

MEET PATIENT 13.
HE'S BEEN WAITING FOR YOU.

THE PAWNS

AND THE PUPPET

BRANDI ELISE SZEKER

The Pawn and The Puppet

By Brandi Elise Szeker

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Table Contents

[Content Warning](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Playlists](#)

[1. A Puppet's Noose](#)

[2. Pretty Little Doll](#)

[3. Emerald Lake Asylum](#)

[4. The Interview](#)

[5. Simulated Drowning](#)

[6. The Thirteenth Room](#)

[7. Home](#)

[8. Lady-doll](#)

[9. Snake Pit](#)

[10. Different Kind of Human](#)

[11. Judas's Deal](#)

[12. Stripped Bare](#)

[13. Cupid's Love](#)

[14. "I Knew You Would Come For Me."](#)

[15. The Mad Men's Muse](#)

[16. Pawn to Pawn](#)

[17. Exiled](#)

[18. The Secrets Game](#)

[19. Unlocked](#)

[20. Smoke and Mirrors](#)

[21. Beacon](#)

[22. Pulling String and Moving Pieces](#)

[23. Exodus 23:20](#)

[24. Ninety-Day Nose](#)

[25. The Other Monsters](#)

[26. Tea Time](#)

[27. Satan Root](#)

[28. Haunted by Design](#)

[29. Forged From Fire](#)

[30. "Will You Always Protect Me?"](#)

[31. Motives](#)

[32. Until the End](#)

[33. The Leather Man](#)
[34. Soul Mates](#)
[35. The King's Move](#)
[36. Isolation Tank](#)
[37. Welcome to Hell](#)
[38. Bigger Picture](#)
[39. Fantastical Dining Party](#)
[40. Eye for an Eye](#)
[41. Soul Sister](#)
[42. Diversion](#)
[43. Man Inside the Beast](#)
[44. House Rules](#)
[45. Spectral Man](#)
[46. "Take My Hand."](#)
[47. "Let Me In."](#)
[48. Alpha](#)
[49. The Stars](#)
[50. Lost Time](#)
[51. "If We Had Met a Different Way."](#)
[52. Violet and Scarlett](#)
[53. Sophia and Arthur](#)
[54. The RottWeilen](#)
[55. Checkmate](#)
[56. The Previous Host](#)
[57. Journey Into the Night](#)
[58: The Treehouse](#)
[59. Free](#)
[Acknowledgments](#)
[About the Author](#)

Content Warning

Please check the list of trigger warnings before you continue.

This book contains: gratuitous violence, depression, suicide, torture, domestic violence, eating disorders, hallucinations, misogyny, poisoning, sexual assault, mention of pedophilia, romanticized mental illness, gore, death of a loved one, child abuse, decapitation, female oppression, hostage situation, body shaming, panic attacks

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For Mom.

*After he died, you never remarried. And when I asked why,
you told me that he was your soul mate, and you'll see him
again in heaven.*

*If it wasn't for your undying, soul-shattering, true love for
my father and your husband that passed away too young...
this book would have never been born.*

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Author's Note

I encourage all to read this before proceeding to the book. This is a work of fiction, yes. However, the mental illnesses that certain characters have are based on real disorders.

The one I'd like to note is Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). Some know it as a "split personality" or a "multiple personality disorder." That is not the correct terminology. Please let this work of fiction open the eyes to those who look at DID in fear or with a lack of respect.

The representation of DID in this novel is a morally gray, dangerous character. This is NOT an accurate representation of DID. It is a symbolic representation of how DID appears to modern society—feared, misunderstood, and a mystery of the mind to gawk at. Please know that the rest of the series will be a journey for this fictional society and the characters to understand and accurately represent.

But allow me to set the record straight for this nonfictional world. This community of people is NOT the monsters. They are NOT the villains. They are kind, intelligent, wonderful human beings that were the victims of horrendous injustice and abuse.

Let this message encourage you to ask the right questions and seek to better understand. For more information about DID, please visit:

<http://traumadissociation.com/index>

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Playlists:

FOR EVERY BADASS SCENE THAT MAKES YOU TINGLE

Play With Fire by Sam
Tinnesz

Lion by Saint Mesa

Still Don't Know My Name
by Labrinth

Toxic by Anthony Willis
Monster by Willyecho

What Kind of Man by
Florence + The Machine
Bad Man by Esterly

Bow by Reyn Hartly

Run For Your Life by The
Siege

FOR THE DARKNESS, ROMANCE, AND BEAUTY THAT IS THIS BOOK

Train Wreck by James
Arthur

It's OK (Slowed) by Edith
Whiskers

Don't Let Me Go by Raign

Surrender by Natalie Taylor
Johnny Belinda by Active
Child

The Night We Met by Lord
Huron

IDK You Yet by Alexander
23

Never Let Me Go by
Florence + The Machine

Power Over Me by Dermot
Kennedy

*You can find more playlists for the Pawn and The Puppet by
searching for 'Brandi Szeker' on Apple Music or Spotify!*

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1. A Puppet's Noose

I BITE DOWN ON THE thin wooden block until my teeth create splinters that pierce my tongue.

There, the first string I sketch connects to the wooden wrist. *Breathe*. With another stroke, the wooden wrist connects to wooden fingers. My pointed piece of charcoal glides across the parchment.

Tears perch on my bottom eyelids, like a hurricane meeting a dam.

Breathe.

I make the second string, like a rope of spiderweb flowing in the wind, tied around the second wooden wrist. A sob rattles from my chest and I grind my teeth harder into the slab of wood. *Keep going*. More wooden fingers. Two legs. Two ankles.

Smudging the charcoal, I add the shadows.

I saw what working in that asylum did to her. She'd cry as she'd tell me the horrors she saw.

Breathe.

I sketch the wooden neck, the head, the shoulders.
Finish the puppet.

Even after hearing of the patients she'd care for, of their *treatments*, of the way their screams would vibrate the asylum walls—I still am going through with the interview to work there today. To fulfill the promise I made to her.

I add the hand and the fingers that control the strings. Add the nails, and the creases in the knuckles. *Control the panic*.

"Delphine will be here in a few minutes to get you ready." Aurick's stiff voice is muffled from beyond the threshold. "Are you well?"

My strokes against the paper pause and my teeth bear down on the wood.

You're okay.

But the memory of my twin sister vomiting in the sink after what she witnessed at Emerald Lake Asylum flashes behind my eyes. *They held a child's head underwater. He couldn't breathe. And they called it his 'treatment'!*

Hot nausea rolls like an ocean wave in my gut.

I spit out the block. "I'm fine," I say breathlessly toward the washroom door.

But I am not. I am cramped inside a bathtub, drawing a puppet on a sketchpad in a cottage that is not mine, waiting for a storm of panic to pass over me. Waiting for the fear that wraps around my neck like a noose to loosen and fall from my shoulders.

In only a couple of hours, I will be greeted at the doors of the notorious Emerald Lake Asylum. I will step into its prison, meet their patients with complex psychological oddities, and even worse—the people who work there.

"You don't sound fine," Aurick utters through the wood of the door. "May I come in?"

"No!" I answer quickly. He can't see me. Not like this.

Aurick has been my only friend since my sister, Scarlett, died only a few weeks ago. He found me in the North Saphrine forest, alone, cold, and with ashes covering my hands. He let me stay in his winter cottage. Fed me. Gave me a warm place to grieve. He was nice to me, didn't ask questions. How can I ask him to bear witness to my crippling fear? I'm the one who begged him to help me get an interview to work in the asylum. If he sees me like this, he'll cancel the meeting.

"Skylenna,"—his voice is like a father's scolding a child—"if you're scared, you don't have to do this."

Oh, but I do. I must. It was Scarlett's mission; she hated working in the asylum—dreaded every moment of it—but she couldn't leave those poor, wounded minds to fend for themselves. *If I turn a blind eye, I am no better than the people who revel in their torture.* So, she made a plan to

change their ways. Change the treatments. Show that there was a better path to treat them.

But she died before she could accomplish that dream.
And it was my fault.

I grip the charcoal, my nails cut into it. *Fight the fear.* But what if I can't handle watching the patients being punished for simply existing? And what if I lose my mind like Scarlett did? What if I end up in that asylum as a patient?

"I'm not scared," I grumble to Aurick, still lingering at the door. "I'll be out in a moment."

Breathe. I wipe the warm tears from my eyes. The trembling in my legs begins to calm like a pebble settling at the bottom of a pond. *That's it.* I add the finishing touches to the puppet. The lifeless smile. The hollow beady eyes. The sad, upturned brows.

I exhale, feeling tired and sodden like a towel wrung out and left to grow mildew in the corner of a washroom.

I can do this. If Scarlett was able to endure it, then that is the least I can do. She told me what to expect. She told me about the waterboarding, the scalding baths, the chair binding. I was present every time she fell apart from sadness after being in those treatment rooms with her patients.

I grip the edges of the bathtub and lift myself from its comforting porcelain cocoon. I stash the drawing under the sink, even though I probably won't ever look at it again. I've drawn hundreds just like it.

As I clean my face with cold water, I avoid the reflection that will peer back at me in the mirror. I refuse to stare into those cold green eyes. Scarlett's eyes.

The eyes I gazed into as I lit her house on fire.

2. Pretty Little Doll

BY THE TIME I EXIT THE washroom, Aurick has left for the city.

I'm certain he doesn't want to be here for what comes next.

An older woman, dressed in all black, with a tight bun of ash-colored hair and a pinched expression, steps out of the buggy. Aurick sent her to get me ready. Dressed. Makeup. All according to the theme that is so delicately placed around the *oh-so-perfect* city surrounding the asylum.

I've lived a sheltered life in a stretch of land on the perimeter of the seven forests. *The Bear Trap*, the outskirts of the Chandelier City. I've never had to abide by the principles of the strange and particularly vain country we live in. Our small country, Dementia, is run by an invented vision of the perfect society.

Perfectly built estates, castles, and people. *Oh, the people are stunning*, Scarlett would say. Women as skinny as the elderly folks they'd bury. The physical appearance of a woman is the *gospel*. They go by *The Lady Doll Regimen*. It's a long nightly routine—hours of soaking in herbal water, a vigorous process to moisturize the skin and hair while also following the strictest dieting standards. *Eat if you feel as though you might faint*, she'd say. And topping it all off with their attire—dresses for every time of the day; tea time, household work, and evening gowns.

My father's job was to cut lumber and deliver it to the city. If you have a job like this, you're automatically exempt from falling into societal restraints. If you're not seen or heard throughout the city lines, you might as well be a ghost. It's in the laws written during first settlement, which has always seemed fair to the hardworking families.

Hearing about it through Scarlett was like peeking through a window to an alternate universe. After our mother gave birth to us, she ran off with Scarlett to live

closer to the Chandelier City, leaving me with our father in the Bear Traps.

After aggressively making herself at home, the crone Aurick sent to get me ready set up shop in the cottage sitting room.

She roughly yanks a charcoal-gray dress over my head. Its sleeves are capped at the elbows, and the center of the dress is darted around the bust and fitted around the hips. I pull my arms through a women's winter wool coat, with a nipped high-waist and puffed black bunch of fur covering my shoulders and neckline. My feet are the last to dress up with a pair of black leather pumps.

The taut woman pokes and rips small hairs from my eyebrows with metal clamps, sneering and shaking her head in silent judgment. Everything else is a blur as I say a prayer for my interview to go well.

"You've never been to the city," she says. Not a question, but I nod anyway. "You'll have to get used to abstaining from regular meals." She pinches the skin on my waist. "Or at least purging if the temptation is too heavy."

I blink. "Purging?"

"Yes, girl. Your bosom is full, and your backside is round. The goal is to see the skin stretch over your bone." She assesses my nails and clucks her tongue. "And your nail beds are dirty. If you're going to live there, you'll need to start the Lady Doll Regimen the moment you get to Aurick's estate. Otherwise, I'll likely hear of your swift movement into the female ward of the asylum as one of the patients."

She's right. Scarlett told me that if Demechnef—our government that so keenly values a pristine presentation—were to observe a slipup such as gaining a couple of pounds, or God forbid, developing an outbreak of unwanted blemishes—they would discreetly be swept away from their day-to-day lives. Away from their families and friends, and as far as anyone knew—they'd simply disappear until they

came back with knobby joints, slight hair loss, prominently outlined rib cages and gaunt facial features.

“Don’t fret, girl. Your body’s measurements are usually taken by a husband, or if unmarried, an official representative of Demechnef will arrive to oversee the process. But I’m certain your new friend will assist.” She pats the top of my head as she tucks my last curl in place behind my ear.

I swallow down the fear that builds in my throat. I *want* this. I *asked* for this.

I’m voluntarily stepping into this buggy that will lead me into the only life Scarlett knew. That will lead me into the only place I swore I’d never set foot in.

The Emerald Lake Asylum.

3. Emerald Lake Asylum

THE ROAD TO THE CITY IS bumpy, and the seats are filled with a constant vibration from the uneven gravel. I'm dressed the part to enter this new society.

I can hear Scarlett's raspy voice rattling around in my head like loose change in a dryer, telling me about the horrors, the screams, the begging for mercy that goes on within those walls. One thing she was more frightened of than the screams was that nearly everyone who worked in that building seemed desensitized to the pain they were inflicting. She described the emptiness in their eyes like a one-way window where you can't see the entity of evil looking back at you—but you can *feel* it, taking pride in and enjoying the torture.

The thought of meeting people like this turns my bowels watery.

As the remaining trees from the forest grow farther and farther apart, thinning like a receding hairline, the canopy overhead dissipates, and the sky shows its swollen face covered in bulging, smoky clouds. Our buggy moves forward on the road into the Chandelier City, and I lean against my window, closing my eyes to this new world as I rest for my interview to come.

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"WE'RE HERE." THE DRIVER WAKES me. I adjust my sight as I lean my forehead against the window to behold the source of many of Scarlett's nightmares.

The castle is small and planted in front of the Emerald Lake Mountains.

As we pull into the long and wide graveled driveway, I get a closer look. There's a clock tower, several chimneys, and long bay windows cloaked on the inside by curtains. With east and west wings, it gives me the impression of a

lavish estate. The entrance has double-sided steps to the doorway, and there are four to five women staggered on the steps, shoulders back, chins raised, matching navy-blue, knee-length, fitted dresses. A man, towering above the women, stands in the doorway, dressed in an all-black suit. Their gazes are all directed at my buggy, unflinching stares that give me pause.

We pass a lush screen of greenery on either side of the driving path. Emerald-green arborvitae, like foot soldiers disguised on the front lawn. Fresh morning dew glistens as the sun pours over the crevices on the small castle.

I don't know if I have the nerve to start yet. I'm not entirely sure I have the guts my sister had. I haven't even let myself grieve Scarlett's death, and I don't think I ever will. But I remember one of the last conversations Scarlett and I shared. The night before she died, we were sitting on her bed, legs crisscrossed. She was brushing her long straight hair, and for the first time since we were reunited at the age of fifteen, she admitted the raw and bitter feeling she had been holding on tight to.

When we spoke about our mother, Violet Ambrose, she would express her anger and hatred toward her—how she shouldn't be allowed to be called *Mother*. How if she ever saw Violet again, she would probably kill her. *How could a mother let men touch her daughter? How could she hear my cries and collect her coin as I suffered?*

But... that night, Scarlett didn't cry, or yell, or scream at the memory. She looked at me sadly, she said, *She was my mother, Sky. She was my mother, and all I ever wanted was for her to love me. She's made me feel unlovable and for that... I don't hate her. I hate myself.*

That night, Scarlett held my hands in hers and said: *It's just you and me now. We have to promise to never leave each other.*

It was the next night that her mop of golden hair and long skinny legs burned in that fire. She was nineteen years

old.

I know there's only one way to never leave her—like we promised that night. Despite my fears of stepping foot in this crypt of living corpses and the malevolent people killing them slowly, I have no choice but to wipe my face clean of anxiety and step out of this buggy.

This is me keeping my promise.

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4. The Interview

TAKING MY FIRST TWO STEPS out, there's a crunch where my heels dig into the gravel. My breath releases from my chest in a small gust of fog; its particles separate and disappear into the morning breeze.

The five women tower in front of me, mounted on the steps like memorial statues, icons of the history of Emerald Lake Asylum. Grim looks of judgment painted over their doll-like features along with rouge-pink lipstick, blushed cheeks, brown or smoky-gray eyelids, and painted eyebrows like markings of a calligraphy pen.

As I scan the faces, I land on the gentleman in the doorway. He is a little over six feet, thin like an Aspen tree in the mountains, with slicked-back charcoal hair and gray streaks on the sides.

The tallest woman, standing closest to the doorway, bows her head graciously, careful not to let any loose blonde curls slip down into her eyes. She's older than the other women, but one could hardly tell. If it wasn't for the lines around her thin lips where her mouth has probably bunched together around a cigarette hundreds of times, drawing in the smoke-filled nicotine daily, I probably wouldn't have noticed. Other than that, her makeup is applied precisely, appropriately, covering any other signs of aging. She's had years of practice. I can assume by her white collar and gloves that she's in charge here. She's who I need to impress.

"You must be Sky Ambrose." The woman flashes me a tight smile, her voice flowing past her lips like the soft notes of a flute.

Skylenna. *Don't correct her.*

I nod my head. "I'm here for an interview."

The one with short black hair at the top of the steps rolls her eyes. It was quick enough that I immediately doubt if I

saw it at all.

"Indeed, you are. That will be conducted by me." She walks down the steps carefully, allowing each heel to gently make an impact. "I'm Suseas Parlomon. Head conformist and one of the six board members on the asylum's council."

Suseas is no longer on a heightened platform and yet is still a good three inches taller than I am. Her posture is so straight that I'm convinced there are poles in her back to keep her upright permanently. She takes my right hand and gently squeezes it between both of hers.

"When we received the call from Mr. Aurick Dawson recommending this meeting with you, we assured him your time here would be most exquisite. He is, of course, a highly impressive figure to give a recommendation. We take his opinion very seriously."

I should have asked him what he does for a living. I can't help but raise my eyebrows in disbelief. I open my mouth to respond, but all that comes out is the clicking of my throat contracting as I gulp.

"I do hope you find our greeting as acceptable," she adds with a fixated stare on my expression.

"Oh." I look back at the women standing straight in perfect alignment with the double staircase. This was all to impress me? "Sure. Yes. It's lovely."

She smiles to herself with temporarily closed eyes. Pleased, she looks back at the gathered women with a reassuring nod.

"Please join us in the main hall. You must be chilled to the bone."

I follow them up the stairs and through the wide double doors. The man disappears the second I step inside.

The bottoms of my shoes clack against the cream-colored marble floors. I look up to see why the echo is so loud, and the cathedral ceilings take me aback. There are stone arches webbed over our heads and a golden chandelier that doesn't quite match the antiqueness of the

room. The walls are stone, with pillars stationed at each corner of the vicinity meant to be a lobby.

A touch of warm air surrounds my face, heating up the tip of my nose and fingers. It carries a strong scent of wood and leather, a crisp impression of luxury—but underneath it, concealed somewhere like under the lid of a trash can, is a lingering whiff of stale urine and an elderly woman's musty body odor.

I can't say I'm surprised by the immediate impression. Scarlett once told me this place was built on deceit.

Suseas guides me and the other women to brown leather couches to the right of the lobby. I'm herded over to the mahogany-finished armchair, sitting on the cushion upholstered in elegant jacquard fabric. There's a tea table between the women on the couches and me, and the furniture creaks as everyone gets settled in. They straighten, resisting the tempting urge to relax against the back of the couch.

Suseas waves over her shoulder and a younger woman wearing a gray dress and white tights carefully sets down a tray holding a fine porcelain tea set, including a steaming kettle. Before I can thank her properly, she glides away, like she's avoiding a stench just released into the air.

I mimic the postures of the women instinctively. Back straight, chin up, legs crossed at the ankles. The shorter woman on the far right kneels to pour the tea and passes the teacups out among us. I try not to let my curiosity get the better of me, but her cheeks catch my attention with little effort. They're gaunt, sucked in around her cheekbones, like a vacuum had tightened everything up around her eyes and lips. The caps of her shoulders could be compared to the indentation of bones to skin on a starving animal. Even her hands are frail—the veins on top are protruding, blue and raised.

My attention is jerked back to Suseas with the wet clearing of her throat.

“So,”—she blows lightly on her tea, pursing her lips into prominent smoker lines—“the asylum isn’t usually a desired place for young women to seek their profession. What brings you here?”

I hesitate, taking this opportunity to reach for my tea. What a simple yet awfully complicated question.

“I believe I could advance here quite nicely if given the opportunity.” They watch me with predatory eyes. “It’s been my dream to be a conformist.” *That’s a lie.* I used to pray that I’d never have to step foot into this glorified prison.

Suseas nods, narrowing her deep-set hazel eyes. I try not to let my eyes wander to the other women. If judgment was tangible, it would flow out of them in a slow wave of steam, seeping from every hole and pore on their bodies.

She chuckles softly, like the lie I told was evident to everyone.

“Well, as I stated before, Mr. Aurick Dawson is an exemplary reference to have. May I ask how it is the two of you met?”

Oh, she’s launching grenades now.

“Old family friends.” *Funny you ask, I had just watched my sister’s body burn in the fire that destroyed her childhood home, and Aurick lent a helping hand out of pity for the girl that had just lost everything. He knows little about me. I know little about him.*

“Good on you.” The woman sitting to Suseas’s left scrunches her nose and gives me a sugary smirk. She tucks a strand of short black hair behind her ear and looks at me expectantly, like I’m supposed to know who she is.

Suseas sets her tea down uncomfortably, tightening her lips together, keeping her eyes nailed to the floor.

“Before we discuss details about the position and the nature of the asylum, there is one matter I would like to bring to this discussion, if you don’t mind.” She places her hands politely in her lap and pulls back her shoulders.

I nod cautiously. The tension added as a secondary layer to this conversation has transitioned to my chest and neck. A coil tightens under my breast bone, twisting clockwise until my shoulders begin to slump forward to relieve the pressure.

"Your... twin sister. She was a conformist's assistant. My condolences for her passing. But, I'm afraid my staff has heard the rumor of how she died. That *you* burned her alive in the house you both lived in. Now, I've done my homework and made sure I saw the incident report. I believe the rumor to not be true. But—you know how people can be. They enjoy a theatrical story to share among themselves. That being said, I must ask—is there any truth to this story? Anything I need to worry about?"

Her body. I left her in the closet.

This time, I can't stop my eyes from darting to the other women. The one who spoke before, with raven-black hair, raises an eyebrow, and the corner of her mouth is tugged upward smugly. The others gawk at me.

My mouth opens to respond, but only an audibly stressed sigh escapes. I don't know how to answer. *Just say no. No, there is no truth to those stories.*

"Her name was Scarlett, wasn't it?" The smug, black-haired woman adds. My jaw constricts, and a thick lump forms in the back of my throat. She said her name like it meant nothing. Like she was an insignificant cog in this machine.

Scarlett.

We reunited at the age of fifteen. I had no one. Only her.

We hadn't known the other existed until she found me in an infirmary outside of the city—broken bones, bloodied face, all at the hands of my father. He wasn't always bad. For the first five years of my life, he was kind and gentle. But when I was six, my father, Jack, had a breakdown that changed him into an insidious brute, a beast, a monster, a

devil of a man that took every happiness away from me.
She found me. Yes, her name was Scarlett.

"No, there is no truth to it, madam," I direct to Suseas.
"Yes, that *was* her name." I give a tight, rigid smile to the nosy one. My smile threatening to turn into a frown.

"She was a peculiar girl, wasn't she? Always sitting alone. No friends, old dresses, very little makeup."

Peculiar. Alone. No friends.

I see the sketch in my mind. The strings. The wooden limbs. I trace over the parchment, drawing it with my thoughts.

I have to hold my breath, keep my lips pressed firmly together as if pins and needles are holding them in place, preventing me from screaming.

"Meridei, it is in poor taste to speak ill of the dead."
Suseas clucks her tongue.

I look into Meridei's cold dark-almond eyes. She taunts me with her unwavering gaze. My forehead is burning and my arms tingling with social discomfort.

"I'd use the word intriguing and unique," I tell Meridei.
"May she rest in peace."

"Yes, dear, of course."—Suseas cuts in—"Ladies, I'd like to show Miss Ambrose around. Please return to your morning duties."

Thank you.

My blood simmers down to a reasonable temperature as the four conformists walk to the stairwell in a single file line. I raise the cup of tea to my lips and blow the steam away, pretending it's the tension Meridei just injected into my body with her inappropriate comments. The steam circulates away from me like the mist from a waterfall as it makes impact with a lagoon.

"Miss Ambrose, I feel a moral obligation to inform you that this occupation is *not* for everyone. It takes a certain amount of... detachment to get along here." She tilts her oval face downward, keeping her gaze leveled with mine

like she's trying to communicate telepathically. "What I mean by that is—if you have a strong sense of empathy... or even a weak stomach, this path isn't one you should pursue."

A frigid tingling sensation coats my upper back and legs. Foggy flashes of Scarlett's stories clutch my mind's eye like flipping through a photo album, and I wasn't even there to witness it myself.

"I think you'll find I'm the perfect fit for this then," I answer confidently. I'm careful to keep my expressions neutral. Scarlett once told me that when interviewed, they watch your body language for signs of weakness. If you blink too fast, readjust your stance, scratch your head, or touch your nose—it's like your body is answering their subliminal questions honestly. I stay perfectly still. My breath is even and controlled. My legs haven't moved from their ankles-crossed position. I'm as still as a corpse, and as a result, my lower back, neck, and legs are aching from the lack of movement.

"Very well." She bows her head and stands from the couch. "We'll take a brief tour of the intricate section to touch on what the day-to-day looks like and the process of treatments for our patients."

5. Simulated Drowning

I FOLLOW SUSEAS UP A stone stairwell with oil lamps mounted on the walls and a draft that carries the faint odor of damp towels that have been sitting in a corner for weeks. The stairs twirl upward, revealing a door at each loop.

We pass three doors before entering the intricate section. The marble floor in the waiting room transitions into white and black checkerboard tiles. She explains to me that halfway down the hallway, we will hit an intersection. The left hall leads to the dining area, the middle hall contains the treatment rooms, and to the right are the patients' quarters; thirteen, to be exact.

"In the morning, you will be assigned a patient as your charge for the day and a schedule of the treatments they will undergo. Your job is to make sure they get fed, complete their treatments, and report their vitals before and after, as well as recording general notes about the visit. It sounds easy enough, but the treatments can be very long and agonizing for the patient. Each session has a purpose, sometimes religious and sometimes scientific. Our council members digest your reports and determine their next treatment, so it is vital that each conformist conduct a detailed investigation on their assigned patient."

"What is your success rate?" I interrupt.

"Pardon?"

"Your success rate. How many of these patients are *cured* and make it back to their families and day-to-day lives?"

She blinks, and her lips part. "Oh, well, we have recorded countless improvements on vast behavioral issues, but their overall mental statuses always remain unchanged. The end goal really isn't to cure them. Although there are priests that would disagree. The purpose is to keep them away from civilization. To protect

the public from them. They are natural-born killers. They don't have souls, most would argue."

I pretend hooks are cutting into the sides of my face, holding my facial muscles still, the skin stretched. It's harder than I thought to not let my body betray me.

"And what is your mortality rate?"

Her jaw comes out in annoyance. "We don't keep track of that statistic, but there are some that perish in trials that are harsher than others." She looks down at the floor, understanding that there isn't any progress resulting from these practices. "But that's really the point of this interview, to make sure you understand the costs."

"Can you tell me about the different treatments?"

"Of course. Now, keep in mind that the purpose of the treatments is not to be cruel or for anyone's entertainment. This has just been the way and law of the asylum for decades."

I adjust my weight to my other leg. It sounds more like she's trying to convince herself that what they're doing here isn't so bad—isn't so evil.

"The beginning treatments for a new patient, depending on the severity of their case, would start with hydrotherapy. Many of the patients who are first admitted come in with manic-depressive psychosis. This treatment helps increase energy with a forty-eight degree temperature."

I scoff. "Yes, I'm sure being blasted with ice-cold water would wake anyone up." I bite the inside of my cheek. I'm not making a good impression. I can't let my feelings about this place get the best of me.

She keeps going as if I hadn't interrupted at all. "Chair binding is another treatment we use for those that have hyperactive personalities or religious nervousness. The straps are bound so tightly it slows down the circulation to relax them for about eight hours."

Pause.

“There’s also simulated drowning, electroconvulsive therapy, chemically induced seizures, and as a last resort to the most uncontrollable of patients... Lobotomies are a surgical procedure on the brain that removes elements that corrupt their behavioral traits.” She sighs. Taps her fingers together in thought.

A quick glance at her watch. “Now that we’ve gone over some of the basics... I need to introduce you to some of the treatments in person. To most, they are extremely difficult to watch and even harder to inflict upon another human. This is merely to observe your reaction to ensure you have the stomach for this.”

A sharp, ice-cold chill runs up the back of my neck to my scalp, prickling over my hair follicles like the bristles of a hairbrush.

We don’t bother to tour the dining hall or the patient’s dormitories. She’s going to test me. I can imagine this is the part where most candidates fail the interview. Fortunately for me, Scarlett would explain to me in vivid detail what went on in these treatments. The first time I heard about the scalding bath therapy, I had violent nightmares about it for days and trembled uncontrollably while she told me exactly what she saw. After a couple of years being her trusted late-night companion to talk to, I grew a thick layer of skin that could fend off the sickly visions painted so delicately by Scarlett’s stories.

I walk directly behind her to the middle hallway. She has a pep in her step, gliding over the tile as if there are tiny wheels on the bottoms of her shoes. The ceilings are ominously high, with rib vault arches and brass chandeliers hanging low overhead. The doors match the dark copper color of the lights, and they all have small windows at eye level. In the first door, I see small white tiles and five water jets coming from each wall. Inside is a naked woman being tossed around by the intense pressure of the cold water.

Her screams are hoarse and choppy as her mouth fills with water.

Hydrotherapy.

In the second room to my left, an older man is strapped down to a table. His arms, head, and legs are bound with two white bulbs connected to his temples, and his body is convulsing and thrashing about. I don't hear any sound coming from this room. *Electroconvulsive therapy.*

As we approach the third room, Suseas stops walking. "Simulated drowning. This treatment is particularly hard for newcomers to watch. Our basic instinct is to breathe to stay alive. Depriving someone of that makes it easy to curb their indecent tendencies and train their minds to obey behavioral correction. However, it is a long and exhausting process on both ends. We hold the patient's head underwater for thirty seconds. Even though a human in good health can hold their breath on average of around two minutes, the panic and adrenaline rush causes a greater need of oxygen, and the fear of drowning is painful enough to bring about a very effective treatment." Suseas touches the doorknob with the tips of her fingers, caressing it like the room itself holds a special place in her heart.

"Indeed, that does sound effective." I hold my hands together to keep them from shaking.

"Take a deep breath. This might appear shocking at first, but after a few trials, we get used to it and eventually desensitize to it entirely."

I do as she says and suck in a deep, choppy breath. She pulls a lever attached to the door and twists it clockwise until the door clicks and a burst of cold air comes out.

"The room temperature is set to fifty-three degrees Fahrenheit. It creates an even more uncomfortable setting for the wet patient," she notes as we walk through the door. The chilled air sweeps over my face, identifying this room as the culprit for the stench of mildew and wet towels, also underlined with a concoction of saliva and sweat.

There is a bathtub in the center of the room. An older man crouches down on his knees, and Meridei sits on a stool with a clipboard in hand. The man's white jumpsuit is stuck to his light-brown skin, saturated with cold water, dripping down the back of his neck and quivering arms. Metal clamps are connected to the long ends of the tub and locked around his neck, secured over the back of his head.

"May I remind you, Chekiss... You decide when this stops. I can imagine this is quite unbearable, with your sore lungs inflamed and the muscles in your neck tender to the touch. You can end the session right now with a single word." The sneering, black-haired woman called Meridei rests her onyx eyes on him, unamused, unfazed by what she is about to do to him. I try to keep my breathing steady, focusing on making my inhalations and exhalations slow.

"This is Meridei. She's worked as a conformist for about five and a half years now. She's the most skilled at simulated drowning. She keeps her improv of questions and lectures smooth and to the point to make it easier on everyone." Suseas smiles warmly at Meridei. *Easier, huh? Is everyone here completely mad?*

"Chekiss has been a patient in the intricate section for a very long time. He was admitted for murdering his wife and daughter. He is mute and will not cooperate with any of the conformists here. For the first year, we kept him on hydrotherapy and electroconvulsive therapy. Since that had no effect on him, we have decided to try this as we have come to the conclusion that his silence is by choice, and his uncooperative attitude—deliberate."

I keep my eyes on Chekiss. His body remains still, his hands bound behind his back. He isn't shaking from the cold or moaning from the pain. He is still, like the softness of waves before a storm.

"Miss Ambrose, can you sign this for me? It's a nondisclosure agreement. You are not permitted to share with anyone what you see within this section today."

That didn't stop Scarlett.

I sign quickly, pressing down hard on the clipboard to keep my hand from trembling.

"Meridei, please continue." Suseas waves her hand once. My stomach twists in three different directions. Meridei's head drops down to her shiny black box. She pushes a button that lowers the anchor around his head into the cold water. He doesn't resist or convulse. I expected the person undergoing this treatment to be outraged, flailing about uncontrollably. But Chekiss seems to have mentally prepared himself for this. He keeps his body relaxed while his head has been dunked in the water.

My hand clenches into a fist, my fingernails curling into the bed of my palms. A ripple of fight or flight pulses over me. I want to pull him free, and I want to do it *now*.

Meridei watches her clock, counting the thirty seconds.

Out of pure empathy, my breath catches in my throat, and I hold it.

Twenty-five seconds go by, and his hands tighten. His body goes rigid, and he begins to flail. Chekiss's knees knock against the wet floor hard. My lungs are set ablaze for him, burning and tightening like a severe muscle cramp.

Three more seconds.

A grunt gurgles from under the water as his frail body manages to loosen a few screws on the clamps from the thrashing. Meridei clicks a button, and the anchor is arched back up, dragging his upper body from the pool of ice water. He gasps for air through raspy windpipes. Coughing from small, but not fatal, intakes of water.

Meridei presses the button again, and he's lowered back in the death tank. This time, he doesn't have it in him to hold his breath as long. He's tired from the last round, but he keeps still once more.

I wait for her to push the button impatiently. My heart vibrating like a power drill, and the muscles over my

stomach hardening like a plate of armor. This time, he only lasts fifteen seconds before he begins convulsing again. His body bangs around against the tub and the metal restraints. Thirty seconds. He's up gasping even harder for air.

I keep my hands pressed flat against my sides. I can't show any signs of weakness. Even though I am writhing inside to knock Meridei off of her stool and release this man from bondage. I can't help him, and it's killing me inside. But that's okay, as long as I don't show it on the outside.

"Again," Meridei says.

Again?! Look at him! He's already suffering!

A jolt of heat reaches my face, prickling my forehead, and singeing the meat behind my eyes. *How am I supposed to watch this every day?*

The anchor lowers him down, and I hear a grunt to hold his breath. He lasts five seconds this time before the thrashing begins. I catch myself holding my breath because I can feel Suseas's eyes sinking into me like the teeth of a python. This time Meridei lets him up after twenty seconds when it looks like he is about to intake water. He coughs violently over the side of the tub, saliva hanging from his mouth in long gooey strings.

"Tell me about your wife, Chekiss."

Silence.

Her finger clamps down on the button. He shouts roughly before going under. Ten seconds this time before she lets him up.

"What was your mother's name?" Her voice is louder to override his panting.

"Did you have siblings?"

More panting.

I can't take this.

My heart is going to explode, swelling up before pressing against my rib cage and bursting within me.

He's back under again. This time she leaves him under the full thirty seconds. Just when I think he won't make it this time, he does. He's an older man, but I can tell he's a fighter by these last few rounds underwater. And if he really can speak like they predict, then he is far more stubborn than I am. I applaud him for this.

She pulls him back out violently, his body hanging like a limp noodle. His eyes are bulging and bloodshot; nostrils flaring, and his gaping mouth is howling like a dying animal.

"Why did you hurt your daughter?" Meridei presses another question. As predicted, he doesn't answer.

This goes on for close to an hour. I fight the pressure building in the back of my throat—the swirling knot of nausea pulsing in my gut.

After it becomes clear that he won't survive another round, Meridei hops off her stool, setting her clipboard down, and unlocks him from the machine. His quivering body falls limply to the floor. Blood drips from his nose. I fight the need to pick him up from the floor and tell him everything is going to be okay. Tell him that I'm going to get him out of here.

But Suseas's eyes are fixated on my expressions, my stiff body language.

Meridei stands in front of Chekiss's body while two guards lift him from the ground. As they turn to face the door, he looks up at me. Although his eyes are brimmed with tears and tiny red veins, they are a brilliant shade of green—like the slimy green algae gathered at the bottom of a pond. They're peaceful, harmless eyes, despite the reason he's here and the terrible treatment he just survived.

Suseas turns to face me with a satisfied smirk. "I'm impressed. Almost every girl I have brought into this room has left in tears." She pauses, examining my empty face. "I could show you the other treatment rooms, but I think that would be a waste of time."

"Why's that?" *Almost done. Almost done.*

"Because it takes a special type of human to be able to watch something like this without flinching," she states plainly.

You mean a sadist? A monster? Good to know.

"I'd like you to meet a couple of the other patients. Shall we?"

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6. The Thirteenth Room

I FOLLOW BEHIND SUSEAS TO the right hallway. It looks longer than the others. Both in length and in life sentence.

I am introduced to two patients.

The first room harbors a woman with a fear of bacteria and germs. Her hands look like a slab of raw beef from scrubbing them with bleach, and she has no fingernails from ripping them off to get rid of any germs that linger. Her head is shaved to keep away lice along with her eyebrows and eyelashes. She persistently peels off the skin from her lips to keep them clean as well. She is under constant watch, so she won't hurt herself anymore.

Another room holds a frantic man in his midforties. This case may be the most frightening. He believes he is in the ninth layer of hell. He sees fire and lost souls burning in pain and agony. They tell me that he's even tried to claw his own eyes out from the horrid things he's seen. He has to wear mittens now like a newborn.

Suseas stops walking at the second to last room of the hallway. Her feet remain planted in front of the last door as if there's a barrier keeping her from stretching her leg forward. For a moment, she glances ahead, parting her thin pink lips as a ghost of a fearful frown leaves her cheeks.

"Miss Ambrose, I'm happy to say you are most impressive. Just as Mr. Aurick said you would be." She blots the sides of her face with the back of her hand, ridding herself of the glossy sheen of perspiration. "Is this really a life you could see for yourself?"

I remember asking Scarlett this same question one night while we sat on the roof of her beaten-down house, letting our eyes wander over the thousands of stars in the sky. She had finished telling me about an incident in one of the treatments. A young boy drowned. While the conformist stared emptily at his cold, blue body. Scarlett tried to

resuscitate him. She pressed on his bare chest for forty-five minutes, bruising her knees and spraining her wrist. He was only twelve years old.

I couldn't see why she would subject herself to this kind of torment. Why not leave? She looked at me then, like I'm looking at Suseas now. She said, *If more people with compassion chose to see the ugly and not turn a blind eye, maybe this world would be a better place.*

"This is where I belong," I say. And despite the evil I've seen, I believe it to be true. I can't understand my own illogical reasoning, but walking down this hallway, running my fingers over the textured walls—there's a cosmic pull that is binding my soul to this place. A vortex that is sucking me in, deeper and deeper.

Suseas lifts her chin with obvious pride. "What a delight. It would be my honor to offer you a conformist position. Might you start as soon as tomorrow?"

I take a deep breath. Nod my head. Swallow down the bitter taste of fear and stress that gathers on my tongue like sour stomach acid.

She takes two steps away from the last door, guiding me back to the beginning of the hallway. I don't follow but hold a hand up to stop her.

"Wait, you're not going to show me the last room?" It's the only room without a profile clipboard or a small window on the door.

"No," she replies sharply, tilting her head and squinting her eyes down at me as if my asking was completely out of place.

"Why not?"

"No one goes into that room." Her voice is cold and out of character, like a winter's death.

I should let it go. But it's like an itch I have to scratch. "Can you explain why?"

She whips her head at me. "Miss Ambrose, this will be the first and last time I address this question. I will not

tolerate nosiness or a proclivity for unladylike subjects. Is that understood?"

I nod, frozen in place. *What nerve have I struck?*

"That room is never spoken of by any individual in this establishment. No one goes near that door. No one steps foot inside except members of the council. You may venture anywhere in the asylum, work with any patient, open any door—*except* that one." Her unwavering stare forces me to avert my eyes. "If you value your life, your sanity, and if you prefer to remain employed by this asylum rather than be a patient inside of it—you'll respect my order, drop your curiosity, and never pick it up again."

I gaze back at the largest door at the end of the hallway. The thirteenth room.

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7. Home

I LET MY SHOULDER RELAX and the muscles in my neck go limp during the drive from the asylum to Aurick's estate.

We've been staying at his cottage in the North Saphrine forest, away from the city, away from the people, away from any responsibilities. But now, it's time for me to learn the customs of living the way the women here do. And thankfully, Aurick's friendship has extended to letting me stay in his estate.

I lean against the window and take in my new surroundings.

We pass the Dellilian Castle first. It has over three hundred rooms, numerous towers, spires, and peaks the color of coffee grounds. It would be the cover of a child's storybook if it weren't for the worn-down stone, as if it were stained by dark oil, lined with dead vines, and surrounded by bare oak trees. Even still, it dominates the area. It bullies the other estates into a smaller, less significant purpose.

The road changes from dirt to shiny gray cobblestone. There are gas streetlights at every corner, followed by shops with windows full of extravagant items, like bottles of wine, jewelry, long gowns, and tuxedos. And there are *so* many people outside. My focus gravitates toward a cluster of women leaving a boutique. They have winter wool coats like mine, with fur muffs and umbrellas hovering over their heads. I avoid their faces at first, like the stories I've heard make them fictional characters ready to disappear in a glamorous gust of wind if I stare too hard.

But they aren't fictional.

They're real and blindingly elegant from their soft, white complexions like porcelain dolls to their silky pinned-up curls and narrow, willowy figures. Their swaying hips flow at a steady rhythm like they're being guided by the gentle

rocking of a boat. My chest tightens with insecurity as the women smile with glistening white teeth like they're constantly performing for a crowd.

Must I become this version of a woman?

Before we turn the street corner, my eyes flick to a woman sleeping on a chaise lounge in the middle of the sidewalk, her hand outstretched to the cobblestone. Then another on the sidewalk across the street. I open my mouth to question it, to ask what—

"They're called fainting sofas," the driver mutters over his shoulder.

I wait for him to clarify, but he doesn't. Then it hits me—the lady-doll regimen. The starvation. It must cause frequent fainting after long hours of shopping. I shudder at the clear memory of the woman's parted mouth, appearing to sleep *peacefully*.

Our buggy sweeps past the catalog of enchanting civilians and slows to our desired destination.

Thin flakes of snow begin to fall from the sky. A brisk wind lifts my hair from my shoulders as I step out of the buggy and onto Aurick's eleven acres of land. There is a freshly cut lawn, an asphalt driveway wrapping around a granite courtyard fountain, and a three-story bluestone mansion. Its sides are covered in ivy, just barely reaching the bottom side of the roof.

The ruby-red front door glides open and Aurick smiles at me wearing a white dress shirt with a double-breasted vest. He steps out of his home with the easy grace of a dancer. A tall and lean frame, with the face of a young professor, and the eyes of a dreamer. His irises swirl with the color of the frozen pond by his northern cottage.

He looks recharged, like the luxury of his estate breathed sophistication back into his body. He runs one hand through his raven-black hair, and his long fingers wave me to come in.

The snow melts on my cheeks as I shuffle up the porch steps to greet him. Aurick's hands theatrically extend to the mansion—presenting it as if for an applauding audience.

I nod with raised eyebrows. "Not bad at all." *Wow*. I mean, *wow*.

He smiles. "Come in, please."

I'm guided through the front door, allowing a rush of warm air to hit my skin. Aurick's home is nothing short of intimidating, like walking into a Gothic fairy tale with dark wooden walls and a common theme of gold lining. I notice the dining room table, set for a feast and a centerpiece bouquet of red roses.

I stand there, looking at every detail, consciously holding my mouth closed. The manor matches his demeanor perfectly. It's beautiful and lonely, cuddled together under a cashmere blanket.

"It smells nice in here," I comment. "Like potpourri and cigars."

Aurick helps me out of my coat and holds his arm out to keep me balanced while I remove the heels from my sore feet. I'm not accustomed to wearing nice things. I'm accustomed to running barefoot in the mud and swimming in dirty creek water.

"Welcome home," he announces with arms outstretched to the mansion. *Home*. The word itself holds warmth, but this atmosphere does not match. The cold floor underneath my bare feet, the shadows pouring out of every corner and crevice, the dim flickering lights of the gaslit chandeliers and wall lamps. It reflects the same haunted sadness that Emerald Lake Asylum cast on to me earlier today.

"Would you like to dine first or after the tour?" He opens a closet to his left, hanging my coat and setting down my shoes.

"I'm famished." I haven't eaten all day. While I was observing the patients, Suseas offered me a meal from the grand dining hall. I refused, claiming I was still utterly full

from breakfast. She gave me an approving nod. I learned some time ago that women are praised for refusing meals. It's a sign they're keeping up with their lady-doll regimen—to uphold a thin and fragile womanly frame. Little did she know that was far from my reasoning. I refused the meal because I feared the extra food in my stomach would give me away, sell me out as an empathetic fraud. I would merely have to think of Chekiss being drowned over and over again, and the contents of said meal would pressurize in my mouth and come spewing out between my fingers.

Aurick nods knowingly. He escorts me to the feast. After only a few steps in that direction, I'm hit with the rich aroma of hot melted butter, freshly baked bread, and roasted turkey.

Aurick seats me at the end of the table, where he pours a large glass of white wine. His focus jumps to the empty glass in front of me.

"Water or wine?" He raises an eyebrow.

"I've never had wine." I shrug, glancing over to his glass. "But after the day I've had..."

He chuckles, nodding his approval as he fills my glass half full.

I don't wait for him to sit down to begin eating. I bite into the turkey leg first, dripping with a bourbon glaze. The juices spill over my bottom lip and glide down my chin. I'm overwhelmed with the succulent flavors purging from the tender meat.

I use my fork to stab at a few slices of cheese from the charcuterie board while using my fingers to pluck rosemary roasted potatoes from the other side of my plate. They're all crammed into my mouth simultaneously. The stickiness of the potatoes makes it hard to swallow down my food. I lift the bowl of hot soup to my lips and slowly fill my mouth to gulp the rest down.

"Do you always hum when you eat?" Aurick severs the comatose state I was hypnotized into by all of these savory

foods.

I smile shyly, wiping the juices from my neck and chin with the back of my hand.

“Only when the food is *really* good.”

“You would make for an amusing date at one of these political dinners I attend monthly.” He shakes his head—then stops—raising his eyebrows at my frozen expression.

Date. Man. Lover. They’re only interested in the slickness between your legs.

Scarlett.

He winces, as if reading the thoughts being printed across my forehead.

“We should address that rather large elephant in the room, shouldn’t we?”

Yes. I don’t want to. But better now rather than later.

“I should have made my intentions clear when we first met,” he admits, setting his fork and knife back down to the table. “I won’t presume to guess how you feel on the matter, but I recently lost my fiancée in a tragic accident. My heart is no longer open—I only seek friendship from you.”

A tub of warm, sweetly scented relief washes over me.

“Good,” I say, swallowing the rest of my last bite.

“Because I enjoy being friends. I’m appreciative of everything you’ve done for me.”

He smiles and shrugs before he cuts into his first bite.

“How did the interview go? You spent the whole day there.”

“They offered me the position,” I respond before I take another solid bite of my turkey leg. I chew faster so I can keep talking. “All thanks to you. I never would have had the opportunity if it weren’t for your influence.” I pause, looking back at him. How does he have so much sway at the asylum?

“I’m a Survivah bureaucrat—a leading board member,” he answers quickly, as if reading the question blossoming over my face.

Survivah. I only know the term in relation to what we'd call infirmaries, it's responsible for the funding for the doctors and the asylum. It's where I woke up after the beating. My father. The club swinging into the back of my head.

"It's the brother to Demechnef's side of the government. Survivah covers health, general nutrition, mental illness, and religious requirements. As opposed to Demechnef that covers the societal cosmetic standards, discipline, order, and—*war*."

I nod, chewing slowly. That's why the staff was trying to impress me. So that I'd report back to him. He's on the board that controls their income.

"Did you see the patients? Their methods?" He takes a sip of wine.

I frown. "I signed an agreement stating that I wouldn't talk about what I saw."

Another long exhale. "Is that right?" He places a small square of steak carefully between his teeth, pulling his fork out slowly. "Does that mean you're not going to tell me anything of what you saw?"

"If it makes you feel any better, I'm sparing you the ugliest of details."

I catch a splash of annoyance in his eyes—fleeting, like a match that refuses to light. He sips his wine and smiles.

"Fine. Then should we discuss your standards moving forward?"

The word *standards* has the same upsetting effect as a fork scraping against a plate. I stop eating. Set my fork down. Straighten my shoulders.

"I don't catch your meaning."

He pats his lips with a napkin. "There are certain standards of the society to uphold in the city. I can imagine that you haven't grown up accustomed to it, which is perfectly fine, of course, but you'll still need to learn and adapt."

I know where this is going. The starvation. Long nightly routines. Soaking in rose water. Lathering in oil and avoiding the sun. The lady-doll regimen.

Even Scarlett had to succumb to putting in the effort and upkeep. She may not have soaked in a warm bathtub steeped with dried herbs and essential oils for hours at a time, but she never went to sleep without buttering her skin with the right concoctions she'd make herself. She stayed out of the sun and kept her skin from darkening. And her meals were small and proportioned.

"I've already filled your wardrobe and vanity with the proper necessities. But you'll need to get used to weekly measurements, days without supper and, of course, vigorous cleaning and prepping every night." He spears two berries onto his fork, waiting to eat them as he anticipates my response.

My hands are now clasped in my lap. The urge to indulge in more of this abundant meal has slipped from my grasp, with the new ideas flowing into my head. He set up this feast to farewell my old habits. A last plentiful supper. And now, the thoughts of hungry nights swell up inside my racing mind. The idea of being waxed of stray hairs and holding an umbrella everywhere I go to avoid the soothing touch of the warm sun prickles my skin with sudden loss.

"And what if I refuse?" My question climbs out of my throat with caution.

Aurick continues eating. Shrugs. "Then you cannot stay or work in the city. I don't need to remind you what happens if anyone strays from societal standards. Appearance is everything here. You either adjust, or you live freely on the outside."

He's right. I hate that I can't fault him for insisting on this matter. But women who gain a pound outside of what they should weigh are taken into the west wing of the Emerald Lake Asylum as patients. Sometimes they're kept there for months. Sometimes they never come back.

Women are taken if their face grows unwanted blemishes.
They're taken if they draw unwanted attention.

Is fulfilling Scarlett's wish of changing the dynamic of the asylum worth all of this? I'm already at risk of being taken. Not for my weight, as growing up malnourished and starving has created quite a delicate frame for my body. I'm at risk for the golden hue of my skin, my long, wavy, golden locks, and the absence of makeup on my face.

But I am the reason Scarlett can no longer complete this goal herself.

I take a swig of my first mouthful of wine, cringing at the bitter dryness.

"I'll do whatever I am asked to do."

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8. Lady-doll

AURICK LEFT ME IN THE hands of the same older woman that had met me at the cottage before—she's waiting for me in my bedroom now. Her ash hair was perched in a high bun and her evening dress began just under her chin. She drew me a hot bath in a large brass tub in my washroom. The soft carpet welcomed my bare feet, but her eyes did not. She made no effort to soften the blow of preparing me for this sudden change in my life.

She had laid out my white nightgown, fox fur slippers, and several glass jars of oils and body butters. Without so much as a nod of consent on my end, she stripped me of my dress and helped me into the tub filled with hot water, roses, and dried lavender.

Exiting the bath after an hour, she lathered my naked body in strong floral oils. She made me stand in front of the fireplace in my room to air dry—meanwhile combing through the knots in my hair. She yanked and tugged, grunting at the stubborn twists and interlocked twirls my hair has always lived by.

After the oil-infused water droplets evaporated from my skin, the stiff woman started a second layer of body butter that smelled of sweet cream, then a third smelling of jasmine. My hair was stacked with a few warm rollers, and my face, neck, and chest were caked with a chunky violet concoction. I felt as though she had rolled me around in a cooking pan filled with grease.

"What's your name?" I finally gather the courage to ask, sitting on my vanity chair, stiff as a board, while she wipes the vibrant purple goop from my cheeks.

"Delphine," she says with the crunchy voice of a smoker.

Delphine then helps me into my nightgown, warning me to stop walking around barefoot and to only wear my new

fur slippers around the house. She scorns me for having rough skin on my heels, calluses on my fingers, and unbrushed hair.

“I’ll be back to get you ready in the morning.”

She walks out of the room with light footsteps, leaving me tucked under the blankets, white and fluffed with feathers. I lie perfectly still as each subtle movement intensifies the greasiness that is the final product of Delphine’s work.

Before shutting my eyes and trying to get some sleep before my first day, I absorb my new bedroom. The thick scents of roses, vanilla, jasmine, and burning firewood. The maroon wallpaper with the golden designs of angels and tree branches. The walnut dresser with gold accents and dovetail joints. The plethora of perfumes, lotions, and stands cradling jewelry.

I stare absently at the new luxury, wondering why I’m not beaming with joy, wondering why I feel like I’ve just opened a window to a new world, and while I’m observing the window jams—I’m unable to shut it. Before I know it, I’ll have lost my footing, free-falling from the window until I’m submerged and unable to climb my way back.

~

AFTER DELPHINE LEAVES, I’M LEFT alone to sink into despairing thoughts. Aggressive memories that won’t stay buried.

My hell was a basement.

Scarlett’s was a closet.

It seemed our parents shared a common interest for locking their children up and treating them like wild animals.

Our mother decided to lock little five-year-old Scarlett in a closet until she was fifteen. In that closet, she would sit in her own fecal matter. In that closet, she would starve and eat the drywall to stay alive. And when our mother would

drag her out of the closet, Scarlett would wish she was back in it.

I'm sixteen again.

There's a banging on a wall coming from the master bedroom of Scarlett's childhood home. We never set foot in this room. This room is where the bad things happened. But this room is where the noise grows louder. I stand in front of the closed closet door and think to myself frantically. Should I open it? Should I give her space? The answer then was so simple. I hadn't realized that until the day she died.

