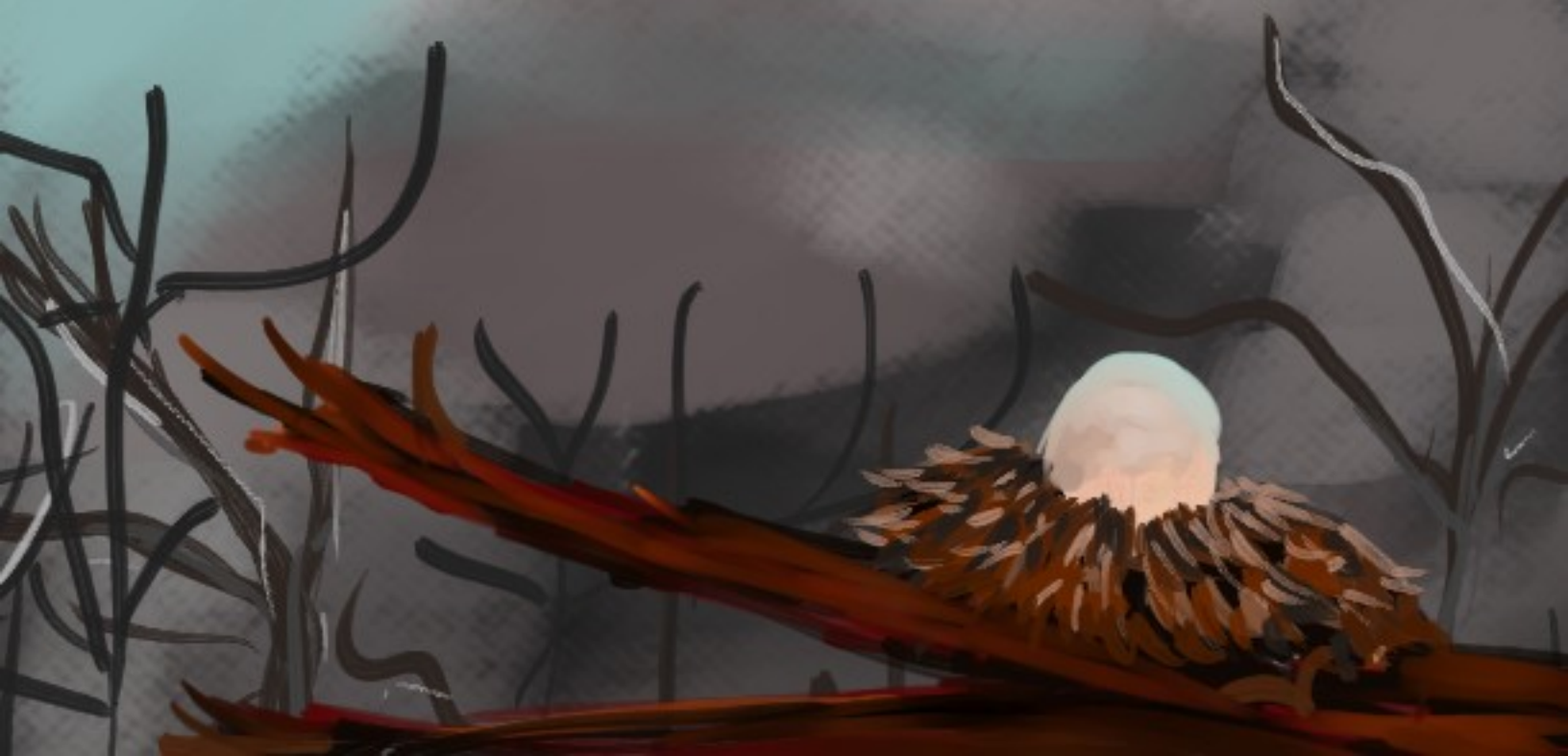


Wayward

by John Thyer



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By John Thyer

The prequel novella to [Facets](#).

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Content Warnings

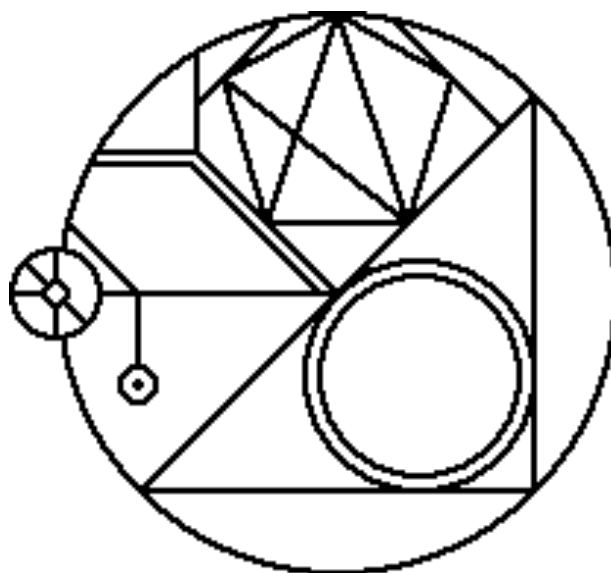
Conversion Therapy

Institutional Violence

Abuse

Self-harm

Suicide



Elementary Fire Sigil, Example #4

(from *Advanced Glyph Use for Military and Industrial Applications*, pg. 344, figure 6.3)

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1

A frozen image. A little girl sat on the floor in front of a blazing fireplace, arms hugging her curled-in legs. Next to her was a woman with beautiful long black hair. A quilt covered in intricate abstract patterns lay across their laps. The woman held a mug of a dark brown drink. A matching cup sat on the floor next to the girl.

The girl's face looked pained. Her still shape spoke without moving her mouth. I listened intently.

A child's voice. "Jessie made fun of my hair again. She said I looked like a boy. Everyone laughed."

A mother's voice, comforting and serene. "You love having short hair. You were beaming about it for a week after we got back from the barber."

The image flickered. Now the child's face was buried in her knees. "Jessie said I was ugly. She said no one would want to marry me when I grew up."

Another flicker. The woman's hand rested on the child's head. "You know that's not true. You're beautiful. I'm certain you'll find someone very special someday."

The child's voice whimpered.

"Sweetie, do you want to grow out your hair again?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"I think you'll look wonderful either way."

The image changed one more time as it faded. The woman had her arms wrapped around the little girl as she finally sipped her drink.

2

I opened my backpack and pulled out some clothes, a camping canteen, a thin blanket. Then I re-packed them for the dozenth time. I wore thick winter wear — I couldn't underestimate how cold it would get if I needed to sleep outside. I considered packing matches to start a fire, then laughed at myself.

I knew how to pack light from my mountain hikes with Mom. It felt different knowing I was traveling alone.

I pulled down my sleeve and examined my sigil one more time. A right triangle glyph-core containing two concentric circles. A cut-off diamond with an added upper-line. A pentagon with rules between four of the points. And several small elaborations beyond that to further focus and refine the glyph's output.

The lines were perfect. I tested the glyph earlier. I still grabbed the pouch containing my straight-edge, compass, and sigil pen off the bedside table. I stuffed it in the corner pocket of my bag. Just in case.

It was 2 AM exactly. Torrents of rain gushed down outside. I knew I was about to get soaked through. I touched my cheek. The ache was gone, but the memory of it remained. I shouldn't have waited until the last possible night to do this. But it wasn't until the conversation with Mom I'd realized this step was necessary. God it hurt though.

I put on my rain coat and put one strap of the backpack over my shoulder. I grabbed a tie and put my hair in a ponytail. I needed it out of the way for everything I was about to do. I took a deep breath. This was it. I'd stewed on what I was about to do for the last four hours. Actually going through with it was harder though.

I opened my bedroom door and crept into the hallway. I took slow steps down the stairs, careful to avoid the middle of the wooden boards, which were prone to squeaking.

I hated that I was doing this. The thought of hurting Mom and Dad tore up my insides. But I knew I could fix myself on my own; I just needed *time*.

I reached the landing. To my right was the living room. The front door was right in front of me, but I had to get the key from the kitchen to unlock it.

I looked out the door's little window into the dark night. I couldn't see a thing. The storm-clouds had erased every trace of moon and starlight. The rain was still so loud. I didn't relish the thought of running into that miserable blackness.

I crossed the living room into the open kitchen. Countless spices littered the countertop, plus the various cooking instruments Mom used for dinner last night. She knew I was nervous, so she went all out making my favorite casserole. She'd followed it up with a delicious chocolate cake. Mom always left the dirty dishes undone when we went to bed — Dad liked doing them in the early morning before going to work.

It was a good meal. I should've appreciated it more.

My mouth watering reminded me I hadn't packed any food. I knew I'd have to rustle up my own meals before too long, but I should at least grab some snacks for the first few days.

I snatched some apples and pears out of the fruit bowl and tucked them in the front pocket of my backpack. After a pause, I stuffed some crackers in too. That should do it.

Now I needed a key. Mom and Dad always put theirs in an open jar by the stove when they got home. I put my hand in to fish one of them out.

The jar was empty.

Panicked, I hurriedly patted around the pitch-dark kitchen trying to find a key.

I made a mistake. I spun around too fast, and my backpack bumped against the fruit bowl. It fell off the counter and crashed against the floor. The noise was deafening even against the loud rain.

I quickly patted the glyph lamp by the cabinets to turn it on, and surveyed the now-lit kitchen. The bowl hadn't broken. It just made a

loud noise when it bounced against the tile floor. I put the fruit that had bounced out back in the bowl, and reseated it on the counter.

As long as no one upstairs heard the noise, I was safe. I started looking around for the keys.

“Larisa?” a voice called down from upstairs. It was Mom’s voice. “Is that you down there?”

The hallway glyph-lamp near my parents’ bedroom turned on and shone light down the stairs. I replied, my mouth bone-dry. “Yeah, sorry about that!”

“What happened?” Mom stayed upstairs. Her leg was still giving her trouble from the accident on our hike a few months ago. She wouldn’t come down if she could help it.

“Just came down for a midnight snack! Accidentally knocked over the fruit bowl.”

“Are you having trouble sleeping?”

“Yeah. I’ll be back to bed soon though.”

“Okay. We’ll go back to sleep then. Love you.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

I waited, still expecting her to come downstairs and see me fully dressed for a late-winter hike.

Finally, the upstairs glyph-lamp turned off, and I heard her door shut.

My eyes scanned the kitchen. I couldn’t see the keys anywhere. I swore under my breath.

After waiting a couple minutes, I tapped the glyph-lamp to flip it off. Then I took off my backpack and set it by the front door. I walked back up to the second floor, deliberately squeaking a few noisy stairs. I opened my bedroom door.

I looked inside. My eyes had adjusted enough to the dark that I could make out dim outlines of the room’s contents. The endless rows of books on the shelf across from my bed. The photo of me and my martial arts clubmates (I still couldn’t quite call them friends) on my dresser. The little wooden puzzle box from my old math teacher, long since solved and emptied of its chocolate treasure. The preserved flower in a picture frame from my first mountain hike with Mom. The idea of leaving these things behind made my heart ache.

No. I wasn't abandoning these memories. I'd be back soon. I just needed time to think. While I was here, I didn't have that.

I closed the door, still out in the hallway. I didn't slam it, but I did make a bit of noise. I wanted Mom to think I'd gone back to bed.

With more care than I'd ever mustered in my life, I crept back down the stairs. I picked up my pack and slung it over my shoulder.

It was about 2:10. I wanted to get out of here soon. I needed time to get out of the capital before dawn. That meant I couldn't stumble around in the dark looking for a key.

Thankfully, I had a way of forcing the door open. I gripped the handle with my left hand, and concentrated.

I took a deep breath, taking stock of the mana flowing through my body. Every living thing had mana inside it. Most people aren't conscious of it. But mages — and mages-in-training for that matter — aren't most people.

I couldn't channel the magic animating my cells. If I did that, my body would burn out, and I would die. But my bloodstream was full of loose mana I'd breathed in over the last day. It was a natural reservoir of power that replenished itself over time. That was the energy that mages harnessed.

I focused on one little river of mana in my left arm. I guided it towards the sigil on my wrist. It emanated a faint red glow, almost immediately.

Glyphs took the raw, undirected energy of mana and channeled it, gave it form and purpose. The glyph on my wrist generated heat. I gripped the locked metal door handle. I had to do this with care.

Ever so gradually, I heated up the handle — and the locking mechanism inside it. Before long, the metal handle glowed a dull red, matching the lines on my wrist. It was definitely searing to the touch now. But as long as I kept pushing heat out through my hand with my magic, I wouldn't be burned by whatever I was touching.

The moment of truth. I twisted the handle. Cooked metal cracked and snapped. I didn't have time to worry about the noise. I pulled open the door, stepped outside, and quickly shut it behind me. I kept pushing heat out of my hand until I let go of the glowing-hot outside handle.

Rain beat down on the entryway overhang. It was still pitch-dark. I could barely see ten feet of the gravel walkway in front of our house. Little puddles had formed in the path. The cold bit at any exposed skin on my body it could find.

I whispered into the dead black night. "I just need more time. I promise I'll be back soon."

I pulled my coat's hood over my head and stepped out into the rain. I looked back one last time at the home I'd grown up in. Then I turned back to the darkness ahead.

"I'm sorry."

I broke into a run.

3

I had to be fast. I made noise breaking the lock, and there was a chance Mom and Dad had heard and investigated. If so, they already knew I was gone. Mom could be alerting the night watch over her remote glyph right this second.

They were trained for catching people like me. In the worst case, every watchmen in the noble district would shortly be on the lookout for a runaway girl with long black hair.

My feet beat down on wet cobblestone. Other nobles' houses surrounded me. I spotted a patrolling guard in the distance with a glowing glyph-lantern, darted behind one of the houses, and ran through several backyards. Hopefully no one was up and looking out a window at the moment.

It was so cold. I hadn't been ready for that. The raindrops were piercing icicles on my face. I had to get out of the capital and find a place to hide. Then I'd warm up and figure out my next move.

My family lived on the outskirts of the noble district. I was already close to the merchant district, and from there it wasn't far to the slums, and then the city walls. The rain was cold and miserable, but at least it made me harder to see. There was a full moon tonight, but the storm clouds kept the streets dark outside of the occasional glyph-lamp.

My heart beat out of my chest. I was lucky I'd exercised with the martial arts club so much, or I'd be on the ground completely winded at this point.

I dashed behind a set of buildings to avoid another guard. The buildings around me started looking a little less grand, a little closer together. The cobblestones under my feet grew more worn and irregular. I was in the merchants' district now. It didn't seem like any night watch had spotted me yet.

I finally needed a break — I'd been running for at least twenty minutes. I sat under a dark overhang in an alley and panted. The

drenched raincoat clung to my body; my face and collar were soaked. Cold water dripped down into my clothes. My boots kept my feet dry, but my long underwear was damp under my wet pants.

I longed for when I was safely out of town and could start a fire. I thought over my plan again. I would camp in the southern forest while I sorted out my feelings. I figured a week or so was all it would take. I needed the strength to do the right thing, to be who my family needed me to be. But I wasn't there yet. I was too much of a coward.

All the running had exhausted me. Maybe now I was far enough from home I could take a more relaxed pace. A shrouded figure skulking around at night was a rare sight around noble homes, and was sure to arouse alarm and suspicion if seen. But it was fairly common in the merchant district or the slums, despite the recent increases in policing. I could probably walk for a bit.

As if in response to that thought, I heard a shout in the distance. I stood immediately. It had to be watchmen. Even if Mom hadn't contacted them, I was still out past capital curfew. I needed to keep running. If they caught me...

I ran further into the alley. That was a risky move — I didn't know this part of town well, and the watchmen probably did. I could run into a dead-end easily.

The back-streets of the merchant's district were a maze. The paths were narrow, almost claustrophobic. I could still hear distant yelling. I kept running. I breathed long deep breaths, just like I'd learned in endurance training with the club.

I turned down paths randomly, hoping to get further from the yelling. There were boxes and other junk strewn about everywhere. I had to keep my eyes peeled in the deep darkness to avoid tripping. I'd hit the edges of the slums soon. They were patrolled much less than the merchants' or nobles' districts. Maybe I'd be safer there. From getting caught by the night watch anyway, if not from getting robbed. I knew I could protect myself though.

My lungs burned. The yelling got louder and louder. I started thinking about what I might have to do if they caught up to me. Could I actually fight them? No, that was absurd. I was already deeply in trouble. I didn't want to make things even worse for myself.

Could they actually get worse though? I thought what the mages and my parents wanted for me was reserved for only the worst criminals and rebels out there. But apparently I was eligible too. If I attacked a watchmen and got caught... would they just do the same thing they were already planning to do to me? Was it even possible for me to make things worse for myself than they already were?

I jumped over some more boxes and ran up to a nearby intersection. A cloaked figure emerged from the left alley and ran straight into my path. I slammed into them at a full sprint.

4

I fell to the ground, dazed. But within seconds, the figure I'd crashed into was back on their feet, facing me in the darkness. Cool metal reflected in the dim moonlight. They were holding knives in both hands.

My breath stuck in my throat. This wasn't a normal guard. Their clothes looked strange; they were almost flamboyant, like a mage's.

I was... in danger. We observed each-other coolly, neither of us moving. If they tried to cut me, I'd protect myself. But I didn't know if I could react in time.

A familiar voice in my head spoke up. If I died here... wouldn't that be for the best?

The clouds parted and for the first time all night, the full moon shone brightly. I could see the cloaked figure clearly.

She was a girl, around my age. She had vibrant green hair and dark skin.

I heard her voice. "You're not a guard."

I shook my head.

"You're not... a mage?"

I was, actually. But I assumed she meant a mage working with the night watch or the military. I shook my head again.

She kept eyeing me, still splayed out on the ground. Some shouting from other alleys woke us both up. I stood in a hurry. The mysterious girl fled down one of the paths.

I went to go down another, but saw glyph lamps running towards me from that direction. I looked at the alley the girl had come from, then the alley I'd come from. Lamps bounced in the distance there too. I swore, and ran down the same back-street as the girl.

I was about ten feet behind her. She turned back and yelled. "Quit following me!"

I yelled back over the rain. "Sorry! I can't get caught either!"

I assumed this girl was also running from the night watch, for some reason. Judging by the readiness with which she'd pulled out those knives, her reason likely wasn't a savory one.

Still, better to run with a criminal than to get caught. I needed to avoid that at all costs. I thought again about what I'd do if they trapped me. I couldn't use my fire on a person. I was resolved against that. But maybe a few well-aimed punches couldn't hurt?

The girl looked behind her and saw me continuing to flee along the same path. We darted over discarded boxes and piles of trash. The cobblestones beneath us had given way to plain dirt paths. We were on the edge of the merchant's district now, near the slums.

The girl stopped and swore. We'd run directly into a locked wooden gate. She pulled a piece of metal out of her pocket and fumbled with it. She was trying, badly, to pick the lock.

I heard the night watch's yelling get louder. We didn't have time for this. I pushed the girl out of the way and held my palm to the lock.

"Hey!" she said as she tried to push back in front of the gate.

"Just wait a second."

I didn't channel the magic slowly this time. Instead I blasted it out in one concentrated burst. White-red light flashed in the dark. I pushed against the lock and it splintered out of the seared wood. The gate flung open.

"What the — you *are* a mage!"

I raced past her into the next alley. She paused for a second, then followed behind me. We came to another four-way intersection, but two of the three alleys were blocked off by other gates. We kept running together into the one open passage.

My heavy boots splashed in the mud of the worn path. I leapt over a pile of boxes. The girl followed me through the air without missing a beat.

She had amazing stamina. I was proud of myself for keeping up with her.

Immediately after thinking that, I tripped in a pothole filled with mud. I smashed into the ground, scraping my knees even through my pants.

The girl stopped. She swore, then turned around and helped me up.

“Why are they chasing you?” she asked as she got me back on my feet.

My eyes were already welling up from the sudden pain of the fall. Without thinking, I choked out an answer.

“I don’t want them to erase me!”

The girl grabbed my arm. “Understood. C’mon, let’s get out of here.”

We started running again. I let her guide us along. We were deep into the slums now. She seemed more familiar with the path in this part of the city. It seemed like we were getting closer to the edge of the capital.

She paused. I stopped too, and took slow big breaths. We’d run non-stop in the rain for almost a half hour. The encroaching soldiers’ yells had long died off. We’d lost them, for now.

“Let’s rest a moment.”

We huddled under some eaves near a nearby door and caught our breath. She didn’t ask me any questions. Clouds passed in front of the moon again. I hoped the rain would let up soon.

I broke the silence. “So, are you heading somewhere nearby?”

She shook her head. “No. I’m leaving the capital.”

“Where are you going then?”

She didn’t reply.

My boots had soaked through. I hated how my wet feet felt. I should’ve just gone with the mages. But there was no way I could do that. My body wouldn’t let me. I had to escape. I looked back over at the girl sitting next to me. Her green hair was so striking.

“Are you a mage too?”

She didn’t reply to that either. I kept talking anyway.

“I’m going... south I think. I need to get some distance from the capital.”

The girl sighed. “I’m going south too. I’ve got a ways to go, past the chasm even.”

Past the chasm? That was almost seventy miles away. Was she planning to walk the whole way?

The chasm was a small canyon stretching miles across the south border of the main province of the Guardianship. There were several bridge checkpoints leading across it — the Guardianship policed the area past it less. I heard raptors couldn't fly beyond the chasm either.

"That's where I'm going too," I said.

She looked over at me and my blue camping backpack. She had a much heftier brown satchel. She looked better prepared for a week-long hike than I did.

"Best of luck," she said. "We should split off once we're outside the city. It'll make us harder to track."

"Ha... yeah, that makes sense. Hey, what's your name?"

She silently looked me dead in the eye for twenty straight seconds. I started to squirm around second ten, but tried to hold her gaze. This girl was intense.

She sighed. "I'm Alyssa."

"My name's Larisa."

She laughed. "That seems like it could get confusing."

"Uhh... my friends call me Lacy." I didn't have friends, of course. But I had always liked how the nickname sounded.

"Lacy then. I'll be friends with anyone getting chased by dream divers, for a little while anyway."

I could barely see her slight smile in the shrouded moonlight. It made my breath catch in my throat. I twitched. Stop that. I looked at the ground in front of me and rubbed my eyes.

"We should probably get going, right?"

Alyssa nodded and stood. I followed behind her as we took a more leisurely pace through the alleys.

"How are we getting past the city border wall?" I asked.

