. "Ingrid and I figured out some things for the task."

"Ah, a perfect segue! I was just about to talk about this task. Do you remember last time, I took a look at your aura?"

"Er. Yeah."

"There was something strange about it! At first, I thought your dad's wish had been granted, and you had been released from this task, but the ties were still there! Just a teensy bit faded." She holds two of her fingers together and pinches them closed. "Daniel, you detected something similar in your attempts to ascertain Ingrid's presence, correct? Oh!" She exclaims suddenly, clapping her hand to her forehead. "Is she here? Ah! Yes, hello, Ingrid. How is she?"

I glance at Ingrid, bewildered. She gives me a shrug. "I guess I'm good."

I relay the message. Omobolanle nods vigorously. "Good, good. That's good. Have you experienced anything weird, Ingrid? Just anything different from normal, that is?"

"Like, living normal? My dead normal? Living-wise, yeah, duh I feel different. Dead normal ... I think I'm fine."

Omobolanle nods thoughtfully again at her response. "And, pardon me for asking, but when the gleaners took you—"

"It didn't hurt or anything. I just sort of blacked out, to be honest, until I appeared back at Alex's side again."

I furrow my brows and tap my lips, realize that I'm tapping my lips, and hurriedly stop. The three adults in the room are all scrutinizing me as if by parsing through my actions, they could analyze Ingrid's. "What?" I ask, crossing my arms. Then, to Ingrid, "I thought getting taken by gleaners was painful. That's what the Mr. Flishle person said."

"Yes, exactly because gleaners tear magic from the physical body. Alex, what of your Sight?"

"What?" I raise a brow at the non-sequitur.

"Has there been anything different to it?"

"No." I hesitate, and then amend, "Well, not right now. But last week, all the magic lines and stuff seemed, uh. Dimmer, I guess."

Dad sits up suddenly, his eyes wide as gold balls. "You don't think—" he cuts himself off, and his expression twists into several different emotions, flickering like the wings of a hummingbird—shock, realization, anger, then back to neutral as he tries to put on a calm face like adults do sometimes when they're trying not to freak out kids.

None of them elaborate, just exchange wide-eyed looks and try to hide every emotion that comes to their face. They're playing a game of hot potato, and it looks like the potato's getting ready to get dropped. When I turn to Ingrid, she's still, her expression matching the others. Finally, Daniel speaks, slowly enunciating like he's

trying to multitask. "Aksel, Alex. If it were possible to just drop this task with little to no repercussions to any living beings, would you do it?"

"What do you mean living beings?" I snap.

"Alex ..." Ingrid's tapping her lip furiously, scanning back and forth like she's reading an invisible treatise called *Don't tell Alex anything again*.

"Okay, fine. Would whatever you guys are scheming about affect what I'm doing right now?"

"... not particularly, no," Omobolanle admits.

"Then I'm continuing with the task. And if you're saying that Ingrid could be harmed if I don't, then especially because of that."

"Alex ..." Dad ventures, and it almost feels like *deja vu*, his tone of voice is so similar to Ingrid's.

"I already told you I would finish this. I thought you said you'd support me."

"And I will. Just ..." He looks at Omobolanle.

"The outcome will probably always be something you will not be satisfied with," she finishes.

I make a noise, half strangled, half vexed. "I thought you said that I would succeed."

"And if you keep on putting in the effort you are now, then there is no doubt in my mind that you will. But ..." she pauses again. Then she turns in Ingrid's direction. "Do you understand the possible consequences?"

"Wh—?" I whip around as Ingrid nods determinedly. "What are you saying yes for?"

"Nothing you have to worry about, Alex. It might not even be true. I don't want you to overthink on speculations."

"What makes you think I'm not going to overthink, anyways?"

"You're kinda a pushover, Al, not going to lie. And you have more important things to think about right now, and it'll be over before we get a break."

"That—what. I don't know what you're trying to say." Or maybe I do. There's a new presence in the back of my mind, a presence that could be the answer, the potato that all other occupants had been throwing around.

"We'll look more into it." Omobolanle gestures at the elaborate clock behind her. "You can return tomorrow, and we'll look more into it." She's not addressing me as she says this. "Right now, I do believe Lily will stress herself to death. Do have a good day, Alex, Ingrid, Aksel, Daniel."

I bite back my protests as Omobolanle stretches to her full height and calls out Lily's name. The woman hurries forward like she's being chased by gleaners, eyebags dark beneath her eyes. "Omobolanle, it's the kids. Again!" I hear her cry before the door shuts. We take our leave.

Back at Daniel's and Brian's, Maia and Florence are there. I stalk out, ready to let out some steam by watching Ralph gnaw at Daniel's plants, but when I get to the garden, Maia comes scampering toward me.

"Hey." She points at the necklaces around my neck, her eyes glittering in childish glee. "Nice necklace."

I shove the warm feelings down. "You aren't staying with Ingrid?"

She shakes her head and pulls out a tiny ball before chucking it down and stomping hard. Amazed, I watch as it expands, dividing into two hot-pink blue swirls and elongating into the shapes of skateboards, two bumps on top. In the middle sits another ball, which Maia flicks into a frisbee-like shape. She picks up one of the skateboards and fits her feet into the bumps. She squats down and lurches up, and to my amazement, the skateboard levitates a few inches off the ground. "Want to play?"

Ralph chews silently and boredly, her arms tucked beneath her head. I take the other skateboard and mimic her movement, grinning as I rock back and forth. To be honest, it feels like rollerblading on regular ground, but smoother, almost like stepping on the flat side of those fitness semi-spherical balls. "How?"

I should've learned my lesson the first two times I indulged in Maia's games. She takes no mercy on me, chucking the frisbee with intense ferocity. Somehow, it curves like a boomerang, and knocks me off the hovering skateboard. I tumble onto the grass with a yelp. The frisbee returns to her with a pleasant snap, and she holds it loftily up, beaming manically at me. "That's how."

The next couple minutes is an exercise of learning how live prey feel. When I try to throw the frisbee the first couple of times, I wobble and fall down myself. Then, I fall down some more because of the one-person chaos that is Maia herself. The only hit I manage flies ten feet past its target, and I almost pummel Ralph's lunch.

"Holy cow, Maia!" I say, crashing to the ground for the twentieth time. I grab at the skateboard before it can zoom away and crawl furtively toward the shade of the garden. "Stop doing that."

"I told you, it's how the game works!" she cheers gleefully, circling to a stop in front of me. "Are you done already?"

"Yes," I pant. "Are you sure you don't have super-strength?"

"Nope," she chirps, way too knowingly.

Holy cow, is she even more annoying than Ingrid? Wow am I glad I don't have siblings. Well ... you know what. "Then what do you have?"

Maia's quiet for a surprisingly long stretch. She crumples the frisbee in her hands so it's a tiny ball again and joins me in watching Ralph swat at the weeds.

"I can turn back time." She pulls out a clump of grass, and I startle, excitement and awe rising, a little jealous but not surprised.

"That's pretty cool." I try to keep my voice even.

"For ten seconds or so. But if I do it too much, I go a little—" Maia twirls her finger near the side of her head. She tosses the clump of grass toward Ralph, who smothers her face into it.

"Can you demonstrate it?" I ask.

Maia shifts uncomfortably slumping her shoulders inward, which almost makes me uncomfortable. I've only ever seen her screaming and laughing and glaring and triumphant. I open my mouth to tell her that it's okay, but she talks first.

"I mean, you wouldn't even notice, anyways. I don't like using it."

Ralph bustles over and belly-flops onto Maia's shoes, and she giggles and scrubs her hands through her fur. The levity is short-lived, though, and she purses her lips together. "I know you're wondering why I think the way I do about Ingrid."

"I—"

She rolls her eyes. "Yeah, you aren't slick. Anyways, I guess it's not much of a secret. I—" Maia pats Ralph a few more times.

"You don't have to explain," I say, even though I really do want to know. Maia grew up with all this magic—shouldn't she be the most optimistic out of the two of us? Especially because she has the ability to turn back time? Dad, too. Didn't he say on that fishing trip that Maia had the right idea?

"Nah. When Ingrid ... died, I kinda exhausted my magic. I rewinded so much even though I knew it wouldn't bring her back. I was too late. It was pretty horrible."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"And I'm not kidding when I say it sorta makes me a little cuckoo crazy. It was kind of a—" she makes a small explosion motion with her hands. "Cycle of irrationality. So I don't want to feel that again."

"But—"

"I know you just found out about your magic, and based on Clary's reaction to those Hatty Portet series—"

"Harry Potter?"

She see-saws her hand back and forth. "Yeah, yeah. You think magic can fix everything—"

"No, I—"

"But I think I understand it better, so ..." Maia shrugs and flings a bushel of grass again. "I'm glad I got to talk to Ingrid again, but unless you somehow find a

permanent solution and get her to stay, I'm not." She picks at a scab, and she lets out an exhale with her next few words. "Not going to go through that again."

"But why don't you talk to her more, anyways?"

"I already said bye."

"So soon?"

"Well, if I keep on going back, I'm going to get used to her here again, and then she'll disappear, and then I'll go crazy again."

Her frown is getting deeper and deeper, so I drop the subject, cursing myself for not using my questions more wisely. She picks at the plants and litters them on Ralph's back. "Do you want to play frisbee again?"

It's guilt that trips me up and pushes the "Sure" out of my mouth.

I should've learned from the first four times I indulged in Maia's games. By the time Ingrid appears by my side again, I'm stained green and brown, and I look like I stepped into a tornado.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

"Take me to 1320, 1930, 60," I demand, shouting each word, spacing them apart, articulating them so clearly, it feels like chanting a tongue twister. The controls stay stupidly unlit, and the silence stretches on with the rustle of palm leaves. I jab at the largest button. "I wish to go to 1320 degrees longitude, 1930 degrees latitude, and 60 degrees longlatitude."

"That's not going to work." Ingrid circles the inside of the rocket. Ralph lifts her head up sleepily before plopping down again. I haul her off the controls and onto the floor and point an aggressive finger at the windows.

"I want to go to 1320, 1930, 60. Please?" I squeeze my eyes shut, squeeze my hands together, squeeze my entire body like a sponge. For a moment, in the darkness of my eyes, I imagine the rumble of some engine starting, the dizziness of a lift-off.

"Nope. No dice."

I try the coordinates again, but I've gotten through so many renditions of the same sentence, the words slip from my brain the moment I speak them. "Maybe the coordinates are a little off?"

"How would we know? There's infinite possibilities. We gotta face it: coordinates do not work. If it didn't work the first few times, it probably won't the next hundred. There's gotta be a more efficient way."

I splay out next to Ralph, glaring at the ceiling. "Hey what if the rocket just needs fuel or something?"

"We can't bring fuel to the island. It'll just disappear."

"Can we make fuel out of coconut oil or something?"

"Alright, day-tripper. Let's power this thingamabob with something that can't fuel things in something that doesn't exist."

