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The Shadow Express

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## Abstract

### The Shadow Express

By Kylie Baker

On his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday, Sebastian receives a letter from his supposedly-dead brother, telling him to board a train called The Shadow Express. The first and only stop is purgatory. There are no return trips.

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## 1. All Will Fall

My brother was certifiably dead and had no business sending me birthday presents, but, in typical Ben fashion, he'd done it anyway.

I found it in the middle of a stack of birthday cards from relatives in Korea that I'd never met: an envelope with a pencil sketch of a lopsided pine tree. The tree was the only way I knew it was from Ben, since he always drew the same droopy pine tree instead of his signature. He said that pine trees were special in Korea because they were evergreen and meant longevity, but he was buried in a pine coffin at age 20 and the irony was apparently lost on him.

I should have thrown it away. It had to be a sick joke or a new world record for UPS inefficiency. Besides, I knew from my horror movie expertise that there was a 0.001% chance that accepting correspondence from a dead person would yield a positive outcome.

My life would have been a lot simpler if I'd just crumpled the letter up, swept it into the trash with my candy wrappers, and gone on with my exceptionally mediocre college life.

But, of course, I didn't do that.

I traced my fingers over the smeared graphite tree branches and swallowed down the hope that was bubbling up my throat, syrupy-sweet and nauseating and wrong. I'd seen his car-crushed body and read his impassive obituary and ran my fingers across the misquoted bible verse carved into his headstone, so I knew that Ben was literally and unquestionably dead, and thinking otherwise was not only illogical but downright masochistic.

I knew all of that because, despite what my parents said, I wasn't stupid. Yet, somehow, I still found myself holding the envelope and staring at the disproportionate pine tree, and all I could think was that part of Ben still existed in this world, just waiting for me to discover him again.

I tore the envelope open and two items fell out: a silver key tied to a piece of twine, and a blue sticky note with the words “South Station, 12AM: 1413 Burgundy St. #821” scrawled in what was definitely Ben’s poor excuse for cursive. Below that, a sketch of a jagged, five-pointed star.

And just like that, all thoughts of writing it off as some sadistic prank flew out the window because it was such a *Ben* thing to do. If there was one thing he’d loved more than aggressively celebrating birthdays, it was a good puzzle. When we were younger, I used to find sticky-notes with cryptic clues stuffed inside my sneakers and taped inside my notebooks. Sometimes they were call numbers that sent me scavenging through the Boston Public Library, sometimes they were geographic coordinates leading me to Chinese pawn shops in questionable parts of town, and sometimes they were addresses of houses that were usually (but not always) abandoned. One clue led to another, and at the end there was always some sort of prize waiting for me. Usually a bag of peanut M&M’s, since Ben knew I would eat them until all my teeth rotted and I fell into a diabetic coma if given the choice.

I’d been under the impression that our game ended a year ago on the official Worst Day of My Life, which coincided with my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. My schedule that day went something like this:

7:00AM: Wake up to a literal cops-and-robbers shootout at the Chinese supermarket across the street. Wish for the thousandth time that you lived anywhere else, like the bottom of the Charles River.

8:00AM: Go to school and don’t tell anyone it’s your birthday. Make it a game to see how many people know, but the game gets boring because no one knows, and you’re not sure if you won or lost.

4:00PM: Sit in the library and Google-translate birthday cards from relatives in Korea. Your

brother calls and says he'll make dinner for your birthday tonight so don't eat early and by the way do you want anything at the store? You tell him you just want *jjajangmyeon* and he laughs because you eat that every week but says he'll make it anyway and he loves you and you tell him to hurry up because you're hungry and then one of you hangs up, you can't remember who.

7:00PM: Your brother never calls you back, so you come home angry and hungry to find a policeman berating your dad for not speaking English. Then he tells you, and your parents wait for you to translate but you can't because it's not true, not possible, he's lying, and you forget how to speak Korean and English and how to breathe and you wish everyone would stop staring at you, wish you didn't exist. You decide not to tell them until you're sure, so you smile even though your face feels broken, tuck the secret somewhere dark inside of you, and go with the policeman to the hospital.

8:00PM: Identify your brother's body at the hospital morgue. You know before they even pull the sheet back. The cop who drove you is gone, and your parents are a 90-minute train ride away, so you know you need to call them, know you won't make it home like this. Spend an hour researching the right vocabulary to tell your parents in Korean that their son is dead. Write the entire speech out beforehand, but it's a waste of time because when your mom picks up the phone, all you can do is cry.

In the weeks after it happened, when I woke up in the morning and remembered all over again that I was an only child, I learned a lot of things that I didn't want to know.

I learned that emotions could feel impossibly heavy, like entire continents resting on your shoulders. I learned that if you didn't grab onto something and hold tight, the tide would drag you out until you were so cold and far from the shore that you thought you were dead because life couldn't possibly hurt so much. I learned that the average number of days a close friend will

put up with your depression before they stop trying to get you out of bed is 63.5, and roughly 57 days later you'll feel pathetic enough to actually get up and start Trying again.

These days, I was better at passing for a Functioning Member of Society. I went to college and didn't fail any classes, made minimum wage washing dishes at a pseudo-Italian restaurant, showered on a regular basis and even talked to girls on occasion. But some things would always set me back, like seeing the black Red Sox snapback he used to wear, or smelling extra-strong black coffee that he always drank, or receiving a post-mortem letter from him on his death-versary.

I sighed and ran my fingers over the teeth of the key, chewing on my lower lip while I considered my options. My plan for Day #365 of Only-Childhood had been to hide in the library and aggressively avoid thinking about Ben, but his unexpected letter had thrown a monkey wrench in that idea. I looked at my watch. Even if I decided to obey the cryptic letter and go to South Station, I had another two hours to kill before midnight. Besides, my favorite method of decision-making was delaydelaydelay until the absolute last minute. I threw my backpack down at an empty table (that I hoped to god wasn't made of pine) and sat down.

I pulled my notebook of blueprint paper from my backpack and turned to my current project: a map of Boston's subway lines superimposed on the city. It was days like this one (the really shitty ones, when you pep-talk yourself into putting on pants and braving the world, then said world tries its damn hardest to strike you with proverbial lightning) that I appreciated my arithmetical hobby the most.

When I made maps, time crumbled. It was a methodical process: Calculate the scale. Measure the angles. Mark. Erase. Redraw ad nauseam. That way, even the worst things in the world turned to harmless numbers (0.74 miles between Davis and Porter, a car moving 38 miles-

per-hour, a pedestrian moving 9 miles-per-hour, a 90-degree intersection, a mathematically inevitable impact.) Numbers numbers numbers and nothing else. No faces, no names, nothing that hurt.

I started making maps when I was 10, after my dad handed me an atlas to shut me up when I was being particularly whiny in the back seat. I didn't talk the rest of the car ride, too busy tracing my fingers over the printed highways. That was the day I realized that I could find anything I wanted if I had the right map in front of me. I could use maps to search for hidden treasure, to build kingdoms, to find my way home. Maps dictated the way we saw the world, so mapmakers created the world.

I started plastering my walls with maps of places I would probably never visit, fell asleep reading atlases, and checked out books on geography and coordinate systems. Then I started making maps of Seoul, the place where I was born but couldn't remember at all. I sketched the curves of the Hangang River and filled in Namsam Park with green watercolors, memorizing the streets and subway lines of a place where I could have lived.

Eventually, I started making maps of places that only existed in my dreams. I shaped the clay mountains and smoothed out the valleys of faraway places. Some of them were remote islands with nothing but freshwater ponds and orange orchards, while others were compact cities made of silver and aluminum skyscrapers with sidewalks made of glass.

My latest map revealed how the Blue Line of the subway curled around the contours of the coast while the Green Line split into streams that moved haphazardly west, like raindrops running down a window. I took out my ruler and started to measure the next stretch of Red Line heading towards Alewife Station.

The intercom hissed overhead and a muffled voice announced that the library was closing,

and exactly three seconds later, the lights clicked off. Everything went black except for a square of pale moonlight from the window that fell over my map. I looked at my watch, then folded my notebook and gathered the last of my M&M's scattered across the table, slipping the string of Ben's key over my head like a necklace.

I stepped outside and checked my phone, too tired to feel disappointed when the only missed call was from my mom. She'd wanted me to come home for my birthday, but we both knew that October 12th didn't really belong to me anymore. Besides, when I came home at night, it was always the same scene: my parents sitting at the far ends of the table, eating glass noodles in the dark while the changing light from the television cast colors across the white walls. They listened to the newscaster speaking a language they didn't understand, then my mom washed the dishes and my dad prayed in the coat closet and went to bed alone. They didn't look at me anymore and I didn't understand why until my dad started telling me to cut my hair and stop wearing Ben's clothes because it was making *eomma* cry. Instead of doing either of those things, I stopped coming home.

I didn't blame them for being upset. Objectively speaking, if they had to lose a son, then it would have been better for everyone if it had been me. Ben got a full scholarship to Harvard and trained to be a surgeon while I took out loans for state school and had yet to declare my major because "Mapmaker of Places that Don't Exist" wasn't a viable career path. Ben read and spoke perfect Korean to our parents while I was illiterate and spoke in creative-but-unintelligible Konglish. I looked like a store-brand version of Ben, perpetually three inches shorter and roughly 60% less attractive. He was even a better brother than me, buying me Celtics tickets that he couldn't afford and taking me out with his friends as if I was anything but average and unremarkable. My trajectory was never supposed to matter, because Ben was supposed to do

everything right for the both of us.

I felt tired again as I unlocked my bike, but not the kind of tired that any amount of sleep could fix. It was the tired that I felt in the first 120.5 Days Without Ben, when the thought of getting out of bed to pee made me want to cry because I couldn't imagine expending that much energy. I reasoned that the sooner I went to bed, the sooner the day would be over. South Station could wait, because Ben wasn't going to be any more dead tomorrow.

I tapped my back light and grimaced when it flickered before burning out. I considered taking my sweatshirt off since my white t-shirt would be more visible at night, but then a cold breeze whipped my hair back and I remembered it was October in New England and squashed that idea. Instead, I swiped my phone's flashlight on, slid it halfway into my left sleeve, and took off riding one-handed.

I congratulated myself on my innovation when a few cars rolled past me, clearly noticing my light and not reducing me to roadkill. It would have been a great idea, except I'd forgotten that it was fall, and fall in Boston meant lots of wet leaves on the ground.

A car flashed past me, way too close, mirror clipping my elbow. I swerved and wet leaves slid out from under my tires, bike lurching to the side. I couldn't decide if I should abandon my phone and use both hands to steer or just hang onto my phone and pray for the best, but I took too long to decide and the street collided with my face.

I lay still for a moment, baking under the shock waves and settling dust. Wet leaves stuck to my cheek when I peeled it from the asphalt and I couldn't feel half of my face, which was probably a good thing.

*I am dead*, I thought, even though I very clearly was not. *My family is cursed and both me and my brother have been felled by Boston drivers.*

But then it occurred to me that it was dark and I was lying in the middle of the street, and if I wasn't dead yet, the next car would make sure of it. I stood up faster than was medically advisable and immediately folded in half where the curb had bitten into my ribs. One hand gripped the rearview mirror of a parked car and held me upright. I sucked in air that knifed through my chest and kicked the world off-balance, the wrought-iron fences and willow trees swirling in my peripheral vision. The street was silent and the driver was long gone.

I swiped a hand under my nose and it came away hot and wet with red coating my fingers in an alarming quantity. More of it was splashed down the front of my sweatshirt and pants. I hesitantly felt my nose and confirmed it was still nose-shaped, sore but probably not broken (a small blessing, since I really didn't need to become another 10% less attractive than Ben, though my parents probably would have appreciated it). My ribs were another story, but I figured I'd know if any of them had impaled my lungs, so it was probably safe to skip the \$300 Emergency-Room-copay and just call it a night. The biggest casualty was Ben's college sweatshirt, which was splatter-painted with nose blood that I doubted would wash out.

I glanced down at my bike lying dejectedly on its side, then hauled it upright and spun the wheels. One of the handlebars was bent and the inner tube had been ripped from the front tire. My phone had burst into about 14 pieces that I didn't even bother picking up. The death of my phone irritated me far less than the battle wounds on my bike, which was my main method of transportation to and from class. I would have to take the train home, if it was even running.

The closet T stop was Kendall. I didn't have to look at a map to know that it was only four stops away from South Station while my dorm was seven stops and one transfer away. I could feel the shape of the key against my chest, cool metal against my possibly-broken ribs.

"Goddamnit, Ben," I said, startling a few people at the mouth of the station. I hauled my bike



down the steps descending into the subway. Even when my brother was dead, I couldn't say no to him.

I used my bike to force my way through the thinning crowd on the Red Line, scowling for the duration of the eleven-minute ride. No one else was heading towards South Station because they all knew the commuter rail stopped running at midnight, so I was entirely alone as I pushed my bike through the tunnel. The tiled walls were the clean black color of outer space, polished so that they reflected my blurred silhouette as I moved through. The tunnel swallowed the sounds of the subway and diffused them into a dull whirring of pipes and echoing footsteps on wet concrete.

I pushed my increasingly-heavy bike into the station. The ceiling arched upwards, leaving an empty yawn of space where the sound of my footsteps echoed above. The vendors that usually sold donuts and coffee to commuters had long since locked up. I walked towards the far end of the station where massive arches were carved into the stone walls, the windows to the train platforms beyond them cast in moonlight. The electronic timetable suspended above the archways only listed one train, departing for Rockport at 11:55PM.

I sat down on a bench facing the arches, dropping my bike unceremoniously at my feet. The last train blew its whistle and its wheels started spinning. The electronic timetable went black because the last train of the night had left, and I found myself staring pointlessly at an empty screen and a deserted station.

In the silence that followed, I closed my eyes and allowed myself exactly 60 seconds of self-pity as a birthday present. I let myself feel small and alone in the empty station. I reminded myself that I'd known coming here meant pain and disappointment but I'd come anyway because I loved Ben the most in moments when I missed him and I wanted to miss him because that

meant he'd mattered. I told myself that no one knew I was here, and if I got on a train and never came back, it would be weeks before anyone maybe noticed.

I counted to 60 and opened my eyes, swallowing down all the bad thoughts like a shot of hard alcohol that burned down my throat. My watch said it was two past midnight, so I stood up and righted my bike.

As I turned to walk out of the station, the floor hummed under my sneakers. The timetable swung slightly from its clear strings, casting swaying shadows across the tiles. I turned around and squinted as a white light beyond the arches blazed like a shooting star and a shrill train whistle knifed into my eardrums. The floor trembled as if it were about to crumble beneath me. I dropped my bike but couldn't even hear it hit the floor over the searing whistle and quaking earth.

Then suddenly, everything stopped. The silence rang in my ears as the shaking slowly died down, and I realized that the white light was coming from a train parked at the third platform. I picked up my bike and moved closer, glancing up at the still-blank timetable swinging overhead.

As I stepped out into the uncovered night of the platform, I suddenly felt tiny and breakable beside the gleaming black monstrosity of a train. It looked like one of the model trains I'd played with as a kid, a coal-fired steam engine with a round face and smokebox like in black-and-white films. The paint was such a pure black that it looked less like a train than a train-shaped hole ripped out of the universe, an absence of matter. The tender had silver letters printed pristinely into the side, reading: "THE SHADOW EXPRESS." Beneath the words was the outline of a five-pointed star.

"Bike accident?" said a voice behind me.

I spun around and grimaced when my ribs ached, looking up at a disarmingly tall man in a

conductor's hat that cast shadows over his eyes. He wore a double-breasted black peacoat with silver buttons, a well-ironed white collar and black tie peeking out around his neck. He shifted slightly and I caught a glimpse of dark eyes. I wasn't one to strike up conversations with strangers in deserted train stations, so I thought about dropping my bike and running away screaming, or at least demanding to know how the hell he knew I'd been in an accident, but then one of the reflectors popped off my back tire and I remembered that I was pushing around a bike that looked like a Salvador Dali painting.

"Uh, yeah," I said, wiping at the blood under my nose. "I didn't know the trains ran this late."

"This one does," he said. He held out a gloved hand. Something about his movements seemed oddly rigid. "Ticket, please."

"Oh, I'm not, uh..." I took a step back and another reflector fell off my bike and clinked against the tiles. "I'm not getting on."

The man looked down at me. For a moment, the shadows parted, revealing the gaunt angles of his face. His irises were almost as dark as the train.

"If you weren't getting on," he said, "you wouldn't be here. You wouldn't even be able to see me."

Wind hummed through the tunnel. I looked back at the train and the star etched on the car, exactly the same as the one in Ben's letter. Suddenly I was six years old, clutching onto Ben's parka and shaking while we sat on a sled at the top of a steep hill in December. I was twelve, standing at the edge of a cliff overlooking a swimming hole in Maine while Ben's friends splashed down below and hollered at me to jump down already because they didn't know I was terrified of heights. I was seventeen, watching Ben use my phone to text love poems to Lilian

Porter from chemistry class and convince her I was someone worth talking to.

“Trust me,” Ben had said every time. “I won’t let anything bad happen.”

I looked back at the conductor.

“Where does this train go?”

He smiled, adjusting his cap.

“The Other Side.”

I wanted to ask more questions, but I figured it would be pointless when the tall man seemed to have an affinity for ambiguity. This was what Ben wanted me to see, wasn’t it?

“I’ll need to see your ticket,” the man said. “We’re slated for departure in three minutes.”

“Oh.” My shoulders dropped. “I don’t—”

“Has anything unusual come into your possession today?” he said, the words jaded, like he’d said them a thousand times before. “Did anything appear in your pockets after the accident? Any strange items on the street catch your eye? Bus tokens? A thimble? A watch? A ring? Most likely some form of silver.”

I remembered the cold metal of the key tied around my neck. My hands fished it out from inside my shirt and pulled it over my head, holding it out to the conductor. He ran a gloved thumb across it and nodded, then held it up by the string and watched the hazy moonlight shiver across the surface. It swung freely for a moment against the backdrop of the half-moon, then suddenly the dark sky seemed to bleed onto the silver teeth and swallow the key whole, painting it the same hollow black as the train beside us.

“Yes, that will do.”

The man lowered his arm and tossed the key back to me. When I caught it, it was silver again.

He stepped back and gestured to the car beside us. I didn't feel my feet move as I stepped into the train, didn't realize what I'd done until the door swung shut behind me. The mechanical whirring grew louder inside the contained space. I stepped through a shallow pool of murky water, leaning my bike against one of the seats.

Someone whimpered at the other end of the car and my head snapped towards the sound. A little girl in a purple raincoat huddled on the floor on the opposite end of the train car, hugging her knees and rocking back and forth. I crossed the car, stumbling as the ground lurched back and the wheels started whispering over the metal tracks.

"Hey, are you okay?" I said. The girl sniffed and moved farther away, her polka-dot rain boots squeaking as she scooted across the puddle.

"Hey," I said, kneeling down beside her. "Where are your parents?"

The girl abruptly stopped her sniveling, every part of her suddenly so still that I wondered if time had stopped.

Then she lunged at me, a tiny hand raking fingernails across my cheek. I fell back into the puddle and scooted frantically away. The girl glared at me, her eyes as dark and empty as midnight, almost like she had no eyes at all.

"Gone," she said, kicking at the puddle. Then she sat down clumsily on the floor and sobbed, her face in her hands. "Everything is gone," she said, wiping her nose with the back of her sleeve. "Don't you get it? We can never go back."

I stayed motionless, watching her cry as the water soaked into my pants and infinities of black surged by outside the windows. The train wheels hissed as they scraped and sparked against the tracks. I closed my eyes and pulled the key from my shirt, running my fingers across the cool silver and collapsing back against a seat with a dry laugh.

After a 365-day hiatus and against all laws of science, our scavenger hunt was starting again.

I curled my fingers around the key and closed my eyes.

*Okay, Ben, I thought. I'm ready to play.*

## 2. Woman in Black

At the first and only stop of The Shadow Express, there was darkness.

A starless night had fallen over the city, like the black depths of the ocean painted overhead. Between the shadowed brick buildings, street lamps cast clean circles of light on the pavement. A cool rain fell down and glazed the gray stone sidewalks, gentler than snow.

A hand grabbed my shoulder. I flinched and stumbled into my bike, spinning around to face the conductor.

“Dorian will take you to Headquarters,” he said, gesturing to a man in a gray raincoat that was kneeling down in front of the little girl. “Don’t go down any side streets on the way there.”

I nodded as he turned back to the train. Passengers from the other cars were already following Dorian down the main street. I pushed my bike forward, tripping twice over the flailing inner tube on the front tire. Noises seemed amplified, like we were walking through a cathedral. The only sounds in the stillness were our shoes squeaking against the damp pavement, the whisper of my tires spinning, my own breaths.

Dorian said nothing, walking beside the little girl but not so much as looking over his shoulder to see if the rest of us were following. I started to fall towards the back of the group because my ribs throbbed and the wheels on my bike obstinately refused to turn. I looked at the steep upward slope of the street where Dorian was heading and groaned, leaning against a streetlight to catch my breath. The group parted around me like water, flowing wordlessly past. I tried to catch up after a few moments but it hurt just to breathe and no one seemed to care. I stepped on the inner tube again and this time wasn’t fast enough to catch myself before I hit the ground, feeling the jolt all the way up to my bruised nose.

My subsequent swearing echoed down the street. I kicked my bike away and sat up as a door

swung open somewhere to my right. Light spilled across the sidewalk and two men stumbled out of a building with a wood placard that read “The Mountain Pine” next to a picture of a beer glass. I licked my lips, imagining how incredible a glass of water would taste. I glanced over my shoulder at the group that was already a block ahead, apparently unaware that I was about as agile as a fish flopping on land and equally as dehydrated, then stood up unsteadily and headed towards the bar.

I pushed the door open and stepped into a bar lit by white paper lanterns and a fluorescent display of green, black, and gold bottles on the shelf behind the counter. An alarming amount of people filled the room, shoving past each other through the haze of smoke and scent of high-proof alcohol. I attempted to infiltrate the crowd and my face promptly collided with a beer mug, sending beer foam sloshing over the rim onto the shirt of the bearded man holding it.

"Sorry!" I said. He glared me down with hazy black eyes, so I exploited my lankiness by slithering into the crowd before I broke any more of my bones due to sheer stupidity, scanning the room for anyone who might be relatively sober or helpful.

A girl sat on the counter, black combat boots perched on a barstool. A black leather jacket clung to her narrow frame and a long ponytail came to a sharp point between her shoulder blades. Her skin matched the white of the paper lanterns suspended above her head. She looked up as I approached, her eyes catching mine. Just like everyone else's, they were black like the empty vacuum of space between the stars, but hers seemed deeper, as endless as the universe. Looking into them was like being swallowed by the sky.

Then she looked away and the noise filtered back into the room.

"Dave!" she shouted over her shoulder, her voice cutting cleanly through the conversations in the room, "A round for the new arrival!"



The men in the room cheered, some of them patting me on the shoulder. I approached the bar as someone shoved a shot glass of something clear into my hand, which spilled over onto my scraped palm and seared.

"Congrats."

I looked up and saw the girl in front of me, her own shot glass in hand. She was much smaller than I'd expected, the top of her head only reaching my chest. Her eyes looked centuries old, the dim bar lighting casting shadows on the contours in her face.

"Congrats?"

"For making it here in mostly one piece." She nodded to my drink. "I can't talk to you anymore until you drink that."

I peered down at the liquid with trepidation. The girl was watching me, apparently serious about not talking until I drank. I sighed and figured that if there was any day to start drinking, it would be today. I tossed the drink down my throat like a pill and tried not to make a face when it felt like a fiery comet going down. When I leveled my gaze, the girl had locked her eyes into mine again. Her eyes widened for a moment before narrowing as if she were probing for something in my pupils. Her grip on her shot glass tensed and glass crunched in her palm, sending alcohol gushing over her fingers.

"Are you—"

She looked down at the mess in her hand.

"These glasses are cheap," she said evenly, palming the cracked glass into the hand of a man passing by and snatching his glass. She quickly tossed the shot back and faced me with a smug grin, the gnawing emptiness gone from her eyes. Then she took a step closer and I felt cold air radiate off of her.

"I like your eyes," she said, tracing the dried blood on my sweatshirt with a tiny finger.

"Are you, uh, sure you want to touch that? That's probably not sanitary."

She laughed and tugged on one of my sweatshirt strings.

"What happened to you?" she said, another finger ghosting over the blood that had dried on my face, starting under my nose and running over the corner of my lips.

"Bike accident," I said, her icy fingers still tracing my lower lip.

"Tragic. You're only what, twenty? Twenty-one?"

"Nineteen," I said. Another hand reached up to brush my collarbone.

"You're young. But then again, I was only eighteen when I..."

"When you what?"

She grinned, bright like a solar flare. "Wouldn't you like to know?" She pushed another glass into my hand and tossed another one back herself, laughing when I couldn't hide my grimace.

"What's your name?" she said, wiping her lips on her sleeve.

"Uh, Sebastian," I said, swallowing back the second wave of fire in my throat.

"Uh Sebastian," she said, smirking. "The only other Sebastian I know is a dog."

"Yeah." I stuffed my hands in my pockets. "I uh, watched *The Little Mermaid* when I was a kid and really liked that crab-lobster guy named Sebastian, so that's how that happened.

Mistakes were made."

"You chose your own name?"

"My English name. I didn't trust my parents to do it. My real name is Seo-jun."

"Seo-jun," she repeated, nodding. "That's a Korean name. But there's no way you're Korean."

I blinked slowly, my eyelids not responding as quickly as my brain had told them to, and

that's how I knew the shots were kicking in.

"I am, though," I said. "My last name's Choi." I paused. "How would you know? Are you—"

"I'm Chinese," she said. "And there's no way you're Korean because I know for a fact that Koreans drink a lot of *soju*. You should be able to handle this, and yet you're turning red already."

My brain suddenly took notice of her dangerous smirk and informed me that she was, in fact, teasing me. I laughed a little too loudly to compensate for my density.

"Well, I moved to America when I was five, and I wasn't much of a drinker in kindergarten."

The girl laughed and grabbed both my sweatshirt strings, pulling me down to her level. "I like you, Choi," she whispered. "Can I show you something?"

I blinked, staring breathlessly into the expanse of her eyes. "Uh, what kind of something?"

"My office. It's upstairs."

"Office?"

But her tiny hand was already wrapped around mine, pulling me through the crowd. I stumbled into the bearded man and tried to duck out of his line of sight while she wove through the swarm of people, still tugging me behind her.

"What do you do?" I asked.

"I'm a street cleaner of sorts," she said, pulling me through a door behind the counter and up a dim staircase.

"Then why do you need an office?"

The grip on my hand tightened.

"You ask a lot of things that you really don't need to know."

She pushed me into a dark room and locked the door.

"What's your name?" I said. I stood in the complete darkness and for a moment I felt as if her eyes had devoured me entirely. Then a lamp clicked on and warm yellow light surrounded the girl, kneeling on the hardwood floor in front of a small fridge in the corner. Heavy curtains stirred with evening air but let no light in. In the middle of the adjacent wall there was a double bed with an iron scroll headboard but no bedding to hide the diamond patterns on the mattress or box springs piercing the surface.

"I swear I had some Tanqueray in here," she said.

"It's okay, I think I've had enough to drink tonight anyway. What's your name?"

"Kenny took all the good stuff. There's just this cheap shit and water."

"Water is fine. Do you, uh, have a name?"

The girl frowned as she turned around, tossing a bottle of water at my head that I fumbled to catch.

"Guess," she said harshly, unscrewing the cap on her own bottle and taking a quick swig.

"You've probably heard of me."

"Heard of you?" I paused before taking a sip. "Are you famous?"

She smirked, sauntering across the dim room towards me. "Around here, yes. A lot of people have heard about me but don't know what I look like. So guess."

Before I could speak, she placed one hand on my chest and guided me backwards until my knees buckled against the bed frame, forcing me to sit down. She straddled my legs and ran her fingertips over the bloodstains on my sweatshirt, gently taking my water bottle away and tossing it somewhere out of sight. Her body was feather-light, her touch a stinging cold. An amber necklace with some sort of crystallized spider hung at her pale collarbone, capturing what little

light was left in the room.

"Um, is it an English name or a Chinese name?" I said, my eyes following the patterns drawn by her fingertips.

"English," she said, placing two fingers in her mouth and sucking the flecks of dried blood from her nails.

"W...what letter does it start with?"

She smiled like lightning and pushed my shoulder back onto the bed. I winced as my ribs throbbed, but the pain helped clear my head from the black clouds brewing above me.

"E" she whispered into the shell of my ear.

"Emily," I said. Her breath was a winter breeze along my neck.

"L."

"Elizabeth." Her glass fingertips glided across my eyelashes and over my lips.

"E."

"El..." I faltered. "El... Elena?"

"A" she breathed into the corner of my mouth.

"El..." I murmured. All her ministrations stopped. She was suspended inches from my lips.

"Eleanor," she said. The word was a whisper but stung like a sudden snake bite. "Eleanor Liu."

"Eleanor Liu," I said. "Um, that's a nice name."

The hand on my neck suddenly clenched, pinching skin under sharp nails.

"You haven't heard of me?"

"No? I'm sorry, should I have—"

She grabbed my chin and angled it up towards her. "You're not a bad liar, Choi."

"I'm not lying!" I said, taking her wrist and trying to pull her hand from my face. "What is it that you do, exactly? Maybe if you give me some context I'll remember?"

Her grip on my jaw tightened. "I'm a bloodhound who sniffs out liars like you."

A hand slammed down onto my forehead and wrenched my eyelids open.

"Hey! What—" I tried to sit up but a knee collided with my ribs, making asteroids flash across my eyes. A lamp clicked on directly overhead, searing white across my vision. Water splashed into my eyes and down my shirt.

"Hey!" I said, struggling against her. Fingers held my left eye open and all I could see was the solar eclipse of white light above me.

"Your eyes are still brown," she said, her voice suddenly vacant. The frozen grip on my face softened and disappeared. I sat up and wiped my face with my sleeve.

"Of course they are!" I said, spitting out water. "Were you expecting them to change?"

"Yes," she said, crossing her arms. "What are you?"

"What do you mean 'what' am I?" I raked my wet bangs out of my eyes. "What the hell is going on?"

"Your eyes are supposed to be black. Everyone's eyes are black here."

My throat went dry. The hollow, black eyes in every face that stared through me since I got off the train weren't a coincidence or paranoia.

"Why?" I said.

Eleanor looked past me, poised like an ice sculpture in the dim light. Gray shadows hollowed out the caverns in her cheeks and under her eyes, making her look more like a skeleton than a young girl.

"It's a side effect," she said. "The more important question would be why are you immune?"

She stepped towards me again and jammed a thumb under my eye, pulling down my lower lid and watching my eye twitch with dryness in the cold air.

"I thought you were using some cheap iris dye to help disguise you," she said, "but you're not Lost."

"I am extremely lost."

She waved her hand dismissively. "I mean, you're not a Lost Soul. How long has it been?"

"Since what?"

"Since the accident."

"I don't know, a few hours?"

"And what happened to your body?"

"My body?" My skin suddenly prickled with cold. "What do you mean? I'm a little banged up, but that's it."

"No, you idiot. *Where* is your body?"

"Right here! What are you getting at?"

She shook her head. "This isn't your body. This is your soul. What you see is all just light reflected off the days of your life. They must have done something with your real body."

"Who is 'they?'" I said, standing up and moving towards Eleanor, my frame towering over hers.

She frowned and stood rooted in her granite stance, eyes lancing into mine. "The paramedics. The police. Whoever was there."

"I didn't call the police! The driver left, so I walked away!"

"So when did it happen?" Eleanor said, her face tight and lips pursed.

"When did *what* happen?"

"When did you die?"

My response wilted on my lips. Eleanor's words were stones falling down a chasm that opened up under my feet and swallowed the light from the room. I looked at the cast ivory of Eleanor's face and unchanging expression, the black shadows under her jaw and hollow space where eyes should have been that resembled a skull and not a face. I realized that her unnerving stillness came from the fact that she *wasn't breathing*.

"I'm not dead," I said. "I... I didn't—"

"You must be, or you wouldn't be here."

"I'm not!" I stumbled back into the bedpost. "All of you are dead? That's what's going on here? What is this place?"