Whatever the right thing to do is, I can't just leave her here. For my sake, I can't walk away from this door. I turn the knob and instinctually shut my eyes, press my palms to my lids, and try to erase all of it. Scarlett rocks back and forth. Banging her bony back against the closet wall. Her clothes are scattered around her. Her bones, gangly and pressed firmly against her skin. So frail, so so frail. The bumps defining her spine begin to turn bright red as she rocks into the drywall again. I place my hand on her back to keep her from harming it more. It's then I hear her wheezing. The sound she makes when she's been crying so hard and for so long that her throat swells.

"Scarlett?" I say softly. Tenderly. Trying not to set her off.

"LOOK AT ME!" she screams in my face. Her emerald-green eyes are swollen and glistening. Face covered in red splotches. I follow the direction of her hands that move to the blood-stained carpet. It's fresh blood. The blood spot spreads from under her. Hands are covered in it.

"THEY'RE ALL OVER ME! THEY KEPT TOUCHING ME!"

It takes me a moment to process what I'm seeing, and then it all clicks into place.

"No, they're all gone now. The blood is just your body telling you that you've become a woman. It's natural.

Nothing to be scared of.” I try to wipe her hair off her wet forehead, but she starts shaking it back and forth aggressively.

“NO, NO, NO! THEY DID THIS TO ME! LOOK AT ME! LOOK WHAT THEY DID TO ME! LOOK WHAT MOTHER LET THEM DO TO ME!” The crying fit starts again, and her screams bounce around the closet walls. Her body thrashes about, and she hits herself over and over again in the place where the blood escapes. At first, I stiffen up. Unsure if I should stay or leave. Unsure of what I could possibly say to calm her down. So, I don’t say anything at all. I do what my father would do for me when he would feel a moment of remorse for locking me in the basement. I get behind her, sit down, and wrap my arms around her. I bury my face in her neck.

At first, she fights this. I catch an elbow in the rib and her head bucks back to bloody my nose. My vision turns black and spotty, clouded with tears. But I only hold her tighter.

“I’m here. I love you. I’ll always love you.”

Her screams become sobs. Her sobs become silent whimpers. And then she holds me back. We rock back and forth for hours.

And the memory returns quietly to the river in my thoughts, sinking back into place without another word. I take a mental note, in the morning I’ll need to sketch that puppet again.

This is what time alone does to me.

9. The Snake Pit

I'M PAIRED WITH MERIDEI OF all people. The inky-haired, sneering-faced snake of a woman.

Or, *The Water Warden*, as I like to call her in my thoughts. It's a suitable title for her after what I've seen. She does not smile, her eyes are as black as her hair, and she specializes in drowning patients.

I was given my uniform to change into in the lobby. Navy blue, with a bow pressed down across my chest. Delphine applied gray, shimmery paints to my eyelids and a blush red to my lips and cheeks before I left this morning. She unraveled the rollers from my hair and ran her nails through each curl. My hair was transformed then—each bouncy curl was smoothed out to assume the soft ruffling of a gold satin bedsheet. I didn't mind it as much as I minded the smoke over my eyes. Delphine claimed it makes my iris glow like sea foam on the ocean floor. But I thought it made me look older, hardened like a garden path of mud that has had time to dry and only exists to be stepped on by strangers.

Meridei shows me around the dining hall, pressuring me with her soulless eyes to only grab one or two items from the buffet. I watch her fingers pluck two squares of cheese and a strawberry. My stomach gurgles on cue as I gaze hopelessly at the array of colorful fruits and steaming meats. I decide on one egg, cooked over easy, and a handful of blueberries.

I'm going to need to learn effective ways to sneak food out of Aurick's kitchen at night. I don't know how I'll ever think straight enough to accomplish anything here if I'm constantly reminded of my empty gut and unquenchable cramps of hunger.

Meridei does not look back as she glides across the dining hall to find an empty table. With my glass of orange

juice in one hand and my plate in the other, I quicken my steps to meet her at a table directly in the center of the hall. The voices flowing happily at each circular, mahogany table begin to slow and lower to hushed tones. In the back of the room, the gentleman playing a grand piano slows his contact with each key. My breath picks up in pace, and my heart thumps loudly under my chest and in my ears like a war drum, sounding off that an enemy is about to attack.

"It's like seeing a ghost," someone whispers.

For a moment, I thought this was because I was new. But with that sharp whisper, I'm reminded of the opinions that must be circulating about me. The fresh rumors that have blossomed in my wake.

She killed her own sister.

Was it because they were twins? Because she wanted to steal her life?

Keep a close eye on that one.

She should have been checked in as a patient.

I suddenly wish that the floor was covered in fluffy carpet. My heels clapping down on the shiny hardwood floor are the loudest sounds in this room, like a trumpet sounding off my arrival.

Meridei waves me over with a taunting smile.

I want to slump my shoulders in defeat. The walk of shame to eat my five blueberries. I expected unwanted attention, but that was brutal. That is only the energy pouring out across the floor, into the roomful of people—negative and judgmental—devouring me in a flood as it reaches my ankles and pulls my head underwater. I even hold my breath to keep from swallowing it all too fast.

"That was lovely," Meridei says softly as I sit down in the chair across from her.

I don't respond.

She keeps her dark eyes leveled with mine as she takes a bite of her breakfast slowly, savoring every flavor. I take small sips of my glass of orange juice, rolling the pulp over

my tongue, waiting several seconds to meet Meridei's eyes again.

"The rumors are only going to grow in volume," she says again.

I decide she's baiting me. Testing the length of my fuse. Studying my levels of strength and tolerance.

"I am sure you're right," I say, squishing a blueberry between my teeth. The sweet tartness bursts over my gums.

"And the ladies and gentlemen behind those rumors can be quite cruel."

"Most likely." *Get on with it before you bore me to death.*

"Then you'll come to know how short lived your stay here will be." Her head tilts mechanically, like the gears in her neck have thick layers of rust.

I set my fork down and hold her stare without a single bat of an eyelash. Scarlett once had a confrontation with a woman named Belinda here. She threatened her in the washroom. Scarlett said that she stared at the blonde-headed switchblade without blinking and began to laugh hysterically. She told me that if her mind seemed unpredictable, then Belinda could only assume her actions would be as well.

I don't dare to laugh like a maniac—yet. But perhaps, burning her internally with a stare so closely resembling a dead girl's will do the trick.

"But I'm certain you'll get on fine." Her eyes drop. She licks the yellow yolk from the busted egg from her fingertips. A slight shrug from her narrow shoulders. "Just as I am certain training you today will be the most fun."

~

MY PULSE RACING AND ERRATIC under my skin for the remainder of the day. The other conformists stare wide eyed as I cross their paths. Their lips purse tightly, and their drawn-on

eyebrows rise in holy judgment. They exchange whispers like I'm a notorious harlot that was found in a married man's bed.

I follow Meridei to the chair-binding treatment room. She refers to this treatment as "boring" because it lacks the thrill of seeing them fight for their survival. She believes that particular part of the simulated drowning treatment is what convinces the patient to conform, to act how we want them to.

The patient undergoing this treatment today is Sun Ravendi. Her illness is extreme obsessive-compulsive disorder. Sun is a danger to herself and others. When she was admitted to the asylum, a neighbor caught her cleaning herself and her daughter with bleach and other chemicals. Her three-year-old daughter was screaming so loud, the neighbors thought someone was being murdered and stormed into the house to check. Their skin was burned and blistered from the hot water and chemicals. They were both rushed to Survivah Medical, but Sun's daughter did not make it. The autopsy found that Sun had sodomized her three-year-old little girl with objects soaked in bleach.

Now that Sun is locked up for good, they have to keep her under constant supervision. She's hyperactive with her need to clean herself. Meridei shows a definite dislike for Sun. Thankfully, Meridei is not in charge of this treatment. We are watching a man named Ash conduct it.

He has strawberry-blond hair, a hook for a nose, and a pair of wandering light-blue eyes. At first, I think he may be the only one here that likes the patients. That shows them mercy and hospitality.

Ash seats Sun in the chair centered in the room. He caresses her arms and whispers to her sweetly. She seems unalarmed by his gentle touch and soft-spoken voice so close to her ear.

She has an abundance of wrinkles over her forehead and brow but doesn't look a day over thirty.

“Sun, I need to know that you understand that when you try to cleanse your body, you have to go through this treatment. Once you stop, the treatment stops. Are we on the same page?” Despite Ash’s message, he has a soothing delivery. He strokes the side of her cheek. She stares off into space, mustering up a small nod.

He smiles and squeezes her thigh once before standing up.

“Eight hours and counting,” he chimes.

Ash takes a long brown rope and ties a knot, binding her by her shoulders to the chair, then wrapping it around her over and over again, as tight as he can make it. Her face begins to wince as the rope gets shorter. He comes to a stop to tie it off. Another rope lies in a pile next to her chair, which he grabs, then starts on her waist. She whimpers while her midsection shrinks up, and then he ties off the lower half of her legs. I can see the blood rush to her face, the tension building.

“She has to sit like this for eight hours?” I ask, troubled by the thought of her legs falling off or her heart giving out.

Meridei smiles and looks at me from the corner of her eye. “Yes. It’s an agonizing process.”

“What good does that do?” I feel myself growing feverish with the lack of humanity in this room.

“It teaches her to ignore her instincts to harm herself,” Ash answers defensively. “The more we do it, the more her brain will remember this pain and associate it with her urges.”

We watch her for another hour, watch her whimper softly, watch her fingers turn purple, watch the whites of her eyes turn pink. I fight my basic instinct to untie her, hold her in my arms.

The rest of the workday is spent in a classroom going over procedural duties in the asylum. On a typical workday, a conformist checks the agenda board in the Director’s room. Our schedules change every day. Sometimes, we

spend all day with a patient. We might run them through hours of treatment and then study their response and the results of their behavioral changes, if there are any. I asked if we keep records of their upbringing and evaluate their childhood to see what event might have triggered their current mental state. She laughed at me. She explained that we are taught not to bring up anything in their past. We focus on their future; reverting back to their childhood would cause their mental stability to worsen and reverse any progress they make during treatment.

After class, we walk back to Sun's treatment room and untie her. I check Sun's skin and see her bruises and discoloration, noting that her cheeks are stained with tears. Her soul, mangled inside her broken body. I caress her arm and whisper in her ear.

Hold on.

~

ONCE I'M DISMISSED FOR THE day, I linger in the hallway after everyone has left.

I see faded glimpses of Scarlett walking in and out of the patients' rooms. Her long honey hair, splashes of pink on her cheeks, the damage that painted her every expression. She'd watch the suffering with a clipboard in hand while she bit down on her tongue. This dark and disturbing place must have been part of why Scarlett could never heal from the abuse she suffered as a girl. This asylum must have acted as a pair of scissors, cutting open her stitches and making her bleed all over again.

My eyes squeeze shut out of reflex, like I've been pushed into a body of water.

The sound of metal clinking behind a wall comes from the end of the hallway, near the thirteenth room. And then another sound, like bolts on a door being unlocked.

The thirteenth door opens slowly, like it weighs two hundred pounds, and Suseas steps out. She closes the door, tightens two bolts, then leans her forehead against the metal. She uses a white handkerchief to dab at her cheeks, making soft whimpering sounds with each breath.

I quietly duck around the corner to keep myself from disturbing her moment's weakness. But even after I'm several paces down the hall, her hushed cries haunt the walls like a lost ghost, saddened by whatever it is that lies beyond the wall of that thirteenth room.

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10. Different Kind of Human

MY FATHER'S FACE AS HE towers over me.

The square jaw. The dark tousled hair. His signature brown leather jacket. A boar of a man—a giant to a child.

Blood and sweat drip down across his temples from his hairline. He strikes fear in me, the way the sun rises at dawn and sets at dusk.

And it's a flash of movement. The back of his hand. A boot plunging into my ribs. His angry tears as he screams in my face. That club violently swinging through the air as it makes contact with the back of my head.

Nightmares have come and gone since I was little. But after Jack took a club to the back of my head, they seemed to linger like an unwanted illness.

~

WHEN I ASKED SUSEAS ABOUT the theory of talking to the patients, asking them about their trauma, about their lives—she invited me to work with Chekiss as a reminder that I can't get through to anyone. It's to show me the fatality of working here. That no matter what, there will always be a sense of hopelessness.

I relax into a metal-framed chair parallel to Chekiss's bed. With a single deep breath in, I let my eyes study his features. Looking into his face is like staring into the depths of the vast sea—dark within its abyss and harboring broken ships upon its ocean floor. His head is anchored off to the side, midnight-green eyes unoccupied yet polluted with worry about the next treatment. He's in his early fifties, although his pencil-thin frame suggests that of a teenage boy.

I'm not entirely sure what to say. I only know the bare minimum about him. He killed his wife and daughter. I don't know how. I don't know why.

I once found a mouse caught in a trap in Scarlett's attic. It had been there for days, starving and slowly becoming too weak to stand. When I set it free from the trap, it didn't move, didn't try to run to go searching for its next meal. It blinked with a hopelessness that possessed its tiny body, and not even the honey-sweet taste of freedom was enough to motivate its tiny legs to scurry across the wooden floor.

Chekiss's legs are caught in the same trap. Kindred souls, I think. I wonder what would happen if I were to set him free.

"My name's Skylenna." I slowly balance my hand in the air for him to shake. He watches it like a dog, hesitant to sniff. Then, becomes mildly uninterested and looks away.

The stream of Suseas's stare washes over me like an ice-cold shower.

What could I possibly say right now that could separate me from the others?

"It's cold in here," I say, rubbing my hands over the backs of my arms. "Is it always like this here?"

The only sign of life is his chest operating like the gentle rhythm of waves in the sea. In and out. In and out.

"Of course it is." I sigh. "Hell has a sense of humor."

His eyes awaken, and they flicker over to me. Not coming close to connecting to mine, but hovering over my hands clasped in my lap. The soft glow from the gas lamp illuminates the raised freckles scattered over his nose and cheeks.

I don't let the sudden tickle of hope distract me. There's a gentle river of intuition coursing through my veins, splashing along the walls of my thoughts, guiding me through the doubt that he will ever see me. The *real* me. The me that has come to his aid.

"When I saw you drowning in that room... I was waiting for a strike of anger. A fit of fury to emerge from you."

His focus leaves me again, trailing off to an empty space in the room.

“But I saw nothing. And I think that can only mean one thing. I think that can only mean you believe you are deserving of this treatment. This *pain*.”

Like a reflection of water in a pond, I see Chekiss gasping for air, cold water and saliva pouring from his weak body. And my heart shudders for him.

“And I know what you did to your wife and child. Anyone who could do something so horrid must be soulless—right? Feel not even a sliver of remorse?”

His unkept eyebrow twitches.

“If that were the case, then why would you believe you were deserving of this suffering? Unless—”

A long whine is released from the opening door.

“Miss Ambrose?” Suseas silently signals for me to exit the room and join her elsewhere. I look back at Chekiss before the door closes, and to my surprise, he meets my eyes expectantly, like he wanted me to finish my sentence.

Day after day, I come back. I sit down in front of him. I make casual conversation while I take his vitals and follow up with questions after daily treatments. I talk about the food, the treatments, the weather. He doesn’t even look my way. Every now and then, he huffs. I found it to be his way of letting me know he’s ready for sleep or just wants to be alone again. He struggles to breathe normally most of the time, the drownings taking their toll on his lungs. His lips—a light tint of blue. His eyes—collecting dark shadows.

Even in a controlled setting, drowning someone breaks away pieces of their psyche, of their life source. I find ways to get creative with his responses. As soon as I came up with the first form of communication, I could see it in the way he straightened his back, his algae-colored eyes became focused on me, and he watched carefully, full of curiosity. I invented a tapping game. Every time I talked about something he agreed with, he would tap my hand. It was kind of fun, like playing with a child.

Sometimes it feels like they hire mentally unstable people to perform mentally unstable punishments on patients. Tap.

Meridei and Belinda seem like they actually enjoy inflicting pain onto patients.

Double tap.

I bet you miss your old life. Nothing. That tells me much.

We tried a numbers game too. I'd ask him a question, and he would hold up fingers to tell me how much of what I asked.

How old are you? Five fingers on one side, two on the other.

How many years have you been locked in this asylum? Twenty.

You've been locked up since you were thirty-two years old? Tap.

After three and a half weeks, I know I have to dig deeper, search for the words he's waiting for me to say. I vigilantly keep track of the details he allows me to know. Writing them in my hand-sized notebook that I keep tucked away in the pocket of my dress.

When I walk the halls of the asylum, I hear whispers and bouts of laughter, all directed at me. I'm frowned upon for attempting to communicate on a personal level with Chekiss. They gawk at me like a child with a deformity. But I've practiced ways to ignore them. I visualize myself entering the thirteenth room, placing each step cautiously, wondering if that room knows that I aim my sights toward its opening.

But I must get through Chekiss first. If I'm to ever be taken seriously, if they are ever to take my word for gospel, it must start here.

I hold out a bowl of fruit, examining the colors that blossom within its perimeter. Strawberries, apples, and

bananas. Chekiss shakes his head. Trying to get him to eat is like trying to break a tree trunk with your bare hands.

I'm tired of watching the orderlies shove a tube down his throat to force-feed him raw eggs.

I shrug. "All is well. I really brought it for me—they don't like women eating around here. This is the only way I can get away with it." It's not entirely a lie. I'm starving.

Chekiss winces, furrowing his brow at something I said.

I set a banana slice on the tip of my tongue, pushing it against the roof of my mouth, its creamy sweetness filling my tastebuds with delight.

"I'm ready to finish our conversation if you are," I say.

He watches me snag a strawberry curiously.

"Our first conversation. I told you that I sensed you believe you deserve what you're getting in here."

He pauses to remember, then nods once, his eyes droop, the color like a cluster of seaweed. His fingers scratch on the side of his head, fingernails digging through his short gray hair.

"If you were truly a monster... you would have fits of anger during your treatments. You wouldn't feel sorrow for what you've done. And you do, don't you? Feel sorrow for what happened to them." I hold an apple slice over my lips, waiting for his reaction before I take a bite.

He stares at me, as solid as concrete, as focused as a lion on the hunt.

I nod, understanding. "They think I'm mad—the other conformists. They laugh at me for wanting to spend my time talking to you. But I ignore them... Because I have a theory. An idea I'm not ready to give up on yet."

Chekiss reaches his hand into the bowl and scoops a handful of fruit into the palm of his hand, taking a piece at a time into his mouth. I resist the urge to smile at this small feat.

"You loved them. You—still love them, don't you? And maybe you didn't mean to hurt them. Maybe it was an

accident. I can't seem to let go of this idea. I can't move on until I know the truth," I say slowly. Carrying my heavy notions and tossing them into his lap.

"It wasn't an accident." Thunder without sound. A whip of energy bolting through my veins.

He. Speaks.

Like the crunching of dead leaves and the echoes of a growling bear, Chekiss speaks.

My pulse races under the skin of my throat, like tiny fireworks igniting over my pores. I can't blink. I can't even close my mouth.

"You didn't want them to drown me," he says, looking off to a distant memory. "When they brought you to see me in treatment. You wanted it to stop."

I think back to my queasy stomach. Focusing on remaining perfectly still while Chekiss thrashed about like a wet, rabid animal.

I tap his hand twice. I can't answer. I know I'm being watched.

He closes his eyes and lets out a deep sigh, like, after many decades, he can finally breathe. "I do still love them. But I meant to kill them, and I'd do it again."

"You meant to?" I say with an unhinged jaw.

Chekiss tells me that the lady-doll regimen had driven his wife and daughter mad. The obsession with starvation and sinless skin was all-consuming. It was like a virus in their brains, chewing away at them. They became erratic in public, vomiting up small bits of food in the streets to show their self-control and keep their figures intact. The societal standards had ruined them. And all Chekiss saw were shells of the people they once were. It was only a matter of moments before their behavior granted them their own rooms in the asylum. It's not unheard of—women and children often lose their wits and are forced out of society because their chaotic presence makes them a problem.

So, he granted them a quick death. Smothered them with a pillow, then took their bodies to the Dellilian Castle. He stripped them down so that the world could see what their rules had done to his family.

“So if you hadn’t done anything... They’d be where you are now. Enduring this—*fate*.” The cold, clammy hands of despair grip my shoulders. He *protected* them from enduring this hell.

I glance back at the window and not only see Suseas’s confused giant eyes but also Meridei and a few other people I haven’t met yet.

Chekiss offers a tight smile. “I hope you were worth my silence and my truth. They won’t take this lightly.”

I start to stand up, then stop myself abruptly. “Wait,” I whisper. “There’s something else... Do you know what’s in the thirteenth room, at the end of the hallway?” His small, supportive smile is suddenly replaced with a slight fog of fear, which sifts its way into my chest.

“Curiosity killed the cat.”

“Please.”

He nods in defeat. “I’ve only heard rumors.”

I urge him to go on with my pleading eyes.

“I heard there is a patient in there. This patient is feared by the council. They’re the most dangerous person here.” I hear the voices outside grow in volume and quiver for him to talk a little faster. “There used to be a conformist here named Sern, and she was their primary. The rumor is, she was paralyzed from the neck down by the hands of her patient. Of course, healers could fix her, but her mind never recovered. She’s now in this building as a patient, not in our department, but somewhere less *intense*.”

Chills fall over my back. If that rumor is real, I definitely want to know who sleeps in that room every night.

11. Judas's Deal

ONCE WORD SPREAD OF CHEKISS's first words in twenty years—I was called into the office of one of the six council members of the asylum.

Judas.

His office is on the top floor, and after many stairs, I enter his cave-like dominion.

It's dark, with only the dim flickering of candles on sconces illuminating paintings on the walls, landscapes of the forests surrounding us, just like Aurick's cottage in the North Saphrine forest.

And in the soft shimmering glow of the room, I remember him. His jet-black hair, five o'clock shadow, and cleft chin. He was on the steps the morning of my interview.

"Please, have a seat." He waves me in. Places his long hands on the dark cherrywood desk. "My name is Judas, and yours is Sky."

Skylenna.

"A pleasure to meet you." No, it isn't. *You permit the torture. You allow the evil.*

"I won't waste our time on pleasantries. I'm a man who favors bluntness." He leans forward, holding eye contact. "Scarlett shared with me her vision. And you accomplished part of it only days after your training, that's quite a feat."

What? She told him her theory that compassion outweighs pain? Her dreams of tearing down the cruel treatments?

"After I heard she died in that fire—I was—well, I was saddened that her dream would die with her." He leans back in his chair. Sighs. "I don't suppose you'd like to make the same deal that I had offered her?"

"Deal?" She never told me. Why wouldn't she tell me this exciting news?

“Each member of the council may implement a new practice of their choosing every year. Most usually choose a new method of—*treatment*. But I’d like to give you access to each patient room, in hopes you can make progress with them, by using Scarlett’s theory.”

Wait. I would be the only one allowed to do this? *I* would be a new method? A new *treatment*?

“What would be in it for you? What’s the deal?” I ask cautiously—quietly.

He narrows his eyes. “I’d like to prove to the council that there is a new way. And if approved—I’d like you to work your way into the thirteenth room. That would be the most effective way to prove this point.”

Without hesitation—without even a breath to consider—the word tumbles out—“Deal.”

12. Stripped Bare

AFTER MANY DAYS IN MANY rooms, aside from Chekiss, Niles Offborth is the toughest to crack out of all the patients I've met.

Niles is twenty-three years old, believing himself to be Cupid. He was locked up for abducting people, usually a man and a woman, and trapping them in his basement so they'd fall in love. This went on for years until he was finally caught. He is convinced he was blessed with magical properties that give him the ability to know where love truly lies.

He is six feet and one inch of lean muscle, with the elegant posture of a warrior angel, cascading down from heaven on a wisp of a cloud. His eyes, lined with an unbreakable focus, are hazel, glowing in warm lighting like the gaslit sconces in the asylum lobby. His symmetrical face, angular cheeks, and golden hair styled in a swoop at the top of his head like he was molded out of clay by the hand of a meticulous artist—perfecting each detail in a thousand brush strokes.

A twenty-one-year-old man with a life sentence in this cage.

His mannerisms, his personality, his way of existing are the most fascinating to me. Unlike Chekiss, he has a short attention span and is severely consumed in his own fictional world.

From the moment I began speaking with him, he had refused to talk about himself. Only about me. Deflection. Only about who my perfect match would be. And since I myself am not fond of sharing personal details, this has been uncomfortable, to say the least.

But I let him poke, prod, and predict, anyway.

Niles is certain that a man within the iron bonds of the strict society we live in isn't what I need. He believes I'm

waiting for the rebel. The man that breaks the rules and can walk among the dirt and the trees without the need of a feather bed and a four-course meal.

And it's the childish glint in his eyes that sparks a question.

"You know what would help me believe everything you're saying right now?"

He raises a golden brow.

"If you told me how you knew all of these things. At what point in your life you changed into Cupid. How can I accept your words? What is it like being *you*?"

He strokes his fingers over his thin red lips, lowering his chin to look up through his thick lashes. A long stare of judgment.

"You want to know what it's like to be the patient that everyone laughs at? Then why don't you sleep in these rooms, wear these chains, and endure the torture we are sentenced to like animals? HOW ABOUT THAT?" Howling his last words at me before he slams his hands down on his chair.

I stare at him in shock, unable to move or even flinch at his sudden outburst. The truth to what he is suggesting was not out of line or out of the question. He has every right to demand this of me and lose his temper. He is tired of the treatments, the lack of compassion, and the underlying fact that he will never escape it.

Now more than ever, I need to prove myself.

I clear my throat. "You have a hydrotherapy treatment in about five minutes, don't you?"

His expression is vengeful, wide eyed, red. He blinks away a tear, silently rolling down his cheek. "Yes," He growls.

"Shall we?" I prompt. Signaling to the orderlies to come and release us.

Niles doesn't say a word. He scowls past me, looking ahead now like I'm a clod of dirt at the bottom of his shoe.

My legs are shaking on the walk over, and the layer of skin stretched across my forehead burns with anticipation. Meridei shows up behind me with a smirk on her face.

“Now you’re starting to get it! Chatting is a waste of time. *This*”—she points to the hydrotherapy door—“this is the only way to correct the behavior.”

I refuse to meet her dark, disappointing eyes. “Then why don’t you stay for the show?” I say each word carefully, trying not to let my nerves bleed into my statements.

She shrugs and follows behind me.

We step inside the frigid room, with the daunting sound of water slipping from the mouth of the faucet in fat drops to the tile floor. Natural light snakes across the white room from the tall frosted windows, and the thick hose is strewn across the floor.

Niles stands in the doorway stoically, embracing the setting like a soldier riding into battle. But his hands tremble at his sides, and his neck is slick with moisture. I suppose it doesn’t matter how often you’re forced into a treatment—fear clouds your soul the same each time.

But he doesn’t know that I have no intention of allowing him to ride on to the battlefield today... No, today, I’ve armed myself for the front lines.

Niles stares into my eyes with malice, stinging like the strike of a whip. And with this stare, he removes his shirt, revealing a smooth muscular chest.

I put my hand up to stop him. Both him and Meridei stiffen.

I look at the hose that is meant to shame and defile patients. I look at it for a long moment. Starting with my shoes, I begin taking my clothes off.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Meridei gasps.

Niles doesn’t say anything. He watches in shock.

I pull my dress over my head and toss it to a dry spot in the corner. My brassiere and underwear come off next. And I cannot help but shudder and take pause. This treatment

isn't foreign to me. My father used to make me strip down to nothing and sit in the cold basement as a punishment for crying.

I swallow down this memory like a pill stuck in my throat. The cold air caresses my skin like the sharp edge of a knife. I walk over to the back wall and position myself the way the patients usually do. One hand covering my breasts, and the other covering my panty line.

"Start," I bark at Meridei.

She stands there with her mouth hanging open. The ice water surrounds my feet in a glassy puddle, and I flex all of my muscles, getting a small taste of the discomfort that awaits.

"Have you gone mad?!"

"Maybe."

"What is it you're trying to prove?" Meridei takes quick looks between Niles and me. My glance falls to Niles one more time. The spite has dissipated, replaced with horror.

"DO IT!" I scream in her direction. My voice echoes the room a dozen times. I'm getting colder by the second and suddenly want this over as soon as possible.

Without another word, Meridei yanks the hose off the ground and points it in my direction. We exchange a look. A look that hardens the limp muscles in my legs and drains the blood from my cheeks.

She's going to enjoy this.

She pulls the lever, and the hose blasts in my direction, like a bolt of lightning connecting its brazen force with a wilting tree. I fly off of my feet, my body spinning in the air, my cheekbone making first contact with the wall. The smack to my nose causes my eyes to water. The metallic taste of my blood mixed with the salty taste of my tears. The cold water is like tiny needles puncturing my skin. I try to hold in any signs of weakness, but the pressure is too powerful, the temperature is dancing on the line of

freezing, and the fact that I am fighting to breathe is unbearable.

I scream as water jets into my mouth, tiny spurts escaping into my lungs.

I panic at the overwhelming sensation of drowning. Trying to cough it out, I turn around to face the wall, so I'm not in the direct line of fire. I manage to clear the pipes, but it hardly matters because the water bounces off the walls and comes from all directions.

Focus.

Focus on when it should be over. But I have no concept of time. I can't tell if she's been blasting me for thirty seconds or three minutes. Not knowing makes the panic spread through the rest of my body like a virus, injecting me with small doses of doom.

I hear my knees crack against the tile when I drop down. I brace my head between my knees, trying to find any position that makes this less painful. It helps me breathe; therefore, it helps me scream. I release another scream, even louder than the last, that dwindles to a whimper.

The water shuts off.

My skin stings and the pressure doesn't go away. My body shakes violently like windows after a strong roll of thunder rattles the glass. A warm substance is wrapped around my shoulders and draped around my body. Pleasure and relief replace the doom, like old friends shooing away an enemy. I look up from my knees to see Council Member Judas—*Judas* is wrapping my naked body in a large white towel. Niles has lost the rosy shade to his cheeks and the tip of his nose. His skin is ashen, and his eyes are wide with tears.

Judas looks up at Meridei. "Please escort Niles back to his room."

She looks at Judas, jaw hanging, and grunts in my direction. "Must you try anything for attention?"

"It's *His Grace*," Niles corrects Judas as he exits the room with Meridei.

Judas helps me stand and walks to the door to turn away while I dress. I can't stop shaking. Violently shaking.

I dry myself off before I slip into my dress.

"Whose idea was this?" he finally asks.

I use the towel to soak up some of the water from my hair. "Mine."

"This wasn't some sort of hazing ritual?"

So he knows how Meridei can be then.

"No."

"Then why did you do it?" he clips.

"I was making a point."

"I gathered that much. What was the point?"

I walk up behind him to make him aware that he can turn around now. "They need to know they can trust me. How can I expect them to open up to me, disclose the terror and darkness in their lives, and let me help them if I'm an outsider?"

He has the face of a priest and a studious librarian, calm and curious.

"That's an extreme point to make." He furrows his brow in concentration.

"These are extreme cases."

And before we leave, I could swear that the sparkle in his eye is pride.

~

I STEP INTO NILES'S ROOM LIKE an exposed nerve. Naked. Wearing my fear and trauma around my neck like a noose. And I know he sees it too.

"I am so sorry. You have to endure that daily, and I only had to do it *once*. I—I am so sorry." I refrain from calling him Niles because I know he doesn't like it. But I can't take

calling him *Your Grace* seriously right now, so I don't use a name at all.

"I can't believe you did that for me." His eyes are still shiny and moist from the tears that once fled freely from his lids.

"I'll do it again... If that's what it takes."

"Why are you here?" His eyes narrow and crinkle at the corners.

"I've come to save you. I want to end the cruelty here."

"Why?"

"Do you remember an assistant named Scarlett?" Her name still pokes an unhealed ache in my chest.

"The girl who looked like you."

I nod.

"They say you murdered her." He studies me as if we've switched roles.

"When she was alive, she found a purpose in life, and that was to stop the treatments here. She wanted the people here to be treated humanely. And when she died, I'm certain that was her dying wish. It's something I *have* to do."

His hands twist in his lap as if he's wringing out a wet towel. I've only seen his body language display confidence, never nerves.

"You want me to tell you the ugly moments in my life. The pieces people often judge. But I don't like being judged, you see. Judgment is quite the opposite from love."

But he tells me anyway.

He shares how his family lived on the outskirts of the city, his father being in lumbering, and his mother mangled from an accident with the ax. But eventually, his father left them, and they had no means of obtaining food or money. Niles had two other siblings and his disabled mother to care for.

At this point in his story, he glances up at me with caution pooling in the pits of his pupils. "I could be quietly

executed for speaking of this next chapter,” he tells me with a warning embedded in his meaning.

I assure him that this may not be a safe place—but I am safe.

Niles was never taught to take up lumbering with his father, so he went searching for work in the city and was collected almost immediately for being dressed like a wild child. The people who ushered him off of the streets and out of the public eye offered him work. But this type of work is not spoken of out loud. In fact, most pretend it doesn’t exist. There’s a mansion in the city, with a glorious view of the castle, and a respectable owner—but under its weight and under its acres of land, children of all ages run a successful wheel of work. Their services are their bodies, and their consumers are adults. A special kind of adult—the kind that has a rare appetite that is frowned upon and never spoken out loud in the ear of society.

“As a child, I was taught how to lie with an adult. Both men and women. I was shown the ways of pleasure and quenching their appetites. It’s a trade that is taught for a plethora of preferences.”

Beads of sweat purge from the pores on the back of my neck, tickling my skin as they snake down my back like tiny spiders being hatched and stretching their new legs to race for food.

There isn’t a word for adults who lie with a child. At least, not in this city. Near the woods, where the working folk live, we call them *cradle devils*.

Niles spares me the details of his first time, spares me the skills he acquired, spares me the many stories he could go into. But he does mention that he was able to support his family, bring food to the table, and provide them with whatever they needed. And he was able to adjust to his new life with nothing but his bare skin, the unwanted touching, stroking, and noisemaking of strangers who could be parents—even grandparents to young Niles. He could

handle it all, though the crying fits and notions of suicide lingered on his mind after a long and tiresome night. He persevered. That is until he was sixteen.

"I was reawakened to a new purpose the night Charlotte requested to be serviced by me for three days. She paid handsomely for my favors and even offered to leave me with fine jewelry to take home to my mother. But during those long hours over the course of those three long days and nights, I was quickly made aware that Charlotte was born a man." Niles's eyes glaze over, actively being dragged through a memory I'm sure he'd rather forget. "I've seen many odd things in my time at that mansion. *Many*. At the time, this wasn't the strangest I'd seen, and so I was not bothered. Charlotte stayed in heavy makeup, asking all of the right questions about my life, about my family, all the while fueling me with flattering compliments on the beautiful young man I'd grown to be."

He tightens his lips and sighs like a man about to tell his wife that he's been unfaithful. Shame forcing his eyes to close for a moment while he finds his words.

"When I tell you what happened next—you will feel disgust in the softness of your belly and won't be able to look me in the eye again. All you'll see is the ugliness of what I have done." For the first time, he looks human. He looks like a little boy, naive and afraid. There is no Cupid facade. There isn't even a maniacal patient. Just Niles.

Before I can open my mouth to assure him otherwise, he continues.

"Charlotte left the jewelry and the money for me on the table when our time was up. I was thrilled when I discovered how much she overpaid... Until I saw the necklace that she left for my mother. A gold chain with a medallion that had a baby Cupid shooting an arrow on it. When I flipped it over, it read—Harmony & Charles Offborth."

He watches me expectantly now, as if I'm supposed to catch on to a hidden clue.

"Charles Offborth is my father. He took the necklace with him when he left us. Charles Offborth *became* Charlotte."

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13. Cupid's Love

No.

Oh my God. Hot saliva pools under my tongue. My fingernails dig into my thighs. And I'm holding my breath, locking it into my chest cavity. The phantom images of Niles spending three days with a woman with male parts knock around on the inside of my brain. Images of his childhood with his father, watching him chop wood, being tucked in at night. It all came to *this*.

"Niles—" My jaw won't close. *Shut your mouth.*

"The world has become so ugly, hasn't it? Love has faded like a puff of smoke from a cigar. It dissipated into the wind. After that, I only knew the hideous kind of love. Like the kind from Charlotte. But real love, the soft and sweet and the kind with feathery wings, it rises from the ashes of the ugly."

My chest burns with disgust. Not for Niles, but for his father.

"I decided then that was my life mission. My sacred duty. To find true love and dig it up from the ashes." He delicately paints a sad smile on his lips.

"Is that why you started abducting people? Locking them in a basement for days at a time?"

Suseas told me he had been caught harboring young men and women. Only two people at a time in his basement. The women had been raped, and both individuals had been starved.

"I would match two young people. Ensure they were soul mates. Twin flames, if you will. And then I'd capture them, force them to have no choice but to find love in a dark and hopeless place. The man would find his courage to protect the woman he would soon fall in love with."

"But why?"

Niles slams his fists down on the mattress. "Because I cannot live in a world where the only love I've seen is from the likes of Charlotte!"

And that I can understand.

This was his way of coping with the horror that filled his heart.

"Saying this out loud—can you understand why your mind clung to Cupid?"

Niles furrows his brow and hardens his eyes. "You still don't believe that I am Cupid," he accuses with a hint of betrayal in his voice.

"Neither do you."

He quickly darts his eyes away from mine. "What am I, if not love?" He sighs.

"You're angry and disgusted with yourself," I answer him. "You have to forgive not only your father but also yourself. I think the person that you were was an immeasurably greater person than this new identity you have given yourself."

"Why do you say that?"

"Not every person has the courage and selflessness to put themselves into situations that are far worse than disturbing, especially as a child, just to save their family." I lean in a little closer. "I'd choose that man for my friend over Cupid any day."

"You think we're friends?" he asks with a newfound hope glinting through his eyes.

"Depends." I smirk. "Are you Cupid or Niles?"

He lets his head fall against the wall behind his bed.

"Niles." He sighs in defeat.

"Before I go, can I ask you a question?"

He trails the tip of his index finger over his bottom lip, then nods.

"Can you tell me anything about the thirteenth room?"

Niles grins a dangerously mischievous smile.

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14. “I Knew You Would Come For Me.”

MY FATHER’S PASSION WAS ARCHITECTURE.

He built our house just outside the hidden red oak forest. It was a vessel for trapdoors and hidden compartments. He once said—*A home isn’t a home unless you can hide your secrets deep within it.*

Before his mind spun freely into madness, he wanted us to live deep in the heart of the red oaks. He planned to design a house on the cliff overlooking the lagoon, directly around the biggest red oak there, with the trunk as the core of the house.

And as I slip into my evening dress, removing my navy-blue asylum uniform, the stockings, and the leather heels—I wonder if I could still do it. He must have had blueprints for this dream home; he must have had it all planned out. My bedroom reminds me that this is *not* my life. The pink satin bedsheets, sheer canopy, and dazzling jewelry sparkling in the glow of the fireplace.

Niles was right. I’d rather have a love that did not need a feathery bed to sleep on.

This—is not my life.

~

I’M STANDING IN MY BASEMENT again. My feet are cold against the floor, blood dripping from my nose down my chin. I wait outside the small door, sitting at the height of the small rectangular windows. The wait seems to puncture my nerves with excitement. The emotions are confusing. I’m anxious and eager, all the while being terrified of the dark. So I scream. I scream for help and pound on the door with my small fists. I beg to be saved.

With a break in the air, and a gust of wind, the door opens, and a hand reaches down for me to take it.

~

"YOU SLEEP LIKE AN EARTHQUAKE." A curious voice, muffled from a distance.

I roll on my side. *Aurick?*

"Do I need to barge in and wake you up?" he asks from behind my closed bedroom door.

I smile sleepily. "Come in, *lurker.*"

He opens the door, pokes his head in with a mischievous smirk.

"I received a call after you fell asleep. From a council member at Emerald Lake Asylum."

My body tenses, ridged between my shoulder blades.

"What did they say?"

Aurick shrugs as he stirs his cup of coffee. "They want you to meet a... Patient Thirteen?"

Something like a whistle and scream bursts like cannons from my throat. I launch myself out of bed, digging through my makeup to get ready. I'm delighted; I'm more than delighted. I'm swelling with every atom in my body dripping with happiness. *Why?* Yes, that would be the question. The daunting room at the end of the hallway. The room other conformists never enter. Only Suseas, who I saw leaving in tears and a full breakdown.

Why? A mystical calling? A shadow of whispers seducing me into finally seeing the mystery that is *that room*? Perhaps all of the above.

My cheeks are warm and probably bright red, and my fingers are tingling.

"I take it this is good news." He chuckles from the doorway.

"It's wonderful news." I shake my head in disbelief.

This is for you, Scarlett.

~

"I'M NERVOUS," I SAY.

The last time I saw Chekiss, his eyes were sunken with dark, ashen rings underneath, shaped like small boats. His lips were chapped and splitting. But since he's spoken, the simulated drownings have stopped. Pigmentation has returned to his cheeks. The storms have parted from his sad, drooping eyes.

"I'm nervous too." He sympathizes with me but seems nervous in a different way. "I miss talking to you."

I smile at him. I couldn't agree more. It's sad that I'd rather talk to some of my patients than any sane person in this world. "I miss you too, Chekiss."

He stares at me for two seconds, pulling back his lips like he's trying not to say something he shouldn't. "I don't think you should go in that room, Miss Sky."

I tilt my head to the side. "Why do you say that?"

"I don't think you'll ever be the same again if you go in there."

That thought seeps into my gut with a sting. "What makes you think that, Chek?"

He rubs his dry hands together, making a crisp, papery sound. "I need to know if I tell you what I know, you'll stay cautious, not curious." He bargains his knowledge wisely.

I straighten in my chair a little. I need to know everything I can before I walk into that room blindsided. "I promise—I'll be careful."

"This patient is the only patient to ever *admit* themselves. And... the council is petrified of them." Uneasiness drops into the pit of my stomach like uncooked meat.

"How do you know they're terrified of Patient Thirteen?"

"There are six council members, and in the beginning, they all visited Patient Thirteen at least once at some point." Chekiss pops his knuckles and starts to frown. "It

only took once for most of them to never pay a visit again, and take every security precaution there is to make sure Patient Thirteen can never get out.”

“Why would anyone admit themselves to a place like that?”

“Peculiar, isn’t it?”

~

I HAD A PLAN GOING into this. I’d meet with Chekiss. I knew he could give me small pieces of information to prepare me for Patient Thirteen. But there is one other person that would ideally have more information than anyone. *Sern*.

Patient thirteen had a dedicated conformist. Sern left that room with her neck fractured and her mind in bits. She now resides in a separate wing of the asylum.

I stand in the doorway, studying her appearance before she notices my presence. Her dark skin has a gray undertone, even beneath the yellow glowing sconces. She scratches at the frizzed bun on her head while absently staring at the stone wall across from her bed.

“Who do you work for?” she asks, still stuck in her glazed trance.

Even though she did not shout, I can tell that she is a loud woman based on her husky voice and wide eyes. The kind that tells stories too loud in a group setting. A trumpet of a voice. And despite her messy, matted brown hair and her crusted lips—she used to be an upstanding citizen. A pinnacle of the lady-doll regimen.

“I work here,” I answer.

A muscle in her brow flinches. “And you weren’t followed?”

I shake my head. *Followed?*

“Good.” It’s here with the wilting of her lids, the lack of energy to even look back at me, that I realize I’m not seeing a form of lunacy. I see she’s locked away in a coffin of depression.

"Sern, I need to ask you a very important question." I walk toward her bed, cautious with light footsteps.

"You'd be wise not to take another goddamned step." Her voice is low and deep, like a woman scorned by the betrayal of a man. "Your name."

My footsteps freeze in place. "Skylenna," I say.

"*Skylenna?*" She's still like an oak tree in winter. "*That's* your name?"

I nod with pinched brows.

Sern looks uneasy, swaying side to side like a canoe on a choppy lake. "And you work *here?*" She finally exhales.

"I do."

"That took less time than I thought." And for a moment, almost a flash of lucidity crosses her face—as if the rest of this were a performance.

"What does that mean?" I lean against the stone wall, grazing my hands over its rough, bumpy texture.

"Can't say. They listen to every word." Her dark index finger taps against her white patient gown.

"I'm meeting Patient Thirteen today, and I have questions." I don't have time for this. I need to get straight to the point before I have to go meet this mysterious figure.

Her body is marbleized into place. Eyes wider than before, chapped lips parting in disbelief.

"Patient Thirteen," she repeats. Eyes tracing a spot on the wall, gears and cogs shifting beneath her skull.

"Do you have any advice or information you can share that can prepare me in any way?"

Her charcoal eyes brim with tears, and by the trembling of her chin, she's fighting to hold a cry in. "This—" She chokes on her words, taking a deep breath to steady herself. "This could be over soon, then."

I swallow. *Please, just give me something. Anything!* "Is it true this patient fractured your neck?"

Another deep breath.

"What do you know?" I ask again.

She turns to look at me, but this time, her eyes are clear, like a bath before it's been soaked in. "Miss Ambrose?"

I freeze. I never told her my full name.

"Don't be frightened. He's been expecting you."

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15. The Mad Men's Muse

SOMETHING IS DIFFERENT ABOUT THESE seconds that capture me. Something is strange.

This hallway curves like a spine plagued with scoliosis, walls creaking from the repercussions of patient trauma, and vents expelling a stench of dried sweat and ammonia. My legs move across the checkered tile floors like I am gliding through warm bathwater.

I am both calm and panicked, wrapped up in a tiny pink bow.

There is something like butterflies rushing to my core. Close, but it's more than that. It's a pull from the inside. It's not only urging me to move, but it's urging me to walk faster—lift my knees higher above this invisible current. Like I'm attached to a fishing hook, looped inside the wall of my ribs, dragging me to my captor. Like it's my divine purpose, it's what I've been waiting for my entire life.

That door, that highly reinforced, indestructible, prison-cell door, grows in size with each step I take. Our heels clack in unison. I want to break out into a sprint, yet I want to stop right here and hold on to this moment. I want to grab it from nothing and wrap it up tight, pinning it in my pocket forever.

If I could just see who Patient Thirteen is, why everyone makes such a big deal about this person—then I can move on from this obsession. Then I can sleep soundly. Then I can finally think about something else.

Or maybe not. Maybe this is just the beginning.

We stop one foot in front of the vast metal door.

"Before we go in," Suseas exhales unsteadily. "I must ask again. Are you absolutely certain you desire to meet this patient?" I resist the urge to twist a strand of hair between my fingers. "Because, to be absolutely frank... I wouldn't wish this encounter on my worst enemy."

This is exhilarating. Her dim eyes tell me to be petrified with fear. But the only thing I am feeling is impatience.

"I am certain," I say.

She nods, unconvinced. "Patient Thirteen—has a rare and deeply disturbing disorder. His soul—or *personality*, is split into two entities. The part that we see on a daily basis is beyond anything you can imagine. Murderous, genius, manipulative—vicious. There aren't enough adjectives in the world." She chuckles nervously, wiping a thin sheen of sweat from her brow with a handkerchief.

"The core personality is what we believe to be the *tame* version of himself. But we haven't seen that personality since he admitted himself into the asylum four years ago. We believe his brain works differently than ours. It's rather extraordinary, really, if he weren't so dangerous, the savants of this city would take much pleasure in measuring the lengths and capacity of his mind—"

"What's his name? You keep saying Patient Thirteen... but he must have a name," I interrupt. I know that shouldn't be the thing I'm focusing on out of all the information she has just shared, but I've been itching to know.

Suseas clears her throat. "Yes, well, he would like to be called Dessin."

Dessin. His name is Dessin.

Suseas lowers her voice like the man on the other side of that door is listening. "But we are trying to get through to his core—his soul; therefore, calling him Dessin would only prolong progress. Patient Thirteen doesn't respond to the majority of treatments. He laughs at the simulated drownings, electrotherapy, chair binding, scalding baths. There's only one thing that we know of that has any effect on him. That's chemically induced seizures. We have to drastically up the dose, and even then, he recovers quickly, so we do it over and over again."

She informs me that he has also erased any record in history ever documented of himself. Birth certifications, photographs, public records, anything. They have no idea what happened in his past to make him like this, much like the other cases I have solved.

She takes a step toward the door to begin. Stops. Tilts her head to face me once more. "You will find yourself going mad in this room, Miss Ambrose. He has a way of snaking around inside your head. Don't be fooled; this is all a part of his game." She reaches over me and types a thirteen-digit number into the keypad covered by a metal plate. "Oh, and don't be alarmed. He *will* know specific details about you. It's part of his facade."

I dig my fingernails into my palms. *Please be with me, Scarlett. I pray. Please help me find the words and actions I'll need to break through to him. Please stay by my side.*

"I shall do all of the talking, yes? You're here to watch, observe, take notes. But do not look him in the eyes, and do not give him any reason to victimize you."

I nod slowly. I know I should be terrified. But I'm fighting the urge to burst through that door and see for myself.

Suseas pulls on a thick metal latch, and the door clicks open. My stomach combusts into joyous webs of violet lightning.

This.

Is.

It.

This room is not like the others. It's double the size. Aged brass gas lanterns mounted on all four walls, filling the area with soft, smoky light, much like a tavern after dark. And there's a feather bed bolted into the concrete floor and wall, with shackles meant for the wrists, ankles, feet, and then one longer restraint for the forehead. The

thought occurs to me that this man admitted himself... Why on earth would anyone choose to live this way?

Then, stopping me midbreath, I'm nearly dizzy from the sweet scent of sandalwood and pine trees. It forces me to pause, unable to think clearly, fully reminded of my childhood. Somehow, my subconscious floats backward in time, the sound of rain pattering against the canopy of leaves, twigs scratching my bare ankles, and gusts of cool wind swaying great oak trees.

I notice all of these factors of the room in a fraction of a second before my eyes jump to the figure sitting with arms and legs tied down to a small black chair that barely supports the broad muscles in his back. I expected to see a wrinkled, worn-down old man in all black. With jagged, yellow teeth, a crooked cynical grin, and black beady eyes.

This man has already had me fooled.

The back of his head is covered in what looks like soft chocolate-brown hair that is tamed and straight in the back but cowlicked with curled longer locks on top.

Instead of sitting in the chair across from him, she takes her place on the edge of his bed, eyeballing me to stay put. I watch.

"How are you feeling today, Patient Thirteen?" She pulls out a clipboard with a shaky hand without making eye contact with him. I also have a clipboard to take notes, to observe, but I'm—numb. All I can do is stare, leaving the board to hang at my side from the tips of my fingers.

She jots something down, but I suspect it's just to keep herself busy. Is she really scared to look him in the eye? I immediately get the sense of dominance in the room that is surely not coming from her—an alpha wolf circling a member of its pack.

I wait for his reply, but he says nothing. He doesn't even move.

"Is today not a good day to talk?" she asks. The only sounds coming from the flickering flames in the lanterns.

"Fine with me, we can go straight to the chemicals. I wouldn't mind the silence," she states, attempting to appear uninterested.

This makes his head tilt to the right.

The muscles in my neck harden like drying concrete.

"I wonder," the man in the chair *speaks*. "Does asking that question so often to someone ever get... *old?*"

An unusual feeling of interest ignites in my chest. His voice.

It's a rumbling beneath the earth. Wise and powerful.

That voice, so deep and silky. If a bottle of bourbon could talk, this is what it would sound like. I'm repeating his question in my head like a broken record. That voice is simply *unforgettable*.

"Absolutely," she says. "Your inconsistent communication is taxing for me."

"I wasn't talking about me," he states, a little raspy at the end. "I was referring to your unfaithful husband, Nathaniel." The smile in his voice does not go unnoticed.

I blink, and Suseas's cheeks turn an unflattering shade of maroon.

"Deflection." She raises her eyebrows like she isn't impressed. "You're becoming a tad bit predictable."

At that, he chuckles calmly. "I suppose you are right. But even if an outcome was predicted, would it matter to you, Suseas? Infidelity is already a touch of messy business... Especially when committed with a conformist here." His accusation haunts the room.

"Enough," she mutters angrily.

"Did I strike a nerve? *Splendid*. Tell me, which one of your bloodthirsty, torture-skilled, anorexic, corpse-shaped conformists did not show up to the asylum today?"

Suseas straightens her spine. "*Why?*" And she takes the bait.

They stare in silence. Suseas mentally examining his notions.

Suddenly Suseas stabs me in the face with her panicking eyes. Mortified and humiliated by what he has said.

“Are you going to leave her waiting in the doorway, Suseas? Or are you going to introduce us?”

It isn't until Suseas's glassy eyes flash up to meet my own that I pick up on who he's referring to. *Me*. He wants to meet me.

I step forward and walk slowly to the seat in front of him. My knees are quivering as if they're made from eggshells. I can't stop imagining what he might look like, even though I'm a single moment away from looking upon his face.

I turn to him.

Time, like a child slipping on a spill, falls backward—knocking the air from my chest.

His face makes my imagination look austere.

He has a face that doesn't seem to belong anywhere, like a gem in the rough from another world. Perhaps from another time, another era of gentlemen. Immediately, I'm forced to redefine what I thought was once handsome. A jaw of stubble and a defining line that could cut through a hand that tries to caress it. Skin smooth with a light shade of bronze. Highly perched cheekbones and evenly proportioned, dark eyebrows.

But it's his eyes—his eyes I cannot break away from. I thought I'd be paralyzed with fear. I thought his eyes would slice into me and leave me cold to the touch. Make me realize I was in way over my head, that not everyone can be saved.

But I was wrong.

They're a mixture of melted caramel and chocolate. How can anyone so dangerous have eyes so sweet? The same shadows that every patient develops after years in captivity. Looking directly into them is stepping into the ocean, submerged by the weight of an anchor until you touch the bottom—or looking into a sunset for long enough that your

eyes start to water and you see bright spots across your vision.

I cannot help but feel welcome, feel safe sitting this close to him. A camouflaged intuition tells me he won't hurt me. But of course, that's absurd, and even I can see through that misleading trick.

Then Suseas's throat bobs, her chest moving at the pace of a heartbeat. And I remember that this is the appropriate response. Fear. Discomfort. Stress.

"Patient Thirteen, this is Miss Ambrose, our newest conformist."

He doesn't take his eyes off me, not even to acknowledge Suseas's introduction.

"Skylenna," he says, voice like satin and woodsmoke. There is something all-knowing in the warm grip of his gaze. "You certainly took your time getting here, hmm?" He narrows his eyes as if to confirm my suspicion that he knows—he *knows* that this has been my goal.