When I'm silent for a little too long, Ingrid raises an eyebrow. "Dude, don't tell me you didn't survey this rocket thing."

"Well, it's magic, isn't it? And apparently it only works based on some specific order. Did I need to survey it?"

Ingrid flings an arm dramatically over her forehead. "Oh my chicken nuggets. For someone so smart, you would think they'd have more common sense."

"Well, I'm academically smart. Different things," I protest bitterly. Ingrid pats my shoulder.

"It's fine, dude. I wasn't trying to put you down. Different intellects and all that. Now, we should probably get going before you fall into the water again."

I stomp at the wooden ground and exclaim slightly hysterically: "This was a complete waste!"

"It's fine, Al. Do you know how many times I attempted this?"

"Yeah, but I only have three more tries!"

"And it's three more tries. C'mon."

Dad seems to catch onto the mood immediately as Ingrid lugs me onto the boat. For the first time, I watch as the island zips out of existence with a blink,

leaving no ripples nor any indication that there had been land there in the first place.

"No luck?" Dad asks.

"No. Can we go to Hyan Island? I want to check the library again." I let go of Ralph, who scampers into her usual spot between the steering wheel and the hull.

"Of course. I'm here to help as much as I can."

Suddenly, a thought strikes me in the lungs. My palms itch to collide with my forehead. "... am I allowed to tell you what I have to do?"

"Yes." He looks surprised. "Did no one tell you?"

"No," I say loudly, frustration straining at my vocal chords. "Yes. Maybe! I've been cramming so much information in my brain, I really don't know." I scuff my tennis shoes at the worn wooden boards. "So you can help?"

"He just said that," Ingrid says exasperatedly.

"Of course. I mean, there are some limitations to how much we can help. Telling you the answer to everything, for example, is strictly prohibited. But you can tell me, about what you've done so far," dad says, calming and eager at the same time. So I do. I talk about the coconuts, the palm trees, the magic lines—

"Well, you've seen the island before." I gesture in the distance, my limbs like overcooked noodles. I feel whelmed and jaded, like I'd spouted out an old man's tale. "Then, the first part—"

"Actually, I have not."

I pause, crinkling my brows. Dad's squinting into the distance, his hands balanced on the steering wheel. I try to gauge his tone, try to connect his reply to something that I've said that would make sense. "... yes you have. The coconut island? Ingrī—my task?"

"You go on an island? That's interesting."

Dubious confusion sinks into my veins. I take a long look at his back, and then scoot forward so I could see his face, but he looks as honest as ever.

He seems to notice my disbelief. "It's not rare for one to be the only person who can see their destination for their task."

The last time I've felt this way was when Ingrid appeared—like someone has taken my head, screwed it upside down, and told me that I had been the last of humans to be corrected. "Then how have you been stopping right before it? To not get sent back or whatever to the mainland?"

"Oh, I must've forgotten to tell you." He looks startled, as if it's a simple forgettery, like failing to recall a geometry equation from two years ago instead of a whole piece of land. "Remember when I taught you sailing?"

I shift uncomfortably on the ground. It feels like a lifetime ago and at the same time just yesterday. I don't like thinking about why I had asked him to teach me sailing or what happened afterward. I croak out, "Yeah?"

"Did I ever tell you about intent?"

"No ...?" There he goes again. I've always known how little I know about this world, and even through all my toils to educate myself between all my classes, everyday I realize how rudimentary my knowledge is. It's like learning a new language in seventh grade—in my class, I had been the best. In an actual Spanish environment? People would've known straight away I didn't belong.

"It's easy to forget because I've been surrounded by magic my whole life, but our oceans, our landscapes—they work differently."

"Great, thanks for the clarification," I grumble. Ingrid swats my knee. Dad smiles apologetically.

"When sailing, yes, you should have the skills, but it also depends on your mindset."

"What does that mean?"

"You have to have your destination in mind, a clear picture of where you want to go. The ocean works with you and the boat. That's why maps and such help so much."

"But that doesn't make any sense. When I ..." I wince. "When Ingrid and I went alone, I was the one steering the boat, and I wasn't really thinking of the destination that much."

"Maybe Ingrid was?"

"Were you?" I ask her.

She splays out her hands and studies her faded palms. After a moment, she presses her lips together. "I'm not sure. My memory's sort of hazy."

Hyau island begins to appear in the distance, the dark dot slowly growing and gaining its neon colors, a stark contrast to the library it hosts in monochrome. I clap my hands together, straightening up.

"Wait, what if we just need a map?"

"I've tried that before," Ingrid shoots me down. "There's nothing about it in any library."

"Any?"

"Yeah. There's a lot, dude. Trust me." She shudders.

"Well, maybe you just overlooked something."

"I had help. We parsed over so many books, Al, you would not believe."

"It doesn't hurt to check." I fold my arms.

Dad glances at me, then at the space I'm facing. He furrows his brow. There's something in his expression, similar to the one he'd been wearing in Omobolanle's office the other day. Before I can parse together the unwanted implications, his facade smooths out, and he turns away. "How about you tell me about the rest of it?"

I talk about the syrup tree and at the vision part, I hesitantly glance at Ingrid. The sun pulses up above, shifting in and out of the clouds. I stare up at it for a long moment, working through the vision myself. It has been a topic I'd been trying to avoid ever since Ingrid disappeared; the image of Lukstid and vision-Ingrid leaves my stomach in knots, still permeated with the distress of the situation after the vision.

When I think about speaking about the things I saw, about the words hitting solid reality and reaching someone else's mind, I have an urge to heave. I hastily sum up a, "I saw some gleaner stuff". I don't think it was that important to the task. And if there was, it's definitely not something I remember now, so it's useless.

My thoughts run away from that as soon as possible, and I continue on, describing the changing locations, the tree rocket thing whatever, and the cursive message etched under a panel: *Where do you wish to go?*

"And that's it. That's what we've been stuck on."

Dad makes a pondering noise. Anticipation jumps with the beat of my heart, but none of us makes much progress, spending the rest of the boat ride in quiescence. He ties down the boat, I give Ralph a temporary goodbye pat, and we walk onto Hyan Island, bypassing the carnival rides and arriving at the hole in the ground again. As soon as dad raises the heavy handle, Mr. Flishle pops out, seeming to exude an ominous air even with the happy clown music in the background.

His mouth twitches in displeasure. "You still need information," he says, deadpan and disappointed.

Well. What a substitute teacher vibe he gives off. "Yes, I do."

Mr. Flishle grasps the bridge of his nose with his spindly pale fingers, pinching his eyes shut, though the eerie white glow emits from under his thin eyelids. "Have you learned nothing, boy?"

"Uh!" I say, unprompted. I shoot a glance at dad's direction, slightly offended.

"I do apologize," Mr. Flishle continues without a beat. "Omobolanle is possibly the most powerful Magister in history, but oftentimes she withholds too much information and refuses to interfere." He sighs as if weighed down by decades and glances at the ground. "The problem with you is that you only focus on one source."

I almost think he's talking to the ground. I sputter. "That's not true!"

"Is it? Tell me, what have you done except follow your sister's path? You've done exactly as she thinks it should be done. Omobolanle overestimated you,

especially when you picked up that picture book. But you've accomplished nothing, have you?"

"What does a picture book have to do with anything?" I ask, uncertain of how I feel about Omobolanle and Mr. Flishles talking about me.

"It was something your sister had overlooked."

"Wait, do you mean the picture book has the answers?"

"No," he says, quite curtly. "It simply shows some independent thinking."

My indignance swallows my perturbation under his gaze. I imagine my mom addressing those horrible teachers in elementary school, pulling myself to my full height. I almost stutter when I realize that my full height isn't all that impressive, but I hope my stance screams the intimidation factor. "Excuse me?"

"Both of you keep on waiting for the other." He seems as affected with my stance as usual—that is, not at all—and waves at the talisman around my neck. "And time is running out."

"Then you tell us!" I demand, not even comprehending what he just said.

"This is your task," he reminds me, but it doesn't seem like he's directing it completely at me. "I can help, but I cannot answer."

"Don't you care what happens to this world?"

"Most of us have accepted the inevitable. We are doing all that we can, but if it ultimately fails, it is on us."

"But you guys didn't do this! It was the generation before, or the generation before before, right? You shouldn't have to pay for their mistakes."

"It's no good to rage about the mistakes of our predecessors. We do our duty, and if it is not effective, then it is not effective." Mr. Flishle blank eyes bore into me for what feels like an eternity. "You may come in. But do not be disappointed when you do not find anything."

"I'm coming in, too," dad asserts.

Mr. Flishle wrinkles his nose at us, but he sighs and gestures at the entrance. "Fine. Do not!" He holds up a light hand. "Touch anything."

We make our way down, and traipse to the area we found the scroll before, but even with dad helping now, Mr. Flishle turns out to be right: we find nothing useful. Most are hearsay, irrelevant to the rocket, which is not mentioned at all in the sparse accounts. Ingrid's scrawled notes and the anthology,—which despite its girth, had more extraneous tales than useful ones—covered most, if not all, of the details we'd parsed through.

"Let's go to Omobolanle's—" I start to say before being interrupted by a sharp, chilling sigh. Mr. Flishle crosses his spindly arms behind him and stares both me and dad down.

"You are wasting your time reading books. Why do you not think?"

I clench my fists, my jaw working around a retort. Dad steers me up the steps. "Thank you, Mr. Flishle, for your help," he says softly.

"What does he mean?" I burst out as soon as the carnival music becomes audible again. "He just keeps on insulting me."

"Yes, he's quite immature." Dad makes a displeased face, which immediately turns thoughtful. "Mr. Flishle ... well, he's been around for a long time. Did he say anything to you the last time we came?"

I glance at Ingrid, but Mr. Flishle's voice rings in my head as soon as I do: *You've done exactly as she thinks it should be done.* I keep my eyes at the top of the vomitory ferris wheel in the distance, instead, drudging up the memories of his advice before. To be honest, I'd been a little too engaged with his creepy eyes and the general hair-raising atmosphere of the library, but he had said some cryptic things about the gleaners ...

"He said something about 'knowing the reason,'" Ingrid mutters. I scowl at her.

"Yeah, I knew that."

She rolls her eyes. "Seriously, Al?"

"Don't let his words get into your head," dad mutters. "I, for one, am really impressed with how much you've completed and learned."

Feeling slightly abashed now, I duck my head. "I'm sorry for getting so angry at you," I say.

He frowns. "What do you mean?"

"On the fishing ride. I was just ... I dunno. I was rude."

He softens. "You don't need to apologize. You were right."

Our boat bobs peacefully on the ocean, reflecting the sunlight. Knowing the reason ... to what? To finish the mission? Dad had said something similar, too, about sailing. Intent, and the ocean and the vessel will work with you.

Someone in the distance screams on a ride.

Three more days.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

I know I'm worrying mom, but my entire nervous system is preoccupied with turning over Mr. Flishle's, Omobolanle's, and dad's offhand comments, like a swimming pool for fish I can't see.