"Shut up," Eleanor said, grabbing my hand and pressing my fingertips to the white expanse of her neck. "Count my pulse." She shoved two fingers into my jugular. "I'll do the same."

I swallowed and gently pressed my fingertips into her skin. It was flower petals under my touch, but there was no heartbeat no matter how deep I pressed.

"You don't have a pulse," I said.

"Obviously," she said, withdrawing her hand from my neck. "That was just to make you calm the hell down. But you, on the other hand..."

Eleanor pressed her palm over my chest, making the dried blood flake away. I felt my heart palpitate through the layers of clothing and knew that Eleanor probably felt it too.

"You're alive."



### 3. Witches in the Air

"Is this going to hurt?" I said.

Eleanor forced my eye open wider.

"Yes," she said. Then she released a drop of dye onto my iris.

For a moment I only felt a drop of cold liquid as Eleanor quickly did the other eye. Then the dye began to soak in and I felt like stars were boiling through the soft flesh of my eyes, sending fire straight back into my brain. I sat up in a panic and rubbed frantically at my eyes, feeling hot ink and involuntary tears sticking to my hands. Then abruptly, the stinging dulled enough for me to blink and look around through a slightly gray-tinged world.

"Look at me," Eleanor said, angling my chin towards her. "Look up. Now look down. Blink a few times."

I did as she said and the gray slowly cleared from my vision. Eleanor grinned and handed me a thin shard of a broken mirror. I held it up to my eyes and blanched at the slate black pupils staring back at me. Unlike Eleanor's, they looked dull and artificial.

"Why do I need this?" I said.

"Your eyes aren't black enough up close," Eleanor said, screwing the top back on the bottle. "The Lost have white eyes, so they use iris dye like this to blend in. Your brown eyes look like dollar-store iris dye."

"And who are the Lost?"

"If we get you out of here fast enough, you'll never have to worry about them," she said, turning to the nightstand and dropping the bottle back inside.

"How long will this last?" I said, praying I wouldn't have to explain the change in eye color to my parents.

"About a day. Less if you sleep or cry."

I nodded, gaze dropping down to the bare mattress beneath me.

"Do *you* sleep?" I asked.

Eleanor paused as she shuffled through the drawer. "No," she said, pawing through the drawer again but slower this time. She pulled out a handgun and stood up, extending it to me.

"And I don't cry, either."

"I don't know how to use that," I said. "Will I really need it?"

"Just take it," she said, dropping it on my lap. "And I hope not."

"Do you have one?"

Eleanor smirked. "Obviously. And mine's not a toy. I won't tell you where I'm keeping it, either." She stood up and put her hands on her hips, glaring down at me. "Now, let's get you to my boss to figure out how you managed to sneak through security."

She turned around and unlocked the door leading to the dark staircase.

"Your boss?"

"So many questions. Just hurry up if you want your heart to keep beating for the rest of the day." She threw open the door and stormed through without looking behind her. I swallowed, slipped the handgun into my pocket, and followed her into the darkness.

"Leave it," Eleanor said as I bent down to pick up my bike. "It looks like it's been through the garbage disposal."

"But I wanted to fix it," I said. "That's my ride to class."

"You have broken ribs," she said, already walking away. "You can't ride *anything* for at least five weeks."

I sighed and gently set my bike back on its side, then gave a quick farewell salute and hurried after Eleanor.

"How did you know I had broken ribs?" I said as I caught up to her.

She glanced over her shoulder at me, apparently determined to walk faster than me despite being at least a foot shorter.

"It's my job to notice details," she said. Then her head snapped back towards the road ahead, her ponytail lashing my chest, ending the conversation.

We passed a grocery store with a long stretch of glass windows revealing a dark and vacant interior, our reflections cast over the empty shelves. Across the street, there was a video rental store with white boards hammered across the windows and metal bars drawn across the doors. The cars parked along the sidewalk were mostly faded red Corvettes and station wagons with cracked windows like crystal spider webs.

A woman crouched in the middle of the street at the end of the block, running her hands across the cobblestones and crawling over the rain-slick surface.

"What's she doing?" I said.

Eleanor shrugged. "Counting."

I slowed down as we came closer. The woman wore a pale blue rain coat, her auburn hair matted and stuck in the zipper, her face parallel to the street as her hands smoothed over the surface.

"Eleven thousand five hundred and thirty-one," she said. "Eleven thousand five hundred and thirty-two, eleven thousand five hundred and thirty-three."

I huddled closer to Eleanor and she immediately pressed a hand to my chest, pushing me an arm's length away.

"I get close when I have reasons to," she said.

"Sorry. Why is that woman counting?"

Eleanor shrugged. "She's bored."

We rounded a corner and stepped around a man splayed across the brick wall of an old diner, scraping his palms up and down the surface.

"Twenty-three thousand four hundred and fifty-five," he whispered into the wall. "Twenty-three thousand four hundred and fifty-six."

A scraping sound in the distance clawed at my eardrums. I squinted at the end of the street and saw two men pushing a refrigerator across the sidewalk, grinding steel against cement while they threw themselves against it, slick with sweat.

"You don't have moving trucks here?" I said after we'd passed them.

"Those guys have pushed that fridge back and forth across the city at least six times," Eleanor said. "I've seen people do the same with couches and radiators. Efficiency is not their goal."

"What *is* their goal?"

"Alleviating boredom."

"Is everyone here that difficult to entertain?"

"Well, there aren't exactly a lot of job opportunities here," Eleanor said, gesturing to another vacant store window. "It turns out that dead people don't want to waste their lives *and* their afterlives working menial jobs. It's hard to keep businesses running without cheap labor, especially when no one needs to buy food. There aren't a lot of products to entertain us."

"You seem to have enough alcohol."

Eleanor smirked. "People take the time to make things if they want them enough. It turns out alcohol is a good way to kill time. We've got a few decent food manufacturers too. Some basic

crops, etc.”

"But how do you have materials? Where do you get clothes and guns and stuff?"

"Residual junk from people who cross over," Eleanor said. "Shadows of people's possessions sometimes follow them onto the other side. Up until a few years ago, all our guns fired blanks because we got them from military parades. Besides that, stuff just appears every now and then, but it's not enough to make a real society. It's just a giant dollhouse for us to play in forever."

"Forever? You don't ever—"

"Put your arm around me."

I looked down at Eleanor, but she was staring coolly ahead.

"Do it now," she said, her expression unchanging.

I reached an arm out stiffly and laid it across Eleanor's shoulders, her damp leather jacket like snake skin under my touch. She slid a hand around my waist and pressed herself close to me. I swallowed and tried to hide a shiver as the temperature of her skin bled through her clothes. She leaned her head against my chest and looked up at me with a candy-coated smile, eyes twinkling with playfulness that wiped decades of purgatory from her face.

"Keep your voice down and don't change your facial expression," she whispered sweetly.

"Someone is watching us. They've been following us for two blocks now."

I swallowed, trying to hold onto her words and not fall into the midnight in her eyes. I let a synthetic smile spread across my face and laughed like Eleanor had just told me an incredible joke.

"Okay, so what do we do?" I whispered, ignoring the feeling that the ground had once again opened up beneath me.

"There's an alley on your right one block ahead," she said, twirling one of my sweatshirt

strings around her finger. "I'm going to push you into it. Take out your gun and wait for me to clean up."

"How close is this guy?"

"About half a block behind us."

"And you're positive that he's following us?"

Eleanor grinned and bit her lip, gesturing with one finger for me to come closer. I leaned down until her lips were at my ear.

"Don't *ever* question me," she whispered.

She stopped walking and pulled back, uncurling her arm from my waist, then took both my hands and laced her delicate fingers through mine. "Pretend you're saying goodbye to me," she said, swinging us around so that my back was to the alley and hers was to the street.

"Um..." I paused, looking uncertainly down at Eleanor while she beamed and tugged at my hands. "How do I do that?"

Eleanor giggled and placed a hand on my chest, standing on her toes and placing the other hand on my cheek. I slid my hands down her back and leaned down until our foreheads were touching, my breath as loud as a summer storm while Eleanor was silent and static as glass.

"Something tells me you're not that experienced," she whispered, her words turning into water vapor that swept across my face before vanishing. "But, to be fair, I've got a thirty-year head start."

"Thirty?"

Then she pressed her palms to my chest and shoved me backwards into the alley.

I hit the cobblestone as a gunshot ripped through the winter air. Two more gunshots went off while I hurried to my feet, one hand wrapped around my bruised ribcage. Eleanor crouched on

the sidewalk, arms extended in front of her, gun cocked parallel to the ground. She threw herself onto the cement as another shot went off, rolling smoothly into the alley and springing to her feet.

"Damnit!" She pressed her back to the wall. "The Lost aren't supposed to have guns. Someone's not guarding their arsenal."

She spun back around and fired three shots in quick succession. Two more echoed back and stripe of crimson appeared on her left cheek.

"Climb!" she said, jamming her gun into her belt and grabbing the wrought iron bars that crossed the windows of the alley. She climbed onto the ledge of the first story, tiny feet jammed between the metal bars, then leaped up towards the second floor. Her fingers barely clasped the bars, feet scraping against the smooth redbrick surface for traction. She swung to the side for momentum and grabbed the top of the iron frame, hauling herself onto the ledge. Tearing the gun out from her belt and aiming it at the entrance to the alley, she looked down at me.

"Climb, you idiot!"

I spun around and grabbed the bars on the opposite wall. As soon as I pulled myself up, pain ripped through my chest so sharply that a million dots sparkled like television static across my vision. When they cleared, I had one foot on the ground and one on the ledge, a hand clinging weakly to the iron bar while Eleanor shouted something at me from above. My hands were clammy and my fingers slipped from the window, dropping me heavily onto the ground. When I looked up, someone was standing at the entrance to the alley.

A young girl stood in front of me, fists clenched and caramel-colored trench coat billowing around her ankles. The wind raked her dark blonde curls over her face, smeared with dirt and bleeding heavily from her left temple. Her irises were pure white cactus flowers, no color except

for the lunar eclipse of her pupils. Her eyes locked into mine. She raised her arm and pointed a gun down at me. Eleanor was still shouting something, but her voice was the wordless roar of a sandstorm whirling above me.

A gunshot tore through the background noise. The girl screamed as crimson bloomed across her palm and splashed against the cobblestone, the gun clattering to the street. She looked up at Eleanor, her jaw set and teeth grinding together.

Eleanor jumped from her perch, descending with the weightless poise of a ballet dancer until she crashed into the girl below, compacting them both into the ground with a sickening crunch. The girl reached up and grabbed Eleanor's throat, rolling over so that Eleanor was crushed beneath her.

"Such a messy eater," Eleanor said, and the thick glaze of blood on her face couldn't hide her smug look, or the gas fire in her eyes.

The blonde girl snarled and grabbed Eleanor's hair, smashing her head into the cobblestone. Eleanor's arms dropped limply to her sides, her blood-spattered palms upturned to the sky. I scrambled for my gun and held it in quivering hands.

"Sorry," the girl said. "I get cranky when I'm hungry."

Then she leaned forward and pressed her blood-slick lips to Eleanor's.

My hand went limp on the trigger. Before I could decide what to do, a shot went off. Eleanor's gun was pressed to the blonde girl's head where scarlet spread across her scalp and drenched her curls. Eleanor shoved the girl's face away with a sour expression and pushed her body to the side, standing up stiffly.

"Are you alright?" I said, standing up unsteadily. Eleanor turned to me, her face smeared with crimson handprints, blood dripping from her lips and between her teeth.



"Obviously," she said. She pulled out her hair elastic and re-tied her ponytail.

"But she knocked you out."

"No, she didn't. As if she's strong enough to do that." She pocketed her gun and pulled out a book of matches from her other pocket. "We need to hurry. That won't hold her for long."

"Hold her? You shot her in the head!"

"She was already dead. She's not double dead now."

"Then what are you going to do to her?"

Eleanor struck a match. It crackled and made the shadows stir in the dim alley.

"I'm going to erase her," she said, dropping the match.

It landed on the blonde girl's hair and immediately set it on fire, the flame clawing through the length of her curls at an alarming speed, wrapping zealously around the waist of her trench coat, slithering up her arms and down her stockings. The smell of burning paper swirled through the alley. Eleanor knelt beside the girl and bowed her head, closing her eyes.

"Are you sure you're alright?" I said.

"Shh." She raised a finger. "Just be quiet for a minute."

I turned back to the burning girl whose blonde curls had dissolved into a glittering platinum dust. As the flames ate through the rest of her body, she transformed from bloody hair and muddy fabric into a fine powder that glistened like new snow. When the crackling quieted down and the flame finally burned out, Eleanor opened her eyes and scooped some of it into her hand. She stood up and cupped the powder in both hands in front of her face, then blew it into the air.

As the cloud of dust sparkled under the streetlights, the particles converged into the shape of a butterfly with wings, cracked like broken glass. It fluttered upwards out of the alley before another breeze tore through it and the pieces dissolved into the winter sky.

“She’s gone forever, now,” Eleanor said. All of her electricity had vanished. “Her soul will never go forward.”

"What was she trying to do to you?"

Eleanor sighed and started wiping the blood from her face onto her sleeve. "She wanted to take my soul," she said, running her fingers across her chapped and bloody lips. The contrast of red made her skin look even more ghostly.

“Why would she do that?”

Eleanor shook her head.

“Because no one remembers her anymore.” She looked at her hand and traced the white dust in the creases of her palm. “The souls of the dead are trapped here until we either figure out how to move forward, or the world forgets about us. We can only exist here as long as we survive in the memories of the living. If one day there’s no one alive who remembers us, we’ll forget about the people we used to be and become Lost forever.”

“What are the Lost, exactly?”

Eleanor lifted her head, looking out the alley at the skyscrapers on the horizon like jagged teeth.

“They look like the rest of us but they’re empty inside,” she said. “Everything human has been stripped away from them except for this insatiable hunger for light, for anyone to remember their names. All they can do is feed off the souls of any unfortunate dead person they can find, hoping that their energy from the living will sustain them. It never does, but they’ll never stop trying. Bloodhounds like me have to erase them so they don’t get in the way of people trying to move forward.”

The wind hummed through the alley, brushing Eleanor’s hair away from her face. She turned

around and smiled tiredly, hands on her hips.

"Stop looking so down, Choi. My funeral was a long time ago."

"How am I supposed to look when you say something like that?"

Eleanor shrugged and dusted her pants off. "I don't know. Fascinated by this new revelation? Terrified of all this blood? Mesmerized by my beauty?"

I blushed and Eleanor laughed.

"God, you're so easy to provoke. Now let's get you to the Overseer and figure out why I'm babysitting you."

"I resent that."

"Obviously." She flashed me a taunting smile, then grabbed the strings of my sweatshirt and took off running, pulling me deeper into purgatory.

#### 4. The Madhouse

"This is headquarters," Eleanor said, striding across the black marble sea of the hotel lobby.

"Try not to breathe too much and hopefully no one will notice you."

Three levels of balconies lined the perimeter of the lobby, a galaxy of lanterns swinging from black chains on the ceiling. Warm sconces lit the redbrick walls, making them glow like an orange sunset. We breezed past a desk where Eleanor flashed an ID at a somber security guard, then led me to an elevator that carried us to the thirty-fourth floor so fast that my ears popped. She strode out when the doors opened without waiting for me to catch up, then marched towards a set of white and gold doors at the end of the hallway, waved quickly to a security guard, and walked in without knocking.

Filing shelves lined the room, spanning upwards for what looked like miles towards the ceiling. The windows at the far end had burgundy curtains drawn tightly across them, locking out the gray light from outside. Tiny black train tracks curled haphazardly around the hardwood floor, curving under chairs and circling table legs. I glanced down as something poked at my ankle, then quickly sidestepped as a miniature train made of glossy black tin whirred and chugged across the floor, continuing its circuit around the room.

A woman in her late twenties knelt down in front of an executive desk in the center of it all, examining a glass tank where transparent butterflies, like the ones in the alley, fluttered around white flowers. A man with disheveled burnt-orange hair stood on the other side of the desk, his dress shirt stained with a mysterious green liquid and his striped tie in a clumsy knot around his neck, one end far too long. The man jumped back when Eleanor slammed the door open, but the woman only turned her head and raised an eyebrow. Her lips were slick and strangely similar to the shade of blood on Eleanor's face.

“I’ll be with you in a moment, Eleanor,” she said. Then she turned back to the butterflies, pressing her fingertips to the glass. “What are these flowers, Felix?”

The man swallowed thickly, fingers twitching under Eleanor’s glare. “*Diphelleia grayi*,” he said. “Skeleton flowers.”

The woman nodded, watching the butterfly drift unsteadily around the cage before landing on another flower petal and flapping its warped wings.

“If I may?” Felix said, stepping forward and gesturing to the tank with a gloved hand.

The woman nodded and took a step back as the man drew an eye dropper from his shirt pocket and lifted the screened cover off the tank. He released three drops of clear liquid onto the biggest flower, its petals broad and curving upward like an upside-down umbrella, then replaced the lid and knelt down.

“Watch.”

The white color in the petals began fading away at the touch of the water, leaving behind a ghostly silhouette of a flower, petals carved in transparent ice. The butterfly landed on top, the same translucent windows in its wings.

“These used to be daisies,” Felix said, “but after a week with the butterflies, they turned to skeleton flowers. It’s the same with roses, camellias, gardenias...”

“And they sustain the butterflies?”

Felix nodded, his expression hardening. “The butterflies without any flowers turn to embers within a day. Flowers, once they’ve turned to skeleton flowers, will sustain them for another week. After that, they need new flowers to pollinate or they disintegrate again.”

The woman sighed and stood up straight, brushing off her skirt. “Even if we turn them to dust, they’re always searching for light,” she said. “Thank you, Felix, this was helpful. You can

tell your supervisor that we'll continue funding your lab.”

The man grinned, then accidentally made eye contact with Eleanor and immediately wiped the joy from his face, clearing his throat.

“That’s just one of my Bloodhounds, Felix,” the woman said, smiling at him. “She won’t bite.”

The man nodded, eyes quivering in Eleanor’s direction but falling shy of meeting her gaze. I wondered what kind of murderous expression she had on her face, but I was standing behind her and couldn’t see.

“I’ll see you again next week?” the woman said.

The man nodded again, hastily locking the lid on the cage and lifting it off the desk. He hurried out the door, skirting around me and Eleanor. The woman withdrew a handkerchief from one of her desk drawers and carefully folded it into quarters, offering it to Eleanor.

“You’ve got something on your face, dear.”

Eleanor scowled and snatched the cloth, violently scrubbing at the dried blood on her cheek.

“You’re not hurt, are you?” she said, taking a step back and examining Eleanor.

“Stop it, Violet,” Eleanor said, scowling. The woman didn’t acknowledge Eleanor’s attitude, smirking knowingly and turning back to her desk.

“Did we have an appointment today?” she said, arranging the glass paperweights shaped like trains on her desk. “If I forgot to put it in my calendar, then I’m sorry to keep you waiting.”

“You know damn well that we didn’t,” Eleanor said, dropping the soiled handkerchief on the desk. Violet grimaced at the ruined cloth, then grabbed a tissue and delicately picked the handkerchief up with a manicured hand, depositing it in the trash.

“Then what can I do for you?” she said, pulling out yet another handkerchief and wiping her

hands.

“For starters, you can drop the customer-service bullshit. You know I hate that.”

Violet smirked and leaned back in her chair. “I’m having a good day, Eleanor. That can happen on occasion.”

Eleanor sighed and massaged her eyes.

“Okay, fine, you’re the human equivalent of a ray of sunshine. Whatever you want, I don’t care. But we have a huge problem.”

Violet frowned. “What’s wrong?”

Eleanor gestured to where I stood in the doorway. The woman looked up at me, eyes coolly taking in my appearance and lingering on the blood splashed across my sweatshirt.

“You’ve found a boy who desperately needs a laundromat?”

“He’s from the Other Side!” Eleanor said, pointing accusingly at me. “He’s still got a pulse!”

Violet’s calm expression evaporated. The corners of her lips melted down into an acidic scowl, darkness eclipsing her eyes until they seemed to devour all the light from the room. She stood up and cut soundlessly across the office towards me. Before I could think to take a step back, she grabbed my elbow and jerked me closer, then pressed two fingers into my throat, fingernails honed like hornet stingers and slicing through soft skin. Her touch was even colder than Eleanor’s, her fingertips urging ice into my veins. I held my breath, feeling my pulse pounding under her hands while my eyes flashed around the room, sliding over the skylight blurred with rain, the plastic train circling Violet’s desk, her wine-colored shoes and nylons, her red lips pulsing like a fresh cut.

“The only way the living can see the Shadow Express is if they have a piece of the Other Side with them,” Violet said. Her words scraped across my face like a winter draft, the kind of

parched and frostbitten air that makes your skin crack. “So what do you have that doesn’t belong to you?”

I swallowed, momentarily forgetting how to speak English. Violet seemed to be made of cool glass, still and frozen in time. Then her fingers tightened around my arm and I hastily felt for the cord at my neck, drawing the key from where it hung inside my shirt and holding it out to her.

“My brother died a year ago,” I said, “but this morning I got a letter from him.”

Violet grabbed the key and yanked, snapping the twine. I let out a breath and hid my shaking hands in my pockets as she turned and stalked back towards her desk.

“What’s your name?” she said, holding the key up to the skylight.

“Sebastian.”

“Your surname.”

“Choi.”

Violet froze, the key swinging back and forth in the air. Slowly, she lowered her arm, still facing away from me.

“And Ben is your brother?”

“I... You know him?”

“Sebastian,” Violet said, her voice eerily calm, “I am going to ask you a very important question, and if you lie to me, you will die. Do you understand?”

Numbness hummed at my feet and fingertips. I held my breath and for one terrifying moment I thought I’d forgotten how to breathe at all.

“Yes,” I said.

Violet turned around slowly, her expression perfectly vacant.

“Do you know where your brother is?”



I felt as if the world had stopped turning while she waited for my response. For a moment my lips couldn't move, and I was certain that she would kill me no matter what I said. I watched her caress the key and swallowed, beginning to suspect that she knew something I didn't.

"No," I said. "I don't."

"Eleanor?" Violet said.

I suddenly remembered Eleanor was there, standing to my side with her arms crossed.

"He's lying," she said, picking at the blood under her nails.

Violet's gaze darkened.

"What do you want with my brother?" I said, fingers curling reflexively into fists. "Why should I tell you anything about him?"

I knew that both of the women in front of me could probably kill me with their eyes closed, but I'd boarded a train to the afterlife and nearly died in the process for Ben and I'd be damned if I let them hurt him just because I couldn't keep my mouth shut.

Violet laughed — a grating, artificial sound — then stalked back to her desk and picked up a glass paperweight. She examined it for a moment, turning it over in her hands, then spun around and hurled it at my head.

It hit Eleanor's palm with the sound of thick ice cracking over a frozen pond. I didn't know if it was the paperweight or her bones that shattered, but suddenly her hand was blocking my face, dark red dripping down her wrist from inside her glove.

"Violet," Eleanor cautioned, her jaw clenched. She lowered her hand, still clutching the paperweight. "You can't."

"I knew you would protect him," Violet said, leaning back against her desk and crossing her arms. "If I'd tried to kill him, he would be dead."

Eleanor said nothing, walking stiffly to Violet's desk and depositing the paperweight on the polished surface. Bright red and twinkling glass crumbs splashed across the paperwork. She turned away and cracked her fingers back into place, flexing them experimentally and wiping the remaining blood on her pants.

"Does that answer your question, Sebastian?" Violet said.

"No." I stepped forward, my voice dry and unsteady but words spilling endlessly from my lips before my brain could veto them for the sake of self-preservation. "You're acting like you need something from me, something that you can't get if I'm dead. So tell me what you want with my brother, or I won't tell you anything."

The smile dropped off of Violet's face. I swallowed and stared defiantly into her black eyes, thinking about black coffee and Red Sox snapbacks and treasure hunts.

"You think I can't make you talk if you're dead?" she said. "If you die, I can interrogate you in my office for the next century. Don't think that your life gives you leverage."

I clenched my teeth, every muscle wound tight.

"You could keep me here for a thousand centuries and I still wouldn't tell you anything to help you hurt my brother."

Violet's eyes narrowed. Then she smiled and tucked her hair behind her ear, shoulders relaxing.

"You're not like your brother," she said, "but that's good, because I wouldn't throw a dog toy to my Bloodhounds. Now sit down and listen."

I dared to breathe, not quite believing that I was off the hook. Eleanor took my elbow and half-guided-half-shoved me down onto a brown leather couch.

"You're not the only one in the Shadow World who still has a heartbeat," Violet said.

“Eleanor, you know where Tam is, don’t you?”

Eleanor turned wordlessly and crossed the room, disappearing behind a bookshelf.

I looked down as a toy train collided with my sneaker and the plastic wheels whirred in protest. I lifted my foot and let it sail by.

“Everything we have here,” Violet said, sitting on her desk and crossing her legs, “is possible because of the trains. They allow us to regulate the flow of souls that come to this side. There was a time when the dead could cross back over and torment the living, but now the trains are the only gateways between worlds, and I control the trains.”

Violet uncrossed her legs and placed her foot across the plastic track, halting the tiny train in its path.

“There are three trains in this city,” she said. “One train from the Land of the Living, and two trains that take you forward. The only people allowed to make return trips are the conductors, and the occasional tourists from the Other Side who somehow stumbled over here. Of course, we send them back immediately because life is only meant to flow in one direction. However, your case is slightly different.”

A door clanged and Eleanor stormed back into the room, a black cat with bright yellow eyes squirming in her arms.

“Give it to Sebastian,” Violet said.

Eleanor dumped the cat on my lap and its claws immediately bit into my jeans. While it had tried to break free from Eleanor’s hold, it seemed to want to snuggle closer to me, rubbing its plump stomach against my chest and flopping over in my lap. I placed a hand on its belly and stroked it gently while it batted its paws against me. Its fur was warm against my palm, its chest vibrating with affectionate purrs.

“It’s alive,” I said, feeling its heartbeat pulsing under my hand.

“It would seem so,” Violet said, “which is peculiar, since we don’t have living animals on this side. The souls of animals can wander over to this side, but live cats can’t board the Shadow Express.” Violet’s tone seemed to grow more bitter the longer she spoke. I stroked Tam’s fur anxiously.

“Ben was working with our researchers to better understand the anatomy of the Lost, but his supervisor reported him spending his off hours on his own projects, taking in stray cats. We warned him that life only flows in one direction, that his research was forbidden, and yet here we have Tam.”

“What happened to him?” I said, swallowing hard and trying not to crush Tam with my tensed fingers.

“Tam got into the lab one day and Ben’s supervisor realized what Ben had done. By the time we sent our guards to get him, he was gone. He hasn’t been seen for a month.”

I laughed dryly and closed my eyes. Of course Ben would use his biology degree to try to cheat death. Had he found a way to resurrect humans too?

“He’s become somewhat of an urban legend,” Violet said, scowling. “The Lost call him the Phoenix and talk about him like he’s Jesus incarnate. They want to find him before we do, for obvious reasons.”

“So why am I a part of this?” I said.

Violet dropped the key in my lap. Tam pawed at the string and started chewing on it.

“Because he called you here,” she said. “The only way he can cross back over is if he has a piece of the living world with him. He’s alive, and he’s waiting for you.”

I was grateful for the cat on my lap because otherwise Violet would have seen my hands

shaking.

“We need you to help us,” Violet said.

I gently pulled the string away from Tam, who looked up at me accusingly before hopping off my lap and settling on top of the train tracks.

“And what will you do if you find him?” I said.

Violet crossed her arms. “You’re afraid I’ll punish him.”

“I don’t trust you.”

Violet pursed her lips and turned to Eleanor. “Remove your gloves.”

Eleanor stared at the floor as she slowly pulled off her leather gloves, stuffing them in her jacket pocket.

“Show Sebastian your hands.”

Eleanor still stared at the floor but extended her hands towards me, palm-side up. A jagged star design was carved in red scar tissue across both hands, the same as the mark on the Shadow Express. Violet grabbed Eleanor’s wrist and pulled her hand closer to my face. The skin was glossy and pink from scar tissue, glowing white around the edges.

“Tell him what this is, Eleanor.”

“This is Cora,” Eleanor said robotically, “the first star that ever died. These scars mean that I made a blood oath. To become a Bloodhound, I made a promise that can’t be broken.”

“And what did you promise?”

“That I will protect the souls trapped in purgatory,” she said, the words falling flatly from her lips as if she’d rehearsed them a thousand times before. “I will eliminate the Lost who take what isn’t theirs, and if the day comes when my own soul is lost, I will come to the Overseer and ask to be destroyed.”

Violet nodded and dropped Eleanor's wrists.

"The dead have nothing to lose but their souls," she said. She turned to her desk and pulled out a thin blade, offering it to me by the hilt. She turned her hand over, revealing a palm so mauled by scars that it was painted a deep red.

"You have to do it to me," she said.

I glanced at Eleanor, but she was still staring distantly at the floor.

"I promise that if you bring us to your brother," Violet said, "and he agrees to destroy all of his research, I will let both of you take the train back to the Land of the Living."

I swallowed, the blade trembling in my hand.

"Unharméd," I said.

Violet rolled her eyes.

"Unharméd. Now come on, it won't hurt."

I held my breath and made a small cut through the skin, watching as blood pulsed sluggishly to the surface. I traced the shape of the star, careful not to press too hard. When I closed the shape, the wound instantly began to heal, scarred skin running across the perimeter and leaving a purple ghost of its presence.

I handed the blade back and offered my palm to Violet. She glanced down at my hand, then smirked and turned back to her desk, placing the blade back inside.

"You don't have to offer your soul to me, Sebastian," she said. "You have much more to lose than just that."

I let my hand fall to my side, not sure if her words were supposed to make me feel better.

"Now," Violet said, "what else did Ben give you?"

I dropped my backpack to the floor and pulled out the envelope. Violet snatched it and

quickly skimmed the note, frowning when she realized that there was nothing written on the back.

“Burgundy Street is on the perimeter,” she said. “That’s hardly a good place to hide from the Lost.”

“They’ve been raiding houses on the perimeter,” Eleanor said.

Violet sighed and handed the note to Eleanor. “Well, it’s a start. Take Sebastian there and see what you find.”

“I have to go too?” Eleanor said, standing up. “This is my reward for getting my teeth knocked out dragging this kid here? It’s only me and Kenny on East Patrol and—”

“Kenny can handle it,” Violet said. “I’m giving you this job because it’s infinitely more important.”

“Violet, this isn’t—”

*“Eleanor.”* The word extinguished all other sounds from the room like the swift severing of electric cables in a storm, dropping heavy darkness over a city.

“Violet,” Eleanor said, “please.” She didn’t sound angry anymore. Instead, her voice was tired, soft as moth’s wings as the words floated from her torn lips.

“This is your job.”

Eleanor stared at the paperweight on the desk, not breathing or blinking. I imagined her as an insect trapped in amber and then realized that in so many ways she was exactly that— petrified perfection, a teenager cast forever in her untarnished skin, suspended by a golden sky.

“You promised me that I could work alone,” she said, still staring at some undetermined point between nothing and everything. There was something about the way she spoke, the way her words were so carefully vacuous, each one at an identical frequency, her voice so detached

that each syllable sounded a thousand miles away. Something about her haunting monotone and white void where there should have been emotions struck me as the saddest sound I'd ever heard.

Violet seemed to ignore the change in mood, sitting at her desk and retrieving a handkerchief from a drawer, which she used to mop up the blood spattered across her desk.

“We both know that you’re not going to quit,” Violet said, “and this assignment is rather time-sensitive, so it would be convenient if you could get started. I need to redo this paperwork now that your blood is all over it.”

Eleanor put her gloves on and turned towards the door.

“Come on,” she said to me.

“Oh, and Eleanor?”

Eleanor’s gloved hand froze on the doorknob.

“Yes?” she said, her tone pleasant but jaw clenched.

“I checked your file recently. Your thirty-year review is coming up next month.”

Eleanor’s hand tensed on the doorknob.

“I am aware.”

“How are your memories holding up?”

“Clear as photographs,” Eleanor said. “Now I’d like to get started on this ‘time-sensitive’ assignment.”

“Go,” Violet said, waving her away.

Eleanor shoved the door open and stormed out without looking back. I hurried after her, jogging to catch up.