Alyssa smirked. "I know a way."

That was comforting to hear. I'd had no idea how I was getting past the wall. That was the one big question mark at the end of my escape attempt.

"It's not far. About ten minutes off I think."

Good, we were close. Then we rounded a corner, and saw the last person in the world I wanted to see.

Alyssa and I froze. The blonde mage knight smiled. “Hi there, Larisa. Good to see you again.”

5

Claire. I'd learned her name last week, when she and a few other mages came to my house. I'd hoped to never see her again. She wore a relaxed grin, but her body was a coiled spring. She was ready to attack the second we moved.

"I'm surprised to see you running around with a thief. I'm sure your parents wouldn't be pleased to hear about this."

I didn't say anything. Alyssa was quiet too. She was ready for a fight.

This was... really scary. What was I supposed to do? I couldn't beat a trained mage knight.

The mage moved her hand to her mouth and spoke into a glowing glyph on her palm.

"I found her. She's in sector B5 of the slums, the southwest cor—"

Alyssa struck. In less than a second she'd pulled her knives from some hidden folds in her sleeves and closed the gap between her and Claire.

Claire already had her sword out. Steel screeched as she blocked the knives and shoulder-checked Alyssa.

Alyssa recovered quickly and entered a combat stance. She watched the soldier, waiting for an opening. I was paralyzed, scared to get close to them while they waved those weapons around.

Claire darted forward and swiped with her blade. Alyssa was already ducking to the side — god she was fast. But Claire backed away out of reach of her knives. She reached out the palm of her hand and... it was glowing?

Of course, she was a mage! "Alyssa, get back!"

A bolt of magical lightning crashed out of Claire's palm. It passed directly through the air where Alyssa had been standing, a fraction of a second earlier. It exploded against the brick wall behind her and sent dust flying everywhere.

Alyssa went to cut Claire again with her knives, and again Claire blocked with her sword. She followed up the block with a solid kick to Alyssa's gut, sending her sprawling on the ground. Claire walked over to her, already lifting her sword to bring it down onto Alyssa.

Claire looked completely calm and collected. As if this was something she did everyday. I saw her eyes move to Alyssa's satchel.

"I'll be taking back what you stole now," she said coolly.

My hand lifted up on its own. I channeled magic through the glyph on my forearm.

I should run, right? No, Claire would catch me in a heartbeat, or shoot lightning at my back.

But I couldn't use my fire on a person, could I? That was barbaric. But it was to save Alyssa, right? But Claire had called Alyssa a thief. Why was I even trusting her in the first place?

The palm of my hand glowed as mana coursed through my arm.

I just needed more time. I didn't want to fight. I wanted to be brave enough to make the choice I was supposed to make. This wasn't fair. I was covered in mud, soaking wet, and terrified for my life. I didn't want to hurt anyone. I wanted to be home in my warm bed. I wanted to drink hot chocolate by the fire with Mom!

Claire saw the light on my palm. I hesitated. Claire leapt towards me and grabbed my wrist, pointing my hand up and far away from her.

"We won't have any of that, you precocious brat."

She punched me hard in the stomach. I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to push down the pain.

When I opened them, Alyssa was already back on her feet, directly behind Claire. Claire gave a pained, angry grunt. There was an otherworldly hum as Claire's whole body shined a bright red. She let go of me, reached behind her, and grabbed Alyssa by the arm.

Claire twisted her body. Alyssa flew over my head. She landed in a heap behind me, upside down on a pile of old trash.

I couldn't hold it anymore. My hand lowered in front of me and the gathered magic erupted from my palm. A gale of flame soared towards the soldier.

Claire dodged to the side of the blast. She backed away from me. She looked like she was in pain.

Then I saw the handle of Alyssa's knife. It was lodged in Claire's side.

Claire spoke through gritted teeth. "They didn't tell me there was a mage with her."

She pulled the knife out of her side. It landed in the mud with a splash. She held her hand against the wound. Blood spilled out around it.

She held her other hand to her face. The glyph on her palm glowed. "Sector B5 southwest. The back alley near the pawn shop. I need healing, ASAP."

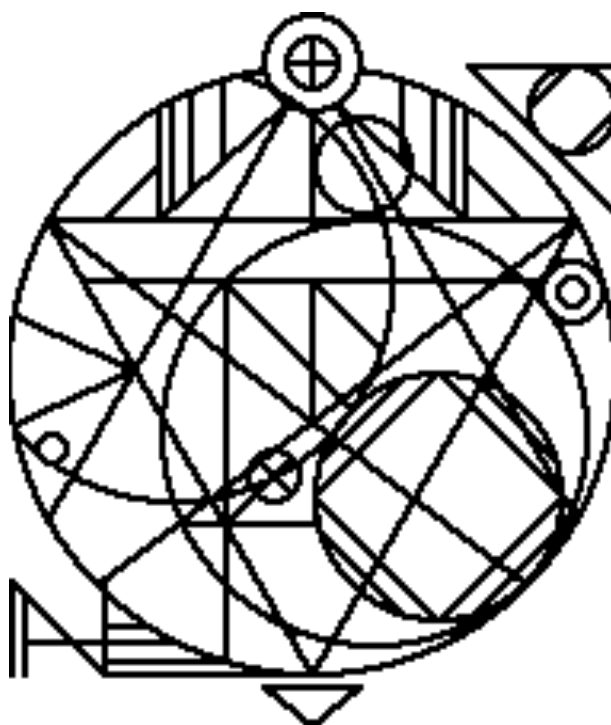
She fell to the ground and stopped moving.

I turned to Alyssa. She'd started to stir and reorient in the trash. Some brown muck had entangled itself in her pretty green hair. Her lip was bleeding.

I helped her to her feet. She looked up, letting the rain wash her face. After she got her bearings, she retrieved her blood-stained knife from the mud by the unconscious soldier.

"C'mon. Let's go."

Alyssa ran. I followed.



Advanced Strength Sigil, Example #7

(from *Dr. Mal's Report on Glyph Self-Inscription for Military Personnel*, pg. 129, figure 2.1)

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6

A frozen image. A circle of adults sat around a table in a well-furnished but claustrophobic office, each nursing a cup of tea. Among them were a diminutive man in jeans with blonde hair, a tall woman, and a stern-looking older man in a full suit.

A young girl with long black hair stewed nearby, pretending to read a diploma framed on the wall. The adults talked about her as if she wasn't there.

"She's too withdrawn." The voice came from the still picture of the older man. "I don't understand why she can't get along with the other children."

"She's definitely a gifted girl," the image of the man in jeans replied. "A lot of students struggle when they reach this level of math instruction, but she's taking to the material immediately."

"That's good to hear. But I'm worried that she still doesn't seem to be making friends."

"You're right to be worried ma'am. She's just not sociable. During breaks I'll find her behind a tree reading, instead of engaging with the other children."

"The others don't want to talk to me." An almost imperceptibly small voice among the booming adults.

"Be quiet sweetie." Kind, but forceful. Now wasn't the time.

"And she interrupts, just like that. Really, I don't know what's to be done with her. It's not proper behavior."

"I think you're exaggerating. She's been a pleasure to have in my class."

"You're coddling her, Mr. Herron. Ma'am, I still think you should consider a boarding school after she graduates from here. She's clearly too attached to you. She needs to learn independence and discipline."

"As I've said, her father and I will consider it." The woman's voice had grown cold.

They talked a little more, then the woman got up to leave. She prompted the child to follow her. The older man stood too.

The image changed. The older man had left. The blond man had asked them to stay a moment longer.

“She really is a wonderful student ma’am. Just give her some time.”

“Thank you Mr. Herron. I wish her other teachers felt the way you do.”

“Hey Larisa. I know listening to all that mustn’t have been any fun for you. Remember that puzzle on my desk you always enjoyed playing with?”

The image flickered. The blonde teacher was handing a small wooden box to the girl. Both the girl and the woman were smiling. “Here you go. I’ve been making a bunch of them lately. I figured you’d enjoy having one.”

The image began to fade. The girl was beaming as she manipulated the box, already engrossed in trying to find the solution and open it. The woman thanked the teacher, her arm gently touching the child’s back as they readied to leave the cramped office.

The rain slowed to a trickle and stopped as Alyssa and I reached the edge of the city.

She eyed the ramparts for any patrolling soldiers. Satisfied there weren't any nearby, she pulled a piece of plywood away from the tall stone wall, revealing a cramped hole near the ground to crawl through. If I wasn't covered in mud before, I certainly was after crawling through Alyssa's tunnel after a rain-storm.

The south forest stretched for dozens of miles between the capital and the chasm. Most of the important cities in the Guardianship territory were to the north and east. The Guardianship concentrated their military forces in those cities, as they were where most rebel groups operated. Alyssa running south was smart — fewer patrolling soldiers meant less chance of getting caught.

We emerged from the tunnel into an immediate tangle of vines and foliage. Alyssa stood and moved into the thicker brush. She motioned me to follow her.

"Didn't you want to split off once we were outside the city?" I asked. I got up, sloughing mud off my coat.

"It's freezing out. Do you even have a sleeping bag in that dinky bag of yours?" She gestured at my blue backpack.

"I... no. I didn't think about that."

"What was your plan once you got out of the capital?"

I didn't have one. I thought for sure Mom would give me more time.

"I thought I'd go to one of the other main cities. I figured I could hide there."

"I thought you were going to the chasm? There are only a few small villages past the chasm, and then nothing for hundreds of miles."

"Oh, yeah..."

I didn't say anything else after she caught my lie.

“Why are they chasing you anyway? Why are dream divers after you?”

I didn’t want to answer that question. “What about you?” I deflected. “What’s in that bag anyway?”

She didn’t want to answer that question either. “Look, just stay with me for a while. I owe you for distracting that mage back there. I’ll at least make sure you don’t freeze to death tonight.”

“Did you forget? I can make fire. I don’t need help warming up.”

“Do you want to know what will find you if you start a fire around here at night?” She pointed straight up. I looked at the dark blue night sky, searching for shadows. I shivered.

There may be fewer soldiers in the south forest. But we weren’t safe from the raptors. They flew everywhere in the main territory. And if the Guardianship knew we’d run south, there would be more of them around here soon. Hunting for us.

Alyssa made her way through the brush. I followed closely behind. Most of the plants were a foot high at most, so it wasn’t too hard a hike. I was exhausted from the running in the city though. And from the fight with Claire.

The fight. I’d been trying not to think about it.

“Alyssa... you’re with the rebels, right?”

She sighed. “Yeah, I guess there’s no harm in telling you that much.”

“That soldier we fought... do you think she’s...”

Alyssa cut me off. “She’s alive.”

“How do you know?”

“Trained mage soldiers are valuable to the Guardianship. They weren’t gonna let her bleed out on the ground. You heard her calling for help on that glyph of hers.”

She’d thought this through. Maybe she wasn’t as unfazed by stabbing someone as I’d thought.

I clambered over a thick downed tree trunk. She continued, as if in answer to my thoughts. “Let me be clear — I don’t care one way or the other. One more dead Guardianship soldier is one less person who can hurt me and my friends.”

The question erupted from my throat before I could bite down on it. “Have you killed people before?”

“Yes.”

This woman was terrifying. Why was I following her?

But what else was I going to do?

“Do you feel bad about it?”

“I don’t feel good about it.”

We ran into a large deadfall of branches and withered moss and took a long way around it. The cold was getting to me. My clothes were still damp from the rain earlier, and the clinging wet fabric bit into my skin.

I spoke up. “The dream divers are after me because I’m... messed up. My mom said the dream divers could fix it. But I was too afraid. So, I ran.”

Alyssa didn’t respond. We walked a little more before she stopped.

“Let’s set up camp here. We haven’t heard anything and we’re several miles into the forest at this point. I think we’ve lost them, for the time being.”

She sat down in a grassy stretch of earth. It seemed relatively dry compared to the mud we’d been slogging through. I realized how dead-tired I was as Alyssa rummaged through her bag.

“Did you at least bring some food?” asked Alyssa. “I don’t have enough to share.”

I only had the fruit and crackers I’d grabbed from the kitchen. I knew it wouldn’t last long.

“I’m not hungry.”

Alyssa pulled out some bread and wolfed it down. Then she unfurled a sleeping bag on the grass, stood up, and started taking off her shirt. I turned away hurriedly.

Her voice spoke up behind me. “C’mon, you’re gonna get frostbite if you stay in those wet clothes. We’ll dry them off in the morning.”

I heard more clothes being shed, then the rustling of the sleeping bag. I finally turned around and saw Alyssa’s head poking out of the black fabric. She looked like a caterpillar — it was honestly kind of cute.

“C’mon, there’s room for two in my sleeping bag. It’ll be a bit snug, but that’ll just help us warm up.”

I stood completely paralyzed for a full minute after hearing Alyssa’s invitation. I wasn’t sure if I even blinked.

Alyssa observed me patiently. Finally, she closed her eyes and faced away. “Or you can sleep on the grass if you want.”

After another minute or so, my body was able to move again. I peeled off my wet clothes, let my hair down, and wrapped myself in the blanket I’d packed. It was still dry, mercifully. I pulled the blanket close to me, trying to stave off the cold of the winter night. I used my pack as a damp pillow.

Ugly images raced through my mind. I thought about Claire. How she almost killed Alyssa. How the blood spilling out of the wound in her side pooled and mixed with the mud next to her.

Alyssa seemed certain she was alive. I wasn’t sure.

Even if I hadn’t stabbed her myself, I used my magic to hurt someone. What terrified me was that I knew I’d do it again. That’s how scared I was of the dream divers.

What if I never found the courage to go back?

If I didn’t want to hurt anyone, and I didn’t want to go with the dream divers, and they kept chasing me... what was I supposed to do?

8

I'd never slept more soundly in my life, which surprised me. I think I'd just never been more exhausted. Alyssa woke me up the next morning as she crawled out of the sleeping bag.

"C'mon, we need to keep moving."

Alyssa watched the sky for raptors while I made a small fire to finish drying our clothes. I ate some of the fruit in my pack and gulped water from my canteen. Before too long we were both rested, fed, clothed, and dry.

And filthy, of course. But it was a big improvement from last night.

Alyssa eyed me as I put my hair back up in a ponytail. "Your hair's really pretty," she said quietly.

I froze, my hands still in my hair. She was looking away now. "Thanks," I said. "I like yours too. It's a nice color."

Alyssa didn't reply. She just lifted her pack and started walking. I finished with my hair and followed after her.

"Alyssa, are you really okay with me coming with you?"

"Sure. I've already told you I'm heading past the chasm. We'll get there together. Then I'll point you at a village so you can lay low for a while."

I nodded. That sounded good to me. I wasn't confident in my ability to safely navigate the forest all the way to the chasm. Alyssa had apparently made this trip several times before.

"If the Guardianship wants to brainwash you, that's reason enough for me to want to keep you safe." Alyssa had a really pretty smile.

"Thank you," I said. I meant it, from the bottom of my heart.

Alyssa rolled up her sleeping bag and packed it, then hoisted up her bag and motioned me forward. She referenced a small compass to check our bearing, then got moving.

Hiking in the day with dry clothes was a lot more pleasant than last night's disaster. After the storm I was surprised not to see a single cloud in the sky. Sunlight beamed through the network of bare tree branches above us. It was still cold — it was winter after all — but the light felt warm and refreshing on my skin.

"We'll need to find food and water soon. Keep your eye out for any streams or animals... Oh hey, look at this!" Alyssa was on her knees digging around in the dirt with her hands.

"What, did you find something to eat?"

"No, even better!" she said with a grin. "Look!"

Alyssa held up the largest earthworm I'd ever seen, inches from my face. I instinctively recoiled.

"It's a tiger worm! You can tell because of the pretty yellow stripes."

The worm writhed around in the air. Pretty wasn't the first descriptor that came to my mind.

"We have a ton of these in our garden back at camp."

She pulled out a clear jar from her pack. I could see it was packed with soil, with little holes poked in the lid.

"There's a bunch of 'em. I'm gonna snag a few in case we run into any good fishing spots later."

She dug around in the dirt, excavating more thick bugs and pushing them into the soil in her jar. Wait, were worms bugs, or something else?

Alyssa finished loading her jar and stood up. We started walking again. Alyssa led the way, checking her compass periodically to make sure we stayed on-track.

"So, Lacy, now you know I like worms. Now you have to tell me something you're interested in."

"What? Oh, uh... I'm in the martial arts club at school. I guess that's my main hobby. I'm really into studying glyphs too."

"Fighting and magic, huh? For someone so afraid of mage knights, you seem to have a lot of the same interests."

"I'm not afraid of them. I..." I paused. I was definitely afraid of them.

“I mean, it would be weird if you were afraid of them,” said Alyssa. “You’re a noble, aren’t you? What would you have to fear from mages?”

We both stepped over a fallen tree. The forest had gotten denser. More branches crowded above us, blocking out the sunlight.

“Fighting and glyphs — that’s two things about me,” I said. “You have to tell me something else you’re into before you can ask anymore questions.”

“I like gardening. I do it a lot back at the base with Irene.” She stopped in place and swore. “Forget that name.”

I wondered if Irene was their leader. “Sorry,” I said. “I guess there’s some stuff you shouldn’t share with me, right? I’m still basically a stranger.”

“And a noble to boot. You’re pretty suspicious.” Alyssa looked back at me and grinned. “So you’re gonna have to answer three questions for me.”

“First,” she held up one finger. “What’s your favorite food?”

I answered immediately. “Chocolate cake.”

Alyssa cackled. “There’s a noble’s answer if I’ve ever heard one. I haven’t had cake in years.”

I blushed. “What’s your favorite food then?”

“I’d have to say... cucumbers. There’s nothing on earth more refreshing than a good cucumber.” Alyssa turned and glared at me. “Hey, I’m asking the questions now. I’m interrogating you as a possible spy after all.”

The forest was denser and darker here. We moved more slowly, often taking longer paths around thick undergrowth. Alyssa held up two fingers.

“Second... did you really run away from home with no plan whatsoever?”

I looked down. “Yeah. I just wanted to get out of the capital. I thought I’d figure things out from there.”

Alyssa stopped. She didn’t say anything.

“You’re right,” I said. “I am suspicious. If you don’t trust me, if you want to split off here, I understand.”

“Hey Lacy... look at me.”

I stared into Alyssa's eyes. She held my gaze for an uncomfortably long time before saying anything else.

"Lacy. I saw the look on your face last night. You're terrified." She touched my upper arm. "I want to trust you. So tell me. Why are you so afraid of the dream divers?"

I held her gaze for a few more moments. Then I pulled away, and sat on a nearby log. Alyssa perched next to me. A small stream flowed into a pond nearby. The sounds of the light current comforted me.

“I mean, aren’t we all afraid of the dream divers?” I asked.

“To an extent, yes. But most nobles seem to have swallowed the Guardianship’s propaganda. You all think the dream divers are heroic defenders of the peace.”

“It’s not propaganda. That’s what they are.”

Alyssa rolled her eyes. “Why are you scared then?”

I bit my lip. I’d never talked to anyone about this before. Not even Mom.

“I had this teacher when I was a kid. I must’ve been 7 or 8 years old. He taught math, geometry specifically. He made it really interesting to me. I still love it — glyph magic is all about drawing precise shapes after all. Every line and curve and angle has a specific effect. If you want to understand magic, you have to understand geometry.”

I saw Mr. Herron in my mind’s eye. He’d draw shapes on the blackboard in big sweeping motions, like an excited orchestra conductor. Then he’d face the class, and he’d have this funny glint in his eye as he excitedly related some new concept.

“He was a good teacher. I still remember a lot of details about him actually. He had this really warm smile when we’d answer a question right. And when you asked him a question he didn’t know the answer to, he’d scratch his head. He made these fancy sandwiches for lunch and would eat them at his desk while we played during break. And he’d always bring something sweet for dessert — usually chocolate. Sometimes he’d share them with me.”

I pulled my legs up onto the log and wrapped my arms around them. My breathing hitched as I tried to word the next part in my

head. I listened to the stream to calm down. Alyssa didn't press me to continue until I was ready.

"Then one day, we had a new math teacher. I didn't know why, until one of the other students whispered it to me. Apparently the teacher had been involved in 'seditious activities.' He was working with rebels to undermine the Guardianship."

"I didn't understand. I just missed my nice teacher, and wanted him to come back. Then one day about a month later, miraculously, he did. He showed up and started teaching us again, like nothing had changed."

"But... something had changed. He was different, somehow. He didn't smile anymore when we got the right answer. His lunches were suddenly plain and boring. He didn't bring desserts anymore either."

"The end of the school year was just a few months after that. He still hadn't gotten back to normal. I wanted to do something nice for him before we left for break. I wanted to make him smile at me one last time. I spent my whole allowance at the best, fanciest candy store in town. I got a box of different chocolates. I thought he'd really like it."

"He smiled when I gave them to him. But it was wrong. It still wasn't the smile I knew from before. It looked forced and empty. It was like he knew he was supposed to smile, but he didn't seem happy at all. And that look broke my heart."

I went silent. I didn't want to say the next part of the story out loud.

I went home for spring break after that. I hoped things would get better for him while I was away. But when I got back... we had a new math teacher again.

Once again, I heard what happened from one of the other students. The teacher I'd learned so much from... the teacher who loved math and chocolate and sandwiches and teaching...

Alyssa touched my shoulder. I was welling up. I thought of the puzzle box on my shelf, the one he'd given me years ago. The gift I'd left behind. She sat still, not prompting me to share more than I was

comfortable with. Once I got my feelings under control, I spoke up again.

“So yeah. That’s why I’m afraid of the dream divers. It was probably just my imagination, but that teacher... After they...” I stopped, not knowing what words to use. “After *that*, he didn’t even seem like the same person anymore. It was like he died, and they’d replaced him with someone that only looked like him.”

I stopped talking there. Alyssa sat quietly, waiting to see if I wanted to say anything else.

She finally replied. “We don’t talk about it much, but most of us at the camp have stories like that. People we lost forever... even though they were right in front of us. You’re right to be afraid of the dream divers, Lacy.”

I knew I hadn’t told her the whole story, but that was all I had in me for now. I listened to the soft song of water flowing over shallow rocks and tried to calm down.

“So what about you then? What’s your story Alyssa?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” She said it with such finality that I didn’t argue, even though it was unfair of her after I’d revealed so much.

Alyssa scratched her head — the same way Mr. Herron did, actually. “So, you’re familiar with glyphs then?” she asked.