Without a moment to gather my response, I lean off the edge of my seat and grab his hand in mine. I shake his hand, rattling the chains that bind his hands to his feet. His eyes widen, and his grip tightens. Warmth curls into my fingers, permeating from his skin. A sudden euphoria trickles into my nerves. Energy pulsing through my hand and up my arm.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Dessin," I say.

Dessin breaks our long streak of eye contact to look down at our hands, and with a single blink, his stare snaps back up to mine.

"Miss Ambrose, we do not acknowledge his request to be called Dessin. If he would like to be called a name, he will tell us the name this body was born with," Suseas says sternly.

"My apologies. I didn't realize referring to him as a number was working so well for you," I retort.

Dessin tilts his head, a curious glint in his eyes.

"Well, old bird, it seems your supervision here is no longer necessary," Dessin refers to Suseas in a calm and sarcastic manner.

Suseas releases an appalled laugh. "Excuse me?"

"*Get. Out.*" He leans forward in his chair. If he's upset, his expression doesn't show it.

"This is a *trial* introduction to Miss Ambrose," Suseas says. "I will not leave."

"I truly hate to dangle this over your head—but I'm sure you recall what happened to Sern when she refused to leave after I asked nicely."

Sern. I didn't think he'd admit to that situation so candidly.

Suseas lifts her chin in defiance.

"And there is the added benefit that if you take your leave now, you'll discover what extracurricular activities Nathaniel partakes in when you're away."

That was the nail in the coffin. Shoulders hunched, she doesn't budge, but her eyes dart around in uncertainty. Dessin watches her with a carnival of amusement in his mind.

"Suseas? I am perfectly capable of taking over if you have an emergency," I offer. I'm hoping to talk to him without Suseas breathing down my neck. It seems Dessin feels the same.

"Thank you. Please keep that between us," is all Suseas says before bolting out of the room.

There is a hum of silence before the door clicks shut, and under that veil of silence, my nerves tingle under my skin like lumps of effervescent salts. Currants of adrenaline buzzing in my ears, moistening my palms, and cramping my digestive organs.

We're *alone*.

16. Pawn to Pawn

I'VE THOUGHT ABOUT THIS MOMENT, what he would be like, how our conversation would flow. I've thought about it every time I set foot into the asylum. In subtle waves of a daydream, in glimpses down the hall. And now here he is.

I watch the door. Knowing that his eyes are glued to me makes it hard to drag myself back to reality. His wrists twist under the shackles, causing the chains to clink together. My head pivots slowly back to where he sits.

"How did you know my first name?" I ask. Not wasting a second to know this man cover to cover.

He blinks slowly, almost anticipating that would be my first question.

"You *look* like a Skylenna," he says plainly.

"That's the answer you're going to go with?" *Bold*. Too bold. Reel it in.

"Why did you call me Dessin, even though your instructor warned you against it?" I catch myself flinching at the deepness of his voice. It sinks in my gut and twists around my bones.

"Because you *look* like a Dessin."

He looks me over, exhaling through his nose. "How old are you?" *My age?* He really wants to know my age?

"This is a simple question coming from a man who supposedly knows *everything*," I say, unimpressed.

"Humor me."

"Nineteen." I scoot forward in my chair. "How old are you?"

"So, you're nineteen." He tilts his chin up an inch. "And you're living with a twenty-five-year-old unmarried man."

Instantly, my palms moisten, and my forehead prickles with heat. *Ah, there it is*. Something to be impressed about. He knows about Aurick. Or at least, he's hinting at it.

I shrug. "Was there a question in the statement? He is my friend."

A dark eyebrow arches. "Does he know that?"

"Yes." I narrow my eyes. "But you so clearly have another opinion. Let's hear it."

But he doesn't share it. Only continues to stare at me. He raises his chin, looks down at me, and the right corner of his mouth curls upward.

"Why did it take you so long to join me?" He asks. And something about his question clenches my heart in an iron fist to the point of pain. *Join him*. Find him in this *hell*.

"It wasn't easy," I say quietly. "I had to get through other rooms first to gain credibility."

He stares at me as if I'm an insect he's studying under a magnifying glass. I want to squirm under his hold. "And you chose to be in this room with me, yes?"

"Yes." I nod.

"Even after you heard of what became of Sern."

I gulp, and it's an audible gurgle in my chest, causing a nearly undetectable smirk to form over his mouth. My cheeks burn in response as if I've fallen asleep in the sun.

"*Especially* after I heard what happened to Sern," I say.

"And why is that? Death wish? Or perhaps you have a fascination for danger." His tone is bored and taunting at the same time. He's *trying* to make me uncomfortable. Testing his limits. But I force myself to become an impassible rock in the center of a rushing current.

"Danger?" I say, urging my voice to sound confident. "I take it you're pretty safe to be around, then. Consider me unafraid."

His eyes widen in amusement. He lifts his chin, looking down at me with a new layer of curiosity. The subtle movement is like a dragon unfurling its wings.

"Give it time," he whispers.

My thoughts are scattered wisps of smoke.

He gives me a solid moment of silence before I'm ready to respond. It gives me the time to gather the right questions. Ones that he may answer, as it could benefit him.

"Suseas told me that you have a core personality, but they haven't seen him since you admitted yourself years ago. Does that mean he's gone? Disappeared?"

Annoyance flashes across his face like a splash of ice water.

"I don't care for that label. *Core* personality. That suggests that I am not real. I am not a person at all, but a mere extension of his mind." The deep, irritated tone of his voice strains my neck and knots my stomach.

"I can respect that," I utter, careful not to further upset him. "Educate me. What should I call it?"

That annoyance that lowered his lids in a stern scowl melts away.

"He was the previous host. I fully took over as host when we admitted ourselves." Dessin shifts his hands over his thighs. The chains clank together loudly. "And he did not disappear. He's simply—out of reach, safe in the inner world."

"The inner world?"

"It's the place in our mind an alter can live in peace, away from trauma." He's patient. The mask of the man that wanted to terrify Suseas is now on a leash.

Trauma. Something happened to make him like this.

A thought crosses his face, and he suddenly looks like he might laugh. "You're going to ask what an alter means. It's what you would call a personality. But it's more than that. It's an alter. An individual person."

I smile, careful not to let my eyes linger on his tightly coiled muscles.

"Thank you for explaining all of this. I'm happy to learn."

He takes a moment to examine my posture, my expression, as if he's trying to predict the flow of our

conversation. “What do you see—when you look at me?” A deep breath moves his hard, bulky chest. And he doesn’t look away.

Odd. Such a strange question. What tactic of manipulation is this?

“I—” *I don’t know*. “Why would you ask me that?”

There’s a need in his stare. An unwavering need for my answer.

“Humor me,” he says.

I blow out a nervous breath. “I see—a carefully orchestrated game—I see—*power*—danger—*warmth*—I see—a man, under a lot of pressure.” It spills out without any real time to sit and think and consider.

Another beat of examination from his long, dark stare.

“Warmth, hmm?” A wicked smile.

Ugh. I definitely should have thought before I spoke.

“I retract that word.” I smile sweetly. “And what do you see when you look at me?”

His eyes lighten slightly. “Naive. Trusting. Young. Ambitious. *Reckless*.”

I scoff. “That’s a judgmental observation for someone who has observed all of two minutes of me.” I reciprocate his same mocking tone.

“Who says these are the only minutes I have observed?”

17. Exiled

I LIE AWAKE ALL NIGHT, palms pressed into my bedsheets, eyes drawn to the canopy over my bed posts, yet I haven't left *his* room.

In that chair. Hanging on to his lavender words.

Dessin.

My nerves spring back to life at the thought of his gaze—knowing, studying, *observing*. His face resonates with me like an old soul, a long-lost friend, and a favored memory.

Peeking through my bedroom door is a soft flickering glow from Aurick's study. I figured he would have gone to bed by now, but he's been cooped up since I got home. I decide we could both use a little company from our sleepless night, wiggle my feet into my slippers, and saunter over to his office.

He's hunched over his desk, hovering a magnifying glass over a long map stretched over other papers.

"Is geography *really* more important than sleep tonight?" I say.

Aurick smiles down at the map before looking up to where I stand in the doorway.

"That depends on your level of fascination for history." He waves me over to sit on the other side of his desk. He taps on the map with his magnifying glass. "Do you know anything about the manifestation from Alkadon?"

I shake my head and lean in to peer down at the map. From what I can tell, I'm looking at two small continents, side by side, then a massive continent about two thousand miles east, followed by several islands scattered nearby.

"This is where we are... Dementia"—he points to the first small continent, north of its twin—"and the one below us is Vexamen. But over sixty years ago, we traveled here from a country called Alkadon—that large eastern continent over there." He taps on the massive continent to the right.

“What happened to Alkadon?” I ask. Something must have caused our grandparents to leave and settle here.

“Nothing happened to them. It’s what happened to *us*. They banished our grandparents and forced them to seek out new land. Alkadon had five royal families and four sons of those families were banished, along with their followers for acts of disturbing the peace.” Aurick removes a leather book from a locked cabinet. The book is worn and thicker than three regular-sized books on his shelves.

After setting it on top of the map, he flips through dusty pages until he finds the painted portraits of those families.

“The two sons that settled into Dementia were Abraham Demechnef and Orin Blackforth.” He points to their pictures, one with a bowler hat and black hair, and the other with dark-red hair and bifocals resting on the bridge of his nose. They look off into the distance with their chins raised in front of a large fireplace.

“Their roles in Alkadon were upholding societal and architectural appearances. Unfortunately for them, Alkadon did not see their vision for flawless women with the highest standards for society as a whole. After gaining followers on this topic and causing internal feuds, the rulers of Alkadon had to banish them along with those who sided with them.

“The other two exiled were brothers, Malcolm and Maxwell Mazonist.” He flips a page to reveal two grinning twin brothers, arm in arm, standing on a cliff overlooking the sea. “Their discretions were the most offensive. Alkadon is known for having the largest navy and military force in the world. The Mazonist brothers were in charge of that. Trained generals. But because they were so young, early twenty’s, they were overly ambitious for growing and strengthening that force. They abducted children to train into even greater warriors than they already had, ran experiments on the human mind, and eventually were caught. To this day, they are still alive in Vexamen, doing far worse than training children.”

I shudder and don't dare ask what is worse than training children.

"Why're you looking into all of this?" I ask between yawns.

He closes the book and smirks. "Am I boring you with my research?"

"Not at all. I never learned any of this growing up." Truthfully, my father never saw world history as a useful parenting tool.

"Well, most people don't like talking about it. We are a disgraced nation in many eyes around the world." Aurick gives me a once-over, drums his fingers on the desk. "How did today go?"

Today, or *yesterday*, as it is now past midnight, I finally made it into that room.

"Intense." I shrug. "This patient that I got to meet—everyone's afraid of him. At least, everyone that knows of him."

Aurick tilts his head. "Why?"

"A number of reasons. They think he's a genius *and* a murderer. But truthfully, I don't think there's a word yet for what he really is." I trace my index finger over the map between us. Aurick watches, waiting for me to continue. "And I wasn't even afraid... isn't that strange? I was more fascinated than anything else."

"How did he react to meeting you?"

That wise, all-knowing face. That look, like he was *waiting* for me.

"Calm. And he knew things—" But a ward goes up in my mind. A metal wall that secures my thoughts from forming on my tongue. I can't reveal anything about this man. For whatever reason, I know he must be protective of all information about himself. Why else would he have checked himself in?

"What kind of things?" Aurick inquires.

I shake my head. "I have to be up in just a few hours. Promise you'll get to bed soon?"

He sighs, smiling up at me with a reassuring nod.

I pat his shoulder before walking back to my room, only to sit on my windowsill, watching the trees rustle in the wind, and waiting for the sun to rise so I can see him again.

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18. The Secrets Game

IT'S LIKE THE FIRST TIME, all over again.

I walk into his room, overly aware of the sound my shoes make when they crack against the concrete floor and of the length each leg stretches in front of the other. But overall, I'm quite conscious of my breath spewing from my lips and my heart gushing fresh beats of blood into my ears.

He sits in the same chair, back facing me. I've spent hours creating possible conversations we might have in my mind. I've predicted thousands of outcomes—all disappearing like rainwater in the soil.

"I have a question." Dessin's voice snatches my focus into a snare.

"Okay."

"Does anyone know why you really worked this hard to make it to my room?"

Are these just mind games, or does he really know this much? I only ever voiced my curiosities to Suseas. Would she have told him that?

"I don't even think *I* know why I worked so hard to get into this room."

He blinks slowly. "I'm sure you probably believe that too." His eyes are like magnets to mine. Even when my gaze falls, they manage to return to base.

"Either way... I'm happy to be here."

The first genuine closed-mouth smile spreads like a warm blanket over my shoulders.

"Now, can I ask you a question?" I set my clipboard down, mostly to break my gaze away from his smile. *Stop staring.*

He shrugs, and the slight movement carries a whiff of sandalwood, cedar, and cinnamon. "That depends on the question."

"What was your first impression of this—*place*?"

His brow twitches, and a phantom smirk threatens his lips. "Do you want the truth? Without the filter?"

I nod.

"When I was being escorted to my room—I had a standoff of sorts in the hallway. Patient Eleven, I believe."

"What happened?" Did he *kill* him? Was there a fight?

A half smirk. "He stood there, blocking the way to my room. Then, proceeded to pull out his precious *male parts*—took a long piss on the floor in front of me, all while maintaining intense eye contact."

The visual is vivid.

"Without blinking," he adds.

I fight the grin widening on my face—but it's inevitable. The thought of Dessin not breaking the uncomfortable eye contact—but also the obvious look of disgust that must have overtaken his expression.

"I mean... He had a good point." I say.

"That he did. It was the welcome wagon I had expected."

I bite my lip to keep from smiling harder. "You had me nervous at the start of that story. I thought you were going to say you fought him—or *killed* him."

"Why would I do that? It's as you said, he had a good point." But the smile fades as he looks away, a memory snagging his attention. "Besides, he escaped later that night to hang himself from the tower on the east wing."

I lean back into my seat, clench my fists. "He—killed himself?"

A casual nod. "He had enough of the treatment, I suppose. The simulated drowning was his primary." He flexes his fingers and rolls his wrists. "Either way, he wasn't the first to free himself—and he won't be the last."

The simulated drowning. *Chekiss*.

How am I going to free them before they free themselves?

But another thought claws at my mind. "Have *you* ever thought about—*freeing* yourself?" I brace myself for an

answer I might not be ready for.

He lifts his chin, studying me, perhaps wondering if I'm ready for his answer as well. "I have not. I have far too much to live for." And there's a familiar glint in his gaze—a reckoning—a smugness—an *I-know-something-you-don't* look.

Is that sarcasm? I don't dare ask him to elaborate. It's in that gaze that I am certain he won't tell me.

"Let's play a game," I say, leaning forward in my seat.

He reciprocates my movement, leaning in, his chains collecting at his ankles.

"You have my attention."

"Good, because you still don't have mine," I challenge. At this, he releases a full-on grin. His teeth are pin straight and glossy white. And *dimples*. "You tell me a secret, and I tell you one. No questions, only answers."

Dessin considers this, eyes lowering in concentration. "The last woman I told a secret to ended up with a cracked spine in three different places." His stare is lethal. He knows I know who he is talking about. "In fact," he pauses, adjusting his wrists under the shackles. "I'm fairly certain she resides in the west wing. Also known as the rehabilitation ward. Humorous, don't you think? Considering recovery most likely isn't in her cards."

"Wha--"

"Ah ah ah." He stops me. "No questions. Only secrets. You're breaking the rules already."

Oh, sweet tree sap. "You're right..." I say. "So, I guess that means it's my turn?"

He nods once.

"I have a paralyzing fear of enclosed spaces."

My thoughts jump back to his Sern confession. That's why he hurt her. He told her a secret? Did he try to kill her to cover it up?

"I killed six people the day I admitted myself here." Emotionless. Ice-coated words.

A jolt to my entire system. I try not to act fazed by his secret. But now I know he is, in fact, a murderer.

He closes his eyes, smiles to himself. "I don't think there are any secrets you can tell me that would surprise me."

A burning urge to prove him wrong rises under my chest.

"I think the only reason I can connect to patients with such ease is that I belong in here too. My secret is... I don't think my mind survived the trauma from my childhood."

Dessin's body goes rigid.

"Skylenna," he whispers like a hollow drum, laced with spider silk that clings to my ears. His lips part, and there is a thought reaching from his mouth, trying to break free. His eyes are conflicted, darting across the floor as though he is settling a silent argument.

Suddenly, his face is calm again and unfaltering with confidence. He lowers his head and raises his eyebrows at me in a condescending glower. "If I had a heart—that might have worked on me."

His words lick my wounds with salt. I stand from my seat, realizing that our conversation has reached an end.

But before I can leave, I take a step in his direction, lowering myself into a squat so that I am now looking up at him. "You can try to convince me in every way possible that you don't have a heart," I say softly. "But I don't give up. And if there is a heart somewhere in there—" My hand reaches out, touching the center of his chest. He stiffens like drying concrete, dark-mahogany eyes fixed on my fingers. "I'll find it. I'll be the first to find it."

19. Unlocked

IT'S BEEN A LONG, UNDERWHELMING week.

The council has kept me from Dessin for “psychosis conditioning.” I’m not really sure what that means. No one is telling me anything other than that. But I get to see him today, and I couldn’t sleep last night knowing that bit of information.

Dessin is not in his usual spot. He’s upright in his bed today, shackled to the posts.

“Breakfast in bed today?” I comment, circling the unoccupied chair to sit down. Dessin looks at the wall behind me as if he is looking through a window with a thousand distractions.

His face is tired, shadows around his eyes like warning signs of danger. His broad chest moves unsteadily, with flexing arms and clenched fists.

“What’s wrong with you...?” I ask cautiously.

Something isn’t right. I blame the council for whatever they have been doing to him.

Finally, he looks at me, causing my stomach to twist. I always thought I loved blue eyes, like Aurick’s. Because they’re piercing and cold, like a jagged piece of ice. But his are like nothing I’ve ever seen.

They speak their own language—a dialect that might take me years to decipher. And I’ve imagined them hundreds of times since our first meeting, never quite capturing them correctly, as if the photograph in my mind smears after I leave this room. But, of course, I know the color. At least, I thought I saw one single, simple shade.

Before, I saw melted chocolate and caramel. But today, they’re the bark on an oak tree, dark and saturated just after a heavy rain.

And his eyes are currently speaking louder than his silence. Something *is* wrong.

“Dessin, what happened during your treatment?” I ask.

He raises his eyebrows with a side smirk that says, *ah, well, you know.*

My patience fizzles out, and suddenly, my knee is bouncing while I sit, fighting to remain calm until he gives me an answer. But what if he’s seriously hurt? He’d hardly show it. Perhaps his pride is too great to ever let me know.

That single thought has me surging to my feet, and then I’m kneeling down in front of him. He blinks, eyes wide, and he leans back as if he’s expecting me to attack. My chest is grazing his knees, and I share a glance with him, silently asking for permission to touch him.

I poke his right rib. He cringes inwardly and clenches his jaw. Every muscle on his body is bulging with built-up tension. I search his eyes for an explanation before I take it upon myself to investigate, but he gives me nothing.

I hook my fingers under his white shirt, lifting it just above his ribs.

A nearly inaudible gasp peels from my lips.

His ribs are as swollen and purple as a bulging cloud cascading across the hills and crevices of his muscles. He makes Aurick look like a young boy.

“What have they done to you?” I whisper in shock.

A tremor pulses through me as I gape at his next movements. While keeping his eyes on me, he undoes his shackles and grabs my hand.

“How—” My hand, suspended inside the firmness of his grip, stiffens.

He presses a finger to my lips. “Are you frightened? Any sane person would think they are as good as dead right now, given that I am free from restraint.”

I pause. I try to understand the emotions that are flooding through me right now. Fear is not one of them. Shock is. Confusion is. But not fear.

“Here’s a secret for our little game... I am *never* truly restrained.”

He's trying to scare me. He's trying to give me pause.

"That does not frighten me. What scares me is how you got these bruises."

The first genuine head tilt of surprise. His lips tug at the corners like he doesn't know if this bit of shock is enough to make him grace me with his white teeth.

Outside of the door, metal scrapes against metal, a latch being lifted. My hand is released from his grasp, and he quickly secures his shackles, clamping them back around his wrists.

Suseas enters the room, careful to stay in the doorway.

"My deepest apologies for the interruption." Her smile falls as she notices me, crouched on my knees in front of Dessin. Brows lift. "Explain to me the meaning of this, Miss Ambrose."

I pop up to my feet, bite my lip, and point at Dessin's ribs. "He has—" I look back at Suseas as if she can help me finish my sentence. Nothing. I glance back at Dessin for assistance. And to my surprise, he raises his eyebrows and laughs.

"Yes, do explain to us the meaning of this, Miss Ambrose." He tips his head back to laugh harder.

"—*Bruises*." I finally spit out. I'd rather not investigate why this is funny to him. But I would be lying if I said that small rumble of laughter in his chest wasn't making me want to smile back.

"He was flogged..." She looks down and picks at her cuticles. "We can discuss that at another time. But for now, Demechnef oligarchs are visiting the asylum today. This is an annual opportunity for us. They've wanted to meet Patient Thirteen since his arrival, but we have never felt comfortable with visitors. At least, not until the progress you've made."

In the corner of my eye, Dessin tenses up.

"I really don't think that's wise." And based on the creasing between his brows, he agrees.

"The decision has been made by the council. Our guests will be arriving shortly."

I open my mouth to object, but Suseas's expression quickly morphs, like a flower wilting without the sun or a painting being washed away from a splash of water. And she's backing into the wall behind her, concealing a breath of horror within her lungs, trembling from head to toe.

I almost ask, *Are you having a stroke?* But the shadow of a man, standing upright, like a mountain that has just emerged from underground, darkens the floor from behind me. And as he takes a step forward, his full length is displayed. Around six foot four, with wide shoulders and a stern stance. He's revealed his secret to her.

I am never truly restrained.

The amusement on his face is like a bolt of lightning.

"No..." Suseas's utters.

"I've been on my best behavior ever since Sern's accident." Dessin steps toward her, massaging his raw wrists. "Therefore, I can certainly understand that you thought my threats had become empty."

Suseas's lips outline the name of God.

"But then, there was that little voice in your head, wasn't there? Saying, *What if his words become actions?*" He's cornered her like a wild animal that has been set free in the asylum, and she has nothing to defend herself with.

His final step is a chain around her wrists. And her complexion is no longer that of peach ice cream—the back of Dessin's fingers caress her moist, gray cheek.

"You see, I have no intention of entertaining visitors today." He smiles. Polite, yet masking aggressive intent. "I promise to make this less painful."

Without even so much as lifting his hands, she faints, body tumbling to the floor like rocks from an avalanche.

The booming sound of the metal door swinging into the stone wall forces a shriek out of me. Two orderlies in gray scrubs widen their stances as they scope out the scene,

running their frantic eyes over Suseas's limp body. But they are not quick enough. Dessin is an arrow in the wind, in two short strides, a guard flies over Dessin's shoulder and drops unresponsive to the floor, just as the other guard slides down the wall to our left with blood trailing after him.

I'm swaying like a ship in a hurricane, a fine cocktail of adrenaline and shock coursing through my veins. *What just happened? Why the outburst? What went wrong?*

There's an echo of jingling bells in my ears. I need to lie down, rest my head, close my eyes until I'm able to make sense of this.

A set of large hands wrap around the backs of my arms.

"I know you don't understand why, but I can't be here. At least, not right now." Dessin has stopped, the motion warping my stability. He's searching my eyes. Squeezing the backs of my arms desperately.

"But—"

"I'll come back," he assures me.

I wait for an explanation, but he doesn't offer one. I should try and stop him, talk some sense into him after this outburst. And maybe it's because I know what happened when Sern got in his way, but something tells me it has nothing to do with fear.

I nod, and he practically dissolves into the air.

Chaos forms down the hallway, screams, metal trays hitting the floor, and words of panic and rumor passing from person to person. I decide I should join the other conformists to help calm the tension and help him do what he needs to do so no one else gets hurt.

I sprint, careful not to slip or trip over the orderlies that stood in his way. They aren't dead, *thank God*. Most of them struggle to get off the ground as if the air had been knocked out of them.

Council Member Martin exits the stairwell, blasting through the door with hands running through his short

black hair. "My God!" His hands reach out as if to touch the pane of glass he's watching this mess through. "Is there something in the water? What has come over all of you?!"

An orderly approaches Martin from the mass of people running in separate directions and whispers something in his ear. Martin's face falls, darkening with fear disguised as anger. He reaches under his vest to fetch a double-edged knife, shouting to the orderlies to draw their weapons and retrieve the gas masks.

Gas masks? I'm instantly reminded of the brutality that encompasses the best practices of this asylum. I can only imagine with great hesitation what their process is for capturing a stray patient. I have to quell this now.

I shuffle through the maze of individuals in their navy-blue dresses, pushing past the ones that are standing in shock as they are told that Patient Thirteen has escaped and breaking through the arms that reach for me, desperate for me to share what I know. I use my body as a roadblock to keep Martin from taking another step, holding my hands up in protest.

"Sir, there's no need to panic. If you can give me a moment to explain—"

Martin's squinty eyes flash to me in disgust. "*You.*" He gives me a quick up-and-down look. "Did you have something to do with all of this?"

"No, sir. But I was in the room and saw what happened."

"Did *you* set him free?" he accuses, breath expelling foul whiffs of old coffee.

Are you not hearing me? "No... But sir, you need to get everyone under control first, and I can get him—"

He snorts. "You're telling me how to handle operations?" His jaw suspends in offense, elongating his potato face. "Do you even know who I am? How dare you!" His right arm winds across his body, showcasing the back of his hand before he barrels down to strike.

A powerful scream blasts like a fire alarm from behind me, and a tan arm shoots forward, snatching the back of Martin's hand midair, just before it makes contact with my cheek.

Dessin broods at my side, arm flexed and veins swelling under his skin.

He came back.

"I'll thank you kindly to keep your hands off of my conformist," he says, his rugged voice quieting the panic in the room like a theater. "You wouldn't want me to lose my temper."

Martin shares the same look of stress that Suseas had earlier.

I'm gazing up at Dessin's face, the way one would look through a telescope, admiring the mystery of the stars. *He came back.*

But in the same moment of my being starstruck, Dessin swipes Martin's knife from his other hand, spinning around my back to align the blade against the center of my throat. The firm build of his chest pressing against my upper back. Instinctually, shying away from the sharp object against my skin, I lean into Dessin's body. And like magnets moving magnets, his left arm slides around my waist to pull me closer. The aroma rising from his embrace—cedar and wood dust.

"I need a break," Dessin announces to the crowd of conformists and orderlies that have formed around us, with faces wrinkled with worry lines. "Tolerating you godless people has turned out to be a full-time job."

Should I have burst into tears? Should I be trying to fight him off?

Why am I perfectly calm?

"I'm very tired. *And* I'd prefer to not have to kill all of you—it would only purchase my one-way ticket to hell."

Martin stretches out his arm to Dessin as if that will pause his movements.

"I can't let you walk out of here with her," he says, sweating a ring around his collared neckline.

Dessin chuckles softly into my hair, breathing in the scent of my jasmine shampoo. "You can watch me leave with her, or you can watch her drop dead at your feet." His words sting. For no reason at all, I convince myself he wouldn't hurt me. I convince myself this is all for show. "Either way, I'm leaving now. There is no one on this earth that can stop me."

His words—*gospel*—set in stone.

Martin fidgets with his hands, eyes dancing around the room as if someone will help make this decision for him. The room itself is so quiet. The sounds of swallowing, breathing, and stomachs grumbling are like music amplified by a grand ceiling in a cathedral.

"Good man," Dessin says with a smile in his voice. "Now, if we're followed, I'll use this knife to dismember the rule breaker that decided to ignore my warning and deliver their parts to their families. Is that understood?" He uses the blade to point around the hall, receiving nods from horrified men and women.

Dessin reaches his head around to the side of my face and kisses my cheek softly, leaving a warmth like a static shock in his wake, a tingle of energy where his flesh met mine.

"Shall we?" he whispers into my ear.

20. Smoke and Mirrors

ONCE WE'RE IN THE STAIRWELL, enclosed and hidden from the rest of the asylum—he tucks the knife away.

Dessin takes the lead down the stone steps, extending his hand behind him to merge with mine, his fingers slipping into the beds between each of my fingers. I'm mystified. Is this all a game to him? Is it a new form of manipulation?

The air in the twirling well is cool and dry, yet my back is slick with new drops of sweat. I'm either going to die or be defiled. But my red flags aren't waving. They're lying back, asleep in my mind. You'd think I'd known enough monsters in my life for those red flags to set fire in warning among my thoughts.

What if Martin retaliated? Even though Dessin held a knife to my throat, what if Martin decided not to care?

The thought tightens like a coil in my chest, burning with irritation under my skin. I tug my hand free of his. *No, I will not hold your hand. You were going to slit my throat just a moment ago!*

Dessin looks down at his empty hand, lifts his chin, then continues leading us down the stairs.

"Was it something I said?" An obvious smug smirk laces his words.

"I'm still trying to decide if you were bluffing or not," I say.

He snorts. "I never bluff."

At this, I stop. Why would I have thought otherwise? Why am I looking at him in shock? Of course he meant what he said. Of course he was going to make good on his promise to use that knife. *He's a murderer.*

Noticing my lack of movement. He stops five steps below me, turning his head enough that I can see half of his face. "Not exactly, anyway. I would have done a lot worse." He

faces me head-on, looking directly into my eyes with utter certainty. "But it would have been to him. Not you."

I nod, unsure of what else to say. I only needed to hear him say that.

We get to the bottom of the stairwell, rounding the corner to a small opening underneath the steps. He stares at the wall.

"What is it?" I ask.

He points to a rectangle on the stone. His index finger presses down on the center of the brick. A small brass key falls into his palm.

"This." He takes the key and pushes it into a dark hole in the floor covered by musty shadows in the corner under the stairwell. He tugs at a tarnished gold handle that protrudes from the ground. An old wooden door slides open. He sticks his feet down the small passage and climbs down into the pit of darkness.

In the dim lighting of the lanterns, there is a ladder that looks like it will crumble down to dust any second. But out of good faith, I follow.

It creaks, like an old bird guarding its nest as I step down each wooden stick, closing the wooden door behind me and latching the lock. Before I can touch my heel to the last step, a pair of hands grip my waist and lift me off the ladder and down to the floor. I pivot around to face him in the darkness.

"The last step was broken," he says quietly, turning to twist a small knob at the bottom of a gas lamp; light is only shed on the spot where we are standing.

"Wait—" I press my hands firmly against the wall behind me. My eyes prance around the enclosed area in a panic.

"Is this a—basement? Are we in a *basement*?"

He turns to face me, expression full of confusion and an eagerness to understand.

"Yes...?" He steps toward me.

“No. No. No.” A flash of heat tumbles over my back, chest, and arms. The oxygen thinning in the old murky air around us. I suck in as hard as I can, but there’s something wrong. I must be dying or seizing or having a stroke. The muscles in my thighs vibrate like blades of grass in a strong wind and streams of sweat snake down the back of my neck. My eyes zoom in on the puddles of darkness in this... *Basement.*

“Skylenna...” He takes another step.

“You have to—get me—out of here.” I gasp for air as I slide down the wall behind me. In my mind’s eye, there are the four walls of my father’s basement. The blood dripping from my nose on the stone floor. The black air. The icy cold draft stinging my naked body. The twisting knot in my stomach as I am left down there for days without food.

“Skylenna! Nothing in this basement can hurt you.” Dessin places his hands on my arms. Kneeling down in front of me. Forehead inching closer to mine. “Look at me. Don’t take your eyes off of mine, okay?”

But I can’t stop them from bouncing across the perimeters of the dark space that is swallowing us whole. Looking for an exit. Looking for an escape.

His hand finds my hand, pulling it to his chest, squeezing tightly. This brisk movement distracts me, bringing my focus back to his own. And in a single second, as brief as a yawn, I feel I know those eyes. I inhale the warmth they permeate.

“There you go. Squeeze my hand until the fear leaves.” I squeeze, but gently, worried I might cause him pain. He nods as if understanding my pause. “You won’t hurt me. I need you to squeeze as hard as you can, Skylenna. Hold my hand until it all goes away.”

I obey and squeeze. Harder than I’ve ever exerted those muscles before. Faint whimpers escape my lips—a thick sheen of tears blurs my vision.

“Good,” he whispers. “That’s good. Now tell me you’re safe.”

I shake my head.

“I need to hear you say it. Tell me you’re safe.”

Another whine as I struggle to catch my breath. “I’m— safe.” A thick, wholesome tear slips from my right eye.

“That’s right. You’re safe. You’re safe with me.”

My grip on his hand loosens as the fear and panic abates, easing my throbbing limbs. And with its absence, I keep a strong hold of his gaze. Déjà vu swirls around in my chest. Why am I feeling this way? Is this a part of his manipulation? His breath is grazing my skin, and his eyes are still captivating me. I stand, shaking off the intimacy that bled between us. I can’t be fooled. I won’t be.

He backs away, bringing his attention to the empty area around us.

I take in a breath. Take another glance at the dark cave. “What is all of this?”

He glances at me from the corner of his eye and walks into the darkness to illuminate the dome-like room we stand in. Weapons. Knives, daggers, whips, gas masks. Everything is encrusted with rust and a thick blanket of dust.

I thought the floor was dirty, coated in dried mud. But rubbing the tip of my shoe on its grainy surface, I see that it is solid dirt. This isn’t a basement, it’s an underground room dug for reasons that were clearly classified, but I’m sure Dessin has the answer.

“Dessin?”

He glances over at me as he studies the knives. His eyebrow is raised like he is about to teach a child how babies are made. His hand clenches around the hilt of the knife. He sighs and turns his head to me. “Tunnels made during the war, well, prewar with Vexamen.” He waves his hand around the room. I scan the walls again. “Vexamen used them to plant spies throughout the country. They dug

the hub and meeting spot under the asylum because Demechnef can't investigate this property."

Where did he learn all of this? He took me to a room no one knows about because it was a passage of war. He continues to impress and surprise me. "Why can't Demechnef investigate here?"

"It's an agreement in our constitutional commandments. The only foundation Demechnef cannot control is this asylum and the churches. It was agreed it was a conflict of religion and government. It's off-limits—but I'm sure they find ways around it." A nod is the only direct movement he makes toward me. Other than that, he wanders the perimeter of the room, rearranging weapons and avoiding eye contact with me.

"But the oligarchs of Demechnef were coming to pay a visit... How could they do that if they're not allowed?"

"As a compromise to both sides, they each get to make a visit to each other's territory once a year. This, of course, is at complete random, so each side has no time to clean up their act if they are breaking laws."

"Suseas said... Demechnef oligarchs wanted to meet you—and I."

"Did she? I don't recall." He continues examining weapons as if my conversation is boring him to death.

"That explains why you ran. But it doesn't explain why you took me with you."

"You'll give yourself a migraine trying to figure it out."

"This is insane. I deserve an explanation." I drop my arms to my sides and slide down the dirt wall to sulk in the mystery of the moments that have just passed.

"You know, using that *word* in an asylum is frowned upon." A twitch at the corner of his mouth.

"Oh, pardon me, but we both know you're not insane," I blurt out.

He glowers at me in suspicion. His bare feet rub against the rough grains of dirt as he sits a few feet across from me

against the wall. "That is certainly something I haven't heard before," he mocks, yet I can tell he's surprised.

"I think people mistake great intelligence for insanity."

He tilts his head, narrowing his eyes as if to look at a child that has just spoken like an adult. The shadows under his eyes darken along with the definition to his jawline, and his two fingers and thumb trail over the stubble along his chin, examining me as if searching for a hint to a problem he's working to solve.

"Please tell me what we're doing here," I say. He takes no time to compose himself.

"Waiting, of course."

"Waiting for what?"

"For the end of the day."

"But why am *I* here?"

He doesn't answer this. He just looks up to the ceiling and sighs heavily, like there is so much I don't know.

"Can we at least talk while we're down here?"

"You want to *talk*?" he mocks.

I flinch. "Is that a problem for you?"

"I took you hostage, and you want to *talk*." He stares at me in disbelief.

"Are you going to hurt me?" I ask hoarsely, with a slight crack in my voice.

"Not unless you give me a reason to." He smiles.

"In that case..." I say, scooting closer to him. "I have a question." His eyes widen as he watches me close the distance between us. I sit cross-legged, face-to-face with him.

"Why did you come back? You stopped Martin from striking me." Like a moving painting, his arms caught Martin's, tightening his grip like a python.

He stares past me in thought.

"I don't know." But there's an unmistakable flash of temper at the memory.

"You're lying," I say coldly. *Tell me something I can hold on to.*

"Foul rumors are floating around the asylum about you," he tells me.

My eyes close reactively, as if to block the truth of that from splashing me in the face. I sigh, shrugging. "There are foul rumors about you, too."

"Quite right." He purses his lips. "There's an old wives' tale that is shared among agronomists, that if twins are born, one must always die young."

He's testing me. Waiting for a reaction. Poking and prodding until I crumple to pieces. *You know nothing about Scarlett or her death.*

"There's a rumor that Demechnef wants you," I say, using his subtle tool of invasiveness. Niles whispered it in my ear before I left his room. He said it was mere gossip, but who knows, right?

His expression gives nothing away. He says, "Is that so?"

"It is. And that's why you ran, to avoid their one, unannounced, annual visit."

The corners of his mouth unmask a curious smirk.

"And there's a rumor you set the fire with your sister inside because you were jealous of her. You wanted to steal her life." And he's back in the game.

The strong muscles keeping the composure in my face fall like a handful of honey slipping through my fingers. I miss what her thin hand felt like in mine, even as the flames warmed the room, and sweat made my grasp slippery—and even though her hand was lifeless. She was still my sad, frail sister.

I miss you, Scarlett.

"Unfortunately for that theory, I never envied a single thing about her life." My shoulders slump forward, and my head bows like a dying tree soaked by too much rain.

"But she envied yours."

My eyes snap up, and my neck straightens.

“How could you *possibly* know that?” I study his confident expression, investigate his eyes for the truth. “Can you read minds?” I ask, slightly mortified at the thought of him snooping around in my head.

He stares at me. Blinks. Blinks a little slower. “*Really*,” he says with every hint of sarcasm there is. “*That* is the best theory you came up with.” I slouch, almost wanting to laugh in my own face. “You’re disappointing. I thought you were supposed to be miraculously gifted at this.”

At this, I perk up. The challenge of a locked door waits in front of me. It calls my name. I move closer. Our knees are touching. He peers down and tenses up, always furrowing his brow at my touch.

“It happened when you were a child... Didn’t it?” I ask with calm caution.

He remains reserved, as still as a priest in confession.

“A trauma, or a loss that brought this personality into existence,” I add.

I pause again, as if the silence will give him the opportunity to nod.

“He must have needed someone strong like you. Brave. Intelligent. And you saved him, didn’t you? The child—the man—that hosts this body. I can only imagine the horror he must have seen.”

His lips separate as he prepares his words. But this time, I don’t need affirmation. I only have one more thing to say.

“The asylum doesn’t have a record of family for you. That must mean he lost his family. They died—and you helped him *survive it*.”

He looks at me, eyes digging into mine, whispering so many secrets, and barely surviving everything he knows. And in those dark eyes, there’s a light of interest, like a candle behind a sheet of fog. He leans closer and whispers. “You’re playing a dangerous game, Skylenna.”

The way he says my name. My whole name. “Please, let me in,” I whisper back.

Dessin grins, finally, like waiting for a show of fireworks.
“You first.”

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21. Beacon

IT IS ON THIS DAY that Dessin and I share an unspoken truth.

We don't have to say it—but we can see it in each other's eyes. That narrow peephole into the universe of the soul lost in darkness and trauma.

I could never speak a word of the day Scarlett died. I'll likely take it to my grave, tucked deep in my pocket, forever a mystery to the rest of the world. She was too precious to me, and her death is a burden only I will live with.

And in Dessin's heart, he is bound by the same fate. At least for now.

To pass the time, Dessin humors my curiosity. I wonder about everything, asking about the asylum, its history, the treatments, the reasons behind it all. And it turns out I couldn't have asked anyone better about this. He knows *everything*. He's only a couple years older than me, and I think he knows that history better than the people who were actually there.

The asylum was created by a handful of *prejudiced, God-loving, narcissistic supremacists*, his words, not mine—but I can't say he's far off.

They based mental disabilities off of religion. If a man wasn't acting like himself, then he must be possessed by Satan. Of course, this idea brought with it quite a bit of experimenting; exorcisms and torture chambers. Scientists and priests believed that pain was the best way to beat someone into their old self.

He describes the hot water treatment as the most common. Scalding hot water was poured down a patient's throat left to singe the stomach, resulting in festering stomach ulcers or imminent death. The patients were never treated but forced to live with the ailments caused by these

vicious treatments. They would vomit blood until their hearts eventually stopped from exhaustion.

To my horror, that isn't even the worst of it.

There was the hanging-toe treatment, where they were hung upside down by their toes for hours until they all dislocated. The blood would rush to their heads, and a pit of fire would lick at their skin until they were roasted like pigs on a spit. There was the acid bathing, pesticide consumption, the infamous shock therapy, aneurysm apparitions, and the genital dismemberment treatment, which is disturbingly self-explanatory.

"I want to show you something," Dessin says, rising up to his feet.

We've been down in this tunnel for a few hours. I note that this time has been a gift for us. No one watching, listening, or judging; no time limitations.

We've been completely alone.

He walks in a determined line toward the weapons, separating the hanging knives and blades with the backs of his fingers, uncovering a hanging leather satchel. Instead of plucking it from the hook it rests on, he gives it a long, fixed look. Losing himself in its appearance as he coddles it in the palm of his hand as if the satchel was a beloved pet he thought perished, only to find alive and well years later.

"I'd like you to investigate the contents in this bag," he says, collecting himself from his fallen moment. He turns his head to me, yet shadows fall across his face. "Tell me what they make you think of. Let's call it—a guessing game."

Ah, another game.

"How do I win?" I ask.

He chuckles softly, shaking his head as he returns to his seated position.

"*Win?*" he muses. "How do any of us win, really?"

I don't follow.

"By guessing correctly."

Okay. "Let's play." I wonder why anyone finds this man so terrifying. He likes to play games and occasionally tosses around a few orderlies like they are rag dolls.

Dessin opens the latch over the bag, flushing a quick whiff of dried tree sap. He holds out his hands, the satchel cupped in them like a small puddle of water. He bows his head once, signaling for me to put my hand into the dark pouch. My fingers reach inside hesitantly, avoiding the possibility of a sharp object. I seize a twiggy, lightweight object the size of my middle finger.

My concentration flickers to Dessin in confusion. *It's a stick.* But he watches me curiously, as if waiting for a discovery, an epiphany of sorts.

I let my eyes fall back to the object, surveying its details. It isn't just a stick. It's a biblical cross. Two sticks are bound together by thin vines and dead leaves. I stroke it gently, understanding that any pressure will cause a snap.

"It's a cross," I tell him. *Fun game.*

But he's still staring intently. "Look again."

I sigh, holding the cross closer, letting it brighten under the wavering glow of the lantern. It's a mousy-brown color, so old it's nearly crunchy to the touch. I look back at him, raise my eyebrows, and shrug. "It's an *old* cross."

He smiles, but perhaps partially in annoyance.

"Clever," he says. "Keep going."

I reach my hand into the satchel and remove three more wooden trinkets. They're not woodman's work, clearly. They're just sticks bound together by dead vines. But, as my nail outlines the shapes, I see a girl (in a triangle dress with dead leaves for hair), a boy, and an animal—a *wolf*.

I tell him my findings. I thought he was supposed to be a genius. This seems a bit rudimentary. He leans back against the wall with crossed arms, unimpressed, disappointed. *Am I the unimpressive one here?!*

"But what do you *feel*?" His look is barbed wire. I have no escape from this question. Obey or further disappoint.

So, I give it all I have. *What do I feel?*

The cross alone, nothing. But all four tokens... Stirs, flutters, tickling the lining under my chest. An airiness, like the streams of sunlight after it rains. But then—without a hint of a warning, sadness. Sadness in its heaviest form, as if these four wooden figurines unscrewed the bottle of depression in my soul. I want to toss them back in the satchel. I don't want to look at them again.

"Skylenna?"

"I don't feel well, Dessin." I set the sticks in the dirt. A bucket of nausea tips over in my stomach. I want to go home. I can't vomit in front of him. I need a washroom.

"Finish the game," he orders.

Anger flashes in my chest, jamming the swishing of bile back down my throat. "*No*," I say between the safety of my teeth. "I want out."

"Tell me what you feel!" he demands, chest expanding.

"No!" We're on our feet now. "I am done!" I smack my hands against his chest, not taking even the slightest moment to realize who I'm hitting. His jaw flexes, anchors outward.

"Tell me!" He raises his voice, yet the power of his volume doesn't frighten me. It fuels me with fight. "Now, Skylenna!"

But I can't tell him. I want to stop thinking about what I just felt. I want it all to go away. Hide it in the leather purse and place it back where it belongs. *I hate it!* I'm ill. *Let me lie down.*

"Get me out of here!" I release my arms to push against his broad chest once more, but his hands hijack them in midair, just as he did to Martin, gripping them with a devil's hold. An unnatural strength pumping from his firm arms.

Air rushes out of my lungs. The fight defusing from my limbs.

"Pain," I whisper. "*Heartbreak.*"

The same nameless pit of feelings that plagued me when I went to live with Scarlett. I mourned for a year. I wallowed and shrank down to a speck of myself. I had almost forgotten what that once did to my body.

He holds my bound wrists to his chest, releases his breath in unison with mine.

“We can go now,” he says.

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22. Pulling String and Moving Pieces

SCARLETT WAS TAKEN FROM HER home when she was seven years old.

For five days, she was taken by a man that reeked of tobacco and had gangrene on his feet. He lived alone, in a small cottage on the edge of Hangman's Valley, keeping little Scarlett in his coat closet while he touched her in places she shouldn't have been touched and made her touch him. This went on for five days before our mother picked her up and took her home.

There was a part of Scarlett that believed it wasn't an abduction at all. That our mother profited from this trip.

When I was brought back to reality from our hideaway in the basement, the fearful folk around me used the word *abduction*. But they didn't understand. They thought they all knew who Scarlett was, but they would never know that her version of the word made mine look like a holiday. I was not abducted. To be truthful, I would have gone willingly.

Aurick stumbles around the kitchen, disoriented and dazed, looking for the liquor cabinet. He heard about what happened at the asylum today. He met me in the buggy outside on the gravel driveway to embrace me in his arms, apologies trickling from his tongue. I told him, I told everyone, I was unharmed.

"Did the patient touch you in other ways?" Aurick demanded to know as if the *other ways* were worse than physical harm.

But now, after I've assured him that I am fine—well, better than fine—I can only admit to myself, and no one else, that I am energized. Filled with an eagerness for my next meeting with Dessin. Now, Aurick can soothe his own soul with substances I'd rather not partake in.

Although, something rather delectable came from my trip to the tunnels. A slice of peach cobbler and a cold glass of milk. *And* Aurick allowed me to skip my lady-doll regimen. The colorful vision of seeing myself slip off my uniform to dive straight into the fluffy, white, feathered bed is the icing on this warm cobbler.

But tonight, Aurick is the dark shadow from a low-hanging tree. With each sugary bite I place into my mouth, savoring every slimy drop of residue, Aurick looms over me like a vengeful ghost. He aggressively swigs more brown liquid into his wet mouth, all while keeping his eyes burning into my seated body.

"Did he rape you?" he asks, flecks of spit sprinkling down onto the table.

I drop my fork as well as my jaw. "No," I mumble.

He scoffs, taking another sip from his expensive crystal bottle, sitting beside me. I sigh, relieved he isn't hovering behind me anymore.

"Red was raped once."

"Who?" I ask.

"My fiancée." He uses his free hand to slick his black hair back with the moisture from his forehead.

"*Fiancée?*" She's dead. He said she was dead. "But—"

"Ex." He squeezes his piercing eyes shut and waves me off. "I called her Red."

This day is never ending. I take a final scoop of sugared peaches in my mouth because the way this conversation is going, the night might go sour soon.

"She was raped by my father."

What? Yes, good call with the cobbler. Fork is down. I'm listening.

He unbuttons his shirt halfway down his sternum. "My father was a cold man, with a large ego and a strong grip." Another sip. "He had eyes like a snake and handled women like they were his puppets. And his words, his way of articulating a point, were his greatest weapon. He could

strip a person down and expose their greatest insecurities with one sentence.”

He focuses momentarily on my plate, half-eaten cobbler, then back at his bottle to trace his finger around its lid.

“He never hurt me, though. He was much too prideful to harm his flesh and blood. It wasn’t until the night I proposed to Red that he pinned her down and forced himself inside of her.”

I clasp my hand over my mouth. I can’t believe he’s sharing this with me.

“She told me immediately after it was over. Never kept a single secret from me. We shared anything and everything,” he says sharply, eyes finding mine once more.

“Aurick—”

A hand goes up to stop me. “Which is why it is hard for me to be left in the dark by you all of the time. You come home—share a meal with me—and avoid all of my questions about the asylum.” He leans closer, bourbon poisoning the air around us. “You are my friend. *Friends* don’t shut each other out.”

I lean back into my chair, the hands of fear pushing against my shoulders, pinning me in my seat to stare at him. *No. Don’t make me leave.*

“You’re right... I’m sorry. You’ve been so gracious to me—it’s not fair how I’ve kept everything confidential. It’s only—the images I’ve seen—the torture haunts me. I did not want my friend to also bear that burden.”

And tonight, I finish my dessert and tell him about my experiences at the asylum thus far. Sharing the horrors, the treatments, the blood, the patients, their histories. We sit on my white, fluffy, feathered bed, and he listens. I tell him about my plans, about the plans Scarlett shared with me. I paint a vivid picture of Chekiss and Niles. And after it all, I’m weightless, floating to the ceiling, afraid I might fly freely into the world on a stiff wind with nothing left to hold me down.

Of course, not nothing. I didn't dare share my moments with Dessin. The totems that brought ugly feelings from within my soul. The obsession with meeting him. I told him the bare minimum.

Because it is not my secret. It's *ours*.

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23. Exodus 23:20

AFTER I MET AURICK, ALL I wanted to do was wonder the forest on my own. To make sense of my sister's death. To mourn, to grieve, to wallow alone. There was one moment in that time that snapped me out of my self-pity, my depressed daze.

The forest is still and covered in nightfall and snow—a sleeping ocean before a cluster of waves. I crouch down to tuck my knees against my chest. Inside the coat pockets, my hand grazes a small box, cardboard, rough on the sides. Matches.

A crack. Like a foot stepping on a brittle tree branch.

I light one. "Aurick?" I call out. Another stick breaks, and this time I pinpoint the sound coming from my left, past a couple trees, and it's close. Animals. He warned. Big ones. The flame burns down to my fingertips, I grunt and drop it, and it sizzles as it falls to the snow.

I pull out another match, watch the tiny flame ignite, starting from blue to bright yellow, then I hear the snarl, not exactly a growl, but something foul, sucking in air through its teeth and nose. I lunge back and trip over a root sticking too high from the dirt. The snarl elevates to a growl—a sharp gurgling in its throat, then a hiss, several hisses. The hiss becomes a scream, a squealing scream like a rat being roasted alive. And it's getting closer.

I hold up the tiny flame and watch as a light-gray figure steps out from behind a tree, hunched over, arms hanging close to the ground. I stretch my hand out to get a brighter view of what it is. The gray isn't fur; it's skin. Bare skin. Leathery and dry. The eyes are white like its tears are made of milk, and the mouth is almost a snout but not quite. Its limbs are spindly, stretching outward to the snow like a dying spider.

It's a night dawper.

I gasp, fresh blood pours from its mouth—I'm assuming a dead animal isn't far. I start crawling backward, my fingers stinging in the snow, and my breath hitches in my throat as I attempt absolute silence for survival. My mouth clamps shut as I remember what my father would tell me.

Night dawpers are highly intelligent animals. They have no fur but can survive in the coldest of temperatures by consuming the blood and organs of other animals. They are born blind, with long arms to climb and long legs to outrun their prey. Their senses are heightened; they can smell blood, much like a shark, from miles away, and frighteningly enough, they can hear a leaf drop from that distance as well.

As a child, I was told not to wander too far into the forest, especially if you have a fresh wound, especially in the winter. I look down and understand I've acquired my monthly visitor. The warm blood slowly trickles down the inside of my thigh. I know it can smell me. I can't outrun it. A gazelle couldn't outrun it. I decide to remain still. It has yet to pounce. The nostrils on its rather stubby snout are flaring—it must be confused because it can smell me, just not hear me.

I take my chances and stay still, breathing into my hand. My heart, fumbling in my chest like a caged, feral animal.

It begins huffing as if from frustration, exhaling a shrill hiss. Deciding there isn't anything here, it turns around and walks away, so similar to the posture of a human. Chills crawl back under my skin like a flesh-eating virus.

Wait. Don't move until the hissing simmers to silence.

Springing to my feet, I whip around toward the firelight beaming from the house that looks too far away to outrun a night dawper. Doubt overtakes me that I might not make it, that I probably won't make it, and I ignore it with a grunt. There's a shriek behind me, cold winter's rage, and earth-vibrating footsteps that follow. The cold is peeling the skin

off of my knuckles. A whiff of clipped wind brushes against the back of my neck—the breath of a predator closing in on me. The cottage grows in detail, more than a simple candle’s light in the distance.

A force, stronger than a bucking horse, throws me into a tree. As if the walls of my ribs have collapsed, I slide down the bark, unable to gasp for air. I fall between the giant curly roots swimming above the black soil mixed with snow. Oh, God—I’m going to die—

The air floods back into my lungs just in time to scream as it pins me down with gnarled feet. My body bucks and squirms and thrusts.

I squint up at the white eyes studying me, wide with hunger and strong releases of adrenaline in its veins. Another shriek escapes its mouth, spittle forming on the corners. A victory cry. I must be a far easier target than what this creature normally preys on. It drags its long, yellow nail across my torso, slowly and nearly as precise as a surgical movement. I bellow again. My voice slicing through the forest, through the ice on the trees, like a machete cutting through butter.

It sticks its bloody nails in its mouth, closing its eyes as it hums. I stare at it in horror, my joints gone rigid. I’m going to die this way. Blood courses into my neck and ears, sloshing around like the violent waves of the sea.

A large black mass of what looks like a wisp of smoke slams into the night dawper like a train running through a falling leaf. I shriek at the sudden attack, the weight and pressure lifted from my body. It’s an animal, a black beast ripping into the night dawper, tearing it limb from limb.