“Hey,” I said, “look, I’m sorry that you have to—”

“Don’t,” she said, punching the elevator button with her thumb.



I closed my mouth obediently and stepped into the elevator. The silence started to feel heavy, and by the time we were out on the street, I'd started thinking too much about how I seemed to be dragging myself down the sidewalk, my ribs and face throbbing every few seconds. My footsteps felt unsteady and I tripped twice over my shoelaces.

"What time did you wake up today?" Eleanor said, still striding forward without looking at me.

I thought back to this morning, which felt like fifty years ago. I'd stayed in bed for so long that my roommate had bent over me at one point to check my pulse.

"Um, I don't know, seven or eight?"

"It's five AM. You should sleep or you'll be even more useless than you are now. Besides, I need a break from you."

"Aren't we supposed to go to Burgundy Street?"

"Didn't you hear Violet say it's not safe there? I'm not taking you there at night when you can barely walk in a straight line."

I nodded, even though she couldn't see me, stumbling after her into the lobby of a glass skyscraper.

"You can sleep at my place while I do rounds," Eleanor said, ushering me into the elevator.

"You mean that room above the bar isn't where you live?"

"What, that attic with two and a half pieces of furniture? That's just a spare room where I can discreetly shoot people in the head."

"Oh."

The elevator pinged and Eleanor took off down the hallway, stopping in front of a door with five different locks along the edge. She pulled out a ring of keys and unlocked all of them in a

matter of seconds.

“One lock isn’t enough?” I said.

Eleanor pocketed the keys and shoved the door open.

“There are a lot of people who would love to see me in powder-form.”

I stumbled inside and kicked my shoes off, pausing to pick up a bright green sticky-note that fell at my feet. Eleanor snatched the note before I could read it, stamping it back on a wall completely covered in the same notes. Post-its of every color plastered the walls of the hallway and small kitchen, small block letters penned cleanly in the center of each one. The notes to my right had seemingly random dates and phrases, like some kind of bizarre cataloging system.

“April 14, 1973: Maine.” “Eloise Litman — Brooks School.” “197? Summer — Chen’s Wedding.”

Eleanor pulled me away from the kitchen, kicking open a door to a small bedroom with a bed made so tightly that I doubted it had ever been used. More sticky notes fluttered down as she slammed the door open, along with a few longer notes on loose-leaf paper. I gravitated towards the bed, throwing myself onto it and groaning in satisfaction.

“Don’t go anywhere while I’m out,” Eleanor said. “Don’t answer the door, even for me.”

I rolled onto my back as another sticky note fell over my eyes. This one said “Spent too long at Stop & Shop — CONSEQUENCES.”

“What are these?” I said, waving the note with a limp arm.

Eleanor plucked the note from my hand and slapped it loudly back on the wall.

“Things I don’t want to forget,” she said. “Now sleep, or I’ll knock you out.”

She slammed the door and everything turned black. The walls shook and I felt more sticky notes fall over my face. Through the light that leaked through the crack under the door, my eyes

lazily followed one of the notes spiraling down. Before it landed on my face, I was asleep.

## 5. The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters

I woke up to hands around my throat.

My eyes shot open, rolling back to search for my attacker while my fingers instinctively curled into the sheets. All I saw was blurred darkness and sparkly black static, the edges of my vision fizzling out. My eyes rolled heavily in my skull, blearily following the panicked path of sticky notes spinning down from the ceiling. My lungs throbbed in protest, and I reached a hand up to claw at the hands pressing into my throat.

To my horror, my nails raked through my own skin, scratching across my jugular and taut tendons in my neck. I raised my other hand and gripped my throat, numb fingers brushing across the skin to confirm that no one else was touching me.

I launched out of bed, falling face-first into the hardwood floor when the sheets knotted around my ankles tethered me to the bed. The second my chest hit the floor, I gulped down a mouthful of air, my heartbeat hammering in my ears. My eyes locked on the thin line of light from underneath the door. I swallowed painfully, determined to reach it because the darkness felt like it was crushing me, wrapping barbed-wire fingers around my ankles to drag me back down. My hands clawed at the floor, jamming wood slivers under my fingernails and pulling the sheets impossibly tighter around my ankles until I could barely feel my feet. Sweat stung in my eyes and my fingers twitched as they scraped across the hardwood. I finally kicked my ankles free from the sheets and threw myself at the door, throwing it open and barreling straight into Eleanor.

All my momentum crashed into her, but she held her ground and grabbed fistfuls of my shirt before I could slide to the floor.

“Sebastian,” she said, her voice like ice sliding down my back. My heart was beating too fast,

echoing through my bones like a church bell. I could barely feel my hands on her jacket. She knelt down slowly, bringing us both to the floor.

“There’s something in there,” I said, panting into her jacket.

Eleanor shook her head. “There’s not.”

I grabbed her arm and shook my head quickly. “There is!” I said, feeling sweat streak down my face despite how cold I felt. “Just look, Eleanor! Something was choking me!”

“Sebastian,” she said, lifting my chin up with her thumb. Her black eyes were big and vacant like the darkness that had nearly swallowed me in the bedroom. Under the violent fluorescent light, her skin was chalky white like unbaked clay, her lips a bruised shade of purple. The way she blinked, the way her fingers brushed my chin, every motion felt stilted and choreographed and it was *wrongwrongwrong* but I couldn’t remember why, then I felt my pulse hammering in my chest and remembered that she didn’t have a heartbeat, that she was dead and rotting and buried under six feet of wet earth and worms and *a dead girl was touching me*.

I shoved away and scrambled backwards until I hit the counter, crushing myself against the wood. Eleanor started to move closer and I flinched away.

“Don’t touch me!”

I curled myself into a ball and smothered my panicked breaths in my knees.

“Sebastian?”

I pressed further into myself, and maybe if I crushed myself hard enough into the wood paneling I would disappear, dissolve into the dark cherry wood and black floor tiles, wake up from the nightmare in my bed in Chinatown, part of a world that was lightless and gray but at least it made sense. Yesterday was supposed to be a dream. Ben was supposed to be dead and I was supposed to be trudging through the rest of my bleak and unremarkable life until I was dead

too. But instead I was trapped in the middle of this fractured reality where I was never safe, not even when I slept.

“Sebastian. Hey.”

Her voice was right by my ear. I tried to crawl away but her arms were caging me, pressing me against the wood.

“This isn’t real,” I said, my voice cracking. “None of this makes sense. Ben is *dead*. People can’t just come back to life so *what the hell am I doing here?*”

I squeezed my eyes shut and jammed my palms over them, like I could push my eyes back into my brain.

“No, open your eyes,” Eleanor said, tugging at my wrist. “You’re awake now.”

My limbs were too weak to fight back, so I let her pull my hands away and tipped my head back against the cabinets, choking down hot air and watching water drip down from the leak in the ceiling. Eleanor maneuvered my hands until they rested on my stomach, then rocked back on her heels.

“Breathe into your stomach,” she said. “You’re inhaling too much.”

I nodded stiffly and tried to concentrate on evening out my breaths because the rational part of my brain dimly recognized that I wasn’t breathing right, that I was making myself dizzy. My gaze locked on the wet spot on the ceiling shifting in and out of focus. I tried my best to think about nothing else but my breathing and the rhythmic drops of water hitting the linoleum. After a minute, my breathing gradually started slowing. I released my sweaty death-grip on my shirt and let my shoulders sag back against the cabinet, wiping my face with the inside of my shirt. My gaze slid back down to Eleanor, who sat cross-legged on the floor a few feet away, watching me carefully.

“You’re okay?” she said. “Not going to have a heart attack or anything?”

I tried to shrug, but my bones still felt locked tight and the movement came out as a sharp twitch.

“Not today, at least.”

For a moment, neither of us spoke. The only sound was the water droplets splashing against the floor.

“Choi.”

I looked up.

“For what it’s worth,” Eleanor said, “I know none of this makes sense. I can’t make you believe that it’s real, or that I’m real, but right now, there’s nothing else for you to believe in. You can lie on my kitchen floor and panic until your heart explodes, if that’s really what you want. Or, for the time being, you can believe in me. Because that’s all you’ve got right now.”

I said nothing for a moment and let her words soak in, spreading an anesthetic coolness as they climbed up my veins. The blurred corners of the room finally came back into focus and my shoulders slowly unlocked.

“Right,” I said, combing my sweaty bangs back with my fingers. “I can do that.”

Eleanor nodded, then stood up and grabbed a glass from a cabinet, filling it with tap water.

“Was it a nightmare?” she said, her back facing me as she waited for the glass to fill. “The reason you got up in the first place, I mean.”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember dreaming anything. I just woke up and it felt like...”

Eleanor handed me the glass and sat down in front of me.

“That’s why I don’t sleep,” she said. “I thought it would be different since you’re alive, but maybe it’s just this place.”

I drained the glass and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

“You mean everyone here has nightmares?”

“Not nightmares so much as memories.”

“Of what?”

Eleanor blinked slowly, then took the glass from my hands and stood up again, turning back to the sink.

“Our deaths,” she said, still facing away from me as she turned on the tap.

“Oh.”

I waited for her to sit down again, taking the glass back with an unsteady hand.

“Can I ask how it happened?” I said, mouth hidden behind the rim of the glass.

“No.”

I nodded and started on my second glass, slower this time.

“Does that mean I dreamed about my death too?” I said. “In the future?”

“You’re not even supposed to be here. How would I know what happens in your head?”

I shrugged, taking another sip.

“You’re sure there’s nothing in there?”

Eleanor rolled her eyes and stomped over to the bedroom, shoving the door open and slapping the lights on.

“No monsters under the bed,” she said, coming back to the kitchen and crossing her arms. “I would know if someone came in here and started strangling you, Choi. It’s my job to be observant. Now drink that glass and then one more. You’re literally paler than the dead.”

I smirked and tipped the rest of the glass into my mouth, standing up slowly.

“Uh, thanks for that,” I said, scratching at my neck.



Eleanor made a face like she'd tasted something sour.

"I don't know what you're thanking me for, but whatever it is, don't."

"Um, okay." I set the glass down stiffly on the counter. "How long was I asleep?"

Eleanor looked down at her watch.

"About six hours."

"That's long enough. I won't be able to fall asleep now anyway. We can get back to work."

"Finally."

She turned and grabbed a paper bag from the counter, shoving it into my hands.

"I did night rounds while you were asleep," she said. "I checked in with Violet and she berated me for not feeding you. I don't have to eat, so if you're about to starve to death, say something."

"Thanks," I said, pulling out what looked like a sandwich wrapped in tin foil.

"Don't just stand there, you weirdo," Eleanor said, gesturing to the kitchen table. I sank into a chair obediently, then took a bite and felt saliva pool in my mouth when my teeth sank into the tender meat and crisp sourdough.

"This is the best sandwich I've ever had," I said before I'd even swallowed the first bite.

"Yeah, it's got extra heart disease sauce," Eleanor said, watching me like I was some rare species of monkey behind the bars of a zoo. "The dead don't have to eat, so when they do, it's for pleasure and not health. I hope high cholesterol doesn't run in your family."

"If it does, it's worth it," I said. Then, after a moment: "Hey, how do you even have meat here? Is there a slaughterhouse somewhere?"

"That's not meat."

"It's not?"

“Chemicals. We don’t have a lot of livestock, but we do have a decent amount of raw materials and scientists with too much time on their hands. If anything tastes good here, assume that it’s made of literal poison.”

I froze, gaze sliding down to my sandwich. Eleanor rolled her eyes.

“Poison as in high fructose corn syrup, not arsenic. Relax.”

I eyed Eleanor warily, but that didn’t stop me from taking another bite. She smirked and picked up another bag, pulling out a folded stack of clothes and dropping it on the table in front of me.

“Finish that and put these on. I grabbed some clothes from a coworker who’s a big scrawny tree like you.”

“What’s wrong with my clothes?” I said, staring regretfully down at how little was left of my sandwich.

“The Lost will smell you a mile off.”

“They can smell me?” I glanced down at my blood-stained sweatshirt. “I smell?”

“You smell like the *living*,” Eleanor said. “The stronger your ties are to the living, the better you smell to them. It’s how they choose the best souls to suck dry. You probably smell like that sandwich to them.”

I looked down at the sandwich crumbs in the wrapper.

“And changing clothes will help?”

“Maybe,” Eleanor said, pulling a stack of blue sticky notes from a drawer and facing away from me. “The smell comes from your blood, so, for a start, you could take off the sweatshirt tie-dyed with your own blood. The bathroom’s on your right. There’s more iris dye in the cabinet, so put a drop in each eye while you’re in there.”

“Alright,” I said, lingering for a moment as she penned two sticky notes and stuck them to the kitchen cabinet. I picked up the clothes and headed to the bathroom, trying to glance discreetly at the notes as I walked by.

“Orange soda,” one of them said. “May — Failed Road Test.” “January — Moved in w/ HIM.”

I pushed open the bathroom door and felt around for the light switch, squinting as my eyes adjusted, then laughed at what I saw. Eleanor might have passed for someone my age in the way she talked and dressed, but her bathroom was an unapologetic time capsule from the 80s. Taffy pink tiles lined the walls and floor, interspersed with turquoise squares that matched the painted toilet and bathtub.

Two glass jars sat on the counter, one filled with black hair elastics and the other with an impressive collection of tiny soaps in different shapes and colors. I picked up a small paperback balanced precariously on the edge of the counter, tracing the metallic gold letters on the cover that spelled “*The Raven*” and *Other Works by Edgar Allan Poe*. Every single page had cursive notes crammed into the margins, words circled and underlined and highlighted. I flipped back to the dog-eared page near the front, the second page of “The Raven.” Part of the second stanza had been bracketed in blue ink:

From my books surcease of sorrow—sorrow for the lost Lenore—

For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore—

Nameless *here* for evermore.

The word “nameless” had been underlined three times, the lowest scratch tearing through the

page.

I heard cabinets slamming in the kitchen and quickly shut the book, carefully setting it down on the counter. I stood in front of the sink and moved a few sticky notes off the mirror so I could see my reflection. Dried iris dye stained my cheeks gray and my bangs were stringy with sweat. I splashed tepid water in my face and rubbed at the circles under my eyes before I realized they weren't from the dye, then opened the cabinet in search of some form of toothpaste.

The shelves were packed tightly with glass jars like the ones on the counter, each one filled with some puzzling trinket that didn't really belong in a bathroom, like measuring spoons and bullets. I unscrewed one jar filled with a white cream and held it up to my nose, then coughed and slammed the lid back on when the violently minty scent scorched through my nostrils, clearing my sinuses with the force of a pickaxe. I eventually found something that resembled toothpaste and used it to scrub my teeth with my finger, hoping I hadn't poisoned myself, then stepped into the clothes Eleanor had left me. They were all black, except for a balled-up pair of blue-and-yellow pineapple socks. I pulled on the pants first, rolling up the hems that were a little too long and sliding my own belt through the loops, then pulled the black t-shirt over my head. The iris dye stung a little less the second time and part of me suspected that was probably a bad thing, like I was slowly blinding myself, but I decided to worry about it later.

When I walked back to the kitchen, Eleanor looked up from sticky notes that she'd scattered across the table.

"Wow," she said, scanning me head to toe. "You could pass for a Bloodhound. You certainly look like a corpse."

"That's the goal, right?"

"You breathe too much, though."

“I breathe like a normal person.”

“No, you breathe ungodly loud and through your mouth. Believe me, I’ve noticed.”

I made a conscious effort to close my mouth as I crossed the room, sitting at the table across from Eleanor.

“You breathe too,” I said. “A little bit, at least. You must, because you can talk.”

“Obviously,” Eleanor said, tapping her pen against the table while she scowled at one of her sticky notes. “I breathe if I want to talk or want to smell my food or something like that, but I don’t need to. New Arrivals usually breathe all the time out of habit, then one day they realize they haven’t really been breathing for months because there’s no point.”

Then she turned back to her sticky notes and I watched her for a moment, beginning to understand what it was about her movements that seemed so strange to me; she seemed human in the moments before she spoke, but in the stretches of silence between words when she had no reason to breathe, the wooden stillness of her rib cage made her seem more like a photograph than a person. She didn’t fidget or scratch her head or let her eyes roam aimlessly around the room the way living people did, so the movements that punctuated her stillness always felt too sudden, like a statue hopping down from its pedestal.

“That’s so cool,” I said, leaning a little closer to Eleanor and trying not to be offended when she scowled and leaned away.

“I’m not a circus monkey.”

“So how do you bleed?” I said, ignoring her comment.

“The same way you do, just not as much.”

“But you don’t have—”

“A pulse? I know. It’s mostly passive bleeding caused by gravity, since there’s no heart

pushing blood out. Even corpses bleed if they're fresh enough and the blood hasn't coagulated yet. People who've been here longer don't bleed as much, so I think we're all just slowly rotting."

"That's... gross."

Eleanor scowled.

"You're alive. I'm sure your bodily functions are much grosser than mine."

I blushed, unable to argue with that.

"Tell your friend I like the socks, by the way," I said.

Eleanor rolled her eyes. "God. Those are Kenny's. If Bloodhounds didn't have a dress code, you'd be wearing pineapple pants and a shirt to match."

"Just how many of you are there, anyway?"

"Bloodhounds? Twelve, last I checked. We don't work together much because we're canvassing different areas."

"So, you're like some elite group of guardians?"

"More like an elite group of garbage collectors." She stood up sharply and grabbed two of the notes, pasting them on the blank spaces on the kitchen cabinets.

"Can I help?"

She paused, looking over her shoulder and raising an eyebrow.

"No," she said, her voice surprisingly gentle as she turned back around. "No, I can do this."

"What is 'this' exactly?"

"Remembering," she said, taking another note from the table and jumping a bit to stick it to the uncovered space closer to the ceiling. "I only exist as long as I can remember my life, so I write things down as they come to me."

She stretched, her fingers barely grazing the empty wall space. I came around the table and stood beside her, extending a hand.

She looked up at me warily for a moment, then scowled back at the ground and stuck the note to my hand. I carefully stuck it to the top edge of the cabinet.

“Now,” she said, turning away from me to clear the table, “is your weak human brain well-rested and well-fed enough to handle visiting your brother’s apartment?”

## 6. Out Hunting for Teeth

The Perimeter reminded me of the parts of Boston Ben told me to never, ever walk through by myself. The buildings looked like they were made of paper, waterlogged and sagging into the street. Rain clanked against the myriad crushed cans and glass shards covering the dead-grass lawns and jammed into the uneven chain-link fences. A car alarm went off endlessly in the distance. Someone was shouting from a fourth-story apartment, throwing shoes out the window and onto an abandoned car parked halfway on the sidewalk.

One building stood out from all the others: a gothic church made of gray slate and tall spires like needles tearing the sky open. The rose window above the doorway was a perfect circle, glowing weakly from a warm interior light filtered through the glass. As the light inside shifted, the window took on the appearance of a giant eye casting its gaze down on the street.

“Are people actually religious here?” I said.

Eleanor glanced up at the building.

“There are some churches, but most of them aren’t the love-thy-neighbor kind that you’re thinking of. That’s Our Lady of Endor Coven.”

“Which is?”

“A satanic cult.”

“Oh.”

I looked away from the building, hurrying after Eleanor.

“Burgundy Street is just a few blocks away,” she said.

I nodded, part of me wishing she hadn’t said anything because the reminder of why we were there lit a fuse inside me and set off a chain explosion of nervous twitches. We stopped in front a poured-concrete apartment complex, one of the only buildings I’d seen that didn’t look ready to



keel over if the wind changed direction. Some of the windows had blown in and someone had spray-painted strange symbols across the ground floor that looked like a bizarre cross between Buddhist mandalas and alchemic transmutation circles.

Eleanor led me through the deserted lobby and to the elevator, pointedly ignoring my twitchiness. By the time we reached the eleventh floor, I was wound so tightly that she had to grab me by the collar to stop me from hurrying down the wrong hallway.

We stopped in front of a cream-colored flush door with brass numbers “821” nailed slightly off-center. I swallowed and pulled the key from my shirt.

“Don’t bother,” Eleanor said, bending down and examining a small dent where the wood had collapsed inward near the knob. “Someone kicked it in already.”

She twisted the knob and the door swung open easily. She looked up at me like she was about to say something, then turned away and drew her gun, going inside.

I followed behind her and flipped the light switch by the door. The overhead lamp buzzed for a moment, then pale white light flickered over a small living room and the body sleeping on the couch.

Ben’s bare feet hung over the armrest, his white t-shirt glowing with sparkling-champagne sunlight from the parted curtains. His chest rose and fell with gentle breaths as he slept, his hair cast over his eyes and glowing warm auburn in the light.

“Ben,” I whispered, feeling as if the floorboards were crumbling away beneath my feet. I rushed forward but a hand closed around my arm and yanked me back.

“Don’t,” Eleanor said.

“Let go.” I turned around to glare at her before yanking my arm back. She stared at me with tight lips for a moment, then her fingers fell away. I spun around and rushed forward, stumbling

into the armrest when I realized that the living room was empty.

The couch was the only piece of furniture still upright. The gray armchair had been overturned and the lamp lay on its side in a spray of glass shards. Torn pages and warped book covers carpeted the floor, sprinkled with ceramic shards that must have been from coffee mugs, based on the burnt smell of caffeine and mud-black stains splashed across the walls.

“It’s just residual memories,” Eleanor said from behind me. “Pieces of his soul left behind.”

“How did you know?” I said, my lips numb.

“Because he wouldn’t be here.”

I swallowed and moved towards the couch, kicking up papers. I traced my fingers through the dust in the cushions and thought that maybe if I imagined hard enough, I’d see him again. I hated myself in that moment because I’d forgotten so much about Ben; the way his black hair turned auburn in the summer, the way his bare feet were always stained brown because he hated wearing shoes outside.

“Violet was right,” Eleanor said. “It looks like the Lost got here first.”

I looked over my shoulder as she turned on a couple more lights, then grabbed an overturned chair and jammed it against the front door in place of a lock. “Just look around, okay?” she said. “The sooner we find what we’re looking for, the sooner we can leave.”

I nodded and stood up, wiping the dust from my pants. Eleanor stalked off down the hallway, so I turned the other direction to investigate the rest of the apartment.

Ben was standing there again, eyes bright with surprise.

“Ben,” I breathed.

But his lips moved at the same time as mine, forming the same silent word. A crooked scar ran across his face. I reached out and touched the clean surface of the mirror, polished so

intensely that it might have looked more like a window to another world if it weren't for the cracks.

I forced myself away from the mirror and headed off to the kitchen. The cabinet doors hung open and the drawers had been pulled out and stomped into firewood on the linoleum. The whole room reeked of burnt coffee beans and way-too-strong coffee and smelled so much like Ben that my eyes watered before I could stop them. I braced myself against the sink, willing myself to calm down so I wouldn't cry in front of Eleanor.

"You want a cup, Seb?" said a warm voice in my ear.

My eyes shot open and I gripped the edge of the sink so hard that my fingers shook.

"Montgomery, Alabama," I whispered. "Juneau, Alaska. Phoenix, Arizona." More capitals spilled past my lips, my brain barely registering the words. My hands gripped and released the rim of the sink with every state that I mumbled.

"Choi?"

I faltered on the capital of Pennsylvania, trying to finish the list in my mind so Eleanor wouldn't hear me.

"Choi?" she said, her voice getting closer. "Sebastian? What's wrong?"

"I need a minute," I said, my voice choked and louder than I'd meant it to be.

Eleanor said nothing for a moment, then footsteps crunched over the ceramic shards and a hand closed around my wrist.

"It gets worse if you think about it," she said. "Come on."

I let her pull me back to the living room, not feeling my feet touch the carpet. She nudged me back and I fell limply onto the couch.

An icy hand fell on my forehead and brushed over my eyelashes, gently pressing my eyes

closed.

“You’re freezing,” I said.

“I know,” she said, her voice close to my ear. Another hand fell softly on the back of my neck.

“Once upon a time,” she said, “I was training to be an EMT. I really wanted to drive an ambulance. Run red lights, make everyone else pull over for me like I was the Queen of England... I’ve been told I have a slight Napoleon complex.”

I smirked, my breathing starting to slow down.

“All that training is pretty useless here,” she continued, “since injuries heal themselves in three minutes or less.”

“You’re an EMT, and you haven’t done a thing about my broken ribs?” I said, my voice still unsteady but tinged with sarcasm.

“You can’t do anything about broken ribs, idiot.”

“Is that how you talk to all your patients?”

Eleanor pulled her hands away. I blinked, my eyes still tingling from the cold of her skin.

“I’m not a doctor,” she said. “Now will you come look at the bathroom? I think I found something.”

I nodded and stood up, feeling Eleanor’s eyes on me. She stopped in front of a bathroom door made of cherry wood that had splintered almost completely in half.

“Someone broke down this door,” Eleanor said. “They wouldn’t have to do that unless somebody locked it from the inside.”

I moved around Eleanor and snapped the light on, shuddering from the winter air before I could even make out the open window at the far end. I crossed the room and stuck my head out

the window, looking down at the fire escape leading down to an alley.

“He got out,” I said, feeling some of the tightness leave my shoulders.

“It looks like it.”

I shut the window and crossed my arms. “But how will we find him now?”

Eleanor nodded towards the wall opposite the mirror.

“Does this mean anything to you?”

Words had been carved jaggedly into the wallpaper, speckled with blood. A shard of mirror lay discarded on the floor below them. The wall read:

*Seb: Andrew, Eliot, Maverick*

I shook my head slowly, fingers tracing over the torn wallpaper and trying to think of anyone I'd ever met named Andrew, Eliot, or Maverick. There was someone named Andrew in my English class who always showed up smelling like a sorority lodge and constantly missed a spot shaving his chin, but Ben never knew him.

“I need some paper,” I said. “I want to test a few ideas out.”

“The study looks like a stationary bomb went off inside it,” Eleanor said, dragging me out of the bathroom. “You could start there.”

I followed her to the study, impressed but not surprised by the number of books strewn across the floor. It looked like Ben had tried to build a castle out of biology books only for enemy troops to pummel it with a battering ram. The book-fortress explosion had crushed every remotely-breakable object in the room, from the desk lamp to the window pane. Even with cold air blowing in through the cracked glass, it smelled overwhelmingly like cat food.

I grabbed a piece of paper from the floor and wasn't surprised to find it covered in pine tree sketches because of course Ben had hidden his real research and left nothing but stupid trees behind.

"He was like this in high school too," I said, stepping over some books and searching for a pen on the desk.

"What, a hoarder?"

"A bookworm. An asshole who reads textbooks for fun and then tells you about it."

"No offense, but he seems a little pretentious."

I blinked, not really processing her words because it had been so long since anyone had talked about Ben in the present tense.

"Hey, Sherlock!" Eleanor said.

I looked up, barely dodging a ball point pen that would have impaled my eye. I mumbled "thanks" and shoved books off the desk, copying Ben's message onto the paper and trying to unscramble the letters on the off chance that they were some sort of anagram. I didn't realize Eleanor had been watching me until she scoffed in my ear.

"Nice metalworker diva'?" she read. "'Cankerworm devil tea'? Choi, what is this?"

I sighed and slammed the pen on the desk, massaging my eye sockets that had begun to ache.

"I don't think it's an anagram," I said.

"Then try something else," Eleanor said, ripping another piece of paper from a nearby book and slapping it down on the desk.

I swiped both papers off the desk, sending them spinning into the air.

"What else?" I said. "I don't know what else to do, okay? I don't understand anything here!"

"That's why *I'm* here, idiot," Eleanor said, crossing her arms. "All you have to do is follow

your brother's pretentious little bread crumbs and try not to die."

"You don't get it!" I said, kicking an atlas at my feet that toppled another stack of books into the wall. "Ben never makes his clues easy for me. Even when there weren't people shooting at me, it took me *weeks* to finish. Now I have to do it with a dead girl breathing down my neck, my dead brother whispering in my ear, and a hundred other dead people trying to eat my face!"

"So go home!" Eleanor said, shoving my chest so hard that I stumbled back. "I'll take you back right now so you can go back to your life where everything is perfect and nothing is ever hard—"

"You have no idea how hard—"

"I'm *dead*, Choi!" she said, jabbing a finger into my chest. "Don't try to compare sob stories because I'll win every time."

"Would you just—"

"No!" She shoved me again, this time so hard that I fell to the floor, books jabbing into my spine. She stood over me and stamped a boot into my sternum. "Shut up and listen to me. I don't care how overwhelmed you are, I don't care that you miss your brother and I definitely don't care that you're scared."

"I'm not—"

"Don't lie to me," she said, grinding her heel harder into my chest. "If you thought this was going to be easy, you shouldn't have come here. And if you walk around this place giving up every time you get angry, or think about your brother, or a Lost Soul says 'boo,' you're going to die."

She stepped off my chest, taking a step back.

"I could have gotten you reassigned to someone else," she said, looking down at me

scathingly. “I could have knocked you around, shown Violet that she couldn’t force my hand, but I gave you a chance. Do you know why?”

I blinked, then shook my head numbly.

“Because you stood up to her,” she said. “Violet could have killed you, but you yelled at her because you would rather die than let anyone hurt your brother. I thought you would do whatever it took to get him back. Was I wrong?”

“No,” I said, my voice cracking and my chest constricting painfully.

“Then act like it. The second you forget why you’re here, you’re dead.”

Then she spun around, grabbed the atlas from the floor and ripped all the pages out in one violent motion, tossing the cover aside and dropping the stack heavily on my chest, some of the pages sliding to the floor.

“I don’t care if you have to use every one of these pages,” she said. “Now try again.”

I sat up stiffly and nodded, accepting her hand that pulled me to my feet.

A knock on the front door echoed through the apartment. Eleanor blanched for a moment, then rushed to the door, leaving me alone in the study.

“Eleanor?” I said, hurrying after her. She came running back into the study and crashed into me, sending us both to the floor and the papers in my arms shooting every direction.

“Shit,” she said, brushing her hair from her face, looking disheveled for the first time since I’d met her.

“What’s going on?”

She looked frantically around the room, chewing her lip. Her distressed gaze finally settled on me.

“Take your clothes off.”



I blinked.

“What?”

Another knock shook the apartment, more forceful than the last one. Eleanor tugged at my shirt.

“Come on, off!” she said, yanking off her own jacket and pulling her hair down from her ponytail.

“Eleanor, what the hell?” I blushed furiously, pulling my shirt down when she grabbed at it again.

“It’s a Light Keeper!” she said, still trying to wrestle my shirt off. “We want him out as fast as possible. Light Keepers have guns, hate Bloodhounds, half of them are bounty hunters for the Lost, and if they decide to playfully shoot you in the head thinking it won’t hurt you, we’re screwed.”

“Shoot me in the head?”

I faltered just long enough for Eleanor to yank my shirt off and stand up triumphantly. I shivered and wrapped my arms around myself, positive that my face was bright red.

Eleanor moved to unfasten her belt, then paused to glare at me.

“Turn around or I’ll shoot you.”

I gulped and spun around, covering my eyes for good measure.

A knock rattled the hinges on the door.

“Inspection!” the voice called.

“Coming!” Eleanor said, grabbing my hand away from my face and dragging me to the living room. I opened my eyes tentatively and saw Eleanor wearing only my t-shirt that fell to her knees. I glanced at her pale, spidery legs and knocked-knees before she caught me looking and

twisted my wrist, pushing me into a chair across from the couch.

“Light Keepers notice details,” she said, spitting in her hand and raking it through my hair. I flinched away but she grabbed my neck and held me in place. “Watch your facial expressions and don’t breathe too much. I’ll try to keep you behind me.”

“You have ten seconds to open the door!”

Eleanor took a step back and examined my hair, then nodded and pulled me towards the door. She grabbed my wrists and forced my arms into place around her waist, melting back against my chest. Then she moved the chair from under the doorknob.

The door slammed back against the wall. An imposing silhouette filled the doorway, eclipsing the gray glow of the hallway lights. The figure loomed dark and gaunt as a deadwood tree, limbs like shadows that dusk had stretched too far. Then he stepped into the room and the delicate haze of light fell away from his face, revealing a chalky complexion slashed with frown lines, silver-blond hair and dark eyebrows arching downward in impatience. He didn’t look much older than me, but his face was contorted with so much bitterness that I thought he must have lived through a thousand years of watching people hurt and ruin each other. He wore a black drummer jacket with gold stripes and a conductor’s tailcoat, a five-pointed star pinned to the right side of his chest. White-gloved hands curled around a gun aimed directly at Eleanor’s face.