I lit up. I *loved* glyphs. Ever since I learned glyphs were just a form of geometry — that you could turn *math* into *magic* — I’d devoured everything on the subject I could get my hands on.

I hadn’t been able to learn as much as I wanted. Glyph magic was tightly regulated. I could study and practice it at school since I was a noble, but there was a limit to how much I could pick up. The law also forbade the fire sigil I’d inscribed on my wrist. Only specially-licensed mage knights could put glyphs on their own body.

They hadn’t taught us the fire glyph in school. They only went over the simplest and most fundamental of evocation and healing magic. But I figured out the basic elemental glyphs on my own, and experimented to see which ones resonated with me. Out of all the glyphs I tried, the fire sigil was the only one I could self-inscribe and actually use.

“Yeah! What did you have a question about? I’ll help if I can.”

Alyssa sighed, and opened her backpack. “Let me show you what I stole from them. What they’re chasing me for. Maybe you can tell if it was worth all the trouble.”

She pulled out a tightly-rolled scroll — no, multiple scrolls. She unwrapped the first one and laid it out on the ground.

There were several glyphs on the page. I’d never seen anything like them. They were so densely woven and intricate. Shapes upon shapes upon shapes. The magic within them tugged at my curiosity and my soul, pulling me into the parchment.

“These are what I stole from the Guardianship. I snuck into one of their military research facilities and found the stash of experimental glyphs they were working on.”

I was practically drooling. This had to be some of the most sophisticated magic in existence.

“Do you know what they do? We’re hoping it’s something useful to the rebellion.”

My eyes traced around the lines of the glyph. It was complicated, much more so than the ones I’d studied. I didn’t think I could parse it at first.

But the longer I looked at the shapes, the more I could see the logic behind them. It was all built out of the same fundamental patterns I’d learned in school.

Alyssa watched me for five minutes or so as I ran my fingers over the lines. Four circles here... a triangle here... connecting at this angle... it was all geometry. And once I understood the math behind the shapes, I could imagine mana flowing through them, warping and distilling, and finally making—

“It’s an explosive glyph. It generates a massive blast of concussive force. Non-elemental.”

“Can you use it?”

I held the paper against my skin and tried to channel mana into it, the same way I powered my fire sigil. Not enough to activate it and blow us up, but enough to spark a response. I waited a moment.

“Nothing. This one’s not resonating with me.”

“Here, let me try.”

“So you *are* a mage then?”

Alyssa ignored me and held the paper to her body. She closed her eyes and concentrated for a moment. The glyph didn’t emit any light.

“Nothing for me either. Still, it could be useful to someone else at the camp.”

Alyssa put down the scroll.

“Hey Lacy, this is only sort of related, but you’ve run out of mana before, right?”

“Yeah. I remember I was really frustrated. I was having so much fun making magic for the first time. But my teacher explained I wouldn’t gather enough mana to practice again until the next day.”

“Mana comes from the air we breathe,” said Alyssa. “And once we’ve spent that, we can’t use any more magic.”

“Yup, exactly.”

“When you’ve run out of mana before, has it ever felt like there’s more magic somewhere inside you? Something separate from what we breathe in?”

My mouth hung open. Alyssa wasn’t just a mage — she was an unusually attuned one.

“I’ve never felt what you’re describing, but I think I know what you’re talking about.”

Mana was in the air we breathed. That loose mana entered our lungs, and then passed into our bloodstreams. That’s the mana we all used to power our glyphs.

But ultimately, all life was animated in part by magic.

“Alyssa, I think you’re sensing the mana inside your cells.”

“Is it possible to use that mana?” she asked.

My eyes widened. “Absolutely not. Even if you could, which most mages can’t, the cells you took mana from would instantly die.”

Alyssa looked coldly curious. “Has anyone done that before?”

“Yeah. They told us about it in school,” I said, feeling uneasy. “It’s called mana burn. And when mages do it...”

“What? What happens?”

The parts of your body you steal magic from, usually around your glyph... they burn away. They’d shown us vivid illustrations at school of it.

“The mages die. Or they’re maimed, horribly.”

“Gotcha,” Alyssa said. “So that mana’s off-limits then.” She sounded disappointed.

I read a few more glyphs while Alyssa stewed on what I’d said. One was powerful healing magic that could bring someone back from the brink of death. Another spread a virulent poison inside a target’s nervous system. None of them resonated with me or Alyssa, but they could be useful to someone else with the rebels.

Wait. Should I be helping with this?

“Alyssa... I’ve always been taught that the rebels are evil. That they’re trying to shatter the peace the Guardianship has fought to maintain these last fifty years under the new regime.”

Alyssa picked up a pebble and tossed into the little pond. It vanished immediately beneath the dark brown surface. “They’re

right, in a sense. We are trying to break their peace into a million pieces.” Circular ripples flowed across the water. “Because we think the peace the Guardianship wants is a sack of garbage.”

“Sorry but... could you tell me what you mean?”

“You’re a noble. How many times have you been to the capital slums?”

“...Not many.”

“Did you know a lot of people there are starving? And the Guardianship doesn’t do anything to help them?”

“I mean... yeah, I knew. But the Guardianship doesn’t have the resources to help everyone just because they’re hungry.”

“But they have resources to train teams of mage knights specifically for brainwashing people *en masse*?”

I chewed on that for a moment, then spoke again. “Dream diving isn’t brainwashing. It’s a way to rehabilitate enemies of the state. It’s a kindness. Without dream diving there’d be no choice but to execute them.”

“Didn’t you tell me your teacher came back a different person?”

“I mean, that’s how it felt to me. But I know I had it wrong.”

“Then why are you coming with me? Why not turn back?”

“Because... I’m stupid. I’m stupid and I don’t know what’s good for me.”

The ripples dissipated. The pond’s surface was calm again. Alyssa gestured at the glyphs I’d deciphered. “You seem pretty smart to me.”

“That’s different.”

Alyssa plucked a fist-sized rock out of the stream and tossed it into the pond. It landed with a heavy splash. The ripples were much larger this time.

“I’ll tell you what the Guardianship’s *peace* means to me. They want to fit everyone into tidy little boxes. They want everyone to work as special cogs in their special machine. And anyone that doesn’t play along, they’ll beat them down with a hammer until they’re dead or until they can fit what’s left of them into that machine.”

She looked in my eyes. “And I’m not going to play along. This system has a cute nice girl like you running in terror for her life. To

me, that means it's broken."

She thought I was cute? No, stop that.

Alyssa rolled up the scrolls I'd deciphered and put them back in her pack. "C'mon, let's get moving. We can go over the other ones later aft—" She stopped talking, her gaze frozen a ways through the trees.

I felt the magic, then. Even here, hundreds of feet away, I could sense it in the air. It didn't burn or chill or electrify me. It didn't have the characteristic flavorlessness of non-elemental magic or the warm light of healing magic. This was something else, something unfamiliar.

A sense of pure fragility cut through me. I was a glass doll teetering on the edge of a shelf, about to fall and hit hard tile and shatter into too many pieces to ever put back together. With absolute certainty, I knew the shape of this magic was death.

I followed Alyssa's look and saw exactly what I feared. A black shadow in the distance, set against the sky. It wasn't a bird. I saw the distinct shape of a man's arms and legs, silhouetted against massive black wings.

I couldn't tell if it had spotted us yet. If it was just patrolling or if it was preparing to attack.

It was a raptor.

Alyssa's eyes darted around and settled on the murky pond. "Quick, get in the water," she whispered. "As quietly as you can." She stuffed our bags into a nearby bush.

I didn't see any other hiding place, so I followed Alyssa who was already waist deep in the water. In just a few seconds, we'd both gotten in up to our necks. She nodded at me, took a deep breath, and pulled her head under the surface. I did the same.

My world went dark as the dirty water covered my vision. Mud squished between my toes as they curled at the bottom of the pond. I waited.

My lungs started to burn before too long. I held on as long as I could, then poked just my mouth over the surface of the water, exhaled quietly, and took another deep breath. Then I pulled back

under the water. I repeated that cycle over and over while waiting for something awful to happen. The dark magic felt close now.

Nobody talked about the raptors, not openly. We knew what we did only from whispers, shared fearfully when adults weren't listening. Some of us thought they were some kind of super-soldier. Most of us thought they were demons. Either way, we knew they were the most powerful weapon the Guardianship had. One it only turned against its worst enemies.

I waited and waited. Eventually, the magic faded. I didn't trust the feeling. I knew some monstrous claw was about to pull me out of the water and do *something* to me. My mind wasn't capable of imagining what that something was. So I stayed in the water, marinating in nameless formless dread.

Eventually, Alyssa pulled me up.

As a child, exploring the side-roads of the noble district, I'd found a dead dog on the side of the street. Its stomach had been torn open. Red viscera sank into and between the cobblestones next to it. I suspected it had been struck by a passing carriage.

The rank, too-sweet smell of that rotting animal carcass had stuck with me. I knew it had, because I recognized the same scent enveloping me now.

"I think we're safe for now. It must not have spotted us."

We scurried away from the stream, freezing in our drenched clothes. Neither of us said anything about the smell, or about the deep three-toed tracks in the dirt.

It started raining after we left the stream, so the wet clothes weren't such a problem after all. We didn't even bother finding shelter. We just trudged on through the woods, our boots sinking into cold mud.

We were both shaken after the raptor had gotten so close. We didn't want to consider what would've happened if we'd been caught.

I was miserable. I knew that running away was wrong, but it wasn't until now that I seriously considered turning back and going home to accept whatever punishment they had for me. Wasn't dream diving usually what they did to irredeemable criminals anyway? Would me being involved in Claire's stabbing make things any worse for me than they already were?

The sun was getting low. I'd started the day feeling better than the night before, but now I was more unhappy than ever. I'd betrayed my parents... for this.

We walked by a stone cliffside. Large rock facets jutted out at irregular angles. It was covered in moss, and almost pretty in the orange twilight.

My thoughts finally turned from self-loathing to Alyssa's glyphs. The more I stewed about them, the more pieces began to click in my brain. How the mana flowed through the interweaving shapes. How the forms fed into each other to create more complex and powerful magic.

I wanted to look through her other scrolls, both to learn more about the glyphs and to see if any of them resonated with me. Some healing magic would be helpful, or something powerful like that explosion spell.

I already knew none of the other elemental spells worked, since they were exclusionary — if fire magic connected with you, that meant you definitely wouldn't resonate with ice or lightning magic. But the non-elemental magics were trickier to predict. Innumerable

invisible genetic and personality factors went into whether a given mage could bond with a glyph. There was no way to know except to try it, by channeling mana into the glyph and seeing if it reacted. I was dying to know what magic my body wanted to create.

A mage was just a person that found a glyph they resonated with and used it. Theoretically, everyone had a kind of magic they could use. But only the nobility, the military, and certain branches of academic and factory work were permitted to inscribe them. I'd studied glyphs in school — that's where I found out I resonated with fire magic. But in order to actually use it, I'd had to make my own sigil pen at home to inscribe it.

That was a major crime of course. If I'd been caught, I would have been sent to the dream divers. But I went for it anyway, since that was where I was already going.

There was a break in the cliffside — it was a cave. Alyssa saw it too, and before I said anything motioned for me to come inside with her.

“C'mon, let's rest here tonight.”

I was happy to agree. We both clambered into the small and mercifully dry cave and quickly tore off our soaking outfits. I was still embarrassed to be in my underwear around Alyssa, but the discomfort of the wet clothes overrode that.

Alyssa sat down with her back against the wall of the cave. We didn't have any usable firewood, so I generated a small flame in my palm and held it between me and Alyssa. Alyssa gratefully held her hands up to it and warmed up, shivering as the cold water evaporated off her skin.

We sat in silence like that for a while. Then Alyssa spoke.

“Lacy, how are you doing?”

“Um, what?”

She cocked her head, her hands still held up close to my tiny flame.

“How are you doing? That was really scary back there, with the raptor.”

“Haha, it was, wasn't it?”

"I've never been that close to one before. I thought my heart was gonna explode."

"Yeah, me too. That smell was awful, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. I'd never heard anyone mention that before. I guess most people who get close enough to a raptor to smell it..."

She trailed off.

"Lacy, I'm sorry you were forced to do this."

"What?"

"I'm sorry you were forced to run. You're not like me. You had a whole life and friends in that city you had to abandon, didn't you?"

"...Yeah."

I didn't know if the people I talked to at school were friends exactly. I wasn't sure if I'd ever be able to make real friends, besides my mom. But I did care about them. What were they thinking? As far as they knew I was just out sick today. But how would they react when the truth came out, that I'd fled dream divers and left the capital?

"Yeah, I guess I did," I said. "But it's my fault. I wasn't forced to run. I could've walked the path they laid out for me. I could've held onto my life and my family if I'd listened to them like I should've."

"But you're afraid of the dream divers, right? Because of how your math teacher changed?"

"...Yeah. It was like he'd lost himself. I don't want to go through that."

"I don't want you to go through that either. I don't want anyone to go through that."

"No one at all? Not even murderers—" I stopped, remembering what we'd already talked about. "Sorry. Not even *really* horrible people?"

Alyssa took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. She closed her eyes.

"First off, I don't trust the Guardianship to determine who counts as 'really horrible.' Secondly... no. I don't think *anyone* deserves to have their soul ripped out like that."

"Isn't it nicer than executing them though? It means they can actually rejoin society. I mean, I'm not one to talk, since I ran away,

but still.”

“...Killing is horrible. When someone dies, they lose all the futures they could’ve had. Those futures are stolen from them and everyone whose lives they touched.” She paused, looking me in the eyes. “And make no mistake, Lacy. The Guardianship kills *a lot* of people.”

I gulped at that. Alyssa continued.

“But the dream divers... to me, what they do is worse. They rob people of their will. They leave behind a hollow shell that only looks like them. I think that’s a worse violation than just killing them.”

“Is that really what you think the Guardianship does?”

“Yeah. I do.”

I stewed on that for a while. Most of us had met people that went through dream dives — even if we didn’t know it. There was an unspoken understanding among my classmates and I, maybe among everyone in the Guardianship, that something was *wrong* with the people that came back. You only recognized it if you knew them before.

For me, it was Mr. Herron, back in primary school. For someone else it could be their uncle, or a coworker, or a friend at their university. With the dives happening more and more, at some point everyone would see the change happen in front of their eyes.

So, I was afraid of the dream divers. Everyone was, really. We just didn’t say it. We all just repeated what the Guardianship told us. That the dives were necessary, and righteous, and safe, and really we should be thankful.

But one day, my teacher wasn’t there again. I’d given him chocolates before term let out, and he smiled, but he hadn’t *really* smiled. And then he was gone, and I found what happened from another student, and I cried. I cried because—

“Lacy, did you know people who’ve been dream dived kill themselves more often than other people?”

My breath caught in my throat. “No, I didn’t know that.”

“The Guardianship tries to hide it. But we’ve snuck into their labs enough times to know it’s something they talk about all the time. They can’t figure out why it happens. People who’ve been dived seem normal to them in every way. They just don’t get it.”

“But I think the truth is pretty obvious. Using magic to erase someone’s mind the way they do... it’s an act of violence. It’s a way of hurting someone so bad they lose themselves. Then they take the husk that’s left behind, and mold it into the kind of person they want.”

“But the person that’s left behind... they live in the shadow of that violence. Even if they’re not conscious of it, even if they do their best every day to fulfill the Guardianship’s demands of them... in the back of their mind they’re still suffering the agony of their own murder.”

Alyssa got very quiet. “Of course a lot of them can’t handle it. It only makes sense. And it makes sense they escape the only way they can.”

I erupted. “But how could you possibly know all that?!”

The flame in my hand went out as I leapt to my feet. I turned away from Alyssa. “How could it possibly be that awful?”

Alyssa took a while to reply. I stood with my fists clenched.

“Irene, the leader of our rebel unit, has sometimes succeeded in rescuing captured rebels. Rebels who got dream dived.”

“She rescued them before their reconditioning was complete — that’s what they do after they erase your mind. They make you loyal to the Guardianship, and instill in you a new set of values and goals. Ones that align with the Guardianship’s.”

“The people she rescued were our friends. They remembered being our friends. But they didn’t feel anything about us. They told us so. We’d remind them of the people and things they used to love. And they’d say flat-out they didn’t care. All of them retreated into themselves, ignored us, and finally left the camp.”

“One of the people I was closest to... I stayed with her as often as I could, even though she didn’t care. I tried to comfort her when she woke up in the middle of the night, sweating buckets and gasping for air. I stopped her when she tried to hurt herself.”

“She was suffering so much. But she was cut off from us, inside her own heart, because of what they did. So I couldn’t help her. And she left, and I have no idea now if she’s alive or dead.”

Alyssa went quiet. I kept facing away. I didn’t want her to see my tears.

After a while, I wiped my face, then sat back down next to Alyssa and relit my fire. The little flame's warmth worked its way into our bodies. We were fully dry at this point. One small comfort in a terrifying world.

"This sucks, Alyssa."

"Yeah, it does."

"I don't want that for myself."

"I don't want it for you either."

"But... what else can I even do? I'm running away, but I have nowhere to go."

Alyssa grinned. God her smile was pretty.

"Isn't it obvious? Come with me to our camp!"

"You mean, join the rebels?"

"Yeah! You don't have to fight or steal like I do. We have a lot of folks at the camps like you, who just need a place to escape to. You can live with us, peacefully."

"That... sounds nice." I hadn't considered the idea that I could actually have a future. But the idea of abandoning my family, my whole place in the world, forever... it made my heart ache. "In some ways."

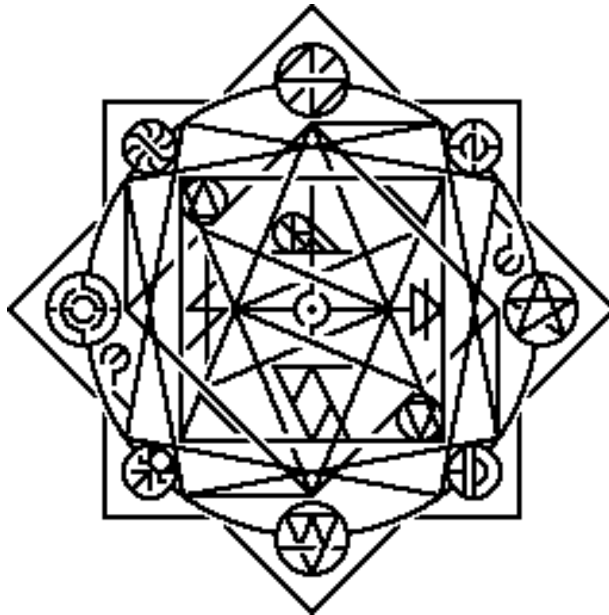
"Just think about it. We've still got a long hike ahead of us. C'mon, let's get ready for bed."

Alyssa rolled out her sleeping bag, crawled inside, and started to doze almost immediately. I pulled out my thin blanket and wrapped myself up in it.

I studied Alyssa's face, framed in vibrant curly green hair, clear even in the dim moonlight shining from outside. I looked at her nose, her lips, the way her sleeping bag rose and fell as she breathed softly.

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Alyssa was offering me a future. Was that something I deserved?
I wasn't convinced.



Advanced Barrier Sigil, Example #5

(from *Dr. Mal's Report on Glyph Self-Inscription for Military Personnel*, pg. 218, figure 3.2)

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A frozen image. A teenager and older woman stood together on a hiking trail, admiring the mountain view. The woman's hand rested on the girl's shoulder.

"I'm really proud of how hard you're trying at your new school."

"Thanks Mom. It's really not so bad. Everywhere has bullies. I just need to stop giving them the reactions they want."

"I'm sure you'll feel better once you make some friends."

"...Yeah. I'm getting along well with most of the martial arts club at least."

"That's great to hear."

The image flickered. The two were admiring a patch of bright pink wild roses.

"I love flowers." The girl wore a warm smile.

"Me too. You know, your father gave me some of these on our first date."

The older woman was making a conspiratorial wink. "I'm surprised you haven't uttered a word of complaint about being stuck in an all-girls school at your age. I would've lost my mind."

"Haha, Dad always said you were breaking hearts pretty early."

"You'll have plenty of time to do that yourself. I'm just sorry to make you wait until you graduate. I know I've told you before, but if you ever have any questions about boys, I'm happy to answer."

The image flickered and began to fade. The woman was walking on ahead. The girl stood in place, her mouth open but not saying anything. The image flickered one last time. The girl followed the woman silently.

I stirred before Alyssa the next morning. Instead of waking her right away, I pulled the scrolls out of her bag. The orange light of dawn crept across the cave floor, criss-crossed with a spider web of shadows from the winter-stripped trees outside. I unfurled the parchment and studied the glyphs Alyssa had stolen.

They were fascinating. A lot of them seemed to strengthen your body's innate physical abilities, something I had no idea sigils could do. One made you more resilient to attacks. Another made you move (and think?) faster. Neither of them resonated with me, but seeing such beautiful glyph patterns was pleasure enough.

I found another that made you stronger. It reinforced your muscles and bones so you could lift heavier things, hit harder. It was simpler than the others — I was surprised I hadn't figured out the logic on my own.

I tried channeling mana into the glyph, expecting another total lack of response. The markings on the paper glowed a faint red.

I was resonating with the glyph.

I tore open my pack and snatched the little bag with the sigil pen and my other tools. This was real. I'd found another glyph I could use.

I put the paper on the ground and pulled up my shirt. I needed a big canvas for this, and my stomach seemed like as good a place as any. I carefully started drawing the lines from the paper onto my gut.

It was slow-going. There were dozens of shapes in the glyph, and I had to get their proportions exactly right. I tried using my compass and straight-edge, but it was too awkward to coordinate using them on my stomach.

So I eyeballed it. The black tip of the sigil pen traced along my skin, leaving behind deep dark ink that seeped into me magically. I wanted to get it right the first time so I wouldn't have to go through the trouble of removing the ink and trying again.

I finished, and shot a blast of mana into the sigil on my stomach.

A red glow emanated from my whole body, lighting up the cave. Power and euphoria surged through me. I picked up my backpack. It felt lighter than air. I jumped, effortlessly rose four feet in the air, and banged my head on the roof of the cave. The pain barely registered in my excitement.

I was *strong*. It took a lot of my mana reserves from the night's rest to use the magic. I estimated I could do it two or three times a day at most. But I'd never experienced anything like this kind of power.

Alyssa still slept peacefully. I wanted to show her this. An evil idea struck me.