It shames me to admit that Mr. Flishle and his lordly creepiness has stabbed itself into my soul. It's time to stop relying on books and start thinking, time to start thinking, time to start thinking. I blink at the Calculus textbook in front of me. Well, I've realized something in the past few days: I really can't think.

Don't let him get into your head, I chide myself, and it sounds suspiciously like dad. My haphazard inattentiveness catches Mr. Cho's attention, too, which would've been embarrassing if I hadn't been so out of it. After reassuring him several times that I'm fine, and then going through that entire process with Jessica, Ingrid practically forces me to take a break with another Just Dance routine.

Although she tries to play it off, Ingrid incessantly checks the calendar, counting the weeks one by one as if the next iteration will increase the number. Even Ralph is antsy, circling around me as if sniffing for daffodils. I had to extract her sharp claws from my pants one morning.

When Thursday finally rolls in, mom gently pushes down the arm that I had been holding up for an indefinite amount of time, caught into a suspiciously phlegmatic panic mid-way through chucking random shirts into a backpack.

"Alex, do you really think you should go?"

Intent. What does that mean? I had intent on that rocket ship. I had a reason. Do I have to say it out loud? Is that it?

"Al." Ingrid snaps her fingers in front of my face, then twirls it around like she's about to start chanting *lolly, lolly, lollipop!* "Mom asked you a question."

"Hm?" I ask before comprehending the last few seconds. My mouth spits out words before I can form a coherent reply. "Yeah should I yes."

If anything, mom looks even more concerned. I try for a grin. "It's fine. I don't think there's any tests next week ... maybe. I'm pretty sure."

"What has been going on there? I know I've commended you on connecting with your dad again, but if it makes you uncomfortable—"

"It's fine, mom! I just. There's this thing. I can't really tell you." Hurriedly, I tack on a, "I can't really tell dad? Either? Kind of? It's just—I mean—it should be over soon."

"What is it?"

"Well. I kinda did say I can't say."

"I'm your mom."

"... yeah. It kinda doesn't really have anything to do with that? Kind of? It's fine! Should be over in two weeks." At that, I sort of retch a little. Holy cow, I really do not have the time at all. And if what Mr. Flishle said was true, then the easy part really is over! I'm actually going to have to deliberate on my own.

"... you're not doing drugs, are you?"

I snap out of my world of pity, mortified. "What?! No!"

"Selling them?"

"No! Mom, how would I—no!"

"Something illegal?"

"No! No, no! Why would you think that?" She gives me one of her patented looks, and I pause for a moment and ponder over my behavior. "... alright. I kinda get why you would think that? But I swear it's not what you think! It's something ... something good, if I succeed. For Ingrid." For the past few months, Ingrid's name had been tantamount to a magic word, and it works now. Mom's expression immediately drops, and she closes her eyes, bone-weary. Acidic regret titrates my lungs.

"Don't hurt yourself, Alex."

"I won't," I promise, puerily crossing my fingers underneath my T-shirt. "I'm almost done."

"You don't have to make up for anyth—"

"I know," I snap, and it comes out more ferociously than I intended it to.

"Sorry. Just. A little tired. I'm gonna. Go to sleep."

Mom gives me another patented look, but she kisses me on the forehead anyways when I wrap the blankets around myself. "We'll talk about this when you get back, okay? And this time, you're giving me answers. I can't help you if you won't tell me."

"Okay."

Ingrid winces. We both know that I won't—which is stupid! It's her world that has all those rules. I'm just following them! Just following them like I'd apparently followed Ingrid for, for—

I groan and slam my blanket-covered hands over my ears.

On the coconut island the next day, I'm tired, irritable, and my mind is in a haze—somehow worse than it has been for the week. I keep on thinking about the calc homework I barely got through on the train ride, about my bed back in Chicago, about my mom who would probably have more answers than everybody in the magic world combined, but whom I couldn't speak to about because of—

"Alex!" Ingrid groused.

"What!?"

She gesticulates furiously at the panel: *Where do you wish to go* stares back at me like a taunt. I throw my hands into the air. "What? I have been! I've been trying! I'm tired!"

I wait for her retort, wait for an escalation, but she simply takes a seat beside me, hovering a few centimeters off the ground, practically melting into her surroundings. "I know, I know. But you have to keep going."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Didn't Mr. Flishle say something about providing a reason?" She nudges.

"Maybe say I want to go to Many-Eyed because da da da."

"I wish to go to Many-Eyed," I grit. "Because I wish to get rid of the gleaners."

Nothing happens. I resist banging my head into the wall or grabbing Ralph and screaming into her fur. Said raccoon is unusually alert, as she was this whole week, prowling around and around, her ears and tail flickering erratically. I take a fortifying breath and turn to the control again.

"Take me to 1320, 1930, 60 because I want to get rid of the gleaners. I wish to go to 1320, 1930, 60 because I wish to get rid of the gleaners. Please take me to Many-Eyed, who dwells at the coordinates 1320, 1930, 60 because we—Ingrid and Alex—wish to get rid of the gleaners so that the world can move on with its life, and people can be happy and safe and not have to worry about being killed on their stinking tasks and—" I'm so busy yelling at the dormant dashboard that I narrowly miss the background noise of Ralph growling.

"What's up with her?" Ingrid asks warily, rhetorically. She's tense, her shoulders pulled back, fists clenched as if readying for a fight. She floats closer to Ralph, who still hasn't stopped snarling. "Alex, what do you smell?"

"Nothing! All I smell is the rotting stench of my failure!"

"Okay, edgelord. Are you sure?"

"Ye—" I freeze, then instinctively press closer to Ralph and Ingrid. I grab at Ingrid's arm; she's freezing to the touch. My reaction screams my answer, and Ingrid grasps me back, clenching my shoulder tightly.

"Alex, keep on making your wishes," she hisses.

The rotten stench augments, putrid on my tongue. In the corner of the ramp, there's a flicker of crimson red, an afterimage of three wide holes in the shape of a pair of eyes and a gaping mouth.

I force my vocal chords to work. My voice is a calliopean tremor. "I wish to go to Many-Eyed, please! Please! Because I want to get rid of the gleaners!"

"Alex, stop repeating the same things!"

"Well what else am I supposed to say?!" I shriek hysterically. We're both crouching down behind Ralph, arms wrapped around each other. How fast do gleaners move? I certainly can't outrun them. And how long do they last? Will they only go when they accomplish their goal? I can't lead them to dad.

Pain registers in the palm of my hand, and I notice that I'd been clutching at the talisman Daniel had made. The protection had worn off. It's as useful as the necklace Maia had made for me.

"I want to go to Many-Eyed, please, for the sake of this world! Don't you want magic to prevail? Aren't you magic yourself? Take us to 1320, 1930, 60!" I demand, voice slowly getting shriller and shriller as the red fog permeates outside, roiling toward the entrance like a swarm of wasps.

"Oh my god!" Ingrid shouts, pulling us back so we're pressed against the wall, the furthest from the gleaners as possible. "Say something like 'I wish to get rid of the gleaners, so take me to Many-Eyed!'"

"I wish to get rid of the gleaners, so take me to Many-Eyed!" I scream dutifully. Think, think! But my brain is sleep-addled, and I just want to lie down and sleep, want my mom to read stories under the soft honey glow of those cheap lamps she likes.

Ralph lets out a battle cry and launches herself at the gleaners, but unlike last time, she doesn't take the upper-hand.

"Ralph!" I try to surge forward, but Ingrid yanks me back.

"Make the wish!" she bellows. I don't even think she knows what she wants me to do at this point.

"I don't know, I don't know!" I wail. I think about mom, about lying to her, manipulating her into agreeing to let me go. "I want to go home! I want to sleep! But I need to complete this because I don't want your death to be unnecessary!"

"That's not what I meant, Al!"

I can't see Ralph anymore. There's a sort of misery in the air, pulling at my cheeks, my eyes, clawing at my innards. "Leave us alone!" I yell at the gleaners, shoving Ingrid away from the licking fog. "You've already taken her once!"

The cockpit shakes, rumbles. I lash out a kick at the amorphous gleaners, reflexively, and my sneakers phase through innocuously. Anxiety rises sky-high. I feel like I'm going to pass out from the fetid odor. My eyes are straining so much that my environment looks green—like staring at the sun before going back inside.

"Alex!" Ingrid gasps, but she sounds amazed, excited. "Alex!"

"Leave us alone!" I yell at the gleaner again, and then I watch, shocked, as it slides away with a blast of wind. The ramp begins to close, shutting off the gleaners, and I realize the green glow I thought I had imagined is the control panels shining. My mouth drops open.

"What are you waiting for? Hit that green button!" Ingrid breathes, grinning maniacally.

"But Ralph—!"

"Alex, Ralph will be fine, trust me. Animals aren't affected by gleaners. She knows this island probably better than me or you, but if you miss this opportunity, we might not have another."

"I—" I send one last look at the outside, but from this angle, I can't see the gleaners or Ralph. The glow pulses, dimming slightly, and I hurriedly slam my hand on the button.

And then we're weightless. A split-second of palm trees zooming past us, a glimpse of the shining blue of the ocean, of the boat, and then everything blurs into a rainbow of colors like jumping into lightspeed of a Star Wars's ship.

"You did it!" Ingrid laughs. "You did it!"

"I did it," I repeat. I wait for the inexplicable exuberance to burst within me, the pride of an accomplishment—but it doesn't come, and it doesn't feel like one.

Ingrid grabs my arms and spins me around the cockpit. "Oh my god! Oh my god!" She bursts into laughter again, covering her eyes and then dragging her hands down her face, shaking her head. "Oh my god." A spark of unease flickers across her face, but before I can read into it, it disappears.

"Thank you."

"What about Ralph? Are you sure she's going to be okay?"

"She ... I think she was there when I died, and well, she's fine."

"Yeah, now. What if—" I don't finish the sentence, my nerves clumping into a concentrated mess.

The rainbow streaming across dissipates, and I'm finally able to register the velocity we're traveling at as it slows down. At first, it looks like we'd traversed nowhere: there's a swath of palm trees in my vision, coconuts hanging from them. With a closer look, though, the magic is different, almost like that of Hyan Island. As we land, softly parting through verdant foliage, the branches of the vessel unwound, its magic streaming across the ridges, falling away and leaving Ingrid and I in the open.

"Those ... are huge mushrooms," I mutter, gaping at the fungi in awe.

"And those are huge flowers," Ingrid adds on, bending close to a bright neon one. Its petals are as big as my face, splotched like an oil painting. The air is clean, fresh, and the forest is alive with something other than life, extending all around us like an all-encompassing embrace. Here, the magic lines were everywhere, streaking the tree barks, skimping through with the tiny movements of animals, buzzing in the air like pollen and confetti and firework sparks.

"Al!" Ingrid gasps, pointing upward. I follow her gaze, and my jaw drops. On top of the closest tree, blue-barked and iridescent, is a huge cave, the sand-colored stratified hunk of rock wrapped around its branches.