“Oh my God,” I say under my breath.

The black animal’s eyes flash up at me, a russet-cinnamon color, and I now catch the familiar details—a wolf, a gargantuan black wolf. But the markings of russet red on the paws, the chest, the small brows above the eyes—a beast said to be extinct.

A RottWeilen. They weigh four hundred to five hundred pounds. Beautiful creatures, but never seen. Not since the first settlement. The agronomists that worked near Scarlett's and my home used to share stories about the massacre of the RottWeilen. They claimed their ghosts still linger around the red oak woods. There were hundreds of them, a massive pack of animals at the top of the food chain. For our settlers to reach the center of this continent and make it through the feral forests, they had to slaughter the pack of beasts.

I didn't know there was anything that could take down a night dawper. It barks at me in between ripping into another body part, a low, thundering growl. Authoritative. Demanding me to leave. Now.

I stare a moment longer, halfway paralyzed. Then, I pick up my feet, my hand pressed on the cut on my stomach, and shuffle through the snow to the cottage.

The front door is wide open.

Aurick is home.

Before I can take another step—I see him standing inches away from me—a crossbow pointed at the mass of black fur and gray ribbons of flesh.

With a focused glare, he squeezes his finger to pull the trigger.

"No!" I scream and jump into his arms and swat away the firing contraption.

I quickly look over at the wolf that takes off running, stepping over the night dawper's bloody, mangled body.

Aurick looks at me and back at the dead animal. "What the hell was that?!"

I watch the black wolf run through the snow, barely touching the ground in its long and majestic strides. Thank you.

I sigh in relief, feeling the stinging pain burn across my stomach.

"Sky? Why the hell did you do that?" He grabs my shoulder and gives me a light shake. "I had a perfect shot!"

I pull my hand away from my burning belly. My fingers and the palm of my hand are smeared in blood.

"Ow..." I wince. But when he notices the thin, not-so-serious cut, and his irritated expression falls, replaced with worry, confusion, panic—I can't help but grin.

A wide, adrenaline-soaked smile.

He cocks his head back, more confusion. "What—are you in shock?"

I shrug. Throwing my hands in the air. "I feel—I don't know—I just feel—"

He smiles back, nodding in agreement. "Alive."

~

BEFORE I COULD STEP FOOT in the asylum to face the aftermath of Dessin's jailbreak, Judas stopped me on the front steps.

He was concerned I had faced severe trauma wherever Dessin had taken me—that I would end up like Sern. He didn't use her name, but I knew that's who he had on his mind. My spine may be intact, but how could they know for certain if he hadn't damaged something else? Perhaps he did—with those tokens.

"I'd like you to be evaluated. I know someone who specializes in trauma from the asylum." He told me that the council wanted to speak with me about the incident. But first, he must know I was truly unharmed.

Now, I'm outside Judas's home. The someone he knows would be here, waiting for my arrival, waiting to dissect me, to yank out and inspect everything wrong.

The front door opens, exposing a woman with a long and snakelike frame. Voluminous crimson hair, a pink pointy nose, and a black evening dress.

"Please come in, Miss Ambrose." Her voice is smoother than wine and a sunset gliding across a steady ocean. It has

a lower register than mine with a sultry echo to it.

I enter the spacious living room with a timbered, baronial structure of the brick walls and antique oil paintings. Candle wax drips down the only flickering sources of light in the room. There is a gas lamp on a round wooden table with a vase of pink tulips.

"Do make yourself comfortable," she instructs, signaling to the velvet daybed.

I do as she says, tucking my navy uniform dress under my thighs like a lady, resting my hand against the arm of the divan. I breathe in through my nose, my eyes softening but still alert. This room smells of dust and women's perfume.

"Wine?" she asks, pouring herself a glass. Her fingers are long and delicate. The skin that coats her bones is seamless in its iridescent beauty, porcelain white from head to toe, and hair vibrant with rich pin-up curls. She only looks a few years older than I am, twenty-five at most.

Deep-set hazel eyes blink at me.

"Oh"—my eyes flutter back into focus—"no, thank you. May I ask your name?" I watch the dark-purple liquid splash the inside of the glass as it puddles into the bowl.

"Lynn." She glances over at me, setting her bottle of wine on the glass coffee table. "You've been quite the talk of the town lately."

I nod. Her voice could put me to sleep. It's soft, like a harp playing on warm summer nights.

"Judas is concerned about any physical or mental trauma from the incident."

"Is he your husband?" I ask.

She chokes on her wine. "No." She dabs a napkin at her plush lips. "Very old friend. Like a brother. I live a secluded life now away from the city, but I can be reached for occasions like this. May I ask... Have you known trauma before?" she inquires between sips.

I want to laugh. *Yes, father, sister, mother.* "I have."

"Was this encounter more or less frightening?"

"Less."

She raises her eyebrows. *Oops*. Maybe that was the wrong answer.

"These traumas you've known... Were they physical or emotional?"

"Both."

She pauses. Swishing her wine in her glass, then taking another swig.

"It can take face-to-face confrontation to begin to heal. Is there a way to contact the person or *persons* that this trauma involves?"

What does this have to do with Dessin? I want to go back to the asylum.

"No." I give her one syllable. One word. "They're all dead," I say under eerie silence.

Her brow furrows in concern. "Did the patient that escaped hurt you in either a physical or emotional way?"

"Neither. He was a gentleman." *His hands reached for my waist as he helped me down from the broken ladder. He made me squeeze his hands as I was paralyzed with a panic attack.* He was... kind.

"Are you experiencing any nightmares or debilitating thoughts about what happened?" She pries for even a shred of detail that makes me compromised. But there is nothing to say.

"The only nightmares I experience are from my childhood. There are no changes."

"I heard he took you hostage. Doesn't that stir unwanted feelings of fear?" She leans back in her chair, truly perplexed.

"I know this is going to sound mad, but I don't think I was ever in danger. Council Member Martin was going to strike me across the face, believing I was the cause for the patient's escape. He was blaming me, and the patient stopped him."

“Why do you suppose he helped you, then turned around and held a knife to your throat?” Lynn asks, fondling a necklace in deep thought.

I shrug. “I think he was trying to get me out of trouble. Show the asylum that I really wasn’t to blame. If I’m the victim, then, of course, it wasn’t my fault.”

She asks a few more questions before she is finally convinced I am well, both externally and internally. And after polite chitchat, where our octaves get higher and our bodies begin to shift uncomfortably in preparation to stand, she tells me she’d like to see me again. I nod politely, but *again* means she wants me to share my trauma.

My trauma is my own. It will stay that way.

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24. Ninety-Day Noose

THE WINDOWS ARE OPEN in the council board room, a heavy course of murky air humming from wall to wall.

There are six swiveling heads. Bickering, spitting arguments and accusations, digging up each other's dirty laundry, and tossing it on the table for the council to see.

Their noses stick high in the cold air, unraveling heavy sighs and grunts of annoyance with one another. I was summoned to a meeting with them. They want to discuss the happenings and Dessin's fate. One of them alone, I wouldn't give a second thought, but all six of them sitting around me have my fingernails digging into my thighs and my back cemented into the chair.

The council has an entire wing to themselves. We are assembled in the meeting hall. It's larger than necessary, with large bay windows exposing the garden. The walls and ceilings are crafted with polished red cedar wood and designed with the same pristine carvings as the long rectangular table we are sitting around. I trace the engravings with my index finger as they argue without acknowledging me or my opinion.

Why did they even ask me to attend?

Judas seems to be the only levelheaded member of the council. He speaks professionally, not interrupting anyone's turn to speak or demeaning their points of view. "Our initial response can't just be to execute a life, Martin. This kind of situation requires time for discussion and evaluation. We know nothing about Patient Thirteen or the reasons behind his acts of aggression and hostility. Perhaps, if we can uncover that information, it will make our system of evaluating his terms of punishment more clear."

"I beg your pardon," Martin scoffs. "He must be mad!" He blasts to the rest of the room. "This man tried to *kill* that woman. He almost killed all of us, and we're actually

going to take the time to find a proper punishment for him?" Martin is wiggling off of the edge of his seat with frustration.

I had a feeling he would be the one to vote for Dessin's death.

"Judas, I know you mean well, but what kind of leaders would we be if we let this kind of monster live? This shows weakness. Demechnef would eat us alive for this, and you know it." The direct comment toward Demechnef has me curious. Do they know how Demechnef connects with Dessin?

"Bite your tongue. If Demechnef isn't already acting toward this incident, then they will shortly, so Martin is correct. We don't have much time to decide," Delilah speaks up after listening to the two argue profusely. Her platinum-blond hair is pulled back tightly into a neat bun, and her clothes are dull. If it wasn't a dress, it could pass for men's attire.

"I'm very much aware that this information will get to Demechnef, but that doesn't change anything. This is between *right* and *wrong*. We can't kill a man for technically not doing anything. Because he didn't kill anyone. Miss Ambrose is still alive, and so are the rest of us. Yes, he very well could have killed everyone, but he did not. I think that is something we have to take into consideration. We can't execute a man for finding his morals, even if it was at the last second."

"Oh, spare me! That's grim, Judas. We can't spare his life based on a technicality! This man is unpredictable and dangerous beyond anything we have ever seen. He quite literally danced around every security precaution we carefully designed just to contain this *one person*. There isn't anything we can do to contain a beast so vicious." Female Council Member Sutton breaks down the problem to trigger the first beat of silence in the room.

"We can medicate him until we decide." Judas's eyes light up with a solution. "We can keep him unconscious until we find a way to either get him talking or if there isn't another way out, execute him."

"It won't work." Suseas shakes her head. "He's somehow immune to any kind of drugs we give him. There's only one way out—he is a monster, and we have to put him down."

That's it. I can't sit here in silence a minute longer, listening to them think they know what's best, think that they know him at all.

I know what I need to do.

"He's not a monster," I interrupt, my pulse picking up like a shaking maraca. The members fall silent. Suseas shuts her eyes in embarrassment, but Judas looks relieved. "He's capable of getting better. Can you imagine what must have happened to this man to make him like this? How traumatizing does something have to be to make a man so vicious? What was so horrific that he forced his mind to split to create two different people living inside one person? What could be so terrible? Whatever it was, it happened to him as a child. Do you have children, Lyoness?" I nod my head to the head of the council sitting at the opposite end of the table. He's the oldest and the one who hasn't said anything yet. In fact, he's been keeping a close eye on me for the entirety of this meeting.

Lyoness nods slowly, relaxed in his large chair, dark-brown hands clasped together across his chest. "I do. Two sons." That ash-colored, raised eyebrow says, *Where are you going with this?*

"And how exactly would you feel if something so terrible happened to one of your little boys? If then, he was left alone without a home, without a family, wounded and broken. But instead of helping him heal and repair his broken parts... he was to be killed because the people around him were too cowardly to stand up against all odds

and help bring a man's humanity back to him in one piece. How would *you* feel?"

The other five members turn their heads like cogs in a well-oiled machine to face Lyoness, waiting for his response, searching for a final word to end this chaos.

"I believe Miss Ambrose has conveyed her point," Lyoness announces, smiling. The other members try to think of something to counter that with, but nothing is coming to their empty mouths.

"I have broken down every case in the intricate section despite what everyone said, even though I was alone with no support or respect from my peers. When I was alone with Dessin, he wasn't the monster he wants everyone to think he is... He was just a man. A man who is trying to shield his previous host with terrifying mannerisms. It may seem difficult because he seems impossible to connect with, but I'm telling all of you right now that I know I can."

I didn't even notice before, but somehow I ended up on my feet. Hands pressed against the surface of the table, leaning toward the shark tank, I challenge them. "He'll open up to me, I'm sure of it. I'll bring back the host that came before Dessin, and we can save a life instead of ending one. I'm only asking for a little time. One chance." The silence in the room has dissipated my gall into cowardice, but I stay standing and wait.

For the first time, the clock behind me ticks loudly, knocking against itself like a gong. Lyoness stands, matching my inward posture.

"You have ninety days."

25. The Other Monsters

"IF YOU CAN'T PROTECT YOURSELF..."

A man sends whispers in the wind that haunt this dream. There's a rich golden sunset, sputtering water smacks against the jagged black rocks fifteen feet below my feet. I let my head fall back, dangling off my shoulders, my eyes gazing at the cotton-candy sky covered by the fiery-red leaves of the red oak trees that surround me.

"Then I must keep you in the dark."

~

THE COUNCIL WARNED ME THAT by taking on the perilous position of Dessin's conformist, I was willingly and knowingly putting myself in danger. Therefore, they would not put any more orderlies or conformists at risk. I signed a document, a crisp piece of parchment with their signatures at the bottom, so they would not be liable for my death or terminal self-detriment. I'm sure part of the protocol is to scare me. However, motivation sprang through my system first, elevating my senses. The conditions we agreed on were ninety days, not a day more, and if he slips up one more time, no matter the intensity of the situation, the decision will be made to put his head on the chopping block.

Stepping into his room, I wonder if he can spot the tension tightening between my shoulders, the exhaustion weakening my posture, or the fear for his life creasing my brow. Can he smell the stress moistening the back of my neck like a bloodhound?

What games will he choose to play today?

But now that I'm looking at him, facing his erudite presence, the fascinated glint in his dark eyes. Something about this vulnerable edge begins to fade, and my growing

allurement with this patient lifts my chin and sets my shoulders upright. It's like magic.

I take a seat in front of him. The tip of his chin points upward. He examines my awkward movements as I try to find a comfortable position in this small metal chair. I can't sit comfortably without slouching in an unladylike way. So, I sit pin straight as if I'm on eggshells.

"Very nice wardrobe change." Dessin greets me, examining my dusty-rose day dress I'd worn for the meeting I had with the council. I didn't have time to change into my uniform once it ended.

"Me? What about you?" I wave my hand to his usual plain white shirt and pants. "You certainly dress to impress."

He glances down at his chest, legs, then back to me. "Not quite. But I do undress to impress."

I have to do a double take at his coy smirk. And to my humiliation, I peer down at his crotch. Heat spreading across my cheeks. *Oh, no.* To top it off, my clipboard slips from my fingers, crashing to the floor. I fumble forward to pick it up.

Dessin's head falls back, barking out a laugh.

"*Charming.*" I shoot him a seething glare.

He twists his wrists within his shackles. "So, how did the meeting about my extracurricular activities go?"

Not sure how he heard about that. *Uh...*

"Am I in trouble?" he asks, amusement lighting up his chocolate eyes.

"Take a guess." I glare.

"No."

"Take another guess."

He chuckles again, deeply amused.

"Well, I'm glad you're so pleased with this situation because that meeting was anything but a picnic." I grimace, still flustered by the tug-a-war over his life.

"And I suppose you're not going to tell me why you fought so hard to keep me alive."

"I thought you knew everything."

He waits to respond. I take a moment to note that this is his cautious face. He's reconsidering his response because he thinks it might give too much of his game away.

"Almost," he says with a smile. "It's time to start another game."

"And what are the rules to this game?"

"For every memory of your past you tell me, I will give you a clue to my past."

I'm intrigued, inching toward the end of my seat. I clench my hands together in my lap, picking through memories and tossing them to the side like clothing changes in my dresser. He's giving me exactly what I came here for. To discover his secrets and assist with arranging the puzzle in the correct order. I *need* this from him.

"I think I like this game." I finally give my feedback.

"You first—"

"You first."

We say it in unison. I gawk at him with narrowing eyes. "Those aren't the rules we agreed on, love." His voice cajoles me into submission. I glance over at his wrists, still bound by the shackles, and I cringe. They must be draining the blood from his arms; I can't imagine how painful that must become.

"Why do you stay locked up?" I ask, unknowingly changing the subject.

"Pardon?" His face remains impassive.

"Your wrists are shackled and bound upward. Doesn't it hurt? Why do you stay that way? Are you just humoring me, or did they actually accomplish keeping you locked up this time?"

His brow knits together. "I didn't want to scare you or make you think you were in any danger." His words are sincere, and that somehow makes me want to put my guard

up as if at any moment he's about to laugh in my face. I stand up from my chair and walk over to his bedside, sit down on my knees, my waist pushed against his legs as I struggle to undo his left shackle. I look over at him for assistance, but his focus is on my body being so close to his.

"Can you—um—how do you—" I gesture to his wrists. I know he knows how to get out; I'm simply making a fool of myself. But he doesn't respond, his attention stuck to my waist, and I'm unsure if he's resisting a memory or fixated on a flaw in my dress.

I clear my throat, and his eyes snap up, readjusting to mine. A peaceful smile rolls over my lips. "Okay. What's your secret?" I ask. "How do you always know how to escape?"

Composed in posture, he shifts his right index finger and thumb to unlatch something small on the inside of his shackle. Then, as it clicks open, he reaches across and does the same movement to the left shackle. His hands are free and gripping my wrists gently. The little voice inside my head is shouting, screaming, howling for me to use enough common sense to be frightened, but I sit still and watch him.

"You're going to have to explain something to me," he demands lightly. The flesh plastered along his fingers is warm, always warm. "The man who abducted you is restrained, and you try to free him?" His voice is thick today, pouring hot with steam, dancing around the room like a few song notes that captivate an audience of one.

"You don't frighten me," I answer quickly, without truly taking into consideration the honesty of his words as well as the explanation. But it's true, I am not afraid of him. He intimidates me. He makes me nervous. He captivates me. He fascinates me. But he doesn't scare me. If anything, I'm frightened by the fact that he doesn't scare me. I should

have the good sense to be afraid of him, but that sense doesn't register for some unknown reason.

"Don't you find that interesting? I frighten every person who knows of me." He moves closer. "Everyone but you," he says, softer than a whisper.

"Why would I find that interesting?" I instigate.

"It's interesting because I'm sure you can imagine all of the grotesque, vile ways I could snap your neck and not lose a moment of sleep over it, and yet you're not afraid that I'm loose of my restraints," he says with a smirk. This smirk is devilish and cruel. It's painted with shards of a manipulative soul broken into tiny pieces that he must cradle inside.

The questions buzz inside my head—what could have happened to this young man who must have once had a heart? What turned him into this dominating, rancorous beast?

"That's a lie," I say.

He raises an eyebrow.

"You'd lose sleep over it," I snap, tugging my wrists free. "I know you think you're doing well at fending me off, keeping your secrets your own—remaining isolated—but you underestimate me. I'm going to figure you out, and I'm going to do it faster than you think."

Dessin reveals a faint smirk. "You really believe I'm underestimating you?" A flash of his white teeth. "It's delightful to hear that you think I don't know enough about you to know how quick you are at learning a human being inside and out. I'm not afraid of you cracking the case of the troubled yet devilishly handsome Patient Thirteen. I'm merely one microscopic piece to this puzzle you haven't come to see yet. And I'm aware of how it will break you inside to know the truth."

I think about asking what he means, but dismiss the thought as quickly as it comes. He wouldn't answer it, and even if he did, it would only bring about more annoying

questions never to be answered. "Shall we start the game?" I ask with a sigh.

"Yes."

My stomach gurgles, low and unnaturally loud. I push down on it with the palm of my hand, heat burning my cheeks with embarrassment. Looking up at him, it's like the sun has finally risen on his face, warm rays eliminating darkness. He's smiling, now also letting the amusement touch his eyes.

"After you eat," he says, smile growing wider.

"No, after *we* eat. I'll bring food from the dining hall for the two of us."

"I'm not hungry."

"I don't care," I say flatly.

We stare at each other as if waiting for the other to blink first. And a new rush of feeling warms my chest like a heated blanket. Familiar and comfortable. But, the way his chin tilts upward, the hint of a smirk softening his lips, it's a feeling of fondness.

I enjoy his company. Does he enjoy mine?

"Well, I suppose processed foods will kill me faster, so let's stock up." He hums enthusiastically, dripping with sarcasm.

26. Tea Time

APPROACHING THE DINING HALL, I inhale the scent of steamed broccoli and mashed potatoes. The sweet aroma of freshly baked bread and melted butter only infuriates the growling in my gut. Dishes for lunch have been arranged on a long rectangular dining table with white porcelain plates, silverware, and trays waiting to be filled.

I ignore the tables with conformists enjoying afternoon tea or picking at pieces of fruit as they gawk at me walking by. Before I make it to my destination, a cold hand snatches my wrist, stopping me in my tracks.

"Hi," Meridei greets me with a kind smile. Sitting next to her, Belinda, another conformist, mirrors her welcoming expression.

"Hello," I say, nodding my head to each of them.

"Could you spare a moment?" Belinda asks.

I look down at their table. Three cups of hot tea and a plate of biscuits in the center. Meridei signals to the cup of tea, disclosing that they've already prepared for me to say yes.

I smile back and sit in front of the third teacup, violets and angels painted on the fine china. "Is this for me?" I touch the handle of the cup.

They nod in unison.

I lift the cup, saucer in my other hand, and sip at the hot herbal mix.

"We have not formally met," Belinda states. "But I was acquainted with your sister."

I stop at my third sip, peeking over my cup at their expressions. They are neutral, hardened, like glass dolls, with their glossy, watermelon-pink lips and the emptiness behind their cloudy eyes.

"She was not the easiest to see eye to eye with," Belinda informs me as if somehow, I should apologize for her lack of

bedside manner. I want to laugh. Scarlett didn't get along with anyone. She was bitter and saw the worst in people.

"Since your arrival, I've been waiting for my moment to speak with you. In hopes we might understand each other."

I take another sip before setting my cup down, my stomach twisting once more to remind me why I'm here.

"And what is there to understand?" I ask.

"Your sister made a fuss once or twice about wanting to change certain traits the asylum has to offer. We did not agree. I was hoping we'd have that in common."

The treatments. They don't want them to end.

Meridei has remained silent, letting Belinda share their concerns. But her eyes are taunting, fixating on me as if she waits to see if I'll sprout horns and a tail.

"I can't say I share your beliefs," I say, rising from my seat. "Thank you for the tea."

In synchrony, their mouths part, opening to speak. I hurry along to the food before I can get sucked into their conversation again.

I fill Dessin's plates with as much "unprocessed" food as I can find.

My clean exit out of the dining hall without any more confrontation is an earned victory.

27. Satan Root

I keep my head down, power walking through the empty hallways.

The sharp hunger pains that once filled my empty stomach are manifesting into gurgling waves of nausea. The kind of hunger that denies you the relief of eating.

I blame this on Aurick for enforcing the lady-doll regimen. He didn't have to. It would have stayed between the two of us. But now, my limbs are trembling, and my insides are twisting. My body might be suffering from a lack of nutrition.

Heat rushes to my face, burning my cheeks. My hands tingle as I open the thirteenth door, and to my surprise, Dessin greets me before my feet pass the threshold. He relieves me of the heavy tray of food I'm holding, taking it to his bed.

I don't have the slightest clue why, but I'm prevented from taking another step. The same heat that touches my cheeks like a hard hand slapping me across the face is now spreading over my chest and back. It prickles over my skin as if my follicles are growing tiny needles. A dull throb unravels in my stomach—foreign to the hunger pains—an illness creeping up the walls of my esophagus, pressurizing in my throat.

I look up at Dessin, who is facing me now, completely still, examining me like I'm the patient. He steps away from the food, approaching me like a wounded animal about to attack. He reaches his hand over my face, hovering like I might bite.

"May I?" he asks.

I don't know what he's asking permission for, but the sweltering sharpness in my gut is putting me in a state of shock, and I don't care what he's asking for—my mind is too busy trying to understand. I nod.

He places his thumb over my bottom lip, lightly tugging it downward to open my mouth. A drop of sweat trickles down between my breasts, and the small space on my mouth where his thumb rests scorches with nerve endings dancing at his touch. And he leans in—as if to kiss me—his mouth levitating over my parted lips.

What is he doing? My stomach lurches as if its thin lining has melted away.

“Licorice and almonds,” he says slowly, leaning away with his hand cradling my chin. My stomach cramps again, this time forcing me to hunch over, wincing in pain.

“*Who—did—it.*” The words come seeping out of his lips like smoke pouring off of a cigarette. I freeze, the hairs rising on the back of my neck.

“Did what?”

He narrows his eyes at me. “Before you came back, did someone offer you something to eat? Or drink?”

I drop my eyes to the ground. *The tea.* Another sharp blade runs down my abdomen. This time, I moan, reaching my hand out for him to stabilize my balance. He latches on to my sides.

“They asked me to sit down for tea,” I finally answer. I know where he’s going with this. He smelled my breath for the remnants of poison. They tricked me.

“Am I going to die?” I ask, unable to look up at him.

“No,” he says. “But you need to let it run its course.” I’m guided to his bathroom floor, shivering, with a new chill wrapping itself around my sweaty body. He lowers me to the toilet, positioning my arms around the bowl.

“You should go,” I beg, panting as the saliva and lump in my throat drastically intensify. “I don’t want you to see me like this.”

He kneels down beside me, running his fingers through my damp hair, moving loose strands away from my face. He doesn’t respond, only looks into my watering eyes, a tilt in his neck saying, *I’m not leaving until it’s over.*

Oh no, he's going to see me vom—

And the bile is plunged from my throat like a heavy stream of hot broth. And suddenly, I don't care that he's here. The periphery of my vision disappears, and all that matters is the poison being forcibly removed from my digestive tract. My entire body locks up, the muscles in my abdomen hardening like cinder blocks as I contract like an accordion.

The more that flushes from my system, the more the sharp stretching pains are relieved. It isn't until I have a fleeting moment to gasp for breath that I realize Dessin's hand has been on my back, stroking in a circular motion, remaining at my side with my hair bunched up in his other hand.

When I come to a stopping point, he stands to exit the room, leaving me to collapse on my side after I flush the toilet. The corners of my mouth sting from the stomach acid, and I'm sore. Deathly, feverishly sore. The same brittleness to my bones one would feel after climbing a mountain or plowing a field by hand. I never want to leave this cold tile floor.

I wish I could say that it's over. But my stomach gurgles once more, like a pot of chili coming to a boil. The violent, razor-edged cramp in my gut flares up, and my whimpers become muffled by my face as I roll on the floor.

Oh God, please make it stop.

Dessin walks back into the room with a glass of water in each hand. His expression is calm yet deeply concentrated.

I groan and turn my body over so that I'm lying flat on my stomach.

"I need you to attempt to drink both of these glasses," he says.

I open my eyes, blink away the blurriness, and watch him pour a black powder, then a white powder into the glasses.

"Are you ensuring the job gets done?" A hoarse moan.

The corner of his mouth twitches. "Death by poison is for cowards. I, myself, enjoy the theatrics of a blade."

Hell. That is not helping. Now the thought of a bloody knife stomps around in my mind, and the nausea seems all the worse.

"You got everything out of your stomach, but the poison still lingers. You need water, or you're going to start heaving."

"What did you put in there?" He's right. My muscles are beginning to buckle down again, waiting for a second launch.

"Charcoal, magnesium, fendacia root, and lemondrak leaf," he says, handing me a glass. "It will protect your organs, expel any remaining doses of the satan root they poisoned you with."

Satan root. *What the hell were they trying to prove?*

"How did you get all of that?" Saliva pools in my mouth.

"Do you really think I'd trust the proper nutrition of my body with these disgusting human beings?" He helps me off the floor. I sit up against the toilet so I can drink his concoctions.

I take a sip, and even though there is seemingly no taste, it feels wrong to keep going. Like jumping into a volcano that is scheduled to blow any moment.

"I can't." I shake my head.

"Skylenna." His voice is now low and alarming. He's kneeling in front of me, eyes embracing mine with a fire, an urgency for me to listen. "By giving you satan root, they're expecting you to end up hospitalized for a while. They probably weren't anticipating you'd make it back to this room. I'm certain they imagined you collapsing in the hallway where others would find you."

I groan again. Why are the women here so insane? How could they knowingly harm me in this way?

"You're going to drink this. We're going to fight through it together. And you're going to leave this room without a

scratch. They'll think you're an untouchable demon from hell."

I smile at that. A weak, sleepy-eyed smile.

"Maybe then we'll have something in common, hmm?" I say, bringing the glass back to my lips to guzzle down.

After making it three-fourths of the way through the first glass, it all comes back out like a burst pipe, tasting like sour licorice.

He nudges the second glass to me. I grunt, smacking my hand down on the bathroom floor. "I want this to be over!"

"One more," he says.

No. I can't do one more. If I have to swallow another drop, I'll explode. I'll—

But it hits me—did Scarlett have to suffer their evil intentions? Did she go through this torture? The blazing thought of these women hurting my sister sparks an indestructible determination in me to make it through this without harm. Don't they know her entire childhood consisted of enduring the cruelty of adults? My wounded, sad Scarlett must have taken the beatings, then went home, shielding me from the knowledge of her scars.

I hate them.

I want them to *burn*.

Dessin is watching me, paying close attention as if he can see the trail my thoughts are running on. I hold out my hand, accepting the second glass.

While I recover on the bathroom floor, Dessin sits in the doorway, picking at his steamed broccoli.

"Why do you treat me differently than you do the other conformists? From what I've heard, you're far beyond ruthless and can instill fear within anyone. Why not me?"

There's caution in his eyes. He knows the answer and doesn't have to pay it a second thought. But it's as if telling me would be breaking unspoken vows.

"I'll tell you what"—he sets down his plate, running his hand over the lining of his jaw—"when this game is finally

over. I promise you will know everything I know.”

“That’s a big promise.”

“Fortunately for you, I don’t break promises.”

“Says the murderer... having an identity crisis.” I smile.

He glares at me and then smiles back. “Let’s begin.”

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28. Haunted by Design

I RATTLE MY BRAIN FOR a memory I can share with Dessin today. I want to recall a safe memory, a memory that won't give away too much about me before I know enough about him. I'm sitting back in my chair, counting off the eerie moments I have lived through over the years.

There's the time my father tried to teach me chess, then broke down into a crying fit. The time Scarlett sang me to sleep when I stopped eating for three weeks after I saw my father's house again for the first time since I left it to live with her. Or the time I caught her banging her forehead into the bathroom mirror. I got rid of all sharp objects in the house that day. So many lovely memories to choose from.

"It would help if I knew what kind of memories you want to hear." I close my eyes, leaning against his bathtub as I fight the flood of unwanted recollections scraping at my sanity.

Dessin's eyes narrow. "I want you to tell me one of the worst pains you've ever felt," he prompts me with an iron hammer that plows through the baby steps I wanted to take.

"That's awfully personal."

"Lead by example. I assume you don't want my professional resume. I'll give you what you give me," he says.

There is one memory—and it seems to be breaking out of its cage first.

"When I was fifteen, I had a bad accident. It was—well, it was enough to give me a three-month recovery time," I say, hearing him breathe in deeply. "And once recovered, I went to live with my sister—Scarlett—and it was after a long night of excruciating nightmares... I tried to jump off a bridge near our house."

Dessin straightens against the bathroom door. Alarmed and suddenly far from the calm and soothing demeanor he had before. "I did not know that..." he states.

Of course you didn't. Why would you?

Something crossing his face tells me he is hiding something, as usual. "Why would you—what happened?"

I consider his question. I consider lying. I could explain how I sleepwalk, not realizing what I was doing. But I did realize it. I remember every moment.

"The nightmares I had were flashes of my father's face as he struck me with a club. And that was bad, yes, terrible. But after all of that, I dreamed I was waiting in the forest, searching for something I lost. I was calling out for someone."

I sound like a lunatic. But he leans in, locking his aim on me, clenching so tightly I can hear his teeth grinding together.

"A name I couldn't put my finger on..." I continue, unsure if he is putting on a show of intimate interest for me. "And I felt true agony. A sadness and loneliness I have never felt before. Like a broken heart, perhaps. It was deeply rooted despair that had sunk its teeth into my heart, and I could no longer ignore it. I woke up and stayed awake for hours with this feeling in my chest and in the pit of my stomach. Whatever I lost, whatever I felt I could never get back, was entirely too much to live with. I thought I might have been finally mourning my father. But—now I know this is going to sound weird, so don't judge me too harshly—the pain felt bigger than that. I was grieving, I think. But I don't know that it was for my father."

He lifts his chin, sighs slowly.

"I went to the bridge by my house. It was a cold night, with ice still hardened over the wooden panels. I knew that hitting the water with such a temperature would kill me. I just wanted that feeling to go away... *Forever.*"

I look at Dessin for a snide comment. Something to break the tension of this moment. Nothing. He watches me, still.

"Scarlett found me, grabbed my hand while I had one foot hovering over the drop. She pulled me slightly and said with purpose and promise, *It's just me and you now. I'm not going to leave you, Skylenna.*

"I'll never forget those words. That hole in my chest never went away, but it was dulled by her promise of us being together. Her promise of never leaving me."

"But she did leave you."

I look down. Does he know? Does he know *how* she died? No, he couldn't possibly. How could he? I am quite literally the only person alive who knows how she departed this world. I don't think that will ever change.

"Yes," I answer. "Yes, she did."

"And did you ever figure out what you had lost? Any idea?"

I clear my throat. "No. I decided on a couple ideas. Brain injury from the accident, or seeing my childhood home for the first time and realizing all I had lost."

"But you don't believe either of those... Do you?"

"I don't know."

He furrows his brow, nods slowly.

"Clue one. Let's hear it," I say.

He stands up, shifting his tray off to the side with his bare foot, reaching into the sink to wet a napkin. "Clue one," he begins, bending down to one knee, shifting my hair away from my face to touch my cheeks with a cold, wet towel. I must look flushed.

"Go to the farthest building north of the city. It's an abandoned building... It used to belong to one of Demechnef's headquarters. Go to the last room, on the top floor. Take a look around. I'm curious to see what you find."

I study him with a suspicious grimace. "You want me to poke my head inside an abandoned Demechnef building?" I

mock. He blinks back, waiting for me to accept the fact that he means every word. “*Okay*,” I say between pauses, watching him comb his fingers through my wavy hair.” But what if it’s dangerous?”

“It might be,” he taunts with narrowing eyes. “But you’ll go anyway.”

I roll my eyes at his confidence, mostly because it’s spot on. I’ll go. Of course, I’ll go. If it gets me a step closer to understanding him, I will walk through a field of grenades.

“I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, then?”

He blinks slowly, a deeply satisfied smile.

“Don’t tell anyone where you’re going.”

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29. Forged From Fire

THEIR EYES, AS IF STITCHED to remain open permanently, follow me down the long hall into the main corridor.

I thought I'd only witness the mortified glares from Meridei and Belinda. But they are gawking at me in shock by the dozens. How many wanted to see me kiss the cold lips of death? How many were expecting I'd leave in the arms of a physician?

But I glide across that checkerboard-tiled floor with my shoulders back and a smirk, like I'm untouchable. Like I'm built for war.

Like I'm the king.

I finally notice Meridei and Belinda filling out their daily paperwork, sitting at a writing desk with a gas lamp illuminating their clipboards. I hover over their work, casting my shadow upon them like a sword to their throats.

In synchrony, they raise their eyes to look up at me. Meridei's eyes twitch. Belinda coughs as if her sudden gasp forced her to accidentally inhale a string of saliva.

"I'm pleased we came to an understanding today," I tell them. "Yes, I'm pleased because I wouldn't want either of you to fall under the assumption that I don't like to play games."

"I don't catch your meaning," Meridei says slowly, keeping her face perfectly still.

I lean forward, clamping my hands down over theirs, squeezing.

"I believe it's my move now."

30. “Will You Always Protect Me?”

“YOU’RE NOT LEAVING THIS HOUSE.”

Aurick crosses his arms over his chest with a wounded look, a frown that only flickers across his eyes.

“One, there’s a storm coming. Two, it is frowned upon for a woman to walk around alone. And three, the evenings are the only time of day I get to enjoy your company,” he explains.

“I’ll only be gone an hour or two,” I offer.

“What do you have to do?” he asks, face falling from a heavy sigh.

I consider telling him I am following up on a lead with Dessin... But something deep inside of me is waving a red flag. “Today is my father’s birthday.” *At least I’m not lying.* “I’d like to visit him before the night ends.”

His brow softens, and he cocks his head back slightly, focusing on me with wide eyes. He nods once, slow with a sigh of remorse. “Would you like me to go with you?”

“No,” I utter. “That’s nice of you to offer, but this is a visit I need to do by myself.”

He nods again and hugs me. The warmth of his hug reminds me how badly I miss the comfort my father used to share. In his moments of lucidness, he’d hold me when I’d cry after being locked in the basement for weeks. He’d snap out of the cruel trance, pull me from the murky pit of the house, and hold me tight.

“I’ll be here when you get back.”

~

THIS POCKET OF LAND IS stowed away, once holding the path of a paved road, with a secured gated entrance and perimeter. Once, there were fantastical towers, barracks alongside an open field, and a dazzling wide river that coursed through

grounds. There were armed men on posts, occasionally known to disguise themselves among the trees.

At least, that's what I read in one of Aurick's books in his study.

Now, the once skyscraping iron gates are melted to the ground, blasted through from chemical warfare within the first ten years of settlement. Trees, bushes, and weeds have conquered the open fields, grown through the barracks, and swallowed the paved roads. Headquarters lie beyond the barracks and past the once open field, a stone and pebbled tower—reigning as tall as a mountain as it kisses the underside of the clouds. All part of a strike of war from our southern rival country, Vexamen. War since settlement, sixty years ago.

My buggy leaves me at the entrance, promising me two hours to explore before returning. I gape up at the monumental architecture, shielding my eyes from the hot glow of the setting sun beaming alongside the tower. The wind had intensified before I left Aurick's estate, beating against the windows of the buggy like a possessed whip. Now, it whirled through my hair and the silk, stormy-gray evening dress I changed into, blasting it around like a loose flag.

If I get tetanus here, I'll beat him.

I walk right in, stepping over the double walnut entry doors, which are punctured and flattened at the threshold. Aside from the piles of ash and chandelier-sized holes in the ceiling and walls, this place doesn't look so different from the inside of the asylum. Without the overtone of potpourri, there is even that same draft of murky lake water with the heavy difference of charcoal and soot.

To my left are spiraled stairs that look like they go on forever. Sadly, my legs aren't equipped for all of this action—Dessin should have figured that out by now.

My heart batters slightly in my chest as I ascend, hoping there aren't too many floors. He said the top one and the

last room. I could be hiking up these stairs for leagues, fainting before I finally reach the end.

I count as I pass each floor, wondering what Dessin's life was like before he admitted himself to the asylum. How did he come to know about the last floor in this tower? Where did he live? What were his passions? What did he care about?

My legs burn with the constant uphill battle to reach my destination, passing floor number six, my arms now sticky from sweat. I tug my gray gloves off my hands, fiddling with them to exert my frustration. *How many more?*

Seven.

I smile to myself, leaning up against the wall for support, swallowing to assist my now drier-than-dirt throat. The heavy winds whistle through the holes and gashes in the hallway.

I look to the end—the last door, wooden, cracked open, and a gentle breeze nudging it wider. I wish Dessin was here with me. He could tell me what really happened here. Even though details were left out, I know he'd have some way of knowing.

Not to mention his company—it would have been nice.

I step over chunks of debris and stone cascaded over the dark wood floors. Setting my sights and tunnel vision for that door, jittering with new energy to find what clue he's left for me. How will I know what it is? What if this is a wild-goose chase? It feels like something he would do. Toy with my emotions by getting me to spill my buried memories in exchange for false leads and useless hours spent following them.

I push open the door, greeted by a rush of cold wind carrying the smell of rain.

A miniature library. Its shiny wooden interior, red carpet, sconces, and a scotch decanter with two crystal glasses on the corner of the desk. The makings of a savant's study,

much like Aurick's, minus the old papers crumpled about and littering the floor.

Where do I start? There is no sign pointing me in the right direction, no illuminatingly peculiar object lying around for me to immediately see. Does he expect me to dig through all of this? The cabinets, the drawers?

I take a few more steps inside, letting myself wander around, waiting for that sign, that pointing finger, to a location I can investigate. But everything here is ordinary, unremarkable, at least not to the standards that would help me identify a clue from Dessin. I suppose I could start with the desk drawers. Peeking behind the desk, I glance over at the bookshelves—a carving into the wood catches my eyes like a spark from a lighthouse.

It's the shape of a tree, with the letters S.W.A.

S.

W.

A.

It's as if the red seas have parted, and those letters glow. Those are *my* initials.

Skylenna Winter Ambrose.

But, no, it isn't possible. Dessin couldn't have left the asylum, come all the way here in the time I've met him, knowing I'd play his game, knowing I'd come here and browse this room in this abandoned tower. He couldn't have planned this. And even if he somehow could have, I never shared my middle name with anyone at the asylum. In fact, Scarlett was the only other person who knew it, other than my father. And now, it's just me.

I lightly touch the carving, careful not to miss a detail, afraid it'll disappear, wash away under my caress. *How could you know so much, Dessin?* The tree's carving is deeper than the letters, the line darker. I push down on the trunk of the tree, and it gives no resistance, falling into the backboard of the shelf. There's a double click, and the

underside of the shelf splits, dropping down on top of the books below like a swinging attic door.

I catch a thick leather string, and a piece of paper tumbles from the opening. My hand feels around in search of anything else. Empty.

A shuddering creak comes from outside the door. I shove the piece of paper and string into the pocket of my dress. My eyes dart around, searching for the cause of the sound and my heart jumps into my throat, flutters there for a moment, like a butterfly trapped in a net. A lanky, dirty man lurks in the doorway, staring at me. He is built like a naked tree in winter, with knobby joints and weather-worn skin. He smooths the sides of his wizened sandy hair as his chest moves rapidly, only breathing through his cracked lips.

"You don't look like the average tenant here," he says with a childish lisp. His clothes are old and torn up. Different dirty shades of white and gray. Sweat stains and an unkempt beard.

Of course, Dessin. Of course, there would be wild men here.

I back into the bookshelves. Should I be nervous? He might be friendly. As if sensing my uncertainty, he takes a step forward into the room and shuts the door.

I swallow and straighten up. My first response is to think of what Dessin would do. He'd show no fear. That much is without question.

"I was just leaving," I say, attempting to sound uninterested and confident.

The filthy man chuckles, licking his gums, never dropping his milky gaze from mine. "Are you here all by yourself, miss?"

My spine, pin straight. "I'm exploring." *Say someone is here with you. Tell them they are only a mere two floors below. Say something!*

"I like to explore." His chapped lips stretch over his stained teeth. "Abandoned towers, abandoned homes..."

Silence. He takes two steps toward me. "...Abandoned *women*." He closes the space between us. His breath is foul and smells like he's been chewing on a dead body.

"Someone is waiting outside for me," I finally whisper, knowing that in no way am I nearly as intimidating as Dessin, and I won't be able to talk myself out of this one. It's clear he hasn't seen a woman in quite a long time.

"Oh." His voice reaches a higher tune as he glances over my shoulder, out through the barred window. I squeeze my eyes shut. "I suppose they went on a walk." He half smiles, eyes wandering the length of my body. "How long do you think they'll be gone?" The back of his hand caresses the length of my hair, spinning in waves along the sides of my breast to my waist. "Perhaps an hour?"

"Please. I have money. I have lots of money," I beg. A moment of dread passes over me, like putting your hand over a hot stove that you didn't know was on. I remember Scarlett sobbing as she told me the horrors of all men. Their hunger and desire, like rabid animals, taking what they want. The effect your separateness has on them. How it grows into something scary that will hurt your insides. How your body is broken down and raw with a sting that stays with you forever.

The muscles in my thighs start to tremble.

"I can never go back to that city, little doll. Money serves me no purpose." He spits in my face. "However, your sinless body is priceless to me." He kisses my neck, and my motor functions turn to stone. I can't breathe. I can't fight.

The man grabs my shoulders and slams me to the floor, rattling the glass on the desk, forcing his knees between my legs. I let out the loudest scream I can build in my chest and gut, the same cry that came from my lips when Scarlett died. The same scream that released from my bloody body as my father was about to swing the club into my face. The panic, flashing images of Scarlett shaking and screaming,

her stories, the terror she felt as a child when those grown men touched her.

And like Scarlett, there is no one here that can help me, but I scream as loudly as my lungs will allow anyway. He puts his hand over my mouth and pants in laughter. "There is no one around here for miles!"

"Please don't do this!" I scream, my words muffled under his sweaty palm, tasting of rust.

He rips my dress down the middle, exposing my white brassiere. He moans. "Keep begging." The aggressive, disgruntled man pins my arms down and pushes his mouth against mine.

"No!" I screech against his lips. Shaking my head back and forth.

An abrupt boom vibrates the walls, rattling the window, and the door has flown open. It slams against the adjacent wall, and something crashes to the floor from the impact.

I gasp, unable to see the cause.

The wild man shifts to the side, twisting his head and torso to see what started the disruption.

Dessin is blocking the doorway. Brooding like cold death.

His eyes are in a blood rage, piercing through my attacker's skull. I try to squirm out from under him, but he holds on tighter, his legs forcing mine to widen for his hips.

"Out! We're busy!" my attacker shouts at Dessin. But he doesn't know Dessin. He doesn't know that his mind knows no limit. He doesn't know that Dessin is not a forgiving man.

There's a change in the air around us, like the darkening before a storm. I whimper and scream under the man's grip, and Dessin's eyes flash to mine, honing a darkness I have yet to see. He charges, pulling the man's arms behind his back and slamming him into the wall by the window adjacent to the bookshelves. I hear a loud unnatural snap, and I pull myself off the ground to watch the disaster spin out into an apocalypse.

The man's arms hang off his body like they are made of jelly. "Get off of me!" the man pleads with his face mashed in the cement wall.

Dessin smirks and whispers in his ear, "Keep begging." His voice is raspy and deep. Dessin bangs the man's head into the wall several times until there is blood spilling from his nose and mouth, smearing against the wood interior. The man drops to his knees, crying hysterically. Dessin turns around and looks at me, eyes examining my frame, trying not to look too much at my dress, that is torn open.

He begins walking over to me.

"I didn't know she was *your* whore!" The man spits blood.

Dessin stops dead in his tracks. Eyes locked with mine, chaos exploding behind his hard gaze. Deep down, I know what is about to happen. I know that I'm about to witness a measure of what people at the asylum fear from Dessin. And that knowledge has suspended the air in my lungs. I do not wish good things for this man after what he was about to do to me. But I do not wish him dead. Although, part of me can't help but debate that. He could have been one of the men who hurt Scarlett. I could never know this for sure.

Dessin's brown eyes turn a shade of hickory in the light of the dimming sunset, narrowing on mine as he turns around slowly to lock his focus on his prey. The man looks up at him through involuntary tears, obviously regretting his decision to speak again.

Dessin grabs hold of the man's head and twists quickly and effortlessly. A wet, thick snap, like lightning striking a tree—it drills into my memory without warning. I'll never forget the way the life emptied from his eyes, like removing a cork from a bathtub.

He drops the man's body to the floor, and it all happens in slow motion in my mind. Spots in my vision, legs locked tightly, my back pressed into the door.

And Dessin stares at the body lying on the ground, disfigured and drenched in blood. My instinct to collapse to my knees is drowned out by his calm stance. I can tell there must be something going on in his mind that will hurt him for a long time.

I rush to his side to grip his left arm, blood rushing back into my legs and restarting the wires in my brain. "Hey," I whisper. He yanks his arm away from me. I grab on again and turn him to face me. "Look at me," I demand.

He drops his eyes down to me from the significant height difference, breathing heavy, chin raised. I gaze back at him, trying to figure out if I am the one he is mad at. It takes me a moment to wrap my mind around the fact that he saved me. He must have followed me to make sure I would be safe. Seeing the anger that engulfed him when he saw what that vile man was about to do to me... Is he starting to care for me?

"I'm okay," I whisper. Dessin jolts his glare back down at the broken body taking up space on the ground. The muscles in his jaw flex twice; he doesn't blink. His expression is unreadable, but I have a hunch that he wants to damage this corpse more than he has already done.

"Dessin, let's go." I tug his arm once, but he remains stationary, impossible to move. I've never seen so much hatred in someone's eyes.

I take another route. "What was your mother's name?" The question bursts impulsively from my mouth.

This catches him by surprise. He is still stuck in a rage, but at least now he is distracted. "My *what*?" he pants.

"Your mother. What was her name?"

He stares at me for a moment, partially lost in a memory, partly confused with the change in the direction of the situation. "Why do you—"

"Just tell me," I insist.

"Sophia," he finally says in a daze.

I nod, feeling a triumphant sense of relief that he is semi-calming down. "My father's name was Jack." I slide my hand up his arm. "Let's go home, okay?" *Home*. The phrase feels natural to say to him, but hearing the words come out of my mouth, they sound harsh, considering I am talking about the asylum. That isn't a home, not even close. Yet, he follows me out the door without saying another word.

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31. Motives

"WHY WERE YOU FOLLOWING ME?" I ask. His legs are longer than mine, so naturally, he walks faster down the stairs, and I find myself practically jogging to keep up.

"You seem to have the habit of collecting bad karma," he answers.

His answer fills my stomach with feathers. "*Sooo...*" I muse over the idea I am about to throw in the air. "You wanted to keep me safe."

"No," he replies sternly.

"You wanted to protect me," I offer again.

"NO."

"THEN WHAT?!"

"I DON'T KNOW!" A lion's roar. His hot breath—a gentle breeze over my face.

We pause in the middle of the stairwell for several seconds. "Careful. You wouldn't want me to believe you could possibly have a heart," I say.

"*Ha!*" He begins walking down the stairs again.

"Perhaps that is exactly what I want you to believe." His deep, rugged voice is hot, boiling water. I follow after him, tripping my first step then regaining balance on the next.

"Well, you could have let that man defile me," I pant, trying to keep up with him.

Dessin spins around to point a finger in my direction. "Enough, Skylenna." The anger refuels his warm-brown eyes. For some reason, this amps me up.

"You could have let him violate me in all sorts of terrible ways, but you didn't."

He corners me, hands pressed against the wall. "I SAID ENOUGH!"

Adrenaline pulses through my body. "I'm sorry," I mutter. His glare fixates on me as he slowly comes out of the rage I

put him in. "I didn't know me talking about it would bother you this much."

He grimaces. In a swift decision, I wrap my arms around his neck and bury my face in his shoulder. "Thank you for protecting me," I whisper, trapping my warm breath against his neck. He's tense, built like a castle, complete with walls to keep me out. Several seconds pass, and his arms remain at his sides. He exhales slowly and gently circles them around my waist.

I release a breath, unsure how I feel about this moment we are sharing. Grateful he has impeccable timing with this ability to show up at the final hour to save me. Excited that he is showing more and more signs of actually having feelings and passions. Nervous that aside from these feelings, I have one hiding deeper inside of me that I am trying to keep undetectable.

"Where does Aurick think you are?" Dessin grabs my waist and helps me down the two broken steps.

"Ahhh." I sigh, wondering if he knows what day it is. "I had a convincing excuse."

"Hmm, it seems a little *me* of you to use such a dreary day in your past to manipulate your friend." *And there it is. Of course he knows what today is. Why wouldn't he?*

We exit the tower. The sky shows signs of a storm coming our way, lightning cracks across the sky, and the clouds clap with thunder.

"I am not manipulating him." I gesture, looking around the abandoned field. "I just knew he would never be okay with me coming out here... He would want to come with me and learn whatever you wanted me to learn about yourself, which I might add—I would never violate your trust. So really, I was doing *you* a favor." I begin walking in the direction of where I thought I came from. I turn back around to look at Dessin. "Are you ever going to tell me how you mysteriously know so much about my life?"

"Why would I do a silly thing like that?"

The cool breeze against my cheek becomes moist and heavy. His soft brown hair whooshes away from his face in the gentle wind, leaving one stray lock to rest to the side of his temple. I lose my train of thought for a moment as I imagine myself running my hand through his hair, to feel its thickness between my fingers, to see his change in expression as I step into him.

He blinks at me, snapping his fingers in front of my face. "Focus, Skylenna." His eyes look intently amused.

"How many people have you killed?" I snap out of my momentary catatonic daze.

He chokes on a surprised laugh. "What?" He half smiles at me expectantly.

"How many? I want to know."

He brushes me off with a whimsical rise of his brow and a sneer in his smile.

"You certainly aren't subtle, are you?" He crosses his arms. "I have not kept count." I follow behind him as he walks in the direction of the oncoming storm.

"That is *definitely* a lie."

"How do you figure?"

"I think you've kept count every single time, even though the other man living in your head wishes you could forget."

"How are you getting home?" he asks. I can see in the distance the rain falling in a mist of gray. Dessin watches it unconcerned.

"I'm not going home." I glare. "I'm staying right here until I get some answers!" I stomp back to the tower, hoping he doesn't see through my bluff and falls into my trap.

The rain reaches us, pouring over my body and staining the abandoned road.

Dessin whips his head back around to see me heading for the stone steps. Rain plummets to the ground, dampening my dress, turning the gray fabric into black. And the wind

is harsh, almost aggressive, as it whips my hair across my face.

A striking gash of annoyance appears on his face. He unfolds his arms and stubbornly walks toward me. I can hardly see him as he makes his way through the curtain of fog and falling water.

"Do you have a death wish?" he shouts over the thunder. "This isn't just a little rain, Skylenna. A hurricane is blowing in. It's either drown out here or go back inside and get attacked by another lawless rat."

I look out at the blurred horizon, unrecognizable with a waterfall of rain. "What do you want from me, Dessin?" I whisper, the notes and letters of my desperate question free-falling into the abyss of the storm.

He looks away, pulling me under the shelter of the doorway, watching the white and gray blaze surround us.

"I want you to be cautious, and I want you to get strong." He looks down at me, his heavy, sultry voice echoing against the walls of our shelter.

"Cautious of what?"

"Of me. Of the asylum. Of everything... Of *everyone*." He moves closer. "You're too trusting, and you're far too forgiving."

"Why are those all bad things?" I mutter, feeling overwhelmed with this day and our conversation.

"They aren't bad.... Unless there are constant threats around you."

Threats? Am I unknowingly being sucked into his paranoia?

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"You'll crumble to pieces. You are too fragile and kind to be this trusting." Raindrops tumble over his full lips, running down his chin and disappearing across his neck.

But my gaze is transfixed on his mouth. And with a shift in the air, he notices. The acknowledgment is in the subtle

tension creeping into his jawline. I flick my gaze up quickly, embarrassed that I lingered there for a moment too long.

But it's a mistake...because his dark, powerful, brooding eyes have dropped down to my lips, shamelessly studying them without blinking. I'm suddenly overwhelmed by the broad width of his shoulders consuming every breath of air around me. His wet hair is messy from the impact of the storm, and I don't know what comes over me. I don't process the impulse as my hand reaches to his hairline, smoothing the strands away from his face.