“Seriously, Wolf?” Eleanor said, all traces of panic gone from her voice. I tried to relax my arms, too aware that my muscles were frozen stiff. I pressed my face to Eleanor’s neck, shivering.

The man hesitated, the anger melting away from his face, replaced by confusion.

“Eleanor?”

He lowered his gun, taking in Eleanor's disheveled appearance. Then his gaze flickered up to mine and his eyes flashed with something dark and poisonous. I reflexively squeezed Eleanor tighter.

"This is a new level of pathetic, even for you," Eleanor said. "Throwing rocks at my window is one thing, but I don't even live here."

The man's lip twitched in annoyance. "I was doing rounds," he said. "I didn't know you'd be here, since I didn't think dogs were allowed in this building."

Eleanor rolled her eyes.

"Look, Wolf, can we hurry this up? You're interrupting."

She placed a hand over my own clasped around her stomach, squeezing gently.

"Unless you wanted to watch?" she said, one finger tracing a line down my bare chest. She tossed her hair over her shoulder and I smelled soap and baby powder. I took a deep breath before forgetting to breathe subtly.

"New chew toy?" Wolf said, his words sounding choked.

"Chew' might not be the best word," Eleanor said. It took every ounce of willpower I had not to combust from awkwardness.

"How can you stand that breathing?" Wolf said, eyes locked on me again. "He sounds like a snowblower."

I froze, instantly holding my breath. The fact that Eleanor noticeably tensed up in my arms did little to reassure me.

"He's new," she said. "Old habits die hard."

Wolf shook his head, taking a step closer.

"There are cuts on his neck," he said.

I swallowed, remembering how Violet's nails had scratched through the skin below my jugular.

"If he's so new, then why haven't those healed yet?" Wolf said. "For a New Arrival, wounds like that should heal up almost instantly."

Eleanor rolled her eyes. "You know as well as I do that no one completely understands how light energy works. If you're going to have a fit about it then just screen him. The name's Benjamin Choi."

Wolf glared at Eleanor for a long moment, then sighed and put his gun away. I felt Eleanor relax in my arms.

He dropped his briefcase on the table and pulled out an impressive stack of manila folders, fingers dancing across the labels. When he reached the end of the pile, he frowned and pulled a notebook from another pocket of his briefcase.

"Date of death?" he said. No one moved, and I realized he was talking to me.

"Umm, October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014."

Wolf flipped through a few pages, still scowling.

"Benjamin Byung-Joon Choi?"

I nodded stiffly.

"I don't have your file with me," he said, closing the notebook. "I don't typically carry files for people who've lived here less than ten years, but rest assured, I will keep yours on me at all times in the future."

"Great," Eleanor said, crossing her arms. "Thanks for the visit. You can go now."

"I'm still screening *you*," Wolf said, smoothly extracting another file from his stack.

"What, do you *always* have my file on you?"

Wolf simply took out a pen and stared at her expectantly. She sighed.

“Just make it quick.”

“Name,” he said, his voice suddenly flat.

“Eleanor Liu.”

“Date of death.”

“January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1985.”

“Cause of death.”

Eleanor’s eyes flickered warily over to me for a moment before she looked back at Wolf.

“Asphyxia,” she said softly.

“Last Meal.”

“Peanut butter and honey sandwich.”

“Oldest cousin’s birthday.”

“Seriously, Wolf?”

“You put it down on your entrance survey, so clearly you knew it at some point.”

Eleanor sighed dramatically.

“April 12<sup>th</sup>.”

“Year?”

Eleanor scowled. “There’s no way I wrote down the year.”

Wolf looked at her coolly, then wrote something on the file.

“Screening failed,” he said. “Score: 55. Memory Retention Index: 61.”

“Wolf, when will you get it through your thick head that I know when you’re lying?” Eleanor said. She took a step towards Wolf and my hands fell away from her. “What will it take to make you leave?”

Wolf twirled his pen in his left hand and raised an eyebrow, looking down at Eleanor like she was his prey.

*“You know.”*

Eleanor rolled her eyes, then strode forward and grabbed his tie, yanking his face down to her level.

*“And then you’ll leave?”* she said, her forehead pressed against his.

Wolf licked his teeth and nodded, lightning flashing in his eyes.

Eleanor sighed, then closed her eyes and leaned forward. Wolf smirked, his eyes fluttering closed.

When their lips were only a breath apart, Eleanor yanked harder on his tie. Wolf gagged, his eyes popping open. She punched him in the face, his nose cracking and spraying blood across the kitchen table. She pulled her arm back to hit him again but he grabbed her wrist, tossing her easily to the floor. She leaped up before he could draw his gun, grabbing a shard of broken mug from the floor and raking it across his face. Blood bubbled across his lips, a stripe of bright red blooming across his right cheek down to his chin. He paused long enough for Eleanor to twist his wrist, causing the gun to fall to the floor. She held the shard up to his neck.

*“Will you leave now?”* she said, her teeth gritted, *“or should I carve out your eyes so you can never give me that disgusting, hungry little smirk ever again?”*

Wolf looked at her in shock for a moment, then smiled darkly, teeth painted red.

*“Next time, Liu.”*

Then he straightened his tie, grabbed his briefcase, shot me a look that could strip paint off a car, and swept out the door.

*“Finally,”* Eleanor said, dropping the shard on the table pushing the chair back in front of the

door. She grabbed her pants off the floor and quickly slid into them. “Wolf has a gross little crush on me. I think he might have a blood fetish too.”

She turned around and blinked at where I stood rooted to the linoleum.

“You’re too white to go shirtless,” she said, stalking off to the study and slamming the door before emerging a moment later wearing her own shirt with my shirt balled-up in her hand. I pulled it on quickly while she scooped her jacket off the floor and gathered her hair in a ponytail.

“What just happened?” I said, finally feeling like I could move without being shot.

“Light Keepers have to screen the dead to see how much light energy they have left from the living,” Eleanor said, dropping down to the couch. “It’s supposed to decrease the number of Lost Souls running around, but if they did their job, we wouldn’t need Bloodhounds, would we?”

Eleanor flopped on her back on the couch, staring up at the ceiling.

“They screen everyone annually, but they also do random inspections and scoring too low can get you locked up. They think they have as much authority as Bloodhounds, but most of them are just bullies you can pay off to get a passing score. Sometimes I think Light Keepers are worse than Lost Souls. They’re harder to get rid of and none of them ever want to leave me alone.”

“You really like your alone time, don’t you?” I said, sitting down on the arm of the couch.

I expected Eleanor to scowl or somehow turn her response into a derisive comment about my mother’s IQ, but instead she just stared at the cracks in the ceiling. She sighed softly, and when she exhaled it seemed like her bones sunk deeper into the couch cushions. I toyed with the loose threads on the couch, not sure how to deal with a lethargic Eleanor.

“Hang on,” I said, hurrying back to the study and grabbing some papers from the floor before setting the coffee table right-side-up next to Eleanor and sitting cross-legged in front of it.

“I think you’d like an island,” I said, pressing down a clean sheet and penciling a ragged shoreline across the page.

Eleanor rolled over onto her stomach and peered down at my drawing.

“You wouldn’t have to talk to anyone there,” I said. “There would be a mountain too, so that you could be even more of a hermit and hide in a cave at the top.”

I sketched a mountain range, drawing a moat swirling around it for good measure.

“What are you doing?”

“Making a map.”

“A map of what, exactly?”

I looked over my shoulder.

“A destination.”

Eleanor blinked, then swung her legs over the side of the couch and sat up, resting her elbows on her knees and squinting at my sketch.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” she said. “Explain.”

“It’s a place where you’ll go someday,” I said, smoothing out the curves in the moat with my eraser.

“It doesn’t exist.”

“You don’t know that,” I said, blowing away the eraser dust. “It’s a place you’ll go in the future, therefore, you’ve never been there before and you don’t know that it exists yet.”

Eleanor frowned. “That’s debatable.”

“I didn’t know that this place existed until I came here,” I said. “I’ve drawn a lot of maps like this —of places I’ve never seen— and I think that all of them exist somewhere, in this world or another one. Like... do you know the infinite monkey theorem?”



“A monkey smashing its fists on a typewriter forever will eventually type all of Shakespeare’s plays?”

“Yeah. The corollary to that theory is that everything that could possibly happen will eventually happen. Time goes on forever, so, at some point on the infinite timeline, a volcano will erupt and a new island will appear, and it will be exactly like the one I’m drawing now. It has to, because it’s inevitable. Everything is.”

Eleanor pursed her lips, nodding slowly.

“Would you like an impenetrable forest as well?” I said.

Eleanor blinked slowly. “A 20-foot stone wall around the perimeter would work.”

I nodded. “Let’s make it 30 feet, just to be safe.”

I quickly penciled in the wall, making note of the height. We decided to add a long, spiraling stretch of highway where she could drive an ambulance, a giant library with soundproof walls, and a warm lagoon inhabited by tropical penguins.

I brushed the last eraser shavings off and handed the paper to Eleanor. She scanned the map, a faint smile curling one side of her mouth.

“Cartography is a really nerdy, archaic hobby, you know?”

I shrugged. “I could never make the basketball team in high school.”

“I’m glad, because then you would have been really useless here. But this...” she gestured to the map, “is a skill we can use.”

“You need maps of places that may or may not actually exist yet?”

Eleanor shook her head, carefully folding the paper into quarters and tucking it into her pocket.

“Thinking outside the box,” she said. “Being a good navigator doesn’t hurt either, but mostly

just thinking creatively.”

I leaned back against the couch, resting my head on the cushion and staring up at the ceiling.

“Not creatively enough, apparently. I still have no idea what Ben’s message means.”

The couch cushions shifted as Eleanor slid off and got to her feet.

“Come on,” she said. “We’re trying again.”

She dragged me to the bathroom, pausing just before the door.

“Let’s start over,” she said. “Clean slate.” Then she pointed at the broken door and elbowed me excitedly.

“Someone broke down this door,” she said, gesturing melodramatically. “They wouldn’t have to do that unless somebody locked it from the inside.” She shoved into the bathroom, then brushed shards of glass off the counter before sitting on the edge of the sink, swinging her feet and pointing to the scratched wallpaper.

“Choi, look at this! Does this mean anything to you?”

I stepped forward, brushing away the powder from the chiseled wallpaper, running my fingers along the curves of the “S” in “Seb” and imagining Ben raking the shard of mirror across the wall.

“Choi,” Eleanor said, suddenly still, all traces of melodrama gone from her voice. “Is your brother’s handwriting just really terrible, or is that ‘T’ capitalized?”

I turned back to the wall and touched the “T” jutting out higher than the rest of the letters.

I closed my eyes and traced the “T” over and over again with my thumb. All the other letters were sloppy, listing off to both sides like tall grass whipped around in the wind, but the “T” stood straight and tall, perfectly symmetrical.

“Maybe both?” I said.

I closed my eyes and started to filter out the cold breeze, Eleanor's feet tapping against the cabinet, everything except for the clue scratched into the wallpaper. The walls fell away and I imagined the "T" in bold black typeface, the image familiar yet far away.

Then all of the scenes came to me at once. Gray snow over an open-air train platform, a train with a red-stripe rushing by and a black "T" mounted on the brick wall overhead, illuminated in a fluorescent halo of white. A black "T" on a glowing white sign jutting out into the street, people pouring down the steps to the subway. Passengers listing to the side when the train car came to a jerky stop, grocery bags on the floor between snow boots, a static-y voice announcing, "Next stop, Maverick."

"The T," I said, opening my eyes.

Eleanor looked at me expectantly.

"Yes, it's a 'T,'" she said.

"Not *a* T. *The* T. You know, Bostonian for 'train'? Andrew, Eliot, and Maverick aren't just names, they're T stops."

Eleanor's eyes widened.

"He's telling us to go to the trains."

## 7. And Still They Don't Go

“This is the only way out,” Eleanor said, gesturing to a pair of parallel train tracks that converged somewhere off in the distant fog. “The Exit Trains.”

We stood on an outdoor train platform paved with gray marble tiles darkened with raindrops. Two steam trains sat on each side of the platform, a deep black like the Shadow Express, but with a matte finish that lent them the softness of evening shade. White lace curtains were drawn across the scratched windows of the passenger cars, masking shapeless figures and weak light inside. The space felt quieter than the rest of the city, the rain a gentle murmur and the clouds a soft silvery gray.

“Where do they go?”

Eleanor shrugged. “Christians will tell you that one goes to Heaven and one goes to Hell, but I don't think they're very credible, since the bible said nothing about Shadow Cities or Lost Souls.”

“But which is which?”

Eleanor cuffed a raindrop from her eye.

“No one knows. That's kind of the point. No one who gets on them ever comes back.”

For a moment I pictured Ben boarding one of the trains, backpack slung easily over one shoulder, shaking the rain out of his hair.

“Does that mean Ben—”

“If your brother got on one of these trains, we'll never find him.”

I flinched at how easily she said it, indifferently describing the Worst Possible Outcome.

“Let's assume he wanted you to look around the platform and not the trains themselves,” Eleanor said, “since that's the only possibility that means I still have a job and you get to go

home alive.”

“...Right.”

The train on the left whistled suddenly and breathed a gray cloud into the sky. The platform started vibrating under my sneakers. A man holding a black leather briefcase appeared at the stairs leading up to the platform, walking with the unhurried pace of sleepwalker traipsing through a dream. His features were smoothed with calm, his eyes focused only on the train ahead of him as he floated past me and Eleanor without acknowledgment. He stepped onto the train on the left platform, the doors instantly sealing shut behind him. The whistle sounded again and the train began rolling forward, slowly at first, as if waking up from a long sleep, then it rapidly picked up speed until it shot out of the station at meteoric speed, surging into the horizon blurred with fog.

“So that’s all it comes down to,” I said, watching the last of the train cars disappear. “The afterlife isn’t about what you did when you were alive, or what you deserve. It’s just a 50-50 chance of going up or down.”

Eleanor crossed her arms, leaning back against a pillar.

“Choi, do you ever just know that you’re supposed to do something? Like, the universe is pushing you in that direction?”

I thought about stepping onto the Shadow Express with nothing but a note from my supposedly-deceased brother.

“Yes,” I said.

“I’ve talked to people right before they decided to go forward, and they all said the same thing: one day they just knew which train to get on, the same way they knew their own names. I think you just have to feel ready enough. Besides, most of us are here by choice.”

“By choice?”

Eleanor nodded. “There are places where this world and your world intersect, ways to check in on the living if you really want to. There’s no guarantee that there will be overlaps like that once you go Forward, so getting on the Exit Trains means being willing to give all of that up.”

She zipped her jacket up tighter.

“Now, what are we looking for?”

“I’m not sure,” I said, glancing around. “Maybe a pine tree?”

Eleanor raised an eyebrow, scanning the barren landscape.

“Anything else?”

I knelt down and examined the unbroken sheet of gray tiles covering the platform, smoother than the surface of a pond, no broken tiles or fractures where notes could be stashed.

“He usually hides things in places you wouldn’t go unless you were looking for something, like air shafts or potholes.”

Eleanor tapped her foot and waited for me to continue. I turned away from her gaze, fidgeting with the zipper of my jacket and looking around for more ideas. I approached the edge of the platform, peering down at the steep drop onto the tracks covered in gravel and mud. Definitely a place no one would go without reason.

“Eleanor, how often do the trains come?”

She shrugged. “You want to go down there?”

“We have to start somewhere.”

She sat down on the ledge, crossing her legs. “Go on, then. I’ll keep watch.”

I nodded and swung my legs over, dropping down clumsily to the bottom.

“Oh, and don’t touch the third rail,” Eleanor said.

“Yeah, yeah.” I dropped to my knees and brushed away some of the pebbles near the first rail as a light drizzle started falling overhead. Cold mud instantly soaked through the knees of my pants and sucked my sneakers into the ground. Eleanor looked down at me with the enthusiasm of a toll-booth collector.

“So,” I said, digging through the pebbles, “you like peanut butter and honey sandwiches?” Eleanor snorted, leaning back on her elbows.

“No. There wasn’t anything else to eat. I was about to go to Stop & Shop when I died.”

I took a few steps to the left and brushed more rocks aside.

“About to’?” I said. “You suffocated before you even got outside?”

“Your persistence is annoying.”

I shrugged, rolling a large rock to the side. “You’re asking me to trust a lot of things I don’t understand. Like you.”

“You don’t need to understand me to find your brother.”

“No,” I said, pawing through more rocks, “but I need to trust you, don’t I?”

Eleanor pursed her lips. “And do you trust me?”

I pretended to be distracted with my digging rather than look back at her face.

“I feel like I’m supposed to say ‘no,’” I said. “I’ve known you for a day and a half, and in that time you’ve killed at least five people in front of me.”

“I haven’t killed anyone.”

“Or shot people in the face. Same thing,” I said, kneeling in front of a pile of bigger rocks on my left. “Plus, you won’t tell me anything about yourself, so you clearly don’t trust *me*, and I think trust is one of those things that’s supposed to be mutual.”

“But you trust me anyway.”

I sat down on the track, wiping sweat from my forehead with my sleeve.

“You’re kind of scary,” I said, finally looking up at her. She rested her chin in her hand, leaning forward and observing me with her head tilted to the side, like I was a piece of abstract art that she couldn’t quite appreciate. “But not as scary as doing this alone.”

Eleanor blinked slowly, then leaned back on her elbows and looked up, raindrops catching on her face.

“There it is, then,” she said. “You already trust me, so there’s no need for me to tell you anything else about myself.”

“That’s not what—”

“There’s a train coming, so hurry up.”

I sighed and stood up, grimacing as the mud inhaled my left shoe, sucking half of it into the ground before I yanked it out with a wet *pop*, stumbling forward. I tripped over one of the rocks I’d just moved, landing hard on my knees and plunging my hands a few inches into the mud.

“Watch the third rail!” Eleanor said.

I yanked my right hand out of the cold mush, trying to pull myself up on the track but nearly smashing my face into the metal when my mud-slick hand slid right off it. With my nose half an inch from the ground, I rolled onto my side, hoping for better leverage. Then I saw it, carved into the cement base of the platform in the shadowed indent tucked away from the rain: a pine tree.

“Choi, you’ve got 60 seconds before I have to call maintenance to scrape you off the tracks.”

“Hang on, I think I found it!” I scrambled towards the wall, splashing mud over the etching when I slammed my dirty palms across it to make sure it was real. A small pile of rocks sat neatly below it and I frantically brushed them away, smiling through the mud in my mouth when I uncovered a small envelope.



I wiped my hands as best as I could on my pants, then grabbed the envelope and waved it at Eleanor triumphantly.

“You get a gold star for not being useless today,” she said, one corner of her mouth curved into a small smile. “40 seconds.”

I glanced at the train in the distance before handing the envelope off to Eleanor. I grabbed the ledge and tried to haul myself up, but felt a sharp pain in my ribs and let go of the ledge without really meaning to, falling back into the mud. Eleanor’s eyebrow twitched with amusement but she made no move to help.

“35 seconds.”

“My ribs are perforating my lungs right now,” I said, sitting up stiffly. “Just help me up.”

“Your ribs are not perforating your lungs. You would be dead, and it wouldn’t matter if you got hit by a train or not.”

The tracks started vibrating under my sneakers.

“Eleanor!”

She smirked, then smoothly slid down from the ledge, pocketing the envelope.

“Step on my leg,” she said, squatting slightly. “I’ll push you up with your other foot.”

“Step on you? But you’re...”

“I’m small, I get it,” she said, rolling her eyes and gesturing emphatically at the ledge. “You won’t break me, I promise. Now hurry up before we both get hit.”

I didn’t need any further encouragement before I stepped up. My right foot was hardly off the ground before she grabbed my sneaker and pushed me up over the ledge. I clawed at the ground and pulled my legs up as Eleanor jumped and swung herself back onto the platform. The train charged into the station with a gust of hurricane wind that whipped Eleanor’s ponytail to the side

and stung like a slap against my cheek. The glass windows flashed past us in an unbroken stream, reflecting our silhouettes like a stop-motion film.

“Let me see,” I said over the roar of the train, holding my hand out.

Eleanor scowled at the command but withdrew the envelope from her pocket, handing it to me.

I ripped through the top of the envelope, deaf to the noise around me as I took in Ben’s handwriting, smudged with mud and rainwater.

*Seb:*

*Sorry for the vagueness. Had to get out in a hurry & didn’t want them to know where I went. I think it’s safe to assume that if the Lost can’t even remember their own names, they can’t remember the specifics of the Boston subway system, right? Fingers crossed.*

*I know this is crazy and I’m sorry. Part of me wishes I’d never sent you that letter because then you’d be safe at home. But I’m selfish, I guess. I just miss you so damn much, Seb. If this all works out, we can go home together, alive.*

*If you haven’t already, talk to a Bloodhound. They’ll keep you safe. Please stay safe, Seb.*

*I’ve found another place to hide out, but I can’t stay anywhere for too long or else the Lost will start to smell me out. I still don’t want to say too much in case the wrong person finds this, so this is all I’ll say:*

*Go to your favorite place and ask for Perry. He’ll take you to me. I’ll wait there as long as I can.*

*Love,*

*Ben*

“I know that look,” Eleanor said. “Do *not* cry again.”

And she shouldn’t have said that, because telling me not to cry was a guaranteed way to reduce me to a puddle of tears and snot. After Ben died, I got my PhD in Crying at Inappropriate Moments and Making Everyone Uncomfortable, which forced me to learn what set me off and how to steer conversations away from dangerous topics or else discreetly disappear into a bathroom stall and stuff a towel in my mouth.

But it felt different this time, less like being dragged out by a riptide and more like stepping into a warm bath in the dead of winter. Ben had been here, days or hours or even minutes before, and the faster I moved the sooner I could close the gap in time between us. For the first time, I realized that there was a possibility I would actually see my brother again.

“I’m not crying,” I said, wiping my eyes on my sleeve.

Eleanor said nothing as I folded the letter, tucking it safely into my pocket.

“Is there a library here?” I said, clearing my throat when my voice still sounded choked.

“There is,” she said, looking at me like I was about to combust at any moment, “but the selection’s pretty limited. We only have whatever books happened to float over from the other side, so it’s a lot of Tibetan 102 textbooks and vampire erotica.”

“That’s where Ben is hiding,” I said, heading for the stairs and waving Eleanor over when she didn’t immediately follow.

“Are you sure?” she said. “It’s not like the Boston Public Library with five levels and ten-foot shelves. It’s one floor of an office space with two guys working there part-time. There’s nowhere to hide.”

“Ben said to go to my favorite place,” I said, rocking back on my heels impatiently.

“And that’s the library?”

“Yes,” I said, taking another step towards the stairs and gesturing again for her to follow.

Eleanor rolled her eyes and finally started walking. “You should at least pretend not to be the biggest nerd in the universe.”

“It’s not like that,” I said, stomping through a puddle. “I don’t go there to read encyclopedias for fun. I just like the quiet. I don’t think I’ve even checked out a book in the last five years.”

I paused when I realized Eleanor had stopped walking. She stood a few feet behind me, staring at something over my shoulder.

“Eleanor?”

I started to turn around to see what she was looking at, but she grabbed my sleeve and shook her head.

“Let’s go back,” she said, her voice clipped and quiet.

“Uh, okay.”

She took off briskly, seeming determined to outpace me. When we reached the road that connected to the main street and Eleanor’s apartment, Eleanor didn’t turn like I expected her to, charging past it.

“Didn’t we come that way?” I said, jogging to catch up with her.

“No.”

“But we did,” I said. “I remember, your apartment—”

“Is *this* way,” she said, grabbing my arm and yanking hard.

I shut my mouth and followed obediently, too afraid to look behind me. Eleanor was clearly concerned about something near us, and clearly didn’t want to, or *couldn’t* talk about it.

She pulled me to the left, dragging me into a small cafe where a few customers were playing backgammon or reading comic books. They looked up as I tripped through the doorway, a few pairs of dice clattering to the floor.

“Hey, Harvey,” Eleanor said, waving to a flustered man in an apron behind the counter. She pulled me straight through the crowd, right past a door clearly marked “Employees Only.”

“I was never here, okay?” she said.

The door swung shut before the man could answer. Eleanor hurried down a hallway, shouldering open a massive steel door that breathed out a gust of air cold enough to rival winters in Boston. She pushed me inside and slammed the door shut, yanking the chain of an overhead light.

I squinted as my eyes adjusted, taking in the claustrophobic space crammed with steel shelves and gallons of milk. The walls were as white as... no, the walls were *literally* made of snow.

“Are we in a freezer?”

Eleanor scoffed. “Of course not. We’re in a fridge.” She sat down on a cooler and crossed her legs, leaning back against a shelf. “It’s soundproof and somewhat scent-proof.”

I shivered. The cold was already crawling under my clothes.

“You haven’t forgotten that I’m alive, right? That the living can get hypothermia?”

“We’re only going to be here a few minutes, you baby.”

I frowned and hugged my arms around my torso. “Why are we here anyway?”

Eleanor sighed and tipped her head back against the wall. “We need to throw her off our scent.”

“‘Her’?”

She nodded. “May.”

“Who’s May?”

Eleanor closed her eyes, gloved fingers drumming against the cooler.

“Last year,” she said, “a school bus somewhere in New Hampshire skidded off the highway because of a snowstorm the night before. It was ugly. The bus overturned and caught fire. There were 23 kids and all of them died.”

I nodded. “I remember seeing that on the news. Did the kids end up here?”

Eleanor shook her head. “They were supposed to. We waited, but weeks passed and they never came. We weren’t too worried at first, because none of us completely understand how the Shadow Express works or where it takes people. But about a month later, Violet had me looking over some security tapes and I saw that all of them arrived the same day that they died.”

I swallowed, another shiver rippling down my spine. “What happened to them?”

“Someone got to them before we did.” Eleanor’s scowl deepened, her fingers clenched against the rim of the cooler. “One of the Lost got to them as soon as they stepped off the train. She drank every single one of them dry, then carried what was left of them to the outskirts. That’s 23 kids who will never move forward, and it was all for nothing. None of it helped her at all.” Eleanor shook her head, standing up and kicking weakly at a shelf. “She thinks she’s the ringleader of the Lost. We’ve been trying to erase her for months, but she always manages to slip away. Violet calls her ‘Mayhem’ for obvious reasons. ‘May’ for short. That’s who’s tailing us.”

My next shiver wasn’t from the cold. Eleanor looked up at me and rolled her eyes.

“Come on,” she said, opening the door. “Your lips are turning blue. She should be bored by now.”

I hurried out of the fridge, sighing contentedly when I felt the warm air of the coffee shop.

Eleanor waved me over to the back door, sticking her head out and peering around before entering a dim alley. I stepped down into a puddle and started following Eleanor towards the main street.

Then several things happened at once.

Eleanor slammed me back into the wall with her shoulder, her elbow sinking into my ribs. I coughed and bent in half, curling an arm around my chest as Eleanor took a defensive stance in front of me, gun aimed at the mouth of the alley.

A gunshot cracked through the air, and before I could wonder how Eleanor's gunshot could sound so far away, she jerked back and her pistol fell from her hand, fingers going limp as blood dripped from her palm. Another shot went off and Eleanor took a shaking step backward. I heard liquid dribbling onto the pavement and looked down at the growing red puddle beneath her as she clutched her stomach. And I knew she was already dead, but something visceral inside me lurched nauseatingly at the sheer amount of blood pooling around our feet. I knew Eleanor could have dodged the shot if she hadn't been trying to protect me.

"Eleanor," I whispered, coming forward as she took another step back and leaned against me.

"Don't let me fall," she said, her voice cracking.

"I can't just—"

"I can take it!" she said, looking over her shoulder and snarling through red-painted teeth.

Blood dripped down her chin. "Just do what I say."

Then a high-pitched laugh echoed against the brick walls.

"And they say chivalry is dead."

My eyes followed the path of the shadow stretched across the alley, stopping at a pair of purple rain boots and white stockings. A girl with golden blonde pigtails stood in a puddle at the

end of the street, and everything about her appearance looked wrong. Little girls with pigtails weren't supposed to have bloodstains or smile while brandishing loaded guns. May had the delicate features of a carefully-painted doll, a soft jawline and rounded nose. She had the complexion of white china teacups and her white eyes burned like stage lights with spidery lace eyelashes. She looked at me over Eleanor's shoulder and her bone-white eyes narrowed, pink lips curling into a noxious smile.

"Everything in this godforsaken place is dead," Eleanor said. She coughed wetly and leaned against my chest. I put a hand on her waist and she grabbed it, nearly falling for a moment before pulling herself up on my arm, pushing my palm against her belt loop. She squeezed my hand hard enough that I swear I heard the bones crunch, then released. My knuckles brushed against something hard tucked against her belt, near her back pocket.

The girl's gray Mary Janes splashed happily through the puddles, kicking up sparks of rain as she strolled towards us.

"Now that I'm closer, I can see why you want to save this one," May said, gesturing to me with her gun. "He smells so fresh, I can practically taste him."

"I wouldn't know because I'm not an animal," Eleanor said, elbowing me lightly. I closed my fingers around a cold handle in her belt.

"Then why are you protecting him?" May said, raising an eyebrow in mock interest. "We've kept up this silly cat-and-mouse game for a while now, but I've never seen you protect anyone else."

"It's called humanity," Eleanor said, "but of course you've forgotten all about that."

The smile slid off May's face, her expression going slack.

"Don't act like you're better than me," she said, her voice a cutting whisper. "This is what



you'll become one day, Liu. Don't ever forget that."

May seemed focused on Eleanor, so I closed my fingers firmly around the handle and pulled up.

The weapon snagged in her belt. My wrist bumped into Eleanor's elbow, jostling her arm. May's eyes snapped down and her eyes pulsed bright white. She raised the gun again, this time aimed straight at my head.

Then blood burst from May's right ear. She stumbled to the side, clutching her ear and dropping the gun. Eleanor dove to the pavement and snatched the pistol, firing a few shots that May barely dodged. Eleanor got to her feet and May sprinted from the alley, tripping as one of the bullets clipped her heel.

Eleanor sighed, examining the bullet hole in her jacket.

"I liked this jacket," she said, spitting out blood and wiping her mouth with her sleeve.

"Eleanor," I said, "where did the first shot come from?"

Footsteps landed in a puddle behind me. I spun around as a lanky man in all-black stood up, a rifle over his shoulder. His sandy hair bounced as he walked, a goofy smile stamped across his face.

"E!" he said, splashing through the puddles like an excited puppy and sweeping her into a fierce, unreciprocated hug.

"Kenny," she cautioned.

He pouted dramatically. "Act more excited to see me!"

Kenny wrapped a hand around Eleanor's hips and picked her up easily, spinning around. Eleanor put a hand on his shoulder to steady herself but otherwise ignored him, retying her ponytail.

“‘Excited’ is a strong word,” she said. “I’m glad I have backup, though.”

“I missed you too!” he said, hugging her legs. I suddenly felt like I was intruding. The idea of anyone touching Eleanor so easily seemed unnatural.

“I knew today was a good day for a street sweep!” Kenny said, his voice far too loud for the silent alley. “It wasn’t raining as much as usual, you know? It just felt like a roof day. And then... bam! Destiny! I finally run into you!”

“It was under control,” Eleanor said, gently pushing at Kenny’s shoulder until he let her down, “but I guess you saved me some time.” She examined the gun May had dropped. “Choi, you’re still alive over there, right?”

“Uh, yeah,” I said, still leaning palely against the wall.

“Then give me my knife back and let’s go.”

Kenny turned to me and smiled like he hadn’t just shot someone in the head. He had approximately 10,000 glistening white teeth and eyes like a little kid on Christmas morning. I could picture him as a model for a toothpaste commercial, skin perfectly airbrushed and highlighted brown hair catching the sunlight in just the right way, and for some reason it made me want to hate him.

“New friend?” he said, walking over to me.

“Hardly,” Eleanor said. “Kenny, this is the guy I affectionately refer to as Unpaid Overtime Assignment.”

“Sebastian, for short,” I said, glaring at Eleanor.

“Kenny O’Brien,” he said, grabbing my hand and shaking it enthusiastically. “East patrol sniper.”

“East patrol?”

“Kenny’s a Bloodhound too,” Eleanor said. “You can thank him for the pineapple socks.”