"How does that even work?"

"I dunno." Ingrid drifts forward. "Let's go up."

"Shouldn't we be trying to find Many-Eyed or something? What if we still have to do something else?"

"What does the magic look like?"

I pause, taking in my surroundings again, trying to focus on the individual strands instead of the motion blurs. I almost don't notice it, and perhaps I'm imagining it, but the magic does centralize toward the cavehouse, a rolling mass of colors. "How are we supposed to get up? You are not carrying me up that high."

"Don't need to. Look." She grins, spreading her arms out in a *ta-da* motion in front of three large mushrooms, purple, blue, and red, spotted generously gold.

"You're going to use these."

"... Ingrid, I can't climb up to the top of this tree with three mushrooms."

She rolls her eyes. "Just step on them. In order!"

"How does that help?" I ask dubiously, hopping on top of them. They're surprisingly stable underneath my shoes.

"They're teleporta—"

Her words are cut off as I step on the red mushroom and suddenly find myself seventy feet above at the beginning of another set of purple, blue, and red mushrooms. My next breath veers into a scream, and I flail my arms. Ingrid shoots up beside me, grinning. "—tion mushrooms. You won't fall. Go on."

"Why. Do you not. Warn me beforehand. About these things!?"

She shrugs. "It's kinda funny, sorry, Al. You're not afraid of heights, right? I mean, you were fine when Maia made you go on the Tall Tumble ride."

"Don't remind me," I wheeze, feeling quite nauseous. Hurriedly, I take two steps up. Thankfully, the next location isn't on top of a questionable platform of

mushrooms. I land on the balcony of the cave house, its wooden floor and rails comprised of the twisting tree it rests on, if that makes sense.

There's a curved indent in the pastel rocks. I place my hand on the surface and blink in surprise—it's soft to the touch, like a fluffy rug.

"You do have the key, right?"

"Yes." I roll my eyes with a small stab of panic. Thankfully, it's in my jacket pocket, which is great because I wouldn't have known what to do if I had forgotten it. "Why?"

Ingrid raises her eyes up. "Dude, you're looking right at it."

"At—oh." Near eye-level of the indent in the rocks is a small crevice, shaped like the ridges of the key. Trembling—whether in the inside or on the outside, I fit the strange key into the hole; as soon as I turn it, it disappears. A door shifts into existence and swings open.

Ingrid and I glance at each other, and we step inside.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Animals. That's the first thing I see when we walk in. The room is jam-packed full of animals—elephants, monkeys, squirrels, tigers, cheetahs, tapirs, and then other ones, weird and bizarre and a mesh of all the rest, megafaunas that defy the dimensions of the cave from the outside. The warm colors of the walls amplify the rays of sunlight sifting through in places where I didn't think light could get through, creating a transmundane aura.

In the back, a series of levers go up and down, sliding doors opening and closing: an elevator.

"Let's go," I declare, pulling back my shoulders and warily eyeing the plethora of animals. They don't pay us any mind, so I begin to push through, dodging a lazy alligator snapping at potatoes, a brontosaurus-giraffe-looking creature chewing at the long stalks of bamboo shoots growing around it. Reaching the frankly dangerous elevator contraption, though, I notice a staircase next to it.

"So which one should we take?" I ask Ingrid, but she's unfocused, tapping her lip furiously. I frown, slightly concerned. "What's wrong?"

Ingrid pauses before lifting her gaze from the ground, halting her tapping. "I have literally done nothing as a ghost. Well, I mean, I learned how to touch my tongue with my nose. Touch my nose with my tongue ... okay, you get the point."

"... okay? So which way should we go?" I gesture at the elevator and the stairs.

"Definitely the stairs. Do you want to die?"

"You know, you make a lot of death jokes."

"Perks of being dead. Get to milk the dark humor," she mutters with none of the levity she usually has. We crawl up the long-winding steps which, thankfully, aren't crowded by more animals. Halfway up, I begin to regret choosing to take the stairs.

"How high up is everything?" I pant, grasping at the sides of the sanded walls.

"Dude, we've barely covered any distance. See what I mean, this is why you have to practice Just Dance. Get that summer bod."

"Oh my gosh, why do you even say anything."

"Hey, you're going to miss our banter."

I place my hands on my knees and bend down, waiting for my calves to loosen up. "What do you mean I'm going to miss it?"

"... nevermind."

"No, you, dad, Omobolanle, Daniel, even Maia! You're not—you're not telling me something."

Ingrid's form flickers. Her voice is soft, almost lost in the distant sounds of the animals. "I think you already know, Al."

"No, I—Ralph?"

Sure enough, there's a raccoon in front of us, bushy black and white tail held high above. Her fur is cleaned, her eyes shining. She looks like she'd just arrived from the world's best raccoon spa.

Without making a sound, she whips around and prances up the steps, pausing only to twitch her tail at us as if urging us to follow.

I quickly scramble after her, hope yanking my cheeks into a smile. "Ralph? Is that you, Ralph? You're alive! How'd you get here? Where are you going?"

"That raccoon—!" Ingrid grits out. "I knew she was suspicious!"

"You were the one who said to let her in!" I gasp out. "Ralph, please slow down!"

"I never knew you were going to keep her!" She zooms in front. "Oh ho ho, if it turns out that *Ralph* has been working with Many-Eyed this whole time, your raccoon and I are going to have a talk."

We burst into a hallway, lined with framed pictures, some yellowed and black and white, others in high resolution, saturated with colors of the modern age. A dozen doors line each side, intricately carved into the red stone. Ralph sweeps to one of them—perhaps the plainest one, etched only with a simple eye-shaped design. My heart hummingbirds in my chest.

"Wait, is Many-Eyed seriously in there?" I crow. "Holy cow, thank you, Ralph!"

"She's a traitor is what she is."

"Ignore Ingrid, she doesn't know what she's saying. Ingrid, say thank you to Ralph."

"We don't even know if she's Ralph."

Ralph sniffs haughtily, and I beam down at her. "Oh, no. She definitely is! How did you survive, buddy? Nevermind, I'm so glad you're alright!" I coo, giving her some chin scratches.

Ingrid crosses her arms. 'Alright, that's great and all. Are you going to knock?"

I suck in a breath and nod. "Right. I'm going to. Right." I try to prepare myself. What would Many-Eyed look like? I expect a more golden version of Mr. Flishle, or the godly aura of the Many-Eyed in the syrup-induced hallucinations—an all-powerful being with the presence tantamount to lying under a mountain and getting your lungs crushed.

"I won't die if I see them, right?" I ask nervously, whether to Ralph or Ingrid, I don't know. Before I lose my nerves, I pound on the door—ne, two, three—and then stop breathing, anticipation driving a drill into my skull. For a moment, I almost convince myself that nothing will happen, that perhaps we're in the wrong place, perhaps this is simply another part of the grand scheme of things, that Many-Eyed is simply a myth that everyone had been tricked into believing.

And then the door swings open.

On the other side is a person, tall and willowy with bright purple and red hair sticking straight up. Their skin hosts patches and patches of scars and bumps, shifting like their body is made out of liquids. The mars are all raised—like eyelids over eye sockets. There's a dark red eyepatch pulled over head and a pair of polarized plastic-circled sunglasses, spiked up like dramatic cat-eyes over their nose. I blink. Are they ... are they wearing a giraffe onesie?

"Hooowdy there!" The person trills, grinning widely, the scars on their cheeks pulling taut, giving them the look of a skeleton with extra teeth. "You made it!" They sweep into a bow, low and formal. "Welcome! Welcome to my humble abode."

"You're Many-Eyed?" I squeak out, discombobulated.

"Hey!" They put their hands on their hips. "What does appearance have to do with anything? I'm plenty great inside."

"That's not—well—"

"Society strives to justify ugliness with beauty, but what it really should do is to disconnect pretty with qualification," they say grimly, their tone completely changing.

"I—what?"

"That was offensive, dude! Consider my feelings hurt! What are you guys doing? Come inside!"

"I—"

He drags me forward, waits for Ralph to slip in, and shuts the door behind him. A dining table sprawls in front of us, lathered with eclectic dishes—bread, spicy

noodles, fried eggplant, rangoons, fresh veggies and fruits—, and there's a bouquet of roses in the middle, red, yellow, orange, blue, purple, white, and black. All of them are in a carved out coconut shell, some of them ranging from the size of a palm to a salad bowl. Many-Eyed plucks a rose—orange—from the coconut vase and crouches down to feed it to Ralph who eagerly snatches it out of their hand, then pads over to url up beside a lone mirror behind the table, snacking away.

"Good girl. Thank you for all your help," they announce with all the vigor of a comedian turned late-night show host. "And you! Sit down and eat, young man! Here, try some tamales. Or zongzi? Ah! I like these! I believe it's called spigghatti!"

"Uh. Spaghetti?" I help myself to some anyway and pour a big glass of apple juice.

"Al!" Ingrid hisses.

"What? I'm really thirsty. And hungry."

"Ah, you should let your bro-ther eat!"

I stop with the forkful of spaghetti half-way to my mouth. "You can see her?"

"Can I? Our eyes are but illusions." There's a tense silence before he grins again, teeth white and perfectly straight. "Of course I can see her! Nice shirt!"

"Oh. Um. Thanks." Ingrid fidgets with her shirt, now looking distinctly uncomfortable. She frowns at Ralph. "How many pets do you have?"

Many-Eyed gasps, throwing themself back so hard that his chair screeches.

"Pets?! Pets?! Where?"

"Um."

"They're not pets!" They rush over to cover Ralph's ears melodramatically. "Not mine nor anybody else's. I'm simply giving them some hospitality. Hey! Why aren't you eating!"

"I can't ..." Ingrid makes a face, one that she usually directed toward me when I wore my *Wrinkle in Time* T-shirt two weeks in a roll.

"Hmmm. You can't, can't you?"

I glance from one to another. To be honest, it's a little weird to see Ingrid actually talking to someone. I'd tried to give her privacy with dad, Florence, and Maia ... it hits me that this might be the first time I've seen her hold a conversation with another person.

"What are we doing here?" She demands.

"What *are* you doing here?" Many-Eyed repeats,

"We were led here!"

"Were you?"

Ingrid pinches her nose and raises her eyes, likely regretting ever wanting to talk to another human being. Or ... is Many-Eyed considered a human being? I eye his shifting skin, the scars mottled across him. Appearances can be deceiving.

Many-Eyed stuffs ten grapes into his mouth.

Ingrid looks distinctly unimpressed.

I finish my apple juice. "You're supposed to be able to grant any wish, right?"

"Yes! Cool, right? If I met someone like me, I would wish for a tapir onesie."

Alas, they do not have it!" Mid-way through, their accent changes from Texan cowboy to British Dumbledore.

"That's. Nice." Is there a way to talk to supposedly all-powerful beings that act like a horrible improv actor? Perhaps that is what is in the anthologies and scrolls and myths. *Mr. Flishle probably lied to me.*

"It's so nice to have company again! The last time was, like. A century ago.