The light touch shoots a bolt of lightning up my arm, and his eyes close in response. The sound of his ragged breathing blends in with the harsh winds and pounding rain behind him. His brows knit together as if my touch physically pains him. But his eyes stay closed, and his jaw clenches.

I should say something. We've been sucked into a moment I don't know how to climb out of. I lift my hand away from his scalp, slowly, carefully reeling it back to the safety of my own space.

But he closes the distance around me, slamming my back into the stone wall with gentle aggression. He's a snake that has decided to strike. And those eyes have snapped open, hooded and glazed over as if he's under a spell.

"Please," he utters. His voice is gravel and thunder. "Tell me to stop."

A wicked feeling curls low in my belly. *Tell him to stop!* I can't speak. I can't even wipe the stupid look off my face.

His rigid arms are holding him up against the wall on either side of me. More drops of rain roll down his sun-kissed skin, outlining his bulging muscles.

"No," I say the word like it's a plea for life. A plea to survive.

The rumbling in his chest is a cross between a growl and a groan. Tortured and pleased.

"No," I say again, striking away any doubt he had that I said it the first time. His arms leave the wall, clamping down on my waist with a hungry possession. His entire body closes in now, pressing against my front with a feverish need to touch me. I let out a stuttering gasp.

What am I doing? I have to stop this.

"Skylenna," he pants, forehead pressing against mine. "I need you to be safe. I *need* you to be safe." There's emotion there. Ancient, clouded feeling that's layered with lust.

I want him to lower his mouth. My hands slide up his neck, snaking over his jawline to pull his face closer to mine. My fingertips graze the stubble over his skin, and I can't hold back the satisfying moan that slips from my throat.

That soft sound sparks fireworks behind his hooded gaze. His hands tighten around my waist like he's a breath away from ripping off my dress. And with that thought, he pushes himself away, turning around to face the storm with clenched fists.

"I'm not fragile at all," I say breathlessly. "I can handle whatever you can handle."

He doesn't look back. "That's what I'm hoping to find out." His hands rest on his hips. "How are you getting home?" Like clockwork, my buggy pulls up slowly, tires whooshing through the flooding water. "Go," he urges.

"I'm not just going to leave you here?!" I step back.

"Yes, you are. I got here on my own. I can get back just as easily. *Go.*"

I grab his arm. "Come with me."

His brown eyes widen, and he smiles slowly. "No, Skylenna. But I think you should make one more stop before going back into the arms of the devil." He smirks at the satanic reference to Aurick. "Go see Jack." *My father.* Strange to hear someone else say his name as if they knew him personally.

My stomach flips, and I involuntarily ball up my fists.

“I’ll see you soon,” he says, disappearing into the shadows of this old decaying building.

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32. Until the End

I PLANTED A RED OAK tree where he was buried.

To me, it was better than leaving flowers. Flowers get stepped on, wither away, decay into the dirt. But red oak trees were our favorite—they reminded us of warm summers swimming in the lagoon, enjoying a picnic in the shade of the red canopy of leaves. This is how he would have wanted it.

The rain soaking the tree makes the leaves look like they are on fire, and the bark is almost black from water absorption. I did not have the means for a headstone, so I found a rock the size of a baby and carved his name.

Jack Ambrose.

I lean against the tree, avoiding the downpour as I process being here again. The last time I was here was the same day I said goodbye to Scarlett. The same day I watched her body light up with fire, and the last time I held her hand.

“Happy birthday,” I tell him, wondering how old he would be if he were still alive. “I’m not entirely sure why I came. I didn’t think I would have ever come back after—after we were here last. I partially blamed you for her death, but I mostly blamed myself.” I fidget with my wet hands uncomfortably. “She *died* that day, Jack... And it was not a peaceful way of parting this world. It was ugly and sad and unnatural.”

A fist of hard anger clenches inside my chest. I want to scream at him. I want him to rise from beneath the mud and stand before me, so I can tell him all about Scarlett’s life—abused, molested, locked in a closet, starved, maimed, depressed, hating herself, hating me, and hating the world. But he is dead now, decayed and one with the earthworms.

“I still love her.” Fat drops of water fall from leaves overhead, splashing against my cheeks and drizzling down

my scalp. "And I still love you, despite everything you've done, despite your abuse. I *still* love you. And when you died, I hope you left your ugliness behind in this world, so you can take care of my sister wherever you are now."

I pause briefly. A shiny gold object catches my attention on top of his stone. I stand and pick it up with my index and thumb and let it settle on my palm. A gold locket that says: *Until the End*, engraved in cursive. I push my thumbnail between the crease and prop it open.

My neck stiffens, and I gasp.

I haven't seen my father's face in far too long, but it's a face I could never forget. Bright, practically glowing, forest-green eyes, thick black hair, and the defined features of a pointy nose and square jaw. The picture on the right is of a woman who incites fire in my heart when I think of her face. Her hair is hanging down her shoulders in long, blonde waves. The sharp, poised face of a princess. She isn't smiling; she is glaring. The circles under her eyes are ashen, as are the shadows under her cheekbones.

She's sick.

This woman gave birth to Scarlett and me.

It's hard to comprehend that this is only the second time I have ever laid eyes on her. The pit of my stomach stings with an unrecognizable growth of resentment. I'm suddenly aware of my surroundings. Could this locket have been left here today? It would make sense. Our mother, Violet, was here on the day Scarlett died. She was drenched in tears for the anniversary of my father's death. It was the first time I saw her in person.

A wave of sickness fills my stomach at the thought of her stare aimed at Scarlett. My sad, sad Scarlett. She only ever wanted to be loved by Violet.

I tuck the locket into my pocket and take a step toward my father's stone and rest my hand where the locket once was. A flashback of the back of his hand striking my cheek shoots pain down my spine. Then another flash of my father

sitting with me on the edge of a cliff—watching the sunset
bounce across the lagoon under the red oaks.

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33. The Leather Man

I SNUCK INTO AURICK'S HOUSE through the window.

He was arguing on the phone with someone about acquiring better filing systems. I figured he would be asleep, or at least that's what I was hoping for.

I wanted to be alone for a little while before Aurick realized I was home and bombarded me with questions, so without changing out of my wet clothes, I climbed the attic ladder and enclosed myself in the only room I haven't been in.

I stand up, observing the moonlit attic coated with a thick sheet of dust and old furniture. I curl up on a pink velvet, mahogany-framed couch, pulling out the contents of my pocket. The string that I felt first is a necklace made of leather, with a small wooden cross hanging off the bottom. I inspect the cross closely. Its edges are jagged, its ends are uneven. It was, without a doubt, handcrafted.

And since this is a clue to figuring him out, could this mean that his previous host was a believer in Christ? I pull out the piece of paper I found. Although, it's not just a piece of paper. It's an envelope.

To The Leather Man

This will be my last letter to you.

It is to happen soon.

I have done all I can for my sons. Their affairs are in order—I have planned for the next fifty years, and one day, they'll find it together and put the pieces together.

You know how I've always enjoyed my puzzles.

I do hope you've done your part—for the key to said puzzle. Without it, my pieces might disappear, dissolve into my memory forever.

My last bit of advice, as parents, this is all we can do. This evil is beyond the protection of mother and father.

Beyond the walls we can build to protect them. Because, my dear friend, they will grow to protect themselves. My eldest knows to never abandon the key to that puzzle. He has learned quickly and will come to you when that evil knocks on my door, and only then may I finally rest.

Teach him then to watch over the others.

Because one day, it will be them against the whole world.

Goodbye, my friend. I will wait for you in the clouds.

Okay—*Really, Dessin?*

I can only gather small slivers of possible clues from this letter. It's a parent writing to a parent about their sons. Perhaps one of the sons is Dessin? Or the previous host that came before Dessin? There are no names other than *The Leather Man*.

The writer could either be his mother or his father, and it speaks of a great evil, preparing the sons for a puzzle. Do his troubles go back to his family?

Stuffing the items back into my pocket, I push against the door with the balls of my feet, letting the ladder fall to the carpet below so I can climb my way down. When my feet hit the floor, a cold wind blows against my damp dress, like shards of ice through the holes of the fabric. I turn around and shriek, falling against a console table, bumping into a vase that crashes to the carpet. At the end of the hallway, an abnormally tall man's silhouette faces me, moonlight pouring over his shoulders from the window behind him.

"Aurick!" I shout, reaching my hand across the broken glass to use as a makeshift weapon.

A hoarse laugh comes from the tall man standing in the dark. He reaches out his hand in protest.

"There's no need for that, Sky. I am not going to hurt you."

Aurick exits the room closest to the tall man, looks at him, then follows his gaze to me. "What happened to *you*?"

I lift my hand from the broken glass and straighten up. My hair is still wet, my dress is ruined. I must look like a stray.

"I was caught in the storm on the way home," I say. "I didn't know we had company."

"Yes." He smiles at the company still darkened in the corner. "This is my oldest and closest friend, Masten."

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he tells me, stepping into the light of the sconce. Even though he dresses like Aurick and has hair like Aurick's, something about him makes me tense. "In fact, you frightened me when you scaled your way from the ceiling."

Oh no. It must look like I've been snooping.

As expected, Aurick raises his chin, glowering at me.

"Why were you in the attic?" he asks, suspicion rising in his tone.

I open my mouth to feed him an excuse, but nothing comes out. I didn't prepare a lie, and now I have to do it in front of an audience. I repeatedly blink, begging my mind to conjure something to offer him. Nothing. I'm empty-handed.

"Have you not set house rules for her yet?" Masten turns his attention to Aurick.

House rules? Am I a stray animal to them?

I drop my jaw and wait for Aurick's response.

"No, I have not. I suppose leniency is a weakness of mine." Aurick expresses with casual coolness.

"I only required a moment alone," I finally spit out.

Aurick raises his eyebrows, and Masten laughs. "And with thirty-seven rooms to this estate, that must have been difficult to come by."

I blow out a frustrated breath, feeling the spotlight on me and the embarrassment warming my cheeks. Shouldn't

he ask Masten to leave so we can speak about this in private?

"Might this one possibly be a little jealous? Of your deceased beloved? That could explain her rummaging through Red's belongings." Masten gestures to the attic.

Are Red's belongings stored up there? Maybe I should have snooped, considering this is becoming such a big deal. I'm being accused of something I didn't do, all because I didn't want Aurick to ask questions about the letter and necklace I found. I wanted to protect Dessin's privacy.

"Quite right." Aurick nods, considering Masten's assumption. "Well, what did you find, Sky? Anything worth sharing?"

I grind my teeth, frozen in place. What is going on? They're acting like I committed a federal offense. I was only in the attic, for God's sake.

"I wasn't *rummaging* through anything," I grumble, a flash of awkwardness and anger burning my stomach.

Masten approaches me, leaning his weight on a long cane, with a metal wolf's head at its handle under the palm of his hand. I back myself into the console again, unable to sense his intentions.

"My friend is quite generous, wouldn't you say?"

I look over his shoulder at Aurick, who shares the same look of conviction. I grip the table digging into my lower back and nod reluctantly.

"But this glorious society we live in is built on pristine presentation. And if he cannot present a pristine houseguest, well then, he should not be living in it, correct?"

He's lowering his concrete gaze at me, waiting for a nod of understanding.

"I am not his *wife*," I say between my teeth. "You cannot treat me like this." How is Aurick letting this man speak to me this way?

“But if you’re living here, then you might be one day,” he informs me the way one would inform a child of their petty mistake. He looks over his shoulder at Aurick, who is now leaning against the windowsill with his arms crossed.

“This is why daily discipline for young women is prudent. Their hormones and monthly cycles make them most similar to wild animals.”

Masten shoots his arm forward, snatching the hair from the back of my head in his hand, bunched against my scalp in a wad. I yelp and squeeze my eyes shut as his fingernails dig into me, clenching each strand of hair until my follicles scream in pain.

“Do you understand that by undermining Aurick’s authority, as master of this house—you have undoubtedly embarrassed him in front of company?” Masten huffs into my face, his breath reeking of bourbon and roast beef.

My legs buckle, trembling as Masten invades my space, and my heart rattles inside of my chest like a drawer of loose hardware. I can’t believe Aurick is letting Masten put his hands on me. Rebuttal boils and hisses within the walls of my throat, but nothing escapes. The urge to reach for a shard of glass from the broken vase is there, begging for me to fight back, like a voice of power heavy with armor behind my weakness. But I could never hurt someone else. Not even if they are hurting me.

“I understand.” I moan with a strained neck.

“And you understand how lucky you are that your friend and gracious host of this estate doesn’t strike you across the face or introduce you to the paddle for this indiscretion?”

The paddle? What the hell? *I haven’t done anything!* Is this something I’m going to have to look forward to with Aurick?

I nod again against his firm hand.

“Good,” he says, releasing my hair, taking a step to the side to pat me on the shoulder. “Always a pleasure, Aurick.”

I will see you at sunrise, friend.”

Masten disappears into the stairwell, leaving me to stare in Aurick’s direction in horror. I don’t know what to think of him. Is he no different than my father?

“Go start your lady-doll treatment. I don’t want to see you for the rest of the night.” Aurick pushes off the windowsill and goes back into the room he came from, slamming the door.

He might as well have just slapped me across the face or tossed me into an ice bath. Instead of comforting me or explaining what happened, he’s dismissed me like a pet or a misbehaving child.

Scarlett, if you’re listening, please protect me. I won’t survive another man like Jack.

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34. Soul mates

"DO YOU BELIEVE IN SOUL mates or not, princess?"

I decided to start my morning off with Niles to distract my current river of paranoid thoughts. What happened with Aurick and Masten was—confusing. I don't want to walk into Dessin's room with this on my mind. I have to bury it.

Soul mates... I think on the subject like it's a foreign topic I haven't explored yet. *Soul mates*? I'm not even really sure what that means, what it entails. Is it a fairy tale, a myth, a fact of life? The goal in life? I look back at him with innocent eyes, pondering over the thought.

"I've never thought about it," I mutter partly to him, partly to myself. I am curious to hear his opinion on the matter.

"Allow me to paint you a picture." He sets his tea down. "When we are brought into this world, our bodies are cages, inside we have a spirit, a soul that is greater than the sinfully tempted flesh that embodies us. That soul was created with a twin, so to speak, and those two souls are divinely bound through life, through death, through as many obstacles as existence can bring upon us. When we are born, we begin our paths to find our other half. It's a subconscious action we are not in control of. It's a force greater than this body." He grips his white shirt with a soothing passion.

"The love that is born between the two cannot be mistaken for anything else. It's not something you can choose or resist. It's beyond our willpower." He loses himself in thought.

"How do you know if you found that person?" I ask.

He sighs, caressing the back of his hand in deep thought. "Because, once you find them, there is no life without them."

We think about this, comfortable with the silence.

"I'm scared." It's true, but I certainly did not mean to say it out loud. What am I doing with Aurick? He said he was my friend, and that was all he wanted—if that's true, why would Masten say *wife*? The tension between us is starting to bury me under a constant coat of stress.

"What do you have to fear? You are long and lean and feline. You could summon anyone into your bedroom with a blink of an eye," Niles assures me with a wink.

But that's just it. I don't have a bedroom to sleep in without Aurick.

~

DESSIN IS LYING DOWN, ARMS behind his head, shackles and all. He looks down from his gaze at the ceiling to peer at me. A warm sensation drapes over my body.

"Hi," I greet, setting my clipboard down beside his chair.

"New necklace?" he observes.

I look down at the silver chain around my neck with a single diamond hanging at the center of my chest. Aurick laid it out for me this morning with a new pink glass bottle of perfume resting next to it. I adjust my stare back up to him.

"An apology diamond," he states. "How original..." He sits up, trying to maneuver the shackles open.

That's exactly what it is. An apology for how Masten treated me.

I sit next to him to help speed up the process. "I see you made it out of the storm alive."

He glues his eyes to my hands as I try to help. "Did you tell Aurick where you really were?"

I give him a sidelong glance. "I told him where I was. *Partially*." I give up and let him undo the shackles, realizing I have no idea how he does it without a key. "Thank you," I say as I reach my chair. "For reminding me to see my father."

He nods his head and tilts his chin upward. "What did you need to ask me?"

"What?"

He leans forward. "I know there is something you want my opinion about, so let's hear it."

"Are you going to tell me how you know I need to ask something?"

He rolls his wrists. Lifts his chin. "You keep clenching your jaw shut and pursing your lips, which means you're holding back from saying something. You also lean forward slightly when you're getting ready to ask a question. There, *satisfied*?"

My eyes widen. A smile uncontrollably appears on my face. "Yes, quite satisfied." I bite my bottom lip. There is no casually bringing anything up with him. I'm still getting the hang of it.

"Are men..." I avert my eyes to the ceiling, crack my neck. "Are men allowed to *harm* women—here?"

"Come again?" He narrows his eyes into small slits. "Why would you ask that?"

"Last night, after I got home, I went to examine my findings from the tower in Aurick's attic. And—something *odd* happened."

He blinks twice, leans his elbows on top of his knees, and clasps his hands together. A sharp look of impatience bolting across his eyes.

"I met his close friend in the hallway when I was done, and they thought I was snooping through Aurick's personal items in storage. They were upset... And his friend..."

"Skylenna, my patience is wearing thin," he seethes.

"He said that I was lucky I wasn't struck in the face or getting the *paddle* for what I did. And that because I'm a woman living with him—I could be his wife one day—so I should be disciplined daily."

Dessin is on his feet, looming over me like a heart attack.

"And then he grabbed me by my hair to scare me," I finish, realizing there may be more occasions where I run into Masten.

"He put his hands on you?!" he growls, hands gripping the arms of my chair.

I nod.

"And your precious *friend* did nothing?"

I shake my head.

"So help me God..." He tears himself away from me, swearing under his breath. He paces the length of the room with his muscular chest rising in anger, his deliberate steps claiming each section of the floor with power and dominance.

He stops before the completion of his next step and glances at me. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," I answer immediately. I didn't think he would react this way. I genuinely wanted to know if that was normal, but seeing him boil over in fury is as flattering as it is confusing. Does he actually mean to show me he cares? Because, if this reaction is anything, it's concern for me.

He nods and continues to pace.

"Is it normal?" I ask. Standing up to intervene in his narrow pathway of agitated pacing. "To strike a woman? Is it acceptable?"

He stops in front of me, eyes falling to my expression, which fails to hide my fear.

"Yes, it's normal, and it's acceptable to *this* society," he states clearly, lowering his gaze to level with mine. "But no, it's not normal. It's not acceptable. It's unforgivable—to *me*."

I tread backward, sinking back into my seat. "I am never to escape the violent hands of a man, am I?"

If I have to go through it again, I might die of despair.

Dessin kneels to my side urgently. "Look at me," he orders, "if he ever strikes you... You tell me immediately. I

will cut off every piece of him that he believes makes him a man and shove it into his mouth until he asphyxiates.”

My mouth hangs open in shock from the finely painted visual.

“For his sake, I hope it never comes to that,” I say.

He looks away, taking in a choppy breath, trying to calm down.

“Do you believe in soul mates?” I ask.

His tightened jaw and furrowed brow fade away like a cloud from a hot summer sky. A side smirk of amusement tempts his lips.

“*Soul mates?*”

“I was told today that we spend our lives searching for another soul that we are divinely made for. And the love that is born between the two cannot be mistaken for anything else.” Why have I decided to share Niles’s love advice? Not sure, it spilled out without any rhyme or reason, ejecting from my throat like a tidal wave. “I asked, how do you know if you’ve found them? And they said—because once you have, there is no life without them.”

Dessin stares at me, licking his lips as he tilts his head to the side.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I want to know if you believe in soul mates.”

“I have never thought about it.”

“That’s a shame.”

“I can imagine you heard this theory from the patient in room four. The magical cherub that shoots arrows in asses.” I force down the tickle of amusement, the smile wanting to spread. “Do you believe in it?” he asks.

“I want to. The notion of someone who understands me—protects me—knows my heart well is—beautiful. I hope it’s true.” And I mean it. I wonder if there will ever be a human alive who knows my heart, passions, secrets, and demons through and through.

But I stare a moment too long, and there's a question that sings like a violin between us. The one neither of us wants to acknowledge, but it's here, all the same, waiting to be noticed.

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35. The King's Move

SCARLETT USED TO SAY THAT men only have one motive on their minds. Procreation. There is no romance. No passion. No pure forms of love. It's all for show, a performance of theatrical arts to get us to spread our legs.

This being the reason she chose to mate with the same sex. And when she'd come home—she would unravel. Spinning out into her own ugly chaos like a ballerina in a broken jewelry box. She would sit in the bathtub for hours, scrubbing until she bled.

For this reason, I am not looking forward to going home today. What if Aurick has a new motive on his mind? He told me he was only interested in friendship. He lost his fiancée and did not look at me in that way. If that were the truth, then why was Masten under the impression it was courtship?

"I have to attend a demonstration for a new treatment this afternoon," I tell Dessin with a sigh that I blow out heavily. "But before I go, I think it's time we talk about the clues you intended me to find at the tower."

I fish the letter to *The Leather Man* and the wooden cross necklace from my pocket, holding them out in front of him.

"And what makes you think those were the clues?" He doesn't even look down at my hands, doesn't examine my findings. He merely glances around the room, uninterested.

"My initials were there... Engraved into the bookshelf where I found them."

He nods, running his hand through his hair. "Skylenna Winter Ambrose. But S.W.A. could have meant anything."

I drop my hands into my lap. "I'm the only living person that knows my middle name." I crinkle the edge of the letter between my fingertips. "How are you acquiring this information?"

"Well, now there are two of us." He gives me a sidelong glance, followed by a smirk.

"The writer of this letter was Sophia, wasn't it?" His mother. The only reason that is my first guess is that the handwriting seemed feminine. I thought I'd add the name he gave me at the tower when he was in a state of fury. It adds a nice touch, giving him a taste of his own medicine.

But he doesn't think it's so nice. His stare is rigid, thick with surprise.

"Aren't you a quick study?"

I shrug. "But I can't figure out who *The Leather Man* is."

"And the necklace?"

It's a wooden cross. Is it his? Did it belong to someone close to him? Does this mean he has religious beliefs?

I shrug.

The corners of his mouth tip up slightly, but not enough for me to be sure if I am amusing him or not. Silence once again slams around the room from wall to wall, panicking about where to go. I let out an aggravated sigh.

"Dessin," I clutch his right bicep, giving it a pathetic shake. His eyes flash open darkly at my hand touching his arm. And he is staring. And I am not moving. Scaring me nearly half to death, he gently pushes my long hair over to my right shoulder, sending an army of blissful chills across my neck and scalp.

His fingers trace the back of my neck, the long curving scar, like the loop of the letter Y just under my hairline. The sweet spot that my father struck with a wooden club, picking apart my memories, leaving holes to decay and fester. I never touch that spot, as if acknowledging it will only let more memories leak from my skull. But Dessin shows no reservations. He looks at his hand as if it is exploring a historical artifact.

"What—what are you doing?" I stutter.

"Does he know about your scars?" Dessin asks, peeking back at my eyes that are glued to him, unmoving, hardly

blinking.

I wait to answer. The tingles bursting where his warm fingers skim my flesh are intoxicating. I *shouldn't* feel that way. Why am I reacting like this?

"No," I say breathlessly. I don't have to ask who he's referring to. For reasons unknown, he has a fixation with Aurick.

"He's never seen the burns around your ankles and legs?" His gaze drops to my right leg, crossed politely over my left. I seize the hand that is resting on my neck and grip him tightly at the wrist.

"You've never seen my legs, and I've never told you about my burns." Agitation is building to a high-pitched scream in my bones. That's personal. That's private. How could he speak of something he does not understand? Aurick has never even noticed. My cheeks flush with a red gush of fever, and I want to scream in his face. *Do you know how I got these burns? Speak up if you do! Tell me all about the horror that came when the flames took a bite out of me.*

But his stare shows no weakness.

"Stop manipulating me!" I stand, arms stiff at my sides. "This is another form of control, isn't it? You're twisting yourself inside my head. You're teasing me with what you know, and I hate it!"

"I am not manipulating you," he growls, rising to his feet slowly, like a lion waking up from a nap.

I throw the letter and the necklace down onto his bed. "Then what does this mean? And how do you know such intimate details about my life?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Of course you can't." I squeeze the air between us with my hands as if it's his head. "Because you're not my friend. Friends do not play games like this."

He takes a step toward me, head tilting as if to say *careful with what you say next*. "And how would you know

what friends do? The two closest individuals in your life abused you!” His voice is like a deep rumble at the center of the earth, all while matching the roar of a lion.

And it punctures my heart, sharp and quick, like a needle pulling thread.

I back away toward the door, tears stinging the tissue behind my eyes. *You’re right. I’ve never had a real friend, Dessin. How would I know?*

How pathetic I must look in his eyes. There’s a sudden regret that reaches the creases along his brow as he takes a step forward, reaching for me in pity, and it’s enough to send me on my way, slipping from his room like a ghost that haunts these walls. The lonely girl who has never known true friendship. The one that accepts violence in place of kind words, and the one that collects demeaning remarks in place of a hug.

You have me all figured out, don’t you, Dessin?

36. Isolation Tank

I HAVE TIME TO SPARE before the demonstration of the new treatment.

To keep the tears from springing to my eyes in front of other conformists pacing the halls, I duck into Chekiss's room. The second I face him, all it takes is one look for him to understand that grief is holding me hostage.

He gently pats the open space next to him on his bed, and the look of a caring father softens his eyes, opening his hand for me to hold. And we sit there, absent of words or pleasantries, staring at his wall while watching the sconces flicker.

He showed me an ugly truth today, Chekiss.

I want to tell him what happened, not only with Dessin but how Aurick has been treating me. But the story is far too long, and I don't have the strength to hear myself acknowledge any of it.

~

THERE ARE APPROXIMATELY FIFTEEN OF us gathered in this new treatment room. It's the same size as the others, except without the tiled floors. The patients' rooms resemble it the most, with one giant eyesore in the middle of the room.

Meridei stands in front of the group, trying to hush the women on my left from guessing at this new treatment that will be implemented for patients that need a change to better correct their inconsistencies.

"I'll wait until you're finished interrupting," she barks at the three girls that are currently the loudest. The group settles down for her to continue. "I know you've all heard the rumors that there will be a new treatment to help some of us change it up with our patients. This is accurate. Suseas showed it to me a few days ago and briefed me on the protocol."

Meridei lifts a black sheet from a mounted object behind her, revealing what looks like a metal coffin. I shudder at what it is supposed to do. "This new treatment is called *the isolation tank*. It is used to keep the patient in isolation for at least eight hours. It is so tightly sealed that the tank is completely black. This will deprive them of sight entirely. There will be an oxygen tube on the side."

"That's it?" The strawberry-blond orderly asks in disbelief. "They sit in the dark for a little while?"

"If you're not going to let me finish, I suggest you leave," Meridei says, cheeks turning red.

The orderly motions his hand forward to continue.

"The oxygen tube also expels a new gas that will induce the patient into hallucinations. But not just *any* hallucinations, this gas triggers the part of our brains, the hippocampus, that recalls memories, and the amygdala, that adds fear and terror. This will, without a doubt, cause a trained response for your patients to fear you, and therefore, do whatever you say. I cannot say how I know this, but I heard from a reliable source that this new drug was brought to us directly from Demechnef." Meridei smiles smugly, crossing her arms and awaiting the uproar from her excited peers.

"Straitjackets will be available before they enter the tank to keep them from hurting themselves."

I hear words like *finally* and *incredible*.

I look around the room in horror. How can so many people not see the wrong in all of this? Am I really the only one? I catch Meridei's narrowed eyes while I scan the room.

"I need a volunteer for the demonstration," Meridei announces over the excited voices. A few hands rise, but her eyes are pinned to me. She nods her head at two orderlies on either side of me. Hands press against my back, driving me forward.

Instinctively, I take a step back, fighting the force the way one would stiffen against an ocean wave. Heat prickles my skin from inside my body, and I shake my head at the dozens of eyes waiting for me to comply. *No*. But they're nodding with encouragement, and I'm coaxed to step up to Meridei's side.

"I'm not comfortable in small spaces," I tell her quietly. Surely, she understands. After all, she's already tried to poison me. Wasn't that enough to satisfy her thirst for causing me pain?

"Set an example for the others," she says with obvious mischief tightening her smile. "It's only a demonstration."

Once, playfully, I shoved Scarlett in the coat closet after she stuck my nose in a blueberry pie. We were having fun, running around the cottage with gooey, blue sauce in our hair and chasing each other around the furniture. But I made the mistake of not knowing the details of her abuse, not knowing the ghosts that still clung to every closet. I was caught in the moment, devious with giggles and floating about like the feather from a pillow. I tricked her into thinking I was in the closet, and when she opened the door—I pushed her in.

I've never heard a scream quite like that one.

She was taken back to a time when she was only seven, lying in her own fecal matter, eating the drywall of our mother's bedroom closet to stay alive. And her fits that enraged those walls I tricked her back into were monstrous. Once I realized that her panic was real, I opened the door, but it was too late. Those one, two, three seconds she had to relive her trauma were enough to trigger a week's worth of nightmares, sobbing in corners and destroying our belongings in a storm of fury.

What is to come of me if I'm forced to relive my own trauma?

"Help her in," Belinda instructs behind me. But before I can turn to her to argue, two orderlies lift me off my feet by

my elbows and hover me over the tank.

"No, I can't!" My voice rises in volume, terror sounding off alarms in my mind. I flip my attention down to the open vessel below me, and my stomach twists like I've just taken another sip of the poison tea again.

Three girls stand on the tips of their toes to look out of the small window to keep watch. *Oh God. No. No. Please. I can't be left in the dark.*

"Put me down!" A breathy order is all that escapes my lips. Air rushes in and out of my mouth. The panic courses through my body, jabbing into my ribs and flaring through my chest like a tunnel to circulate all negative energy.

Despite my rigid body as I hover over the tank, the stares from the small crowd in the room are wildly amused. Anticipating the demonstration of my destruction. *I can't go in there.* "Please, don't!" I scream again as they lower me into the metal coffin. My motor functions are flipped on, and my arms and legs thrash about, kicking at nothing in particular. Blood rushes to my face and scalp, and pulses of heat radiate through me like an oven, roaring with untamed flames.

My bottom hits the metal floor first, then my back as I'm pushed downward to lie down. I brace myself for an episode to send me into an epileptic shock or even an aneurysm to put me out for good.

"In you go!" grunts an orderly.

"I said *no!*" I scream now, like a banshee burning at the stake. Frightful tears are released from a dam behind my eyes. Someone has to hear me—anyone outside of these doors. Suseas? Judas?

"Once you close the doors on the patient—"

"No!" I choke out with fresh tears running down my cheeks. I throw my hands up to stop the metal top from coming down on me, but the orderlies hurl their body weight onto it, driving it shut.

I blink over and over again, waiting to see a light that will not come. "Let me out, please!" But I'm suddenly convinced that my lungs are out of oxygen. Convinced I'm in one of my nightmares.

I hear Meridei instructing the group on how to turn on the contraption. A muffled voice. A few metal clinks and a humming sound rumbles on the left side of the tank. I remember what she said about the oxygen tube. The drugs that Demechnef provided. In my next breath, I can taste it. Oddly enough, it's familiar. I can't remember where I've smelled it before. Like bleach and saline. My silence encourages a wave of laughter.

"Please don't do this to me!" I bang on the walls of the tank once more. Not able to see my own arms moving to make contact with the metal, unlocking a new sense of dread, a detachment to reality, ultimately sending me into a monstrous panic attack.

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37. Welcome to Hell

I TRY TO TAKE SHALLOW breaths because if I don't breathe as much of the drug in, I can make it out unscathed. But even that logic isn't solid enough to grasp. I *have* to breathe.

I start to scream louder, banging my hands against the metal ceiling and gasping on my sobs. "HELP ME!" More saline and bleach-scented air pulses through my throat, snaking into my lungs and staining my insides.

A hand catches my left arm before it strikes the metal again. Above me, a fluorescent light shines on a body hovering above my own, holding my wrist, glaring at me with a thin milky film that glazes over her eyes. Her hair is straight and long, and her face... well, her face is *my* face.

"Scarlett?"

"Hi, Skylenna." Blotchy bruises cover the soft pockets under her eyes, and her skin is a corpse shade of gray, nearly translucent like a puff of smoke. "I don't like it down here." She frowns, still suspended over me, as if she's attached to thin strings.

"I—what's going on? You're not—*alive* anymore. How—how are you here?"

"I'm not doing so well," she says, still squeezing my wrist like a handcuff that was bound too tightly.

"Scarlett... I thought I'd never see you again." The urge to howl in pain and break into another sobbing attack is pinging at the bottom of my gut.

She shakes her head. I now see the dislocation from her skull to her neck, and her head swivels side to side. "It's dark down here."

"Where are we?" I'm stunned. I can't remember how I got here. The darkness, cold and empty, like sinking to the bottom of the ocean, all while remaining dry.

I focus on her face as it becomes a little clearer. The skin around her lips is a light shade of blue, and some hair is

missing on the top of her head, leaving cotton-like clumps. Her thin, white dress is covered in patches of dirt, flowing like gentle ripples in water.

"It's nice of you to visit me, but you shouldn't stay long. There are lots of things you'd sooner not experience if you had to choose."

"*Where* are we, Scarlett?" I ask again.

"The Bible did say I'd go here. I can't blame it for that. But sister, I left my favorite books at the cottage, and I don't get any blueberry pie here. I keep bleeding between my legs, and those men"—her milky eyes grow wide—"they keep coming back." Her voice quivers, and her bottom lip curls. And like a row of dominoes, her eyes well up with tears glistening around the rim of her red lids. "You see, there's no one to hold me here when I get scared. I can't find any water to drink. There's also no one to talk to. But the nasty things tell me I *asked* for this! They come around a lot to set me on fire and laugh at me!" Her soft voice that was shaky with fear, is now shouting. "It burns! I beg God to save me, but he won't come! He doesn't love me! *No one* loves me!"

"I love you!" I shout back, tears clouding my vision, adding a quiver to my voice. Her body is now dangling at least ten feet above me when it was only inches away before. "I've always loved you! Say the Lord's Prayer, Scarlett! Say the Lord's Prayer, and he'll bring you home!" I can't move, not even to turn my head. The darkness holds me down with shackles. "Oh God, please take her home!" I scream. In the distance, I see the movement of the nasty things she was talking about, jabbing her in the sides with fire pokers. She yelps and wiggles to get free from them.

"OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN! HALLOWED BE THY NAME! THY KINGDOM COME, THY WILL BE DONE, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN!"

She screams again as a fire poker plunges through her chest from behind her back.

"GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD! AND FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US!" I scream as loudly as I can, trying to get off the ground to save her. Like hybrid beasts with rotting charred skin and fangs, more nasty things climb on top of her now naked body and rip off her skin in shreds that look like tissue paper.

"LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL—" A blinding white light causes my sister to vanish as quick as the blink of an eye. All of the darkness surrounding me is sucked into a hole that drains the black hell until it's nothing but a pinhole of a memory.

Something warm grips my hands and yanks me out of the hole I am buried in. *God. It's our Holy God. He saved us.* "For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory—" The warm hands tighten around the sides of my arms, fingers stern with purpose.

"You're safe. Come back to me now." An angel's voice speaks to me from behind the blinding light.

"Forever and ever—" I say with tears growing colder on my cheeks from the breath of the angel. A thick daze still whirling in my head, spinning around a maniacal carnival. The clean scent is gone, and I blink over and over to clear the white light from my sight.

A figure taller and broader than myself comes into focus. "Squeeze my hands until the fear is gone." A man's voice. I do as the angel man says and squeeze his hands as the panic and despair simmer in my gut. "There you go," he says softly.

"Amen." I let go of the last of my prayer.

"Tell me you're safe."

I know this man.

"I'm safe."

"You're safe now. I'm here," he assures. The man's eyes come into focus. Those vengeful brown eyes, like bronze lit on fire, dazzling me with anger and concern.

Dessin. It's Dessin, with his titan-like shoulders, peppered stubble, and a spartan chest. It all comes back to me now. The tank. Meridei. The drugs from Demechnef.

"Oh..." I say, the welling tears threatening to expose me for a coward once more, causing my chin to tremble and tighten upward.

Keeping his eyes locked intently on mine, he says, "You don't have to hold it in. I've got you."

And as if he had the key to my grief, the cry splinters out of me like a bolt of lightning. I throw myself into his arms, and he doesn't hesitate this time. Dessin's hands find my waist, and he burrows his face as close to my neck and shoulder as he can get it.

I'm safe now.

I sob into a space somewhere between his chest and shoulder, and he keeps me grounded with the steady rhythm of his breathing. Warm ripples plow through me. I don't know what to make of it, so I pull away gently.

"How did you find me?"

He stares into my eyes with an impenetrable sense of purpose. "What did you see in there?"

"Nothing," I say quickly. "Just—hallucinations."

"No. You're lying to me. Something had you scared."

I lower my head. If I can't tell him the truth. I won't say anything at all. I see his fists clench at his sides. Within the span of a single breath, his features change. Once comforting and gentle, now twisted in a look of silent rage.

"Say your goodbyes," he says, murder dancing in his chocolate eyes. "I'm going to kill them all."

"No—please don't."

His head snaps up to the door, watching it like a guard dog sensing intrusion.

"What is it?" I follow his concrete stare, but there is nothing but a closed door.

He holds a finger up to his lips, signaling me to stay quiet. He glides across the room, careful to keep his

footsteps light, and flattens his back against the wall by the door.

The door unlatches, and Meridei pokes her head in.

"Oh." She stiffens at the sight of me. "I was going to let you out when the screams stopped..."

"I see that," I say, hatred welling up inside of me like a cannon of hellfire.

Do you have any idea what I went through in there? Who I saw? Does it mean anything that this will cause me nightmares for years to come?

"My condolences for seeing your departed sister in there. Though it does give me hope for the experiences of our patients. And I hope our little initiation didn't deter you too much."

I nod slowly, unsure if I may cry at the fact that she heard me yell out Scarlett's name or laugh in pure, utter defeat.

"I do hope you'll join us tonight. My mother and father are lending me their estate to throw a dinner party for the conformists. Isn't that grand? All of us, together, outside of the asylum?"

It sounds similar to being waterboarded.

"Lovely," I say.

"So we can expect you? Your presence is truly fantastical for us." Her sarcasm bleeds through her tight-lipped smile, crinkling the corners of her eyes.

I nod again, drops of sweat spilling down my back.

She offers a syrupy smile before exiting.

The closing door uncloaks Dessin, showing off his cosmic smile.

"I do enjoy a *fantastical* dining party." He flashes his teeth.

I wipe the tears from my cheeks with the backs of my hands, rolling my eyes as I sniffle away the aftermath of my blubbering. "If I'm in the mood for food poisoning or the electric chair, I'll stop by."

I've come to notice that when Dessin's mind populates a new idea or an ingenious thought, his fingers flex, and his eyes dart around the room as if he's watching his masterpiece play out in real time.

"No," I say, shaking my head. "No, I already know where you're going with this."

"They're going to keep terrorizing you," he warns, gesturing to the isolation tank. "And what if next time, I'm not there to pull you out."

Oh. That's the fairest point I've ever heard.

"I have one condition." I decide it would be smart to have a counterthreat to scare the other conformists away. Point a sharp object at them until they back into a corner. Dessin could be that sharp object.

"As do I."

Wonderful. "No one dies."

"Fine. But you stay home."

"What? Why?" He wants *me* to stay home? I think I more than deserve to watch him avenge me. It won't erase what they've done, but it will help ice my wounds.

"I'd rather keep you out of my line of fire." His expression is absolute. There will be no negotiating.

"Fine," I huff. But, I'll say what I have to. I earned the right to watch whatever he has planned. It's good for research. It will help me understand the radius to which his mind stretches.

As my fingers graze the handle of the door, I pause, close my eyes, and reflect.

"Thank you for being my guardian angel."

38. Bigger Picture

BEFORE I SNEAK OVER TO Meridei's dining party, I have one more person to visit.

I open the big wooden doors into the main council meeting room. This spacious area has always reminded me of a church, with rib vault archways, paintings of angelic children, hardwood floors, windows made of stained glass, and gas lamps keeping the room lit in every corner. And one man that waits for me to enter upon an individual request.

"Ms. Ambrose, please have a seat." Judas is the only one here today, elegantly eating his steak with broccoli at a long rectangular dark cherry teakwood dining table. I sit down and take a sip of a glass of water in front of me.

"How was your visit with the retired conformist I sent you to?" he asks.

I fidget in my seat. Until this moment, I forgot about Lynn.

"It was fine, thank you."

Judas sets his fork down, dabbing at his mouth and chin with a napkin. He exhales through his nose, releasing the air from deep in his chest.

"I knew of Dessin before he admitted himself into the asylum." Judas shocks me with a new fact, like a surprise storm of hail, and I brace myself. "I had heard of tales of the man that could walk through fire, execute an entire army with his bare hands, and who exists without a weakness."

I open my mouth to speak, but Judas holds his hand up.

"Much of that had to be theatrical folklore, but as you can imagine, there are many waiting to obtain him. To *use* him. And after reading through your session notes, I've calculated that the two of you understand one another on a different level. Perhaps that changes the course of events

that will happen for him. My question to you is... Are you prepared to stay with him—through the journey he will endure?”

He sets his very expensive pen down by his notepad and steeples his fingers together.

Deep down, in the center of my fascination for Dessin, I’ve known that meeting him and knowing him and understanding him is only the beginning. I’ve opened up a locked door to the world, revealing only a corner of the universe he has had to live in. But I can’t imagine that after ninety days, I could ever leave him. My story is now entwined with his, fused together with every fiber.

“I won’t leave him.”

Judas smiles and squints his eyes at me with concern. The small wrinkles around the corners of his lashes form closer. “Ms. Ambrose,” he leans forward and speaks in hushed tones. “You are a noble young woman.”

I release a long breath. “Why are you so different from the others on the council?”

He readjusts his notepad and folders, tapping them gently on the table.

“Let’s just say I am looking at a bigger picture.”

39. Fantastical Dining Party

MY HAND HOVERS OVER THE knocker on Meridei's front door, shaking in the cool breeze.

What if Dessin was right to ask me to stay home? What if I do get caught in his cross fire? I'm blindsiding him by even showing up. The nerve that I once had to watch those who hurt me as they crash and burn has diminished to the size of a melting snowflake.

Before I can turn away, backtrack, and erase my presence from this doomed three-story estate, the door flies open. A soft, golden light shimmers from behind Meridei and Belinda, grinning at me in unison.

"I truthfully did not think you would come." Belinda raises her eyebrows, not trying to hide her incredulity.

I take a deep breath and dig up my best forced smile. *There's no going back now.*

"I surely couldn't miss this," I say, allowing Meridei to take my dress cloak.

Her home isn't nearly as lavish as Aurick's. It's comparing aluminum to gold, but even still, my home in the outskirts, the *bear trap* of the city, never held a candle to this place. Her walls are covered in floral wallpaper and copper sconces. The grand sitting room isn't at all spacious. The walls are crowded with paintings of tea parties, rose gardens, and angels. Thick lavender curtains cover four wide bay windows, and glass cabinets display glass collectibles—majestic animals in mid-stride, dancing women in long ruffled gowns, and porcelain teacups.

Her guests sit on matching pink-velvet armchairs and sofas, reaching for miniature cakes and finger sandwiches on stacked trays on the coffee table.

One of the orderlies sits at a grand piano, playing an upbeat tune meant for dancing, yet the conformists stay seated, sipping their tea, snickering at old gossip. The

sitting room carries a light aroma of vanilla and honeysuckle, a most impressive disguise for the rot and fester that transfers from woman to woman with each thought of destructive intent toward me.

I scan for empty seats, unsure of the safest location for me. In the center of them all? *Never*. But there is an open love seat closest to the front door. *Perfect*.

Aware of the sinister eyes following me, I quickly lean down to the woman sitting on the other end of the loveseat. "May I sit here?"

I've never seen her before, at least not at the asylum. Is she a relative of Meridei's?

The woman nods. A genuine smile softens her cheeks and lights up her hooded brown eyes. "I'm Ruth." She reaches her hand out to shake mine. "Tomorrow's my first day as a conformist assistant."

Ah, she's new. She must not be in on the blueprints to my demise. It's reassuring to have a blank slate with someone. Ruth doesn't slouch or relax into the love seat. Her legs cross, tightly bound against each other, and she holds a stiff smile as if her life depended on it. The elegant posture of a ballerina between stances.

"My name is Skylenna," I say under my breath. I don't want the others to have reason to target Ruth, so it's probably best to keep my kindness toward her as under the radar as possible.

At a closer glance, her looks are almost elfin, with an upward pointed nose, long eyelashes, sharp bony shoulders, and wide, sparkling eyes.

"They're quite an intimidating bunch." Ruth matches my hushed tones, fidgeting with her floral evening dress. "I was afraid to say no when invited—it didn't exactly seem like it was optional."

I frown inwardly. She seems perfectly pleasant. I'd hate to see her corrupted by the likes of these parasites.

“To be frank, I didn’t exactly want to work in the asylum. But my father gambled away a good amount of our small family fortune. My parents forced me to ask for work here, so they wouldn’t muddy their reputations as Survivah bureaucrat and Emerald wife.” Her focus wanders across the room, sizing up the other women nervously as if at any moment they could grow fangs and spit fire. She’s rather candid for someone here, sharing her family’s downfalls so openly.

I have to remind myself to warn her. *Don’t trust any of them with your secrets.*

It dawns on me why I’m here, like dipping my toes in the water to realize it’s ice cold, shocking my system back into its finest form of defense.

Dessin is *here*. Or he will be. And I wasn’t supposed to come. And now, I might have found a new friend, one that’s not a patient or a man that lets me live with him. A friend that is about to fall victim to Dessin’s twisted antics.

“You should leave,” I say under my breath, under the high-pitched chitchat mixed in with the piano.

Her head turns to me, a question making a solid “o” out of her thin lips.

“I don’t have time to explain,” I whisper, maintaining my socially acceptable smile.

As if remembering my presence, Meridei raises her voice at us over the music.

“Ruth, Sky—come, enjoy the sweets.” She signals her hand to the trays of crumpets, cakes, and muffins.

“I haven’t eaten in four days so I could enjoy tonight,” Belinda tells two conformists sitting on either side of her.

As Ruth stands to help herself, I shoot her a look. *Sit down.* I plead with my alarmed expression.

“We’re saving room for the dinner,” I respond for the both of us. The lady of the house, dressed in a black evening dress complete with black gloves, sets the table.

Dishes of asparagus, roasted pig, hot sourdough bread, and glasses of champagne fill the table.

We're not going to be able to touch any of the food, are we?

"Dinner, yes! Everyone, take your seats at the table," Meridei announces.

Ruth grabs my hand as everyone rises, pressing me with a bewildered expression. *What's going on?* she mouths.

"I'll explain when this is all over. *Don't* touch the food."

I want to tell Ruth all of the insidious actions the other conformists have sprung on me since I arrived. I want to warn her that Dessin will be crashing this evening's festivities, and the likeliness of this all occurring in a clean and calm manner has the odds of a million to one. But I can't. All I can do is stay by her side and hope Dessin senses my urgency to protect her.

We take our places at the long dining table set for fifteen guests. Meridei sits directly across from me, keeping a steady watch on my every move. Ruth instinctually sits to my right, careful not to touch anything. I probably scared her to death with my warning. But I still don't know what Dessin is capable of. I can't take any chances.

There are nine forks and spoons on either side of our silver plate covers and flute glasses with bubbling champagne. I scope out the surface, curious if there will be any sign that Dessin has been here. What if he doesn't show? What if I've ruined everything by showing up? What if he was right when he said there could be a time they terrorize me and he won't be here.

"I'd like to make a toast"—Meridei holds her flute at eye level—"to myself." She laughs teasingly, then her face falls as she shoots a vicious glare in my direction. "For being so generous to share my former lover, Aurick, with Skylenna. The conformist that has set out to destroy Emerald Lake Asylum."

Now my face has fallen. *Wait. Aurick? My friend Aurick?*

I wasn't expecting this. She knows him? Why didn't he tell me? Why is she just now sharing this with me? My face warms, throbbing with heat and pressure, like a burn from touching the stove. A few girls snicker at the end of the table, and one of the orderlies blows out a long breath, followed by a whistle.

"Oh," Belinda cringes. "I don't think she knew that."

Ruth rubs the back of her neck, staring down at her plate cover.

"There are no hard feelings, though," Meridei adds, her flute still waiting in the air. "Skylenna, Ruth? Toast with us," she orders, quick and clipped like the bite of a python.

Ruth whips her head to gawk at me.

I nod and lift my glass. *Don't drink it, Ruth.* She follows suit and holds hers close to her chin with a trembling hand.

"To Aurick. May his cock still taste like me."

Oh my God. My jaw unhinges like a broken drawer, dangling from its post. The rumbling sensation coming from my pulse in my ears drowns out the laughter, a stampede of nerves galloping across my spine. *What do I do?* I bring the flute up to my mouth slowly, watching the others take gulps of their champagne. I want to stand up. I want to hurl this glass at her—

My glass is instantly blocked from touching my lips. I look down at the top of a hand covering my flute glass. It propels my hand back down to the dining table, and that's when I follow the frozen looks of panic. With relief washing over me like warm summer rain, my eyes find Dessin towering above me.

40. Eye for an Eye

HE WINKS DOWN AT ME, then readjusts to greet the table of conformists and orderlies. "Good evening."

The only sound is silverware crashing to the floor.

I've never felt such a tidal wave of happiness—not at any point in my life—not like this.

"I did not receive my invitation to this soiree, so I thought I'd bless the host with my unannounced drop-in." He wears a comfortable smirk, then shoots a side-glance to Meridei.

As he circles the table, I notice his tuxedo, jet black, a little tight around the arms and chest. Pleasure simmers in my gut at the sight of him.

"How did you escape the asylum?" Belinda chokes out.

"Is my attire appropriate? I borrowed it from Aurick's wardrobe." Dessin loosens his collar, maintaining eye contact with the hostess, who still hasn't unclenched her hand from her champagne.

He broke into Aurick's mansion? *Why?!*

Dessin turns the corner around the table, approaching Meridei slowly, prowling with purpose, with the confidence of a tiger swaggering around hens.

"Do you find me attractive, Meridei?"

I have to do a double take at this one. What did he just say?

Meridei's porcelain cheeks flush a deep maroon that spreads to the tip of her squished nose.

He leans down in front of her, using the tips of his fingers to coax her champagne back to her lips. She doesn't resist. As if in a spiritual trance, she gulps the bubbles down loudly. Dessin grins at the gold liquid disappearing into her mouth.

My heart sinks like an anchor falling through quicksand.

Okay, whose side is he on? It's as if I've just walked in on an intimate moment in the bedroom. My chest opens up, and I hold my breath behind pursed lips. An agitation, like a shock of caffeine, curls my toes inside of my shoes, straightening my legs until my thighs burn under the table—a trickle effect. Why is this making me so angry?

"Good girl." His voice is low and sultry, unlike the many times he expresses irritation with these individuals. And she's starstruck, baffled, unable to recognize that she has a roomful of guests watching the show.

Desire flows through me like lava. It melts my bones and floods between my thighs. *Jesus, how can I be jealous and aroused at his performance?*

He sets the glass down, then looks around the table—his highly alert eyes landing on me. "You see? Her legs will open for anyone."

I can't help it—I cough out a laugh. It bursts from my tightly sealed, pouting lips.

Ruth's hand flies through the air to cover her mouth, probably from reacting the same way I did.

"Get out. We're turning you in." An orderly builds up the courage to rise from his seat, causing a chain reaction with three more tossing their napkins onto their plates to meet the occasion. It *is* their duty to collect him.

Dessin's hand swats downward in a brisk movement, tapping a knife at the handle and watching it flip upward through the air to land precisely in his palm. Without a moment of thought, he points it to the first orderly that spoke up.

"*Sit down.*" He lifts his chin. "I'm not quite finished."

It's the alpha in his tone—the crack of a whip—the roiling, unconquerable dominance.

The orderlies exchange defeated looks. They've all seen how he operates, and they know that fighting him is a losing battle.

"Besides, I did not come empty-handed." He twirls his knife between his fingers, flipping it through the air like a performance. The men in the room lower themselves back into their seats, holding stoic expressions, as I'm certain they feel emasculated by one man showing up the lot of them.

"I brought favors for everyone, except—" He catches his knife and points it directly at Ruth. *Oh no.* "—*You.* I don't know who you are."

She stiffens beside me, her hands visibly shuddering over her silverware.

"This is Ruth," I speak up, lifting my hand from my lap to cover hers.

Dessin follows my hand, watches it fold over hers, snaps back up to meet my pleading expression. *Leave her out of this.*

"Tomorrow is her first day." *Please.*

He looks back at Ruth, studying her, catching her fearful body language to validate my words. He raises his chin in understanding. And with a synchronized sigh, Ruth and I both relax, but I keep my hand planted safely on hers.

"Let's toast to Ruth," he finally says, looking expectantly at everyone.

The conformists and orderlies lift their glasses slowly, cautiously, finishing off their champagne.

"Welcome to hell." He winks at her. But I squeeze her hand tighter. *Don't drink it.* Dessin turns back to the rest of the table. "I've been in the mood for murder as of late. I have an unorthodox thirst for it. It's like an insect inside my brain readjusts the wires, and instead of thirsting for a glass of champagne, I crave the heat from fresh blood expelled from a collated artery to coat my hands and drip from my fingers."

Someone drops their glass. *That certainly took a turn.*

"But I'm trying to be better, truly. Because I get to see that beautiful face every day, even though she can be

unnaturally optimistic”—he points to me with his knife, smiles sadly—“and it can be mildly annoying. I’d rather not let her down.”

As if someone set me on fire, the heads of the room rotate, and the attention is solely on me. I don’t know what to do. Should I blink? Sigh? Keep my eyes plastered to my lap?

“That only leaves me with one option, correct? If those in this room continue to compromise my conformist with not-so-harmless pranks—I suppose my only course of action is to make a statement that is so enticingly extreme, it quells your thirst for Skylenna’s pain.”

There are nervous readjustments in seats, gasps, and fidgeting.

“Please, enjoy my dining favors.” He signals to the plate covers.

My body clenches—back pressed firmly into my seat. How far is he going to go?

The table takes their silver covers off of their plates, setting them to the side, then straining their necks to get a better look at what was under them.

From what I can see, they are photographs.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Belinda shrieks, shoving herself backward in her chair, away from the photos.

The rest of the table reacts similarly. Shocked expressions, sounds of bewilderment scraping from their throats.

Dessin’s eyes are dark, laser-focused, and as callous as a cold-blooded murderer. *What’s on those photographs?*

“You broke into our homes?!” the orderly that spoke up before shouts.