"GOOD MORNING ALYSSA!" I yelled as I gripped both ends of Alyssa's sleeping bag. I easily lifted her clear over my head.

"WH-WH-WHAT'S HAPPENING?" The caterpillar above me yelled and writhed in her cocoon. As light as she was, the movement made me lose my balance, and I fell flat on my back with Alyssa on top of me.

She rolled off me, struggling to escape her bag. "What on earth were you doing??"

I sat up and bit my lip. "Ehehehe... sorry. I just got excited about this new glyph I resonated with."

Alyssa's eyes lit up as she extricated herself from her cozy prison. I blushed, realizing she was still in her underwear and a thin shirt. "You got one to work with you?"

"Yeah. I think it's some kind of strength sigil — I'm much stronger now."

"How long do you think it'll last?"

"I'm not sure. I'd guess about ten minutes or so?"

"That could be handy."

"Why don't we test the rest of them now? C'mon, I wanna see what magic you resonate with."

Alyssa mercifully put some pants on and sat with me and the stack of parchment. Instead of figuring out what each one did, we skipped to channeling a bit of mana into each glyph. We wanted to know if any of them would react with us.

Unfortunately, none of the remaining glyphs worked with me. But Alyssa found one she connected with. I studied it closely.

A twelve pointed star with an inner six pointed star... The outer star was made up of three overlapped squares... Once I lost myself in the math, I could see how the mana flowed easily. But it was still hard to picture exactly how it worked. All I knew was that it was a protective spell, and that there shouldn't be any danger of it hurting Alyssa.

"Can you inscribe it?" Alyssa asked. "I was never any good at drawing sigils."

"Umm... sure."

Without any prompting, Alyssa took off her undershirt and presented her bare back to me. Air rushed out of my lungs like I'd been punched in the diaphragm. This was too much.

"Is something wrong Lacy?"

"N-no."

I took up my sigil pen and tried to stop my hands from trembling. My strength magic had faded at this point, but that had nothing to do with the weakness in my whole body. I put the parchment with the design off to the side, and touched the pen to the muscled brown skin of her upper back.

I took a deep breath and steadied my wrist. The canvas might be... challenging... but I could do this. I traced my pen over her shoulder blades, drawing the first of the outer circles. It was the slightest bit off at one edge, but I knew it should still work.

Every subsequent shape came smoother and easier. I lost myself in the joy of meticulous geometry. Before I knew it, I was done.

"Can you test it?"

Alyssa nodded, and channeled mana towards her back. The glyph lit up, even if it didn't have enough power to activate fully.

Alyssa grinned, then stood up and faced me. "C'mon, let's go test it out."

"Please put this on first," I said, holding out her undershirt with my eyes closed.

She put it on and grabbed my hand, pulling me outside, leaving our packs and supplies behind.

Alyssa stood next to a tree near the cave's entrance. The morning sun shone through the trees brightly now, making her look even more radiant. Then she closed her eyes and concentrated on her magic. A white light enveloped her for just a moment. She didn't look any different after.

Actually no, there was something — a faint, chromatic glimmer covering her body. Was it some kind of shield?

"Alright Lacy. Punch me."

"W-what?"

"Hit me! You said it was a protective spell right? Let's test it out!"

"I don't want to hit you!"

"Do it do it do it! Hit me! You said you know martial arts, right? Prove it!"

It only took a few more taunts for me to take my stance, red-faced. I reared back my arm and slugged her hard in the gut.

"OUCH!"

I pulled my hand back in pain. It felt like I'd punched hard glass.

"Oh my god Lacy, I didn't even feel that. Are you trying, c'mon!"

"I was trying! It's the spell, it's protecting you!"

Alyssa smirked. "Are you sure? Maybe you just have pathetic baby punches."

"I'm the top ranked member of the martial arts club at school! I know how to punch!"

"Suuuuure you are."

"Fine, let's try something else."

I looked around for something else to hit Alyssa with. I picked up a fist-sized rock. Alyssa grinned and extended her arms, waiting for the attack. I threw the rock at her stomach again. It bounced off — Alyssa didn't even flinch. I did notice a small shimmering crack in the rainbow glimmer around her body. But just as I tried to get a better look at it, the crack vanished.

I spent the next ten minutes hitting Alyssa with everything I could find. I picked up a thick tree branch and bashed her with it over and over. I did a hard running tackle. After some careful testing we determined it didn't matter where I hit her — the stomach, the legs,

her back, even her head — the chromatic barrier protected her everywhere.

The stronger and harder the hit, the more cracks would spread across her shield. But every time, after five or six seconds, they'd knit back together completely. And no matter how hard I hit her, she wouldn't react at all. It really didn't seem to hurt her in the slightest.

After about fifteen minutes, the barrier slowly faded away on its own, while I crouched off to the side taking a break. Alyssa sat next to me. "That's a *really* neat trick."

She punched my arm. "You just found us some cool new toys. Thanks Lacy. Nice to finally have a sigil I can use."

I smiled back at her. I was happy too — my new sigil was amazing. It was a shame none of the others resonated with us, but this was enough to give us an edge if we ran into any trouble on our way back.

Wait... was I thinking about fighting Guardianship soldiers? Or even a raptor? No, I couldn't do that. I was in enough trouble as it was.

I frowned as Alyssa walked out from under the tree into an empty stretch of grass. Sunlight shone down on her, unbroken by the trees' shadows. I gazed at her, a smile creeping back onto my face as the worries left me. They were replaced by admiration for Alyssa's taut muscles and firm... no, stop that.

She turned back to me and cracked her knuckles.

"Well. I've got enough juice in me for one more. Wanna test out our new magic 1-on-1?"

"What?"

"C'mon, Lacy." She entered an unfamiliar and intimidating combat stance. "Let's fight! I wanna see what you can do!"

"What?"

"Let's do one round without the new magic to warm up." Alyssa had her arms raised in front of her, her hands balled into fists. She was grinning. "You said you were in a martial arts club at your school, right? C'mon. First to eight points wins."

I blinked. She really wanted to fight.

I recognized, abstractly, that I was a pretty boring person. I didn't have any friends at school. Besides math I didn't excel at any of my classes. For a long time I felt like I didn't have anything that *compelled* me, something that lit a fire in my heart. I spent a lot of time at home, reading or complaining to Mom about bullies at school.

As outgoing and curious and interesting as my mom was, I knew it frustrated her how withdrawn I acted. She kept taking me out on camping trips, introducing me to her friends' children, anything to get me out of my shell. But nothing ever seemed to stick.

I got really into poetry for a little while, at the boarding school. No, don't think about that.

But in the last couple years, I found two things that I *loved*. The first was glyph magic. I'd finally been given clearance to actively work with it at school, instead of just the theoretical stuff they teach when you're younger. I loved parsing out the logic of it. I loved feeling and understanding the mana that had always been in my body, and using it to do incredible things. I read everything about it I could get my hands on with my limited student clearance.

That was the first thing. The second thing that got me excited was *fighting*. My mom had gotten me to try nearly every club at school before I'd landed on martial arts. I took to it immediately. I was strong, and I was good at it.

For a long time, I'd been scared. I'd been scared ever since that teacher I cared about died in front of me, while still walking and talking and teaching as if nothing was wrong. When I fought, when I won, I felt in control of that fear for a little while. I didn't know who I was planning on fighting. But I knew that being able to fight made me feel safer.

Now I knew I was afraid of the Guardianship, of course. The mage knights, specifically. I was afraid of what they might do to me. And

now those fears were real.

Alyssa had beaten a mage knight. And not just any mage knight, but the one that had terrified me a little over a week ago.

I wasn't thinking about whether what Alyssa did to Claire was right. That didn't matter right now.

What mattered was that the girl in front of me was *strong*.

If I could beat her, I could beat anyone.

I eyed Alyssa's stance. Arms up, protecting her face and upper body. She leaned towards me, ready to react whenever I made a move. She was left handed; I'd gleaned that much from watching her fight before. I needed to avoid that hand's hook.

I was caked in sweat from trying to break Alyssa's barrier in the sun. But I wasn't winded either. I knew I could hold my own against her.

A flame ignited inside me as I entered my own stance. I looked at her grin. "You're confident you'll win. You still think I'm just some noble kid, don't you?"

"I know you're more than that." Alyssa's smile faded. "I'm just not sure how *much* more yet."

"First to eight points then. Ready when you are."

"Alright then."

Alyssa lunged towards me.

Her first attack was a feint. She came at me with her dominant hand, expecting me to block and leave myself open to her real attack. I stepped aside and punched her in the stomach.

"1-0," I said.

She jumped back. I stepped forward, not wanting to relinquish my starting advantage. She had a strong guard up. I moved towards her again, wanting to psyche her into revealing an opening.

Alyssa kicked at me, more quickly than I expected. But I was able to dodge and punch her again in the chest.

"2-0." But as I said that, she sank lower and elbowed me in the gut. I flinched backwards, and she followed up with a quick kick in the same spot. I ran the tally in my head. One point for the first hit, two for the lower-body kick.

"2-3," Alyssa said as she backed away.

We exchanged basic jabs for a minute or so, both fighting defensively. We each got in a few strikes. I managed to land a strong

kick to her sternum — three points. Plus she was winded now. “7-5,” I said with a smirk.

And then I was in the air, Alyssa’s grip tight around my shoulder as her whole body twisted me off the ground. And then I was lying in the grass, eyes up at Alyssa’s smiling face and the clear blue sky.

“7-8. Good match.” Alyssa reached a hand down to help me up.

I smiled back as I took her hand, trying to smother my frustration from losing.

“Let’s catch our breath, then try it with the new magic. Sound good?”

I nodded to her.

A few minutes later, we were back in our stances in the empty patch of grass. The sun beat down harder now. It felt good in the crisp winter air.

“No points this time,” said Alyssa. “Just go to town on me, Lacy. I wanna see how this magic holds up.”

I still felt heated from my loss before. I wanted to win this time. I couldn’t break the barrier before, but with more strength...

I channeled magic through the glyph on my stomach. My body glowed a deep red, and for the second time in my life, unthinkable power coursed through my body. I could train my whole life and never get this strong on my own.

Of course this was the glyph I resonated with. This was the magic I was always meant to use.

Alyssa’s body shone white light. Now that I knew to look for it, I immediately noticed the thin multi-colored barrier covering her. That was what I had to break if I wanted to beat her.

This time I went on the offensive. I raced straight towards Alyssa and reared my arm back. She raised her arms in front of her to block. I slammed my fist into her crossed arms as hard as possible.

Glass splintered at the impact. Massive cracks weaved up Alyssa’s arms and across her shoulders and chest. She lost her balance and fell away from me, quickly rolling back to her feet near the edge of the clearing.

It didn’t hurt to punch her this time. Just like my fire glyph protected me from the heat of my own magic, the strength glyph kept

the bones in my hands from breaking.

Alyssa looked surprised. I suddenly felt concerned. “Alyssa, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she said. “But that was a big hit. I don’t think I could take more than a few of those in a row.”

The rainbow glass was already knitting itself back together. But it was slower this time.

“Of course, that depends on you being able to hit me again.”

Alyssa darted towards me in a zigzag pattern. She read my dodge and kicked me hard in the gut. I almost fell to the ground — it hurt just as much as when Alyssa hit me before I used the glyph.

Okay, so the magic only protected me from my own attacks. I was still just as vulnerable as before. Good to know. That meant I needed to wrap this up quick!

Alyssa had barely pulled back her kick before I grabbed her arm. Mimicking her own move from earlier, I twisted my hips and launched her into the air. But instead of falling back to the ground next to me, she flew up over my head. I watched as she soared across the edge of the clearing and into the trunk of a tall bare tree.

The sound of glass shattering rang through the air. The light around Alyssa broke into a million tiny rainbow shards, flew off her body, and vanished. She fell to the ground and laid face-down in the dirt. Her back arced up and down as she made an awful wheezing noise.

The competitive fire blazing inside me instantly extinguished. I raced over to Alyssa, terrified I’d gone too far. She sounded like she was in agony. I rolled her over to see her face.

The biggest grin I’d ever seen in my life greeted me. Alyssa wasn’t in pain — she was cackling.

“You’re really something else Lacy!” She croaked sharply every time she inhaled.

Alyssa wrapped her arms around her stomach as her cackle turned into a rasping cough. I stood above her, dumbfounded. I sat on the dirt next to her, suddenly exhausted. I smiled.

“Is that what your laugh sounds like, Alyssa?”

That just made her grin and wheeze even harder. It was an objectively miserable noise, and the cutest sound I'd ever heard.

It took Alyssa several minutes to calm down. With tears in her eyes, she got up and dusted the dirt from her clothes, still grinning. Then she clapped my back.

"This magic's something else too," said Alyssa. "We're a force to be reckoned with now, Lacy."

A sudden irregular pressure tugged on the line. "Alyssa, I've got one!"

Alyssa coached me through the act of pulling in my first fish. I yanked, a bit of cloth protecting my hand from the cord, and a fish flew out of the pond at us. I yelped and backed away from the flopping gasping creature. Alyssa smacked it hard on the head with the hilt of her knife. It stopped moving.

I watched her skillfully descale and clean the fish. Within minutes, I'd speared bits of chopped up fish and mushrooms onto a thick stick and held it over the fire. The smell was intoxicating.

"I told you the worms would come in handy."

"Are you sure these mushrooms are safe to eat Alyssa?"

"Positive. I eat them every time I make this trip."

"How many times have you walked to the capital?"

"Hmm... five at this point."

"Dang, you're an expert at this."

"Not quite... there's a mushroom that looks an awful lot like this one. I only learned the difference after I lost a day puking my guts out."

"Oh..."

The spears of food looked cooked. I paused for just a moment, then decided I trusted Alyssa and took a big bite out of mine.

I grinned at her. "Delicious."

She smiled back. God her smile was pretty. How many times had I said that to myself at this point? Stop it.

At my request, Alyssa had used her knife to cut my long hair to a more manageable shoulder length. “I’ve always liked it better like this,” I said. “I don’t even remember why I grew it out in the first place.”

Alyssa smiled. “I’m surprised. I liked your long hair a lot, but this looks even better.”

We got ready for bed. “Look, I know you said you’re fine with your blanket, but it’s *very* cold tonight. Are you sure you don’t want to share the sleeping bag?”

The warm feelings from my haircut dissolved as I ground my teeth. Obviously I wanted that. For a lot of reasons. I didn’t say anything.

Alyssa waited a moment. “Do you want to use it alone tonight? I’ve made this trip in much worse weather. I’ll be fine with your blanket.” Alyssa touched my arm, smiling again. “Consider it a favor to me. I want to make sure you’re in good shape tomorrow so we can cover plenty of ground.”

My face felt hot. How could someone be this sweet and this beautiful? Stop it.

“No, I’ll be fine.”

Her smile faded. “...Okay. Sleep well, alright?”

I didn’t sleep well. I woke up several times, overwhelmed by a searing and all-too-familiar shame. I ultimately sat up and distracted myself by studying the remaining glyph scrolls, illuminating them with a tiny flame on my finger tip.

During the day, I could break off the thoughts I didn’t want to be thinking. But I couldn’t stop my dreams.

We picked at our lousy meal of days-old cooked mushrooms. Obviously this species was safe to eat. But after carrying them in our bags for multiple days, I was suspicious that *these* mushrooms weren't. We passed the time reminiscing about meals we wished we were having.

"So what do you put in your cucumber salads then?"

"...Cucumbers?"

"No, like, what dressing do you use? Other ingredients?"

"What do you mean? A cucumber salad is when you chop up and eat cucumbers."

"Alyssa, that's not a cucumber salad! You need other stuff in it!"

"Lacy, that's absurd." She flicked a mushroom at my forehead. It bounced off and landed on a log in the fire. "You're telling me a cucumber salad isn't made of cucumbers."

I sulked and looked at the mushroom as it curdled in the heat. "When we get the chance I'll make you a *real* cucumber salad."

"Is it just me, or does 'cucumber' not sound like a real word right now?" said Alyssa.

"Cucumber, cucumber, cucumber, cucumber. Oh my god you're right."

"Cucumber cucumber cucumber."

"Cucumber cucumber—" Another mushroom bounced off my face.

I threw the uprooted tree into Alyssa. Glass splintered as her barrier nearly shattered from the impact. I ran towards her as she rolled across the ground and got back to her feet.

Cracks covered her entire body. One more punch and I'd have her right where I wanted her. I reared back my fist.

Then a magically-reinforced forehead slammed into mine. I fell to the ground, dazed. Alyssa stood over me and smirked.

I caught my breath. We'd been walking for almost a week, and we'd sparred every single day. I'd only managed to beat Alyssa the one time. My technique was solid, but she kept finding new ways to surprise me. She held out a hand to help me up.

We sat down by a nearby tree, both of us panting after the fight. My forehead still stung a bit.

I tried to relax. But even after almost a week without any issues, I still remembered how close that raptor had come to catching us. It was hard for me to forget that tension; it crept into me even in calm moments like this.

I felt a little better now than I had the first day we'd sparred — Alyssa wisely suggested we only use our new magic once when we practiced. That left more than half our mana reserves, so we wouldn't be defenseless if we ran into... trouble.

Alyssa spoke, her eyes closed. "Lacy, what did you call it earlier when someone uses... the magic in their cells? The magic making up their body, and not just the magic they breathe in?"

"That's... mana burn." I grabbed her hand. I was very serious about what I said next. "You need to never do that Alyssa. They showed us in school what happens to mages who do. I really can't describe it. It's awful."

She reached with her other hand and touched mine. "Understood. I promise I won't."

It was night at this point, and the end of a long day of hiking to boot. We were both about ready to collapse. On top of everything, it had started sprinkling. We heard thunder in the distance, and braced ourselves for a wet and miserable night.

And then we stumbled into some very good luck.

It was a simple one-story house. Plants and vines grew up and around its wooden walls and glass windows. An old trash bin was torn open on the ground, the victim of some foraging animal. There was a small well dug outside; little stone walls rose up around the hole, also covered in vines and moss.

The house looked like someone had built it themselves, and then left some time ago. It was obviously abandoned. I knocked on the door anyway. "Hello? Anyone home?"

Alyssa and I waited. When no one replied, we pulled at the door. It was unlocked.

Inside was just one big room. I lit a fire in my hand so we could look around. A bucket sat in a corner, tied to a long rope. Another corner housed a wooden bed, with a hand-stuffed mattress and quilt on top. Spices lined a shelf, along with a dozen or so books. I browsed the spines — they were all fiction. One was a collection of short fairy tales I'd read over and over as a kid.

"This is really nice," said Alyssa.

"Yeah, it is."

I pulled the book of fairy tales down and plopped myself on the bed. "I used to love these stories." Alyssa sat down next to me as I browsed to one of my favorites. A black-and-white illustration of a horse-drawn carriage took up the page, with a passage of the story printed at the bottom. A man steered the horse along the road — he looked panicked. A swarm of bats chased him.

But they weren't bats of course. That was just the form the vampire was taking as he chased down the hero, who'd stolen the

vampire's precious necklace during the day as he'd slept.

"That art is pretty scary. Were these horror stories?" asked Alyssa.

"Kind of. They're just old stories for kids. They tend to be a little morbid."

Alyssa got up to browse the shelf. "I like happy stories I think." She pulled another book off the shelf. "Irene told me about this one."

I read the back cover. It was an old-fashioned romance, written before the Guardianship took power. Back when we had regular knights, instead of mage knights, dream divers. The Guardianship was choosy about which books like this were permitted to stay in circulation. I wondered if this one was banned or not.

I spotted an oil lantern on a rickety table, the kind people in the slums without access to glyph lamps used. I lit it, then let the flame in my palm go out. The room was much brighter now. Alyssa pulled the dark red drapes shut across the windows.

I eyed the glass panes as Alyssa covered them. They seemed too neat, out of place. The surface was so smooth. Either they'd bought the glass at a town and lugged it all the way out here, or they'd made it themselves with glyph magic. I wondered what a mage would be doing out here in the woods by themselves.

Alyssa was already in the bed reading her romance. I laid down next to her and picked up the fairy tale book. We read together in silence.

I finished the vampire story. Then I finished the story about the mermaid in love with a human, and the one about the fairy lost in an unfamiliar forest. Before I knew it, at least an hour had past. Alyssa was still enraptured by her book.

This was really nice. Did I deserve this?

A loud and familiar voice yelled in reply. Of course I didn't deserve this.

Another, much quieter voice spoke up. It was muffled almost completely by the yelling. And that voice said something very different.

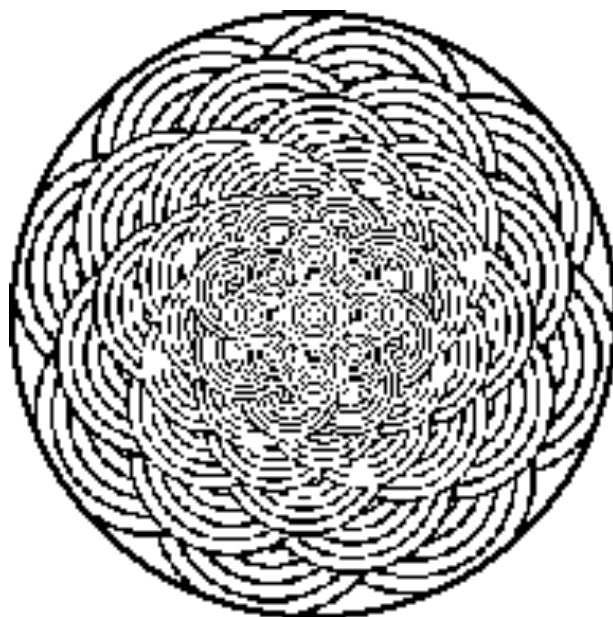
I closed my book.

"Alyssa..."

She looked distracted for a second as her concentration left the story in front of her. Then she closed her book too and looked over at me.

“Can I tell you why the dream divers are after me?”

Alyssa took my hand. She nodded.



Dream Catcher Sigil

(from *Dr. Mal's Report on Human Metamorphosis Magic* , pg. 2)

FOR REVIEW EXCLUSIVELY BY THE MINISTERS FIVE

A frozen image. In a well-furnished living room, a tall woman embraced a teenage girl by a smouldering fireplace.

The young girl's face was curiously blank. Just from looking at her, there was no way to tell someone had just told her the worst, most painful thing she'd ever heard.

“There you go sweetie, just the way you like it.”