Actually, I'm not too sure. Time is wonky around here. I think a week passes, and it turns out to be, like, a year. It's so weird!"

Ingrid and I gander at each other in alarm. "Yeah ... um, so, about that wish—"

"And he was definitely more reticent than you! Surly attitude Teenage emo at its finest. His name was Hyan, I believe—"

"Hyan?" I ask, shocked.

"OH NO! I forgot to ask for your names!?" They turn their head this way and that for a good solid ten seconds before I clear my throat.

"Um. I'm Alex. That's Ingrid."

'Nice to meet you! And the magic of Sight, huh? I think Hyan had magic of the Past. He could look into your past. Haha! I just said that! Well, I implied that. Silly me! That boy was a cool dude, though. Had cool glowy eyes, all white and stuff. I'm always appreciative of eyes! Haha! Alex, Ingrid, your eyes are almost a complete match. Wow, genes are so—"

"Wait, cool glowy white eyes?" I reiterate. I think about the statue of Hyan—powerful and huge and adonis—and try to superimpose it with Mr. Flishle's hermit-like behavior, his sunken cheeks. "Are you talking about Mr. Flishle?!"

"Oh my god," Ingrid whispers.

"We praise the gods until the gods condemn our beliefs," Many-Eyed remarks. Another tense silence follows their statement as they nonchalantly flick twenty pistachios into their mouth in a second. "Flishle? I dunno, dudes. I think he asked for something that would make him last forever. An island. Some power. I'm not sure. Those kinds of wishes are always the hardest to remember because they happen so often."

"Hyau Island?"

They snap their fingers. "Yes! One of the harmless wishes. It didn't even leave a scar! Though, I suppose it left a scar on your world. That is, young un' Ingrid's world."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

Many-Eyed rolls up their pajama sleeves and turns their arms this way and that. The copious amount of gnarled scars and raised skin make their arms look like things that have been pieced together, like pulling a single strand from the cross-stitches would unwind their entire body. "I grant wishes. Wishes that are not followed up fail me. The wish dies and is corrupted. And now that my eyes aren't regenerating as fast as usual ..." he trails off, finger pressed to his scarred cheeks. "Hmm ... I'm not sure exactly what happened, to be honest! But I think something about his wish tipped off something about the creations of gleaners ..."

"Lukstdid."

"Lukstdid?" Ingrid furrows her brow.

"Ha! Consequences! Everything is two-fold in this world. Back and forth, back and forth ..." Many-Eyed tilts his head over his chair, staring silently at the ceiling. He shoots up suddenly. "Anyways! You're here for a wish! What is it?"

I push away my empty dish and glance at Ingrid. She doesn't meet my eyes, though, gripping the bottom of her shirt, her shoulders tight. Her face is twisted like she's bracing for something, but she doesn't look scared so my concern simply simmers instead of boils. "Go on, Al. Make it."

"Just ... to get rid of the gleaners, right? And make sure it doesn't happen again."

"Oh, how the world goes around and around! One generation's mistake is another's and another's and another's!" Many-Eyed cackles and claps their hands. Then, they revert back to a more sophisticated enunciation. "Alright. And what are you willing to give?"

"My magic."

"Sorry, no can do."

Alarm strikes me in the chest. I turn to Ingrid, eyes wide, but she simply clenches her jaw. Dread pools into my heart. "What? What do you mean? What else is there to give?"

"Oh, no. Giving away magic is a balanced trade for this."

"Then why'd you say ...?"

"You don't have magic."

I feel like I've been reversed Harry-Pottered, and at the same time, vindicated. "Oh. Then what else is there?"

"Here it comes," Ingrid mumbles, voice heavy.

"Your sister has magic. Or, she is magic. I'll take Ingrid in exchange for your wish."

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Ice water drenches my entire body. In moments of complete denial, my decorum becomes impeccable. I sit straighter, I fold my hands on the table. I say, clearly and curtly, "Sorry?"

Many-Eyed bobs their head in equal perplexity—though on the opposite end of the spectrum from mine. "I thought you knew?"

"Yeah, he did. He's just really in de nile, if you know what I mean," Ingrid comments. In moments of complete solemnity, her horrible puns come out, apparently.

"Well, we can't agree to that. What else is there to exchange?"

Many-Eyed kicks back in their chair, rocking back and forth. "I dunno, man. What have you got?"

"Alex, just agree to this sticking thing so we can all get over it and life can go back to normal."

"What do you mean so that life can go back to normal? Don't you want to stay with dad? And Florence and Maia and mom and me?"

"I'd rather you finish the mission. And ..." She stares at her hands—transparent, see-through. "Don't get me wrong, Al. It's been so, so incredible that I got to know you, and you're not bad company. But ... it's also incredibly lonely. And I know Daniel can do his voodoo to make it so that I'll be able to interact with others once in a while, but I feel so. Useless." She clenches her hands into a fist. "I can't touch anything. No one else can hear me. I'm stuck to you, and what would happen if you die? Would I just stay forever in the world? Not being able to do anything?"

"Mm, that may be the case." Many-Eyed nods his head.

"Okay, well what if you just take her magic, and then I wish for both her to be, like, revived and the gleaners to be gone. A thought strikes me. "Or, if you can't revive her, then ... then well, since I was possessed by a gleaner before, and Ingrid is like a gleaner, she can—"

"No. I can go through anyone else, but you're solid to me. And honestly, that's just disturbing. Anyway, you can't do that. Don't you remember? Magic is tied intrinsically to your very being. Many-Eyed can't just take my magic without taking me."

Frustration builds inside me. I wonder if this is what Giles Corey felt in his last moments. "Why are all of you guys just accepting this? You have magic!"

"The balance—"

"Shut up about balance! Everything's out of balance! Why are you so eager to just go!? Aren't dad and Florence getting married soon? You can't just—" I stand up and pace around, ignoring Many-Eyed's shrew gaze. They've been casually peeling an orange, filling the dining room with the citrus-y scent. I ignore them. "Mr. Flishle was right. I've been following your interpretations too long! I'm going to think. We're going to talk about this later. Bye!"

"Alex—"

I stalk out the door and sprint downstairs, aggressively counting the steps as I go down. The spaghetti churns heavily in my stomach by the time I make it to the foyer. I'm about a second away from reenacting Eminem's rap as I shuffle myself behind the herd of elephants, out of sight.

There, I remain, wracking my memories for anything that would help, but I keep on hearing Mr. Flishle's voice—Hyan's voice, telling me to think, telling me about the gleaners. For someone who had wished for an entire island, for fame, he sure is an anchorite in his library. We didn't even know he's Hyan until now. What had changed? What had happened? Does he even want the fame anymore? Does he regret it?

Think, Alex. But I've never been good at thinking. Just memorizing and spitting out facts from a textbook, and suddenly everyone thinks I'm a genius, that I should skip some grades because I can reiterate information. I grip my head in my hands and press my forehead to my knees. The baby elephant closest to me flips his trunk in the air, giving me a free shower.

"Alex ..."

I shoot up. Ingrid hovers beside me, concerned. She silently lowers herself to my level.

"How'd you find me?"

She gives me a look. Right. Of course. We're tied together or something. Well, that's fine. She can aid my brainstorming.

"Help me think of another way to get rid of the gleaners."

"Al, I'll be miserable." She leans her head back, disregarding my plea and watching the baby elephant spray out water like a sprinkler. "If I had a choice, I wouldn't go—"

"But you do have a choice."

"No," she says patiently, calmly, like we're talking about a regular day at school. "I—I took this mission because I wanted to belong. Because the magic world lauds about family and home, and I always felt like an outcast and a little useless. And I was regretful, too. I wanted to reconnect with you and mom. Many-Eyed mentioned something after you left, that the rocket is attuned to your innermost thoughts, and so ... I guess the reason why I was never able to succeed is because I was so focused on completing the mission that I refused to acknowledge anything else." She looks a little pained at that admission. "Or something."

"You had to tell the truth?"

Ingrid grumbles. "What do you mean tell the truth? I had been telling the truth. I needed to get here."

"I don't know," I protest. "Maybe it's like, want over need."

Ingrid stops fidgeting. "I guess. I mean, that doesn't really make sense to me, but that's what Many-Eyed was trying to get at, too." She side-eyes me, tipping her head away from the baby elephant. "You know, I'm still kinda bitter over the fact that you just had to make a single stupid wish when I spent like two months on that part before dying."

Unconsciously, my mouth twitches into a smile, feeling equal parts triumphant that I had managed to understand something Ingrid doesn't and distracted by the deluge of life that thrummed all throughout. Her magic. Which will disappear.

"I think when you stand at the end of the world, even as a dystopia maniac, you'll realize you really don't want the world to end, Al, so no matter how much you want me to stay ... I'm satisfied. I've gotten my wish. I've said good-bye to my family. Now I have to—you have to complete my task."

I stare at the stratifications of the ground. If I speak, I'm afraid it will come out in a sob.

"I need you to finish this. Please. For me. We can't afford to use up anymore time. Please, Al. I'm fine with this, and ... I'm already dead. There's not much to take away."

"That's not true," I choke out.

"Al ... please. Just do it. How much time has passed already?"

The grains of the rocks glint at me. The word *think* keeps on repeating in my head, blocking any actual thoughts. It feels like standing in front of Ingrid's coffin again, wordless, empty, but this time, I'm staring at a clock and waiting for nothing. "Fine," I whisper. Then, louder. "Fine."

Ingrid lets out a sigh in relief. She stands up, brushing off invisible dirt before offering a hand to pull me up. When she smiles, it's bright and happy. Why couldn't I feel like that? Everyone else seemed to accept her ultimate demise, even Ingrid. She looks proud, even, and why wouldn't she? Why couldn't I? "Good. Let's go. Free flying ride, one last time?"

We zoom up the stairs, Ingrid's hands uncomfortably cold around my ankles as she basically piggy-backs me up again. It probably looks ridiculous, but I feel leaden, like falling into the ocean again.

Many-Eyed is lounging in the same spot, petting Ralph—who's nibbling on another rose, red this time—as they munch on almonds. They look up, sunglasses glinting in the light. "You're back, fro! Get it? Like friend and bro mashed up."

"Never mind that. We'll do the trade."

"Alrighty." Many-Eyed stands up, towering over us, and strides forward. For the first time since meeting them, I feel genuinely cowed. Then, they take off their sunglasses, revealing their left eye—standard brown in color—before reaching into their socket and pulling it out. My mouth drops open. My stomach heaves at the spaghetti. I throw my hands over my eyes and turn away. Many-Eyed says, "Here, take this."

"Uh, no thanks," I whimper.

Many-Eyed boisterously laughs, and the sound rumbles like a gentle earthquake. They turn the eye around, and I look away, feeling sick. "Look," they say. "Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid! That's just disgusting!" But with some gruesome curiosity, I peek again. It's not an eye anymore but a round, almost gaseous-like thing in their hands, shimmering and pulsing like a new-born moon. *How can they see anymore?*

"Take it."