“Not recently,” Dessin says. “But I have been there many times in the last few months. You know, in case I needed to make a statement.”

And that's when I see the conformist next to me tilt a photograph of what looks like an older woman in bed at night...

He's been taking photographs from inside their house to scare them. I don't know whether to be disturbed or impressed. He's a volcano—inactive until something disturbs him, causing an explosion that destroys all in his wake.

"You're doing all of this because you're in love with her, aren't you?!" the bold orderly barks, and I'm instantly on ice, captivated by a sudden urge to hear how Dessin responds.

Dessin tilts his head, lowering his eyes to the man with strawberry-blond hair and crooked teeth. "I'm starting to lose my temper with you, Ash," he says quietly, dark eyes set ablaze. "And when I lose my temper, I tend to quench that thirst I was telling you all about. In fact, I'm imagining how far this flute glass will stretch down your esophagus. And don't soon forget... I know where your sister sleeps at night."

The room is frantic, the energy ricocheting off the walls, spewing from person to person. Dessin hushes them like children, softly and tenderly.

"Now you know, one slipup could trigger my temper. And that temper knows your family—in their most intimate, most *vulnerable* settings."

In a series of groans and muffled whimpers, something like an explosion of gastrointestinal fireworks disgorges across the table, mouths gaping open, pouring out streams of blood and carbonation.

Ruth and I shriek, jumping out of our seats and backing into the china cabinet. We watch them vomit violently onto their plates, dribbling down their dresses. Meridei falls to the floor as she heaves like a cat gagging up a hairball. Belinda sobs between upchucks, and Ash lies on his side behind his chair, letting the excretions flow endlessly.

A lake of blood spreads across the hardwood oak floors, forming around the legs of the table and chairs.

They're dying.

"What did you do?" I stare at Dessin, now at my side, in astonishment.

You killed them, didn't you?

I can't calm my muscles, they're vibrating like a small tent in a sandstorm. Ruth clutches my arm for dear life as she gapes wide eyed at Dessin so close to both of us.

"It's time to go now," he commands, holding his hand out for me to take.

Even though I can't fathom why I still trust him, after witnessing what I'm sure is a small presentation of what he is capable of, I slip my hand into his.

But as he tries to guide us out of the house, I'm frozen in place. Ruth isn't moving. She's in shock, paralyzed in place.

Dessin looks over my shoulder to level with Ruth. "If I wanted to hurt you, I would have." *Thank you, Dessin. That will calm her down.* I roll my eyes and nod my head at Ruth to let her know she can trust me if she's not able to trust him.

Tears pool in her eyes as she nods back, stepping over a writhing orderly at her feet as we exit the house.

41. Soul Sister

IT'S SO SILENT I CAN hear my bones grinding together as we walk to the edge of the lawn.

There are no crickets or the gentle rustling of tree branches. Not even the cooing of a night bird. There is only my cadenced pulse thudding in my throat.

I keep seeing their faces... The scared, wincing faces.

I stop at the edge of the blackened paved road, running both of my hands through the soft, wholesome curls of my hair. *What happened?*

"Say something." His voice is an aggressive winter night. Coarse and impatient.

I avoid his eyes. I can't think of anything to say. There was blood. It sprayed into the air like pink misting paint. How could I have trusted him this much? I'm now responsible for their deaths. For the grief of their families.

"Did you kill them?"

I blink rapidly. The thought was certainly on the tip of my tongue, but I didn't open my mouth to voice my concern.

Ruth.

I almost forgot she was still with us. I redirect my attention to her, then back up to Dessin, who looks just as taken aback that she addressed him at all.

"No," he answers. "Skylenna asked me not to."

Does my word really carry that much weight?

Ruth's arms are wrapped around her shivering body, rubbing up and down to attempt friction heat. Dessin swiftly removes his black tuxedo coat, swinging it around her shoulders.

He glances at me with a knowing smile. "Aurick won't miss it, right?"

"What did you do to them?" I wince as I picture them heaving, groaning, and slipping in bodily fluids.

"I gave them the satan root, just as they gave you... Only with a twist."

Satan root. The poison they slipped in my tea in the dining hall. *Ha!*

"What was the twist?"

He buttons the coat around Ruth, pats her on the head, then turns to face me.

"Must I share all of my tricks with you?"

I gesture my hands back at the house. "Yes, you must."

"Red piper dust. Sprinkled in the champagne, but once it hits stomach acid, it produces a vibrant red concoction."

The blood. It wasn't blood, after all. He tricked them.

"So, they only think they're dying..." I say. *Wow*, he really thought this through.

"For about as long as you thought you were dying," he adds.

I stare at him, stupidly, *happily*.

"You—work at Emerald Lake Asylum—too?" Ruth chirps up behind us, most likely sensing the tension dissipating.

Dessin grins, crossing his arms over his chest. "I suppose you can say that."

"He's a patient." I roll my eyes, correcting her. "He's in the thirteenth room in the intricate section."

As expected, her eyes expand, bouncing back and forth between Dessin and me. She's heard of him, maybe from her parents or maybe from boutique gossip.

"But you can't talk about what happened tonight," I warn. Not because I think anyone will believe her. The other conformists won't even breathe a word of it.

Ruth huffs, tightening the coat around her. "Why did he do all of that?"

"They haven't exactly made my time at the asylum pleasant. They've poisoned me and forced me to endure a treatment locked in a tin coffin. Dessin was only ensuring they left me alone." I shrug. I hope this doesn't chase her away.

She's unmoving, watching the house and the indigo sky clumped with violet clouds in its backdrop. Then, she laughs quietly, as if someone whispered a joke in her ear.

"I think it worked." She looks back at us with a shy, pink-lipped smile. "He gave a convincing performance. Bravo, sir."

Dessin bows his head at her. And I want to hug him, tell him thank you, tell him I wouldn't have lasted another week with how they treated me. But that would be a lie. I would have stayed. Endured. Taken on more poison. I meant what I said to Judas.

I won't leave him.

"About what Ash said before..." I prompt Dessin with the utmost sense of caution.

"What about it?" He blinks slowly.

"Well, wha—what do you think about what he said?" *Err, how do I ask?* He nearly lost his temper when Ash said it. *He said you were in love with me.*

He looks away, as if remembering Ash's exact words, then those dark eyes slide back to mine. They swallow me whole with a silent message I can't decipher. But this look is pure heat and untamed hunger. A trill of excitement reverberates down my spine, and my heart pelts a percussion against my ribs.

"I do not wish to go home tonight," Ruth interrupts, stepping back into our circle. The spell is broken. "I can't lie to my parents. They'll know I'm shaken up about something."

I don't hesitate. "You'll come home with me." I lock my arm to hers and pull her to my side. "It's the least I can do."

Dessin walks with us for about twenty minutes, ending the night at my front doorstep by stating that he won't be returning Aurick's tuxedo. Adding that his muscles stretched it out, and it would never fit Aurick's corpse-like body again.

And as he disappears into the midnight horizon, on a lonely walk back to his cage, I want to chase after him. Wrap my arms around his neck and thank him for the bit of life he's jolted back into my body.

~

I SHUT THE DOOR GENTLY, CAREFUL not to wake Aurick if he's already asleep. We haven't spoken about the night Masten was here; how he yanked the back of my head and demeaned me like a thief caught with their hands in a safe.

There was a keen look in Aurick's icicle eyes that night—he observed my fear and only had a subtle wariness in his expression.

I trust a murderous patient more than the man I'm living with.

"This way," I whisper to Ruth. But she can't hear me. Not with her mouth hanging open and her eyes like those of a child, spinning in a circle as she marvels at the mansion. The lights are dimmed to the soft flickering of dozens of candles across the glittering chandeliers and fireplace.

I laugh as she pretends to wipe the drool from her chin.

"I can't believe you live here," she whispers back.

"You'd never know with how little she's actually here."

That voice, annoyed, jerks my muscles into defensive mode. That voice is like ice melting down my spine. *He's awake.*

Ruth goes rigid against the front door.

I'd like to follow her lead, but if tonight taught me anything, it's to never show fear. Otherwise, they will walk over you like a dirty rug under their feet.

"Is it fine with you if my new friend, Ruth, stays the night?" I walk toward him as he sits, slouched, in front of the dim fire with a bottle in one hand and a leather journal

in the other. "Or is that against the house rules?" I challenge.

He perks up, but only enough to get a better look at me. "Where have you been all night?"

I was so hoping you would ask. "There was a dinner at a conformist's house. I believe you know Meridei, right?"

And as predicted, he straightens up completely, wide eyed, like he was the one caught with his hands in the safe. Her name, sparking sober recognition in his eyes, confirming everything she said. He was with her before me.

"We'll be starting our lady-doll regimen now. Please don't disturb us."

I snag Ruth's moist hand and race up the stairs as if he were going to chase us. But he stays put, possibly considering a way to explain his activities with the woman who torments me.

We enter my bedroom, and I close the door behind us. Ruth wastes no time enjoying the amenities of this room. She skips twice, then launches herself in the air, absorbing into the soft fluff of the massive bed. She rolls over onto her back, smiling with her eyes closed.

"Wow," she says slowly, with dragged-out admiration. "This is lovely."

I nod. It is. I never needed all of it, though. I'm happiest under the trees when the wind picks up and the leaves create their own symphony.

I walk into the washroom, suddenly grateful for having two copper bathtubs. I light three vanilla-sugar scented candles and arrange everything we'll need in the jars spread across the golden countertop. I reach into the cold chest under the counter and retrieve two pitchers of milk. Then, I carefully arrange four teaspoons of honey, two small vials of lavender oil, two bowls of freshly plucked rose petals, and Epsom salts. For hair care and skin lathering, I organize butters and oils to the far right of the counter, whipped and blended in glass bowls.

"I peeked into your wardrobe and watched my soul exit my body. It will reside with your beautiful, expensive dresses if you should ever need it." Ruth sighs heavily as she sits on the edge of the copper tub.

I nod, smiling. "You're welcome to borrow them whenever you'd like. I'm in my Emerald Lake uniform, mostly."

"I beg your pardon, but if I lived here, I'd wear a new gown every hour." She runs her hand through the hot running water absently, imagining the luxurious life I must live.

"Ruth..." I step in front of her tub, pouring the milk into the water, mesmerized by the way it dissipates, turning into rolling white clouds. "I want to give you my sincerest apology for what you saw at Meridei's dining party. I should have stopped—"

"In my interview, they made me watch Meridei attempt to drown someone. They laughed about the way the woman's body seized up, about the way her lips turned blue. And when I went home, I cried to my father. I begged him to not make me go back. But they didn't believe me—or did not *want* to believe me." She uses her hand to mix the teaspoons of honey I let melt off the spoon into the bathwater. "When I arrived at the dinner, I thought I was going to be alone. That I would face their cruelty and have to force a smile. But—you fought back."

As she smiles, her cheeks turn a soft shade like that of a rose petal, and the freckles scattered across her nose and cheeks draw closer together.

"I'm quite proud to say you're the only friend I'll have there," she says.

You sent her, didn't you, Scarlett? My skin warms from the heat of the stream and the triumph of making my first real girl friend.

"You'll be my only friend there too." I blow out a sigh of relief. At least, my only friend that isn't a patient.

Ruth helps me dump the rest of the petals and oils and salts into our baths. We turn around as the other undresses, slipping out of our evening attire and into the hot, floral-scented water.

We talk about everything as we soak and lather our hair in butters and creams. I tell her about Chekiss and Niles—explaining their hardships and what makes them special to me. I share the horrors I’ve seen and the treatments that left me breathless. And for the first time, I let myself fall into a conversation about Scarlett and how she wanted to change everything at the asylum, about how I promised her I would do everything I could. But my first lie to Ruth is when she asks me how Scarlett died, and I tell her plainly that it was an accident, and there was a fire, and I could not save her.

Oh, how that lie cracked my bones and left me writhing.

It was *not* an accident.

I killed my sister.

But Ruth is kind and safe and sweet. How could I tell her that I am worse than any patient she will see? I have a secret that will rot me from the inside out.

But then she wants to talk about Dessin, which lights me up like a torch at midnight. “There’s something interesting about him. He reminded me of those knights from the fairy tales my mother would read to me at bedtime.”

“He’s a genius. I suppose that will never not be interesting to me. But yes—he looks like a prince and a warrior merged into one body.” I shrug, sinking deeper into the warm tub.

Ruth giggles, swishing around in the water. “Yes! I had trouble forming words when he looked me in the eyes.”

Just wait until that stare makes you stumble, stutter, and trip. His eyes are a universal blessing to this world. They’re my favorite.

“But he’s dangerous. And manipulative. I can’t tell if he’s truly my friend or if he’s using me for a grander plan.”

That thought still bothers me. It makes me paranoid and insecure. What if this is all a mass manipulation? I'm his pawn that he'll use to take out a queen.

"No." She shakes her head. "Not with the way he looked at you. Didn't you see the sun rising in his eyes? A man cannot fake that."

This notion gives me electric vibrations that whirl through my veins. What way does he look at me? His stares are intense, yes, but anytime he looks at anyone, it's always intense. Why would he look at me with the sun rising in his eyes?

Ruth dunks her head underwater to wash out the layers upon layers of soft hair masks. I do the same, running my fingers across my scalp, feeling the thick cream dissolve around my naked body.

We take a breath in at the same time, our heads breaking the surface of the creamy water, wiping the residue from our eyes.

"I'm hungry," she whispers as if it's a crime to want to eat.

I look over at her, my stomach clenching as it grumbles to confirm her statement.

"Me too. Want to sneak food up to our room and stay up all night eating?"

Her face beams, and we rush out of our tubs to dry and lather and dry some more.

It's a mission to sneak to the first floor, gathering a bag of cookies, iced custard from the ice chest, bread, pastries, and wine—the sweet, pink kind that Aurick would never let me have due to the extra sugar.

We slip along the walls, careful not to disturb the creaking floors.

Our entire night is spent on my floor beside my bed, with the window open in front of my fireplace. We stuff our mouths with sugary treats and savory slabs of meat, laughing at the stories she tells me from her childhood

sneaking around behind her parents' backs. She tells me all about the boys she's kissed and how they're all the same—lanky, pale white, and lacking a sense of humor.

And on this night, we bond, the way raindrops merge into the soil. Ruth becomes my friend, and I become hers, introducing our newest term of endearment.

Soul sister.

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42. Diversion

"OH MY, DON'T YOU CLEAN up nicely?"

A stranger's voice stops my hand at mid-stroke; a fluffy makeup brush with a sprinkle of pink powder hovering over my cheekbone.

But it's not a stranger—not quite.

Masten.

Ruth snuck back home at sunrise, only achieving an hour of sleep. She didn't want her parents to wake and find her bed empty. If she were still here, I might not be so afraid.

Masten has planted himself on the edge of my bed, watching me as I carefully apply a subtle amount of shadows and colors at my vanity. In the reflection of my mirror, I see his face over my shoulder. His hair is the same glossy-black shade of Aurick's, but longer with gentle curls at the ends and tousled in gelled strands for a messy middle part. He wears his long black topcoat and holds that cane with the wolf's-head handle.

What is he doing in my bedroom?

I don't dare make another move.

"I brought you a spot of morning tea," he offers as if it is a white flag. "I was hoping for a quick chat with you."

I stare at his hand, holding the white cup of tea, and shake my head. I watch him set it down casually. I've learned to never accept tea from those who threaten me.

Ever.

"Is this quick chat similar to the last one we had?" I ask carefully. *Where is Aurick?*

He chuckles, raising his eyebrows like we're sharing an inside joke.

"I hope not. But I was wondering if you'd be so kind to take off work today? Perhaps spend time with me. I do feel as though we have started off on the wrong foot."

I turn around at this. What is his motive now?

"And why do you think that is?" I ask, squishing my tongue between my teeth to keep from grinding them.

He holds his hands up as if I'm about to strike him. "I know, I know. I was hardly a gentleman. But I'd appreciate the chance to make that up to you." His sapphire-blue eyes sparkle in the orange morning sun, flaring through the curtains of the window.

His tone is tranquil now, sober, and without hard edges. His pleading gaze makes me want to give in, accept his non-apology and start over. But like the thunder of Dessin's cautious voice, I have a strong, persistent hand pulling me away from the notion. A thud in my gut begging me to not fall for the chivalrous ocean eyes.

"I'd like to but..."

He's standing now, a hand like a feather landing on my shoulder. "I think we owe it to Aurick. I am his oldest friend, and you are his newest friend. Don't you think it wise to be on the same side?"

"Skylenna!" Aurick hollers from his study. "Emerald Lake called for you. They need you in immediately."

I release a long, shuddering breath. *Thank God*. Relief loosens the knots building between my shoulder blades.

Masten's eyes droop, a theatrical frown animating his mouth.

"Another time, then?"

I smile politely but am hesitant to answer. I'd rather not be pressured by him again. I need to remember to keep my door locked at all times.

Once he takes the hint and starts to exit my bedroom, he stops in the doorway, and without looking back at me, he says. "You look nothing like her. In case you were wondering."

JUDAS WAITS FOR ME ON the front steps of Emerald Lake, watching my buggy pull in across the gravel driveway.

He hurries me inside, doing his best to explain that Dessin had an outburst, something—they're not sure what—sent him into a ferocious rage. Suseas took the liberty of arranging a treatment she finds to be highly effective on him. Judas warns me that they have only seen him like this on two separate occasions. When he was first admitted four years ago—he burst through the front doors covered in blood, terrorizing the staff until they locked him in a room—completely isolated—for seven days. The second time was only a few months ago; he destroyed his room and ripped out the plumbing in his washroom.

"You have never seen him like this," Judas says quietly, opening the doors to the intricate section. "I want you to be prepared."

Like stepping into a war zone, the grunts of a grown man ripple down the hallway, ricocheting off the walls like a blast wave from a bomb. His howls are muffled, enclosed in the thirteenth room. I throw both heels off and sprint to him. Panic ripping into my chest when I recognize the groans to be Dessin's voice, roaring deep in his chest, like a lion. I see orderlies hovering around his door, I wave them aside, and they thank me with looks of relief. The door clicks, and I shove it open with all my weight.

I choke on a gasp, taking in an image that twists my gut.

Suseas stands to the side of a long table, controlling a machine connected to Dessin's ears with small black earmuffs. A cream-colored tin box with black knobs that Suseas's hands shift up and down. Dessin's ankles, legs, stomach, arms, wrists, and head are strapped down. With a wooden stick between his teeth, he howls again, flexing his entire body under the restraints, causing his muscles to swell around the straps like a large body of water being held back by a dam.

I launch myself forward, climbing on top of Dessin's writhing body, straddling his hips as I rip off the black ear muffs that seem to be the source of his pain.

"Stop! What are you doing?!" Suseas shrieks at me.

A force like a speeding train bulldozes me off of the table, throwing me to the floor like a train blasting through a spiderweb. An orderly falls on top of me, his meaty weight pumping the air from my lungs, leaving me breathless and in shock. My eyes shoot open, leaking tears of panic as I struggle to gasp in the oxygen I need to move again. But the orderly holds me down, clamping his sweaty hands down over my forearms. And just over his shoulder, Dessin stares at me, eyes wide, suddenly awake and alert. Much like a grenade before it detonates, there's a beat of silence, and the dark steam behind his lethal expression sparks into a flame that lights the fuse. Voices murmur in the background as Dessin's right arm tears through the restraints and he untangles himself to freedom. Two guards barrel into him, holding him against the wall, but his eyes fall back to me, and I bear witness to the emotions shaking from his insides, pressurizing before they burst out of him. *A volcano.*

The guard holding me down goes to help, only to fall to the ground with his hands making a steeple over his bloodied nose.

Fast and with undeniable precision, Dessin twists an orderly's arm around his back, and much like the time he snapped my assailant's neck, another loud crack pops from the orderly. One with a broken nose, and now one with a broken arm. Dessin punches the third one in the jaw, and with a moment's pause, blood drips from his mouth.

I scream as the air refills my lungs. I jump to my feet, shuffle around the table, and throw myself between Dessin and the orderly. Dessin blinks furiously as I push him against the wall, his eyebrows cocked upward, making no

effort to hide his surprise at my intervention. But he doesn't hurt me. Does not push me out of the way.

His chest is moving wildly under my hands with a loss of breath. I question if it is from the fight, the rage, or my hand touching his chest.

"Please, *stop*," I plead. His fiery gaze bounces back and forth between each of my eyes, and his jaw grinds in fury. He's probably still in some sort of pain from whatever they were doing to him.

I stare at him another moment and recognize the panic in his eyes. When I was four years old, my father brought me to the red oaks, and we swam in the lagoon below. I wandered off on my own in the water and decided to swim as deep to the bottom as I could. I didn't get far before I ran out of air, and me being only a little girl, I panicked. Before I could inhale the water, my father pulled me out and threw me onto a rock to make sure I didn't drown. I spit out the water I'd swallowed and began to cry hysterically. The look I saw in his eyes was the same look I see in Dessin's.

"I'm okay. I'm okay. I'm not hurt," I whisper, placing my hand over the side of his face. The sting of hatred is muted for a moment in his glossy-brown eyes, then replaced with pain. His head falls back against the wall in defeat.

"*What happened?*" I growl at Suseas.

"We don't know. It happened so suddenly. He started throwing things around in here, yelling, and pounding on the walls. When we tried to calm him down, he went ballistic and kept telling us to '*leave her alone!*'" I look back at Dessin, who just stares at me, unyielding in his supreme knowledge.

"What were you doing to him? Why was he in so much pain?"

"We used a radiation mobilization on him until you came."

I step toward her and try to remain calm. "I need you to leave... *now*." I enunciate each word, each syllable, carefully, as if I am speaking to a child. But on the inside, I'm unhinged like a wounded animal. Seeing him howling in pain conjured a feeling I've never come close to feeling. I wanted to hurt them. To strap them in and watch them suffer. They hurt him. And that struck me like a bat to the cheek.

Suseas leaves with the severely wounded guards—no objections, no farewells. Dessin slides down the wall I pushed him against, adjacent to his bed that is flipped over on its side. *Unbolted* from the concrete.

He sighs. Eyes closed. I sit down on the floor, trying to pull my uniform down as much as possible. This feels like the time when he took me to the basement when I tried so hard to break through his steel armor. That feels like a lifetime ago.

"Who were you talking about?" I ask.

"Did he hurt you?" He scans my face with his eyes.

I shake my head. "No, he just knocked the air out of me. I'll live." But apparently, I've answered his question incorrectly. He just nods and smiles as if I'm living in another world. Like I'm the one institutionalized.

"Suseas said you were yelling '*leave her alone*.' Who did you mean?"

He contemplates lying for a moment—I can tell by the way he lifts a brow a single millimeter in amusement. Then answers vaguely. "I had a visitor."

"Impossible," I say. "You aren't allowed to have visitors other than me."

He rolls his eyes at this. "Perhaps you've underestimated a higher power."

"Like Martin?"

Dessin wrinkles his brow and grimaces like what I've said has insulted him. "Certainly not. That sweaty bastard would likely piss himself before facing me again."

I push my fingers against my lips and let out a sound I haven't heard since I was young and small. It hums pleasantly from my chest, tickling its way up my throat.

Immediately his eyes meet mine, stretching wide, eyebrows arched to the sky.

And now he is grinning.

"You *laughed*," he says, flustered with levity.

I look down, smiling. I forgot how good it felt to actually laugh, release the built-up tension from my chest. "Yes, I did."

"That was—incredible." His eyes soften. "You know I haven't heard that—well, it's a pleasant change from your constant frowning."

"Why?" I twist my fingers in a loose strand of hair. "Everyone laughs."

"Not you," he argues. "Not genuinely, at least. You force it or don't have the urge to let it out at all." I think about this. He's right. My world has clipped my urge to laugh, darkening my thoughts, dimming that airy tickle that rises like a gentle summer breeze in the back of my throat. Laughing is hard when you're always fighting the urge to keep from crying.

I look back up at him to find that he's watching me, dark eyes searing into my soul. My heart takes a tumble in my chest.

"What was wrong with you earlier?" I change the subject.

He bites his bottom lip curiously. "Has Aurick ever heard you laugh?"

I'm not sure. He may have caught a brief chuckle. But a full-on, belly-deep laugh is hard to come by.

"That's irrelevant," I answer.

"It will be when you start to see what I see."

"Please answer my question," I beg. What was his breakdown about? What was the trigger?

“How about we make a little deal?” he suggests, waving his hand in the air.

“Depends on the deal.”

Dessin moves closer. “Stay here with me. Just for tonight.”

“Why...?” I ask, leaning back, hesitant to fall into another game, even though it intrigues me, sending every nerve surging through my brain with excitement. He grabs my arms to pull me closer.

“Skylenna, I wouldn’t ask you if it wasn’t important. Please—don’t leave.” I start to shake my head. “At least not until you’re sure Aurick went to bed.”

“I can’t. I’m already in the doghouse from the last two times you had me stay out past dark.”

“He’s getting stricter now?” His eyes narrow, and he has to take a moment to process.

“Yes.” I don’t want to share how Masten was in my bedroom before I left this morning. I still don’t understand his motives.

“Look at me.” He tilts my chin up so that I can see the urgency in his eyes. “Do you trust me?” I don’t have to think about this. I nod with confidence.

“Then here’s the deal. You stay with me tonight without contacting Aurick. And I’ll tell you something you’ve been dying to know.” One by one, every muscle that holds me up hardens to iron.

“If I stay with you, you’ll tell me a part of your story that made you who you are today?” I can’t even breathe correctly. I’m stunned, in total disbelief. Whatever happened to him all of those years ago to make him the way he is today, I will know before anyone.

He nods. It’s not something I have to consider. I will face Aurick when this is over and accept the consequences. At the very least, I’ll stand up to him, knowing this was all worth it.

I want to know what's in Dessin's soul more than anything. I want to know the previous host. I want to know his name. I want to know the life he had before this Dessin facade came to be.

"If you tell me a piece of your story, I will tell you a piece of mine."

I freeze up. "I've already told you everything there is to know."

He shakes his head. "I want you to tell me what you've told no one before." He narrows his focus. "I want you to tell me what happened to you. I want you to tell me about your father. I know there is a far more despairing story for you to share with me. I won't ask that of you just yet. But I will ask about your father."

I suck in a weak breath. "Dessin, I don't..."

He takes my hand in his. "I'll only tell if you will." We stare each other down, waiting for the other to yield or merely confirming that neither of us will. I blink first and look away.

"Okay." An unsteady rush of air fills my chest as quickly as it rushes out. I've stored these memories in a prison—they've been locked up, restrained from moving, frozen in time and space so they can do little to no damage from where they sit. I meant to keep them there the rest of my life.

43. Man Inside the Beast

"I'M ALL EARS," HE SAYS softly.

And with those three words balanced in the air, I release a few demons with a single breath. I tell Dessin about the day my father came home with blood trickling down his brow. About how something had changed. That the caring sparkle in his eyes had been replaced by a fog, thick and cloudy, cast over his pale-green eyes. I explained how my six-year-old body was kicked down the stairs, tumbling from step to step until I met the floor of the basement, hearing the snap muffled by blood and skin as my arm broke my fall. And the three long dark days I spent in that cold, dusty space will live forever in my mind. Flashes of that drip from a leaky pipe in the corner or how the cobblestone felt under my small hand.

He flew into a rage, burning the dolls I had in my room and tossing their ashes down the stairs to taunt me with what he had done.

"What brought all of this on?" Dessin asks.

"I've never known for certain. One day he was a good father, and the next, he was sick and sadistic... a monster." I shudder at the memory of his abuse. "When he started drinking, it got worse. I tried to hide his liquor once; I buried it in the backyard while he was gone, and when he realized I had done it, he beat me and locked me in the basement without a scrap of clothing. It was a little over a week before he let me out." I pull the edge of my dress down as it rises while I speak. Dessin catches my movements and pulls the sheet off of the bed and lightly drapes it over my legs tucked under me.

"And you never tried to run away?"

"No. At least, not that I can remember." I shrug. "He was my father. I didn't want to lose him. As bad as he got, I still loved him."

Dessin doesn't nod. Doesn't flinch. He simply parts his lips and lets out a small breath. Then, he lowers his head, looks down at me with dazzling eyes, and it's then that a section of the prison is unlocked, and the inmates come pouring out of me.

I share the time he made me drink a quarter of his bottle of whiskey—it would have been more, but I was only eight, and I physically couldn't stomach anymore. And even though it burned my throat, soured my stomach, and left my body writhing on the carpeted floor in a drunk, dizzy, and nauseous state... I still loved him.

When I turned eleven, he had glimpses of sanity peek through, like sunshine through slits of a curtain. He would look at me like he hadn't seen me in years and tell me he was trying to fight it, that he wasn't strong enough. During some of his rants, he would blame me for my mother leaving us. He would say that she was the only woman he'd ever loved, and she was probably having it a lot worse than him right now. *All for you*, he would say.

"When I turned fifteen, he reached the peak of his violence and attacked me to within an inch of my life. But someone—it was never discovered who—saved me and slit his throat with his own knife. I woke up in Survivah with a chopped-up memory and a long road to recovery ahead of me."

He furrows his brow but still remains silent.

A thought pops into my head and sends a slight jolt of adrenaline through me. "You knew," I direct to him. "You knew it all. I mean, you've hinted that you knew, but why did you want me to tell you about what happened with my father if you already knew?"

He lifts his chin and scratches the left side of his jaw. "I wanted you to tell me because you trusted me." He blinks and then meets my eyes again.

"Why does it matter if I trust you or not?"

He sighs. "It doesn't. But I needed to know if you did."

“That doesn’t explain how you already knew.”

“You’re right. It doesn’t.” He halfway smirks. “And there are details about your perspective of this story that I didn’t know.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll never share those memories again.” I clench my teeth, dragging them together from side to side to bite back the tears that are burning behind my eyes. I swallow the thickness tightening in my throat. Why does he have to dangle the truth in front of me this way? I shared a piece of me that was behind bars in my mind. That should have taken an army to do, but he coaxed it out with a soothing voice and warm eyes.

“And why do you think that is?”

I hesitate. “Everyone would look at me differently. They’d see me as damaged, broken, like a doll missing limbs or an eye.”

I take a deep breath to soothe the unbalanced quivering in my voice. It’s the way he’s looking at me, the way he always does. Not like I’m a toy he no longer wishes to play with. And that triggers the tears that want desperately to escape.

“But you don’t seem to be fazed. You’re looking at me the way you always do.”

He sits up straighter. “How do I look at you?” Amusement twinkles in his eyes.

“You look at me like you want to protect me. Like you want to keep me safe,” I murmur, unsure of my own assessment because, frankly, it would be embarrassing if I were wrong.

His stare causes a flood of chills to rush down my back. A beat of silence swarms the room. He looks like he wants to say something but can’t, or won’t, or maybe something inside him won’t allow it. He clasps his hands together.

“What I’m about to tell you... Will put you in danger by merely knowing. I expect it to stay between us, just as your burdens will stay between us.”

I bow my head in understanding. But I want to shake his shoulders, thank him, scream at the top of my lungs—*you have no idea how badly I've wanted to hear this.*

"There is a rumor that Demechnef is looking for me. That I am the way I am because of our government is true to some degree. From the age of six to seventeen, I was trained, like no one in the world has ever been trained—for the war against Vexamen. Demechnef's intent for me became clear when they discovered that Vexamen's armed numbers far exceeded our own. For every one soldier we have, they have a hundred. But there are a couple of defenses that have kept their armies from invading our country completely. That is the knowledge that our technology and weapons go beyond the advancements of their own and that the thousands of miles of forest surrounding our cities are far too dangerous to voyage through."

"Not that I don't find this fascinating or anything, but what does any of this have to do with you?"

Dessin narrows his eyes my way. "The backstory helps you understand for what purpose I was trained so harshly." He pauses and looks down and to the right, as if he's listening closely to someone whispering in his ear. "When I was six years old, I was brought into the Demechnef bunkers. I was taught every language, every form of martial arts, the science of anatomy, psychology, weaponry, chemistry, anything and everything that could advance me in warfare. I learned it all in a matter of weeks. It would have taken the average man an entire lifetime to learn half of what I know to this degree. Studies have shown that I have unlocked parts of my brain and use that at a different frequency than the average human.

"Despite my intellectual training, I was conditioned to survive extreme amounts of pain. That conditioning went on for three to four hours every day for eleven years. If you combined every treatment here, at Emerald Lake Asylum, it

still wouldn't come close to the sessions I endured as a child. But they made me strong, resilient, capable. By the age of eight, I could disarm any soldier, outsmart any scholar, and endure more pain than any man alive. When they discovered that a soldier this powerful could not be controlled by any government, they worked to find a weakness. To keep me in line."

"And did they find one?" I know the answer is no. But I can't help but ask.

"Yes," he says with great seriousness. "Despite my efforts to keep it hidden away. They did not hesitate to use it against me when they found it. Which is why I had to leave."

"And come here? Why, of all places, would you choose to hide out here?" I ask.

"Demechnef and Survivah have an agreement. They do not have control over the other unless one breaks our laws. Meaning, under oath, Demechnef cannot reach its hands in this asylum to bring me back. They can keep an eye on me. They can send people to spy on me. But they cannot touch me," he says, arms crossed.

"So your plan is to rot in this cage? Live out your days undergoing horrific treatments?" It's unthinkable that the Demechnef training on him was significantly worse than this asylum. I thought this was as bad as it gets. I thought this was a gateway to hell, where demons danced and preyed on weak minds. I feel a cloak of sadness drape over me. This *is* Dessin's life.

He smiles at me. "I have no intention of staying. My reason for being here is threefold. First, is what I've already stated. I cannot be controlled by Demechnef in here. Second, I am buying time for a grand plan. And lastly and most importantly, I don't dare to say out loud just yet."

A groan involuntarily leaks from my throat. "I have so many questions." I trace the lines on my left palm with my

index finger. "But I know if I ask them, you will not answer."

"Just as you are not ready to answer questions about Scarlett." He says her name carefully, with a softness that couldn't possibly break or damage such a fragile word.

"What weakness did they uncover, Dessin?"

He breathes in deeply, searching for a way to respond. "A very long time ago, the previous host of this body... Found something to live for."

I stare at him. An iron rod pulls to Dessin from inside my chest. A force from inside me trying to explode. Climbing a great height. Fighting a storm that has yet to come. I wish I knew why I have such strange feelings when I'm around him. Certain words that he says. Certain ways he looks into my eyes.

"Skylenna, I have to ask this, not because I want to, but because I have to... Has Aurick ever touched you?"

My eyes widen. I bring myself back from the black hole I had fallen into. "What's your deal with him?" My heart pumps at the rhythm of a hummingbird's wings. "You act like you two are mortal enemies."

"Has he?"

I roll my head back, loosening the muscles that have fastened tightly around my spine. "What exactly do you mean by *touch*?"

Along the sharp edge of his jaw, the muscles rise and fall, bearing down against his teeth in annoyance. "Has he taken you into his bed?"

The notion disgusts him, it forces his brow line to bunch together and his lips to purse into a fine line. A faltering gaze, like staring into the sun.

"What—" I can't complete a thought. This feels personal on another level. This somehow acknowledges that I am a woman to him, besides a friend and a conformist. I am a woman, and he is a man, and he wants to know if I've been

intimate. I'm elated with fluttering wings erupting from inside my organs, soaring through my veins.

"No." This is none of his business. I shouldn't even answer these questions. But, for a reason I am blind to, I jump at the chance to tell him.

"So, you've never..."

"Never," I whisper as if the word itself is intimate, private, and only for his ears. *Never*. I would never let him touch me. I've never had the desire.

His shoulders relax, and he lets out an inaudible breath.

"Why did you have to ask?"

"He'll hurt you," he says. "The way Jack hurt you."

I shake my head. "No, I don't believe he would. I'm far more concerned about his friend, Masten." I wonder again why Masten wanted to spend the day with me. Was it truly a peace offering? Or another way of scaring me?

"He was around again today," he states. I thought this would end in a higher tone to indicate a question, but he says it stiffly.

"Yes."

He looks down. Considers a thought. "You'll stay until dark, then?"

"I suppose so, you haven't given me much choice."

I leave sometime after midnight when the moon is full and beaming a silver glow over the gravel driveway. The air smells like peonies and soothing woodsmoke from an outdoor fire.

At one point, Judas summoned me to the hallway, where he warned me of the repercussions of Dessin's actions. There must be treatments to follow his behavior, and he asked me to break the news to him. I understood that if Judas was telling this to me, it meant there was nothing he could do to prevent it. Dessin accepted the consequences with casual ease.

The rest of the evening, we never ran out of topics to talk about. We shared a plate of fruit, and he told me about

his love for the outdoors, that sleeping with a roof over his head is less than appealing. Then for dinner, we ate turkey legs, smoked sausage, and roasted potatoes. We made a rule that we couldn't ask questions about the other, not in the way we do with the game.

Tonight was for friends.

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44. House Rules

THE MOTIVATION FOR SLEEP GUIDES my movements through the dark mansion.

It's one thirty a.m., and I'm afraid Aurick waited up for me.

I trudge into the sitting room with bare feet and sore limbs, look around and see that Darcie has been here, Aurick's maid. The white marble floors have been swept and polished. The shelves have been dusted, and the chimney has been cleaned. I step into the kitchen and find a bottle of bourbon, now bone dry. My head falls. The sight of an empty liquor bottle always petrified me as a child. It meant my father was lurking somewhere in the house, thirsty and angrier than ever.

I jog up the spiraled stairs and peek into the crack of his door. Aurick sits on the edge of his bed, hunched over a small trash can. Shirtless, black briefs hugging his hips, and an uncharacteristically messy head of raven-black hair.

I consider racing back to my room, locking my door, and pretending like I had been asleep this entire time. But I can't leave him while he's sick. I push open the door with my left hand, and his head pops up. I offer a soft smile and step into his room.

"I really hope it wasn't your cooking that's making you this sick," I tease. He sets the can down. I try not to look inside.

He chuckles and nods his head. "It would make sense, wouldn't it? I am the only one who ate the dinner I set out." A rigid bitterness in his tone—an iceberg cutting into a ship passing by.

"I'm sorry—but I got a lot of work done tonight." I stay close to the door, suddenly feeling a violent tremor permeating from his frame. He stands up, back hunched

and shoulders slumped forward. He doesn't lift his head, but his eyes work hard to focus on me.

"Let me ask you something—do you find me attractive?" His words are slow and slurring, and he stares at the space between my eyes.

"I—you said we were friends."

He laughs aggressively loud, cutting me off with the sudden noise. He takes a stumbling step toward me.

"Because I didn't want you to feel uncomfortable staying with me!" he shouts with breath reeking of cigar smoke.

"Aurick..." I have nothing to say, only a new perspective gliding into focus on my living here. This whole time, he lied to me. My hands reach behind me to grip the door for support. As if I were eight years old again, my knees threaten to buckle, and hot waves of fear flood into my gut.

"It's been torturing me to live under the same roof as you—knowing you're undressing just across the hall—but I've been patient, waiting for *you* to make the first move. Show me you want me."

"But I don't—" I choke on his unexpected confession.

"You don't want me." His words are heavy, eyelids sluggish. "You're telling me you've never thought about fucking me?"

He drags his feet a step closer, cornering me like the night dawper I met in the woods.

"Not once. You're my *friend*."

"No—" He runs a shaky hand through his wild hair. "I'm a man, and you're a woman. A woman living with me. A woman that has to obey me. Care for me. Touch me."

My mouth falls open, and I dig my nails into the palms of my hands to force an invisible dam to my eyes as the urgent flood of tears blurs my vision. The blood from the arteries in my neck pumps hard and fast into my face, prickling with heat to my forehead as if I've pressed my face in an oven.

That warning, like a red pulsing fire growing in height at the center of my brain, tells me to run. Much like when my father had his violent streaks. *Do I leave? Where would I go?* But I must. At least until he's sober and able to have a civil conversation.

"We can have this conversation when you're sober." I take the door handle and begin to turn to flee the scene.

Thick beads of sweat roll down his temples, and his face becomes red. "Don't you dare walk away from me when I am speaking to you!" I see a flash of the back of his hand and then feel the hardness of the bones from his knuckles against my cheekbone. A screech escapes me, like nails across a porcelain plate—I fall backward.

I hold my hands over the right side of my face to comfort the sting, the throb, the déjà vu threatening to throw me into a sea of depression. Instantly the sobs possess me, and my shoulders shake like a twig in a thunderstorm. Salty tears puddle in the corners of my eyes, drip down my cheeks, and seep between the slit of my lips. As if stepping backward in time a good ten years, I am powerless to stop the ones I love from hurting me. I can't believe it's happening all over again.

He kneels down, swaying back and forth. I flinch and use my arms to shield my upper body. "Please," I beg, whimpering as I bear down for another strike.

And like soothing warm water, Dessin's last words to me before I left him tonight flow into my mind, reminding me what to do as my first line of defense. *Tell Aurick I told you about my time at Demechnef. That you know I have a plan and that I plan on revealing it to you soon. He's a jealous man—and if he believes you're opening up to him, it'll help your living situation.*

My eyes flicker to his bloodshot stare through the small opening between my arms. This could easily anger him even more—but I trust Dessin. I trust he wanted me to tell Aurick this for a reason.

“Patient Thirteen told me about Demechnef—how they controlled him! And that he has a plan—he’s going to reveal it to me soon. That’s why I stayed so late! Only for that reason!” I’m blubbering now, hiccuping to catch my breath as Dessin’s solemn advice spills from my lips wet with fresh tears.

Aurick’s eyes suddenly look sober as they open wide to process my statement. He bows his head in remorse, shaking it side to side. “*Shit*—I didn’t mean it. Oh God, what have I done?!”

My right eye waters up as it burns from impact. I sigh in relief that he has snapped out of his spontaneous rage and isn’t going to keep attacking. “I’m okay,” I whisper.

In the beginning, when my father first began to change into the monster he became, he would hit me and then briefly apologize afterward as if he regained his conscious morals. I grew accustomed to telling him it was okay after he had struck me. After a few months, he eventually stopped apologizing.

Aurick scoops me into his arms. “I don’t know what came over me. I swear to God, Sky, I won’t ever lay a hand on you again! I can’t believe I did that.” Thin, hardly noticeable tears spill from one eye. He kisses the top of my head and sobs lightly into my hair. I’m sick to my stomach at the thought of this happening to me again. I finally escaped my father, and now it seems that he has found me again. I can’t help but have feelings of abandonment toward Dessin. Did he know this would happen? Is this what he was talking about when he said leave her alone? At the moment when Aurick reached his anger and violence, I wished Dessin would save me.

“I’m okay,” I repeat. He abruptly turns to the can and hurls again. I stand up. “I’m going to get some ice for this,” I say with my back turned to him. He doesn’t answer. Silence. I glance over my shoulder to see him passed out on the floor.

Thank God.

As I lay my head down with a bag of ice resting over my right eye, Dessin's words ring through my thoughts.

He'll hurt you. The way Jack hurt you.

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45. Spectral Man

THIS MORNING I TRY TO recall if it was Aurick's hand or a frying pan that hit my eye and part of my cheekbone. He left before me this morning—either avoiding me or completely forgetting about events that cloud over my head.

I see Chekiss and Niles first, introducing them to Ruth. We sit on the terrace of the asylum, and they all ask why my eye is practically glued shut. Delphine covered the bruise with thick, creamy makeup. Unfortunately, there was no way to cover the swelling. I let her know I would just tell people that I fell down the stairs. None of them nodded convincingly, but they were too polite to question me further.

After an hour, it becomes abundantly clear that Niles and Ruth do *not* enjoy the other's company.

"Why must you speak so vulgarly?" Ruth sneers as she finishes off her breakfast.

"I have trust issues." Stone expression. Serious. Which Niles rarely was.

"And why is that?" she asks genuinely—fully expecting a genuine answer.

He licks the tip of his spoon while maintaining eye contact with her. *Here we go.*

"Because Skylenna brought me lime Jell-O when I asked for pudding."

After a second of silence, Chekiss barks out a rough laugh, tipping his head back with his eyes shut. And I am flooded with warm surprise, my cheeks turning hot at the pleasant sound.

As I rise to leave them, Ruth whispers in my ear. "I want to talk about what really happened to your eye... later." And I won't deny her that. As a woman living under the same standards, I know she will understand.

Niles gives me a quick kiss on the cheek goodbye, and I feel my stomach churning with each step that brings me closer to his room. I know the right thing to do is to keep it from him; at all costs, do not tell Dessin what happened last night. It will save everyone the stress and heartache. I can do that. I've held it together since I left Aurick's room that night. I've sucked in my tears and placed my trembling despair in a locked drawer.

Stepping into the thirteenth room, I see him sitting there on his bed, his eyes immediately drawn to the right side of my face. And merely locking eyes with him is like opening a closet door that is filled to the ceiling with items compacted together. Everything I have comes falling to pieces, crumbling to my feet in a weak downpour.

I reach for something to hold me up as I fight to hold in the sobs that rattle my frame. The cry produces a new supply of warm tears, and I can no longer hide the imminent breakdown.

Dessin is unleashed of his shackles, racing to my side and holding me up by my waist. I grip his arms, squeezing my feeble hands over his muscles. His forehead touches mine. "He hurt you." And his voice is a husky growl, the awakening of a new beast.

I nod against him, weeping softly as I try to open my eyes and explain. To tell him that I'm okay. It's happened before. *I'm okay. I'm always okay. I can handle this. I always handle this.* But I can't lie to him. I can't hide the terror still crunching down on my bones after last night. I thought that part of my life had ended. But I traded one monster in for another.

"*Goddammit.*" He squeezes his eyes shut and uses his left hand to move my hair away from my face. "I'll *end* him." There isn't an ounce of doubt. Only unlimited confidence and a blizzard of fury lighting a fire behind his eyes, showing me the volcano in him once more, with two strong hands that could wipe out the world.

"I'm scared," I murmur into his chest.

And I am. I can't tell if this is a one-time occurrence. I hadn't realized how deeply affected I was by his knuckles until I saw my reflection in the warmth of Dessin's eyes. I'm ashamed of myself. I wish I wasn't this person that can't fight back.

Coward. Coward. Coward.

My words cause him to melt into me. He wraps his arms around my waist, and in response, my arms move around his neck with my tear-stained cheek resting on his shoulder.

"Tell me what happened."

I blow out a choppy, frustrated breath. "He was compelled by the drink. And I came home late again. He confessed some—*lustful* feelings that I didn't know he had."

Dessin doesn't seem surprised by the last bit. "Did you tell him what I told you?"

I nod. "Only after he struck me."

Dessin moves away, reaching for the door. "I'll rip his lungs from his chest." But I snatch his hand from making contact with the handle.

"Please," I whimper. "Don't leave me."

He clutches me tighter. Presses his cheek firmly to the side of my head.

"God, I should have been there." And there's truth and regret in his voice—heavier and colossally larger than I can imagine.

I unlock my arms and lightly push against his chest to face him.

"Where were you, Dessin?" My voice breaks, and new tears form in my eyes.

His face falls along with his shoulders, and he shuts his eyes as he clenches his jaw in utter defeat. "I wish I could tell you why I couldn't protect you this time."

A thought lands like a meteor in my mind, and the tears stop abruptly. "You—you knew this would happen. That's why you made me stay late. Did you know he'd hit me if I

was late? Did *you* set this up?!" I shove him away from me, and he doesn't resist—he takes two steps back.

"No."

"You must have! Is this part of the game? Set me up for my demise? You control everyone differently. Was this your plan all along? To make my worst nightmare come to life?" My voice is rising with every sentence I spit at him. The pieces are all falling together in unison.

"That's not what's happening, Skylenna," he says tensely, agitation narrowing his eyes and cocking his head to the right.

"What? Now you have little to say? *Now* you're angry? I finally see through your antics, and now you don't have an explanation?" My fists are tight and shaking with embarrassment, anger, betrayal. *How could he put me through this?*

"No." His one word passed through his lips in a low warning. But I cannot stop. My blood is boiling, and it sends steam through my ears as I continue.

"Then WHAT?!"

He moves two steps closer and slides his hands on either side of my face.

"BECAUSE WHAT MASTEN WOULD HAVE DONE WAS MUCH WORSE!"

And it's as if the Emerald Mountains shake from the anger of his words.

What?

"I was keeping you here, so Masten did not have the chance to spend time with you yesterday. I knew he wouldn't wait up late for you, but I didn't think Aurick would jump to that extreme."

How did he know Masten wanted to spend the day with me?

"You're going to have to help me understand how you know all of this? Because I'm becoming more and more

convinced that you can hear my thoughts.” And that on its own is a mortifying thought.

“No, I cannot hear your thoughts. Your body language is enough to pick up on.” He lowers his voice and relaxes his hands that are holding my face. “My brain works differently as you’ve been able to experience during the time you’ve known me. My reach is quite expansive, and I am able to keep tabs on certain individuals. Masten being one of them.”

He was keeping an eye on Masten... And something he was planning caused Dessin to resort to keeping *me* in his line of sight to ensure my safety.

“What was Masten planning?”

“I—can’t go into detail with you about that right now.” He sighs. “But he’s not going to bother you now. I can tell you that much.”

“But—”

“Skylenna, I know this is difficult for you. I do. I understand I am not easy to trust. But I need you to try.” He shakes his head and drops his hands. “No, I need you to do better than try. There’s a feeling of trust and comfort that you felt when you first met me... despite everything you were told about me. You trusted me. Am I wrong?”

I shrug. *No, you’re not wrong.*

“Well, that feeling is mutual. And if a raving mad lunatic like me can trust you? Despite the many burdens I carry at this very moment—you can believe in me.”

“Why me? Why do you care about protecting me and no one else?”

It dawns on me that I haven’t asked him this question before.

But I’ve caught him off guard. He blinks, opens his mouth to answer, looks away.

“I don’t exactly have a choice,” he says stiffly.

“I need more than that.”

“The other man in my head...” He looks at me darkly, like he’s about to spill classified information. “He isn’t allowing me to care for anyone else.”

Processing that bit of news sends me walking to his bed in a colorful trance. Taking my mind off the earlier trauma and focusing on this new spectral idea that the mystery soul inhabiting his body behind the shadows, behind psychological bars, is aware of my existence.

And he... *cares* about me.

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46. "Take My Hand."

DESSIN AGREED TO HOURS OF various treatments for the harm he inflicted onto the orderlies during his outburst. I wasn't allowed anywhere near him until they finished.

Hydrotherapy was first, then he was left in the coldest room of the asylum to reach near hypothermia. What followed after that, he asked that I didn't inquire about. To spare me the knowledge of the severity of his punishment.

I sat in a washroom and sobbed alone until it was over.

It took some time this afternoon, but eventually, I made a case that sitting inside his room every single day without any other scenery wasn't in anyone's best interest. With Judas's blessing, I managed to get two hours a day outside of Dessin's room, and if he so much as looked at someone the wrong way, he would be sentenced back to solitude.

Together we sit in silence. Dessin glances down at his food residing beside him on the stone steps on the terrace. A sense of hopelessness sinks inside of me. I don't know what I am going to do when this day is over and it is time for me to return to a home that isn't mine. That now more closely resembles a cage.

I glance over at Dessin, taking in his short time of pretend freedom, the rays of the soft afternoon sun draping over the asylum garden like a cloak of protection, and the towering pine trees oscillating in the breeze. But when a dancing ray of light bounces off of his brow, I see that it is furrowed, and he is frowning.

"What is it?" I ask.

He turns his head so that I no longer have a clear view of his profile.

"You're going to stay with him, aren't you?" he asks, yet, in the absolution of his tone, I know he already knows the answer.

I stare at him, holding my breath, summoning the right answer with a silent prayer. I can't leave Aurick. If I leave, I might as well kiss my position here goodbye.

And for that matter, Dessin goodbye with it.

He scoffs at my lack of an answer. "Are you going with Aurick to his grand, luxurious ball tomorrow?"

Ball? Tomorrow? I can't handle this right now. I don't want to think about the near future or the distant one. I only want to sit here with him. I want to be distracted.

"I don't know." And we both know that my words are to answer both of his questions.

He finally turns to look at me, this time with eyes that force me to believe he hates me; he actually hates me. But a second longer, and I see something else, something deeper, stinging with buried pain. There's a look of exhaustion and an unfamiliar yearning.

"I thought I'd have to fight you to keep from hunting him down. Why didn't you?" I breathe in the spring air to calm my erratic emotions that continue to bottle up at the surface, threatening to burst at any sensitive trigger word.

He stares down at me. "Because I knew if I did, you might never have forgiven me. Even though it took every ounce of restraint I had to not give him a living autopsy."

I flinch. "It's really not a big de—"

"Don't you dare finish that sentence," he interrupts, holding a hand up to stop me. "Do you know how tormenting it has been to look at your face and see what he did to you? See the pain behind your smile?" Pause. Two breaths. "How—" his voice breaks, and he caresses his finger lightly under my right eye where the bruise sits under my makeup. "How could you stay with him after he did this to you?" There's a sadness in his voice, a certain tenderness that comes out only when he's talking about me.

"I have nowhere to go." I can't explain it to him. If he knew I was staying so I can be with him, care for him in

this death trap, ensure he's not executed—he would do something explosive.

"Take my hand." He stands up, holding his hand out to me.

"Where are we going?"

"If you're going to be stupid, then I want you to be stupid with a good right hook." I fold my hand over his and rise to my feet.

"A what—"

We stand, facing one another in a secluded part of the garden in the backyard of the asylum. A clump of giant trees surrounds us, making a fluttering symphony as the leaves wave at us from up above our heads.

I try to mimic his stance. His feet apart, knees slightly bent. His warrior's resting spot. My body tingles with adrenaline like shaking up a bottle of ale.

"Charge me," he says. I blink, my mind and body remaining in a state of hibernation. "Skylenna, charge me. Try to choke me."

Sudden uneasiness takes root in my stomach. "Wait, you want *me* to be the attacker?!" I take a step back. "I thought we were trying to avoid poking my eye out?"

He laughs, gazing at me as if he were adoring a child singing a song out of order. "I'm not going to hurt you." The wind picks up, and my hair is being strewn across my face and neck. "At least not until you get good at this." He winks.

At that, I charge him, moving at a jogging pace. My hands reach his throat. I manage to push him against a tree, although I know he didn't resist.

Meanwhile, this entire three seconds, he is holding my gaze, intensely staring down at me with dark lashes and chocolate-brown eyes. Once I fully become aware that it is his turn to defend himself, I tense up. With one swift movement, Dessin's left arm shoots straight up, then he

twists his body and uses that elbow to bend down over my forearms, unlocking my hands from his throat.

He twirls me around him and presses my body into the tree he was once against in the lightest way possible. His forearm locks against my throat with no pressure added to it.