“*You* took my socks?” Kenny said, spinning around and throwing his hands in the air. “I dumped out my entire sock drawer looking for those!”

“We trained together a few decades back,” Eleanor said, ignoring Kenny. “Used to live together, too, before the first Lost Soul Revolt.”

“El crowned me ‘The Literal Worst Roommate in the World, Alive or Dead.’”

“He shot me.”

“Once! Accidentally!”

“In the face.”

“My aim has improved since then!”

“You’re a sniper, so I fucking hope so.”

I looked away, feeling out of place again.

“Just don’t point your gun at Sebastian,” Eleanor said. “He still has a pulse.”

Kenny’s eyes widened. He rushed over to me and reached out to touch my face but I flinched away because he looked like someone who tripped into antique vases and spilled soda on 15<sup>th</sup>-century paintings and I genuinely thought he might gouge my eye out on accident. He saw my hesitation and froze, his hand hovering an inch from my skin.

“He’s not made of porcelain,” Eleanor said.

“He might as well be, in a place like this.” He turned back to me. “Are you okay? Did El beat you up yet?”

Eleanor smacked Kenny’s arm in what looked like a playful gesture, but the bone audibly cracked and Kenny squawked. He shook his arm out and the bone seemed to snap back into place.

“Case in point,” he said, winking at me. “I assume there’s a story behind all this?”

“Later,” Eleanor said. “We need to regroup somewhere safe.”

“Come over!” Kenny said, tugging on Eleanor’s sleeve. “It’s clean, I promise!”

“You’re lying,” Eleanor said.

Kenny laughed and punched my shoulder a little too hard, making me stumble.

“Did she tell you she’s a lie detector?” he said.

I thought of the way Violet had turned to Eleanor to see if I was telling the truth.

“Try it,” Kenny said, poking at my sore ribs. “Say something and she’ll tell you if it’s true.”

Eleanor rolled her eyes but made no move to walk away.

“Umm... my shoe size is a ten.”

“Out of all the things you could have said, that’s what you picked?” Eleanor said, sneering at me. “And you’re lying.”

Kenny applauded excitedly.

“Hey Eleanor! *My* shoe size is a ten!”

“I know what your shoe size is, you Texas-footed freak!” Eleanor said, shoving Kenny’s shoulder. “I can’t believe I spent years studying facial expressions just to be a party trick for you morons. Now can we get out of here before I get even more bullet holes in my favorite jacket?”

“My place is two blocks away!” Kenny said, running ahead and waving lanky arms at us, beckoning us to follow.

Eleanor grimaced, massaging her neck.

“He won’t give up until I come over,” she said to me. “And it’s safe there. But we’re not staying for long.”

She walked away before I could reply. Kenny clapped excitedly when he saw her

approaching and the two of them started walking without looking back. I flinched as something creaked on the fire escape above me. It was probably just a stray cat, or the metal bending in the cold, but I wasn't about to stick around to find out.

“Hey, wait for me!”

## 8. This Is Worse

Kenny circled the block a few times until he was sure no one was following him, then dashed into an alley and clambered up a fire escape, slipping through the window of an apartment on the eighth floor with a basket of half-dead yellow flowers hanging off the ledge.

“Is there something wrong with your front door?” I said, trying to pull myself onto the ledge and accidentally plunging my hand into the flower box.

“This way is more fun!” Kenny said.

“He lost his keys,” Eleanor said.

I fell inside and quickly closed the window, then turned around and surveyed a surprisingly normal-looking apartment kitchen, complete with an island, three barstools in a perfect row, and a procession of pineapples of various sizes on the counter. Apparently, Kenny had also built a Mt. Kilimanjaro of dirty dishes in the sink. Something wet rolled down my neck and I looked up at a leak in the ceiling.

Kenny took my wrist and lightly pulled me into a living area while Eleanor disappeared into another room, shedding her ruined jacket. He punched the light switch and crossed a yellow paisley shag carpet, sat down on a green couch, and put his feet up on an electric purple ottoman. I wondered if the color combination could induce seizures. Kenny gestured for me to sit down, then fished a remote from between the couch cushions and grinned like a naughty child.

“Want to see something?” he said.

“Um, okay?”

Before I'd even answered, Kenny had turned the TV on. My gaze slid over to the screen, where little girls in electric blue tulle and silvery sequins pranced across a stage to the beat of an 80's soft rock melody. The screen zoomed in on one little girl with a thin face and stormy eyes as

she hurried to her place and smiled through a mouthful of her mother's lipstick.

"Kenny," Eleanor said from behind the couch.

Kenny jumped and dropped the remote. Eleanor stood behind us with her arms crossed, a towel draped around her neck.

"Don't drag Sebastian into your emotional opium den."

"I'm just showing him how it works," Kenny said, picking up the remote and scooting away from Eleanor as if he expected her to smack him with a rolled-up newspaper.

"What is this?" I said. The girl smiled with lipstick on her teeth.

"That's Nicole," Kenny said. "That's my baby brother's daughter. Don't you just want to bite her cheeks?"

"Umm—"

The screen switched again, this time to a scene of a young woman walking through the snow, a pink backpack hitched over one shoulder. She was tall and lanky, fumbling to pull something out of her bag and slipping on a patch of black ice.

"That's Kendra, my oldest brother's daughter. They named her after me. Isn't that great?"

"He has five siblings and they all have kids," Eleanor said. "You want popcorn? You'll be sitting here a while."

"Eleanor only had one sibling," Kenny said, elbowing me playfully. "She's jealous that my channel is more interesting than hers."

"This is what they're doing right now?" I said, leaning forward as the girl brushed the snow off her pants and looked around to see if anyone had noticed.

"Yeah, like live TV!"

"And this is why Kenny's been here half a century," Eleanor said.

“Half a century?”

“Yep!” Kenny said. “Next August will be my sixty-first birthday!”

“Most people stop celebrating birthdays after they die, you know,” Eleanor said.

“You were really young, then,” I said. “When you died, I mean.”

When neither of them spoke, my face felt hot and I wondered if I’d broken some sort of dead-person etiquette rule.

“Yeah, I was eighteen,” Kenny said after a moment. “But hey, I have some pretty awesome tire-track scars on my chest. Want to see?”

Eleanor slapped a hand over her eyes.

“Shoot me,” she said, turning back to the kitchen.

Kenny shrugged and turned back to the TV just as something wet splashed onto my cheek again. I wiped it with my sleeve and looked up at water dripping from the ceiling.

"You guys have a leak," I said.

"Again?" Kenny said, looking up. "That's got to be you, El!"

"Doubtful," Eleanor called from the kitchen. "Maybe it's because Sebastian's here."

"I didn't touch anything!"

"Not like that," Kenny said, patting me on the shoulder. "When someone cries for you on the other side, the tears always make it back here somehow. If you're outside, it's rain. Inside, it's a leaky ceiling."

I scooted closer to Kenny to avoid the drip.

“I doubt anyone is crying for me,” I said. “I’d be surprised if anyone even noticed I was gone.”

I didn’t realize how pathetic I sounded until Kenny smiled sadly and patted my shoulder



again.

“Well,” Eleanor said from the doorway, “maybe we just have a shitty ceiling.”

She came back into the living room, pulling on a rain jacket and re-lacing her boots.

“Kenny, you’re on babysitting duty,” she said, sliding on her gloves. “Don’t let him touch the stove.”

Kenny looked over his shoulder. “Doing rounds again?”

Eleanor shook her head. “Picking up dinner. I need to get out, anyway. There’s too much testosterone here.”

“Most of it’s yours.”

Eleanor tightened her ponytail with a sharp tug and hauled herself onto the windowsill.

“Just try not to shoot him,” she said. Then she hopped out of the window and vanished into the night.

Kenny stretched, reclining back on the couch.

“What should we do while she’s gone?” he said. “The possibilities are endless.”

I looked at Kenny splayed out across the couch like a rag doll and swallowed down whatever part of me had hated him at first. He was too kind and too happy to hate, but somehow that made me feel worse.

“Hey, are you okay?” Kenny said, waving a hand in front of my face.

“Yeah, sorry,” I said, rubbing at my eyes. “It’s been a long day.”

Kenny nodded and shut the TV off, the smile gone from his face.

“What does a heartbeat feel like?” he said quietly. I looked over at him to see if he was joking, but his expression was serious for the first time since I’d met him.

“Umm, it doesn’t really feel like anything.”

Kenny shook his head. "It has to feel like something."

"If you can feel your heartbeat, it usually means you should see a cardiologist."

Kenny shook his head more vigorously and angled himself towards me.

"What about when you're hungry? What does that feel like?"

His fingers started drumming anxiously against the couch cushions.

"It's... uncomfortable?"

Kenny pouted. "Can you describe it better?"

He stared so intensely at me that I couldn't bear to disappoint him.

"It... hurts, I guess? Except it doesn't really *hurt*."

Kenny nodded for me to go on, like I was telling him the most interesting story in the world.

"Sorry, I'm not really good with words."

"What about when you're thirsty?" he said, scooting closer. "Or when you first wake up in the morning? You know, that moment right before you actually open your eyes?"

Kenny's hands were gripping my knees, his eyes wide and blazing inches from mine. His fingers burned with cold, even through the fabric of my pants. When I didn't answer right away, he squeezed even tighter, the fabric of my jeans scraping across my knees hard enough to burn.

"Well?" he said. I suddenly wished that Eleanor hadn't left, because this Kenny was different from the one I'd seen five minutes ago. His gaze was feverish, his movements desperate.

"Kenny, you're hurting me."

Kenny's lips parted, then he scrambled back like he'd been electrocuted, moving as far away from me on the couch as possible.

"I'm sorry," he said, grabbing a pillow and hugging it to his chest. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to."

“It’s okay,” I said, sitting up cautiously. “What was that about?”

Kenny shook his head miserably, pressing his face to the pillow and rocking back and forth.

“I’ve just been here so long,” he said, his voice muffled in the fabric. “There are all these things I never paid attention to when I was alive, and now I’ll never feel them again.”

I scooted closer to Kenny, tentatively laying a hand on his knee. He looked up, his muscles relaxing slightly.

“Do you hate me?” he said. “I scared you, didn’t I?”

I shook my head. “You’re probably the least scary thing I’ve seen here.”

Kenny laughed dryly, still looking upset.

“I need to get out of this place,” he said, running a hand through his hair.

“Why haven’t you?”

Kenny didn’t move for a moment, then he smiled distantly, his hand falling to his side.

“There’s someone I’m waiting for,” he said. Then he laughed and shook his head. “It’s weird waiting for someone I love to die, but I promised I would wait.”

He picked up the remote and turned the TV on again, flipping quickly through the channels until the screen filled with a kitchen, dark cherry wood cabinets and starry black marble countertops lining the off-white walls. A man and woman sat at a small table, silently cutting into a beef roast. They must have been in their late fifties, fine lines etched across their faces and silver hair peeking out at their roots. They looked faded, like clothes run through the hot cycle in a washing machine one too many times. The man had hollow cheeks covered in gray stubble and violently blue eyes that stood out from the dullness around him. The woman had deep smile lines around her mouth and rosy lipstick smudged outside of the lines. She looked like she had been beautiful once.

“We were together when it happened,” Kenny said, not really looking at the screen.

“When you died?”

Kenny nodded.

I looked back at the screen. The woman said something to the man, but the words seemed so vacuous and unimportant that I forgot them before she’d even finished speaking. The man nodded without looking up, and I wondered if they felt as lonely as they looked.

“What’s her name?” I said.

Kenny raised an eyebrow, glancing at the screen, then smiled sadly and looked back at his feet.

“I don’t know.”

I blinked. “You don’t know?”

“I don’t know,” Kenny said, “because I try not to check on Will too often. It’s hard to watch.”

I blinked, looking back at the man on the screen.

“Oh. *Oh.*”

“Is that a problem?” Kenny said, pointedly looking at the screen and not me, as if he was afraid of my answer.

“No! No, definitely not!” I said, raising my hands defensively. “It’s just, I thought that you and Eleanor...”

Kenny’s eyes somehow got even bigger, then he laughed so hard that he threw himself off the couch, clutching his stomach while he rolled around on the floor. He looked up at me, then burst out laughing again.

“Sorry, sorry,” he said, wiping tears from his eyes. “I’m just picturing me and Eleanor... Oh

god. Even if I liked girls, Eleanor would rip my tongue out of my mouth if I tried anything.”

“Oh,” I said, incapable of formulating a more coherent thought than that.

“Wait,” Kenny said, sitting up sharply, “don’t tell me you... you don’t, right? You and Eleanor?”

“Uh, I—”

“No!” Kenny moaned, throwing himself onto the carpet again and covering his eyes.

“Sebastian, no! That’s like, the worst idea ever!”

I felt my face getting hotter.

“I never said I—”

“Sebastian,” Kenny said seriously, sitting up and patting my knee, “you don’t have to be a lie detector like Eleanor to be able to read your face. You’re, like, 100 times more expressive than any dead person.”

“I’m just here to find my brother!” I said, grabbing my hair in desperation. “It’s not my fault that I’m forced to spend time with her!”

Kenny sighed and leaned back against the couch from his position on the floor, head propped up on one hand resting on the cushion.

“Sebastian,” he said, “you know that necklace Eleanor always wears?”

“The amber one?”

“Yes. It was a gift from the person who murdered her.”

I blanched, feeling cold sweat on my back. “Why would she wear something like that?”

Kenny gave a half-shrug. “I think it reminds her to be angry.”

I looked down at my sneakers.

“Physical injuries don’t hurt much, because these are our souls and not our bodies,” Kenny

said, “but emotional pain, things that leave scars on our souls... that feels like every bone in your body shattering. She would never admit it, but I think that’s how she feels all the time.

“I guess my point is, Eleanor can’t be anything for anyone because she doesn’t want to try, and I don’t blame her. I’ve known her for decades and she still won’t even call me her friend.”

“What happened to her?”

Kenny opened his mouth as if he was about to answer, then shook his head.

“I could tell you what I think, but it would just be an educated guess. She’s never told me the details.”

“And what do you think?”

He pursed his lips. “I think that she trusted someone and wishes she didn’t.”

The window slammed open in the kitchen. Kenny frantically changed the channel back to Nicole’s dance recital and threw his legs over the back of the couch so he was hanging upside down. Eleanor came in, her jacket glazed with rainwater, a brown paper bag in her left hand. She raised an eyebrow as she looked at Kenny, then turned to me.

“You two are so suspicious.”

“We’re just watching TV!” Kenny said.

“When are you going to realize that I know when you lie?” she said. “You know what? I don’t care.”

She tossed me the bag and stormed out of the room, mumbling something about testosterone. Kenny gave me a thumbs-up.

The next time I fell asleep, I felt the moment that I died.

I tried to breathe, but instead of air, my lungs filled with darkness. It was like falling into

warm water, my limbs weightless, every part of me responding in slow motion, silent like outer space.

Then something ripped inside of me, like a page torn cleanly from its spine, and darkness flooded into the empty vacuum where my heart used to be. It spread outward from my chest and I could feel it erasing me, stealing away my heartbeat, numbing my lips until I had no lips at all, painting my eyes an inky black and then devouring them too, dragging me to the bottom of the ocean where the pressure compacted me into dust. Everything felt so cold that it burned and then felt like nothing at all, and somehow the absence of sensation was excruciating, setting off firecracker explosions of panic in my brain, a million images flashing past my eyes every second, every word in every language screaming at me at the same time.

I woke up in the middle of my own broken scream, clawing at the invisible force that held me down.

A lamp clicked on and dim light fell across Eleanor's gaunt face, her right cheek striped with three parallel scratches. She straddled my chest, hands pinning down my shoulders. I took a deep breath and felt sweat roll into my eyes.

"I felt it," I said, grabbing her wrists and shaking as if that could make her understand. "I felt myself dying."

"I know," she said, easily sliding her wrists out of my fragile grip and pressing my shoulders down again.

"Is that really how it feels?" I said, breathing faster. "How can I feel this every night? Will my dreams keep getting more detailed?"

"I don't know what you felt, Sebastian," Eleanor said, regarding me calmly. "And I don't know what will happen. I'm sorry."

I curled my hand into a fist and bit down hard on my thumb to ground myself, anything to stop my mind from spinning like a broken carousel. Eleanor got off the bed.

“Come here,” she said, pulling my arm. I let her guide me until we sat on the floor in front of the open window, moonlight pouring over us. A cool breeze nudged at the curtains. Eleanor hugged her knees to her chest and closed her eyes, and I realized belatedly that her hair was down and her leather jacket had been replaced by a thin sweater, as if I’d caught her in the middle of doing something other than being a Bloodhound.

“Cold air will help,” she said.

“Are you okay?” I said, noting the way her lips pulled downward and her eyes seemed darker than usual.

“Yes,” Eleanor said, not opening her eyes. She didn’t snap back at me, and that was how I knew she was lying.

“What were you doing before I woke up?”

Eleanor opened her eyes slowly and stood up, sitting on the windowsill and looking out over the city. Another breeze pushed the curtains back more violently and turned the pages of a book perched on the windowsill by Eleanor’s bare feet. I recognized the meticulous annotations from the book I’d seen in her bathroom.

“Are you going for a PhD in gothic literature?” I said.

She glanced at the book at her feet, then scooped it up and hugged it against her chest.

“Would you prefer it if I watched you sleep?” she said, but the bite was gone from her voice.

“Ah, no, please don’t. I was just curious.”

“Why would you be curious about something like that?” Eleanor said, raising an eyebrow and squinting down at me.



“I was trying to make small talk. I know I’m not that good at it, but you’re not even trying.”

She rolled her eyes, then opened the book and flipped through for a moment before smoothing out one of the pages.

“‘Leave my loneliness unbroken,’” she read. “‘Quit the bust above my door. Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door. Quoth the Raven, nevermore.’” Then she shut the book and tipped her head back against the window frame. “It’s a poem about a man who loves a woman named Lenore, but she dies. One night, he’s sitting alone in his house when a raven flies in through the window and tells him he can never forget about Lenore, and he’ll never find her in heaven.”

I looked slowly up over my shoulder.

“Is this your idea of small talk?”

“Choi, I swear—”

“Sorry, I’m sorry. It’s just... that’s so tragic. And your name is way too similar to ‘Lenore.’”

“I *am* Lenore.”

I spun around, facing the window.

“What? You said you’d been dead for thirty years! Poe wasn’t even—”

“Calm down. I meant that I got my name from this poem. I chose it.”

“*You* chose it?”

Eleanor nodded. “You’re not the only one who wants a name that teachers can actually pronounce. My name is Xinyi, but I started going by Eleanor when I was seven because it reminded me of this poem.” She leaned back even farther, sagging against the frame. “I think I cursed myself. Obviously I knew it wasn’t a happy poem. Lenore’s dead, after all. But I guess I just liked the idea of someone loving me so much that it ruined them.” She closed her eyes.

“Eleanor...”

“I can’t remember his name,” she said, so softly that the wind seemed to carry her words away.

“Whose name?”

She seemed not to hear me. A stronger breeze blew past her, shuffling the sticky-notes on the floor. I stood up and leaned against the windowsill beside her.

“Eleanor.”

She shook her head.

“It’s like a polaroid,” she said, “after a while, the colors start to change, all the edges are less pronounced, the faces are blurred. It happens a little every day, but you never notice it until one day you can’t recognize the faces anymore. It’s useless.”

“Eleanor, what are you talking about?”

“Sebastian,” she said, turning to me slowly. Her eyes seemed far away and lost, as if she were sleepwalking. “Tell me some names that start with a ‘C.’”

I shivered as more wind streamed inside.

“Cameron,” I said. “Chase, Charles, Chris...”

She shook her head. “More.”

“Eleanor, I don’t know if—”

“Just keep going!” she said, slamming her fist against the windowsill. I blinked, then slid down the wall and sat cross-legged on the floor.

“Caleb... Caspar... Claud... Clifford... um... Carlos?” I paused, glancing up at Eleanor. She had turned back to the window so I couldn’t see her face.

“Actually,” she said, “never mind. I’m sorry. You can go back to bed.”

I sighed and leaned my head back against the wall. “Connor,” I said. “Craig, Collin, Chad.”

“Sebastian, stop. I’m not even sure if it started with a ‘C.’”

“So we’ll go through the whole alphabet.”

She looked down at me, her lips parted slightly.

“Do you want to start with ‘A’ or ‘Z’?” I said.

For a moment she just stared at me, then a gentle, sad smile spread across her lips.

“It wouldn’t help,” she said. “I know it wouldn’t, I just didn’t want to think...”

She paused, turning away from me again. “It means that he’s forgotten me,” she whispered.

“Who’s forgotten you?” I said. I reached for her shoulder and she smacked my hand away, so suddenly that I heard the sound crack the air before I felt the sting.

“The one who murdered me, you idiot!” she said, her eyes like boiling tar. “He shouldn’t be able to forget about me! He took away everything I ever wanted. He shouldn’t be able to forget because I never can. And to think that all of it meant nothing, that *I* meant nothing.”

Her voice trailed off. She sighed, turning back to the window.

“I have thousands of notes about my life covering my walls, and not a single one of them has his name. I was so sure that no matter how much of me I lost, I would never, ever forget his name.” She shook her head, leaning against the ledge. “Go to sleep, Choi.”

I leaned my head back against the wall.

“You said that you remember parts of your life as long as the living remember you?” I said.

“Yes.”

“Does it help that *I* remember you?”

She shook her head, hair falling over her eyes.

“You don’t remember who I was. The Eleanor you know now isn’t...” her words trailed off.

“I don’t think it works that way.”

I nodded, looking down.

“It’s too bad I never got to meet her,” I said, closing my eyes and leaning my head back against the wall.

“You wouldn’t have liked her,” Eleanor said. “She was... she wasn’t the way I am now, which is probably why it’s so easy for everyone to forget her.”

“No,” I slurred, already half-asleep with my cheek pressed against the wall.

“No?”

“You’re wrong.” I yawned. “No one is more average and unmemorable than me. I’m the king of mediocrity, and I won’t let you take that away from me.”

I thought I might have heard Eleanor laugh, but I was only about 30% awake, so I couldn’t be sure.

“Believe me, Sebastian, you’re anything but average.”

“Mhm.”

She sighed. “Go to bed, Choi.”

“Make me.”

“I’m not carrying you.”

I didn’t respond, and five seconds later there was a warm breeze and a blanket fell over my shoulders.

“Don’t blame me when you have a stiff neck tomorrow.”

After that, the line between dreams and reality started to blur. Eleanor might have sat on the windowsill for the rest of the night, humming a lilting lullaby. She might have brushed my bangs

aside with her snow-cold fingers and whispered something in my ear that I knew was important but forgot almost instantly. Or that part might have been a dream.

## 9. What a Tailor Can Do!

I woke up with a stiff neck and a bowl of cereal shoved under my nose. Eleanor shouted at me to “hurry up and eat, Sleeping Beauty, I need to run an errand,” then stomped off to the kitchen, making an ungodly amount of noise in the process of boiling water. I cracked my neck and spooned some cereal into my mouth, waking up a bit more when the taste of the rainbow-colored marshmallows hit my tongue and exploded like a sugar grenade. I’d never been one for sugary breakfast cereals, but I’d cleaned the bowl in record time, only sparing half a second to consider what kind of chemicals I’d just ingested.

I pulled on Kenny’s wrinkled clothes from yesterday, then brushed my teeth and splashed some water on my face, figuring Eleanor was in too much of a hurry to let me shower. As predicted, she was already waiting by the door when I came out of the bedroom, this time wearing a black rain jacket that fell to her knees, her bullet-torn jacket slung over one arm.

“Bowl in the sink, shoes on, let’s go.”

I obeyed robotically, feeling awake physically but not yet capable of intelligent conversation.

“So what’s up?” I said, leaning against the wall of the elevator and slipping when I forgot there wasn’t a hand rail.

Eleanor frowned. “What?”

“I mean, where are we going?”

“An errand,” she said. “I haven’t forgotten about your brother, don’t worry. I just need my jacket fixed.”

“I wasn’t worried,” I said, taking a few seconds too long to process that the elevator had stopped and Eleanor was striding across the lobby. I ran after her, the forced movement helping me wake up a bit more. “But don’t you, like, have other jackets? Is this really that urgent?”

“It’s not a normal jacket,” Eleanor said, “it’s part of my Bloodhound uniform. If I fire a gun when I’m not wearing it and a tattle-tale like Wolf happens to see, I get arrested. Having so many holes in it is like ripping your passport in half and then trying to get on a plane to China. It’s part of my credentials, and with Wolf breathing down my neck, I’m not taking chances.”

I closed my mouth and decided to save the rest of my questions for later. I was already starting to figure out that Eleanor could only take so many questions before she literally jumped out a window to escape from me, and I figured I’d probably get my answers wherever we were going.

We’d only walked for two blocks when Eleanor stopped in front of a gray slate office building, the windows blocked off by heavy curtains.

“This won’t take long,” she said, pushing the door in.

The walls inside looked like a patchwork quilt, suffocated with paisley and chevron fabrics suspended from an intricate web of clothes lines. The onslaught of patterns and colors gave me vertigo and I imagined that this was what the inside of a kaleidoscope would look like. The harsh clicking of a sewing machine punched through the room, muffled by all the cotton layers.

“Laurent!” Eleanor said, brushing aside a curtain of pale blue satin and instantly vanishing in the fabric forest. I hurried after her, shoving aside pink taffeta and tripping over a bolt of kitten-patterned cotton.

I stumbled into a clearing where the fabric had been strung high enough to reveal a scratched work table and an old-fashioned sewing machine. A man in round tortoise-shell glasses pushed a length of striped cloth through the machine, surrounded by mannequins in various states of undress. The man wore watches on both wrists, one slim and tarnished silver, the other bulky and rose gold. His baby blue dress-shirt was rolled up just below his elbows, an indigo tie with tiny

white stars and a perfect Windsor knot tucked into a black vest that streamlined down to his tailored black pants and polished loafers. He looked like someone who ordered martinis at a Ritz Carlton bar after a long day at Wall Street, exuding the kind of James-Bond class afforded to the rare breed of men whose dress pants fit perfectly.

Eleanor burst into the clearing a second after me, huffing and pushing aside corduroy pants strung from a low-hanging line.

“Laurent!”

The man jumped and raised his hands defensively, the sewing machine abruptly going silent.

“Eleanor?” The man took his glasses off, fogged them up with his breath and scrubbed them with a stray scrap of fabric, then popped them back on and smiled. “Eleanor! *Ça va?*”

“I’m fine. My jacket, on the other hand...” She held up her leather jacket, reduced to Swiss cheese by bullet holes.

Laurent’s jaw dropped. He shot up, sliding on a silk scrap and nearly chipping his tooth on the table as he scrambled over.

“What have you done?”

He tore the jacket from Eleanor’s hands, cradling it tenderly and rubbing it against his cheek.

“I obviously didn’t put bullet holes in my own jacket,” Eleanor said, crossing her arms.

Laurent slammed the jacket on his work table and angled his desk light over it, fingers tracing the holes with the attention of a surgeon.

“This material is supposed to be bullet-resistant,” he said. “What did you do, invite all the Mainers to the forest and prance around in a deer costume?”

Eleanor rolled her eyes. “It was a close-range shot.”

“How close?”



“Fifteen feet, tops.”

“What kind of gun?”

“Looked like a Glock.”

Laurent pulled a notebook out from a drawer and scribbled something down.

“So, can you fix it?” Eleanor said.

Laurent scoffed and stormed to the other side of the table, tossing the jacket in a large hamper of fabric scraps.

“Of course I *can*, but I won’t. I can do better. I’ve got a few jackets in the back I can tighten up for you. I’ve been working on a new blend, actually. Remember all those leotards I didn’t know what to do with? I’m combining the spandex with recycled tires, so it’s flexible and durable. It smells a bit off, but we’re running out of leather, so it has to be done. Besides, I…”

Laurent trailed off, frowning and tipping his head to the side, peering around Eleanor at where I stood half-hidden behind a sheet of black velvet. He cleaned his glasses again and glared when I didn’t disappear.

“You.”

I flinched. “Me?”

He stood up and walked in a predatory circle around me, then shook his head and tugged at my jacket.

“Off.”

“What?”

But he’d already yanked the jacket to the floor and lifted one of my arms. He pulled a tape measure from his pocket and started measuring my wingspan.

“*Mince alors*, the fit is terrible,” he said, dropping my right arm and measuring my left one.

“You look like you shrank in the wash.”

“I... what?”

Laurent shook his head and jammed one end of the tape measure to my inner thigh.

“Hold this.”

I blushed and held the end down while he got to his knees and held the tape taut to the floor. He tugged at the hem of my pants so suddenly that I had to grab my belt before I was standing in my underwear in front of Eleanor.

“I made these pants,” he said, glaring at me like I’d killed his firstborn son. “Where did you get them?”

“They’re Kenny’s,” Eleanor said. She sat cross-legged on a steamer trunk by the table, making no move to rescue me from Laurent’s demanding hands.

Laurent stood up and yanked the tape measure violently away from me, quickly winding it up around his hand.

“*Oublié*. That’s unacceptable. Kenny’s inseam is at least three inches longer than yours, and don’t even get me started on your hips, string bean.”

Eleanor rolled her eyes.

“He’s fine, Laurent. I just need a jacket without chunks taken out of it.”

Laurent shook his head, flipping furiously through a sketchbook.

“*Non*, Eleanor, you don’t understand. I did not spend twenty hours in a plane from Port-au-Prince and two years living in an apartment the size of a toilet stall so that this coat rack could play dress-up in my art.”

“I try not to bring him out in public much,” Eleanor said, re-crossing her legs. “I’m not buying—”

“*Allons!* Eleanor, just let me—”

“We don’t have time—”

And then Laurent started yelling in French, and, to my horror, so did Eleanor.

Laurent’s arms flailed around wildly, watches jangling on his wrists while Eleanor stood her ground, hands on her hips. Their words shot back and forth like stones in a slingshot. I glanced at my discarded jacket on the floor, then tentatively picked it up and pulled it back on, wondering if I should slip out before things got violent. Just as I started backing up, their voices stopped. Eleanor huffed and crossed her arms.

“*Ça va être génial, tu verras,*” Laurent said.

Eleanor frowned but relaxed her shoulders, sitting back down on the trunk.

“Fine.”

Then Laurent spun around, marched over to me, and swiftly pulled my pants down.

“*What are you doing?*” I said, barely grabbing my underwear before he unintentionally pulled that down too.

“Off, off!” Laurent said, yanking at my pants pooled around my ankles until I tripped backwards and fell to the floor, letting him easily slide them off. He stood up triumphantly and tossed the pants at Eleanor.

“Give those back to Kenny,” he said, disappearing into the fabric forest.

“I didn’t mean strip him right here!” Eleanor said, tossing the pants to the floor. I grabbed a yard of fabric off the floor and pulled it over my legs, scrambling backwards before anyone could divest me further.

“Eleanor!” I said, blushing uncontrollably and cowering against a stack of fabric bolts.

“Can’t you... like...”

She sighed and turned around dramatically, facing the wall.

“I’m not looking.”

“No, I mean can you *do something about this?*”

She turned slightly, glancing at me over her shoulder.

“Just hang out for ten minutes and he’ll make you new pants.”

“How the hell did *your* argument result in *me* losing my pants?”

“Not *your* pants,” she said, folding up the pair Laurent had thrown at her. “Kenny’s. And there’s nothing I can do, because apparently you’ve gravely insulted his work. Be glad you couldn’t understand the things he said about your legs.”

Laurent flew back into the clearing, dropping bolts of fabric on the floor over his work table.

“So, string bean,” he said, eyes boring into mine, magnified behind his lenses, “what do you do?”

I tugged the fabric tighter across my lap, the force of his gaze making me feel completely naked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what’s your specialty? Are you a mole? A marksman?”

“An emotional time bomb,” Eleanor said under her breath. “He’s not a Bloodhound, Laurent.”

Laurent waved his hand dismissively at Eleanor.

“Everyone has a forte. Mine, for instance, is nimble fingers and an impeccable eye for color.”

“Can I just have some pants?”

Laurent scowled and slammed his notebook down on the desk.

“It’s not that simple,” he said, standing up and unclipping a leather jacket from one of the

ropes. He gestured for Eleanor to take off her rain coat, then held it up for her to put on. As her slicker fell to the floor, I caught a glimpse of dark purple bruises at the base of her neck like ink spilled across white paper. Then she pulled the leather jacket on, and the collar hid the marks. Laurent folded the sleeves back experimentally, then made a few chalk marks on the fabric.