Nervously, I slide my fingers underneath. It feels like nothing in my palms, wispy and shadowy. "What do I do?"

"Make the wish."

My heart pounds in my chest like a beat on a tiffany, and my entire body shakes. Ingrid gives me an encouraging smile, but her lips tremble.

"Tell mom that—well. Just tell everyone I love them, alright? You included, Al."

"I love you, too." I laugh weakly. "I'm gonna be so mad if all of this turns out to be like, schizophrenia or something."

She shares a wet chuckle with me. "It'll be over soon," she says, and she probably means it to be reassuring, but the words seem to stab me in the chest. It'll be over soon. Wasn't that what I had wanted since the very beginning? I take a deep

breath. In the corner of the room, the mirror reflects me back—pale, stiff—and I picture my eyes empty, just as theirs is. For some reason, it seems more fitting for me than for them.

“I wish—” I hesitate. The words are on the tip of my tongue: *I wish for the gleaners to be gone forever*. But they feel like a choking hazard. Adrenaline races across my entire system. There’s an earthquake in my chest, spanning to my feet. I gaze at Many-Eyed, eyeless and willowy. Omobolanle’s voice reverberates inside my mind: *Magic is an ecosystem*. “Wait. No.” I close my fists, and the orb distinguishes, zipping back to Many-Eyed’s empty socket. They reel back and smack a hand over it.

“Ow! Hey! What was that for?”

“I’m remaking my wish.”

“Alex! What are you doing?”

“This is my want over your need,” I say. Then I pull my shoulders back, stroll up to Many-Eyed, and slap on one of mom’s facial expressions, the one that oozes confidence. “You’re made of magic, too, aren’t you? This is affecting you as much as anybody else. Don’t you stand to gain the same with the gleaner’s disappearance?”

They shrug, still rubbing at their eye. “Sure. But I can’t do anything without a return of equal value.”

“... you said your eyes weren’t regenerating as fast. What if I were to return one to you as a trade?”

“Well, you just did. And it hurt! ... Kind of.” They mutter petulantly, frowning at me before collapsing back into a chair, arms flopped out. Many-eyed taps their chin. “Hmm. Maybe. Like how?”

“The trades don’t have to be abstract, right?” He nods, so I continue, frantic to get my ideas out. “Hyan Island. If you take back Hyan Island, will one of your eyes return?”

Their hand drifts to the eye-patch. “Yes. But are you in the authority to make that decision?”

“I don’t think he’ll mind, really.” I pause. “It’s just a library and a carnival, right?”

“And the library possesses much knowledge.”

“... fine.” I don’t think Mr. Flishle will care that much. Hopefully. In fact, he’ll probably like my wish. Hopefully.

“And?”

“And what?”

“You said you were remaking your wish. What is it now?”

Oh, wow. For a guy in a giraffe onesie, they sure are perceptive. I guess I should’ve expected that from someone who’s a literal legend. “I’m not going to get rid of the gleaners. I want all of them, including Ingrid, to be returned to their bodies. In full health.”

Many-Eyed frowns. “You can’t possibly think returning an island will match millions of lives. I need something more. What about the necklace your sister gave you?”

I blink, taken aback. “What? The necklace Maia gave me?”

“Yep. And maybe one more, and we’re good with this trade.”

I grit my teeth. “And ... and I won’t use anything magic, either. Like the book light thingy dad and Florence gave me.”

“Those mattered to you that much?” Ingrid exclaims.

I flush red. “Shut up, Ingrid. They were nice.”

“Hmm. And you won’t be able to get any more magical souvenirs, how about it?”

“Yes, that’s fine,” I agree quickly, anticipation burgeoning, its tips turning into joy. “I’m good with that.”

But Many-Eyed stalls. “You see, those are quite fine trades, but how can you ascertain that the wish I give you won’t be corrupted? That the magic world won’t regress and create more gleaners?”

That stumps me. “You can ... believe in the good of the people?”

"I do believe in the good people. And I do believe that people can make great changes. It's keeping them that is the problem."

"I'll personally oversee the progress to assimilate the past gleaners into our society and to ensure that nothing like it ever happens again," Ingrid blurts. "And if what I do doesn't meet your standards, then you can take me and everybody else."

"Ingrid!" I gasp.

"Just you? I'll take both your souls, how about it?"

"You can—"

"Ingrid!" I shout.

"Because I will not fail you."

"And you do realize what your wish entails, right? You're displacing millions of the dead."

"But most of them are just kids, right? They deserve to—to have a second chance. And ... that time when I was possessed, I think I somewhat felt what they—or one of them—felt. It was ... it was horrible. I wouldn't want that to be their last moments."

"And the magic world can take it," Ingrid adds on. "The population's been dwindling ever since the gleaners. And with more magic-users, magic itself strengthens."

"Yes! That, too!"

Many-Eyed swivels from left to right. Then, they let out a deep exhale. "Sometimes, I believe humans simply like to make things harder for themselves to feel any sort of accomplishment." They look up at me. "Fine. It's a deal. And you better stick with it this time."

"Yes!" I almost shout, beaming. "Thank you!"

"Yeah, don't thank me." They pause. "On second thought, I'm great, aren't I? Okay, hold out your hand."

This time, I do so eagerly as they deposit the eye into my hand. For a moment, it hovers, pulsing in a warm light. The pull and stretch of a bubble of faces

warp in front of me, and for a second, I can feel them—not like the possession, not like the violation, but ... understanding. Their yearning, their miserable dissatisfaction, their hatred inside and out. I just want to belong, I just want to succeed. I just want to be enough, I just want to be home. Their sorrow becomes mine, their fears, their self-disgust.

All around, the magic lines go crazy. It's more than Daniel's glowing eyes, more than Hyan Island and this forest combined. I feel faint with the colors, the verve, the pounding in my eyes and my head and my fingers. Behind it all—or perhaps in front of it—, there's a shearing light, the outlines of eyes—hundreds or thousands—blinking in unison, irises gold, pupils gold, stoic and sorrowful, delighted and poignant.

Then everything winks out of existence.

Ingrid does, too.

"Where did she go?" I ask, the familiar panic winding into me.

Many-Eyed waves their hand before pressing it to the eyepatch. Their face twitches rapidly, like they're blinking. "Don't worry, dude. She's fine. Woooaaah does that feel weird. Ever have one of your eyes regrow? Ha." They give me a look—or a face? There's nothing visible on their face except for scars now. "Anyways, you should probably toodle-loo. Time's ticking."

"How am I supposed to get back? So much of this mission depended on following the magic lines." I glance around. The customary buzz of magic has vanished as well, leaving the room as plain as any other.

"Hmm ... Leaf!"

"Leaf?"

"Ya ... Leaf? Come here, girl ..." Many-Eyed tilts their head, furrowing their bright purple brows. "Weird."

"You mean Ralph?"

Ralph perks up and scampers to me. Many-Eyed raises an eyebrow. "Well then."

They give me a long stare then shrugs. "She'll be your guide home. Just follow her. Howdy, that feels weird! You're such an interesting human, Alex. This hasn't happened in like ... more than a century. I dunno. A long era passed. Did I say how weird time is?" They itch at their elbow. "Wow! Haven't felt the healing process of biology actually work in this long!"

"Um. Cool. Er. Thanks, again."

"Actually, I should be thanking you, Alexander." They grin and pull out a beaded necklace out of their giraffe onesie—too colorful for my taste, rainbow in the most grisly way. "For this necklace."

I scowl at Many-Eyed. For an all-powerful being, they could be quite an immature jerk. Though, I suppose some adults are like that, anyways. If I couldn't expect that from the supposedly grown people in society today, how can I expect that from a million-year old myth?

"Yeah. Whatever. I'm leaving now."

"Buh-bye! Visit any time!"

"Let's go, Ralph." We scamper downstairs and take a sharp right, arriving at a door. When I push it open, there's a long, wooden bridge, extending so far, I can't see the end. Perhaps fifty feet below is vast open water. Somehow, I see the coconut island, but from this high, it looks like a regular one, with slabs of rocks instead of fruits. I purse my lips, scanning the bridge.

Ralph steps forward, unafraid, giving me an expectant look. I glance around at the cave, at the animals. "Let's go home," I say softly.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

"Are we there yet?" After today, I'm not going to move at all for at least two months. No walking. No strenuous muscle activity, even if it's simply picking up a textbook. I'm going to sit in a roly-chair and use a fan to push maneuver around.

The fog, thick as soup, drifts lazily around us, blocking out anything behind, above, and below me. I clutch at the twine rails nervously. Ralph chitters. I imagine

her saying, *Almost there, Al! You're doing great for someone who has only recently started exercising, albeit exercising by Just Dance!*

But she's probably judging my lagging pace. I gulp, glaring into the fog. How long have we been walking? Ralph flicks her ears at me, and I nod, swallowing. "Okay, okay. I'm going, I'm going."

I lose track of the seconds once I reach three-hundred, keeping my mind focused on putting one foot in front of the other on the wooden panels, its light tan color drifting in and out of sight, watching as my shoes blur as I gradually hasten my stride, as Ralph's tail swish in and out of my vision. If it had been any warmer, I would've been pouring sweat.

"Ralph? Are we at least close?"

"I swear, if we do not find him today, you will regret everything."

What the—did Ralph just speak? I'm so taken aback at another voice, I halt completely in my steps, eyeing Ralph who disappears into the fog during my distraction. Panicked, I fall into a jog. "Wait, Ralph—"

"Are you going to say something?" The voice comes again, and more lucid now, I realize that I recognize it. Anticipation, relief, jubilation builds in my chest, pushing my legs forward.

"Mom?" I call, pushing past the fog, which begins to clear, revealing the clutter of an office—Omobolanle's office.

"What—Ralph? Where did she come from?"

"Mom!" I burst out and almost slam into Omobolanle's table with my momentum. Dad jumps up with a shout. Omobolanle stands with a sharp gasp. Mom careens into me, pulling me into an embrace.

"Alex!?" She cups my face in her hands. I manage to grin at her before she pulls me back in. "Oh my god, Alex? Where have you been? Are you hurt? Where have you been, Alexander?"

"I'm fine!" I giggle, swelling, cheerful.

"Fine? You've been gone for a week! I had to—they had to—where have you been?"

"I did it! I did it!" I half-turn to tell the news to Omobolanle and dad; then, I register mom's presence and I whip around again. "Wait, what are you doing here?" Then, I comprehend what she'd said. "Oh. A week's not bad."

"Not *bad*?" she repeats, baffled. "When you said you had to finish something, when I told you to tell me about it, when I asked if you were safe—Alex, why—wait, no." She aims a glare at the others in the room. "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you allow him to tell me? I'm his mother!"

Guilt threatens to swallow me whole. I study my shoes and try to swallow down the urge to make an excuse. "I'm sorry."