I grunt, not from pain but shock and frustration. He has my hands bound behind my back by only one of his hands, and his body is barricading me against a tree. For a split second, there's that pull again—the invisible fishing line that reels me into him, tempting me to reach my hand up to his jaw and wait to see how he'll react.

And for that split second, the same look of temptation sits like honey in his eyes.

"You would have seen that coming if you weren't undressing me with those pretty green eyes," he says.

A quick jolt of heat in my belly. Like candle wax. "How could I have missed it? You moved at a glacially slow pace."

His chest rumbles with a closed-mouth laugh. *What would he look like naked?*

I wiggle my way out of his grip and turn to face him. "Teach me."

He demonstrates again. One arm straight in the air. Turn. Use the elbow to break the hold. I practice on him slowly, ensuring my movements are in good form.

After we both feel confident in my ability to replicate the moves faster, he says, "Attack me again. Swing at me."

I lunge at him, this time with a fist ready to swing, aiming for his jaw. I assume he sees this action coming from a mile away; somehow, I end up on my back with my arms pressed against the dirt on either side of my body.

"You're crushing my appendix!" I groan, spitting my own hair out of my mouth.

"You don't even know where your appendix is." *Oh.*

I blow a raspberry as I try to suppress an embarrassed laugh. "Interesting."

He raises himself anyway, lifting his weight from my gut. I grimace, panting in his face. "How am I supposed to magically learn how to do that?!" I have a strong feeling that I am going to disappoint him repeatedly.

"You're not. But it was fun." That wicked, playful smile is like the heat of a fireplace after walking through the snow.

He lifts me back to my feet with one tug.

"Again," he says.

I raise my hand to jab him in the throat, and he blocks my motion like swatting away a fly—but I knew he would. This gives me full access to jump onto him like a monkey, arms wrapped around his neck and legs tied to his hips.

His eyes widen, and he stumbles. *Finally*, I make a move that catches him by surprise.

"Another move, and you're dead—you—you man pig!" I shake him with a deeper registered tone that is supposed to sound authoritative.

He laughs, exasperated and airy. "*Man pig?*" he says, placing his hands on my hips to hold me up. "Your hidden vault of insults is most impressive."

"Did I catch you off guard?" I pant with a raised eyebrow.

"Mhm." He's smiling, watching me with a bewildering look as if I'm the crazy one. "An attractive woman leaping into one's arms and wrapping her legs around their hips might give them the wrong idea though..." He sets me down, straightens his white shirt. "And then you ruined it with your very intimidating catchphrase." He begins laughing to himself again.

"Attractive, huh?" I cross my arms. I've never compared myself to other women to know what is deemed as attractive. I have the narrow waist and long legs that most women dream of, but my skin is slightly golden instead of paper white, and my bum isn't skin and bone. It's round and cushioned when I sit. How would one know if they are attractive with these outrageous beauty standards?

“Semi-attractive.” He looks around the trees to see if anyone is near. “*Ish.*” He tilts his head.

For the next hour, we continue different tactics and approaches. He shows me step by step how he deflects and how to use his body weight against him. Finally, I let my body fumble to the grass in exhaustion. I’m not used to being this active for such a long period of time. Actually, not any time at all.

“I believe I understand something about you. About why you are dragging out telling me what happened to you.” I breathe in deeply, catching the scent of a warm cabin and roasted chestnuts. “I suppose it’s a theory. But if it is true, it makes us more alike than we thought.”

He half smirks. “What have you come up with?”

“I can’t talk about Scarlett... About what happened to her, because I can’t face what I have done. Speaking about the day she died would be like holding up a mirror and seeing myself for the villain I truly am. I cannot forgive myself, and that guilt is burning me from the inside out.” I pause, looking into his eyes as he lies next to me. “I know I recognize that feeling in you. The guilt of something you’ve done or someone you’ve hurt. I can see it when I look into your eyes, just as you can see it when you look into mine.”

After briefly looking away, his eyes connect with mine, the way fire catches to wood. “There is much irony in your words.” Sigh. “One day, you’ll understand.”

“You don’t have to confirm that I’ve uncovered something about you. I know I have.”

He ignores me. Gazing back up at the clear sky.

“What scares you most in this world?”

“Why would you want to know that?” he finally responds.

“Humor me.”

He looks down and then back up with an idea. “If you can figure that out by the ninetieth day, then I will tell you his name, and step away from the front.”

“You mean you have a choice if he is brought back to the surface or not?”

He nods once and blinks twice, as if that was an obvious observation.

“I accept the challenge.” I don’t know why I always let him suck me into his games, but I can’t bring myself to walk away from them. I feel the best way to get to him is not to resist but to let him consume me, as dangerous as that might be.

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47. "Let Me In."

A RARE MOMENT, LIKE A gift being placed into my hands.

The morning of the grand ball that Aurick is taking me tonight, and all I want is to sit right here. Because we had a good day yesterday, Dessin is granting me any rapid-fire questions I can think of, with only three questions that have veto power.

I mock Dessin's cross-armed posture. We sit face-to-face on his white sheet covering the floor. A bowl of fruit is in front of us. Sliced apples, grapes, strawberries, and raspberries.

"Complete honesty," I restate the terms.

He tosses a raspberry in his mouth.

"How old are you, really?"

"Twenty-two." He smirks, a little thrown off that that is my first question.

"Right-handed or left-handed?"

"Ambidextrous."

I raise my eyebrows. "Really?"

"*He* is right-handed." I understand *he* to be the other mind in his head.

"Favorite instrument?"

"Lethal or musical?"

"Musical." I grimace.

"Harmonica." Side smirk.

"Happy place?"

"The forest."

"Dogs or cats?"

"Dogs."

"Fire or ice?"

"Fire." I could have guessed that one.

"Have you ever had a pet?"

"Yes."

"What was your father's name?"

"Wyatt."

"What's your fondest memory?"

"Veto."

I frown. I wonder why he wanted to veto that one?

"Have you ever been in love?"

"Veto."

Sigh.

"Would you say you're a perfectionist?"

"Not especially. I simply always get it right."

"How would you describe your life in one word?"

He purses his lips to the side in thought. "Corrupt."

"Any regrets?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"All of them."

I pause again. Something dark creeps in and ties itself around his words.

"If you could be anything, what would you be?"

"Free." *Hmm...*

"Greatest strength?"

"Control."

"Greatest weakness?"

"Veto."

I blink twice. "Ugh."

"Is it my turn yet?"

I stare at him. I've lost the energy to demand an explanation. "Okay."

He straightens his back. His facial expression doesn't show any sign of being fazed by the questions he needed to veto. But then again, his greatest strength is control.

He buries his chocolate-brown eyes into mine, strengthening a connection I have yet to comprehend. "If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?"

"Somewhere close to both the sea and the forest."

"Favorite beverage?"

"Milk, I guess."

"Why?" He cocks his head to the right.

I lean to one side, trying to decide that for myself. "Uhh, I don't know. Maybe it became my favorite when Scarlett started baking me a blueberry pie when I was sad. It helped comfort me. Maybe—I don't know."

"Favorite animal?"

I look down in thought. "A RottWeilen!" I remember the black-and-russet-red-colored fur of the wolf that saved my life. He was majestic and ancient.

"*Huh*. That's awfully specific." He stares at me with curiosity building in his eyes.

"I met one once, you know. Out in the woods one night. A night dawper came after me. I was as good as dead. But this gigantic RottWeilen came in right when I needed him. He was so brave." I reminisce over the moment.

"Hmm." He watches me without blinking. "That's a sweet... *Fantasy*," he mocks.

"It really happened. I have scars to prove it. When the night dawper pinned me down, it dug into my stomach! I can show you!" Without taking a second to process my own actions, I grab the end of my dress to lift it up high enough for him to see my scarred torso.

"*Skylenna!*" Dessin grabs my handful of dress that was moving past my upper thigh. "I'll take your word for it." He says with a somewhat alarmed, open-mouthed smile.

"Oh... *Sorry*." I say.

It takes him a moment to collect himself and blank his expression after rubbing his forehead.

"Pet peeve?"

"People who lack empathy."

"What do you like most about yourself?"

"Nothing."

He frowns. "That is not true."

"No, it is."

A dissatisfied look. Disappointment dripping from his stature. And before he can respond, I'm summoned to

leave. I need the time to get ready for the ball tonight. The ball that, uncharacteristically, Dessin does not make a comment on. But he waves me off, salutes me with a dark grin tugging at his mouth.

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48. Alpha

THE BALL IS HOSTED IN the famous Dellilian Castle.

A mystery, my father would say. It was built and abandoned when our people first settled here over sixty years ago. But life was proven to have thrived here, only two sets of bones in the grand master bedroom.

He used to draw it for me. Aside from the hard labor he did during the day, chopping wood for the city, he also designed many buildings, châteaux, and houses.

But this one glorious landmark was his favorite.

Walking into its grand ballroom, descending the stairs, is like stepping into a lucid dream—perhaps I can fly? Dance on a golden cloud? Twirl into another universe?

The room glows as if honey was glazed over every sparkling chandelier and light fixture. There are pink fluffy clouds, warriors in gold armor riding the backs of ancient animals, and elegant family portraits painted across the dome ceiling. The walls are cream with gold trim, like a structure one would imagine coming from heaven's gates. I'm dazzled by the scent of roses and baby powder infused in the heavy air.

Couples spin in the center of the room, high heels clacking against the gold glittering floor tiles as they cling to their partners and hold their faces to the shimmering light to exhibit their bold red lips and sharp-winged eyes. Most of their gowns are ruffled and fluffed around their hips, with dark, dreary colors and identical pinned-up curls.

I hook my arm into the loop of Aurick's. He smiles down at me, a storm of small talk and booze gathering in his eyes. "You look remarkable." He glosses me over with encouragement. I smile but not with my eyes, unable to stop them from hypnotically watching the whirling dresses and tuxedos.

Before we left, Aurick returned home with a syringe that took away most of the swelling. He wouldn't have brought me otherwise. No apology. No acknowledgment of what he did.

We stand at the top of the wide white marble staircase. A few women chat to the side, waiters walking around serving caviar and drinks. They are staring up at me, whispering with looks of disgust like the caviar seemed to spoil as soon as it touched their tongues.

I look down at my gown. It's dark bloodred satin, not as much volume as the other dresses with their frilly ruffles, but it does have some weight to it. The back is open with a couple laces down at my lower back, holding everything together. The core is tight around my waist like a corset, and the chest line is formed in a V with a sheer fabric that holds hundreds of little jewels sprinkled over my breasts.

I keep my eyes plastered to my red heels as they meet each step, convinced I'm going to tumble down to the floor and make a fool of myself in front of half the respectable Dementia population.

He guides me to a waiter, where he grabs himself a glass of champagne and hands me one too.

My breath hitches in my throat. *Please, don't drink again.*

I touch the bottom of his glass before he predictably downs it. "That frightens me, Aurick."

He peers up over his glass. "What frightens you?"

I nod at his champagne glass.

"What about it?"

"I don't want to be hit again." I fiddle with my necklace.

He pulls me in by my elbow. "Keep your voice down," he whispers harshly. "That won't happen again."

"Okay," I say as he departs into the crowd of laughing women.

I keep moving in the direction of the violinists gathering, tuning their instruments, preparing to share their art.

There's a light tap on my right shoulder. I turn around to see a thin woman, her loose bun with wild curls, like tree roots emerging from the dirt around its trunk.

"Ruth!" I yelp. "What are you doing here?" I pull her in for a hug.

She laughs and embraces me back. "Aurick extended an invitation to my family! Isn't that lovely? I was not certain I made a decent impression, but I suppose I did." She examines my dress with a busting grin. "My goodness. You look like a ruby princess."

I chuckle. "What is a ruby princess?"

"Didn't your parents ever tell you about the royal families of Alkadon?" She eyes me in disbelief. My lips harden in a fine line, and she instantly understands.

"There were five of them, I believe. And the first daughters were always named ruby princesses, and they always wore dark red. It symbolized the power of a woman."

"I naively never considered how big the world is." I raise my eyebrows.

Aurick approaches and Ruth straightens her gold and black calf-length dress nervously.

"I am pleased you could join us tonight, Ruth," Aurick greets.

"Thank you, sir," Ruth fusses with a cute, wrinkled-nose smile. "My family and I are honored, truly."

There's a beat of silence that turns the air thin and unbreathable. I look back at Aurick, who is staring at Ruth without blinking. "I bet you are."

Ruth glances at me anxiously and laughs, her discomfort changing the color in her cheeks and causing her soft-brown eyes to flee to a new focus point.

Changing the course of thickening silence, there's a new note of a violin stepping into the beginning of a song. Men and women line up as if this is a routine dance that everyone has known since birth.

“Shall we?” Aurick turns to me, arm extended.

“But I don’t know the steps.”

“And that’s why you have the best leading dance partner here.” His eyes bore into mine confidently, like the silver light of the moon shimmering over the surface of a resting ocean.

“Okay.” I sigh and share a glance with Ruth. “Have fun.” She waves me away.

Aurick holds my hand by my fingertips, upright and proper, as we move through the arranging dancing partners.

Two ovals of men and women have formed side by side in the center of the dance floor. Each couple locks elbows and holds the opposite hand. Aurick and I mimic this gesture in the line of our oval. With the beat of low bass, we step forward with a clap of heels and shoes to the music. The orchestra follows after every low thump from the bass.

After three steps of this, we face our partners, and our bodies join as closely as possible. His breath quickens before we move again, now in a circular motion with the slow stretch of the violins, rotating around other partners, like slow cogs spinning in a machine. It takes me a moment to see how beautiful this is, how carefully orchestrated the dance goes, and the blend of colors from each dress that bleeds into one another with the flow that carries us around the ballroom.

He places a quick kiss on my cheek and then twirls me away. My body collides like an ocean wave against the jagged rocks along a cliff, and fireworks burst inside my chest as I arrange the puzzle pieces of his face. I see lips, full and plush with stubble along the jawline, tan glowing skin, and the eyes—I know these eyes. Warm, burning firewood.

“*Dessin...*” I whisper, following a gasp.

A smooth, mischievous, partial smirk creeps over his lips. "Hello, Skylenna."

I swallow down my shock. I realize my feet are moving along with his to the rhythm of the crowd. Somehow this feels natural. This feels *right* dancing with him.

"What are you doing here?" I finally say. "How did you —" My breath speeds up and catches in my throat. I look around frantically. What if someone sees him? What if someone already has? Is he planning something? Some elaborate scheme he won't tell me about?

"Relax." He lowers his voice, and his eyes rest solely on me. "I came to enjoy the festivities," he murmurs, leaning in close enough until his breath tickles my cheek. Desire swirls in my belly like water circling a drain.

"Tell me. Why did you come?" I say.

He narrows his eyes and furrows his brow. A smile that only he can make blooms across his face. He doesn't answer.

"You look happy to see me," he finally replies. We move around another couple. At the stroke of a low, growling violin, Dessin dips me along with the other men. I hover low to the ground with my hair grazing the floor. I let my head fall back, seeing some women smiling and others closing their eyes.

"Depends," I breathe out, "are you here to dance with me or ruin the night?" He lifts me back up, dragging my body tightly against his.

"A little bit of both." He nods. I catch a slight whiff of spearmint in his breath.

"Don't ruin the night. Enjoy it with me."

He tightens his hold on my lower back, and I can't ignore the electric sensation that erupts where his touch is placed on my body, as if our wires have crossed, entwined, and the tingling currents settle under my skin. He leans in, lips grazing my ear. "It is difficult to focus on why I came when your hips are pressed to mine."

I gulp loudly, feeling him tense and grow against my lower belly. His arousal triggers my own, like being connected to a power source. My eyes snap up to his, and the weight of his stare is crushing.

I lick my lips nervously.

"That right there," Dessin says, voice like melted chocolate and eyes transfixed on my mouth. "That, and the way your back arches at the touch of my hand is very distracting."

The air is suddenly charged with violent, sexual energy. I react out of instinct, arching my back and pushing my hips harder against him.

He releases a strangled sigh. The sensation of his breath in my ear causes heat to pool between my legs. I shouldn't react this way. *Change the subject!*

"You like the way I feel against you," he whispers. I could melt into a puddle at his feet at the rugged deepness of his voice.

"I don't." But my breath hitches in my throat as his hand trails past my lower back, fingers grazing the roundness of my bottom. I don't want him to stop. I want to feel his hands squeeze my backside.

What is wrong with me?

"I guess it's finally time for Aurick and me to get acquainted, hmm?" he suggests, scanning the people in the ballroom and snapping me out of the spell.

"Nooooo, absolutely not," I respond, swiveling my head to block his view.

"Why? Are you afraid I won't approve of him?"

"I know how you feel about him, and I'm not willing to see how you'll act if you were to meet him in person."

Dessin twirls me around his pointer finger, guiding me back to his body. "You think I'm going to cause a scene?" He scrunches his nose in a menacing smile.

I look away from him, trying to hide my nerves.

"I'm shocked. Skylenna, this is a ball. What kind of animal do you think I am?" Smugness overrides any genuine honesty.

"I know you," I scold, flashing him a momentary glare. "You always have your reasons. You're here for something." A concern pops into my mind. "What are you going to do if someone recognizes you?" I whisper.

"Well, Suseas isn't here tonight, neither is Martin. Every other council member who is here hasn't seen me in years. Trust me, they would have blocked out the mere memory of my face," he reminisces.

The music slows to an end, and our movements do as well. I stare into his eyes and beg. "Please don't hurt anyone. If you act out... *Here*, of all places, then there is no talking the council out of executing you." I look down at his lips and then back up warily. "I can't lose you," I utter, and then instantly, my stomach fills up with burning regret. I don't know how I formed those words, but they came out and sounded like I see him as more than just my patient... More than just my *friend*.

A solemn look of despair falls over his face.

Dessin closes his eyes and then opens them slowly, now focused on something behind me. The corner of his mouth tips upward.

"Aurick," Dessin says with purpose, conviction, and a threatening tone.

I turn around to see him greeting us with a smile.

I. Want. To. Die.

I'd prefer death just to escape this moment.

"Glad you could join us," Dessin adds behind me.

"Sorry, have we met?" Aurick folds his hands into his pockets with an overly happy smile on his face. I glance back at Dessin.

"No." He steps to the side of me. "I met Skylenna at the asylum. Your name is quite famous around there."

“Well,” Aurick laughs. “It’s always nice to meet an admirer.”

Dessin looks down and chuckles to himself. “I’m sorry, did I come across as a fan?” He presses his fist into his mouth. “My apologies, I didn’t mean to mislead anyone. I must say for myself that I most certainly am *not* a fan of that violent, nasty bruise that radiates under that expensive makeup you gave her.”

Silence. Underneath the chatter and music, we are in a bubble of stillness. It’s as if the room was emptied for this. “What do you have to say for yourself?” Dessin steps toward him.

Aurick shoots me a glare—a warning glare. The kind that sinks to the bottom of my stomach.

“Don’t look at her,” he snaps his fingers in Aurick’s face. “Look at me.”

Thankfully, the room is roaring with upbeat music and chattering voices.

“It was wrong of me. I should have never let my anger get the best of me the way it did.” He shakes his head with sorrow. “It was wrong of me.”

Dessin smirks. “Aurick, you state the obvious with such a sense of discovery.”

“D—” I stop myself before I blow his cover. “Damon, stop.” I slip in a cover name.

“Let me make myself imperatively clear.” He steps up to Aurick, only a finger’s length away. “If you ever...ever... strike her again... I’ll make her watch while I castrate you.”

And it’s the raw, primitive energy of an alpha that flows off of his broad stance that forces Aurick’s eyes to look away. He nods quickly.

The truth of the matter is—I know that Dessin’s threats are not empty. They will never be empty. I hope for Aurick’s sake... He never hits me again.

49. The Stars

I EXCUSE MYSELF TO THE washroom and climb the stairwell that twists upward to a flat platform on the roof. I hold on to the rail and my dress so I can wind my way up to the top without tripping. I glance down at the crowd below, spot Aurick's head, motioning with his hands and making the circle of men and women around him laugh.

He does not notice my absence, and I do not mind.

Reaching the top, I push a thick golden door open and am greeted by a gust of cool wind. The platform is surrounded by pinnacle turrets and parapet walks. But this secluded, elongated balcony is sprinkled with leaves from the nearby sycamore tree and decorated with small candle lanterns that surround the perimeter, twinkling in the night. On the edge of the walk, Dessin's tall, broad figure, arms crossed, watching the sparkling city below.

"You're not going to jump, are you?" I speak, knowing he is most likely already aware of my presence. I was hoping I'd find him again when he stormed off after making Aurick practically piss himself in a ballroom full of people. But if not, at least I'd have this view, this peace, this soundless night before I return to a new life.

"Depends... Are you?" He turns to the side just enough for me to see his profile.

I nod in his direction and scoff. "Don't tempt me." I walk across the cement, my six-inch heels scraping as I drag my feet. As I come closer to stand by his side, I notice the full view of the city below us. The honey-glazed lights make the cobblestone streets shimmer, the cone-shaped rooftops, rugged masonry arches, and the Emerald wives starting their lady-doll regimens through their open windows—all in the homes of the wealthiest bureaucrats in the city.

"There are so many pretty lights down there..." I whisper. "And yet, there aren't any in the sky."

Dessin looks up at the black sky, empty of stars. "I know a place deep in the forest where you can see the stars as clearly as you can see those artificial lights." He gives me a sidelong look. "We should visit there soon."

I hold my breath, search his face for confirmation that I heard him right. *I would love nothing more than to leave with you tonight.*

"That sounds perfect right about now."

Dessin nods and slides his hands in his pockets.

"Is that why you came tonight? For Aurick?" I can't look at the city anymore. It's a beautiful painting on the wall. A painting meant to cover mold and decay. I choose to fixate on him. The man who defies that society. Defies the asylum. Runs by his own rules.

"I needed him to know what would become of him if he ever laid a hand on you again." He flexes his jaw and stares hard at the ground like he's having an argument with someone in his head.

Another cold gust of wind rushes past us. Instinctively I fold my arms over my midsection and step into him to keep warm, my forehead hovering a solid inch from the center of his chest. His heavy gaze falls to me, sizing up the little distance that remains between us. And he sighs.

"The swelling has gone down."

But it's still sore. "Courtesy of a Survivah injection."

"What a gentleman," he seethes. "When are you packing your bags?"

I cough out a laugh. "What *bags*? He found me when I had nothing."

He grimaces, waiting, giving me the silence to say what he hopes I won't say.

"I'm not going anywhere," I tell him.

I look down at my hands, weaving my fingers together. I can't even tell him that I will endure this all for him. To stay at the asylum. To stay in the city. To live with a violent drunk. All to stay close to *him*.

He turns on his heels, heads for the door without another word.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” I ask as he reaches for the roof door. My tone gentle and pleading for understanding.

He sighs and looks down at his hand grazing the doorknob. “You look”—starry eyes lingering on my dress and back up to my face—“so perfect tonight.”

The door shuts behind him. I stand at the edge of the roof, my red dress flapping like a flag in the wind. And there’s an absence of warmth where Dessin once was.

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50. Lost Time

"MAY I HAVE A WORD in private?" Judas asks. His eyes wrinkle around the corners.

I nod and look back at Ruth, sharing stories about her progress with Chekiss and Niles. "I'll meet you for lunch, okay?"

I follow Judas to his office. Always neat and clean, like a museum with its only sin age and dust.

We sit at the same time. "Miss Ambrose, I wanted to keep you updated on time," he prompts. Eyes serious and concerned. His fingers fiddling with a gold pocket watch.

"Time?"

"Yes, are you aware you only have seven days left with him?" He folds his arms, navy-blue suit creasing at the inside of his elbows.

A cold tremble of nausea rolls through my gut and up my throat, like a snake slithering from its coat of old skin.

"Only seven?" My lips part. I can't believe I have wasted so much time. What have I accomplished with his case other than confusing myself? Yes, he's opened up about his past, but if the previous host doesn't resurface, none of that means anything.

Judas nods. "I hope I do not need to remind you that the price of not fixing this is a man's life." He fixates his stern, ominous eyes on me like a child. "Have you made any progress with him?"

I cough up the silence that has clogged my throat. "Of course, I have. It's just... I'm worried I won't be able to get to the previous host in this amount of time."

He sighs, putting his hand out for me to shake it. "Do what you have to do."

I take his hand, feeling the dryness of his palm rubbing like sandpaper against my skin. My mind fills with clouds of

smoke, self-doubt, disappointment with myself—I leave his office in a daze.

A small cold piece of metal rests in the palm that Judas shook. I look at the thin brass key, and I know why he gave it to me. I squeeze the key and hold it tight to my side. He knows, and I know, I must make drastic decisions at this point in the game. I have to take a grand enough action to give Dessin the push he needs, to give the previous host the push he needs.

I need *them* to trust me.

A warm flutter of excitement pours over me, tingling around the skin that touches the key. I can't wait to show him that I have it. That we're going away, only for the night. I can't wait to see his face when I tell him this.

I wonder if Judas knows what he's risking by giving us this. Unless he knows that Dessin can leave anytime he wants. He has no limitations. But giving me this key will show good faith. And I think Judas is counting on that.

I push open the door and fight the smile burning my cheeks, but it's impossible to keep down. The door unveils his dimly lit room, his brass bed frame with built-in shackles, and a strikingly handsome man sitting in a chair, smiling back at me.

"Hi," I say with a grin that feels permanent, taking two steps closer to him.

He crosses his arms and smiles back cautiously. "*Hello.*"

I think for a second about how I want to approach this. "If you could go anywhere in the world with me right now, where would you want to go?"

"Why?" He narrows his eyes on me.

"Could you get us out of here? Everyone's leaving for the day." I keep my poker face firm. He tilts his head to the right, focusing on my expression with a curious glint in his eyes.

"Right now?" he asks, surprised. A hopeful, crooked smile spreads over his mouth.

“Mhm.”

“For the first time, you have dumbfounded me, Skylenna. What is going on?” Now he’s the one demanding answers, and I’m the one holding all of the cards. I wonder how frustrating it must be for him. However, he doesn’t look frustrated. Not even slightly. More like he’s intrigued, studying an animal, rare or thought to be extinct.

“I think we both know it’s not the first time.” I hold my eyes to his without blinking, feeling bold.

He leans back in acceptance. “Where would you like to go?”

“You told me you would take me somewhere we could see the stars,” I say quietly, as if people are listening.

He looks down, thinks for a moment, trying not to smile. “And you’re only wanting to leave with me to postpone going home to Aurick.” A switch of moods comes over him.

I let my eyes drop. “I wanted to spend time with you, Dessin.” I’m curious to see how he reacts to what Ruth has taught me about flirtation. I have the urge to do it, but I’m nervous. Nervous he will reject me or call me out. I’m not even sure if Ruth would be deemed an expert on the matter. “I want to spend time with you—*alone*.” There it is. It crept its way in, despite my concern.

His eyes widen slightly, and his full lips part. He doesn’t say anything. But he stares at me, seemingly at a loss for words. Two long seconds pass, and he nods once.

“It’s 7:01 p.m. They’ve already locked up and forgot to check on you because I’m not even on your schedule at this time. The last to leave are Judas and Martin, but it is Martin’s wife’s birthday, and Judas is deaf in one ear, so even if he is here, he won’t notice us leaving.”

I keep the fact that Judas gave me this idea to myself.

“Let’s see it, mister magician.” A rush of adrenaline spikes through my veins as I realize I’m about to see how he does it, how he escapes the impossible. I know he sees the glint in my eye to learn.

He reaches under his bed, and pulls up a floor panel, swipes an item, and approaches the door. It's a key. Identical to mine. He *made* his own.

The ticking and clanking of cogs break the silence, and the door cracks open, releasing a short spurt of air to decompress.

He pulls the door open the rest of the way. "After you." I tighten my hand around the sides of my dress. Suddenly, the thought of us getting caught niggles at the back of my mind. I'll be terminated and given federal punishment. Dessin will be publicly executed. What if his death is inevitable? What if I can't save him?

Dessin flashes his eyes up at me darkly and squints. "If I don't intend on getting caught, then I won't," he says as a matter of fact. "It's not a hopeful thought. It's a fact."

The truth to his words is reassuring. However, his confidence when he speaks is a different level of reassurance. He makes me believe that he can never fail.

When we arrive at the ladder to climb down into the basement, he goes first. Just like last time. I climb down after him. But this time, when I glance down and over my shoulder, I notice him looking away and to his left as he probably has a perfect view up my dress. I get to the third to last step, and he grips my waist hesitantly. I look down at him and smile, nodding my head. He lifts me and sets me down.

"Follow me," he says, low and rugged.

He lights the lanterns, and we walk down the hall of tunnels for a few yards before we reach a dead end. Another ladder. Another door with a latch. He maneuvers a dagger in the lock, wiggling it around. I place my hand over his forearm. "Will this work?" I hold my hand out with the key resting on my palm.

Genuine, satisfying, unmistakable *shock*. "Where did you get that?"

I drop it in his hand. "I'm *not* going to tell you."

His eyebrows rise.

"Annoying, isn't it?" I mock.

"I could have broken out without it. But it does make this easier, so I'll let it pass." We climb out into a wooded area. The sun has gone down, yet the air is still warm.

He walks over to a thick evergreen tree. Underneath its wilting cover, he pulls out a motorcycle. I've seen one once when I was a little girl. But they don't fit into our society. Only small black buggies with loud engines and bumpy rides.

I stop abruptly, holding a prickly pine tree branch away from my face.

"I'm wearing a dress."

He chuckles. "You're not wondering where this bike came from or even about riding one for the first time, but about how your dress might fly up while you're on it." He smiles up at me, eyes capturing the deep orange and blue from the sunset like a painting reflecting in the gaze of its artist.

"I mean, it's fine if you're okay with a lot of men seeing what's under this dress." I smirk, swaying my dress lightly in the breeze.

He looks down at it then back up to meet my eyes. His smile falls. "I'm not."

Thank you, Ruth. Maybe you are an expert at flirting.

I walk over to the bike and hold my dress down while I throw a leg over. "I'm resourceful." I tuck the dress across the seat so that he can sit on it.

He eyeballs it cautiously, sits down on my uniform for more assurance. I then see that I need something to hold on to.

I can't help but take pause at his back. The outline. The indentions of muscle. The wide frame.

Cautiously, as if I'm about to pet a wild animal, I slide my hands around his waist, locking my hands together. The muscles along his stomach are as firm as bone, contracting

with each breath he takes. And with that being said, he sighs and drops his head for a moment. I take it he isn't used to someone touching him, holding him, being close like this.

"Should I be worried we aren't wearing helmets?" I ask with my chin resting on his shoulder. His build vibrates as he chuckles, and the bike roars to life.

We take off, and the wind pours over my face with density as thick as water.

The sky shadows the earth with darkness and silver clouds. The moonbeams through them, overpowering the earth's fragile atmosphere. I squeeze his waist tighter as I rest my cheek against his back. I haven't felt this at peace in a long time. A fantasy slips into my mind, against every ounce of my control. An image of Dessin holding my hand, pressing the back of it to his full lips. Traveling the world on this motorcycle, sleeping under the stars, laughing about inside stories while he holds me in his arms.

I shut my eyes hard. I wish we hadn't met like this. I wish we had met in a different way.

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51. "If We Had Met a Different Way."

DESPITE THE BEATING OF THE wind, I tune into Dessin's heartbeat, and I count and memorize how fast it drums inside of him. Trees canopy over the dirt road we travel upon while the city of glowing lights, castles, and painted faces fades behind us into the night.

As we slow down, there's a small opening of trees parted, just enough for a person to walk through... I recognize it.

"I...I know this place." We pull over to the side of the road. He helps me off of the bike with both hands.

"Is that right?"

The wind is pushing against our bodies, flying into the opening of trees down a very familiar walkway. I am instantly drawn to walk inside. My mood lifts like a butterfly from a cocoon, unfurling my wings and catching the wind as I fan them out in flight.

"I've been here before, Dessin." My eyes hover over the dark opening. Dessin walks backward to it, facing me.

"Have you?" He urges me to follow him inside. A slight twinkle of a smile unhinges across my lips.

We walk into the opening, side by side. He is much taller than me, wide broad shoulders, and his steps are heavier than mine—sinking into the soft dirt. Above us is an evergreen canopy of trees tangled among one another. The crickets are a symphony tonight, humming into the sleepy forest.

If he's taking me to the spot I think he is... Then the last time I was there was when I let Scarlett's ashes go, into the wind, into the lagoon where I knew she could rest.

"Are you an indoor or outdoor kind of man?" I break my own train of thought and ask him the first thing that comes to mind.

He chuckles.

"What?"

"I've been locked away in a room for a long time. Which do you think I prefer?"

"Oh." I look down and blush, plucking a pine cone off the ground. "But you don't really expect me to believe that you never saw daylight in that time?"

He glances at me from the corner of his eye. The corner of his mouth pulls upward.

I hop over a root bulging from the dirt. "I want something while we are here..."

He raises his eyebrows and grins, giving me a *this-oughta-be-good* look. "Oh, do share."

The leaves hanging from the trees begin to change to a bright bloodred color. It is the same place I let Scarlett go. The same place I'd seen as a magical portal into a new world as a little girl. I lose my train of thought for a moment, with a memory tugging away at my heart. "I'm ready to hear what happened to you."

Dessin stops mid-stride and studies my expression.

"And I'm ready to tell *you* what happened to *me*," I say.

"You don't have to tell me anything you're not ready to share." He steps closer.

I nod. "I've been ready for a while. I hope you are too."

As I complete my sentence, we begin walking again, and the trees open up wide, engulfing the dark-blue sky. Titanic red oak trees are scattered throughout the opening, mountainous in size, and in the center flows a massive light-blue lagoon. Instantly, my mind is on a roller coaster, with clipped, choppy memories. My father and I lie under the biggest red oak in the opening, right on the edge of the cliff where the drop-off to the lagoon is, eating apples and sharing tales of what used to go on here in our little secret place away from the whole world.

My heart swells and aches at the sudden combustion of memories awakening me to another life that I've tried to

forget. I take in the scenery as a whole, and it overwhelms me, like stepping into a cold bath, jolting my body awake. The lagoon is several feet below the trees surrounding a cliff being fed by a waterfall.

And stepping into this old world I once knew, I breathe in the nostalgic scent of lavender and pine trees—and it's that momentary paralyzation where all I can do is close my eyes and let the aroma flood my body, taking me back in time.

My eyes flash over to Dessin, who is watching me closely, with a trenchant stare. He nods over to the tree hovering over the lagoon. I wasn't allowed to climb it when I was younger. My father would always say I would fall off the cliff and drown.

"How did you know about this place?" I ask with calm caution.

He looks over at me and then back at the horizon of red and blue. "Why? Does this place mean something to you?" he asks as we move to the tree to sit, our legs dangling over the edge of the cliff. I pick up a leaf, red as blood. I stroke it between my fingers.

"You know it does. But how—*how* could you know?"

"Why is this upsetting you so much?" he prompts, eyes drinking in my reaction like I'm his favorite form of entertainment.

"You know why it's upsetting me. I don't know how you could possibly know, but you do. I was alone the last time I was here. *Alone*." My hands turn into fists. Tight balls of stone and fury.

Dessin meets my eyes, and I suddenly feel so small, so insignificant in the eyes of someone so brilliant. And then his brow creases, the muscles in his jaw tighten up as if he is biting back words. Words that might tell me *everything*.

"Why were you here alone?" He's baiting me. Stringing what he knows along like I'm his pet.

Her ashes. You must know.

"Don't you dare make me say it," I growl, grinding my teeth until my gums bleed.

He tilts his head, waiting, watching, preparing for the explosion.

"Because this is where I *buried* her—where I tossed her *ashes*—or what I told myself was her ashes because I couldn't identify the *body*!" The angry words pour out of me like a mist of acid, along with a thick sheen of tears collecting over my eyes.

His expression, dark, like the moon has abandoned him.

"It's the perfect place for her to rest," he says as if he knew her.

We turn to the horizon, searching, as if Scarlett dances on the water, floating in peace as she waves to us.

"This place isn't just special to you... It means something to the other man in my head as well." He breathes out, reluctant and frustrated. I am coming to realize that he is not fond of losing control, of appearing vulnerable.

"*You*?" I utter. "You've been here before?" Sometimes I forget that he's had a life before all of this... He must have. He was, at some point, simply a boy.

He nods once. "You always have so many questions."

"And I know you have the answers. Why is this so hard for you?" I let my hands drop, but he catches them before they hit my lap. He squeezes them gently—both of my wrists in the palm of one hand—and focuses so hard on my eyes that my head spins.

"Have you ever taken a leap of faith, Skylenna?"

For some reason, this question makes me emotional. That feeling like you're slipping away, maybe into tears, or maybe into a panic. I can't tell. But a notion in his words triggers it.

"I need you to do that now. Things are going on around you that you are blind to, and I need that not to change. I do have the answers... You have no idea how big this really is. Despite your exhaustion and your frustration with me, I

need you to trust me... When the time is right, I promise you will know and understand *everything*." He squeezes my hands harder. "And I promise you... That will be the worst day of your life."

I watch him, wide eyed, my mind filling up with more questions.

"I can't tell you much... But I can tell you something that I know you must already suspect. This place was a part of the life he had before he became this... Before I became a monster."

He loosens his grip on my hands, so I tighten mine to keep his grasp. I look down at the rushing water sparkling below my bare feet. A sliver of desire to jump in runs through me.

"Ignorance is bliss, my sweet girl," he finally adds. I tense up at his term of endearment and melt in a puddle, complete with his warmth and whole with this feeling I can't describe.

"I never thought I'd come back," I say.

"And now that you are here, what do you want to do first?"

"Jump in," I say as a joke, nodding my head at the lagoon below our feet.

He takes one look at me and smirks. To my surprise, he steps up to the edge of the cliff and looks back at me. "How good of a swimmer are you?" Before I can answer, he dives forward as elegantly as an arrow being shot through the air.

"NO!" But it's too late. My scream echoes across the walls of the cliff's edges. I hear his body make an impact into the water, cutting through neatly with minimal splash. I jump to my feet and look over the cliff. The adrenaline spikes through my nerves as I feel the wind sway my body to go over.

"Dessin!" I shout. Echoes. He doesn't come up. *What if he broke his neck? What if he drowns?*

The sudden reasonable fear of losing him forever jolts through my limbs and sends my body flying off the cliff. The cool forest air pounds against my dress and reverberates through my hair. I squeeze my eyes shut and prepare for the water.

Hold your breath.

An instant rush of cold surrounds my body, filling my nose and ears. My skin is electrified from the cold, murky water. The human instinct to surface for oxygen flickers on, and I start kicking to break for air. I look up at the white streaks of moonlight glistening through the water, and I realize how far from the surface I have sunk. My bare feet are grazing the squishy lagoon floor. And there's that alarming heat that fills my lungs, like hot melted metal, being poured by a funnel down my throat. That fire in my chest that tells me I need air, and I need it within the next few moments. I kick at nothing, waft my arms around, but the harder I fight, the farther away I feel from the top.

My arm is caught in a tight grip. I'm suddenly forcefully lifted to the surface. Cold water glides over my face, and then the tip of my nose is greeted by a cool gust of air. I gasp and arch my back as I take in as much air as I can. My eyes dart around, disoriented and alert. Dessin treads water beside me, chocolate-brown hair slicked back, and he's like a mythical creature in the darkness of night and the light of the moon. His features are glossy with water droplets and those eyes, like heaven and hell, bottled into one soul.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I yelp, wiping the water away from my eyes.

"Well, don't you look like a dream—soaking wet." That damning smile curls my toes. "Serious question. How good of a swimmer are you?"

I huff. "Just fine when I'm not falling from a cliff!" Murky water splashes into my mouth.

“Good. Follow me.” He flashes me his teeth in a quick smile and strokes away toward the thundering waterfall.

I follow behind him pouting, with reluctant strokes. My dress trails behind me in a heavy, sluggish manner. “Why can’t things ever be simple with you?” I comment.

A muffled chuckle.

As we come closer to the splashing of the waterfall, instead of going under it, he guides me to a large rock formation peeking just above the surface. We grab on like it’s the only lifeboat.

“Let’s go in,” I say, nodding to the fall. The majestic instantaneous drumming of the waterfall gives me a good feeling. A hint of nostalgia.

“No.”

“Why not?”

Dessin glances over at the fall and then back down at me. “I promised someone I wouldn’t go in there until the time was right.”

Curiosity ignites small but bright in my chest. *Here we go, yet another riddle.* Regardless, now I’m eager to see what’s in there.

“Hey.” He gets my attention, noticing my sudden fascination with this waterfall. “Promise me, even after we leave, you won’t go in there.”

I look at him and then back at the fall longingly. “Will I ever get to go in there?”

He lowers his gaze on me and harnesses a knowing smile back.

“Yes.” A quick nod. “Just not today.”

The smell of rain and moist soil cools my throat. The rock is centered between us, just like the constant obstacle that seems to stand in our way. I swim around it toward him. He watches my movements like a hunter being approached by his prey, like I’m dangerous, like I’m unpredictable and he’s almost... *scared* of me. It’s the only time I’ve ever seen him nervous... When I move closer.

Our bodies graze each other as I close the distance in the water between us. His deep brown eyes drag across my body up and down, eyebrows knitted together in slight panic. I notice him shift away from me, so I move forward again and grip his arm.

He goes rigid, staring at my hand on his bicep. I glide it over his skin, tracing the drops of water up to his shoulder until I reach his chest.

"Skylenna." A warning. A question. A plea.

But I ignore the edge to his tone and continue feeling his skin against mine. I know it's inappropriate, and I should stop. But he's always the one to initiate this need to touch. And God, he feels so good. I'm drunk with lust, and his eyes burning holes into my head only make me hotter.

"Stop," he utters as I reach my fingers under his shirt, caressing the lean, shredded muscles of his abdomen. His trim yet wide build is evidence of years of training from Demechnef.

"I want to touch you," I say breathlessly.

The hunger in his eyes strikes me like a bolt of lightning. My words seem to unhinge him. He snatches my hand from his stomach, bringing it to hook around his neck. The space between us is eliminated, and I'm reeled into his broad frame, chest against chest.

His forehead touches mine. "I can't have your lips yet..." He's out of breath, gripping my waist as he holds me against him. "But you can have mine."

My jaw falls open as he tightens his grip around my body like a snake. His head dips down to the side of my face, and I choke on a gasp. Warm lips graze my jawline. *Oh my God!*

He drops a trail of light kisses, then stops. "Do you want to know what my tongue feels like close to your ear?"

Bolts of heat spark in my lower belly. *Say no. Say no!*

"Please," I say.

Great.

He flicks his hot tongue over my earlobe, teasing me with his wetness. I become pudding in his arms. My bones disappear, and I'm a limp noodle against his chest. He sighs, low and deep into my eardrum, and I can't hold back the breathy moan that slips out of my mouth.

Dessin stiffens, growling against my skin. It's then I feel the weight of his erection and the sheer size of his arousal against my lower belly.

Everything about him is intoxicating. I'm losing my morals. I forget why we're here.

We came here for a reason.

"Wait,"—I push against his chest—"I have questions."

He blinks. Face unreadable. "Shocking."

I take a moment to catch my breath, forcing my eyes to watch the rippling of the water around us. Guilt and confusion grow like a tumor in my chest, but I shove the feeling away so I can focus.

"Do you ever wonder what it would be like if your life was different? If you lived a normal life, with a normal occupation, and a normal wife, and you were happy? Have you ever thought about that?" I want to know what he thinks about in his spare time. *Which he, unfortunately, has a lot of.* I want to know his fears and his desires.

His eyes soften, he takes a breath. "I've thought about it," he answers, looking away at the waterfall. Squeezing his eyes shut and blinking a few times. Someone is talking to him.

"And?" I push. "Is that something you wanted?"

"I'm not cut out for that lifestyle. That kind of future isn't in the cards for me, Skylenna."

I shake my head. "That's not what I'm asking. Have you ever wanted that?"

He looks down at the narrow canal flowing between our bodies, rushing along the crevices of my wet, wrinkled navy dress. "Why would you ask a question like that?" He sighs

as if this topic is draining a great amount of energy from his being.

“Why won’t you answer the question?”

“*Why?!* Because look where I am, Skylenna. I spend every second of my life locked in a cage. I am a sadistic murderer, marked the most dangerous man alive. How can someone like that ever be allowed to have a family? To live a normal life?” His lips hover above mine, and he’s so close, so full of emotion. It’s a rare moment when I can provoke this. Although the point he makes is true and heartbreaking, I can’t help but feel accomplished for being able to pull this out of him. And yet, it hurts me even more that he’ll never be able to have this.

“But if things were different?” I ask again, defining my question.

“If we had met a different way?” he utters the question so shocking it sends sparks up my body.

I freeze. *What did he say?*

“If we had *what?*”

“If I were a normal man living a normal life, would that life be possible for us?” he asks, and suddenly I can’t tell if he is serious. The Dessin I know has a motive for every question. How is the Dessin I know asking this question right now? Does he see me in the way he is implying?

“*Us?*” I manage to croak out. “I don’t understand...”

He looks over at the waterfall and then down again. Steady breathing. “If things were different for both of us, Skylenna. If we had both lived normal lives, *free* lives... would that life—married, children, a family, a normal life be possible for us?” His voice is deep, dark, and midnight soft.

The image of his embrace forms once again in my mind. His lips pressing against my forehead. I shake my head.

Has he thought about us before? Does he think of *me* like this now?

“You said *us*,” I say again. “You didn’t refer to this life with any person you would marry... you referred to *me*?” I

gulp. He watches me.

“Yes.” He nods. “I did.” He doesn’t say anything else, only looks at me with those warm-brown eyes that could deceive any woman into believing he could have a warm heart.

“You think of me...” Only those words escape my lips. I exhale at the complete loss of thoughts.

His lips part, and he reaches out to touch me. Looks down to the right, listening to that voice. His hand retracts back. I begin to shiver. Possibly at the cold water, but mostly by his action.

“You’re cold. Let’s start a fire.”

My eyes light up as he guides me to shore. Lighting a fire, sitting under the stars—it has nostalgic energy flaring in my chest.

I finally, after a long, long time, feel like I’m home.

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52. Violet and Scarlett

I MANAGE TO BE IMPRESSED BY his quick ability to build a fire.

We sit against the walls of the cliff, looking out at the lagoon over the large fire he created. My dress releases slow drops of water down my legs, and I hold my hands out to the fire to stay warm.

Dessin sits down next to me and glances at my wet body. He pretends not to notice the dilemma we're in with wet clothes—that we have to ride on a motorcycle back to the asylum. I wonder how he would react to me making a bold move. I wonder how he would react to my body without my dress on. I tell myself it is an experiment. He wouldn't kiss me before. It's as if there are written rules with the previous host in his mind. Is he stopping Dessin from pursuing me?

"I'm freezing," I prompt. He gives me a sidelong glance and focuses back on the fire, poking it with a stick.

"Move closer to the fire. You'll warm up."

I watch him a moment longer, smiling on the inside. My hands begin to shake as I make the internal decision to do this. I rise next to him and peel off my uniform dress, pulling it up and over my head.

"Are you insane?!" Dessin is on his feet in front of me, gripping my dress above my head, attempting to pull it down. I remember the undergarments are ones that Aurick got me. White lace. I'm sure he stocked my dresser with these revealing items in hopes of seeing me in them one day.

"What's your problem?" I gaze up at him as he holds me by my wrists over my head. A tingling heat warming my legs, my gut. "I'm cold, and this wet dress won't get any dryer on me."

"Skylenna—put it back on," he says sternly. His eyes stay firmly on mine, refusing to let them wander.

“Or what?” I taunt. And that flirtatious smile is brought on smoothly as I bat my eyes slowly. *Thank you again, Ruth.*

I pull the rest of it off, my body fully exposed in only my white lace. I worry that it may not be appealing to a man. My breasts are decently sized, I’d say. Enough to swell above my brassiere, enough to catch Aurick staring at my chest, often.

His eyes fall over my bare body, and his gaze feels like hands wandering over my breasts, my waist, my thighs. A slow burn of thirst building behind his expression. But he catches himself, eyes retreating back to the dirt beneath his feet—and he’s listening. A voice inside his head.

“Look at me,” I say in a voice not much stronger than a whisper.

He glances up at me, making intense eye contact but nothing below the neck—and it’s manifested from thirst to hunger. A predatory way that he parts his lips as if to run his tongue over his teeth. And warmth fills my gut, tingles through my fingertips.

What is happening to me?

His chest moves up and down fast. Faster than when he fought the guards. Faster than when he snapped the man’s neck. And it’s the hitch of a gasp in my throat that snaps him out of the wild trance. He looks away and sits back down in front of the fire.

“Scarlett was depressed. But I was helping her find the will to live again.” *I’m ready. I’m ready. I’m ready to tell him.*

His eyes widen, and his back straightens up.

“Her downfall was always her anger. She hated our parents for what they did to us and couldn’t let it go. It would eat her alive. It would cause episodes of violence and self-harm. When Scarlett told me her fear of becoming a patient in the intricate section, I knew I had to do something. I couldn’t let her end up in there. I couldn’t let her rot away from not being capable of forgiveness.” It’s all

coming back now, the screams, the rush of panic. “So, on the day that marked three years after our father had died, I decided it was time for her to visit his grave and forgive him.” I pause. The easy part to tell is the decision behind the tragedy. My hands begin to tremble.

Dessin reaches out his hand, signaling for me to sit down in front of the fire. I shake my head. I have to stay standing for this; otherwise, I won’t be able to finish.

“I began the day feeling a sense of pride for Scarlett’s actions. Her emotions and stubbornness ultimately characterized who she was, but not that day. With my best efforts, she had put them aside to take a much higher road with me. And even though Scarlett never forgave Jack for hurting me—and she never forgave him for leaving her with our mother to suffer a different form of abuse—she made the much-anticipated decision to come with me to his grave. No, she had not forgiven him. I highly doubted that she ever would, but part of me thought she did it for me, or maybe she did it for her. Maybe she had fought with a dark and blistering fire for so long, she was ready to try out the water with me.

“We gathered a bouquet of sunflowers on the walk over, through a small passage in the woods, and she reached for my hand. Something in her was uneasy. *‘Do you ever wonder what life would be like if we grew up together? And Mom and Dad were just normal people?’* I told her that I had thought about it a lot, actually. *‘What do you think I would be like, Sky?’* This was an easy answer for me. *‘I think you would have been happy. Married.’*

“*“You think I could have really ended up like that?”* I told her I still thought she could. I remember her looking at me in disbelief. *‘You still can. Your soul is capable of moving mountains. You just have to believe it too!’* I remember her looking at me with the eyes of a child. *‘I want to be all of that. I know I haven’t been easy to live with, but I want to be happy. I want to be loved.’* She looked at the cemetery

only a couple hundred yards ahead of us. '*Only because you believe in me.*' I squeezed her hand three times. She squeezed it back three times."

A pulse of regret and pain vibrates through my body. I feel unsteady and nauseous. A hole burns through my stomach like hot coal falling from my esophagus. And the tears scream at me from behind my eyes. They want to be set free. But I can't, no, not yet.

How could I have done this to her? She wanted to change. She wanted a better life.

Dessin stands, placing his hands on my shoulders, looking deeply into my eyes. But my breath turns jagged, and the world around me catches fire.

"It's okay," he whispers.

I shake my head, my eyes darting in every which direction again.

"You're ready to say it out loud. It's time." He places his hands on my clammy cheeks and forces me to focus on him. "She'd want you to forgive yourself. You can say it now."

I grip his wrists like I'm dangling from the edge of the cliff, begging him to pull me back up. *Please don't let go.* I keep my eyes on him. "When we walked up to my father's grave, a woman was standing there. She had our honey-blond hair."

Dessin's brow furrows in understanding.

"Our mother, Violet. The woman that allowed Scarlett to be molested for all of those years. The woman who destroyed her little girl. This woman was standing over our father's headstone in tears. When she looked up at us, she wouldn't look at me, only at Scarlett. I could see she knew who she was. And for a moment, I thought this might work. Maybe she changed. Maybe she was the antidote Scarlett needed to heal. But I was wrong. *I was so wrong.* I was naive and wrong, and I was a stupid girl!" My voice is an earthquake, quivering, rumbling, setting the stage for a disaster.

“What happened?” he asks.

“Scarlett and I stood there in shock. Neither of us knew what to say to her. Violet looked at Scarlett like an insect. A poisonous insect. She spat on the ground and said, *‘I remember you. You’re the little monster I made a few shiny coins off of.’* I responded quicker than Scarlett could blink and asked her how she could do those things to her own daughter. Scarlett held my hand, and her whole body shook. Violet laughed at us—she laughed so hard tears slipped from her eyes. *‘Scarlett deserved everything that happened to her. She’s nothing to me. No daughter of mine.’*

“And then she was gone. Left at that moment. And—when I looked at Scarlett’s face, there was no color. No tears. Only emptiness and utter shock. I began apologizing profusely. I couldn’t believe I made the decision to come here. To introduce her to everything that would reopen her wounds and break her soul. I practically dragged her back home, where she fell into tiny pieces. Her cries weren’t out of anger this time. They were out of agony and catastrophic devastation. She sobbed and crashed to the floor, holding her stomach as she tried to set a perimeter around the pain.

“And in that moment, I made the second of bad decisions I made for that day. I told her we were going to make a blueberry pie together. Just like how she would do for me when I was sad. I was going to run out and grab the blueberries, and we’d read an old book together, and she would feel better. However, that was what Scarlett would do for me. I normally would hold her while she cried. I’d sit behind her and rock her back and forth. That is what Scarlett believed she needed. Instead, I strayed and tried something new. Before I left her, I begged her to tell me she still loved me.

“But she kept crying in a puddle of her own despair. I gathered a basket of blueberries from the woods while

chanting, '*She's going to be okay, she's going to be okay.*'"
Oh, God. The tears. They burn at the backs of my eyes.
They are filling around my lids.

"But in my stomach, I knew this was the worst it ever was. And if anything in the world could break her for good, it was going to be this. And I was stupid—I was so stupid. When I came back to our house, I couldn't find her. The house was so quiet—" My knees begin to buckle. "*Mmm.* No. No." I shake my head again.

Dessin wraps his arms around me. "You can do this. You can finish it. Tell me what you found," he pleads with raw emotion in his voice. The fire crackles behind him.

"As I ran through the house searching for her, I knew deep down where she would be. But I was—petrified. I didn't want to see what had become of her mental state in the minutes I was gone. The closet door in our mother's old room is where Scarlett was locked away as a little girl. It was a frightening place for her. But the door was closed. I felt a sinking evil residing over that room as I opened it. *And...*"

Dessin nods. "You're almost there," he says.