“Why do you think I dress Eleanor in only black?” he said.

I looked from Laurent to Eleanor.

“Because it matches her personality?”

Eleanor shot me a look that could have melted plastic.

“No,” Laurent said, tugging at the waist of the jacket and pinning a few sections back, “because black makes her look smaller.”

I raised an eyebrow and peered up at Eleanor. “I mean, isn’t she already kind of...”

“That’s the point,” Laurent said, gently lifting Eleanor’s left arm and caressing her glossy sleeve. “She can melt into the shadow behind a car, or disappear into the dark between the streetlights. And when she finally chooses to reveal herself, her target sees how small she is and thinks, ‘this couldn’t be easier.’ Then they’re on their backs on the pavement with their skulls cracked open like poached eggs.”

He pulled a switchblade from his pocket and raked it across the length of Eleanor’s sleeve, smiling boastfully when the material remained unblemished.

“Her clothes are a blend of tires, snake skin, and polyester. Flexible but tear-resistant to allow for tumbling and scrapes. Machine-washable too, since her job gets messy sometimes.”

Then Laurent crossed the room and shoved aside a curtain of stone-washed denim, revealing a window that I hadn’t realized existed. He clipped the curtains to the side with a clothespin, then pulled a gray leather jacket off a hanger, holding it up to the light.

“Kenny’s clothes are tailored to his needs, of course.”

As he spoke, the deep gray fabric seemed to grow brighter, color sapped away by the pale sunlight until the fabric nearly matched the murky white clouds beyond the glass.

“Kenny is a sniper,” Laurent said, smirking at my amazed expression. “He doesn’t do much hand-to-hand combat, so his priority is remaining unseen. I developed a chameleon-like fabric that responds to light and heat to match the sky. It has a hood, and the material doesn’t make any noise when he moves.”

“That’s incredible,” I said, “but he wasn’t wearing that when I met him.”

Laurent’s smile dropped, his eyes going dark as he turned to Eleanor menacingly.

“He wears it when he’s on assignments,” Eleanor said, glaring at me for obviously having said the wrong thing. “He doesn’t wear it all the time because, and I quote, ‘I look like a floating head and no one wants to talk to me.’”

Laurent said nothing, harshly drawing the curtains.

“Are everyone’s clothes so... specialized?” I said.

“Ha!” Laurent picked up his sketchbook, kicking his expensive shoes up on the table and flipping to a clean page. “Of course not. Not everyone can afford me. I make clothes for our public sector superheroes. Bloodhounds, Light Keepers, the Night Watch, etc. The rest can dig through the thrift shops for residual matter and ill-fitting hand-me-downs.”

“Exactly,” Eleanor said, carefully removing the leather jacket and setting it on the table, picking up her slicker. “He doesn’t work in the public sector, so there’s no need for this.”

Laurent lowered his sketchbook and looked at Eleanor seriously. “Anyone who spends time with you is in constant danger of becoming an *hors d’oeuvre* for the Lost. At the very least, he should have pants that don’t fall to his ankles when he’s running away.”

Eleanor sighed and cracked her neck.

“Fine. But seriously, we’re in a rush.”

“Aren’t you always? Give me twenty minutes, okay?”

“Alright.” Eleanor stood up, grabbed a pair of striped blue pajama pants from the clothesline and tossed them at my head. “Put those on and follow me.” Then she shoved aside strips of cotton and headed deeper into the room.

I quickly pulled the pants on and hurried after her, grateful for the elastic waistband that held the pants up, even if they were a solid four inches too short.

“Slow down!” I said, spitting out yarn after a knit sweater caught on my collar and trapped my face like a fishing net. I managed to unhook myself and followed the path of swaying fabric, eventually coming to another clearing where Eleanor knelt down on the floor, digging through a large vase of cloth scraps. An old-fashioned elevator stood behind her, mahogany door barred off by a bronze scissor gate and padlock.

“What are you doing?”

Eleanor huffed and turned the vase upside-down, sending silk scraps in all directions. She brushed them aside and picked up a bronze key, pocketing it and gathering up the cloth to stuff back inside.

“Laurent likes to work alone,” Eleanor said. “We can wait at the Crossroads.” Before I could ask what that was, she jammed the key into the gate and swept inside.

I caught the gate before it could slam shut on my fingers, wedging myself into the tight space as Eleanor pushed the button for the eighth floor and waved me aside so she could shut the door properly. The air felt compressed, the space so tight that Eleanor had to stand in front of me for both of us to fit. The elevator hummed in contemplation, then clunked and slowly started rising.

“Is this safe?” I said, reaching for a hand rail and plastering myself to the wall when I found none.

Eleanor crossed her arms and looked over her shoulder, shooting me a flat look.

“There are people here who literally want to drink your soul and you’re worried about an old elevator?”

Then she turned back around, ending the conversation. As she shifted to her right foot, a wave of vertigo blurred my vision and for a moment I felt like I was in a house of mirrors, not processing the image in front of me because it didn’t make sense.

My eyes overlaid the image of the black elevator buttons and tarnished bronze panel onto Eleanor’s shoulder, the illuminated 8 glowing *through* her bones like a lighthouse in a fog. I blinked, but the mist wouldn’t solidify, instead growing more and more translucent until I could see the carved wood panels of the door through Eleanor’s back and neck.

“You’re disappearing!” I said, hearing the words before I felt my lips moving.

Eleanor frowned and turned around as I reached for her shoulder, expecting my fingers to comb through water vapor but instead feeling cool leather. Still, the fabric felt different somehow, numbing my palm as if it were falling asleep.

“I’m not,” she said, removing my hand from her shoulder the way one might pick up a dead cockroach in a tissue. “Like I said, my body isn’t real, it’s just a slant of light. It’s a bit unstable at the Crossroads, but my soul is still here.”

“What exactly is the Crossroads?” I said, rubbing my eyes again. It was hard to focus on Eleanor’s eyes when I could see straight through them.

The elevator jolted and stilled. Eleanor turned and slid the door aside, pushing back the scissor gate to reveal an ash blue sky.



“One of the places where your world and my world intersect.”

Then she turned to step outside.

I hurried after her, not wanting to sacrifice any fingers to the gate, but collided with Eleanor’s back before I could leave the elevator. She’d braced her arms on both sides of the door, muscles tensing against my push but firmly caging us both inside. I was about to ask what she was doing, but as I fell against her I caught a glimpse of the outside from over her shoulder, the expanse of sky stretching forever in all directions, translucent clouds just below us like a screen of white tulle, blurring the patchwork farmland far below us. I threw myself back against the wall, making the elevator lurch threateningly.

“What are you trying to—”

“Wrong floor,” Eleanor said simply, closing the gate and pushing the button for the ninth floor.

This time, she pulled the gate back and revealed marble pillars cast gold in candle light, sweeping upwards towards faraway vaulted ceilings with cracked oil paintings of angels.

“This looks right,” she said. She hopped out, her boots echoing across the stone floors.

“It ‘looks’ right?” I said, peering out and tentatively setting my foot on the ground while still holding onto the elevator, only letting go when I was convinced the floor wasn’t going to turn to clouds. “Haven’t you been here before?”

“Obviously,” Eleanor said, her voice jarringly loud in what seemed to be a cathedral, “but it changes a lot.”

She swept past the rows of pews, stomping towards the elevated sanctuary platform where a granite crucifix leered over the invisible congregation in jagged black shadows, illuminated by stained-glass projections of faceless saints. A polished wood table stood beside the pulpit, the

words “IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME” carved into the front in an antiquated font, an untouched silver chalice and round loaf of bread sitting on the surface.

Eleanor turned when she reached the table, striding towards a door on the left, just past the confessional booths.

“Eleanor,” I said, jogging after her, “what is—”

Eleanor threw the door open and a wave of saltwater rushed inside, soaking her pants up to her knees and splashing up to her face.

“Yeah, this is it,” she said, wiping her eyes and sitting down at a pew where she yanked her boots off. “You might want to leave your shoes here,” she said, tying her boots together by the laces and hurling them somewhere beyond the pulpit.

“What’s out there?” I said, trying to peer out the door without stepping in the puddle but only seeing black sea and blue sky.

“I refuse to explain the concept of an ocean to you. Come on, your shoes.”

I tentatively kicked my shoes off, throwing them near Eleanor’s. She applauded in melodramatic approval, then turned back to the door, stepping into the water that rose up to her knees.

“I feel like I should mention that I can’t swim,” I said, dipping a toe in the water. It was warmer than I expected, like a cup of tea left on the table for a little too long.

“It’s not that deep,” Eleanor said. “Just don’t pass out face-down or anything.”

I nodded and stepped down, the water warming my shins. I curled my toes into the sand, watching the rippling image of my feet through the dark water. Then something touched my calf from behind and I spun around, ready to punch a shark in the nose like I learned on TV that you were supposed to, or at least scream loud enough that Eleanor would pull out her gun before it

could take a chunk out of my heel, but when I turned around, all I saw was a waterlogged violin bobbing on the surface. I frowned and picked it up, shaking it off and plucking the strings, but they only made tired plinking sounds and sent sparks of water into my eyes.

“Eleanor?”

She turned around, already having waded a few feet away.

“What, do you play?” she said.

“No, I mean, what kind of ocean is this?”

Eleanor sighed and waded back over to where I stood.

“I already told you that we get a lot of residual junk from the living,” she said. “Did you think all that stuff just fell from the sky? We come and collect it at the Crossroads.”

I looked down at the violin in my hand, then back at Eleanor.

“Why is it an ocean? And a church?”

“It’s not always like that,” Eleanor said. “Like I said, it changes. Last time, it was a cabin in a forest. It’s always some sort of combination of places in the Living world and this one. You know when you dream, your subconscious tosses up things that are real and things that aren’t into some sort of hybrid-reality salad? It’s like that.”

“Okay...” I dropped the soggy violin back in the water and watched it sail away. “But why does stuff like *this* cross over?”

Eleanor shrugged.

“They’re shadows of things that people forgot about. Mostly socks, earrings, photo books... You know, stuff people keep in their attics.”

“And Laurent has exclusive access to it?”

Eleanor laughed and shook her head.

“There’s seven Crossroads that we know about, all in different parts of the city. Laurent just happens to have access to this one because he’s trustworthy. He’s worked for the Bloodhounds for a few decades and he needs the materials to make clothes. The collectors come by every week to take inventory and bring stuff back to headquarters, but Laurent keeps the key.”

“Does that mean that some of your stuff ends up in the living world?”

Eleanor frowned. “Haven’t you learned anything? Life flows in one direction. Once things end up here, they don’t go back.”

“Okay...” I nodded slowly, watching an empty picture frame float by. “So why are we here?”

“Because I need spoons.”

I waited for Eleanor to explain, but she only bent down and started scrutinizing the sand.

“Spoons.”

“Yes. You’ve heard of those? The silver things that you use to drink soup.”

I frowned, peeling away a pink t-shirt that floated by and plastered itself to my leg.

“Is there some sort of special significance to spoons here that I’m missing?” I said. “Do they ward off the Lost or something? Are they really rare?”

Eleanor shook her head, plunging her arm into the water and scowling when she pulled out a yellow sock.

“No,” she said, tossing the sock behind her and barely missing my head. It hit the water with a wet slap and sprayed my eyes.

“Then why do you want spoons?” I said, heatedly scrubbing at my eyes.

“I collect them.”

“What?” I temporarily forgot about the stinging in my eyes. “Like, as weapons? Because you

don't have enough silverware?"

"Because I collect them."

"Why do— quit splashing me!"

Eleanor paused before tossing a soggy textbook behind her head. "Are you the Wicked Witch of the West or something? Help me look."

I sighed and rubbed my eyes, forgetting that my hands were wrinkled with saltwater and wincing when my eyes started to sting again. When my vision cleared, Eleanor had moved another ten feet away. I wanted to ask more questions, but I also knew that I probably wasn't going to get any answers out of Eleanor until she got what she wanted. Besides, part of me didn't care about the reasons behind it because I was intrigued by the prospect of a treasure hunt out in the inter-dimensional ocean.

I waded to a spot where the water felt a little warmer, dragging my toes through the sand. My feet unearthed a few warped pencils, along with some car keys and toothbrushes. Something hard collided with my big toe, and when I looked down I saw a tiny spoon trapped beneath my foot. I reached down and snatched it before the current could pull it away, drying it off on my shirt.

It was the kind of spoon I'd seen in cafes where they whipped the foam into hearts and served it to you in a ceramic cup and saucer. The spoon was the size of my ring finger and had a tiny leaf design carved into the handle. I grinned and hurried over to where Eleanor stood, kneeling at a sandbar and shoveling sand behind her.

"I'm good at scavenger hunts," I said, holding up the spoon triumphantly. Eleanor looked up, eyes widening when she spotted the spoon. She stood up and grabbed at it, but I held it out of her reach.

"Choi, I swear to—"

“Why do you want spoons?” I said. “Tell me and I’ll give it to you.”

Eleanor sighed. I watched the ocean breathing through her ribcage, her hazy silhouette even paler in the sunlight.

“My mom read me this book when I was a kid,” she said, wiping her hands on her pants. “It was about a little girl who was kidnapped and sold as a slave to a king. Every day, when she washed all the king’s dishes, she put a spoon in the pocket of her apron. After three years, she melted all the spoons into a block of silver and used it to buy her freedom and go back to her family.” Eleanor shook her head, absently kicking up clouds of sand underwater. “It’s a stupid story, honestly. How did no one notice that 900 of the king’s spoons had disappeared? But I started collecting spoons after that, just in case I ever needed them for something. My parents always found me these exotic, antique spoons for Christmas, and nothing made me happier. You’d be surprised how many different kinds of spoons there are. There’s dinner spoons, dessert spoons, soup spoons, tea spoons...”

She looked up, and something in my eyes must have reminded her where she was, because she immediately closed her mouth and shook her head.

“So, yeah. I guess I’m just stupidly sentimental about fairy tales and stuff. Like I said, I just collect spoons. There isn’t more to it than that.”

Eleanor stuffed her hands in her pockets, refusing to make eye contact.

“What kind of spoon is this?” I said.

She looked up. I smiled and held out the spoon, gently depositing it in her hand. She examined it for a moment, running her thumb across the design on the handle.

“Could be a coffee spoon, maybe a cappuccino spoon.”

“There’s a difference?”

Eleanor smirked and dropped the spoon in her pants pocket.

“Obviously. Thanks, Choi.”

Then her smile fell and she grabbed my wrist, dragging me through the water back towards the door.

“We have to go now.”

“Um, is everything okay?”

She glanced over her shoulder, then pulled me harder.

“You ever seen *Jaws*?”

I stared at Eleanor for a moment to see if she was joking, then charged through the water with a burst of energy equivalent to ten shots of espresso injected directly into the heart.

“Who the hell keeps *sharks* in their attic?”

When we made it back to Laurent’s shop, barefoot and trailing saltwater, Laurent had already finished sewing and was busy sketching what looked like a jumpsuit made of coated newspaper and gum wrappers. He jumped when Eleanor pulled the curtain back, then he frowned and threw towels at us, mumbling something in French that I assumed meant “stop getting water all over my goddamn floor.”

When we were mostly dry, he peeled off Eleanor’s rain jacket and held out a new leather jacket, eagerly zipping it up and holding out her arms to examine the fit. Like her old jacket, the sleek fabric hugged her skin like it was an extension of her silhouette, not part of her outfit but part of *her*. She raised her arms above her head to test the movement, then nodded and started toying with the zippered pockets in the front.

“There’s an extra layer of Kevlar in there,” Laurent said, “so it should hold up better. But I

can't give you anything sturdier than that unless you want a suit of armor."

"This is fine," Eleanor said. "*Merci beaucoup.*"

Laurent beamed, hurrying back to his table and holding out a pair of dark-washed jeans.

"And for the string bean, a blend of cotton, polyester, and latex. I went with an ink wash instead of black, because there's no need to make your legs look even smaller."

"Uh, thanks," I said, glancing up nervously at Eleanor who rolled her eyes and turned around. Unlike Eleanor, Laurent seemed intent on unabashedly staring at me while I peeled off my wet pajama pants and put on his jeans. The second I'd fastened the button he was the ground, pulling at the waist and pinching the fabric at my thighs.

"You've outdone yourself, Laurent," he said, stepping back and nodding in self-approval.

"You've turned a scarecrow into a prince charming. From the waist down, at least."

I bent my knees, surprised when the pants neither strangled my thighs nor started sliding off my hips. While I wouldn't describe myself as a Prince Charming, I'd admit that I'd never owned a pair of pants that fit quite as well as these.

"These are really nice," I said. "Thank you."

"Of course they're nice," Laurent said, turning back to his work table and whipping out a balance book. "That's 110 Castors."

Eleanor pulled a thin wallet from her back pocket, thumbing through bills before pulling out a few small bank notes, misty gray with silver stars emblazoned in an intricate pattern across the front, black numbers stamped in the corners.

"I'll, uh, pay you back," I said, rubbing the back of my neck and shifting from foot to foot.

Eleanor paused, then rolled her eyes and handed the bills to Laurent.

"*How?*" she said coldly, clearly not expecting an answer. "Forget it."



“No, seriously, I could, uh... wash dishes or something?”

“Stop trying to salvage what’s left of your fragile masculinity by paying,” Eleanor said, tucking her wallet back into her pocket. “If I couldn’t afford it, I wouldn’t have bought it. Do you have any idea how much Bloodhounds make?”

“A lot,” Laurent whispered.

“You were already hopelessly indebted to me anyway,” she said. “Besides, this was for Laurent, not you. Now let’s go. We’ve wasted enough time.”

Then she stepped into her boots and quickly laced them, pulling her gloves back on and swiping Kenny’s pants off the table before I could even locate both of my shoes.

“Thanks, Laurent!” Eleanor said, waving and already heading for the exit.

“Thanks, Laurent,” I echoed, trying to tie my shoes and run after Eleanor at the same time.

“Come back soon, string bean!” Laurent called.

I managed to stumble out the door with one shoe on my foot and the other in my hand. Eleanor was leaning against a wall, arms crossed.

“Has anyone ever told you that you move in slow motion?” she said, looking down at me struggling to tie my right shoe.

“My mom’s mentioned it once or twice,” I said. “Hey, Eleanor?”

“What.”

“Thank you. For the pants, I mean. Among other things.”

Eleanor waved her hand dismissively. “Don’t mention it, and I mean that literally. I have a reputation as the most ruthless Bloodhound in the history of Bloodhounds, and I fully intend to keep it that way.”

“Right. I’ll leave out the part about the fairy-tale-inspired spoon collection too.”

The hard smack to the back of my head was expected.

“Bite me, string bean.”

## 10. Sleep Overcomes Them

The factory district looked like the crumbling aftermath of a war. The roofs of most of the buildings had been ripped off, exposing bomb-crushed cellars and uprooted floorboards to the empty sky. The buildings that remained had been patched together with blue tarps that inhaled and exhaled with the pull of the wind, as if the streets themselves were breathing all around us. The streetlights had burned out, the only light coming from lopsided candles in the windows.

Even though this part of the city felt 100 times more ominous than the crowded streets near headquarters, Eleanor and Kenny seemed remarkably unaffected. Kenny had been stomping through puddles for the last three blocks, deliberately splashing Eleanor and then scurrying behind me for protection, growing more and more defeated when she didn't react. At the fourth block, just as Kenny was preparing to launch himself into the air and land in the middle of a massive puddle with a sonic boom, Eleanor stuck her foot out and kicked Kenny's feet out from under him, sending him head-first into a muddy pool of rain water. He sputtered and appropriately shook himself off like a wet dog, pouting and accepting defeat. I swore that Eleanor smiled for half a second, but it happened so fast that I couldn't be sure.

I flinched and looked over my shoulder at the sound of glass breaking, but neither of them seemed to notice.

"Who lives here?" I said, shuffling closer to Kenny.

"The unemployed, mostly," Eleanor said. "Anyone can occupy these apartments for free as long as they register with Violet."

I nodded, accidentally locking eyes with a black pupil through a slit in the curtains of a nearby apartment. Someone yanked the curtains closed, the candlelight that flickered behind the fabric abruptly going out.

“I don’t like how quiet it is,” I said.

“Not many people live here,” Eleanor said. “These aren’t exactly penthouses.”

“Is this to force people to get a job?”

“It’s just a practicality. These people could have jobs if they wanted them. Sweeping streets or washing dishes, stuff like that... they just don’t want to do it.”

“You sound like a republican.”

Eleanor shook her head, elbowing Kenny when he walked too close and his hair dripped onto her shoulder.

“It’s not like that,” she said. “They just want time to think without distractions so they can get out of here faster.”

“But isn’t that what everyone wants?”

Eleanor pursed her lips, zipping her jacket up tighter.

“I think there’s a limit to the amount of time you can spend sitting in the dark contemplating the unfairness of the world before you become part of the darkness,” she said, watching the wind tear a tarp free from a shattered window, sending it tumbling into the air where it caught on a street light. “I think this is the most dangerous place in the city, even though the Lost almost never come here. All these broken windows and buildings falling over in front of you are just fuel for self-pity. Once you start romanticizing how tragic your life turned out, telling yourself that no one else could ever understand how much it hurts... that’s when you’re not sitting in the dark anymore. You *are* the dark. That’s not how I want to spend my afterlife.”

I nodded slowly, watching Eleanor’s carefully blank expression. Even Kenny had quieted down, following silently behind us. We passed by a schoolyard caged in by a great chain-link fence where two boys in green rain ponchos kicked a doughy soccer ball back and forth,

stopping to stare at us as we walked by.

“This is it,” Eleanor said, turning sharply to the right. A ragged dirt path with led to a three-story brick building squeezed between two apartments without any breathing room.

A wood plaque nailed to the wall by the screen door read:

LEVEL 1: BOOK LENDING

LEVEL 2: WE BUY GOLD

LEVEL 3: THIRD-HAND SHOP

OPEN IF DOOR UNLOCKED

Eleanor pushed the door handle in, but instead of swinging open, the door careened forward, falling easily from the hinges and slamming into the carpeted hallway with a crash. Eleanor stared at the fallen door for a moment, hand frozen where she'd barely touched the doorknob. She turned to look at Kenny, who frowned and knelt down to inspect the door.

“The lock was knocked off,” he said, lifting the edge of the door and pointing to two small holes and the outline of a rectangle indented into the paint, “the hinges too, obviously. Someone must have put the door back up. Sorry, El, you don't have super strength.”

“Like hell I don't,” she said, taking out her gun. “Come on.”

We stepped over the door into a dim hallway, moving past the staircase and pausing in front of a beige door neatly labelled “BOOK LENDING” in dark blue paint. Eleanor pressed her ear to the door, then hesitantly touched the doorknob, shoulders relaxing slightly when the door didn't collapse inward.

We entered a large living room crowded with mismatched bookshelves and coffee tables stacked high with books. The space made me feel a bit like Alice in Wonderland, impossibly small as I looked up at paperback skyscrapers.

“No one’s here,” Kenny said, lowering his gun and steadying a stack of books that he nearly sent toppling onto me. Eleanor wove around the stacks and checked under the tables, working her way around the room.

I bumped into a shorter stack of books, spinning around to catch it before it had a domino-effect on the rest of the room. I brushed the dust off the cover of *101 Marmalade Recipes: Fourth Edition with Bonus Kumquat Guide* and suddenly understood why Eleanor had been less-than-enthusiastic about the so-called library. I edged carefully through the narrow walkway between the shelves, hoping for some sort of clue, even if Perry was mysteriously absent. While admiring the cover artwork of *My Amish Lover*, my shoe snagged on something and I tripped into a shelf, setting off an avalanche of harlequin novels over my head.

Then Eleanor was yelling at me over the sound of fluttering pages and paperbacks thumping against the floor, but I couldn’t make out her words. I pushed a book off my chest and glanced down to see what I’d tripped over.

It was a hand. Bloodless and stiff, fingers curled rigidly inward, connected to a withered forearm under the table, gray skin with deep violet veins like roads leading to the hem of a too-large t-shirt and spattered red with—

I screamed and scrambled away, falling into another stack of books and trying to blindly claw my way out of the paper deluge. My fingers scratched across leather and I tried to shove it away but hands hauled me to my feet and then there was Kenny, gripping my elbow and looking down at me in concern while I sputtered and pointed dumbly to the table I’d fallen in front of.

Eleanor was already on her knees, peering under the table with a flashlight. I turned away from the light, choosing to face Kenny instead. He put a hand on my shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“I think we found Perry,” Eleanor said.

I heard the click of a flashlight shutting off and turned around. Eleanor crawled out from under the table, holding up a plastic name badge with the words “PERRY J: MANAGER” printed in bold letters.

Kenny swallowed, stepping closer. “Is he—”

“Hollow,” Eleanor said, nodding. “His soul’s completely gone. We’ll have to file a report on the way back.”

“Hollow?” I said, stepping towards the body that seemed remarkably less frightening with Eleanor standing in front of it.

“This doesn’t make sense,” Eleanor said. “They sucked him dry, but they cleaned up after themselves and put the door back up? There’s no way they could have gotten him without knocking over some of these stacks.”

“Probably just a delay tactic,” Kenny said. “Making it less obvious, slowing us down. Getting rid of the body probably would have been too conspicuous.”

“So they know we’re after the same thing,” Eleanor said, crossing her arms. “I figured as much after our last run-in with May, but I was hoping otherwise. Sebastian looks, and probably smells, a lot like Ben. They might not realize there’s two of them and think we’re harboring Ben. At the very least, they know we’re involved. If May’s in charge, they’re going to cover their tracks.”

“So what now?” I said. “Perry was supposed to take me to Ben.”

“Sebastian,” Kenny said, his hand reappearing on my shoulder, “if the Lost found Perry...”

I brushed his hand away, backing up and shaking my head.

“He must have been hiding somewhere nearby.”

“There aren’t any other doors in here,” Kenny said, “at least, none that I can see.”

I looked around and realized that Kenny was right — there was only one door and it led to the hallway.

“A secret passageway, maybe?” Kenny said, experimentally pulling one book from a shelf and frowning when a secret door didn’t immediately swing open.

I knelt down to inspect the floorboards, looking closer at the dark streaks marking paths where the stacks had been pushed.

“They moved the books around,” I said, pointing to the marks.

“Which means they’re probably hiding something on the floor,” Eleanor said.

Kenny squatted down and started sliding a stack across the floor.

“Where should we put them?” he said.

Eleanor watched him for a moment, then elbowed the stack of books behind her, sending all of them to the floor.

“Ei!” Kenny said, shooting up.

“Why move them when we can just knock them over and kick them around?”

“But—”

“Perry won’t mind. They’re dumb books anyway.”

Kenny closed his mouth at that, unable to disagree. He reached out hesitantly and toppled a stack, clapping enthusiastically when it knocked over two other stacks. After clearing one corner and finding nothing, we shoved all the books to the other side, enthusiasm quickly waning.

My finger brushed a groove in the floorboards as I tossed aside a Kosher cookbook.

“I found something!” I said, brushing the other books away and revealing a square trap door about three feet across. Eleanor knelt down next to me, pressing her ear to the wood and



knocking.

“Kenny, come here. Choi, back up.”

I slid back on the floor. Eleanor ran her fingers around the groove, lifting experimentally, then tossed the door back all at once in a swirl of dust.

“What is it?” I said, peering around Kenny. All I could see was a dark chasm.

“Don’t know yet,” Eleanor said, pulling something out of her pocket. I saw something gray fall from her palm into the opening, then a metallic echo followed by clanging.

“It’s about a ten-foot drop, then it curves off somewhere,” Eleanor said.

“Could be a trap,” Kenny said. Eleanor nodded, reaching around Kenny to unzip his bag and pulling out a coiled-up rope, expertly knotting it around her waist. She gripped the rope with one hand and held a flashlight in the other, situating herself on the ledge. Kenny took the rope wordlessly, looping it around his hand.

“Be careful,” he said.

Eleanor rolled her eyes as she clambered into the tunnel, abruptly vanishing into the dark. Kenny stoically fed more and more rope into the tunnel, sitting cross-legged on the floor.

“How deep can this possibly be?” I said, watching as more of the rope disappeared.

Kenny shrugged with one shoulder.

“If it’s longer than forty feet, we’ll need more rope.”

“Why would someone build something like this?”

Kenny raised an eyebrow.

“It’s a bunker,” he said. “Tons of them were built during the first revolt.”

“Who revolted?”

“The Lost, of course,” Kenny said, his lips pursed like he was trying not to laugh at me.

“There weren’t always Bloodhounds to keep them in line, you know.”

The smile dropped from his face when the last of the rope tugged against his hand. He glanced down into the tunnel.

“El?” he said, knocking softly on the wall.

No answer. Kenny turned to me as if I could explain. When I shrugged helplessly, he called louder. Eleanor’s voice echoed back but her words were too far away, hazy shapes that were no more than wisps when they reached the surface. Kenny chewed his lip.

“I think I should just—”

Then the rope jerked violently forward, yanking Kenny face-first into the dark.

I reflexively grabbed his shirt in an effort to pull him back, but he was falling too quickly and before I could even think about holding onto something, we were both plummeting into the tunnel. The passage swallowed what little sunlight there had been between the shutters of the library, leaving us falling blindly through a narrow passage at first lined with metal, then with wet dirt and branches.

For all his gangly limbs, Kenny was surprisingly agile while free-falling. One of his hands reached back and found my wrist, tugging it around his neck in a chokehold so I was braced against his back. When he let go of me, he reached for the walls on either side of him, fingers carving through the dirt and scraping it from the walls but not finding any purchase. Our descent slowed somewhat, but we were still sliding dangerously fast through the dark. I wrapped my other arm around his neck and squeezed tighter, feeling a little bad for strangling him but reminding myself that he didn’t actually need to breathe.

I slammed into Kenny’s back, tasting his leather jacket as we both crashed into a dirt floor. The impact pounded all the air from my lungs, and I struggled to move when I felt Kenny trying

to get up beneath me.

“Could have been worse!” Kenny said, his voice vibrating through his back. He coughed and rubbed his throat, leaning on his forearms. “There could have been spikes at the bottom!”

A match sparked and pale blue light fell over the dirt.

Eleanor stood in front of us, one hand holding up a match and the other on her hip, looking thoroughly unimpressed. I rolled stiffly off of Kenny, glancing up at the dirt walls painted with shadows behind Eleanor’s blue light, then up at the tunnel where we’d fallen from. We seemed to be in some sort of small office space. Cabinets lined the far end of the room near the door, and a large desk with overturned chairs was shoved into the corner. Another spark hissed and suddenly Kenny’s face was illuminated in blue.

“Did you break anything, Choi?” Eleanor said.

I stood up slowly, wiping mud from my pants. “You mean in addition to the ribs I’d already broken? No.”

“El, what happened?” Kenny said, circling her as if checking to see if she’d lost any limbs and forgotten to mention it.

Eleanor scowled and held up the frayed end of a rope. “Your stupid rope gave out, that’s what happened.”

“Damn.” Kenny examined the rope and gazed up at the tunnel overhead. He sighed, then handed me his match and struck another one. The room took on an even bluer tinge. “Don’t drop that,” he said. “These matches are worth a lot. They won’t burn out on you, though.”

I examined the indigo flame and realized that Kenny was right, the flame hadn’t even begun to eat away at the wood of the match.

“I didn’t know there was a bunker here,” Eleanor said, holding her match up to the dirt walls.

Kenny nodded. "This one definitely wasn't on the maps."

Eleanor turned and started pawing through the filing cabinets. Kenny strode off and started examining the furniture, seeming to forget I was there. I turned to a smaller table with a ripped book and a bronze candelabra, holding the match up to the pages before I realized that the paper practically dissolved in my hands and the cursive was illegible. I shut the book too forcefully, jarring the candelabra and splashing wet wax over the cover. I paused, dipping my finger into the small puddle of hot wax.

"Eleanor," I said, turning around.

Both Eleanor and Kenny looked up immediately from their corners of the room. I held out my wax-coated finger.

"Someone's been here," I said. "Recently."

"So we're not that far behind after all," Eleanor said. "That's got to be your brother. The Lost don't need light when they can smell blood."

"But he's gone," I said, "so someone chased him out already."