"No, no, not you, Alex. You." She jabs a finger at dad, her scowl fierce. "He's not allowed to visit you until he's eighteen."

Dad looks about ready to agree. I frown. "Wait, what? No!"

"Alex—" He looks almost as bad as the first time I saw him after Ingrid died, and he's looking at me like he's being torn into several pieces. It occurs to me that he had one of those who had thought Ingrid would be taken completely after the task. First, though, I address my mom.

"No, he allowed me to back out. I said no. It was my choice, and I'm sorry I kept things from you,, but I wouldn't have—wouldn't have done anything different with the task itself. Did they ... did they tell you everything?"

Mom nods stiffly. She has this look in her eyes, the one she'd worn for months after Ingrid's death. The one she has still been wearing. "Yes."

"Well, it's done now. I'm ... I'm sorry, but Ingrid ... I didn't want her death to be. You know." I wave my arm. "It's over. I won't do anything like this again. I'm sorry I made you angry."

"No, Alex. I was worried. That you—that something had happened, and I couldn't help, and I couldn't push you without having you go over the edge. I'm glad it's over." She hugs me close again, and for a moment, it's just her, me, and the room.

I duck my head onto her shoulder. "But promise next time anything like that happens, you'll come right to me."

"Yeah," I croak. "You don't have to worry about that, mom. It's all over."

"And you," she says over my head at dad. "You know the consequences."

"I'm sorry, Mitra."

"You should be. All of you. You let a *kid* go on a possibly life-threatening mission to—to save this world or something? I don't care what your laws are, but they better change."

"Of course," Omobolanle defers. Even though she's the tallest and possibly the most powerful, she seems slumped and small next to mom, more normal instead of orotund and robust than I've ever seen her. She gives me a regretful bow of the head. I give a hesitant one back.

Suddenly, K'shmert bursts inside, his hair tousled like he'd run all the way to the office. "Magister, we're evacuating Hyan Island!"

"Whatever for?" Omobolanle asks, shocked.

"No, wait, it's okay!" I say. They both turn to me, looking slightly disturbed. "I mean, you should definitely evacuate it. That was just part of my bargain. The next part should be appearing—"

A surprised scream echoes from outside, and then the rumble of a crowd, the mutters of confusion.

"—right now." I rush to the windows, throwing open the heavy curtains. In front of the building, there's a massive aggregation, more people than I have ever seen in the magic world ever. I scan desperately over the audience, but it's impossible to pick out any distinctive features from this high up. I flip around and shake my dad's arm. "Come on, I need to show you something!"

"What did you wish for?" he asks, astounded. When he doesn't move, I plow past K'shmert and to the elevators, ignoring the perplexed calls behind my back, pausing only to let Ralph claw up to my shoulders. "Come on!"

I push impatiently at the elevator buttons, and then drag both mom and dad in as they approach. Omobolanle and K'shermt rush in behind them.

"What's going on?"

"You'll see, dad. I promise it's not dangerous, mom." I hop on my toes, giddy in excitement. "By the way, does anyone have a megaphone?"

"A what?" mom asks, her eyes wide. She almost looks like Ingrid when she's questioning my sanity.

"Never mind!" I say happily, shoving them out as soon as we hit the lobby and making my way to the exit.

As soon as we step outside, toward the mass of people in various states of confusion, some looking more cogen than others. They're the ones with tears streaming down their faces, laughing hysterically—but not in a bad way. It sounds like someone finally escaping, finally finished with a grueling task.

Omobolanle's face slackens. She gapes at one of the girls close to her.

"Genny? I—how can this—"

"Magister?" The girl furrows her brow. She brings up a hand, gripping at her heart. "What happened? I feel ..."

Omobolanle turns to me, her eyes wide, her hand at her mouth. "Alex, did you?"

"Yeah, I did," I affirm, preoccupied with craning my neck around the immense assembly. I tug at mom and dad's arms. "Help me find her."

"Find who?" Mom asks.

"Alex, you didn't!" Dad exclaims, horror and joy clashing. "What did you trade?"

"Nothing bad or dangerous. Kind of." I wince. "Anyways, that doesn't matter. Ingrid! Ingrid!"

"Ingrid?" Mom breathes, her steps slowing. I yank at her sleeve restlessly, and together, mom, dad, and I shove into the crowd, calling out Ingrid's name. I frantically search people around me, my adrenaline hitching everytime I see

something remotely close to Ingrid's features. I feel invigorated, somehow, even as my body begs to rest.

"Ingrid! Where are you?"

Dad clutches my arm. "Alex, maybe we should sit down?"

"What do you mean?" I ask, tugging at his grip, rifling through the faces, searching for scraggly hair and a purple shirt and obnoxiously green pants.

"He's right. You look as if you're about to lose consciousness," mom adds on, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. Annoyingly, Ralph climbs onto my head, blocking my vision. Traitor.

"Wait, but we need to—"

"You need to rest," mom snaps authoritatively. "There's possibly a million people here. We won't accomplish much just shoving through."

"But I—"

"Rest. Maybe Ingrid'll be the one who finds us."

"Ain't you correct!" Ingrid crows, and that's the only warning we get before she crashes into us—solid, solid, solid. Solid color, solid opacity, solid, solid, solid. She's laughing, high and loud, and her nails are digging into my stomach as she tries to wrap her arms around all three of us, but I grasp back, laughing with her, tasting salt on my tongue. Ralph barely manages to skirt out of the way.

"Ingrid—"

"Oh my god—"

"Ingrid!"

"Al, you're so stupid!" she sobs, which is not what I'd been expecting the greeting to be like, but whatever. "Your son—" she gasps out, burrowing her face into dad's chest as he turns around to get a better grip around her, squeezing mom's arm tightly. "Your son is so stupid, oh my god."

Her elbow digs into my collarbone. Her hair tickles my nose, and it makes me want to sneeze. Her feet are planted on the ground. There's colors in her skin, in

her voice, ones I'd never noticed before. We're all crying, great, heaving, cries, and she's latched onto us as if she'll never let go. Solid, solid solid.

Somehow, we manage to make our way to an empty bench near the bridge, all still gripping at each other. Ralph curls up on Ingrid's lap. Dad and mom's gazes never leave Ingrid's face, like they're trying to burn it into their retinas, like if they look away or release her, she'd disappear again.

"What did you trade?" Dad asks.

"Oh, you wouldn't believe, dad." She starts to talk, carefully covering the confrontation with the gleaners ("It's okay, dad. Oh my god, you're going to give yourself high blood pressure." "I already do, Ingrid."), the rocket ship, the forest ("It was kinda cool," I admit, leaning back. I pat Ralph on the head, and she nestles into my palm. "I'm just glad Ralph was okay"), Many-Eyed, the trade. Ingrid takes in a heaving breath, glancing around, her eyes red and puffy. She chortles. "We're lucky Many-Eyed didn't ask for more."

Right. That reminds me. "Are you serious? You literally sold him our souls!"

"What," mom and dad say in unison.

Ingrid rolls her eyes. "Chill, guys. When I say I'm going to finish something, I will finish it."

"Yeah, that happened fine and dandy last time. Oh wait!" I give her a dead-eyed stare. Mom cringes. Dad flinches. I'm ready to apologize—perhaps it was too soon to make jokes like that—but Ingrid guffaws, shaking her head.

"Okay. Good point. But I still got it done, didn't I? Even dead. Plus, something tells me that they'll ensure that I won't die prematurely. After all, they depend on this, too."

Mom rests the back of her hand against her forehead and tilts her face to the sky. Under her breath, she begins counting from one to ten and then back again. Dad looks faint, his hand—and therefore Ingrid's, who has her fingers around his wrist in a vice grip—pressed to his chest as if stalling a heart-attack.

"I'm not going to even ask anymore," mom mumbles to herself. "This entire week has been too crazy."

"Sorry," I say, squeezing her hand. She slumps on the bench.

"I know I said you didn't have to apologize, but I'm highly reconsidering. You're going to send me to an early grave. Both of you."

Ingrid's the one who winces this time. "Well, the rest of the deal wasn't bad. Just Hyam Island and some of Alex's magical trinkets. Oh yeah." Her face falls in disappointment. "Aw, that sucks. You won't be allowed to use any magical items now."

"That doesn't matter," I brush away. "I'm just glad you're back."

She lets out a noise at that. "God, you're making me choke on my heart. I hate you so much."

But she's smiling, and dad's smiling, and mom's smiling, and I'm smiling, so I think everything's okay for now. We sit in silence, listening to the background noise of people displaced and slotted back in. I can hear the sounds of other reunions, of shocked exclamations. For the first time in weeks, though, I'm calm.

I'd been slightly worried about returning so many gleaners back to their original bodies, but there's something about watching people—barely older than me—realizing that they are here, alive again, able to feel something positive instead of the gripping madness of being a gleaner, something about watching people clutch at themselves and others and realize that that period is over—well, it makes me happy.

"You're going to have a lot of work to do," I tell Ingrid. She nods, her eyes fixed on the crowd.

"Yeah. I do." She bares her teeth at the sky. "I'm ready. I already have a lot of ideas."

"Of course," dad says.

"And you say I work too hard," I grumble.

She reaches over with her and dad's hands and gently swats my shoulder. I squirm out of the way, and Ralph lets out an irritated chirp, lunging into mom's lap for safety. I watch as mom pats her.

"Hey, mom?"

She hums in response.

"We should buy some roses. I think Ralph's gonna be a permanent addition to our household."

She lets out a heaving sigh. "Alright, Alex. Alright." She sends me a sharp glower, though. "But don't think you're not getting grounded for at least five years."

"Grounded!" I repeat, flabbergasted. "People still do that?"

"I am," she says. When Ingrid starts to laugh, mom flings a finger at her. "And don't think that you'll escape punishment, either."

Ingrid's smile immediately drops, face twisting in disbelief. "Wait, me? What, you can't do that!"

"Yes, I can. And I will because obviously your dad can't handle you kids by himself." She lets out a huff. "Honestly, I'm enlisting the help of Florence. She at least seems to know what she's doing with Maia."

"You met Florence?" I ask.

"Yes. Nice to know that your dad's taste is as fine as ever. It's mine and hers that need checking up."

"Well, hey that's—" Dad pauses, tilting his head. He lets out a sheepish chuckle. "Well, that's fair."

Mom reaches over and grasps Ingrid's hand. "I promise you, Ingrid, I'm going to do better this time. And that means doling out chastisements, and—and—I—"

"It's okay, mom," Ingrid whispers, sniffing. "I know."

She suddenly shoots up, finally letting go of us. "Right. Okay. Enough of this for now. Let's go! Where's Maia and Florence?"

"Wait, can I just sit on this bench for a moment? I'm tired. You can go on without me." It's true. All of the energy I'd had has leeched out, leaving me drained and feeling like a puddle of jelly.

"Nope!" Ingrid declares, grasping me under my armpits. "We're all going. Come on, where's your stamina? Don't tell me all my *Just Dance* lessons went to waste?"