"And she was *hanging!*" The cry comes now, blustering out of my chest. Tears pooling in my eyes and streaming rivers down my cold cheeks. "Her body swinging back and forth. She had *hung* herself. *My* Scarlett had—hung herself in the closet where she was kept a prisoner. Fresh tears were still on her cheeks. Her neck was the color of a plum and elongated—the image of her was mortifying. And I was in shock. I couldn't breathe. But then I saw the note on the ground in front of her feet hovering above it. In fresh ink, it read: '**I still love you.**'"

The sobs rattle my body in the stronghold of his arms down to the bone. My glass shell has burst into tiny shards.

"And that was it for me. I broke. I lost all will to live, and I burned the house down. I held her lifeless hand as my world burned down for her. My only regret was that I didn't

keep the note. I was pulled out of the fire and left on the side of the road, mere moments before rescue arrived. I woke up to see our home turned to ashes. It was and will always be the worst day of my life."

Dessin remains, holding me close to him, his arms tightly around my body like I might disappear. Like I might float away. I don't want him to let me go. His embrace is by far the most comfort I have ever known.

His arms are what made saying this tragedy out loud bearable.

Saying it out loud to him forces the sketch of the puppet to reenter my mind, pushing past my grief like an earthquake breaking through the ground.

"Do you think that's why I sketch the puppet? Is that why I draw the strings around the limbs? Is it to keep me from losing my mind?" My words spill out over his shoulder, garbled and choked.

His brows knit together. "You draw a puppet?"

"Almost every day. I draw it when I think about her. I draw it when I'm hurting."

"I think the puppet was your way of coping. It was your mind's way of taking a tragic death and turning it into something harmless. A puppet attached to strings." He clears his throat, strengthening his hold on me. "Skylenna, for you to blame yourself for her death is a dishonor to her memory. Scarlett would hurt knowing that you were suffering believing this every day. It wasn't your fault. She was on the brink of death for years. *You* kept her alive with your love. But unfortunately, she remained broken for too long. There was nothing you could have ever done." Dessin says every word as a matter of fact. No question. No doubt.

"You talk about her like you knew her." I pull away from him slowly.

"I know what I've observed through you."

A brief wave of déjà vu overcomes me. I stare into his eyes curiously, like a crystal ball revealing an unraveling

ribbon of secrets.

"Thank you." I wipe my eyes. "That truth was burning me alive. As if I never made it out of that fire."

He nods. "I wouldn't have let you burn alone."

And that notion sends me into his arms again, letting him hold me tight as I cuddle my face to his neck, breathing in his sweet scent, praying he'll never let me go again.

He presses his mouth and nose into my wet hair, inhaling strongly, and curls his fingers around my waist like I'm about to be dragged away from him.

"Look up," he whispers peacefully.

My eyes flicker to the night sky, sparkling with millions of diamonds suspended in the darkness. And my world doesn't seem as significant anymore, not where we stand, below the glowing white lights. The dazzling map of stars.

"They're brighter here," he tells me, still holding me tight. "What does it feel like standing under them?"

"Like home." I smile.

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53. Sophia and Arthur

HE TAKES A BREATH, GATHERING his words. "I haven't told you how I came into existence—in this body, out of apprehension that the previous host would be triggered into taking back control. You see, this memory is one that fueled many of the decisions I've made in his life and one that always sent him into a deep depression. I don't think it will trigger him now. I believe he needed to hear your story first."

Why mine? What could my story possibly mean to him? He guides me to sit next to him in front of the ambiance of the fire.

"When the previous host was quite young, his family was targeted for a great act of violence. He had a mother. I believe you asked me her name once. Sophia was exponentially intelligent and fiercely compassionate, much like you. She always put her children first. Even when she was trapped with an abusive husband, she protected her children from ever knowing... But even she couldn't stop what was to come."

Dessin allows me to intertwine my hand into his. "He also had a little brother. His name was *Arthur*." Saying that name that drips with innocence, Dessin winces, tilting his chin upward as he watches the rippling water. This name carries weight. It's been cloaked and cradled by the previous host, but even saying it out loud causes him pain. "Arthur wanted to be like his big brother, following him around when he'd play outside. He was his shadow... And only wanted to be included."

In my mind's eye, I watch a little boy with glasses and dimples follow Dessin through the trees, wielding a branch as if it were made of razor-edged steel. I see the admiration in his brown doe eyes as he watches his big brother climb a tree, wanting to be just like him when he grew up.

“Arthur—he was just like their mother. He didn’t have a mean bone in his body. He was kind in the way that when his big brother did something wrong, he would take the blame for him, take the punishment. And afterward, he would get to play with his big brother in the woods, where they’d pretend to fight monsters, build forts, and climb trees. And that was life. It was *heaven* for them.”

His voice trails as he flips through the best memories this body has. It’s the calm before the storm, and my heart prepares to break again, as I’ve only just begun to fall in love with the sweet idea of this little brother, Arthur.

“The previous host was six years old when they came into his home. He was six years old when six men took everything from him. He came in from playing outside where his mother, Sophia, was tied down on the kitchen table, her clothes had been torn off, and there was blood, not enough that would mean she was close to death, but enough that it had sunk deep in his stomach and lingered there to this day.”

He releases a quick breath. Dessin himself is detached from this story in a way that a friend would share another friend’s tragedy. He wasn’t there and didn’t see it, but he saw how it affected his friend. That’s what bleeds through his expression.

“Two men bound the boy’s hands behind his back and tied him to a wooden chair. For approximately three and a half hours—he watched those six men barbarically defile Sophia. They raped her, taking turns as she was helpless to fight them off. And he was forced to watch them, forced to accept those actions into his mind where they would burn into his brain like poison. He screamed and thrashed and tried to break free of his restraints. He begged for them to stop. But the violence only got worse.” He looks down at me from the bottom left corner of his eye, catching my eyes pooling with tears.”

I sniffle, blinking the tears away furiously. "I can handle it," I say with new strength. I won't let him bear this alone. And so he continues.

"They sodomized her with common kitchen utensils. They pried her mouth open so that they could push themselves down her throat until she would choke on her own vomit. The young boy sat in his own excretions as the scream of his mother burned his ears. She didn't care about what they did to her. No, when she screamed, she begged for them to remove him from the room so he wouldn't have to watch. The men were creative, though. They included him in decisions like which entrance of his mother's body they should force themselves into next. But she fought so hard, in fact, that when there was no energy left, saliva hung in strings from her mouth as she dissociated herself from the moment. The boy tried to do the same, but all he could see was the blood and fluids spilling from her open areas. And when he'd try to close his eyes or look away, they'd do something to make her scream in pain, forcing him to focus back on the scene in shock.

"When the last man finally finished, they zipped up their pants, and when he heard his mother sigh in relief, he felt he could breathe again. It was over. He could help her get to a doctor, and they would have survived. But the six men came with a purpose. This was not a random crime. Two of them left the kitchen and came back with his little brother, Arthur. Arthur had been hiding in a closet, and—he was clutching his favorite stuffed rabbit. The rabbit that their selfish father had given to him on his third birthday. Arthur held on to that rabbit like it might save their lives, like holding it tightly would summon their father to protect them. But it did no such thing."

"Oh God." The words flee my lips in a broken sob. I make no effort anymore to hold the tears with the strong dam of my will to stay strong for Dessin. They stream heavily down my face.

“The men held Arthur next to Sophia in a chair parallel to the boy. This brought Sophia out of the relief-stricken coma she was resting in. He knew it had somehow gotten worse when she began to beg again, this time with a fury that enraged her. The men put a sickle, sharp enough to cut through a watermelon like butter, in the previous host’s hands and gave him a choice, with calm, daunting voices. He could choose to put his mother out of her misery, or he could end his baby brother’s life. If he didn’t choose, they would both suffer. If he chose one to die, the other would live. It was *simple*.” He nods his head matter-of-factly, like the enemy that forced his hand had a thoroughly thought-out plan.

My skin morphs from wet to damp to dry, and yet I still shiver, as if tiny maggots are wiggling through my veins. The horrors Dessin must have seen. A choice that no little boy should ever be forced to make. He was introduced to pure evil.

“So simple, in fact, his brain, in the heat of the moment, evolved, rearranged itself. As he looked into Sophia’s eyes, she became at peace, smiling softly. It wasn’t a choice for her. She wasn’t afraid or angry. She looked at him with love and asked him to swing the sickle into her. *‘It’s okay, sweet boy.’* she said. *‘You and Arthur are going to make it without me. I’ll always be with you.’* When he looked at Arthur, his little brother was shaking violently. Tears poured from his eyes, and he wouldn’t let go of that pathetic little rabbit, the same one that he had tossed high in the branches of the backyard tree, taunting little Arthur for fun, the same rabbit that had been dragged through the mud when Arthur would chase his big brother in the rain begging him to let him play too. It all flashed before his eyes, and it was more than this boy could take all on his own.”

He closes his mouth and rubs his fingers across the lining of his jaw. And with this subtle break of

concentration, I know he's about to crush me with the truth.

"In that moment, I came into existence. I was and am stronger. I am dominant. I see clearly without the clouded emotions. Born into this child's body, I knew I couldn't take on the six men that had held my family captive. The only logical action was to choose, so he wouldn't have to. And so I did. I told little Arthur to shut his eyes as I swung the sickle into Sophia's chest.

"It took what felt like hours for her to die. If I knew then what I know now, I would have aimed for her head. And so, naturally, doing what evil men do, they went back on their word. They yanked the sickle from my hands and plunged it into his baby brother. The tip of the blade tore through his rabbit, saturated heavily with blood. And... Arthur looked up at me through tearing brown eyes under his oversized glasses. He wore overalls that day, had a side part in his brown hair, and he *never* let go of that rabbit.

"In the end, I saw his eyes as he cried for their mother. In his eyes, he was the only one who knew I wasn't his brother anymore. A monster had been born. A monster that killed his mother and, in the end, couldn't protect him. Deep in the back of my mind, I felt the boy howl. I felt him writhe in a pool of suffering he hasn't been able to swim out of yet."

It was worse than I could have imagined. I've given into the shuddering of my shoulders, the hiccups, and the fire that burns under my cheeks. His story is like a wind that fanned the hot coals deep in my belly. In all of my theories and thoughts and imaginings of what could have happened to him... This wasn't even a possibility. Dessin came into existence to protect him. He was forced to do something that no child should have to experience. He had to be brave and fearless. In that moment, Dessin was born.

"I—I..."

"You don't have to apologize. It wasn't me that happened to. It was *him*," he corrects me dismissively.

But it doesn't matter. It happened. Regardless of who I'm speaking to, that unspeakable tragedy and pain is stuck inside his body, rotting like a sick animal in the woods that the other beasts wouldn't finish off. I can reach out and touch the hateful energy it sends off into the air around him.

"I can't believe that happened." The tears don't stop. "I could kill them—" I roll off of the tree trunk we've been sitting on and climb into his lap, pulling myself against him with my arms tight around his neck. But he doesn't react by embracing me back, only tensing his entire body, every muscle, every joint hardened. "Please, hold me back," I whisper. "I need to know after everything, you'll never let me go."

His breath releases from his firm chest, labored, like the result from hiking up a steep hill, and his warmth spreads from the muscular perimeter he surrounds me with. At first, it touches my cold skin, tingling past the first layer, then, stronger than the fire in front of us, it unfurls through my lungs and into my heart, like being hugged by the sun itself.

Infinite.

"I assume you got your revenge," I breathe into his neck.

Justice. I gave him justice. The men took me to Demechnef, where, as you know, I was trained for years. When I was eighteen, I ended those six lives in ways I wouldn't dare say in front of a lady." He takes my face in one hand to get a good look at me and winks. "Including his father. The man that sold his family out for this... Experiment."

"Wait... Experiment?" A low growl comes from the trees above us. Dessin's head snaps up to search for it. I follow his gaze as he locks his eyes on something in the shadows.

“We should go.” He rises to kick sand over the fire. Lifts my damp dress to put it back on me.

“Why?” I search his expression, trying to understand his urgency.

“There’s someone close.”

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54. The RottWeilen

I FOLLOW HIM UP THE PATH where the red oaks begin again. He grips my hand and keeps me close behind him.

“Dessin, what’s happening—”

He stops in his tracks as the beast I haven’t thought about in some time stands before him. The RottWeilen that saved me in the winter forest. I remember the reddish-brown eyes that glowed in the white snow.

“Keep walking,” he instructs. But I’m not listening to him anymore. I walk around him, crouching at eye level with the mass of black and red fur. The animal watches me cautiously. But there’s a pull as if I’m connected to a fishhook, an alignment in my chest. A surge of déjà vu again.

“Skylenna...” Dessin warns.

“It’s okay,” I say. “He won’t hurt me.” In a cosmic daze, unmindful of consequence and acting on pure instinct—I reach my hand out, slowly, inching closer to the beast’s head, staring into his fiery eyes. I hold my breath, and the animal pushes his face against my hand, rubbing the top of his snout against me.

I let out a laugh in relief, looking up at Dessin like a child.

“Are you seeing this?!” I rub my hands over the back of his neck and scratch. He bows his head while he leans into my chest. My shoulders shake with more surprised laughter as I choke on gasps and am covered head to toe with chills.

“DaiSzek, where are they coming from?” Dessin barks.

The great wolf growls and throws his head in the direction of the north.

“Let’s go,” he commands.

Wait. Does he know this animal? Am I losing my mind?

“Now, Skylenna.”

I stand up, unable to look away from his distressed face.
“You *named* him? Does he belong to you?!”

I jog to keep up with his pace as we descend the dark path we arrived on.

“He doesn’t *belong* to anyone.”

We are stopped again by an obstacle standing between us and his motorcycle.

Two people.

A young woman and young man, looking close to our age. In the moonlight, I can see her auburn hair and her smooth, tan skin. The man is much taller than her, with a lean frame and wild black hair, down to his shoulders. They looked just as shocked to see us as we are to see them. The man looks at the woman and back at us.

“What’s your business here, friend?” Dessin speaks to the man. The man looks at the woman again, who looks as though she might pass out. He readjusts his focus back on Dessin.

“Going for a late-night hike, sir. How about the two of you?” He glances over at me and then darts his eyes to the ground. This creates suspicion in Dessin. I can sense him straighten up beside me.

“Mhm, yes, I can see that. Tell me, is hiking in a ball gown and tuxedo a new trend I’m unaware of?” Dessin’s eyes grow hard and cold in the moonlight spilling through the holes in the trees. How did I miss that? Why are they dressed up like they’re coming from a ball? My spine goes rigid, and suddenly I’m glad I’m standing behind him.

The man with the curly dark hair looks back at the woman for help. She says nothing. She merely stares at Dessin, eyes wide as if she knows who he is—what he’s capable of. Before I can close my eyes to blink, Dessin charges the man and pins him to a tree by his throat. His feet dangle, toes grazing the dirt as he kicks.

“Who are you?!” he growls.

The man chokes to try and get his words out, but nothing happens.

“We came to have sex in the woods!” The auburn-haired woman screams at Dessin. She’s panting, and her eyes are glossy with tears. “Leave him alone! We just wanted privacy away from my parents!”

Dessin looks back at her and then back at the man. Still unsure, still suspicious. Reluctantly, he lowers him to the ground.

“You’re too young to get caught in this world,” Dessin says to the couple but aims his glare at the woman. “I will spare your lives once. Do not run into me a second time.”

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55. Checkmate

I COULD NOT SLEEP LAST night.

I tried to count the days we have left, but it doesn't matter. We had a breakthrough on both of our ends. I showed him the ugliest side of me. And he lifted that veil, that cloak of mystery, for me to see his past. It wasn't ugly at all. But it did make my heart twist and ache.

Instead of sleeping, I crawled out of my window and sat on the roof of Aurick's mansion, looking up at the sky in search of Dessin's stars. And as I stared up at the abyss of clouds blocking the moon and the empty atmosphere, my future became abundantly clear, as if the sun came peeking out at midnight, smiling at me.

There is no future left in this home.

This extravagant piece of architecture was never my happy ending.

It's nearly time for me to go.

This has always been about fulfilling my sister's dying wish, but it has turned into so much more. I've built friendships. I've created a bond with Dessin that I can't break. And it's evident that the asylum will never let them go. They will rot within those walls, decay into the foundation as if they never existed.

That only leaves me one choice.

Arriving late to the asylum, I step through the doors to hear my name being used in the dining hall. "Skylenna will throw a fit when she hears." A whisper between conformists having breakfast. Immediately, I think something happened to Dessin. I take off running to his room. I pass Ruth, who flusters at the sight of me in a sprint. "What's wrong?"

I ignore her. Almost to the door. Past Chekiss's room. Past Niles.

I unlock the thirteenth door with a thrust of aggression.

Sitting in a chair, he raises his head to greet me.

"You look rested. " He gives me a once-over. I sigh loudly, panting to catch my breath. "*God.*" Whispering under my breath, I place my hand over my forehead and hunch over to fill my lungs. I half expected him to not be here at all or to be pinned down and tortured again.

He's standing now, concerned. "I was being sarcastic. You look terrible," he says.

"Lovely to see you too." I spit out a laugh.

"What's the matter?"

I smile. "Nothing." Deep breath. "Nothing, I overheard someone saying I was going to be upset when I heard about something, and I thought they were talking about you. I... I had a bad feeling."

He narrows his eyes. "I need to ask something of you before the day is over." He crosses his arms and raises his chin, detached and serious.

I stand up straight.

"Do you feel a bond between us?" His jaw clenches. Humor gone from his eyes.

"What?" I try to step back, but he tugs me toward him, hooking his hands around my arms with tender pressure.

"A bond. The kind that is familiar. The kind you can't reach out and touch, but you know it's there. A bond that you've never felt with anyone in the world before. A bond that is unbreakable, even through death."

I widen my eyes. "Dessin—"

I know the bond he speaks of. The kind that would send me into a forest fire to be with him.

"Yes. I've felt that bond to you since the moment I stepped foot in this room." *Since the moment I saw your smile.*

He's become my best friend and closest ally in a short amount of time. And there's something buried deep that I trust, a shelter I never want to leave.

“Would you abandon your whole world for me?” he asks. In those brazen dark eyes, I can see that this is his most dire question. One that he has been waiting to ask me.

There’s a sharp clinking sound, and the door is thrown open. Martin, in a power stance, wearing a suit with a white button-down and suspenders. He rolls up his sleeves and leads a large team of military men—wearing merlot-red wool blazers with bronze tassel linings. *Demechnef*. Belts of blades and weapons hanging from around their hips.

They’ve come for him.

“We’re in the middle of something,” Dessin purrs casually. “You can come back in—a couple of years.” He winks at me as if he simply does not care that the air has shifted and we’re outnumbered.

Flooding the room in vast numbers like a swarm of cockroaches, four of them hook their hands around his arms and bind them in shackles. He lets them. Standing at ease, calm and collected, like he knew this was coming.

“What are you doing?” I shriek. “Let him go!”

“Skylenna, did you really think you’d get away with your little rendezvous last night? You signed an agreement. One of the clauses is that he is clearly not allowed to leave the premises of the asylum. You *knew* that.” Martin was born with this sneer on his round face. He places a hand on my shoulder. “Time is up. We gave you the time. The patient hasn’t improved. He is to be publicly executed at dawn.”

My heart sinks into the earth. “No...” is all I can muster. I failed him. *I failed...* He’s going to die. Executed in front of my eyes. The thought of living and him not being on this earth anymore is unbearable.

I watch, blood draining from my face, as they usher Dessin out of his room. He watches me with careful eyes, and I wish I knew more than anything what he is thinking. Why he isn’t fighting back.

In the midst of him being dragged from my grasp, I make eye contact, and the entire world stops spinning.

Even the particles in the air take pause. I look into those soft-brown eyes that have consumed me from the first day I met him. The same eyes that made people cower in fear of him, the same eyes that made me feel safe when my surroundings told me to run. From the moment I met him, I felt what it was like for the first time to come home. I can't let him go. I won't say goodbye.

"Dessin, *run*," I breathe the words, push them into existence. I would rather him be alive and safe than leave this earth permanently. Martin spins around to look at me and to make sure he heard right. I was giving Dessin the okay to fight back. To escape for good.

Wide eyed and beside himself, Martin stares into Dessin's stoic being, examining him as if waiting for a dormant volcano to erupt.

Dessin phases into a full moon, cold and emerging from darkness, an expression I have recognized as the animal inside of him, going on instinct to do what needs to be done to escape fatality. But the men of Demechnef came prepared. Before he can make a move, they secure us in his room by bolting the door shut. They remove gas masks from their belts and release canisters that spew fog into the room. I watch them strap the black crow's masks over their faces, one by one taking a fighting stance as they wait for Dessin to retaliate.

But he does not move. Only a mere glance at me as Martin covers my nose and mouth with a small half mask.

The fog lifts, and I jerk backward, realizing what they're doing.

Why isn't he fighting? He doesn't have a mask. *Dessin!* I try to wiggle free, but Martin is holding me from behind, keeping the mask firmly over my face.

"*Lemmego!*" But my scream is muffled. And the smoke rises to Dessin's face, thin like a puff of steam from a cup of tea. *Cover your face!*

But that dazzling smile glistens through the fog, claiming ownership of the situation. My shoulders relax, and I stop fighting Martin's hold. Of course, he knows what he's doing. And as theatrical as he is known to be in moments of panic, he takes a deep breath in, letting the gasses slip into his nostrils, inhaling into his lungs. *And nothing happens.*

The men take hold of the weapons on their belts, looking back and forth between each other, confused as to why he didn't collapse to the floor.

"Hello, gentlemen," Dessin says calmly. "Have you missed me?"

Martin ushers us to the back wall away from the tension building in their stone faces, rising in their testosterone levels. And right on cue, the man with honey-blond hair, directly across from Dessin, draws what looks like a handful of darts from his belt, plucking them one by one and flinging them at Dessin, his arm extending then drawing back to snatch another dart. The ends are pointed with a needle dripping with red residue. A tranquilizer, perhaps? But his impressive quickness and precise aim are no match for Dessin. His body dodges the flying darts like the crack of a whip. The other men seek out their own weapons of choice, a maul, hand axes, daggers, a triple-bladed knife, and of course... The sickle.

My heart sinks in on itself. The weapon they forced on him to slice into his own mother. The weapon that obliterated his childhood. His family.

And the collision of the twelve men swarming in on one man whirls together in a heap of sweeping movements. It's a strike of thunder without sound. The metal from their weapons clinking against each other, but in the center of it all, Dessin uses his bare hands. Deflecting blows by intercepting wrists, breaking arms, and whipping a stiff leg through the air, taking out three men at once.

It's in this tornado of fists and elbows and grunts of agony that I catch a glimpse of blood splattering to the floor. Four men are unmoving on the ground, but only one with a forehead gashed open and a stream of blood flowing into his right eye.

The rest take turns swiping their blades at Dessin in what could only be described as a choreographed performance, like assassins being instructed at a ballet. Dessin takes a man's head into his hands, using it as a handle to throw his exhausted body into two others, collapsing them to the floor like a house of cards.

It's clear they've come from the same training. They know Dessin. They anticipate that he'll overpower them. Yet, they have to put up a fight. They have their orders.

This is the first time I witness Dessin's honed physical skills. If a stranger saw him swarmed and attacked by twelve capable men, they'd already assume Dessin's fate was sealed. My chest vibrates as if an avalanche has fallen, and my heart thumps like tumbling rocks down a mountain. He's down to one man. The one with the sickle. And I can see in his satisfied glare and the inferno under his flesh that he saved him for last, to take his time, without any distraction.

With a launch like a lion in the hunt, Dessin climbs up the wall behind the middle-aged man, spinning through the air to strike the last man with his bare knuckles three times against the jaw, the cheek, the bridge of his nose. And it's powerful, like a shooting star crashing into a small meteor. His blows are violent yet sharp and contained. It's a matter of calculation for him, measurements of where to hit, the angle, the power and passion to let explode from his body.

But it's not enough. Not for the man wielding the sickle. He's building up to the final decisive movement. He gyrates in the air with his leg extended, forcing a fatal blow to the side of the man's face. It's swift, without warning, and he falls to the stone floor, cracking his cheekbone like an egg.

Dessin hovers over him, seizes the sickle from his limp grasp.

"It's time to come home, Dessin," the man chokes out, spitting a string of clotted red saliva to the ground.

Home. I hope he doesn't believe that to be true.

"How many of you must I kill until you comprehend? I cannot be controlled." Dessin spins the sickle handle on his index finger, watching the hook of the blade rotate.

"You can be as long as she's alive," the man hisses through his bloody mouth.

The sickle stops spinning, and Dessin's body tenses. A wicked smile with more edge and supremacy than a strike of lightning. His muscles bulge from his arms, revealing the indentations across his toned biceps as he presses the edge of the sickle across the man's throat, pointing it there, showcasing what he could do if he wanted.

"I enjoy a challenge." And he stomps on the blade, crushing it into the man's trachea and slicing it down the bone of his spine. His arteries burst like the city's fountains at midnight, spraying like broken pipes across Dessin's white clothes.

Martin's arms harden around me as we both stutter on a painfully broken gasp.

But it's *still* not enough. He stomps on the blade once more, severing the spine and decapitating the man. His head, with a gaping mouth and glossy-blue eyes, rolls toward us. And in a ritualistic trance, he plucks a rusted knife with a wooden handle from his pocket, proceeding to stab him in the chest three times.

I've been standing with locked knees and clenched shoulders for long enough that I might as well be dipped in wet concrete, turning into a block of pavement. I can hardly take in a breath, barely wipe away the tears gathering in my eyes. *What did I just see?*

How can I unsee this? After everything, does he deserve to be executed? What kind of man is he? The thoughts are

polluting my mind like a giant storm cloud carrying the makings of a tornado.

The guiltless pool of hot crimson fluids spills in spurts around the man's severed neck. Dessin drops the sickle next to the head, staring at it, reliving tragedies, visualizing his other kills. Although I'm not certain of the last part—but it fits in like a puzzle piece with that haunted glazed look of his eyes.

My mind trails frantically back to the fight, to the men all lying helplessly at our feet, locked in this room with a genius executioner. It peels back my strength, unveiling the soft, gushy parts of my humanity. And it simply slips out. A piercing, guttural scream.

Dessin looks back at me, suddenly aware once more that I exist and that I was among the audience of two for the massacre. He takes a step toward me, avoiding the puddle of blood still growing in size. But he stops before taking another step, eyebrows rising as he analyzes my face—and there's a question waiting on his lips, frozen in fear. *Are you afraid of me yet?* He wants to ask it. His brow creases in debilitating anticipation.

I want to scream at him—*Yes! Yes, I'm terrified! This was nothing short of monstrous.* But I gave him permission. I urged him to run to freedom. And even though this was like watching a tsunami wipe out an entire small section of civilization—I cannot be afraid of him. It would be like being afraid of the sky because at any moment, it could rain hail or fire. It's intelligibly his nature, like a volcano.

As he opens his mouth to speak, Martin's arms tense around me. I hold up my quivering hand to stop him. "Go see the stars," I say weakly. If he goes to our secret place, at least I'll know where to find him. At least I won't have to suffer the idea of never being able to see him again.

He looks at Martin and back at me. Tilts his head to the side, doubtful, visibly rejecting the idea of leaving me.

"Leave," I say between my gritted teeth.

But his eyes burn like two suns into mine.

"Get out!" I scream, and my body shakes with an internal sob. Venomous tears swell in my eyes, clawing over my lids.

The muscles in his shoulders go rigid. *You have to leave.* They could send more men. He'll never make it out fast enough with me. I'll only slow him down.

"I said get out! Get the hell out!" I fire my words off like arrows slicing into his flesh. Heat spills over my face and chest, burning under my skin as I thrash against Martin's hold. My world burns around the edges, blisters from the hot rage I release into the thirteenth room to get him to walk away. *Save yourself, damnit.*

"I said leave, you bastard! *I hate you!*" It's those last words that strike us like the sickle. He stumbles back toward the door, repeatedly blinking like he can't process my indignation. A short choppy breath as he forces the door open, never taking his eyes off of me. *Please, go.* I beg with a river of tears. As he disappears from the doorway, I split at the seams, suffocating on my own sobs. *Oh God, I'm never going to see him again.*

With groaning men around me on the floor, cursing, panting, still trying to understand what happened, Martin grabs my forearm and walks me out of the room into the hallway. "You're coming with me."

I don't object. My heart and soul are still in shock, standing in the mess of blood, waiting for Dessin to come back for me. I know my actions in causing his escape will have repercussions. I know I am to pay for letting him leave, but I am not bothered by that. The only thing I care about is that he is safe. That I saved him from being executed.

Prancing down the hallway with my elbow locked in Martin's sweaty grasp, Ruth exits Chekiss's room, closing the door behind her.

“Skylenna?” She gasps, and my reflection is a mess of sweat, gray tears, and blood splattered across my legs and shoes. “What is this?” she shrieks at Martin.

“Out of our way, child,” he grumbles, blustering past her.

“Unhand—her!” Ruth stumbles behind us. “Skylenna!”

Goodbye, my friend.

He whirls around to face her, bumping me into a wall in the process.

“Another word out of you, and I will have you thrown from the premises, leaving your penniless family to grovel in the Bear Traps outside this city, where your names will be forgotten.” His predictable sneer is back. Ruth has suspended her steps forward, watching me with pain-stricken eyes.

“Tell them I said goodbye,” I say. I don’t have to point at their rooms for her to know. Chekiss and Niles. *Take care of them.*

She nods slowly.

I’ll come back for you, soul sister.

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56. The Previous Host

Martin leads me to the gravel driving path in front of the asylum doors, shimmering with a dark-orange sunset. He ushers me into his buggy. I sit, alarmed and confused, into his passenger seat. "What's happening?" I ask breathlessly.

"I know where he is going." He starts the engine, and our buggy bounces over the gravel as we exit onto a scenic dirt road. "Are you that naive, child? To not know that I would have you followed?"

Dessin was right to threaten that couple. They worked for Martin.

"I must say, when I followed you to the forest, I worried I'd see a little more than I bargained for. A naked encounter. A murder suicide. Or perhaps seeing his bull-like body assaulting yours with a friendly weapon. But the other council members would not listen to me. You walked on water in their eyes. So, I had you followed. I'd bet my wife's expensive wardrobe that he'll be there waiting for you."

I stare at the dark landscape through the windshield—the rolling hills, the moonlit fields of grass. "And what exactly do you think will happen when you see him? *Alone*. This is your death sentence, and you know it." I wipe my damp palms on my uniform. I want this day to be over. My life is about to spin out of control.

"Demechnef sought me out to administer a deal. They clued me in on this monster they created and set a course for a plan to obtain him." He adjusts his hands on the wheel. "Since taking him as a child and turning him into their ideal weapon, they did their jobs a little too well. He learned of loopholes, such as our asylum. We have what you call an invincible little force field around us. Demechnef cannot touch us. Back when the laws were written, religion took over science, and it was strongly believed by our

leaders of the faith that the asylum had as much immunity as the church.”

He takes a turn at Nocturne Road, and my stomach churns at how close we are. I look down at my feet, my brain glitching, rummaging through all I’ve learned, hoping to find a way out of this.

“They told me if I could find leverage to hang over his head, I could control him. And if I could control him, I’d become a Demechnef bureaucrat. It’s been my dream since I was a boy.”

The buggy jerks, and I am yanked forward, my hands slamming on the windshield. I whip my head to the side to gawk at Martin, whose mouth is hanging open as if he’s been struck by lightning. I follow his eyeline past the wheel and into the stream of the dim headlights to Dessin standing strong and hardened like a gladiator walking through fire, with DaiSzek by his side. The great beast I met in the woods.

“Devil’s crop,” Martin whispers under his breath. He pulls a knife out of his console and scoops me up from my seat onto his lap. “To answer your question, this is how I expect to take him on. Using the leverage I found.” I’m hauled from the buggy with him pulling my back to his chest, using me as a shield with a knife to my throat.

Dessin stares at Martin, bleeding him dry with a look of hell’s fire. “Have you finally lost your mind in that torture pit, old man?”

“I am in control here. I want *you* to *surrender!*” Martin’s hand shakes against my throat, wobbling the sharp point against my jugular. I try to take deep, controlled breaths. *He won’t slit my throat.* If he does, then Dessin will surely kill him. But what if he doesn’t have anything left to live for?

“Have you not seen enough of my wrath, Martin? Are you foolish enough to believe this will stop me?” Dessin takes a step toward us, causing Martin to press the blade

harder to my soft skin. I yelp at the jab and suck in a frantic breath. Dessin's attention flashes to me, pinning me down with a harnessed feral temper. It's the most animalism I have ever seen in his darkened eyes—shadowed with previous murder. Blackening his soul.

"It's her, isn't it? She's the leverage Demechnef pointed me to!" Martin pants against my ear—his body hot and sweaty against my back.

"She means nothing to me," Dessin says, low and wicked.

"Is that a fact?" Martin shouts against the summer wind, puncturing my skin with the knife, digging it in enough to cause a rush of blood to snake down my cleavage. I whimper at the pang of splintering pain in my throat.

"I'll skin you alive," Dessin growls, following the snarl and low predatory stance of DaiSzek, the bear-sized wolf, black as the starless sky.

"You will not lay a hand on me. Not while I have her in my grasp." Martin digs his fingers into my shoulder. "I am to turn you into Demechnef. And only then will I let her go. I've broken the laws that protect the asylum and have no life to lose!" He's desperate and lower than maggots under a corpse.

But I won't be the reason Dessin goes back. I won't be Martin's leverage.

With a rush of wind filling my lungs, I explode in a window-shattering scream, causing Martin to flinch away, loosening his hand around the hilt of the knife. In a clumsy movement, I grab the inside of Martin's wrist with my right hand and his blade with my left, maneuvering it out of his clutch, slicing the inside of my palm in the process.

But before I can complete my planned reaction of kicking him between the legs the way Dessin taught me—he's barreled over by a flash of white—the same way I watched DaiSzek tackle the night dawper to the ground.

A chesty grunt to the dirt. Dessin's hand reaches up against my chest, keeping me an arm's length away. And I fall backward, not at Dessin's touch, but at the sound of a roaring dragon coming from behind us. I shriek, turning around on my bottom, facing DaiSzek as he flashes his fangs and sharp teeth.

"Skylenna, look away." Dessin's heavy and troubled voice pulses through my chest. He's holding the knife against Martin's throat, watching the blade pierce his skin slowly.

No, not again.

Watery flashes of the sickle—cutting through flesh—chopping past bone.

I will not pretend like I know the previous host, but I can imagine that murder, blood, and death—all at his hands—will not help bring the previous host back.

"No," I whisper in exasperation. "Stop," I say. I remember the darkness overcoming him when he snapped that man's neck at the abandoned Demechnef headquarters. He did it for me. He did it to protect me.

His eyes snap up to me in distress, and I know I have to be the one to protect him now. "Get back." His words jolt through the old road and back to me.

"NO! I need you to be whole. And killing—killing chips away at everything you are. I need you *whole*." I drop to my knees in front of him, placing my hands over his jawline, searching his eyes for the humanity I can hold on to.

"He needs to die," he growls. But in the warm molten swirling in his eyes, I've caught him. Hooked onto an anchor. I begin to pull.

"Not by your hands," I pant, inching closer to his body, tightening my hands around the bulge of the contracting muscles in his arms. "You told me if I can guess your greatest fear, I can meet him." He's staring at me now, brow tightly knitted together, with the look of an assassin as I slowly remove his mask. "I know what it is now... Your

greatest fear is losing *me*. I know this because my greatest fear is losing *you*."

I pause to catch my breath. And his face is gravity, pausing, stunned in silence. "If you're ever going to listen to me... hear me now," I beg him. "Come back to me. Please come back to me. I'm right here."

Our heartbeats synchronize into the dead silence.

"I need you," I whisper.

His eyes narrow on me, and it's as if he's watching a tidal wave coming straight for him, unable to react, unable to run or hide.

It crashes over him.

His pupils dilate, widening until the chocolate brown is almost swallowed in the darkness. Then, the brown fills in once more, radiating with flecks of green and gold. The new expression on his face is overwhelmed with sorrow and exhaustion.

Martin wiggles his way out of Dessin's grip and runs into the forest. But much faster than he can make his escape, the massive black and russet-red mountain, DaiSzek, explodes into a ferocious sprint after him. In a flash of blackness, there are only guttural screams.

Dessin doesn't seem to notice. Is it even Dessin? Could it be the previous host?

He doesn't take his eyes off me. Instead, he places his hands on my wrists. I realize my hands are still grasping the top of his neck and jawline.

"Dessin?" I ask.

A sad smile. The kind you receive at a funeral. "My name is Kane. I've waited—a very long time to see you again."

The words are mummified in my throat. Capsulated.

I can't believe I'm finally meeting him—but—what did he say?

—*to see you again*.

"What—" An anchor tugs in my mind, teetering on the edge of a memory.

"Hold on," he whispers, and those eyes are portholes guiding me far away.

I'm back at my father's house four years ago, my body broken and bloody, sniffling cries as my legs swing back and forth from a moving object—carrying me.

"What's happening?" I mutter the question, but I'm not sure if it escaped my lips. My forehead is wet and throbbing, and the left side of my vision is blinding red.

"Hold on," his voice breaks, sounding like he's about to lose it. Cry out in pain or yell in anger. "I'm so sorry, Skylenna."

He was younger here. His hair was slightly shorter. There wasn't any scruff on his jawline or chin. He was—*Kane.*

He was the man who saved me. Survivah's infirmary never received the name of the man who carried me several miles from my father's secluded home near the woods. I always had wondered, though. For years, I called that person my angel. I was convinced God sent me protection to carry me from the brink of death and deliver me back to life.

And he's here now—patiently waiting, watching, wondering if I remember. We're kneeling in the middle of the dirt road, our bodies clasped together, with only the moments of Dessin lingering between us—but I *remember* him.

"You..." I utter. "You were there. You saved my life."

He nods his head once.

"But how? And why didn't you—why didn't *he* ever tell me?" My mind is flowing a steady bountiful river of questions. Is this why he has always acted a certain way around me?

Is this why he has always been so protective of me? But why all of the secrets?

He presses his forehead against mine, closing his eyes as if sensing my urgency to know what is going on.

“These are questions for another day.” His voice is different. Changed. Still deep and strong and powerful. But now, it’s laced with a conscience, with remorse.

“Why can’t they be questions for right now?!” I raise my voice. Fire rising in the depth of my chest.

“Because, Skylenna, we’re fugitives now.”

His eyes lift slowly, taking my hands into his and holding them to his chest.

“It’s time to run.”

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57. Journey Into the Night

WE HAVE NOTHING TO CARRY. Nothing to claim ownership of.

It's only us. The Emerald Lake Asylum's clothes on our backs. And *us*.

I didn't dare ask another question as he guided me by my trembling, bloody hand into the forest, walking briskly over the lifted tree roots and tangle of vines. And we ventured into the blackness of nature, listening to the sleeping lullaby of nightfall, the breeze flickering past the leaves, and drying the sweat along my neck and chest.

Kane. His name is Kane. He was born with that name.

Kane.

After an hour and a half of trudging through the weeds, he turned to look at me, hardly recognizable in the lack of light. Without hesitation, his large hands slid along either side of my waist—and just as I thought he was going to lean into me—he lifted me effortlessly from the ground over the fallen tree trunk.

I tried to hide my expression as the goose bumps blistered over my skin.

After a couple more hours, I couldn't keep going—I had to stop. I had to hold myself up as I wiped the sweat from my brow and fought to catch my breath. I had seen so much. Learned so much. It was dragging me to the ground. And all I wanted to do was sleep. Rest. Wake up and ask questions when my brain healed. But I knew he had a plan. Knew he had a destination in mind.

It was my legs—they burned, wobbled, threatened to collapse. But I couldn't tell him that. Couldn't burden him with the deadweight.

And it was as if he could read me like a book, understood my silence, sensed my exhaustion. Another set of chills broke out across my legs and back as he scooped

me from my slouched, panting position against an oak tree and into the cradle of his massive arms.

I gasped then, gawked at him, so close to his tan face even in the pale moonlight.

"I can walk myself," I told him, "I only needed time to catch my breath." *A lie*. It was impossible to take another step.

But he didn't dare embarrass me. He only smiled and said, "I don't mind."

It took me several minutes to loosen the tight flex of my muscles, the rigid position I was sitting stiffly in, and relax against his chest. I let my body then melt, curling into his heartbeat, his deep breathing, his sweet scent of cedar.

And then, I had fallen asleep easily with the gentle sway of his walk. I drifted away in the safest setting I could imagine.

With my ear against his heart.

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58. The Treehouse

"TIME TO WAKE UP." His deep voice muffled through his chest. "We're almost there."

Rich, honey light. Sunrise or sunset. No more darkness. No more crickets. No more shimmering moonlight. I flinch, still comfortable in his arms.

"Did you—did you walk all night?" I peer up at him through sleepy eyes.

"I did." He smiles down at me. Not a drop of sweat. No sign of exhaustion.

"Is it morning or night?" I wince. Please tell me he only walked for a couple of hours.

"We're nearing dusk."

I slap my hands over my face, shielding my eyes from the horror.

"You walked all night *and* all day!" I groan into my palms. "Why didn't you wake me?"

That smile is different. It's not laced with ulterior motives or strutting arrogance. It's kind. It's sweet. "You needed sleep. You've been through a lot."

"You have too," I say, pointing my toes, stretching my legs. "I can walk now." I nudge his chest with my nose.

He lets me down gently. I straighten my dress, glancing back at him.

"Your arms must be so sore. I'm so sorry." Carrying deadweight all night and all day. I can't believe he didn't wake me—

But that blurred, bloody flash of his young face hovering over me as he ran—*ran*—with me, beaten to near death in his arms. It was miles from my father's house to Survivah... *Miles.*

It's like touching a pot of boiling water. I flinch inwardly.

"You've—grown accustomed to carrying me over long distances, haven't you?"

Here it is. The question.

"I've wanted to tell you for so long," he confesses with longing like hot coals in his eyes. "But—"

I jump at the sight of the great mass of fur behind Dessin—no—Kane, stalking toward us.

Kane looks back at DaiSzek, smirks, then nods at me to keep going.

Only a few feet away is a mammoth sycamore tree covered in vines and thick clusters of ivy, hanging like a green tangled curtain. Kane grabs hold of the bottom of the green ropes, pulling them aside to reveal a treehouse at the top.

"After you." He gestures. Carved wooden planks, like steps to a ladder, lead up to the top of the platform.

~

IT'S ANOTHER WORLD OUT HERE, overlooking the tops of the forest trees, like heads of broccoli. The sun burning in flames as it falls toward the horizon, and the wind, strong and refreshing as if it flows more powerfully through the treehouse.

Kane sits against the wall of uneven wooden panels, watching me as I dangle my legs from the edge, observing our new hideout.

"I've worked so hard to meet you, Kane." My voice breaks, cracking around the edges. "I deserve answers." But I can already tell that he's been sifting through what he can tell me and what he can't.

I don't look back at him. I can't. The anticipation for more secrets and more unanswered questions is hard to bear.

"I was there. I saw how much of yourself you put into helping him. Helping me." He shifts against the wall. "I'll tell you as much as I possibly can—but there are some pieces that have to wait. *He* won't let me share them."

I blow out a frustrated breath. Dessin, of course, loves his secrets.

"Where would you like me to start?" he offers.

"The day Jack died. The day I almost died after he beat me." My voice scratches from my throat harshly.

"I escaped from Demechnef often when I was younger. One of the days I freed myself, I wandered into the Bear Traps, and—I heard you—*screaming*." It's the wince that is almost audible in his voice. *Screaming*. The pain, tangible.

But I keep my focus on the horizon, even as the bright-orange light makes my eyes water.

"I followed your cries until I found your father's house and saw you in a puddle of blood on the floor through the window." He clears his throat. Takes a long pause. "I broke down the door and tackled Jack to the ground, throwing him off your body. And that's when I carefully picked you up and carried you out of there."

That confirms it, then. When I woke up in the infirmary days later, they told me the person who rescued me... also killed my father.

"Did he suffer?" I can hardly push out the thought. I'm not sure I want his answer.

"Skylenna—" He moves closer to the edge, a silent plea for me to look at him. I hold my hand up and shake my head.

"Just tell me."

"Jack—he—slit his own throat."

My heart stops—*no*—that's not what they told me—

"I tried to stop him." A thunderstorm in his tone, dark and remorseful.

I turn to him now, my tears blurring his hard edges. "You saw it happen?"

He nods. "I had you in my arms when he did it. I begged him to put the knife down. But—he asked me to tell you that he was sorry and that he'll always love you."

I use both of my hands to cover my mouth and try to hold back the broken sobs that shake my shoulders. *He killed himself.*

"Oh my God," I cry. Everyone I've ever loved—all gone—all *chose* to leave.

Kane doesn't wait for permission. He moves around me swiftly. Wraps his strong arms around me as I cry. "What is wrong with me?"

"They were sick, sweet Skylenna. That wasn't your fault. None of this is your fault."

Ignorance is bliss. Dessin must have known the secrets I would uncover would be ugly ones. Nasty ones. The kind that are better off rotting alone.

"And you ran with me in your arms for miles. You're the reason I'm alive." He could have left me there. I was as good as dead anyway. But—the math—that was four years ago.

"Kane, they told me when you admitted yourself in the asylum, that was one of the worst breakdowns of yours they had ever seen." I twist in his arms to get a better look at his face. His features fall, and that longing turns to torment.

"Yes, I remember," he says stiffly.

"That was four years ago."

He looks down. "So, you've done the math."

But the memories keep trickling in, like a broken faucet. "Dessin told me that you had to turn yourself in—because they found your weakness." He wouldn't say what it was. "He said you found something to live for."

His throat bobs. "It nearly tore my heart out to see you near death in my arms as I ran through the hills and the trees and the city. I've never run that fast in my life."

Me. His weakness was me. "But you didn't even know me."

He uses his thumb to wipe the tears from my cheeks.

"When I heard you screaming... It was as if I was six years old again, watching my mother scream. But I couldn't

save her then. All I could do was watch and cry. Hearing those screams again woke something inside of me. I couldn't save her, but I could save *you*."

It's as if I can hear the puzzle piece to this story physically clicking into place. I was his redemption. The guilt he held toward what happened to Sophia. I was his second chance.

"I've never had anything to care for after I lost my family. You were the purest, sweetest human being. Then and now." He strokes my back in lazy circles. "And Dessin got the chance to know you in the asylum, learned of your heart, and the fire you have to care for others. It's been one of the most rewarding times of my life to watch that behind his eyes."

It all fits. "That's why Dessin went to such great lengths to protect me. To avenge me. And that's why I felt I knew him that first day. Because you were the angel that swept me away from death." The tears gather again, this time from joy, from happiness.

"But why didn't he just tell me? Why the secrecy?"

"Because my saving you that day—it made you a target to Demechnef. I wanted it to be your choice. To run with me. I didn't want you to feel it was being forced on you."

Because either way, he'd find a way to protect me, no matter what.

Another question. "Why did he break Sern's neck?"

He traumatized her. She went mad from being his conformist.

"Sern was faking the insanity. She and her family were being targeted by Demechnef due to her role. Dessin gave her a clean break. He only hurt her in a way that would heal but seemed severe enough that she could convince the asylum of her mind being lost from the trauma."

The gravity of his situation grows in size, pushing down on my shoulders with large hands.

“But—he still knew so much—knew personal details that you couldn’t have known. How?” He knew about Scarlett. He knew about my time in the basement.

The sun sets like a glowing coal losing its heat. He watches it with sadness growing in his soul.

“That’s one of the questions I can’t answer just yet.” It bothers him that he can’t share all he knows. That flexing jawline. His curling fingers. Unlike Dessin, he doesn’t like games.

The thought of Dessin causes my heart to sink in my chest, like an anchor drifting down to the ocean floor. “Is he gone...forever? Is Dessin gone?” *Please. Don’t say yes. Don’t say yes.*

Kane smirks, rolling his eyes at the idea. “I’d never be so lucky,” he mutters sarcastically. “He won’t want to reside in the inner world for long. He’s grown too fond of you.”

I let out an audible sigh and close my eyes. I don’t know how any of this works. He could have disappeared. He could have retired from taking care of me, being my friend. I’m warm with relief and joy.

“What about his instincts with Aurick and Masten? He knew they were bad news and always had a sense they would hurt me. It all just seems like...he’s psychic or something!” I let out a frustrated breath.

Kane shrugs his broad shoulders. “Not psychic. But close. Our mind works differently. It doesn’t have barriers that would keep others from seeing signs in body language, verbal cues, and past and present behavior. Not to mention, Dessin takes his job as an avenging alter *very* seriously. He does his homework on everyone. So, he knew what to expect with Masten and Aurick.”

Makes sense. But I see Kane holding back in the clenched muscles of his jaw.

“That isn’t the whole story, is it?” I ask.

“Please believe that I’ll tell you the whole truth when it’s time.”

“We should sleep,” I say. Even though I only woke mere hours ago, my heart is worn and sore. I need the cover of nightfall to process, to sift through my new findings in my dreams. I need time.

Kane pulls out my cot, and we both settle in, adjusting to our first night together, in our new life on the run.

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59. Free

THE SCENT OF FREEDOM ENGULFS my senses as my mouth opens wide to yawn in the early morning air.

It's earthy, carrying gusts of pollen and the aroma of pine trees. I don't care to open my eyes as I enjoy the cool winds that the sunrise brings into the treehouse. Despite the life-changing events, the death, the new memories—I'm awake with a smile on my face. I'm no longer stuck in the cage of the Chandelier City. No longer plucked, lathered, and starved.

But most importantly, I'm with *him*. The man I fought to keep alive. To get close to at all costs. To set free.

Kane slept on the cot at the opposite side of the treehouse, and I wondered as we closed our eyes where this place came from? Is this all part of the plan he couldn't share with me?

"Are you going to cook pancakes or waffles for us this morning?" I tease, rolling over to my elbow. Empty. It's as if his cot hadn't been slept in last night.

I sit up, noticing the bowl of fruit, a canteen of water, and a note on the floor next to me. It reads, *if I'm not back by the time you wake, eat up, the forest was out of eggs Benedict.*

I smirk, tossing the note to the side as I gobble down the fresh berries, apple slices, and figs. Afterward, I chug the cool water, tasting of rain and soil, but I don't care. My mouth had dried throughout the night, and I was parched.

As I clean my bowl, I tense at the sound of rumbling earth, a mechanical growl. I poke my head out of the opening, first seeing DaiSzek on guard at the base of the tree, then Kane on his motorcycle, pulling up to the curtain of vines, turning off his transportation, and covering it with the camouflage of the ivy.

"I didn't leave you any eggs Benedict!" I shout from the top of the tree.

He grins up at me, laughing as he scratches the top of DaiSzek's head and begins climbing up.

"I'd settle for coffee," he says, reaching the opening.

"Where have you been?" As he stands to his full, towering height, my attention is snagged on the dark circles around his eyes, the devouring exhaustion. "You've been up all night again, haven't you?"

And despite the dark clouds and the weight of no sleep, I see the constellation.

"Yes. I had to run one more errand—so that you could sleep soundly every night." There's a relief in his tone, tenderness, absolution. *What did he do?*

He hooks a loose strand of hair behind my ear, caresses my cheekbone with one knuckle. "I went back to the asylum to break Chekiss and Niles out. They're in a safe location now, with everything they'll need until it's safe for us to meet with them again."

"You—you *what?*" A sound like that of a small animal peels out of me, whimpering, choking on a gasp.

"They're *free* now, Skylenna."

I'm stumbling back now, gaping at him in wonder and awe. How could he have done that alone? He freed my friends. My family.

Quicker than a blink, I'm on my knees crying from joy and the greatest pulse of relief I have ever known. *They're free. They're free.*

Kane joins me on the wood panels, holding me up as I crumble in bits of gratitude and peace. "You saved them," I murmur into the wholeness of his chest. "You've set them free."

I can see it now—Chekiss's face as Kane opens his door, guides him to the fresh air, breaking him free of his chains. And Niles, the promise of never suffering from a treatment again.

And it's her rare smile now beaming in my mind's eye—that face that was nearly always in a permanent scowl—tears of joy filling her green eyes.

We did it, Scarlett.

We sit on the edge of the treehouse, watching the sun hit its peak, watching the trees dance to the symphony of the wind, and together, we breathe in the air we've earned. The air away from the city, away from the treatments of the asylum.

And as Kane caresses my hair, placing a kiss on the top of my head. I turn to him, with a smile I only reserve for his presence, for his company, for the familiarity of those cosmic dark eyes.

"We're free," I say, finally.

But as he processes my words, his eyes zone out. My words that I thought would trigger an expression mirroring my own. His face slackens, and it's as if he's fallen asleep with his eyes open. His vessel is empty. No one is home.

"Kane?"

He blinks. The only visible sign that his body is still working. I'm not even sure he's breathing.

I lean in closer, observing the cold, lifeless eyes now dark as coal. Is he—is he shifting again?

"Dessin?"

Sending a hot jolt to my system, piercing eyes of darkness flick to me. They're wide with alarm, yet narrowing slowly with suspicion. A chill runs down my back, like spilled wine, as he tilts his head slowly. His lids are hooded, desire and curiosity pumping through his gaze.

And I have the bone-crushing suspicion that I've never met the person staring back at me.

"Well, don't you have a pretty mouth?" His voice is slow, silky, elegant, with a new accent. "And don't mistake me for that deviant again." He takes his finger, running it under my chin with an intimate caress. But it's not out of familiarity or fondness.

His touch is seductive, forcing the hairs on my neck to stand at attention and my belly to warm and flutter in response. That finger drags its way down to my cleavage, stopping just before it disappears into the crease. He slides his shadowed stare, glazed in arousal, back up my body with wicked thoughts dancing behind his eyes.

“Do I look like that sociopath to you?”

I nearly choke as I swallow my saliva.

“You’re—not—Kane *or* Dessin?” I ask in frigid caution.

He grins in answer.

“There’s a third alter?” I ask again, breathless, spineless, and detached from my body.

“My name is Graystone.” His finger hooks under my chin to lift my head in perfect view of him. “And there are far more than three alters, pretty one.”

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*To be continued in the next book:
The Master and The Marionette*

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About The Author

Though most know Brandi Elise Szeker as a content creator on BookTok, her heart and soul have always been with the stories that live inside her mind. It all started in her backyard, the place she would dream up new worlds. And one day, she'd write about them, filling their lands with epic characters and wondrous plots.

When she's not writing about soul-shattering love or reading about it, you can find her binge-watching TV shows with her mom; her first inspiration that started it all.

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