Mom handed me the mug. I took a big gulp of the hot chocolate sloshing around inside it. It didn’t burn — she knew I didn’t like it too hot, so she always dropped in an ice cube after mixing in the cocoa and an extra spoonful of sugar.

It was delicious, of course. I smiled, even though my heart thundered in my chest.

I had something to tell Mom. Well, something to ask her about. It had been almost a year, and I still didn’t understand these feelings I’d been having. But I knew I could trust Mom to help.

I curled up the blanket tighter around me. The fireplace blazed in front of us. Mom looked at the fire, smiling. Besides the ticking of the clock and the crackling flames, it was quiet. Dad was working this weekend, so it was just us in the house tonight.

It was winter break. I’d gotten back from boarding school a few days ago. Mom had gone out of her way to make me feel as warm and loved as possible since I got back. She knew I got homesick easily, so she tried to make my breaks special.

I’d been attending the school for a few years now. I didn’t like being away from home for so long at a time. But as a noble, I knew I needed to get the best possible schooling. I needed to learn how to uphold the ideals of the Guardianship, and be an upstanding member of society. It was hard sometimes, but knowing I had these breaks to look forward to made it a lot easier. It helped that we wrote regularly too.

Mom asked me all sorts of questions about school. I answered them as fully as I could. I complained to her about some of the meaner students. I told her about how much I’d enjoyed English class. I even showed her some of the poetry I’d written.

The poems about *her* — the ones I’d written privately — I kept to myself.

We talked about my history studies. Obviously I knew things were bad before the Guardianship, but I didn't have any idea just how bad. I talked a lot about that with Mom. She nodded along with me. We were both thankful things were so much better now.

I told her about bullies and acquaintances, sports and clubs, all the activities I'd been keeping busy with. Anything to avoid the question I desperately wanted to ask and longed to smother down.

I sipped the hot chocolate. It really was delicious. We ate a lot of great food at school — it was for nobility after all — but it was no substitute for Mom's touch.

"Sweetie," said Mom. "Didn't you have something you wanted to ask me about?"

I gulped. I didn't know why I was so worried. It was just a simple question. I'd almost asked it on the hike with Mom earlier that day. But I somehow knew there was something *wrong* with me for even asking it. And I worried Mom would get mad at me. That feeling of wrongness was what I'd been wrestling with all year.

I couldn't keep it inside me any longer. I needed to know. I needed someone to tell me how to fix this. Or maybe... to tell me I didn't need fixing. That I was normal. And that everything was going to be okay.

So I turned to my mom for that. Because she was my best friend.

"Mom... there's this girl at school."

She looked over from the fire to me, her face blank and expecting.

"I really like her."

Her forehead crinkled a bit.

"I'm glad you made a friend, sweetie."

I shook my head a little.

"No, it's not... I don't even think she knows I exist. But, I think I like her... the way I'm supposed to like boys."

Mom's face was still. I didn't know what else to say. She looked back at the fire. The clock seemed to be getting louder.

We sat there for a while. She wouldn't say anything. I didn't know how to react.

Finally, she spoke. She sounded just as warm as before. I was relieved she wasn't mad at me.

“Have you talked to anyone else about this?”

“No,” I said hurriedly. “I wanted to talk to you first.”

She smiled at that. “Thank you sweetie. I’m glad you trust me so much.”

I still didn’t know how to feel. But I gave Mom a hug. She hugged me back.

“Sweetie, don’t talk to anyone else about this, please.”

I nodded. “Okay. But, do you know what I should do?”

She was quiet for a while. Then she spoke again, her voice still full of love.

“Let’s just wait a while. Let’s say... if on your next birthday, you’re still having this problem, come talk to me again.”

I nodded. That was eight months from now. I didn’t relish the idea of eight more months of not knowing. But I trusted my mom.

“These things often work themselves out in time. If it doesn’t go away by your next birthday, we’ll figure out what to do next. Sound good, sweetie?”

I nodded, and hugged her again.

Winter break came to an end. I found out I'd been withdrawn from the boarding school. Mom and Dad had changed their minds. They couldn't bear being apart from their only daughter for so long at a time.

I was enrolled in a new school recently founded in our district. It was still a prestigious private academy for nobility, albeit not as historic and well-regarded as the school I'd left. But now I'd get to come home to my family every night. I was happy. I loved my parents, and I loved getting to spend more time with them.

I was sad not to see *her* anymore. But maybe it was for the best. I buried those feelings away. And after a few months of life at my new school, going home each night to see my parents, I'd stopped thinking about her almost entirely.

One night, when both my parents were away, I gathered up all the poetry I'd written about her. I crushed it up in my hands. Then I burned it in the fire.

I was confident the feelings were gone. I was normal. I wouldn't make Mom sad.

On one of our hikes, I told my mom about a cute boy I met in class. I told her how nice it was to be around boys my age after being stuck in the all-girls school for so long. She beamed at that. I tried to hang out with the boy more.

After we'd been together for a while, the boy took me on a nice date. He set up a picnic by the river. He'd made all the food himself. The beautiful multi-colored glyph lights of the noble district shone on the water.

He told me he liked me. I smiled and told him I liked him too. He told me he wanted to kiss me. I said I wanted that too. We kissed for a while. Then he stopped, and asked me why I was crying.

The feelings were gone. I was normal. I wouldn't make Mom—

Once we realized I didn't want to kiss him, the boy stopped wanting to be with me. I cried to Mom that I'd had my heart broken. I didn't tell her about how I couldn't kiss the boy. I didn't tell her about the new girl in my class with the bright red hair and the glowing smile, and how I couldn't stop thinking about her.

My birthday came faster than I expected. I considered not saying anything to Mom. And yet, that night, after we'd eaten a delicious cake, and after Dad had gone to bed... When it was just me and Mom by the fire, sipping hot chocolate...

"I'm still having those feelings, Mom. "

Once again she was quiet. She looked at the fire for a long time.

"Don't worry. Leave everything to your father and I. We know some people that can help you."

I didn't say another word about it. Several days later, there was a strange man in our living room when I got home. He had blue hair and eccentric clothes. He was obviously a mage. He told me he worked with my father. He was here to help me with my problem.

His name was Ellis. The quiet woman behind him was named Claire.

My dad wasn't there. I hadn't seen him for almost a week, since talking to mom again about the feelings. Mom sat on the couch with me as Ellis explained why he was there.

I'd heard of the dream divers of course. But I'd always thought they only "operated" on rebels, traitors to the Guardianship. I thought they were a last resort to save lost causes, people who were otherwise so far gone they'd need to be executed.

Ellis told me that wasn't the case anymore. Recently, they'd started helping people like me. He called me a "child of the nobility who'd lost my way." He told me the procedure wasn't anywhere near as violent as rumors made it sound. I'd just go to sleep for a bit. When I woke up, I'd be fixed.

The man seemed nice. I wanted to believe him, even though I remembered Mr. Herron's sad empty smile. But the blonde mage behind him kept making this awful smirk. Like Ellis was telling an inside joke I wasn't in on. My mother didn't seem to notice.

I knew I was supposed to believe Ellis. But at some point in the meeting, I started to cry. Mom wrapped her arms around me tightly and told me not to worry, that everything was going to be okay.

I eventually settled down. I thanked the man for explaining the procedure. I told him I'd be happy to do it.

He smiled at that. More importantly, Mom smiled. He told me they'd pick me up in one week. He said reconditioning would take some time. But since I was a noble and volunteering for the procedure, I could come home between sessions. He'd already instructed my mom and dad on how to take care of me during the interim period, after the dream dive but before reconditioning was complete.

I nodded along, only half-absorbing what he said. They were doing everything they could to make the "procedure" sound easy and inviting. But I was still terrified. I couldn't trust Ellis and Claire. I kept looking over at Mom, and she looked completely at ease with them.

Why wasn't I okay with this? Why couldn't I get this one thing right?

The next week passed in a haze. A teacher at school asked me if something was wrong. I dodged her questions, and tried not to let on to her how terrified I was.

Dad came home again. Maybe it was my imagination, but he seemed colder than usual.

I didn't get much sleep. My parents didn't talk about the upcoming procedure. They just acted like everything was normal, and I responded in kind. But when I was alone in my room, sitting in my bed, I felt my heart race. I'd breathe too quickly. I'd soak the bed in sweat. Once, I threw up in my waste bin. It was a pain to dispose of the mess without my parents seeing.

I thought about Mr. Herron, about how empty he'd looked when I gave him those chocolates. Was I going to be like that? I didn't want that.

But what did I want then? I hated myself the way I was. And I knew now I would never change on my own.

Besides going with the dream diver, I could only think of one other way to fix things. But it was even more scary, in its own way. I didn't know if I had the strength to go through with it.

It was the night before the mage was supposed to pick me up. Dishes from the delicious casserole and chocolate cake we'd had for dinner littered the kitchen. Dad would take care of them in the morning, like always.

Mom and I sat by the fire. It was mostly deep red embers at this point. The housecleaner had left for the night, and Dad had already gone to bed.

"Mom, I'm scared."

She didn't say anything to that. She just looked at the fire. The ticking of the clock roared against her silence.

"I don't think I want to do this."

I didn't want to hurt my mom. I just wanted to be normal. But I didn't want my eyes to be like Mr. Herron's. I didn't want to forget all the things that made me happy, that made me myself.

Mom still didn't reply. I couldn't bear hearing just the ticking of the clock.

"Please, Mom. Isn't there another way?"

"We're not going to talk about this again."

"Can we wait just a little longer? I promise I'll—"

A sudden stinging impact on my cheek. Mom lowered her hand and spoke in a quiet, low voice. "I've tried so hard to protect you. I didn't want to tell anyone."

I'd never seen her face look so pained before. She gripped my shoulders. Her voice got even quieter.

"I didn't want to invite dream divers into my home. I didn't want to have to stop your father from..."

Her voice trailed off.

She closed her eyes, and pulled me into a hug. "Larisa. I love you. You know I love you right? Please. I just want to make everything better."

I hugged her, not knowing what else to do.

“My sweet girl. Light of my life. I love you, I love you so much.”

She clung to me. I cried silently into her shoulder.

“You’re my everything. I don’t understand why you keep causing problems. You’re the most important person in the world to me. You’re so sweet and good but you just won’t fit in and I can’t keep protecting you. I adore you, Larisa. I’m so tired.”

I let her embrace and her words envelop me. She kissed me gently on the forehead, then held my face in her hands as she looked in my eyes. I’d never seen my mom cry before.

“You can’t be like this. Okay?”

After a few moments, I nodded. She pulled away, then silently headed off to bed. I stood by the fire for a while after that.

I'd been staring at the floor by the bed the whole time I'd told my story. I looked over at Alyssa finally, and gasped at what I saw.

Her fists were clenched tight. Every muscle in her body looked tense. I swore I could hear teeth grinding against each-other.

Alyssa was *furious*.

She realized I was looking at her. She stood and started pacing around the room.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Did I upset you?"

She looked back at me, her mouth agape. It seemed like she was struggling to get the right words together.

"They were your parents! How could they do that to you?!"

I didn't understand. Wasn't it obvious?

"They were both high-ranking members of the court. They couldn't have a degenerate daughter."

"You're not a 'degenerate.' Don't talk about yourself that way."

Alyssa kicked one of the walls repeatedly. Wood splintered and cracked. I laughed.

"It's not funny!" said Alyssa. "I can't believe they..."

"You seem so cool most of the time Alyssa, but you have a childish side, huh?"

She stammered. "W-w-what do you mean, childish?" Her anger seemed to short-circuit from my teasing.

"Do you think you've sufficiently punished that wall?"

She stalked back over to me and sat down in a sulk. "Shut up."

I grinned and tousled her bright green hair.

"Do you honestly think you have anything to be ashamed about?" Alyssa asked.

"I mean, yeah. I failed my mom. I couldn't be who she needed me to be, even when she laid out a path for me. All I had to do was walk it. And I couldn't."

"Lacy, you didn't fail your parents. They failed you."

I didn't know how to respond to that. It wasn't an idea I'd considered.

"My dad was captured by the dream divers. The last time I saw him, after they'd 'operated' on him... he wasn't my dad anymore. He did something horrible, Lacy. Something I know my real dad would never have done."

Alyssa touched my cheek.

"I can't know what your parents went through to make their choice. I can't know what things are like in the courts. But when they called in that dream diver, they offered you up to die. I haven't known you that long, Lacy. But I know you don't deserve that."

I didn't know how to respond to that either.

"Lacy... there are other girls like you at the camp. You're not broken. There are lots of people like you. People that don't fit in the Guardianship's stupid boxes."

What?

"Come with me to the camp. I'll show you."

Alyssa wrapped her arms around me from behind. She pulled me in close to her. I thought about pushing her away, about getting out of the bed. I knew I shouldn't listen to her beautiful comforting lies.

"Are there really other people like me?"

"Yeah."

"I'm not broken?"

"You're not. You're perfect just the way you are, Lacy."

Stop crying.

"Come with me, Lacy."

Stop it. Don't listen to her. Don't pretend you have any choice but to fling yourself into that chasm and finally stop ruining the lives of everyone that ever cared about you.

I broke out of Alyssa's embrace and got out of the bed.

"I can't be like this."

I sprinted to the door, tore it open, and ran into the night.

I was done being stupid. I was done lying to myself.

I knew all the things Alyssa was saying were wrong. Here, in that cave, while we were walking and fighting and eating and sleeping. She'd told me so many little lies that made me feel better, made me feel less alone.

I wasn't listening any more. I knew the truth. I'd known it the whole time.

I stomped through the brush. Shadows of bare trees flew by me. I trusted Mom. She loved me. She'd never given me any cause to doubt that. And yet there I was, curled up in bed listening to a rebel murderer just because she was pretty and she told me the things I wanted to hear.

A voice rang out behind me. "Lacy, wait!"

I kept running. I couldn't believe myself. What was I hoping to happen between us? I was throwing away everything I'd ever believed in because of *hormones*! Because I wanted to kiss someone I'd met a week ago!

"Lacy, this isn't safe! I'm sorry! Come back and we can talk!"

Why was she sorry? For feeding me a bunch of lies? She probably didn't even believe the things she'd been saying. It was all a trick to get me to join her degenerates' insurrection.

"You're gonna hurt yourself you idiot! Where are you even going?"

I had to keep running. Eventually she'd give up and I could figure out what to do next.

I already knew of course. I knew the second I'd left my parent's house. My existence was a poison. If I wasn't strong enough to get dream dived, there was only one other antidote.

"LACY, STOP!"

A blue flash glowed behind me. Suddenly I tripped and fell to the ground. I tried to get up, but my legs were heavy and cold.

I examined my feet. It was easy to see under the light of the full moon. They were encased in thick blocks of ice.

I tried to stand, but couldn't stay balanced on the ice. Alyssa caught up to me, panting. I sat quietly, my eyes on the ground. Alyssa sat down next to me.

"Hey, what was that about? You scared me there."

"Is that how it is, then? I'm your prisoner?" I spat my words at her. "It makes sense. You've told me too much about your little rebel group already. Obviously you can't just let me go."

Alyssa's eyes went wide. "What? No! What are you even saying?"

She waved her arms around. The ice around my feet evaporated in a cloud of blue mana sparks. I stayed sitting.

"So what, you'll stab me in the back when I try to run, then?"

Alyssa didn't say anything to that. The tears welling up in her eyes glistened in the moonlight. She was a good actress; it was like I'd actually hurt her feelings.

"Do it then. It's what I deserve. My mom was right. I knew it this whole time. I'm just a sack of human garbage who couldn't walk the path laid out for her."

I smashed my fist into the dirt.

"No, I'm less than trash — at least trash doesn't hurt people. That's all I've done for the last year. It's all I've done my whole life."

I grabbed my left arm and dug fingernails into my skin.

"So if you're gonna kill me, just do it. If I die I'll finally stop hurting people."

I looked up at Alyssa. We were both crying now.

She didn't try to close the distance between us. She just watched me, crying silently. I felt the fingernails break the skin on my upper arm. The pain felt nice. It was something concrete to latch onto in this miasma of twisted-up feelings.

Alyssa wiped her tears away. She stood, facing away from me.

"If you hate yourself, I can't change that. If you want to die, I can't change that." Her voice was almost cold. "But I never once tried to trap you. I didn't *trick* you. You came with me because you wanted to. If you're saying otherwise, then the person lying to you isn't me. It's yourself."

Her fists were clenched. “If you don’t want to come with me, then fine, do whatever you want.” She pointed a finger at me and yelled. “But personally, I think you’re an idiot! You keep talking about this path they laid out for you. But look at where you are right now! You already chose not to walk that path! And you’re still here! You’re alive!”

I stood. All my self-loathing flared outward at this woman lecturing me. She didn’t know the first thing about what I’d been through. “Who the hell do you think you are?!” I yelled back.

Alyssa stepped forward and grabbed my shirt. “I’m someone who knows how to make a choice and stick with it. Because the Guardianship tried to lay out a path for me too. One of their soldiers tried to drag me down it.” I pushed Alyssa away. She extended her arms outward. “And you know what I did to him? I stabbed him in the goddamn chest!”

We both flared our sigils. Red strength glowed around me. A bright rainbow barrier shone around Alyssa.

“I don’t regret it. I’ve never regretted it! Because I got the chance to make my own path and *I took it!*”

“SHUT UP!” I lunged forward and slugged Alyssa in the stomach. Cracks radiated out across her body. She ducked low and swept a leg under me, knocking me to the ground.

The infuriating woman stood over me, continuing her lecture. “You’ve got that chance too. A lot of my friends died without ever getting that chance!” She kicked me hard in the side. “And here you are, sulking! You don’t even appreciate it! You’ve stopped them from killing you and now you want to do their job for them!”

I grabbed her leg and yanked. She fell over. I clambered on top of her.

“JUST SHUT UP!” I punched her in the face. Cracks shot down her neck and arms.

“You think you’re a coward because you’re refusing to be murdered! Do you have any idea how deranged you sound?! You might as well get dream-dived at this point — they’ve clearly brainwashed you already!” She tried to push me off. I pinned her

arms under my knees and smashed her face again. The cracks spread across her whole body now. Her barrier was about to break.

She writhed under me and finally succeeded in pushing me off her body. Her knee crashed into my crotch. I howled in pain and rage. The sigil on my wrist activated on pure instinct — a burst of fire flew out of my mouth and into the sky.

Alyssa dodged out of the way of the fireball. “Why are you being so stupid?! I don’t want you to die, Lacy!”

I leapt forward and slammed my forehead into hers. It hurt like hell. Her barrier shattered. She grabbed my arm, twisted her hips, and threw me over her head.

I landed, and immediately tried to get up again. Alyssa stomped her bare foot onto my chest. My vision darkened as the impact pushed all the air out of my lungs.

I laid still. She stood over me, still pinning me to the ground. Neither of us moved.

Infuriatingly, Alyssa had beaten me. Again.

“Rebel murderer psychopath.” I spat blood. Some of it landed on her foot.

Alyssa crossed her arms. “Suicidal noble brat.”

“Did you honestly brag to me about stabbing someone? I don’t know where you get off lecturing me when you’ve clearly got plenty of your own issues to work out.”

“I said you’re an idiot. I never said I wasn’t one too.”

“Fine. Then we’re both idiots.”

“At least I’m not a math nerd.”

“At least I’m not weirdly into gross bugs.”

“Worms aren’t bugs. They’re annelids.”

“Now who’s the nerd?”

“The one who had a crush on her math teacher.”

“Oh my god you’re such a jerk!”

“You’re right, that was mean.”

I pouted at her as she took her foot off me. Then I put my hands behind my head and closed my eyes. “I guess you win.”

Alyssa wiped her eyes. “I guess so. You’re getting better though.” She sank to the dirt next to me. “Are you alright, Lacy?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Even though you fought dirtier than usual.”

She laughed at that. I laughed too.

“I really do hate myself, huh?” I said. “I’d never admitted that before.”

“Yeah. I think they did more of a number on you than you realized.”

“I guess so. I don’t want to die, Alyssa.”

“I don’t want you to either.”

“Not right now anyway. I think I’m gonna have moments where I do... for a while.”

“That’s not unusual for people in your position.”

“I’d rather feel like this than get dream-dived.”

“I’m glad.”

“I’m sorry for all the mean things I said.”

“I’m sorry too. We really are idiots, huh?”

I reached out a hand. Alyssa took it. I looked up at the moon as my thumb circled around her palm.

“I want to come with you. I don’t know exactly what path I want to take. But I think if I come with you... I’ll have time to figure it out.”

“That sounds a lot better than dying.”

“Yeah, it does.”

We walked back towards the house together. My body ached all over from my fight with Alyssa. Some animal made an awful cry nearby and startled me. Alyssa assured me it was just an owl. Apparently the species in this section of the woods just sounded like that.

My feet hurt from running on sticks and pinecones and other forest debris. I was ready to relax inside our little house together and pass out. Maybe I’d read one more of the fairy tales first.

Alyssa stepped in front of me. I watched her stride along. She always looked so confident, like she knew exactly where she was going. I liked the way her long green hair bounced up and down with her steps.

The words spilled out on their own. “I have feelings for you, Alyssa.”

“The kinds of feelings you’re supposed to have for boys?”

“...Yeah, those kinds.”

“I figured. You’re not exactly difficult to read, Lacy.”

I laughed. “I just wanted that off my chest. Obviously it’s okay you don’t feel the same way.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth. I don’t know what I feel.”

My heart lurched.

We reached the house. Alyssa leaned back against one of the vine-covered walls by the door. I did the same. We looked at the moon together.

Alyssa sighed. “Ever since my mom died, I’ve had a wall up between me and other people. I’ve kept myself from getting too attached to anyone, because I don’t want to be sad when they’re taken away from me.”

“And the thing is, that fear has been validated over and over. I’ve lost my mom, my dad. Diane, Noah, Will. Maybe tomorrow it’ll be Syd, or Penny, or Irene. Maybe I’ll lose you.”

She took my hand again. “I don’t know if I feel the same way you do, because I don’t know what that feels like. But I know I’ve had a good time getting to know you this past week. And I know I don’t want to spend my whole life afraid of getting hurt.”

We looked at each other, both smiling. Alyssa was really pretty in the moonlight.

“Thank you for saving me, Alyssa.”

“No. You saved yourself. Don’t ever forget that.”

“Well, thanks for helping me out then.”

“Happy to. Next time, don’t try to set me on fire.”