"That was you?" Mom asks, stretching her arms above her head. She pauses, sending me a scrutinizing look. "On second thought, that makes a lot of sense."

"Hey," I complain, not knowing what I'm complaining to. "You try crawling up a tree then walking sixty miles on a bridge."

"I'm pretty sure you're exaggerating," Ingrid remarks. She tries to lift me up like a cat. "Wow, this is so much harder as a person," she grunts before turning around and pointing at her back. "C'mon. Second piggy-back of the day. You should be honored."

"I am not getting piggy-backed."

"Dude, no one's watching. Hurry up! I want to see Maia and Florence and change out of this stupid shirt, oh my god! Alex, if you don't come, so help me, I will show Maia baby albums or something. I'm sure mom would let me."

"You wouldn't!" Just thinking about Maia's sadistic streak paired up with anything remotely embarrassing about me makes me want to scream in terror.

"I can, and I will. Hurry up!"

Needless to say, I get my second piggy-back ride of the day. Ralph gets her first one, hitched on my back. Of course, I don't enjoy it, but it's nice, anyways. I can even tolerate Maia's ear-piercing screams and Florence's strangled gasp again, too, if it means that I can keep this picture in mind, this warmth in my chest.

It's over.

And everything's fine.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

The curved dome—cream and gold, streaked with pastel blues and greens—extends above, stretching into a gaping hole for the light to reach in. There's a calm breeze filtering through, brushing past the rows of flowers arranged artfully around the venue. It was supposed to be sunny today, and it is, in the gentle way of a hovering touch. Or, perhaps it's simply the way of the magical community.

I adjust the blue suit, checking to make sure Ralph is preoccupied with her rose feast and not targeting any other flowers as I make my way to the center, intently keeping an eye on the rings in my hands. Across from me, Maia stomps down the path, flinging her basket of petals this way and that. She passes me, scattering more on my side of the path before running back to stand beside me in a surprising act of compliance. I had been slightly worried she was going to run out and drag her mom in impatiently.

Looking across the crowd of people, smiling in suspense, I meet their gazes, picking out several familiar faces: Daniel, Brian, Mr. Flishle, and on and on. When the music starts, the doors open from both ends, and Florence and dad walk out, accompanied by my mom and Ingrid respectively.

I brush my bangs out of my eyes and repeat my role in my head as Florence and dad meet in the middle. The only wedding I remember attending had been when I was six, at my mom's cousin's; all I remember is that it was long, colorful, and rambunctious. My mom briefly pats my elbow as she passes, a grin stretching across her face, her dark green dress matching Ingrid's. She and Florence had apparently hit it off grandly, keeping in touch after the events of the mass appearance of past gleaners. With dad, it had been a work in progress, rebuilding almost a decade of evasion.

Ingrid gives me tiny jazz hands and flips Maia's pigtails in greeting. She leans over and whispers, "Al, stop looking so constipated. Your part is over. You gotta prepare for the crying now."

I make a face at her, but before I could do much more—which I wouldn't have, by the way—Omobolanle begins her speech. It's long-winding, full of blessings and

sayings and a few jokes, her bombastic voice amplified easily in the open space. When she finishes, Florence starts. "Well, here we are."

She looks like what people probably wish to look like as a bride: practically glowing, her hair rustling with the breeze, her white dress fitted to her body, stylishly intricate but modest. I think my mom had done her hair, interwoven daffodils in the braids adorning her head.

And dad—his lips are twitching, his eyes are brimming with tears which he keeps on blinking back as if he's experiencing the best inner turmoil.

"I never thought I'd be marrying a man who forgets to wear pants to retrieve the mail, but here we are." Florence laughs as dad mock-grimaces, and they grasp each other's forearms, eyes on each other. "And I'd never imagined that it would happen like this, a year after what we had planned, but somehow right in every way." They both glance at me and Ingrid, and I offer a shaky smile back, fingers tight on the plush pillow in my hands.

"I know marriage has never mattered to us, but you don't know how lucky I am to share this moment with you, and not only so that we have an excuse to invite all of our friends and family and wait in anticipation for some sort of chaos to unfold."

Laughter skips through the small crowd, the opening staccato of a studio Ghibli soundtrack about the mellow taste of a clear blue sky.

"And I think, right now, marriage is more than a physical union, but one that signifies the connection of this family, of us. I remember when I met you—quite overwhelming, and quite honestly, I had to ask Ingrid to ensure that I had the memory right." She grins at dad. "It was on the shore. I think you were trying to teach Ingrid how to fish, a rite of passage, apparently, for people you like."

I find myself nodding, and glimpse mom, Ingrid, and Maia do the same.

"Maia had seen Ingrid's fishing hat and, in her five year old glory, decided to commit a felony and steal it off of Ingrid's head. I'm embarrassed to say that I didn't

notice until five minutes later when my daughter came dragging a little girl after her, sporting a new hat. Thank you, Ingrid, for being so patient.”

Ingrid tips an invisible hat.

“And then I met this girl’s dad. I’ll spare you the sappy details or all the attributes of Aksel that made me love him the way I do now—”

It’s a little awkward listening to someone describe dad that way. I try not to make too weird of a face.

“—as there are children here.”

Sheepishly, I rub my neck.

“But, after a while, Ingrid and Aksel—they became family, and then through them, I was able to meet other people that brightened my life, showed me lessons I will keep close to me. There have been many things I’ve regretted in my life, and in the beginning, I was scared that getting closer to them would be one of them.

But love is inevitable. We may all react differently to it: denial, acceptance, whatever, but we—and I—have to keep in mind that happiness isn’t something you have to force upon yourself, isn’t something you should be able to predict or plan for. It’s something you should work to give to others, and something others should work to give to you. It isn’t something that can dictate our entire self, and it isn’t something someone else can foist upon you, but it’s something that should coincide with your beliefs with all the flaws that it brings. Aksel, thank you for being one of those people who have made it possible to move on.”

Dad sniffls, but he manages to rasp out a, “I’ll do my best to make sure you’re one of the happiest women on this Earth.”

Florence laughs, but she’s tearing up too. “I already am.”

After that, he barely gets through two words of his own speech before choking up. “Oh, no. You’ve already said all that I wanted to,” he gets out, still crying. Florence places her hands on his cheeks and he kisses her palms. “I’m so glad we got to share this moment with everyone here.”

“Me too.”

When dad doesn’t seem to be able to speak anytime soon, Omobolanle takes over. “You may kiss.”

They do. Amidst the cheers of the people, slowly the ceremony progresses to the dancing part. People are getting up. People are boogying like they’re having a seizure. People are smiling and clinking glasses and snacking on the trays of canapes.

Mom immediately heads to dad, gripping him in a careful hug. “Aksel, I swear, if you hurt Florence ...”

“I know, Mitra,” dad says, still grinning like a lovesick boy. Maia and I look away. Ingrid cackles at us. “I won’t.”

“Good. I trust you.” She pulls him into another hug before wrapping her arms around Florence. “You can come to me if you want to complain about his antics.”

“Of course, Mitra.” Florence laughs, burying her face in mom’s shoulders. “Get ready for them.”

“Let’s go dance!” Ingrid shouts, and then she drags me, dad, and Maia to the floor, where we then show off all our *Just Dance* skills, almost dancing to the roar of the crowd as well as the music. After exhausting myself through several renditions of a popular song of the magic community—something about trees and acorns or something—I excuse myself and make my way to the drinks.

I gulp down a cup of water and then almost choke myself when Mr. Flishle appears like a spectral beside me.

“Good afternoon,” he greets like I wasn’t hacking up a lung.

“Oh. Uh. Hi,” I say after getting over the fit, sending a thanks to whatever being up there that I didn’t squirt the water back up my nose. That would’ve made things even more uncomfortable considering the last time I saw him was when he insulted my thinking abilities, and then I took away his island. “Erm. I’m sorry about your library.”

Mr. Flishle stares at me for a moment too long. Then his sunken face spreads into a grin. "Apology accepted" He looks off to the distance. "You've returned my friend. And lives are much more important than being known."

I sip my drink and contemplate defenestrating myself before realizing that I was outside and therefore could not. However, Mr. Flishle—Hyan—turns back and simply tilts his head.

"Enjoy the rest of your day," he bids before ghosting off to somewhere else. I shiver.

"Why is he invited again?"

"I have no idea," Ingrid says, and I jump, splashing my water all over myself.

"Holy cow, would you stop doing that?"

She shrugs, brushing her sweaty hair off her forehead. "Gotta milk my talents."

"To scare people? Were you always like this?"

She throws back a cup of water like a shot. "How are you, anyways? Finally catch up on your schoolwork?"

"Yeah. Like, a long time ago, dude. I'm—well, I'm thinking of joining a club."

She grins and shoves my shoulder. "Oh my god, my little bro, all grown up. What kind of club?"

It's my turn to shrug. "I dunno. Like. Maybe. A dance one? I dunno. Jessica says she's in the club, so who knows. I don't. I might not join. I dunno."

Ingrid claps her hands, and I can't help but match her excitement. "Are you serious, Al? You should! You're pretty great at dancing!"

"Well, obviously you'll say that," I say, flushing, though. "You're just really bad."

"Don't talk to your mentor like that!"

I laugh at her exaggerated offense. "What about you? How's your reforms and stuff going?" I hadn't had much time to see Ingrid as AP season had come around, but last I heard, she was working under Omobolanle. Dad, Florence, and Maia visited once or twice during the wedding planning, but Ingrid had to stay in the

magic world, first because she's technically supposed to be dead, and second because she had been so busy reintegrating the past gleaners into life again.

"Bro, I'm thinking of starting a new project to integrate some non-magic crap with some magic crap. Dunno all the details yet, but maybe next time you come around, you won't be stepping on glass all the time, maybe be able to use something and participate in some games or something." She nudges my arm, almost making me spill the water a second time. "Aren't I a great sister?"

"Sure," I say, making sure to sound as sarcastic as possible while being utterly genuine.

"Yeah I am!" she whoops. Then, she hooks an arm around my neck and drags me to the dance floor again. "Let's get you into shape for that club!"

"I'm not sure if I'm going to join, though."

"Doesn't matter! Let's beat some fun into your bones. I can feel your proselytization to fun-hood, and we can't have you regressing!"

"Fun-hood's not a word," I shout, just to be contradictory, then I point in the opposite direction and direct her to dad, mom, Florence, and Maia. In the crowd, surrounded by people, with my family, singing and humming and throwing our hands up to some popular song—I don't have to say much else.

Epilogue

There's a picture in a classroom in the place of an empty spot that used to host a nonexistent island. It's a boy and his family and what looks to be a raccoon in the foreground. Three adults, three teenagers.

They're lit by the setting sun. One of the girls has sunglasses on, covering half her face, along with a droopy sun hat. Her identity is hidden, only known behind a locker's door, her arms slung around the boy and the other girl.

The picture's a bit foggy, spotted even with the sun.

It's finally raining.

(And it isn't so bad)