"If the Lost didn't already show up, I'm sure you two idiots banging your way down the tunnel would have scared him off."

Eleanor drew her gun, then lit one of the candles before extinguishing her match.

"They must have gone out that way," she said, gesturing to the door. "There's no way anyone could climb back up. The walls are too wet. Kenny, guard the door. Sebastian and I will keep looking."

Kenny nodded and pressed his ear to the door, listening diligently for sounds on the other side.

"These cabinets are all filled with papers like these," Eleanor said, slamming a few sheets

onto the table. The paper was brown and curled at the corners with age, covered in the same faded cursive scrawl that I'd seen in the book.

"I can't read these," she said. "I'm not even sure what language this is. Do they mean anything to you?"

I shook my head slowly, examining the papers. "All of them are like this?"

"Take a look," Eleanor said, waving me over to the cabinets and pulling out an armful of filing folders, dropping them heavily on the table. I sighed and started sifting through them, barely looking at the pages after the first ten folders or so.

"Wait," Eleanor said.

She dropped a thin blue folder in front of me, its corners crisp unlike the rest. I pulled out a sheet of loose-leaf paper and unfolded it.

"Shit." I dropped my head to the table.

"What?"

"I hate him," I said. "If he weren't already dead I would kill him."

"*What, Choi?*"

"It's Korean!" I said, waving the paper in her face as if I could make her understand my frustration. Messy Korean characters were penned across the page, disregarding the lines. Ben's signature tree sketch was at the bottom right corner.

"He knows I suck at reading Korean! He always gave me such a hard time about it."

Eleanor sighed. "Do you have any idea what it says?"

I chewed my lip and looked back at the paper.

"The curved line makes an 'S' sound, I think."

Eleanor rolled her eyes and started stuffing the other papers back in the cabinets.

“Just take it with you,” she said. “We’ll look it up later.”

I nodded and started gathering the papers that had fallen to the floor. When we finished cleaning up, Eleanor drew her gun and stood next to Kenny.

“Hear anything?” she said.

Kenny shook his head. “No movement outside.”

Eleanor nodded and put her left hand on Kenny’s shoulder, gun ready in her other hand.

Kenny pulled the door open and the two of them hurried out first, calling for me to come out a few seconds later.

I followed, tucking the paper into my pocket. We emerged at the mouth of a tunnel system, the walls and ceilings paved unevenly with stones lit by the steel blue light of our matches. The air smelled damp and felt about ten degrees colder than the previous room. Four different arches lined the wall across from us, leading to four dark pathways.

“It’s a maze,” Eleanor said, grinding her teeth. “Of course it’s a maze.”

“I love mazes!” Kenny said.

Eleanor shot him a dark look and the smile fell from his face. “We don’t have time for this.”

“All the bunkers are like this,” Kenny said, shrugging. “If the Lost got in, it would be hard for them to find anything without knowing the way. All the turns are supposed to make it hard to follow scents, or at least make it take longer.”

“Wonderful,” Eleanor said. “And it doesn’t look like your brother was nice enough to leave a trail of bread crumbs for us.”

She sighed, making the match in her hand flicker.

“*You’re* the world-class navigator,” she said, looking at me. “Pick a path.”

“We don’t have to do it randomly,” I said. “Do you have chalk?”

Eleanor blinked, then shook her head and looked to Kenny, who shrugged.

“A knife?”

Eleanor pulled out a blade so fast that I didn't see where she'd kept it, offering it to me by the handle. I took it and bent down, scratching a line across the junction between the current tunnel and the one to the left.

“If we mark the paths we take, we'll know where we've already gone,” I said. “If we circle back to this path again, we'll mark it twice and know not to take it again.”

“You're right, El, he's a world-class navigator!” Kenny said, pumping his fist in the air.

“How do you think of this stuff?”

“I didn't. It's a maze algorithm I studied.”

Eleanor raised her eyebrows and feigned clapping.

“You've earned your keep today,” she said. “Lead the way, Columbus.”

We moved through the tunnels (quickly, because Kenny started complaining about the darkness creeping him out), marking our path on the walls and circling twice back to the start before we figured out that the third tunnel was the one we wanted to take. Kenny started humming some upbeat tune every few minutes and only stopped when Eleanor elbowed him in the ribs. He mumbled something in protest about it being our “theme song” and started humming again a few minutes later.

I watched Eleanor's amber necklace catching the light from our matches, swinging back and forth as she walked. When she tucked it sharply back into her jacket, I realized she'd seen me looking.

“Stop it,” she said.

I nodded, not sure what “it” was but agreeing anyway.

After a few more turns, it started to feel like the air was full of sand, rasping down my throat and resting heavily in my lungs. My head ached behind my eyes and no matter how deep I tried to breathe, it was never enough air. I knelt down to mark the next tunnel and tell Eleanor I needed a break, but the knife tumbled out of my numb fingers and I stared at it dumbly, sagging against the wall.

“Are you okay?” Kenny said, grabbing my shoulder before I could fall over.

“What’s going on?” Eleanor said, sounding far away.

“He doesn’t look good,” Kenny said, pressing me up against the wall. Words and sounds swirled together above my head.

“Hey, look at me,” Eleanor said, grabbing my chin and forcing my head up. I couldn’t focus on her eyes, my vision zooming in and out like a broken camera. Breath was still hard to come by and the edges of my sight sparkled with black glitter. “Sebastian, what’s wrong?”

“Dizzy,” I managed, my lips numb.

Eleanor’s thumb grazed over my lips and she looked up at Kenny, saying something I couldn’t hear. Then she opened her mouth and took a deep breath, her eyes widening.

“Shit, Kenny, it’s the air! He can’t breathe underground.”

The world slid to the side and suddenly I was much taller, slung over Kenny’s back, unable to move my limbs.

“Breathe slowly,” Eleanor said, then loud footsteps echoed through the tunnel, getting farther away. I knew Kenny was saying something because I could feel the words vibrate in his chest, but I couldn’t hear anything through the pain in my head. The world dripped to the side, colors bleeding down a canvas. I didn’t remember closing my eyes.



“We killed him!”

Kenny’s voice cut through the mudslide of sensations.

“We killed him, El!”

“Would you shut up? He’s clearly breathing.”

“Why didn’t we realize sooner?”

“Because we don’t breathe!”

“What even happens if someone dies in the Land of the Dead? Does he get to stay here?

Does he disappear and have to board the Shadow Express again?”

“He’s not dead, Kenny!”

“Your voices could wake the dead,” I said, blinking up at the blurry black sky. I moved to sit up and Eleanor shoved my shoulder back down.

“No. Stay down,” she said, as if scolding a dog. She jabbed two fingers into my neck and felt for my pulse. “How do you feel?”

I looked around at the gray sky and Kenny’s frantic expression as he chewed his lip and peered over Eleanor’s shoulder. We were in a field full of dandelions and pale grass, the city skyline far away behind Eleanor.

“Appreciative of oxygen,” I said after a few moments, the words scratching my throat.

“Impressed that you guys made it out. And also kind of tired, but I’ll live.”

Eleanor withdrew her fingers and pressed a bottle of water into my hand.

“You can sit up now,” she said.

I leaned up slowly onto my elbows and pushed myself into a sitting position, the world tilting a bit too much. My throat felt dry and sore. I felt long arms lock around me from behind and looked over my shoulder at Kenny, hugging me delicately.

“I’m sorry we’re the worst friends ever!” he said into my shoulder.

“You’re not,” I said, patting his hair and smirking as Eleanor rolled her eyes. “I’m alive, aren’t I?”

Kenny nodded enthusiastically and hugged me tighter, making me cough.

“All right, get off of him you big koala,” Eleanor said, prying Kenny’s arms away. “Can you stand?”

I nodded and let Kenny help me to my feet. My limbs felt stiff but otherwise normal.

“I’m fine,” I said, watching Eleanor count my pulse for the second time in five minutes while looking at her watch and mumbling something under her breath.

“You don’t just walk off hypoxia, Choi,” she said, scowling.

“You’re having too much fun playing doctor,” I said, smirking and trying to lighten the mood. I didn’t know how to respond to Eleanor being upset. “Afraid Violet will fire you?”

Eleanor looked at me without smiling. “I made a promise to protect the souls trapped in purgatory,” she said, “and when I made that promise, I meant it.”

Then she turned and started walking through the tall grass back towards the city. I turned to Kenny, who shrugged and started jogging after Eleanor. The grass seemed to whisper around them, the gray sky murmuring overhead, as if the entire Shadow World was full of secrets.

## 11. What Courage!

“You can read this?” Kenny said, eyes wide as he flipped through the Korean textbook.

“He can’t,” Eleanor said, not looking up from her array of sticky notes on the coffee table.

We’d gone back to her apartment and while I’d fallen asleep as soon as Eleanor manhandled me onto the couch, she’d gone out and returned with food and a stack of Korean books from God-knows-where. I was starting to get the impression that Eleanor knew just about everyone in the Shadow World and could have used her connections to find Ben in time for dinner if she didn’t have to drag me and Kenny along with her.

We quickly realized that the Korean-English dictionary was useless since I didn’t know how to read the characters, so we’d resorted to teaching ourselves the Korean alphabet in order to sound out each word.

“Choi, I’m going to start force feeding you if you don’t pick up a fork in thirty seconds.”

I dropped my book, knowing that she probably wasn’t joking. I picked up the white takeout box and froze, because I knew without opening it that it was *jjajangmyeon*.

“Don’t tell me you’re a picky eater,” Eleanor said, stabbing her pen into her notebook.

“Uh, no,” I said, immediately grabbing the fork and stirring the noodles around. I hadn’t eaten *jjajangmyeon* since Ben had died because the smell alone made me want to vomit, but it would take too many words to convince Eleanor that I was, in fact, traumatized by noodles and not just picky.

I could feel Eleanor watching me with disapproval while I stirred the noodles and made no move to eat them.

“Are you really so white-washed that you’ve never had Korean food?” she said, tossing her pen down. “I thought this would be more up your alley.”

My face felt hot when I realized that Eleanor had bought *jjajangmyeon* thinking I would like it.

“I have,” I said, closing the box when I felt myself gagging, trying to hide it but positive that Eleanor nodded when she stopped glaring quite as intensely. “I just... I’m not hungry right now. I’ll, uh, eat it later.”

I felt Eleanor’s eyes on me and stubbornly stared down at the book in my lap, trying to breathe through my mouth. No one spoke for a moment, then Eleanor picked up the box of takeout and dropped it in front of Kenny.

“Eat it.”

“Really?” he said, flashing a 1000-watt smile.

“Yes. But go buy Sebastian something else first.” She turned to me. “The sandwich you had the other day was fine, right?”

“Uh, yeah, but—”

“Go to the sandwich place near the Mountain Pine.”

Kenny nodded and pulled his jacket on as Eleanor picked up Kenny’s Korean book.

“You really don’t have to,” I said, looking up at Kenny.

“Don’t worry about it,” Kenny said, ruffling my hair at the same time Eleanor said “yes, he does.”

When he shut the door behind him, I turned to Eleanor.

“I’m—”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“But—”

“Stop,” she said, looking up over the book. “You don’t have to explain. We all have things

we don't want to talk about.”

I nodded slowly, caught in some intense-yet-accidental staring contest with Eleanor, her eyes daring me to challenge her while mine were too disarmed by her sudden understanding to look away.

“You're right, by the way,” Eleanor said, looking down at her book. “The curved line makes an 'S' sound.”

She laid the book flat on the table and pointed to a sound chart.

“How did you find that?” I said, scooting closer and scanning the page for the rest of the sounds. “The middle part is an... 'ooh' sound?”

“And an aspirated 'P'” Eleanor said, tapping another box on the page. “S-ooh-puh?”

I frowned, silently mouthing the sounds. “That's not a word.”

“Well pardon me,” Eleanor said, scowling and pushing away from the table. “That makes two of us who can't speak Korean.”

“I can speak it, I just can't read it,” I said, kneading my forehead and trying to remember something, *anything* from Ben's impromptu Korean lessons. Eleanor had already started translating the characters into a phonetic alphabet. I watched over her shoulder and tried some of the words out loud.

“*Sup?*” I whispered, lips testing out the word. “*Sup,*” I said again, this time with conviction. “It means 'forest.'”

Eleanor nodded.

“Keep going.”

“That means 'night,'” I said, pointing to the line where Eleanor had written 'b-ah-m.’”

Then I remembered lying in my parents' bed in Seoul, pulling all the blankets away from

Ben while my mother lay down next to us and stroked our hair, a crescent-moon nightlight glowing pale blue by the door. She sang the same melody every night, her voice like warm milk and honey, her hands cool and soft over our foreheads. The day that Ben died, she sat with me in bed and sang the same song until I fell asleep.

“You can stop now,” I said, picking up a pencil and writing a quick translation.

Do not be afraid of the dark.

I am the fireflies in the field.

Do not cry when you are lost.

I am the moon above the trees.

When you are most alone,

Go to the evergreen forests,

And look up at the glass stars.

My promise is written in the constellations.

“It’s a lullaby,” I said, setting the pen down. Eleanor examined my translation, pushing the textbook aside.

“Go to the evergreen forests,” Eleanor said. “You’re sure that’s what it means?” Her eyes seemed darker than before.

I nodded. “Is there a forest here?”

Eleanor crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair, staring up at the ceiling.

“There is,” she said after a moment, “but we can’t go there.”

“Why not?”

She sighed, gnawing her lip. “It’s Lost Soul territory. Not only that, but it’s huge. We don’t even know what we’re looking for.”

“It can’t be that hard to find,” I said. “Ben had to go there, so he couldn’t have gone that far.”

Eleanor shook her head, turning to the fridge and shoving bottles around until she pulled out a bag of ground coffee, tossing it on the counter.

“That’s not the problem,” she said, haphazardly spooning the coffee into the machine.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“You.”

Eleanor jabbed a button and the coffee machine started letting out angry, mechanical growls.

“Out in the forest with nothing but trees and Lost Souls,” she said, “you’ll be way too easy to smell. For anyone with a pulse, it’s a death trap.”

“Then how could Ben have—”

“Sebastian,” Eleanor said, turning around. Her eyes seemed clouded, her frustrated glare watered down with something like pity. “That’s what I’m saying. If Ben went there alone thinking it would be a good place to hide... we’re not going to find him alive.”

I stared at Eleanor, hearing her words but not attaching meaning to them. Hearing that my brother might be dead for the second time was easier than I’d expected. There was no sensation of crashing into a brick wall at 180 miles-per-hour, no cold wash of nausea as I imagined Ben being scrubbed for existence, empty holes torn into the world where he used to be; the vacant seat in his classes, the rice crackers in the cabinet that only he ate growing stale, the phone that would ring and ring and ring forever because no one would ever pick it up again. The second

time, it was the same as telling me that it might rain in the afternoon or that HMart was having a sale; the words rolled off me like raindrops on slicker, inconsequential.

“He’s alive,” I said. “How do we get to the forest?”

Eleanor pursed her lips, and for a moment I thought she would yell at me, but the fight abruptly drained from her eyes and she sighed, turning back to the coffee machine.

“Let me think,” she said, slamming a mug down on the counter so hard that the handle cracked off. She brushed the shards into the sink and pulled another mug from the cabinet, slamming the door. “I need coffee before I can talk to you anymore.”

I looked back down at the translation, not sure what to do except try not to breathe too loudly in case it set her off again. Luckily, Kenny knocked on the front door and I had a reason to scurry away from Eleanor and let him in.

“Sandwich!” he said, shoving a paper bag in my hands as soon as I opened the door. “Is my *jjajangmyeon* still warm?”

“You were only gone a few minutes,” I said, but he was already hurrying across the room and unboxing the noodles. He paused when he saw Eleanor hunched over the coffee machine.

“What did you do?” he said, suddenly lowering his voice and angling his body away from Eleanor.

“Nothing!” I said, dropping onto a chair and crossing my arms.

“But she’s making coffee,” Kenny said, as if that explained everything.

“We think the next clue is in the forest,” I said, reaching for the sandwich just so I’d have something to do with my hands.

Kenny slurped up a long noodle, painting his lips brown with sauce.

“I love the forest!” he said, shoving more food in his mouth before he’d even swallowed the



first bite.

“You’ve been there?” Eleanor said, suddenly turning around.

“Well, yeah,” Kenny said, shrugging. “The tall trees are good for climbing and practicing my aim with the Lost running around and screaming on the ground.”

“And they didn’t catch you?” Eleanor said, pulling out a chair beside Kenny and leaning on her elbows, coffee forgotten.

“They saw me, sure,” Kenny said, pausing to slurp an especially long noodle, “but I threw them off.”

He grabbed a napkin and hastily wiped his mouth, then unzipped his bag and fished around for a moment, pulling out a small glass vial filled with blood.

“I just uncap one of these, toss it and run in the other direction,” he said. “The Lost aren’t stupid — they know it’s not me, but they can’t help being distracted by the smell. That buys me enough time to run away.”

Eleanor examined the vial, nodding thoughtfully.

“That’s smart,” she said, scowling like it physically hurt to admit.

“Kenny,” I said, shoving the paper across the table at him and tapping the pine tree sketch, “are there any trees like this in the forest?”

Kenny examined the drawing, pursing his lips.

“Oh, you mean bonsai trees!”

When neither Eleanor nor I said anything, Kenny went on.

“You know, the trees with the puffy branches that you see in all the paintings in Chinese restaurants?”

Eleanor dropped her forehead to the table.

“Those aren’t bonsai trees, Kenny. Bonsai trees are the ten-inch trees people keep in pots on their desks.”

Kenny shrugged and took another bite.

“Well, at any rate, there aren’t any in the forest.”

I groaned and followed Eleanor in smashing my head against the table.

“Kenny,” Eleanor said, looking up so suddenly that he jumped and choked on a noodle, “did you ever see the Eternity Tree when you were in the forest?”

Kenny nodded, still choking, then grabbed a napkin and hacked out a mouthful of *jjajangmyeon* into it.

“Yeah,” he said, clearing his throat. “It’s real, alright. Doesn’t have any magic powers, though, which was disappointing.”

“What’s the Eternity Tree?” I said.

“A legend,” Eleanor said. “Everyone’s heard it at least once, so it wouldn’t surprise me if Ben believed it. They say there’s this giant tree in the middle of the forest with velvet leaves—”

“Which was a bit of an exaggeration.”

“—And the top is supposedly a ladder up to heaven, but if you fall down, you fall all the way down to hell. The—”

“Lies. It’s really pretty and all, definitely the tallest tree I’ve ever seen, but I climbed all the way to the top and all I got were splinters.”

“Was I not talking?”

“You were.”

“So why did you interrupt me?”

Kenny shoveled more noodles into his mouth.

“The bark is made of moonbeams,” Eleanor went on. “They say it’s the paper God used to write the story of the world, so if you carve something into it, you can rewrite destiny.”

“That’s perfect!” I said, standing up. “That’s exactly what Ben is doing. He has to be there!”

“Hang on,” Eleanor said, holding up her hand. “There’s still a thousand and one reasons why this is a terrible idea.”

“Like what?”

“Like the fact that Kenny’s dinosaur blood isn’t going to distract anyone if your heart is beating anywhere near the forest.”

“So let’s just use my blood!”

Eleanor grimaced, turning back to her coffee and drumming her fingers on the counter impatiently.

“I guess,” she said.

“You don’t have to cut one of my limbs off,” I said. “A few paper cuts should do it, right?”

Eleanor sighed, grabbing the pot and pouring herself a cup of the strongest coffee I’d ever smelled. She took a sip and closed her eyes.

“We plan this down to the last second,” she said, still facing away from me. “We ask Violet for backup. We get in, we get what we need, and we get the hell out.”

Kenny raised his fists triumphantly, still chewing.

“I get to use my M24!” he said.

Kenny’s enthusiasm was contagious, but when I looked at Eleanor, my grin slid off my face. She still had her eyes tightly closed, hands wrapped around the mug, whispering something into the rim.

“Eleanor?” I said.

She opened her eyes, taking a long sip of coffee and nearly draining the cup in one gulp.

“Is there something you’re not telling me about the forest?” I said.

Eleanor shook her head, setting the mug down but still facing away from me.

“I just get a bad feeling about things sometimes,” she said, her voice surprisingly gentle.

“Uh oh,” Kenny said, *jjajangmyeon* momentarily forgotten. “El’s usually right about things like that.”

Eleanor sighed, then grabbed the mug again and downed the rest of her coffee like a shot of soju.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, finally turning around, hands on her hips and eyes determined.

“There’s no getting around this, so let the Lost do their worst.”

Kenny cheered and went back to shoveling noodles into his mouth. I pretended to turn back to my sandwich, but I didn’t miss the way Eleanor’s eyes fell, as if she didn’t believe her own lies.

## 12. When Day Breaks, We Will Be Off

The second time Eleanor burst into Violet's office without knocking, a Light Keeper was holding a teenage boy down on the couch while Violet stood over both of them with a pitcher of water in one hand and a flashlight in the other. She paused at the sound of the door opening and looked over at us.

"Eleanor," she said, smiling cordially. "I'll be with you in just a moment."

Then she turned back to the boy and dumped the pitcher of water over his face.

The force of the water whipped the boy's bangs back, soaking his white shirt until it was transparent and clung to the lines of his rib cage. He coughed and pushed back against the hands that restrained him, shaking his wet bangs and spraying water across both the floor and the disgruntled Light Keeper. Violet set down the pitcher and pried one of the boy's eyes open, shining the flashlight directly in his pupil. He tried to turn his head but Violet gripped his jaw with her other hand, holding him still as she repeated the process with his other eye.

"Alright," she said, clicking the flashlight off. "He can sit up, Emmett."

The Light Keeper immediately stepped back, wiping water from his face. The boy lay staring at the ceiling for a moment, then slowly sat up, hands cuffed together behind him. He glanced at me and Eleanor for a moment, then his gaze slid tiredly back to the floor, strands of dark hair falling over his eyes and dripping rhythmically onto the carpet.

Violet set the flashlight on her desk, then pulled a white towel from a nearby shelf. She stalked back across the room, pausing just in front of where the boy sat dripping on the couch, eyes fixed on the floor. She shook the towel open and carefully dropped to her knees.

"Theo," she said, delicately dabbing his eyes with the towel. She wiped the water from his cheeks and neck, then brushed his bangs back with the cloth, ruffling some of the excess water

from his hair before draping the towel across his shoulders. The boy finally looked up, his face slack with exhaustion but his eyes like hurricanes, violently dark.

“You know why we had to bring you here, Theo?”

The boy nodded slowly.

“I forgot too much.”

“His Memory Retention Index is 25,” the Light Keeper said.

Violet held up a finger to silence him, not looking away from Theo.

“You’ve only been here for two years.”

“Sorry,” he said, the word stale and automatic, like a gum ball spit out of a vending machine.

Violet shook her head. “Theo, look at me.”

He looked up slowly, fresh drops of water dripping down his face.

“Never apologize for things you aren’t responsible for,” she said. “Do you know who still remembers you?”

“Johnny,” he said quickly. “Johnny’s my best friend. He still remembers.”

“Okay, good. Anyone else?”

“My grandma.” Theo’s gaze fell to the floor again. “But she’s old... I don’t know how much longer...”

“I’ll check her file for you, okay?” Violet said.

The boy nodded and bit his lip.

“I... I don’t remember anyone else. My parents... I mean, I don’t have any.”

“They’ve already passed through,” Violet said, picking up one end of the towel and wiping away the new drops of water. “You know they boarded the Exit Train about six years ago, right?”

The boy swallowed and nodded jerkily.

“It’s about time that you see them, don’t you think?”

He nodded again.

“Sorry.”

Violet sighed and stood up, traipsing back to her desk.

“Take the cuffs off, Emmett.”

The Light Keeper barely suppressed the scowl that twisted his lips. He grabbed the boy’s wrists, jerking his shoulders back at a strained angle before finally unlocking the handcuffs. Theo rolled his shoulders and winced, then wiped his face and pulled his jacket tight around his chest, hands disappearing under the too-long sleeves. He covered when Violet came back over, brandishing a letter opener.

“Before I can let you go, you need to promise me something, Theo,” she said, kneeling down again. “Promise me that if you feel yourself becoming Lost, you’ll come back here and turn yourself in.”

“You’re letting him go with just a blood oath?” Emmett said, frowning.

“He’ll go Forward soon if he tries hard enough,” Violet said. “He’s almost there, I can tell.”

“That’s not what we do for scores under 30,” he said. “You want fewer Lost Souls crawling around? Let us Light Seekers do our interviews at *our* headquarters.”

Violet’s head snapped towards Emmett’s, her face a rigid cast of slate, eyes like flaming charcoal.

“I know how you Light Seekers conduct your ‘*interviews*,’” she said.

The anger immediately drained from Emmett’s face.

“That will be all, Emmett,” Violet said, her features abruptly relaxed, her tone suddenly light

again. “I can handle it from here.”

Emmett was running before Violet had finished her sentence. He barely dodged me as he rushed towards the door, tripping over a train and sending it tumbling under a bookcase as he grappled for the doorknob, throwing himself into the hall. As soon as the door slammed shut, Theo’s shoulders relaxed.

“He won’t bother you,” Violet said, “but you do need to move forward soon, Theo. You understand that?”

He nodded. “I will, I promise. It was just my birthday last week and I... I started missing Johnny too much and I thinking about going backwards and—”

“I know,” Violet said, holding her hand out. Theo sighed and laid his hand over Violet’s, palm facing up. She held the letter opener to his skin and swiftly etched a five-pointed star into it. The boy didn’t even flinch, simply holding out his hand for the letter opener when she had finished. He repeated the action on Violet’s scarred palm, then they shook hands, a faint blue glow emanating from where their skin touched, light bleeding out from their fingers. Violet stood up and pulled a handkerchief from her pocket, polishing the letter opener.

“You can go home now, Theo.”

The boy nodded and stood up, glancing shyly at me and Eleanor before ducking his head and skirting around us, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Eleanor went to her place on the couch, kicking her feet up. I followed her stiffly, leaning against the armrest.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you actually cared,” Eleanor said.

Violet said nothing, tossing a towel across the wet spot on the floor where she’d overturned the pitcher. She crossed the room and picked up the toy train that Emmett had kicked, spinning



the wheels a few times with a small smile before setting it back on the track and watching it race across the room.

“I care about reducing the number of Lost Souls on the streets,” Violet said, standing up and turning back to her desk. “The Light Seekers love to waste their time on people who aren’t actually threats so that they meet their quotas.”

“If you want the Lost Souls off the streets,” Eleanor said, sitting up, “then give us more matches.”

Violet smiled sadly and set a file on her desk, uncapping a pen. “You know that’s not my decision, Eleanor.”

“I thought you were in charge of everything?” I said.

Violet chuckled and looked at me like I was a child asking if the world used to be black-and-white like in the movies.

“You thought I was the Queen of Purgatory? Maybe someday, but right now I have more than a few people checking my authority.”

“She’s like the president,” Eleanor said. “There’s a public safety council that has to vote on a lot of her decisions.”

“Like the matches,” Violet said, frowning. “Some people are afraid of giving the Bloodhounds too much power, so there’s a set allowance of matches per month.”

“Which is ridiculous,” Eleanor said, crossing her arms, “because we’ve never erased a single person who wasn’t already Lost. We always check their eyes first. If anyone needs to be on a leash, it’s the Light Seekers. They’re basically witch hunters who make sure you pass your screening if you pay them enough.”

“So why don’t you make them do the...” I paused holding up my hand and tracing an

invisible star across my palm.

“The blood oath?” Eleanor said.

I nodded. “Wouldn’t it be easier to make everyone do it?”

“The council would have a field day with you,” Violet said. “It’s not like a pinky promise. It’s black magic taught to me by the last Overseer before he went Forward. Imagine trying to pass a bill saying that everyone born in the U.S. had to sign a contract promising to obey the government or forfeit their souls. In theory, it shouldn’t be an issue if you’re not actively planning to become a serial killer, but people are wary of giving up their free will and giving the government too much power.”

“Who knows?” Eleanor said. “Violet could trick people into promising her all sorts of things, then use all those souls to create her own undead army and take over the Land of the Living.”

“Ha,” Violet said, not looking up from her paperwork. “You do know that the council is informed every time I make a blood oath, don’t you? And that I need to file a 10-page report justifying it every single time? The paperwork alone is enough to squash any fantasies about world domination.”

“It was a joke,” Eleanor said.

“But who could possibly object to that?” I said. “What’s the point of quibbling over free will if you’re already Lost?”

“The quibbling happens *before* you’re Lost,” Violet said. “People can tell when they start to lose their ties to the Living, because it usually happens over a number of years. The government-sanctioned wording is ‘if you feel yourself becoming Lost, you will turn yourself in.’ It’s vague, but that’s because the process isn’t something that we can quantify in days or months, and it will obviously mean something different to everyone. Some people want the right to keep fighting to

move Forward until the last drop of light energy is gone. I can't say that I blame them, but it certainly puts other souls at risk."

"That's an understatement," Eleanor said. She turned back to me. "Right now, the only people who have to make blood oaths are people with erasing privileges, and people who make deals with Violet as a safety precaution, like Theo. Personally, I think anyone with a gun should have to do it. Then maybe the Light Seekers would stop being so damn useless."

"You know that's not fair, Eleanor," Violet said, setting aside a completed file. Eleanor snorted and crossed her arms.

"Not fair? Did I tell you that Wolf is still convinced I'll kiss him someday if he blackmails me hard enough?"

Violet jabbed her pen into the paper so hard that the tip snapped off and blue ink soaked the file.

"I've been working for forty-six hours straight," she said, voice dangerously soft as the ink bled across her desk. "Don't barge in here and whine about a greasy little rat that you and I both know you can snap in half. Tell me what you want."

Eleanor smiled. "We need to go into the forest."

Violet's expression didn't change for a moment. Then she closed her eyes, jaw clenched as she let out a long breath like she was trying very hard not to bludgeon anyone in the room.

"Why, in the name of God, would you need to do that?"

"For sight-seeing," Eleanor said, rolling her eyes. "You think I'd ask if we had a choice? We think Ben is there, or at least he was at one point."

Violet opened her eyes and tossed her pen in the trash can beside her desk, then picked up the saturated paper and did the same, wiping the remaining ink away with a towel.

“If he’s really in the forest,” she said, folding the towel, “you’ll be bringing him back in a body bag.”

I flinched but Eleanor just shook her head impatiently.

“We know, okay? That doesn’t change anything. Can you help us or not?”

Violet dropped the towel back in a drawer, slamming it shut.

“What do you need?”

“More people. Rosalind and Brooke could—”

“I can’t give you more people,” Violet said. “Not to the forest. That’s out of my jurisdiction, not to mention a suicide mission. You can ask Rosalind and Brooke nicely if you want, but I can’t make them go.”

Eleanor sighed and jammed her hands in her pockets.

“Matches?”

Violet shook her head.

“Damnit, Violet. A car, at least?”

“I can do that.”

“Is there a map?” I said.

Violet blinked, then turned to the filing cabinets on the far wall, fingers dancing across the top before quickly withdrawing a folder.

“The thing about maps is that you need to be able to set foot on the place you want to map out,” Violet said, flipping through the file, “and the only people who go to the forest don’t exactly work for me. This is all I can give you.” She handed me the stack of papers. I thumbed through them and found a series of sloppy sketches and notes about the catalogued trees. It wouldn’t be hard to use them to piece together some sort of map. I’d worked with less.

“And, of course, you’re aware that you can’t go with Eleanor into the forest?”

“I... what?”

The folder slipped from my hands and papers skidded across the room. Violet winced at the mess.

“Sebastian, I keep cleaning—”

“What do you mean I can’t go?” I said, stomping over the papers and slamming my hands on Violet’s desk. “Eleanor and Kenny won’t know what they’re looking for if I’m not there! I can’t just send them in to do my dirty work!”

“Do you want to die?” Violet said evenly.

I sputtered. “I...”

“Answer the question, Sebastian.”

“You’re not asking the right question,” I said. “You should be asking what I’d do to get my brother back.”

“There is nowhere to go ‘back’ to if you die!” Violet said, slamming her fist against the desk and overturning one of her glass paperweights. “Have you forgotten that he needs you alive in order to go home?”

“Don’t bother, Violet,” Eleanor said. She was reclined on the sofa again, staring up at the ceiling, arms crossed behind her head. “I argued with him for over an hour this morning. He doesn’t get it.”