“No promises.”

We both laughed at that. Then we kept laughing — eventually Alyssa’s voice devolved into that same adorable wheezing cackle from before. Which just made me laugh even harder.

Then we stopped, instantly. Alyssa’s smile vanished at the same time as mine. She sensed it too. That same putrid too-sweet taste. Mana that smelled like an overripe corpse.

A shadow crossed Alyssa’s face. I looked back at the moon. In front of it, hovering in the air, was a black winged silhouette.

I pulled open the door and dragged Alyssa inside. I still felt the psychic stab of the raptor's presence. A kind of dark magic I'd hoped to never feel again. It cut through my mind and destroyed the sense of safety I'd felt holding Alyssa's hand.

We stood by the door, holding our breath. I knew the strength magic from my fight with Alyssa would last a few more minutes. I had a little more than enough mana for one more casting.

Alyssa tip-toed across the decayed wood floor of the house over to the bed. She gently picked up the pack with her glyphs and hoisted it over her shoulder.

I wanted to look outside, even though I was terrified of what I might see. I parted the red drapes by the door just an inch so I could see outside.

Nothing. Just a calm empty forest under a pale full moon, shining bright. The distant storm we heard earlier must have passed us by.

I still felt that dark presence. I waited as long as I could bear — about ten seconds — then looked out the window again.

And I saw exactly what I expected to see. A black shadow, with wide dark wings. Except this time, I saw it from the front. This time, I saw its shining, bared teeth.

It looked around the mud, seeing the footsteps we'd made leading up to the house. Maybe it didn't know we were here. Maybe it would fly away and Alyssa and I would be left alone and safe—

It looked at me. Did it actually look at me? I wasn't sure. It didn't seem to have eyes. I let the curtain fall and backed away from the window. It was coming. I knew it was coming. This was it. We were going to die.

I backed away, staring at the window. I needed to warn Alyssa. We had to run. How could we run? It could fly!

I dashed over to the bed, as quietly as I could manage. The lowest whisper I'd ever made in my life crawled out of my choked throat.

“Alyssa, we’re going to have to run.”

Alyssa’s eyes froze on me. Even her breathing halted.

“It’s right outside. It’s—”

A cacophonous crash.

I spun around. Moonlight flooded the room as the raptor shattered the glass window and tore through the curtains. It let out a horrifying shriek and stalked towards us, crimson drapes still caught on its wings and claws. The smell of rot and decay was overwhelming.

I tried to drag Alyssa so we could run. But she wouldn’t move. She stared straight through me into the monster. Her mouth hung open as she tried to voice something — but she couldn’t get the words out.

I turned back to the monster. I needed to run. But I couldn’t leave Alyssa behind. I needed to run. But I couldn’t.

Which only left one option. I ran straight towards the raptor.

I screamed at the top of my lungs. “LEAVE US ALONE!” I reared back to punch the monster.

A tree trunk slammed into me. I flew off to the side and collided with the back wall. Bits of old wood splintered and broke from the impact. All the air got sucked out of me as I fell to the floor.

A face with no eyes looked me over, its thick arm still raised.

“Black hair. Light skin.” A voice made of gargled dead insects and rusted metal creaked through the air. “Capture alive.”

The raptor turned back to Alyssa. “Green hair. Dark skin.” Its massive arm surged forward at a speed that made no sense given the monster’s size. Its claw wrapped around Alyssa’s neck, lifted her into the air, and shoved her against the back wall. “Execute on sight.”

It raised its other arm. The shape of it twisted in the air. It was like the arm really was a shadow, with no mass at all, able to morph and transform at will. Alyssa was still frozen, not even lifting her arms to fight the claw around her throat.

The monster’s arm took the shape of a long thin blade.

This wasn’t happening. This couldn’t be happening. I struggled to get back on my feet. My body screeched at the effort — even with the strength from my power glyph, I was too hurt, in too much pain.

I screamed. “ALYSSA!”

White light flashed. Magic filled the air.

The tip of the blade crashed into Alyssa's forehead. A massive network of multi-colored cracks erupted across Alyssa's face and down her arms and torso.

Alyssa came alive again. She pulled at the claw around her neck and gasped for air.

The raptor paused for a second, studying the magic barrier around Alyssa. Then it brought its blade arm back, and stabbed into Alyssa's face.

A crash. Cracks covered her entire body now. The barrier was about to shatter.

I finally got to my feet. I wouldn't let this happen. I couldn't let this happen — not when I'd just found a person who made me feel like I belonged somewhere. I didn't care if it was a lie. I believed it anyway!

I held out my palm. "I SAID, LEAVE US ALONE!" A torrent of flame aimed squarely at the raptor burst from my hand. It tore across the shadow. The monster shrieked, dropping Alyssa.

She fell to the ground, breathing deep and desperately. I ran towards the monster, fire still alight on its amorphous skin, and on the wooden floor and ceiling around it.

I poured a second dose of mana into my strength glyph. More power than I'd ever felt in my life flooded my being. I prepared to deliver a punch that could tear a hole through concrete.

The monster slugged at me again. But this time I was ready. "JUST DIE!" I ducked out of the way and sank an uppercut into the beast's gut.

A hellish wail vibrated in the air, in the floorboards, in my bones. The monster flew backward from the impact. It landed on its feet, then jumped towards the ceiling, one claw cutting into the wood and holding it in place, out of reach. Its blade arm morphed back into a claw, which it held out-stretched at me.

I looked over at Alyssa, still on the ground catching her breath, eyes straight forward not even looking at me or the monster.

Living shadows slashed through the air. This wasn't the monster's body — it was a kind of magic I'd never seen or heard of before. A

lattice-work of black poison carved through me.

I grit my teeth against the agony and death creeping through my veins. I aimed my palm at the monster, and shot another burst of fire at it. “JUST DIE JUST DIE JUST DIE JUST DIE!”

The monster kicked off the ceiling and into the floor. Then it launched forward and tackled me. I was in my stance ready for it, and thanks to the double-dose of magical strength I withstood the tackle. My feet dug into the cracking floorboards as I pushed back against the raptor.

The house was on fire. Parts of the walls and ceiling burned. It was getting hot. Alyssa murmured to herself by the bed, her arms wrapped around her knees.

I wrapped my arms around the raptor, lifted it into the air, and slammed us both into the ground, my elbow against its twisted facsimile of a face. Just die. Please just die.

The monster shrieked in pain from my magically charged suplex. It turned the motion from the attack back against me, flipping me over its body, and quickly got on top of me. It grabbed my arms and dug its claws into them, pinning me to the floor. Teeth sank into my shoulder. Nausea welled up in me from the pain and from the reeking corpse-stink.

I cried out in pain. I opened my mouth wide and tried to shoot more fire into the monster’s gut. Nothing happened.

I was out of mana.

The monster gnawed and crunched. Something snapped in my shoulder. My vision went red as pain seared my body. I saw a dead dog by the side of a road. I saw myself with my guts spilling out onto cobblestone streets.

I thought back to my conversations with Alyssa. I had more mana inside me. I searched for it. My normal reservoir was empty, but I knew there was so much more. I closed my eyes, searching.

The raptor bit down harder — the pain barely registered. All of a sudden, I could feel it. I could feel an endless wellspring of power inside me. It was enough to beat this monster, to save Alyssa. I reached out inside me. If I could tap into that power then I—

A thunk rang out and vibrated through me as something impacted the beast. It twisted away from me. Alyssa stood next to it, snot and tears drenching her face. She held her knives unsteadily. One had black ichor dripping from it.

The monster got off me and stood, facing Alyssa. She was still covered in a rainbow of cracks. They were regenerating too slowly. One good hit from the raptor and her barrier would shatter.

Which is exactly what happened. The monster slugged her, almost casually, and the rainbow barrier splintered and vanished. Alyssa flew back against the wood wall.

I tried to stand and help her. But I couldn't. The pain was just too much. This was all too much. And the power inside me that could save us was just out of reach.

There wasn't anything we could do. We were both going to die here.

The fire was everywhere now. It wouldn't be long before the whole house collapsed. It was hard to breathe from the smoke.

Both of the monster's arms turned into thin blades. It reared back to stab them into Alyssa. Alyssa held out her hands and screamed.

There was a bright, beautiful flash of blue. Magic filled the air.

Long white ice crystals materialized in front of Alyssa. Dozens of them. They hovered frozen in the air. Then they launched towards the raptor.

The monster recoiled as countless glass arrows penetrated its skin. It roared, then lurched forward. I tried to stand, but the agony from my broken bleeding shoulder bolted me to the ground. Fire blazed on the wall nearby. It crept towards me along the wooden floor.

"Execute on sight. Green hair. Dark skin. Execute on sight."

Another blue flash. Alyssa generated more waves of ice spears. She was using too much mana. I needed to stand up. I had to protect her. I had to save her!

Another flash. She fired icicles continuously into the monster. It kept screeching as the spears perforated its body. It lifted its blade arms, ready to stab them into Alyssa even against her onslaught of

magic. A chunk of flaming ceiling broke off and fell right next to Alyssa.

I managed to stand. I still had the extra power from my strength glyph. Even if I couldn't break through the wall inside me, I could help Alyssa. I gripped my fists together and lifted them over my head.

"DARK SKIN. GREEN HAIR. EXECUTE ON SIGHT. DARK SKIN. EXECUTE ON—"

Alyssa closed her eyes. Her whole body glowed blue as she readied a final massive volley of ice. The monster jumped towards her. She wasn't going to make it in time. She was going to die impaled on that monster's shadow-morphed swords.

I leapt forward and slammed my cinderblock bundled fists onto the raptor's head. It dropped instantly, its final attack cut short. I gritted my teeth hard against the stabbing ache in my shoulder, my vision tunneling inward.

I looked over towards Alyssa. She glowed bright white blue, a stark contrast with the flame rising up the wall behind her. Her eyes were still shut. Dozens of ice spears hovered in the air in front of her. I realized I was standing directly in their path. I jumped to the left, lifting my arms to shield my face.

Alyssa screamed. Sharp, cold pain erupted across the right side of my body. I collapsed.

Looking up from the floor, I saw Alyssa open her eyes and scream again. I still felt heat from the burning house, and pain from my multitude of wounds. I hadn't lost consciousness, but my body refused to do anything.

Alyssa's face took on a kind of cold clarity. She knelt down and scooped me off the floor. She lifted me effortlessly. God she was strong.

I could barely breathe from all the smoke. I tried to cough up some soot stuck in my throat. My diaphragm wasn't up for it. Moonlight shone across the room from a destroyed section of wall by the door.

The raptor screeched as a piece of burning ceiling collapsed on its body. It still wasn't dead. We would be, if we stayed in this building much longer.

Alyssa ran. She soared through the flaming hole in the wall and into the forest. My head sloughed to the side. I could see behind us. The rest of the flaming house's walls gave way, and the ceiling collapsed. I heard the raptor shriek.

Then I saw it. It broke through the collapsed ceiling and clawed its way up into the air. Its skin was on fire. It tried to fly higher. Its left wing seized and contracted, and the monster plummeted into the dirt. It stood back up, getting smaller in the distance as Alyssa ran.

Then it got larger again. It flew close to the ground, straight towards us.

I tried to say something to Alyssa, but only choked gasps left my throat. Trees blew past us as Alyssa sprinted along the forest floor by the moonlight.

The monster was completely ablaze. I could feel heat coming from it now. It let out a deep guttural wail. Alyssa looked over her shoulder at it. It was close now.

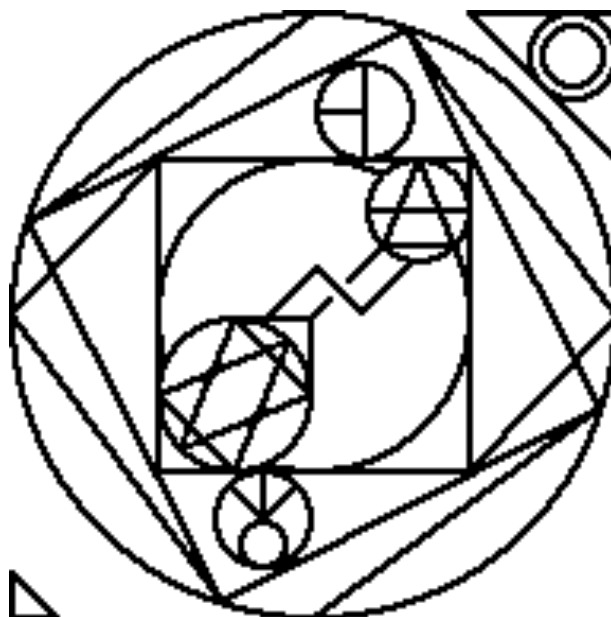
She stopped suddenly and tossed me to the ground. I tumbled in the dirt and landed face-down with a mouth full of leaves.

Blue light glowed in my peripheral vision. Was she casting more ice magic? But she'd already used her barrier twice.

Alyssa gasped and panted. I heard shuffling in the dirt nearby. She was fighting the raptor.

I tried to focus on the sounds and figure out what was happening. But a thick layer of wool had wrapped itself around my head. I couldn't make out anything distinctly.

I let myself drift away from it all, and sank into the darkness.



Elementary Ice Sigil, Example #2

(from *Advanced Glyph Use for Military and Industrial Applications*, pg. 295, figure 4.3)

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“Ah, you’re awake. That’s a good sign.”

I lifted my head off Alyssa’s bag — she must’ve put it there as a pillow. I looked around. The sun poked over the horizon through the web of trees off to the east. It was morning.

A campfire blazed nearby. I was thankful for the heat. Someone had stripped most of my clothes off and wrapped me in bandages.

My body screamed at me as I sat up. I was sore all over, with sharp pain biting at me at several spots along my arms and torso. Alyssa was cooking some fish over the fire.

“I’ll have this ready in a few minutes. Here, drink some water.” She tossed me her canteen. I managed to catch it, but the effort made me ache all over. I unscrewed the top and guzzled down fresh stream water.

“The raptor tore up your shoulder really bad. You’ve also got a fat bruise on your face from our fight before. The real issues though are the stab wounds on your arm. My ice tore straight through. That’s also where you got the mean gashes on your side and your leg.”

Alyssa spoke calmly. Her assessment of my wounds felt cold and clinical.

I touched the bandages. “Thanks for taking care of me, Alyssa.”

“Don’t thank me. The raptor was only chasing us because of those.” She pointed at the bag full of glyph scrolls I’d been sleeping on earlier. “And all your worst wounds are from my magic.”

“Alyssa, it was an accident.”

She continued as if I hadn’t said anything. “Irene should be able to fix you up. We’d be an hour away from the base normally, but it’ll probably take us until noon to get there now.”

“You used a lot of magic last night, Alyssa. Are you... okay?”

Alyssa didn’t say anything to that. Instead she pointed behind me. I looked over and gasped at what I saw.

A naked man lay on the ground, covered in dirt and leaves. He was pale, with brown hair and a slight build. Thick lines of glyph ink covered his back. Blood congealed around dozens of tiny wounds across his body. Some were tiny and circular. Many were long and jagged.

Alyssa's knives were on the ground next to him, covered in blood.

"I don't know what I thought the raptors were. That they were monsters the Guardianship made in a lab? Which isn't far from the truth, I guess."

"They're... people?"

"Yup. Some kind of glyph magic transformed his body. He turned back to normal after I killed him." Alyssa wandered over to the corpse. Her gait looked odd — instead of walking confidently, she favored her left leg. She picked up one of her knives and cleaned it with her shirt. "I wonder if he chose to be like that. Or if they chose for him."

"Alyssa..."

"This is all I know how to do, Lacy. I don't know who this man is. I don't know his story. And now he's dead."

She dropped the knife to the ground. A short icicle sprouted from a sparkling blue light in her other hand. "Before I met you, this was the only magic I'd resonated with. It's the same magic that killed my mom. I almost killed you with it. I've practically killed myself with it."

She dropped the icicle. It landed point-first and cut into the ground. After a few moments, it vanished in a puff of blue sparks.

"All I know how to do is hate, Lacy. They took everything else from me." She took a step forward and stumbled. Her leg was definitely wounded. Was it from the raptor? I didn't see any cuts on her pants.

"I'm flattered you're interested in me. Really. It feels good. But you should find someone else. Someone who's capable of love."

I got to my feet, even though I was still sore everywhere. I took careful measured steps over to Alyssa. I put my hands on her shoulders.

She just looked at the ground. “Alyssa,” I said. “Take off your pants.”

She jumped in surprise. “What?!”

“Your ice glyph. It’s on your leg, isn’t it? That’s why I haven’t seen it before.”

“Lacy, the one who’s hurt here is you. Don’t worry about me.”

“Take off your pants.” I fixed her with a cool stare.

She relented, and we both sat by the fire. Alyssa tugged off her shoes, then pants. She hiked up the edges of her shorts and showed me the glyph on her thigh.

It was a simple ice glyph, the kind I’d figured out based on the elementary glyphs they taught in class. But the skin under the glyph wasn’t brown. It was a light grey — it looked like ash. Dozens of lines of the grey shot out from under the glyph across her leg, around her thigh, and towards her knee and crotch.

I gently touched the skin the glyph was written on. It felt hard, like a blackened log in a burned out fire. It was cool to the touch.

A part of Alyssa’s leg had died. She’d used the mana animating her cells. And the cells had burned out.

“It won’t get better,” said Alyssa. “Healing magic won’t work either.”

I took a deep breath, and nodded. “It won’t spread at least, as long as you don’t mana burn again. But you’re right. It’ll be like this forever.”

“You tried to warn me. It’s my fault.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Only when I walk on it. The dead parts feel... sharp.”

I held her hand. “Alyssa, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine. It’s better than being dead.”

“Thank you for fighting so hard, Alyssa.”

The fire crackled in front of us. It was warm and comforting in the brisk winter morning air.

“I’m really sorry I hurt you, Lacy.”

“It was an accident. You were fighting for your life. For our lives.”

“Can you walk?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

I stood up and took some cautious steps around the campsite. My eyes caught on the dead raptor — the person. It was my first time seeing a dead body.

I studied the black glyph etched onto his back. I'd never seen anything like it. A series of concentric pseudo-spirals. And instead of terminating near the center, the spirals seemed to get tighter and smaller, endlessly. I'm sure it ended at some point, but I couldn't make it out with just my eyes. The glyph lines were too tiny and precise for a human to draw them — they must have used some kind of instrument, like my compass.

I didn't have the faintest idea how it worked. It didn't align with any of the fundamental patterns I'd learned at school. All the other glyphs I'd seen in Alyssa's bag made sense on some level. But this magic was entirely new to me.

I shook off the fear and followed after Alyssa. She'd said the chasm was normally only an hour away. We both moved slower now though — me because of my multitude of wounds from the raptor and the ice magic, and Alyssa because of the mana burn in her thigh.

"Alyssa, I'm not mad at you."

"I know. Thanks for saying it though."

Smiling, she took my hand in hers. Together we shuffled south, in pained silence.

Even in the cool winter air, I felt warm in the afternoon sun. Alyssa and I took breaks from walking frequently. We still had plenty of water and food from this morning.

“You know,” I said. “On some level, it’s pretty awesome that we beat both a mage knight and a raptor.”

Alyssa smiled. “Excuse me, *I* beat the mage knight. I seem to recall you standing there uselessly.”

“Touché. I definitely carried my weight against the raptor though.”

“Thanks for that. Especially since I took my sweet time getting my act together.”

“You freaked out when the giant murderous shadow-monster broke into our house? I can’t imagine why.”

We laughed. Alyssa found a patch of mushrooms under a tall bare tree. We decided to stop for a meal. I noticed some wild roses in a bush next to them. I plucked a particularly pretty pink flower and admired it. When Alyssa noticed, she took the flower from me and tucked it in my hair near my ear. “That’s a lovely picture,” she murmured.

Alyssa skewered the mushrooms on some sticks and held them over my hands for me to cook them. I thanked her for the meal and chowed down. After all our traveling, I’d actually grown to enjoy the mushrooms’ taste.

“Next time I’ll make you a cake.”

“And I’ll make you a *real* cucumber salad.”

Alyssa cackled at that. She took a mushroom off her skewer and tossed it at my face. I was ready and caught it — then I shoved it in her open mouth. She choked in surprise.

I grinned as she swallowed the mushroom. “I’m excited to meet your friends, Alyssa.”

“You should be! I know a lot of awesome people. You’ll really get along with Penny and Syd I think. Penny’s also a huge nerd. And Syd basically collects cute girls — she’ll latch onto you immediately.”

I blushed. “W-what? Are you saying she’s like, uh, me?”

Alyssa rolled her eyes. “She’s like you times a thousand. I practically had to beat her off with a stick when she joined up a year ago.”

“Oh, wow. Huh,” I said. “So wait. Are you saying I wasn’t too forward with you then?”

“Not at all. I know what too forward looks like and you’re much more relaxed.” She scratched her head. The gesture still reminded me of my old math teacher. “I’m making Syd sound like a creep, but she’s really sweet. She’s just more intense than I’m used to.”

Oh my god, was Alyssa blushing now?

An evil grin sprouted on my face. “So wait, did you like Syd’s *attention* or not?”

Alyssa sat ramrod straight, eyes wide. “Shut up.”

“C’mon, answer me.”

She coughed. “I mean. I guess I did. I just wasn’t ready for it at the time. Once I told her that she backed off immediately. She’s been a great friend ever since.”

My smile relaxed back into its non-evil state. “She sounds lovely. Penny too.”

“Isaac’s cool. He doesn’t talk with us much — Irene’s been trying to draw him out of his shell lately. I’m doing my best to help, but that’s not the kind of thing I’m good at.”

“Can you tell me about Irene?”

“She’s sort of the mom of the group? She’s way older than the rest of us. She’s really sweet.” Alyssa zoned out for a moment, smiling. “I guess there are a few other adults, but they’re almost always out somewhere. Irene doesn’t let the kids go out on missions — this was actually only my second time making the trip to the capital alone.”

“Was the first time the one where you ate bad mushrooms and puked your guts out?”

Alyssa shuddered and eyed the last mushroom on her stick suspiciously. “Yup. I’m still an amateur at this, if you couldn’t tell.”

“An amateur, huh? Has Irene killed a raptor?”

Alyssa laughed. “If she has, she hasn’t told us about it.”

I finished off my mushrooms and leaned back against a nearby tree. “So Syd’s like me then? Does that mean she wrote bad poetry about girls she liked without ever talking to them?”

“Oh god, of course you’re the pining type.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?! I’ve been straight-forward with you, haven’t I?”

“Yeah, after we almost killed each-other.”

“Ha, that was pretty fun, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, it was.”

Alyssa yelped and stood quickly. Apparently she’d been sitting in the path of some fire ants. They’d grown impatient enough to ask her to move, the only way they could. After I helped brush the bugs off Alyssa’s butt, we started walking again.

A long silence passed between us. It lasted until the question burning inside me grew too hot to contain. “Alyssa, are you like me too, then?”

She sighed. “It’s like I said last night. I don’t know what I am. I’ve been too wrapped up in hating the Guardianship to figure myself out.”

“That makes sense to me. It sounds like you’ve had a rough go of it.”

“Yeah, I have.” Alyssa tapped her thigh and winced. “And now I get to deal with whatever this is.”

“Yeah, that sucks.”

“It won’t be the worst thing I’ve dealt with. At least I didn’t get stabbed by a bunch of icicles like you.”

We cackled darkly together. I knew Alyssa’s mana burn was more serious than my wounds though. Alyssa said Irene could use healing magic — once we got to their base, I’d be fixed up quickly. But Alyssa would have to live with her injuries forever.

“Sometimes you just have to laugh.”

“You either laugh or you lose your mind.”

There were five bridges along the hundred mile canyon south of the Guardianship. Alyssa guided us towards the one closest to her base. A lot of the rebel groups stayed hidden in the main cities near the capital. But Irene kept theirs all the way south of the chasm. She cared about advancing the rebel cause; that's why Alyssa was out on this mission. But she was more concerned with keeping her group safe.

Guardianship citizens weren't allowed past the chasm. It wasn't a written law, but one quietly understood by the citizenry. To go beyond it was to leave the Guardianship's care and venture into the unknown. To cross it would be to say goodbye to my family and my old life.

The sun was high in the sky — it was around noon. Alyssa said if we kept going east the bridge was another ten to twenty minutes away. We moved slowly, me still dealing with all my wounds from the night before, and Alyssa hurting from her mana burn.

"Do you think they've got soldiers waiting there?" I asked.

"It's definitely possible. If they know about the raptor we killed, stationing guards at all the bridges is a safe bet."

"I have enough mana to use my strength sigil a couple times. If I do that I should be strong enough to fight."

"I only have enough for one barrier I think," said Alyssa. "I'm not absorbing as much mana as usual."

"That's probably because you mana burned last night. Your body's exhausted from channeling extra magic."

"I can still run and fight on this leg at least. It just hurts."

I hoped no one else would try to kill us today. But if Alyssa was prepared to fight, I had to be ready too.

I walked over to the edge of the cliff and looked down. The canyon was over a hundred feet deep. Apparently a river had run along the

bottom a long time ago, but now the bottom was bone-dry dirt and red clay.

“I think until last night, my plan was to end things here,” I said.

“Is that still your plan?”

“No. You knocked some sense into me.”

Alyssa put a hand around my waist. “Good. You helped me out too, for the record.”

I gazed down into the chasm. I imagined taking that last step over the side. The rush as my body accelerated and plummeted through the air. The crash of meat and splintered bone at the bottom.

I thought about all the circumstances that led to me almost making that choice. My old math teacher and the darkness in his eyes. Ellis, the mage that had calmly, rationally explained to me why all my fears about dream diving were unfounded. Claire, the mage who smirked behind his back the whole time as if listening to a funny joke. The mage Alyssa and I had possibly killed back in the capital.

I thought about my mom. How sad she’d looked by the fire. The slap, and the tears afterward.

I couldn’t hate any of them, not really. All I felt was relief that I’d found a new place to belong.

I wasn’t saying goodbye to my old life. That life was already long gone. I’d made that choice when I left my parents’ house. I was making a different choice now.

We walked together along the chasm’s edge. It extended straight towards the horizon, splitting the forest in half. The sun shone straight down on us. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky. “I’m excited to meet your friends, Alyssa.”

“I’m excited for Irene to fix all the holes I put in you.”

I laughed. “Yeah, they still hurt like hell to be honest.” I looked into Alyssa’s eyes. God her smile was pretty.

We finally arrived at the bridge. It was built from old stone; it looked like it had been around since before the Guardianship. The unkept path was rough and covered in fallen leaves and debris. Waist-high walls rose on each side, along with a handful of tall stone pillars that stuck out into the path. The pillars had metal supports about eight feet up, made to hold torches, in different times.

I stepped out onto the stone path with Alyssa. Leaves and sticks that had blown out onto the bridge from the forest crunched underfoot. We stopped in the middle of the bridge.

I took Alyssa's hand. A figure stood at the other end of the bridge, blocking our path. She wore a green tunic and had bright blond hair.

"Wow," said Claire. "You two look *awful*."

“Look. I’m under orders to capture you both alive. The green one because you have information we need. The brat because your parents were obnoxiously insistent to Ellis that we rescue you.”

Claire drew her sword. Three soldiers, identical in their plain uniforms and helmets, ran out from behind trees and blocked the way we’d come onto the bridge.

She held up her palm, showing us her remote glyph. “The raptors from Bridge B will be here in about five minutes. How about you come quietly with me? I promise it’ll be a lot more pleasant than letting the birds take care of you.” She gave that same awful smirk. “I know you’ve had a run-in with one already. It doesn’t seem like it went great for you.”

Alyssa and I stood still, tense and alert.

Claire rolled her eyes. “Alright, how about this. I’m giving you five seconds to drop your weapons and the glyphs. Five.”

We were both wounded. But my strength sigil would keep me on my feet for a while during a fight. I could push through the pain.

“Four.”

Claire held out a palm. The soldiers behind us walked closer.

“Three.”

Yellow sparks emanated from her hand.

“Two.”

Twin flashes of white and red. Alyssa dashed forward towards Claire, knives drawn and arms raised in front of her face. I followed directly behind her. The knight reacted instantly, firing a bolt of lightning at Alyssa.

The electricity split across Alyssa’s body as it failed to penetrate her barrier. I made a mana-strengthened leap over both Alyssa and Claire. I shot a blast of flame straight down at the mage as Alyssa cut at her with her knives.

“ZERO!” yelled Claire. With a red flash of her own, she jumped into the air straight through my fire blast and punched me in the gut. I fell backwards away from her as she kicked Alyssa hard in the head. Rainbow cracks spread down Alyssa’s neck, chest, and arms as Claire landed in a crouch.

Barely singed from my fire, she drew her sword in one hand as she stood and blocked Alyssa’s next attack. With her other hand she let loose another bolt of lightning, this one aimed at me. I barely read her move in time and dove to the side. The electricity arced into the stone pillar behind me. An explosion of dust erupted around all of us.

I jumped backwards away from them and shouted. “Alyssa, duck!”

I blasted a torrent of fire into the dust cloud. As the fire and dust dissipated, both Alyssa and the mage were lying prone on the bridge. I wasn’t sure why I expected that to work.

Before I could react, the mage leapt from the ground straight towards me, her sword aimed at my chest. I had no chance of dodging. I tried to block the sword with my arms.

But the mage’s strike was cut short. She fell back to the ground after Alyssa jumped and wrapped her arms around the mage’s legs.

“Get off me, you cockroach!” Claire yelled as she swung her sword into Alyssa’s face. The blade collided with a thunk. Alyssa smirked as more multicolored glowing cracks cut across her head and body.

The mage raised her sword again and prepared to smash it into Alyssa’s face. Alyssa let go and rolled away from her. The mage swore in pain as I kicked her hard in her back.

We’d held our own against this woman, a trained mage knight, for several crucial seconds. Because there were two of us, and only one of her. That advantage crumbled as the three other soldiers caught up to us.

They weren’t identical up close. Two men and a woman. One of the men was young and blonde. The other was older, with red hair and a crooked nose. The woman had straight black hair, like mine.

Alyssa got to her feet and dashed towards Claire, knives extended. Claire parried to the side of Alyssa’s strike and countered with an off-

handed slash of her sword. Alyssa blocked it with both of her knives, visibly off-balance because of the mage's strength.

While Alyssa recovered, the red-haired man ran forward and slashed at her with his sword.

"Lin, Owen! You take care of the noble brat!" he shouted at the other two soldiers. "I'll help Claire!"

"Got it, Mason!" they responded. They ran towards me.

Alyssa couldn't deal with Claire *and* another soldier. I had to act fast. With a magically-enhanced push, I tackled the red-haired soldier into a nearby pillar. He made a pathetic gasping sound and sank to the ground. Both of the others shouted and went to hit me with their swords. I reached out my left hand and blasted fire at both of them.

The woman caught the full force of my blast. The blonde one expected magic and ducked out of the way. I only barely avoided his sword, and managed to get off a mean punch right to his helmet.

There was a sickening give against my fist as his head twisted with a snap. He fell to the ground and stopped moving.

"OWEN!" the black-haired woman screamed. She'd just gotten back to her feet, as had the older soldier I'd tackled.

I stole a glance at Alyssa. She darted around the mage with intense speed, cutting at her and keeping her off-balance. The mage snarled and let off another lightning bolt, but struck only air.

I looked at the blonde soldier's body — at Owen. Don't think about it. Just fight.

The two remaining soldiers rushed me. I targeted the woman — her name was Lin — with a leg sweep. She fell to the ground. These chumps wouldn't last a minute in my martial arts club.

That was all this was. Just another sparring match, like all the ones I'd had with Alyssa. I'd beaten her, albeit only the one time. If I could beat her, I could beat anyone.

I sprung into another magically-enhanced tackle aimed at the older soldier — at Mason. He dodged this time, and before I could regain my balance he cut deep into my left arm. I gritted my teeth against the pain and punched his ribs. Armor dented around my fist.

I followed up with an uppercut and sent Mason flying back. He landed in a heap.

Lin screamed and ran towards me, sword extended. I side-stepped her attack, grabbed both her wrists, and head-butted her hard in the forehead. She sank to the ground, still.

Deep exhaustion welled up in me. Waves of pain exploded from last night's wounds and coursed through my body. It was too much to bear. The strength from my mana glyph was the only thing keeping me standing.

I pushed it down and turned my attention back to Alyssa. She looked fine — I saw several cuts across Claire though. Claire looked pissed off.

The mage growled, and her body glowed a dark red for a second time. I copied her, flooding the glyph on my stomach with another dose of mana. More power flowed through me.

I didn't have enough mana to use it a third time. I only had one or two more fire blasts in me too.

The other soldiers were all still on the ground. I decided to ignore them for now. I kicked off the bridge and flew towards the mage fighting Alyssa, bridging the gap between us almost instantly.

She shouted in surprise and cut at me with her sword. I ducked out of the way and aimed a super-powered punch to her side. She dodged it in turn, but took a nasty cut on her arm as she failed to parry Alyssa's knives.

Claire bounced backwards against a nearby pillar, reached out both her hands, and fired lightning at each of us. We each jumped out of the way, but I landed awkwardly and stumbled.

Then the mage did something strange. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a glass vial of some blue liquid. In a practiced motion, she popped the cork off the top of the vial and gulped down its contents. I stood back, wondering what was happening.

The mage dropped the vial and returned to her stance, sword up high. Her various burns and bleeding cuts were... healing. Her skin was actually knitting itself back together, just like Alyssa's barrier.

"Mana potions like that are expensive," said Alyssa. "You must be really incompetent to have to waste one on us."

Claire ignored Alyssa's taunt and shot more lightning at the ground in front of us. A cloud of dust and debris flew into the air between us and the mage. We both prepared for an attack. But none came.

When the debris cleared, we looked over and saw the mage on the ground next to two of the fallen soldiers. Her hands were pressed against their backs. Light flashed, and Lin and Mason both stirred.

The mage spoke to the soldiers as they started to stand. "C'mon. They've used up too much magic. This is gonna be easy. And remember, we've got reinforcements on the way."

Claire looked at Owen, the soldier with the twisted neck. She hadn't even tried healing him. "Idiot," she whispered.

Lin and Mason readied their swords, with Claire standing behind them. She didn't have a scratch on her, and the soldiers looked ready too. They were still, waiting for us to make the first move so they could destroy us.

How did things go wrong so quickly? Alyssa and I were winning. Now we were exhausted and they looked right as rain. Besides Owen. Don't think about it.

"Is your barrier still holding up, Alyssa?"

"Yeah. I'm not sure it can take a direct hit from that mage though. I don't have enough magic to use another one. How about you?"

"Yeah, I still feel strong. But I'm just about out too."

"If we run, that mage will just fry us from behind with lightning. Healing magic like she just used uses a lot of energy. That potion restored her mana."

The mage got tired of watching us whisper to each other and spoke up. "You're Larisa, right? Ellis asked me as a special favor to be sure to bring you back alive. I don't want to disappoint him. Why don't you just give up here?"

I looked over at Alyssa. Her teeth were gritted. She was determined to go down fighting here.

"We haven't found many mages compatible with those glyphs. You could make a good addition to our ranks." Claire wore the same twisted grin she had on when she visited my house. "After your *treatment*, of course."

All I wanted was the chance to make a choice. And Alyssa had given me that.

I wasn't going to drag her down with me.

I responded to the mage. "Here's what's gonna happen. Alyssa will toss you the bag with all the glyphs, and then run away. I'll stay here and leave with you."

The mage sneered and spat out words. "Sorry, but I'm not about to let either of you go."

She took something out of her pocket. Another vial? The color inside looked different from the healing potion.

Claire glanced at the fallen soldier behind them, then looked back at me.

"Especially after you killed one of my men."

She tossed the vial up in the air. It soared over our heads in an arc poised to land on the ground behind us. I turned my head to look at the traveling projectile.

The vial landed. And my world exploded.

I flew backwards into the side of the bridge. Something inside me snapped as my back impacted hard stone. I fell to the ground.

The vial was a mana bomb. I didn't know they could make them that tiny.

I tasted blood in my mouth. That explosion had hit me hard. I wondered if Claire would make any effort to save me, or if using the bomb meant she'd given up on that. Maybe that was what I deserved.

I saw my mother's face. God I'd hurt her so much. My dad too. They'd find out from the military that I'd been running around with a rebel thief. That I'd murdered someone.

They'd both wonder where they went wrong raising me, how I turned out so broken. I didn't have an answer for them. I never would.

I tried to move. My body screamed at me. I stayed still.

I saw the blurred shape of Alyssa. She was already up and fighting again. The barrier must have protected her from the explosion. Even from here I could see the wide array of multi-colored glowing cracks across her body. They didn't have time to heal, because she kept taking hits from the soldiers' swords.

I didn't register any emotion as Alyssa grabbed Lin's arm, lifted her into the air, and threw her over the side of the bridge. I didn't feel anything when her screaming cut off a few seconds later as she hit the bottom of the chasm.

Claire glowed crimson for a third time, and flung her sword against Alyssa. The barrier shattered. She didn't have enough magic to make another one.

Weak and mana-deprived and vulnerable, Alyssa jumped backwards away from Claire, and threw one of her two knives at Mason, the older soldier. The knife missed and flew into the chasm. He immediately smacked the other knife out of Alyssa's hand with his sword.

Alyssa leapt towards the soldier, flashed blue, and slammed a closed fist into his face. Mason screamed. A tall crystal of ice stuck out of the viewport in his helmet. He fell to the ground and went still.

Alyssa was fighting for her life. I wished I could help her, but my body just wouldn't move. And if I couldn't fight to help Alyssa, I wasn't going to at all. I certainly didn't believe my own worthless life was worth fighting for.

Claire screamed out some words I couldn't understand over the ringing in my ears. Alyssa ducked around and tried to tackle her. Claire flung a punch with her off-hand into Alyssa's chest. Electricity flashed around the point of impact, and the whole bridge vibrated. Alyssa coughed up blood and collapsed.

I couldn't just let this happen, could I? I tried to move again. With more effort than I'd ever mustered before in my life, I pushed my hands into the stone bridge and clambered up onto one knee. Claire took her sword and stabbed it into Alyssa's gut. Alyssa cried out in pain, and grabbed uselessly at the mage's tunic. The mage shook her off, snatched the bag of stolen glyphs, and flung it over her shoulder.

I had to stand up. I had to help Alyssa, like she helped me.

I knew I didn't deserve it, but I wanted to be with her. I wanted to run away with Alyssa and get away from all this pain.

The mage saw me standing and pulled her sword out of Alyssa. Alyssa clutched the wound with her closed fists. Claire cleaned her sword with her shirt. I tried to enter my stance. I was still magically strong, even if I'd only used the glyph twice versus the mage's three times.

The mage inspected her blade, and, when satisfied that it was spotless enough, leisurely walked over to me. I tried to punch her. She easily side-stepped it. I was too weak and slow after the bomb had hit me.

She didn't even use her sword — she just slapped me hard in the face.

I fell to the ground, tasting more blood. Something hard and loose rattled around in my mouth. I spat it out in my hand. It was a tooth. Even then I knew she hadn't hit me as hard she could, or my neck would've snapped like Owen's. She had something to say before she

killed me. The ringing had faded enough that I could hear her clearly at this point.

“I read your file, Larisa. You’re not an unusual case. When noble brats exhibit degenerate behaviors, it’s important to stomp it out early. Some of them don’t take kindly to it and try to run. They never escape.”

The mage grabbed my hair and lifted my face close to hers. She whispered to me. I had to strain to make out her words.

“Your parents begged Ellis to bring you back safe. They really care about you, you know? It’s a shame they have such an ungrateful daughter.”

Her grip on my hair tightened.

“I’m not as warm-hearted as Ellis. But he asked me nicely to help you. And I intended to oblige him.”

With her other hand, she punched the side of the bridge next to me. The stone shattered, leaving a large hole.

“Unfortunately, you and your girlfriend had to go and murder the first halfway competent subordinates I’ve ever been saddled with.”

She let go of my hair. My head slouched to the bridge. I tried to get up on my knees and fell over. I tried again. I fell over. “Only because you want to murder us.” The words croaked out of my throat.

Claire watched my pathetic display and smiled. “Ellis would take offense at that. He truly believes that dream diving saves people’s lives. Personally, I don’t care. I just know I’m good at it, and the pay’s great.”

I gasped out my question. “Then why are you fighting so hard?”

Claire patted my cheek, then stood. “I want to *erase* worms like you. That’s what we all want. Whether it’s by dream diving or running you through on our swords. That’s what you freaks deserve.”

She lifted her sword high above her head.

“So that’s how it is then,” I murmured to myself.

These people didn’t want to protect me. They didn’t want to heal me, to fix me.

“They don’t like the person that I am. So they want to destroy me.”

A frozen image, in a vast dark expanse. A tall woman with beautiful long black hair, kneeling down to comfort a little girl. The girl was crying. The woman looked at her with love, and kindness, and sadness, because it hurt her to know the girl was hurting.

The woman was there for the girl in so many ways.

But in one crucial way, she abandoned her. Even though she loved her so much, in this one way, she wasn't strong enough to protect her.

I wrapped my arms around the tall, frozen woman from behind. Cracks of white light splintered across her skin.

I spoke quietly. "I know you love me with all your heart." The cracks of light expanded across her whole body. The light was bright and beautiful. I was smiling, and I was crying.

I embraced her even more tightly. "Which is why this hurts so much. Because right now, I have to let you go. Right now, I have to say goodbye."

The woman shattered into brilliant white stars. I fell forward into them as they scattered and floated up into an empty sky.

I sank to my knees and looked at the stars as they faded into the void. "I love you, Mom."

I looked down, at the crying girl suspended in front of me.

"But right now, I have to love her more."

I hugged the little girl. I cried, because I wanted so desperately for her to be happy, to be safe, to be loved. I gave my whole heart to this girl who I knew was so scared and so alone.

"I'm here. I'm here for you now. I'm so sorry it took me so long."

My body glowed red. I was back on my feet now. I'd caught the mage's hand before she could bring her sword down on me. Wounded as I was, the third blast of power flowing from my strength sigil was enough to hold her still.

Claire's words had made it all click. I'd been thinking about this wrong.

"You're wrong. I don't deserve any of this. I don't deserve a drop of this pain."

They were all wrong. The Guardianship was wrong. Mom was wrong.

"I deserve to live. I deserve to be happy. I deserve a normal life."

Claire pushed hard, trying to bring her sword down on my head. I held her steady. She mustn't have had enough mana to use her sigil again.

All the self-loathing balled up inside my heart exploded outward. I was a supernova of hatred. And instead of paralyzing me with guilt, this new hate filled me with *power*.

"And if someone tries to destroy that, if someone tries to hurt me, if someone tries to turn me into something I'm not... I'm going to fight them with everything I've got."

It was a hate for everything that brought me to this point. A hate for everything that shattered the happy everyday life I deserved.

Alyssa was right. My parents failed me. If they'd really loved me, I wouldn't be running for my life, beaten down and freezing cold. I wouldn't have trudged through the mud or gotten mauled by some terrifying shadow monster. I wouldn't be here right now, fighting for my life against a soldier who had every intent to kill me.

Claire kept trying to wrench her wrist out of my grip. I coughed up grey ash. Horror dawned in her eyes as she realized what I was doing. I smirked at her.

It wasn't just liking the girl at school. I'd known my whole life I was different. Because every time a bit of that *different* slipped out, they'd tried to beat it out of me. Endless bullies who'd hurt me because of how I acted or how I looked. Teachers that refused to protect me, that joined in in torturing me for failing to fit in.

Only two people had ever seemed to understand me. Mr. Herron, who they'd killed. And my mother, who'd given up on me, who'd personally handed me over to his murderers.

My whole life, I'd only ever been told I was broken. Why had I been so worried about earning the love of these people?

My left arm burned as energy flowed from my fire glyph. A new inferno engulfed my whole body, more powerful than any I'd ever made before. The heat felt amazing. The mage screeched in agony as the fire scorched her skin.

I hated the mage. I hated my parents. I hated all of them for how much they hated me!

I roared over the flames. "And someday I'm gonna fall in love! And we'll hold hands, and share secrets, and kiss each other a whole bunch! And I won't give a damn what you, the Guardianship, or my mom and dad think about it!"

"What the hell are you talking about?!" Claire screamed. Red blisters erupted across her skin. She wrestled free of my grip and pulled away. The fire billowing out from my body didn't die down — it kept blazing. It was as if my fury itself was powering the glyph on my wrist.

I was never broken at all. This messed up world was broken!

I dodged to the side as Claire fired a bolt of lightning at me. "You're killing yourself, you freak!" she yelled. I pressed my hands into the surface of the bridge and channeled magic into it. The stone beneath the mage glowed red. A pillar of solid flame engulfed her from below.

The mage burst out from the pillar, her clothes smouldering and her face covered in burns and blisters. She fired a half dozen bolts of electricity in my direction. But I was already leaping high in the air, propelled along with a fire blast.

I rushed towards her for a flaming, magically powered-up tackle. She failed to duck in time and took the full force of the attack. She flew backwards, but I kept my momentum and ran towards her.

I tried to lift my left arm for a punch. It hung at my side, limp and unmoving. I realized I couldn't feel the arm at all, and that its skin was ashen and grey.

The flames enveloping my body extinguished. I'd lost the connection to my fire glyph. My left arm was completely dead.

So, that was the cost of mana burn. Alright. That just meant I had to wrap this up quick!

I reared back my right arm for a punch, but Claire had already parried to the side after I whiffed the first hit. Her sword plunged into my burnt out arm. She grinned, then frowned when I didn't react in any pain. My good arm wiped off her smirk with a glancing punch to her face.

After three charges of my strength glyph, even a glancing hit was enough to send Claire rolling across the ground. She stood up in a hurry before I could close the gap between us. She held out her sword with one hand, and searched her pocket with the other — the same pocket she'd pulled the potion from earlier.

The mage went pale as she dug around in her pocket. Then she checked the pocket on the other side of her tunic. "What the hell!?"

"Looking for this?"

The mage and I both turned towards the voice. It was Alyssa. She was getting to her feet, and wearing a big grin. Her stomach wasn't bleeding.

She twirled an empty glass vial. "You really ought to keep better track of your toys."

Alyssa, her remaining knife back in hand, darted towards the mage. I joined her, coming from the other angle. The mage gritted her teeth and tried to keep both of us in sight at once.

As hurt as I was, I still fought in perfect tandem with Alyssa. She cut at Claire with her knife. I kept trying to land powered-up punches. The mage was still strong, so if she landed a single hit with her sword she could kill one of us instantly. But she was distracted by having to fight two other mages at once.

We dipped and parried around Claire. Alyssa kept landing small cuts across her unarmored body. I wasn't landing any hits myself, especially since I had only one arm to fight with. But the work of dodging my more powerful blows kept her from avoiding all of Alyssa's. She was getting tired.

"Where are they?" muttered Claire.

I was on my last legs, of course. The mana burn had given me a jolt of power, but I was feeling its after-effects now. And that was after the explosion and multiple hits from the mage, and all the wounds from last night. Unlike Claire and Alyssa, I hadn't drunk any healing potions.

But my newfound fury still churned inside me like a furnace. That kept me on my feet. We had to defeat this woman so we could escape. I wasn't going to get brainwashed. I'd burn my soul to ash before I'd let them kill me.

The mage's sword cut right by me and landed hard on Alyssa's shoulder. A noise like bending metal rang as rainbow cracks spread across Alyssa's body. The bridge quaked under us. Perfect — the potion gave Alyssa enough mana to cast a new barrier!

I upped the intensity of my strikes even further. I needed to give Alyssa's barrier time to regenerate. I knew the mage was tired. But the raptors were coming. We needed to end this and get out of here.

Claire's sword slammed into Alyssa's knife. Alyssa lost her grip and the blade went flying off the side of the bridge. She caught herself hard on her right leg, and winced in pain from her mana burn.

I panicked, and made a mistake. I went for a punch while Alyssa was still recovering. I missed, and the mage seized her chance while we were both still off-balance. She glanced me in the throat with her elbow, and while I was even more off-balance from that, shot off a kick to my sternum.

I flew backwards into the side of the bridge and landed with a crash. For the second time today I heard bones inside me crack. Pain shook through my whole body.

I fell to the ground. I tried desperately to stand. "Don't give up yet. Don't give up yet." I said it over and over. But my body wouldn't

listen.

Claire kept battling Alyssa, who was almost a blur at this point. I heard Alyssa yell out a few disjointed sentences.

“I don’t know this girl too well yet!”

Blue mana sparks shone around Alyssa’s off-hand. The mage’s legs suddenly stopped in place.

“But she seems pretty cool!”

Claire looked down in a panic and saw ice fixing her feet to the stone bridge. More mana sparks emanated from Alyssa’s hand.

“And I’m not gonna let you hurt her anymore!”

Alyssa’s fist, covered in a block of heavy solid ice, crashed into Claire’s face.

Claire stumbled backward as the ice around her feet dissolved. She looked at both of us, grimaced, and threw Alyssa's bag in the air. It flew off into the chasm. So much for getting the glyphs back to Irene.

Claire collapsed. Alyssa watched her prone form for a few moments, then, satisfied we'd won, rushed over to me.

She touched me lightly, and I groaned in pain. She apologized.

I wanted to live, desperately. But I also had to be honest about this situation.

"Alyssa. You need to get out of here. More of them are coming."

Alyssa shook her head quickly. "I can't do that. You saved me. Yet again."

I smiled. "Personally I've lost track of who owes who."

Alyssa touched my hair. "I'm pretty sure you're still in the lead."

"Did you happen to grab anymore of those healing potions?"

"Sorry, I downed the last one."

"Any of the bombs then? Just for fun?"

"Nope, looks like she was only carrying one of those."

My eyes traced across the bridge, and saw the two downed soldiers from earlier. I remembered the other one Alyssa had thrown off the bridge.

"They're dead, right Alyssa?"

"Yeah. I don't think even that woman's healing magic can help them now."

"We did what we had to," I said quietly.

"I wish we didn't have to."

"Me too," I said. "Alright then. Do me a favor Alyssa, and listen to me. Get out of here before the raptors show up. Get back to your friends." I gestured south with a weak neck motion, one that would've been imperceptible if she hadn't been studying my face so closely.

“I can’t do that,” said Alyssa. She put her arms under me and stood, lifting me up with her. She made the motion look effortless.

She was so strong, and that was without any magic. I gulped as I stared at her. The sun bathed her in bright white light. All the cracks in her barrier had knitted themselves back together, and the chromatic shimmer across her body shone beautifully. My face felt hot.

“I’m bringing you back to Irene. She’s good with healing glyphs. I’m sure she can help you.”

I couldn’t argue with her. After all, this was what I wanted all along. If Alyssa wanted to save me, I’d let her.

We both heard awful shrieks and looked out west, towards the bright blue horizon. Three dark winged shadows flew towards us.

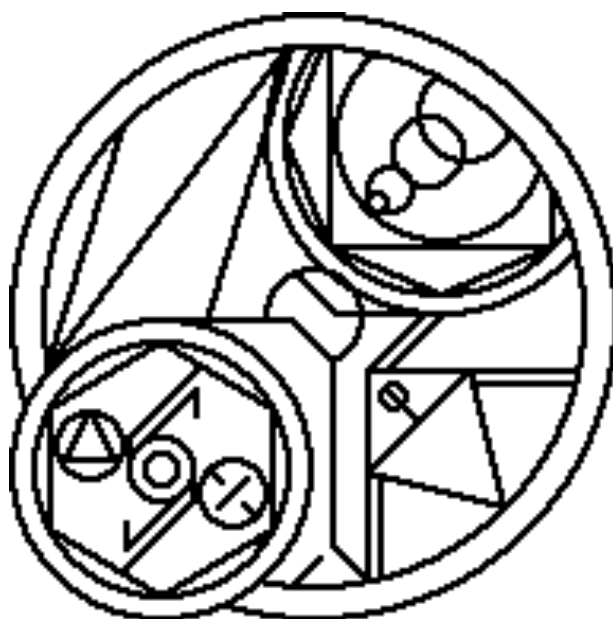
“Finally,” Claire murmured. She coughed as she sat up, then gave a simple order into the remote glyph on her hand. “Just subdue them. Might as well keep my promise to Ellis.”

Alyssa looked at all the raptors. Then she gently parted my hair.

“Lacy. Do you want to let them capture and brainwash you? Or do you want to come with me?”

I just smiled and gave Alyssa my reply. She smiled right back. She looked radiant.

She held me close, as close as I’d been wanting her to hold me this whole time. Then she sprinted across the bridge and into the southern forest.



Advanced Revival Sigil, Example #3
(from *Dr. Mal's Report on Glyph Self-Inscription for Medical Personnel*, pg. 476, figure 5.1)

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I sank through a miasma of frozen images. A fairy, lost and helpless in a deep dark forest. A girl on a hiking trail in the mountains standing alongside a faceless figure. The same girl impaled on black swords, falling down a deep ravine with no bottom. An empty wooden puzzle box left alone on a shelf. A vampire raging in the darkness of his keep at the theft of his precious necklace. A corpse in a broken twisted heap on the side of a road, her entrails spilling out onto the cobblestones.

Two girls fighting, one with bright green hair. Curiously, neither wore clothes. Images like that instilled a hot deep-rooted excitement and ache in my stomach. Normally, these images carried with them welling dread, anger, hurt. Now I just quietly enjoyed their thrill, protected from considering them too closely by the translucent veil of the dream.

I awoke in a dim room on a hard cot, believing I was still dreaming. A blond woman in a jean jacket stood over me. I thought I recognized her from somewhere, and the unnamed familiarity made me feel safe and comfortable.

A name rose out of my subconscious. "Irene?"

She nodded, and looked over at a corner of the room. A handful of glyph lamps illuminated walls of brown natural rock. It was humid and a bit cold. I followed Irene's gaze and saw Alyssa on the ground leaning against the wall. She was asleep.

"You two really banged yourselves up out there," said Irene quietly. I noticed a bit of round glass in her hand, etched with transparent markings. I recognized it as a scope, a kind of magically enhanced medical tool for looking inside bodies.

I remembered the mana burn. I remembered how much we'd hurt ourselves to escape from Claire and the raptor.

"Is Alyssa okay?"

“Yes. Outside the leg, of course. She’s really amazing. As wounded as she was, she carried you all the way here from the chasm.”

“Yeah, she is amazing.” I smiled. “Where’s ‘here?’”

“Our little rebel camp. You’re inside a cave system, in some mountains near the chasm.”

“You’re being awfully trusting, telling me that.”

“Alyssa’s filled me in on what happened to you. I don’t see any reason to distrust you.” Irene smiled, sadly. “You’ve been out for about a week, for the record. You hurt yourself really bad. We had to take... certain measures.”

I finally noticed my left arm — or rather, its absence. I lifted the stump, cut off about halfway down the bicep. It looked like it had healed nicely, at least.

“That much mana char would’ve poisoned you long-term. We had to remove it. I’m sorry.”

I eyed the stump. “Well, it’s not like I would’ve been able to do much with it anyway.”

“I’m working on a prosthetic now. I’ve made a few before — it won’t be mana-animated or anything fancy like some of the nobles have. But it should look nice, at least.”

“Thank you. That means a lot.” I winced as pain shot through my gut. It felt like there was something sharp inside me. I touched my stomach with my right hand and felt the burnt dead texture under my strength sigil. “How about the rest of the mana burn?”

“You damaged your intestines, and completely wrecked one of your kidneys. It’s not enough char to poison you thankfully. I’m not a surgeon, so we might’ve been out of luck if it was worse.”

“Wait... you think I’ll live, then?”

Irene scratched her head. I recognized the gesture — Alyssa did the same thing the same way when she was struggling to articulate something. It felt familiar for another reason too. “As far as I can tell, none of your injuries are fatal. You’ll have to get used to the pain and the digestion problems moving forward.”

She looked at me very seriously. “Don’t mana burn again. Ever. You got lucky. You will absolutely die if you do this to yourself even one more time.”

I nodded. Irene ran a hand over the glyph on my stomach. "This is precise line-work. I knew you had a gift back then." Her fingers grazed the spiderweb of black burnt lines seared in my flesh. "I feel guilty geometry wound up hurting you like this."

"Don't say that. This glyph saved our lives." I looked at Irene's familiar face, perplexed. "Wait, what do you mean 'back then?'"

Irene smiled. She didn't say anything.

I jerked myself up, triggering a sharp stab in my guts. My eyes welled up. Not from the pain, but because I realized who I was talking to.

"I thought you got dream dived!" I said loudly. "I thought you..."

Irene shh'd me, looking over at Alyssa. I continued more quietly. "What happened? How are you here? How are you fighting against the Guardianship?"

Irene sat back on a little stool by my cot. She stayed quiet.

"I'm sorry," I said, tears flowing freely now. "You don't have to tell me anything. I just... I don't understand."

"It's fine. I'm just not used to talking about it." Irene sighed. "My wife turned me in. When I told her I wanted to be..." Irene gestured across her body, "...this."

"At school they said you were part of some rebel group."

"Nope. That came later." Irene's eyes focused on a pin-prick in the far distance. "I followed their programming as best I could, afterward. I tried to be a good teacher, a good husband. But, even though they managed to kill everything else about me... they couldn't quite kill the part of me that wanted to be Irene."

"I don't understand. Does that mean... dream diving isn't as bad as I thought after all?"

Her tone got harsh suddenly. "No. It's definitely as bad as you think. Or worse."

She held my hand. "I'm sorry. It's just... I don't feel anything looking at you. The me from before, I remember how she felt... and you were her favorite student. They took those feelings from me. They severed my connections with everyone I'd ever loved. So that I'd love just them, and no one else."

Irene closed her eyes. “I’m glad you and Alyssa saved yourselves from that. The pain from being erased, and the voices they put in your head afterward. I don’t want any of you to be hurt that way.”

I squeezed her hand back, weakly. “So, you did die. In a sense.”

“Yeah. They ended the story of the Irene I could have been, in a different world. I’m someone new now.”

“Well,” I choked out a sob. “It’s nice to meet you then. You seem really nice.” I looked over at the corner, where the girl I loved dozed quietly. “Alyssa loves you a lot. You’ve taken good care of her.”

“Natalie would be happy to hear that.” Irene was crying too now. “I love her little girl to bits. I love the whole family we’ve made here.”

She squeezed my hand again. “It’s nice to meet you Lari— Lacy,” she said. “Please don’t tell anyone at camp. None of the others we’ve rescued have ever come back from a dream dive. Not really. I honestly think they messed mine up somehow.”

The pain in my stomach was starting to get to me. I ignored it, and gave Irene a big hug. “Either that, or you’re just really strong.”

Irene hugged me back. Her embrace was comforting in the cold cave. “I don’t want to give them any false hope.”

“Okay. I’ll keep it a secret.”

Alyssa mumbled and stirred in the corner. Then she noticed I was awake. Irene stood back as Alyssa sprung to her feet and ran to my side.

My spine rigid, I sat at the table in the glyph-lit cave that served as the base's dining hall. The table and bench were carved from wood. Ingredients grown in nearby gardens made up the plain but delicious salad in front of me. It would've been a serene scene, if not for the ceaseless barrage of questions from Alyssa's friends.

"Alyssa said you got hit by a mana bomb. Is that true? What did it feel like?" Penny leaned over the table towards me, her face clasped in her hands. She was desperate to hear about our fights with the mage knight and the raptor. "Did it really keep flying after you even after catching fire?"

"I heard you and Alyssa spent the night in Irene's old house in the woods," said Syd. "Did anything *happen* between you two there?" At some point in the conversation, she'd laid on the bench next to me and rested her head on my lap. The gentle weight on my thighs and her exceedingly pretty face breathing on my chin inspired challenging feelings. They were not making my situation any less overwhelming.

Isaac sat away from us, pretending to read his novel but listening intently. For several minutes, two-year-old Alice ran in circles around the table, pulling "confetti" out of her bag (actually bits of sticks and leaves) and throwing them in the air, yelling "WELCOME! WELCOME!" When she finally got tired of that, she started prodding my new prosthetic arm.

I did my best to answer, but every reply just prompted more questions. Just when I was getting into the rhythm of the conversation, Syd rolled her head a few degrees on my lap. My breathing hitched mid-sentence from the sudden change in pressure. I struggled to get more words out.

This was only a fraction of Alyssa and Irene's family, the ones who were most starved to meet me after two long weeks recovering in the "hospital wing" (really just a different part of the cave system

that made up most of the rebel base). I'd apparently be meeting the rest, excluding the handful of adults who were out on missions, later that day. The idea both exhausted and exhilarated me.

Alyssa, sensing I was overwhelmed, invited me for a tour of the gardens. Syd sat up obligingly as I stood to follow Alyssa. The others attempted to come with us. Alyssa halted them with a glare.

We left the cave through a small side-passage. My eyes adjusted to the first natural light I'd seen in weeks. I was astounded by what I saw.

Rows and rows of cultivated earth. Countless plants, some towering six feet in the air.

"We've got a big patch of tomatoes over there — Syd loves romas — along with a bunch of obvious staples like potatoes and corn. It's enough to eat pretty well, and since it's surrounded by mountains the Guardianship patrols never find it."

It was incredible. I stopped by a blank patch that looked like it had just been dug up. "What's over here?" I asked.

Alyssa blushed. "I, uh, planted some flowers a few days ago. I know it's not functional, but I thought it'd be nice. Irene had the seeds."

"Oh?" I said. "What made you want to plant flowers?"

"N-no reason. It just sounded nice. Oh, look!" We stopped for a few minutes as Alyssa excitedly examined some worms wriggling on top of the plowed dirt.

She showed me the chicken coop next. They'd named all sixteen of them — I had no idea how she could tell them apart. "Don't tell the others, but Wyatt's my favorite," she said with a grin.

I wrapped my remaining arm around Alyssa's waist. "This is amazing. Your family's really incredible, Alyssa."

"Ha... I guess they are my family, aren't they?"

"Yup, whether you like it or not." Irene's voice boomed. She'd snuck up behind the two of us. She wore an infectious bright smile and looked radiant in the afternoon sun. She held out a small box. "Hey Lacy, this is for you."

I took the little wooden package in my hand. I immediately recognized it. It was a puzzle box, the kind with some hidden

mechanism you had to trigger to open. It was just like the one Irene made for me years ago. The one I'd left behind in my old room, at my parents' house.

"Thank you," I said, trying feebly not to cry.

"No problem," said Irene, smiling. "I haven't made one of those in years. I actually had a lot of fun." She rested a hand on my shoulder. "Now c'mon, the others just got here. They're excited to meet you."

I smiled back, deeply appreciating the gift. I moved to follow her inside, then grimaced as pain rushed through my stomach. I clutched at my gut and hunched over. I still wasn't used to it yet.

Alyssa and Irene helped me sit. Alyssa held my hand. Slowly, the sharpness faded. I smiled at them.

I'd been hurt tremendously. So had Alyssa and Irene. So had everyone else in the camp, because none of us fit into the tidy boxes of the Guardianship and we'd all been punished for it in one way or another.

I wasn't going to escape that pain overnight. It was possible I'd never escape it, not fully. But I was here. And the garden smelled of wet tilled earth and the sunlight on my skin was bright and warm.

An Ending

Alyssa grinned as I flittered around like a hummingbird, getting everything set up for our picnic. I'd unfurled the blanket under our tree. I fiddled with the corners, trying to arrange everything comfortably.

It had taken a lot of time and experimentation, but I'd finished redrawing the sigils Alyssa had stolen from the Guardianship, the ones Claire had tossed into the chasm. The mission hadn't been a bust after all. My heart beat fast. I'd been planning this celebratory picnic for awhile; everything needed to be perfect. The weather had cooperated at least — the spring evening was temperate and lovely. New leaves budded on our tree.

I ignored the stab of stomach pain and continued setting up the picnic. They were less frequent now than they were three months ago. I used a small flame on my fingertip to light the set of candles I'd lined up on the earth nearby. Irene had helped inscribe a new fire glyph on my right wrist, one I'd promised to use responsibly.

"Hey Lacy." I looked up. Alyssa was holding out a rainbow bouquet of a dozen flowers, all different types and colors. They were beautiful. I smiled wide, took them gently, and set them in the emptied picnic basket. Alyssa took a pink wild rose from the basket, broke off the stem, and tucked it in my hair near my ear.

"Thanks, cutie-butt," I said.

"Oh my god that one is way too much," she replied, melting as expected. Syd informed me recently that pet names were a weakness of Alyssa's, one I was determined to exploit. The sillier and more embarrassing the name, the more it flustered her.

I busied myself preparing the meal. I poured the pre-chopped cucumbers and onions into the bowl, then sprinkled salt and pepper over them. Salt was a rare commodity at the rebel camp. We couldn't grow it ourselves, so we only ever got it stealing from Guardianship supply caches.

I pulled out a corked bottle and swirled the precious viscous liquid inside it. Salt wasn't a tenth as hard to come by as this. I popped it open, and generously poured the olive oil onto the vegetable mixture. Then I stirred the whole thing with a wooden spoon.

I handed the bowl to Alyssa, triumphant. "There. A *real* cucumber salad."

She thanked me, and dug into the meal with her fork. I watched as she took her first bite.

Alyssa's eyes went wide. "Lacy, this is the most delicious thing I've ever eaten." She spoke quickly, almost desperately.

She savored every bite, rapture plain on her face as she chewed. Before we knew it, she'd finished the bowl.

Alyssa blinked. "I'm sorry. I didn't save any for you."

"What are you talking about? I made it for you!"

"Ha... thanks. You were right. That was a lot better than plain chopped cucumber."

I wolfed down the mixed nuts I packed as Alyssa drank some of the tea she'd chilled with her ice sigil. She passed me the canteen and I washed down the remnants of the nuts with the cool drink. Then we split the tiny precious bar of chocolate Irene had secretly given me, inside the puzzle box.

Afterward, Alyssa moved over to our tree, taking care not to hurt her bad leg. She rested against the trunk, stomach full, content. I rested my head on her lap. She pet my hair gently, and we laid there in silence for a long time.

Alyssa finally piped up. "Your hair's really pretty, y'know."

I grinned. "Of course I know. You say it every day." I fiddled with my prosthetic. "Hey, Alyssa?"

"Yeah?"

"You deserve to be here," I said. "You're good enough. Just as you are."

She tousled my hair. "Where did that come from?"

"It's how you make me feel. I want to make you feel the same way, if I can."

"You're sweet," she said with a smile. Her eyes looked tired.

“Are you okay?”

“It’s fine. I always get sad when I’m really happy.”

“I think I understand.” I touched her cheek. “I love you, Alyssa.”

“I love you too, Lacy.”

I lowered my hand. “Do you want to tell me about your parents?”

She nodded. I closed my eyes, and listened.

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