I paused, angry retorts dying on my lips because we *hadn’t* talked about it. Eleanor had sure as hell made it sound like I could go with them, so either I was terrible at reading context clues, or she was lying to Violet.

I clenched my fists and spun around to face Eleanor.

“Are you going to bludgeon me with a cheese grater again if I don’t shut up?” I said. We both knew that never happened, but Eleanor’s reaction would tell me what kind of game we were playing.

Eleanor frowned and sat up as Violet let out a strangled sigh.

“Eleanor, I told you that you can’t hurt the Living. Dislocating Kenny’s limbs is one thing, but—”

“It wasn’t a cheese grater!” Eleanor said, her face flushed red. “I don’t even own a cheese grater, you idiot. It’s called a colander.”

“Eleanor, that’s even worse!”

“No it’s not, there aren’t blades on a colander!”

“It’s heavier!”

“I clearly didn’t kill him!”

Violet groaned and massaged her forehead. She jerked one of her desk drawers open, fished around for a moment, then slammed car keys on top of her paperwork.

“Go to the forest *without* Sebastian. Take the Chevy from the East lot. Take the folder. And get out of my office.”

Eleanor smirked, shoulders instantly relaxing. She pranced across the room and scooped up the keys, spinning them around her index finger.

“Thanks, Violet!”

Then she headed for the door, waving me after her. I hurriedly gathered the papers from the floor and jammed them in the folder, then rushed after Eleanor, glancing over my shoulder at Violet waving weakly at us.

The door slammed shut and Eleanor shoved my shoulder so hard that I fell against the wall

and the papers went flying everywhere again.

“You brat! Don’t tell my boss that I beat you. You want to get me fired?”

“I’m not good at improv!” I said, scrambling for the papers. “You could have warned me.”

“Sorry, I left my crystal ball in my other pants. Next time I’ll tell you everything Violet says before she says it.”

She knelt down and gathered the last of the papers, shoving them at my chest.

“You were lying, right?” I said, my voice softer this time as I straightened out the files and tucked them away. “You’ll let me go with you?”

Eleanor stared at the floor for a moment, unmoving, then pocketed the car keys and stood up.

“If there were any other way, I’d leave you at home watching cartoons with Kenny. But you have a job to do and so do I.” Then she offered me a hand and I took it, letting her pull me to my feet. “God help the unfortunate soul who tries to get in the way of that.”

## 13. May the Rope Break

“Extra rounds?”

“Check.”

“Matches?”

“Check.”

“Blood vials?”

“Check. Wait, those are Tic Tacs. Sebastian, did I give you—”

“You didn’t give me anything.”

“If you lost the blood vials, Kenny, I swear to god—”

“Got them! Got them, sorry.”

Eleanor sighed, massaging her forehead.

We had parked at the edge of the forest, the city a distant dream behind us and a valley of trees sloping down into darkness and fog in front of us. The early morning air was cooler, painting the sky a faraway pink diluted behind the gray clouds.

Eleanor tightened her ponytail and slipped her gloves on, staring out the windshield like she wanted to be anywhere but here.

“We’ll be fine, El,” Kenny said, reaching forward from the back seat and patting her shoulder. “I come here all the time.”

Eleanor didn’t respond, still staring fixedly at the washed-out sunrise.

“Let’s just get this over with,” she said after a moment, turning to me. “Are you ready, Choi?”

I nodded, fingers tracing over the blood vials in my jacket pocket. Eleanor looked at Kenny, who gripped the rifle in his lap and nodded. She exhaled, closing her eyes. When she opened



them again, they sparkled like the fuse on a stick of dynamite.

“Go.”

Three car doors flew open simultaneously. I jumped down, elbowing the door closed and taking off running. Kenny sprinted to the right, flying down the hill toward the tree line. Eleanor had already raced to the left, waving me after her. Everything was going according to plan.

Using Kenny’s vague descriptions and the files from Violet, I’d managed to sketch a map of the forest. The notes from the other explorers had confirmed the presence of a strangely white tree in the forest, taller than any tree they’d seen before. I’d used their notes to chart the approximate location of the Eternity Tree and plot the fastest route. The forest was too dense to drive through, so we had to go on foot.

Kenny would run perpendicular to the forest line, dodging the clearing in the lowest points of the valley because it was too exposed, then head straight to the tallest tree he could remember seeing (aside from the Eternity Tree, of course) and climb to the top — the perfect vantage point for a sniper.

Eleanor and I had a more complicated route, and not just because I could get tired and smelled like fresh pizza from a mile away; the fastest route to the tree cut through a river, but we couldn’t count on being able to cross it without knowing how deep, wide, or fast it was. There were too many variables. Instead, we would run parallel to the river until we reached the narrowest point, then cut back to the right, carving a straight path to the grove at a 110-degree angle.

Our goal was to make it in and out in thirty minutes or less, with or without Ben. Eleanor reserved the right to call us back sooner if it didn’t look safe, meaning that I had to run at least a ten-minute mile for us to stay on schedule.

After the first two minutes of vaulting over thorn bushes and tripping over roots, my shirt was already thoroughly saturated with sweat and my ribs ached in time with my frantic heartbeat. I forced myself to stop thinking about stopping, because it wasn't an option anymore. The way the air scratched like embers down my throat, the way my heels stung with blisters, all of those things were only messages sent to my brain that I could ignore. I focused on Eleanor striding easily in front of me, her ponytail swinging back and forth, glancing over her shoulder every few moments and gracefully vaulting over the fallen branches.

I could tell from the sudden fork in the river that we were reaching the narrowest point. I tried to call out to Eleanor, but my throat was so dry that I could only make a strangled gasping sound. She raised an eyebrow and turned around as I pointed emphatically to the river, scrubbing sweat from my eyes with my other arm.

She nodded and slowed to an easy jog, stopping at the muddy banks of the river. The water was shallow enough that I could see the rocks at the bottom. I put my hands on my knees and hung my head, catching my breath.

"This is where we cross?" Eleanor said.

I gave Eleanor a weary thumbs-up, still choking down air. A gloved hand wrapped around my wrist, tugging gently.

"Come on," Eleanor said. "Don't stop."

I nodded and let her pull me across the ford, cool water instantly soaking my socks and sneakers. I slipped on the wet stones, but Eleanor kept pulling me until we'd reached the other side.

"Which way now?" she said. "Show me, Choi."

Her voice didn't seem tense or panicked the way I felt; more like she wanted me to keep

talking until I forgot how much I wanted to collapse.

I closed my eyes and estimated a 110-degree arch, pointing at the section of trees to our left.

“It’s not far, right Choi?” Eleanor said, already starting to jog.

I nodded, stumbling after her. “Not far.”

“Wait.”

I tried to obey and stop gracefully, but instead I slid on a pile of wet leaves and let myself fall on my forearms. I looked over my shoulder at Eleanor, who was jogging towards me with something black-and-white in her hand.

“Do you recognize this?” she said, dropping a sneaker in front of me.

I scrubbed some dirt off to look at the logo on the sole, then ran my fingers over the laces caked in mud, laced through the top and bottom eyelets in two big “x’s” but ignoring the holes in the middle.

“I’ve never seen this shoe before,” I said, “but Ben ties his sneakers like this. Something about him having high arches.”

“We’re on the right track, then,” Eleanor said. She took the shoe from my hands and tied it to a nearby branch, then looked down at me expectantly.

I hauled myself to my feet, trying not to think about the implications of Ben running through the forest with only one shoe. We ran for a few more minutes, and if Eleanor had to slow down to stay with me, she didn’t say anything about it.

I could have cried with happiness when I saw a clearing appear beyond the thinning trees. I raced the last few meters and fell to my knees at the glade, panting hard. The night painted the field a shade of blue-gray, the leaves on the trees looking oddly white, reflecting an unseen moon. Up ahead, an enormous tree formed a bridge between the shadowed ground and smoky

gray sky, its trunk a twisted rope smaller trees intertwined, its bark a soft seashell-white with a ghostly glow. Just like Kenny had said, it was about the circumference of the clock tower, with enough grooves and pockets in the trunk to hide a thousand secrets.

Eleanor had already stopped, striking a match and holding the blue flame up like a beacon. I wiped sweat from my face and looked up at the tree line across the grove. From the top of the tallest tree, an identical blue flame appeared.

“Kenny’s in place,” Eleanor said, blowing out the match and turning to me. I nodded, feeling incapable of forming words at the moment.

“It’s now or never, Choi.”

I nodded and forced myself to stand up, fueled by the knowledge that Ben, if he was here, was running through the mud with only one shoe.

I jogged to the Eternity Tree at the outer edge of the clearing. Any Lost Soul wandering by would see me, but so would Kenny. If I stood behind the trees, he wouldn’t be able to help me. Eleanor would cover the inner edge because she was armed and faster than I was.

I hopped over roots until I stood before the base of the tree, running my hands across the brittle bark that flaked away under my touch. It felt cool and delicate beneath my fingertips, but I didn’t see any sort of clue or message. I took a few steps to the right and repeated my examination, feeling the sweat on my forehead turn cold and an anxious knotting starting to gnaw at my stomach as I kept going. I’d almost finished inspecting my half of the trunk, but still hadn’t found anything. Everything in the forest was painted the same shade of night and the colors were all starting to blur together. Had I written a bad translation and sent us into the forest for nothing?

A breeze whipped through the branches, wailing in my ears. I shuddered, looking around for

Eleanor and realizing I couldn't see her or hear her on the other side of the tree. The darkness suddenly felt thicker, like hot tar all around me. For a moment, I was trapped in my dream again, hands pressing harder and harder into my throat, night unhinging its jaws to inhale me.

I closed my eyes and hummed the slow and wistful lullaby that my mother used to sing, trying to think about her hands brushing through my hair and cool feather pillows and grandma's quilt that smelled like tiger balm and Ben curled up next to me, his summer-warm skin and cotton pajamas.

Another breeze rushed past me, tearing through the trees with a feral sob. I shivered and sang the lyrics under my breath, the words choppy and spilling haphazardly from my lips because I would never be fluent like Ben or my parents, never speak in unbroken phrases like calm rivers and silk ribbons. Ben always liked it when I sang because he said I sounded like a little kid and it made him laugh.

"Look up at the glass stars," I murmured, my voice rising in pitch when another frigid breeze crept across my neck. "My promise is written in the constellations."

A raindrop landed on my head and rolled down the back of my neck. I held my palm out and watched as more raindrops somehow pierced the canopy of branches overhead.

"Look up," I whispered.

Something caught the light overhead, glittering white between the parted branches.

"Eleanor!"

She appeared at my side instantly, hair tangled with branches.

"I haven't found anything," she said, rubbing the sap on her palms onto her pants.

I pointed to the light high up in the branches.

"We have to climb."

Eleanor squinted at the distant light, then nodded and took a few steps back, running forward and hauling herself onto a branch.

“Grab that one,” she said, pointing to a low-hanging limb.

I gripped the wet bark that slid away like snake skin in my hands. Pulling myself up tugged at my sore ribs, but I managed to clamber onto the first branch and found that the next few were fortunately closer together. Eleanor was already halfway up the tree to my right. She looked down at me and opened her mouth to say something when a shot echoed across the forest floor.

A Lost Soul collapsed onto the wet leaves at the base of the tree, dark red rapidly spreading beneath his head. I mentally thanked Kenny and reached for the blood vials in my pocket.

“Let me do it,” Eleanor said, her words a harsh whisper. “I only gave you those as a last resort.”

I scowled. “Why can’t I—”

She leaned back and hurled a blood vial through the air. It landed so far away that I couldn’t hear it hit the ground.

“Because we want them far away from us and you throw like a baby,” she said, reaching for a higher branch. Her fingertips couldn’t quite touch it, so she bent down and sprung off the previous branch, momentarily airborne before her fingers closed around the wood.

“I got something,” she said, pulling something from the branch and leaning down to show me.

She held a silver key threaded through frayed twine where it had been tied to the tree. I examined it carefully, slipping it over my neck beside the other key.

“Get up here, Choi. There’s something carved into this trunk.”

Then she pulled herself back up and started examining whatever “something” was written,

apparently not inclined to help me climb. I reached out for the next-highest branch, jerking backwards when the branch I was sitting on creaked in protest. I scooted back slightly, trying to grab it while still holding onto the trunk, but my arm wasn't long enough. I glanced at Eleanor, fixated on whatever she was reading. I sighed, then pulled back and lunged forward.

The branch beneath my feet crunched down, sloping so steeply that I started to slide off the end. I grabbed the branch above me with one hand, leaving me swinging dangerously in the wind, only a thin branch between me and the forest floor.

A sharp pain bit into my palm where I gripped the branch. I winced, my desperate grip crushing dirt and hard bark into the scrape, my palm warm with blood.

"They're coming!" Eleanor said, turning towards me and looking surprised to see me dangling so close by. She rolled her eyes and grabbed my hand, hauling me safely onto the branch.

"I don't know why—"

She looked at my right hand and her eyes widened.

"Choi, what did you do?" she said, grabbing my wrist. I could feel her anger through her bone-crushing grip.

"I almost fell," I said. "I had to—"

I muffled a scream as Eleanor pulled out a role of duct tape and started binding my fist, crushing my fingers together.

"What are you doing?" I said, trying to pull my arm away. Eleanor didn't slow down, easily holding my arm in place.

"It's your blood, you idiot!" she said, punctuating the last word with a sharp yank of the tape. "That's why ten of them suddenly started sprinting over here."

She released me only after she'd completely bound my fist into a useless wad of duct tape. I reached for another vial but she swatted my hand away.

"It's too late for that. You've probably bled all over the ground already."

The footsteps crunching through the pine needles grew louder below us. Eleanor slid onto the branch beside me, hugging close to the trunk.

"Don't move," she whispered.

I tucked my taped hand into my jacket and gripped the branch with my other hand, trying to breathe as shallowly as possible. Two figures appeared at the base of the tree, sniffing at the forest floor. They stood behind the trunk, obscured from Kenny's view.

"I smell it, but it's weaker than before," one of them said.

The other one nodded, circling the base of the tree and scooping up a handful of wet dirt and leaves. He held it to his nose and visibly shuddered.

"It's so fresh," he whispered. "Like warm bread."

"Wait a second," the other one said, noticing the pale hand lying prone on the other side of the tree. "Shit, there's a body here!"

The bark suddenly flaked away under my hand. I grabbed another branch, the tree creaking audibly.

A cold hand covered my mouth. Eleanor tugged me back against the trunk.

"What was that?"

I held my breath, my whole body tensed against the tree. Eleanor's other hand slid into my pocket, pulling out a blood vial. She raised her arm slowly, then leaned back and hurled it over the tree line.

"Do you smell that?" one of the men below said. "They went that way."



“Let’s just go,” the other one said. Leaves crunched. “I have to meet Wolf in an hour for supplies.”

Eleanor’s grip around my mouth faltered for a moment. The men started running through the damp leaves, but she didn’t move for a moment until the silence settled. Her hands slowly released me as she relaxed back against the trunk.

“They’re meeting with Wolf?” I said.

Eleanor pursed her lips.

“I’ll deal with that later,” she said. “Can you remember these?”

I scanned the numbers etched into the bark, closing my eyes and repeating them until I was sure they’d stuck. I turned to Eleanor and nodded.

“Let’s go.”

She wasted no time in swinging down to a lower branch, reaching the forest floor in seconds and gesturing impatiently for me to follow. I struggled down, my taped hand rendered useless. I dropped gracelessly from the last branch, landing on my side in the dirt. The Lost Soul that had fallen near the base of the tree was starting to stir, so Eleanor kicked him in the face before moving to the clearing and striking another match, holding it above her head. Moments later, an identical blue flame appeared at the top of the tallest tree. Eleanor shook the match out and dropped it on the ground.

We took off running again, and I realized that in our brief tree-climbing stint, I’d forgotten how much I hated running. My lungs started aching again almost instantly while Eleanor didn’t even look winded. I tried to distract myself with calculations, estimates of our speed and how much distance we’d crossed. My waterlogged shoes were untied and I felt them slipping off.

“Are we still going the right direction?” Eleanor said, vaulting over a thorn bush and slowing

her pace only slightly when I stumbled through it.

“Yes,” I said, wiping sweat from my forehead.

“Is there any other way to get back out?”

“Does it matter?” I said, having trouble forming words between gasps for air. “This is the fastest way.”

“It matters because there’s someone directly ahead of us.”

I slid on a wet leaf, scrambling for balance.

“How close?”

“About 200 meters.”

“Can you handle it?”

“I can handle one, but if the other five show up before we’re done, it’s going to be hard to fight them all while protecting you.”

“The other *five*?”

Eleanor said nothing, pointedly avoiding eye contact.

I swallowed and tried to visualize the map. Heading west would take us uphill, which would be fine for Eleanor, but I’d barely be able to run once we reached the top. We could try to fight our way past whoever was ahead of us, and if we could make it back to the car it would be easy to escape, assuming Kenny had made it back already. If we went east, we’d hit the river. It might be shallow enough for us to cross, but if it wasn’t, we’d be trapped.

“Can you swim?” I said.

Eleanor nodded.

“Then let’s go this way,” I said, veering to the right.

The earth under our shoes grew damper the farther we ran, making it harder to keep my

sneakers on as my feet sank into deeper and deeper mud with every step.

I knew before we'd even reached the river that I'd made a mistake. I could hear the roar of the rushing water before I could see it. I fell to my knees at the bank, staring into the surging white rapids. The water crashing against the rocks sprayed back at my face, ice cold. Eleanor couldn't have weighed more than 100 pounds, and would inevitably get swept away if she tried to cross, while I would probably freeze to death before I had a chance to drown.

"They're moving in," Eleanor said, standing behind me. "Do you have any more blood vials?"

I frantically felt my pockets, shaking my head. Eleanor swore and combed her hair from her eyes.

"We'll just have to fight them off," she said.

"*We*?"

She reached to her belt and smoothly pulled out a handgun, flicking a switch near the handle and holding it in front of me. I thought back to the day I'd met her when she'd handed me a gun in the attic above the bar and I'd had no choice but to trust a dead girl who'd almost tried to kill me.

"You're right-handed, right?" she said, eyeing my taped left hand.

I nodded slowly.

"Aim for the chest and don't get creative. Remember that you're not killing them because they're already dead."

I took the pistol with a sweat-slick hand and held it awkwardly away from my body.

"Try to run first, but if you have to use it, don't hesitate." She raised her left arm to wipe sweat from her forehead and I realized that she was shaking.

“Eleanor...”

“You remember the numbers?”

I blinked. “Uh, yeah, I—”

“Don’t forget them, or this was all for nothing.”

Eleanor wouldn’t look at me, but her voice was tense and frayed, like rope pulled too tight.

“Find your brother,” she said. The words sounded so firm, so *final* that my blood suddenly felt cold because they sounded an awful lot like last words.

“I will,” I said. “*We* will, Eleanor.”

Eleanor shook her head, eyes restlessly scanning the tree line. She pulled a knife from her belt and slowly unsheathed it.

“Eleanor, what are you—”

“I’m going to distract them,” she said.

“What?” I stood up. “You...but...it’s...” I groaned in desperation when words failed me, my mind too much of a mess to process anything. “You can’t do that!” I said finally, gripping my hair.

“Sebastian.”

She finally turned to look at me, sliding the glove off her left hand and showing me her palm. The five-pointed star carved into her skin glowed electric blue.

“I will protect the souls trapped in purgatory,” she said, the words pale and vacant. “That includes you.”

The branches shifted ahead of us, twigs snapping as two Lost Souls burst from the thicket, crouching in the black leaves. Eleanor raked the blade across her palm, slicing the star in half.

All eyes turned to her. There was one moment of delicate silence, then blood started running

down her palm and the two Lost Souls lunged forward.

Eleanor's bullets knocked both of them back before they could reach her, but another descended from overhead, tackling her to the ground and latching his mouth onto her hand.

"What are you waiting for?" she said, trying to pry the Lost Soul's jaw away. "Go!"

I scrambled to my feet and took off, slipping in the wet leaves. I thought I might have been in shock, falling back into that familiar standby mode when I couldn't think, couldn't process the gravity of anything, could only shower eat sleep repeat and do what my parents told me. More shots echoed behind me and I tuned them out, turning off the pain in my lungs and the chill of wind blowing through my wet clothes. The life of Sebastian Choi had only one purpose at that moment, and it was to reach the edge of the forest. Ben had never happened. Eleanor had never happened. There was only an exponentially decreasing distance between me and the tree line.

Then Eleanor screamed, and my carefully-constructed walls shattered.

I spun around and collided with a tree, the world abruptly slamming to a stop. I fell on my back in the grass, staring up at the black branches forming a crooked canopy overhead. When I remembered how to breathe, I tried to sit up and found myself staring down the barrel of a gun.

"Tired of running?" a voice said. The shadows from the tree behind her fell over her face, preventing me from seeing anything but a moonbeam-white hand closed around a pistol. I glanced quickly to the side and saw my own gun lying five feet to my right.

"You smell delectable," she said, her tongue lashing out and running across her teeth at the last word.

Then she crouched over me and blonde pigtails swung down across my chest.

"May," I breathed.

She smiled, then reached down and caressed my face with a touch that felt like death itself.

Then a shot clipped her ear, spraying blood across both of our faces. May hissed and looked up, jumping off me as another shot flew by overhead. She grabbed my hair and pulled, yanking me to my feet and bracing me in front of her, a gun jammed into my cheek hard enough to loosen some of my teeth.

The shots stopped abruptly. I strained my eyes from the awkward angle to see Eleanor come to a stop in front of May, blood dripping from her forehead over her left eye.

“You don’t want to do that, May,” Eleanor said, eyes searing.

“You don’t know what I want,” May said, pressing the gun harder into my face. “It’s too bad you can’t smell him, Eleanor.” May leaned down and pressed her nose to my neck, inhaling deeply. “Just imagine how he’ll taste.”

I squirmed when I felt something wet crawling up my neck. May was *licking* me, I realized. I cringed away and she jabbed the gun deeper into my cheek.

“So this is our little phoenix,” she said. The words felt like maggots crawling into my ear. “What will it take for you to spill all of your secrets?”

“May, wait!” Eleanor said, voice suddenly panicked. “That’s not him!”

May didn’t move for a moment. Then her hands tightened around me, nails pricking my skin.

“You think I can’t feel how fast his heart is beating?” she said. “You think I can’t smell his blood racing under his skin?”

“He’s alive, but he doesn’t know anything,” Eleanor said, raising her hands when May only seemed to get angrier. My neck was bent at a 90-degree angle, but I didn’t dare move. “We’re looking for the answer, just like you, and he’s the only way to find it. Why would he still be here otherwise?”

May didn't move for a moment, then her pistol eased slightly away from my cheek. She grabbed my chin with her other hand, forcing me to look her in the eyes.

"Is that true?" she said.

I shivered, feeling like a paper doll in her hands. Up close, I could see red veins crawling through her white eyes, as if her eyes had shattered and been glued back together.

"Yes," I said, nodding frantically. "Yes, I swear."

A slow smile curled her lips, teeth tinged blood red. She pulled her gun back to her side.

Then her head exploded with the sudden bang of a pistol and a spray of blood and brain matter in my mouth, dripping down my face. Her hands slid away from me and I heard her body fall against the leaves but I stood frozen, too terrified to open my eyes and see the carnage splashed across my shirt.

"Sorry, sorry," I heard Eleanor mutter. She scrubbed at my face with her sleeve and I felt the thick liquid and chunks fall from my nose and lips to the forest floor.

"I didn't mean for it to be that messy," she said, frantically wiping *something* off my shirt, "but I saw an opening and had to take it. Come on, Choi, open your eyes."

I slowly opened my eyes, gummed together with blood. I could taste it on my lips and smell it in the air. She dug around in her pocket and swore.

"I'm out of matches," she said, glancing down at May. "Doesn't matter. We need to get out of here."

I stumbled after her, trying hard not to gag when I thought about what was all over my face and hair. The moment we broke from the tree line and Kenny came into view, perched happily on the roof of the car, I fell to my knees and vomited in the grass.

"What happened?" Kenny said, his voice high and panicked.

A hand closed around my wrist and pulled me to my feet while I was still gagging.

“Come on, we have to go,” Eleanor said, dragging me to the car and shoving me into the passenger seat. “Kenny, get in the car!”

I closed my eyes and leaned back in the seat, breathing hard. The car doors slammed and the car lurched backward as Eleanor started driving. I opened my eyes when I felt a hand on my shoulder, turning around wearily to face Kenny, his huge black eyes wrought with concern.

“I’m fine,” I said, wiping at my lips with a dry part of my sleeve and trying desperately to compose myself because I couldn’t stand Kenny’s look of pity. “Sorry. I promise I won’t puke in your car.”

“This isn’t *your* blood, is it?” he said.

“It’s May’s,” Eleanor said, still staring icily ahead.

“May was there?” Kenny said, his grip on my shoulder tightening. “What the hell happened to you guys?”

“Kenny, you can drive, right?” Eleanor said.

“Uh, yeah? But—”

“I’m going to park in front of my place and take Sebastian upstairs. Can you park in the lot and walk back over with another pair of clothes?”

Kenny looked at Eleanor uncertainly for a moment.

“Yeah, okay,” he said, squeezing my shoulder again before leaning back.

We drove the rest of the way in silence. When we pulled up in front of Eleanor’s building, I slid out of the car and grimaced at the wet squelching noise of my shoes against the pavement, leaving bloody footprints behind me. She shuffled me into the elevator and back into her apartment, her expression still stoic. More sticky notes had fallen to the ground in her absence,



but she ignored them in favor of pushing me towards the bathroom.

“Wait here,” she said, heading back towards the kitchen. She reappeared a moment later with a black trash bag and a pair of scissors, spreading a towel over the counter and pulling my wrist over it before carefully cutting away at the duct tape and running cool water over it until the blood washed away.

“We’ll have to wash it out with vodka or something later.”

“Vodka?”

“What, would you prefer soju? That’s pretty much rubbing alcohol anyway.”

I shuddered. “Neither.”

“You don’t want an infection here, Choi,” Eleanor said, folding up the towel. “We don’t have antibiotics.”

Then she set the towel aside and picked up the garbage bag from the floor.

“Shoes and socks in here,” she said, holding it open for me. I stepped out of my waterlogged shoes and placed them carefully in the bag, peeling off the pineapple socks afterwards.

“Get in there,” she said, nodding towards the shower, “and hand me your clothes.”

I stepped obediently into the bathtub, pulling the curtain closed and handing her each article of clothing from around the fabric.

“I’m a bad shot,” she said as she took my shirt.

“What?”

“That’s why Kenny’s the sniper and not me,” she said. “I’m better in a fist fight, but Kenny wouldn’t have showered you in skull fragments.”

“Uh,” I faltered, not sure if I should take her words as an apology, “It’s fine. I’m alive, aren’t I? No one ate either of our souls.”

I held my pants out around the curtain. Eleanor hesitated a moment before taking them.

“Violet’s probably going to eat mine,” she said. “I told May too much.”

“I mean, it worked, didn’t it?” I said, pulling off my underwear and blushing before sheepishly extending it towards Eleanor.

“Yes, but she’ll be back,” Eleanor said, taking my boxers without comment. “She’ll be more prepared next time.”

The plastic bag crinkled, Eleanor’s silhouette shifting through the white curtain.

“Take a shower,” she said. “You smell like exploded brain.”

The door slammed shut. I turned around and spun the knob on the faucet, jumping when cold water rained over me before gradually heating up. The water around my feet ran bright red, so I closed my eyes and vigorously scrubbed my hair, trying not to think too much about the chunks of *something* that my fingers combed out. I grabbed a bar of soap and scrubbed at my skin until it burned, then picked up Eleanor’s shampoo and squirted a generous glob into my hand. As I rubbed the lather into my hair, which started to feel more like hair and less like straw, the whole bathroom started to smell overwhelmingly like Eleanor — clean sheets and bubble baths, sweet like fresh rain but earthy like an impending thunderstorm. Just like Eleanor herself, it was a strange balance of light and dark. Somehow, she could put a bullet in the forehead of a girl who looked like a hand-painted porcelain doll, yet the next minute she could rinse the blood from my hands with the most delicate touch I’d ever felt. I wondered which version was the real Eleanor.

I shut the water off, wrapping a towel around my waist and stepping into the hallway. I found Kenny at the sink, white bubbles up to his elbows as he wrung out my bloody clothes.

“Eleanor put you on laundry duty?” I said.

He looked over his shoulder, then smiled tiredly at me and nodded.

“Yeah, she’s in the study doing something with numbers. Are you okay?”

“I mean, I’m kind of naked right now,” I said, shivering in the cool hallway air.

Kenny smirked, nodding towards a pile of clothes on the kitchen table. I thanked him and took the clothes to the bathroom, stepping once again into his pineapple socks and too-long pants. I slicked my wet hair back and peeked into the study where Eleanor was hunched in front of a desk light, scribbling something into a notebook, crossing it out, then repeating the process all across the page.

“If I ever meet your brother, remind me to punch him in the face,” she said as I entered, not looking up.

“You and me both,” I said, shifting from foot-to-foot in the doorway.

She pushed the desk lamp away, setting her pen down, then hooked the leg of a stool with her foot, dragging it closer. “Sit,” she said.

I sat down on her left, examining the numbers that she’d penned at the top of the page:

24:        17:        00        32

“The good news is that May hasn’t found your brother yet,” she said, pulling out a clear bottle of Svedka and pouring it onto a folded square of white fabric. I could smell the sharp sting of alcohol before she’d even set the bottle down.

“How do you figure?”

“She thought you were the Phoenix, which means she hasn’t found the real one yet.”

“God. I hope Ben never finds out that’s his nickname. He’d love it too much.”

Eleanor rolled her eyes. “Hand,” she said, arm extended expectantly.

My mouth curled into a grimace in anticipation of the pain, but I placed my hand in her palm anyway.

“Tell me about these numbers,” she said, nodding towards the other side of the desk.

I picked up the pen with my good hand and twirled it, biting the end.

“Any idea what they mean?” Eleanor said.

I shook my head slowly.

“They might be coordinates,” I said. “I could try— hey!”

Eleanor wiped the cloth roughly against my palm, the sting of alcohol biting through my skin all the way to my bones. It felt like it was burning the flesh off my hand. I tugged my hand away reflexively, but Eleanor gripped my wrist.

“What could you try?” she said, running the cloth down my fingers and spreading fire wherever she touched. “What about coordinates, Choi?”

I swallowed, looking away and wiping sweat from my forehead with my other hand.

“I could try them in different orders as geodetic coordinates,” I said, my voice shaking, “then maybe ECEF coordinates.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” Eleanor said. I could have cried in relief when she set the cloth down on the desk, picking up a dry piece of fabric and winding it around my hand. “Any other theories?”

I gnawed my lip, shaking my head as she tied off the makeshift bandage.

“It’s a start, at least,” she said. “What do you need?”

I flexed my fingers experimentally. The pain had fizzled out to a dull sting.

“A calculator, some paper... an IV drip of coffee.”

“I can get you the first two, but we’re running short on medical supplies here, in case the Svedka-sterilization wasn’t enough of a clue.”

I smirked, stretching my arms across the table and resting my cheek on top.

“You must really like having me here falling to pieces all the time,” I said.

Eleanor paused, raising an eyebrow.

“What do you mean?”

“You finally get to be an EMT.”

She stared at me for a moment, then rolled her eyes, turning away to hide her smile.

“I already have a full-time job here, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“But it’s not what you want.”

She didn’t answer for a moment, still facing away from me. I sat up and stretched, and by that point so much time had passed that I figured she was ignoring me. Then she turned around and gathered the fabric scraps from the table, balling them up and tossing them into the trash can. She picked up the bottle of vodka by the neck and headed for the door, hovering in the doorway for a moment and glancing over her shoulder.

“What I want hasn’t mattered for a very long time.”

## 14. Until Death

If I'd known that I was going to take a vacation in The Land of the Dead, I would have done a better job packing. All I'd had in my backpack when I boarded The Shadow Express was a notebook of blueprint paper, two laughably-short pencils, a graphing calculator with three dead AA batteries, and a mostly-eaten bag of M&M's crushed into chocolate powder.

When I converted coordinates under normal circumstances, I had my geography textbook open to the formula key, my fully-charged calculator ready-to-go, and the internet at my disposal in case I got stuck and had to ask Google to solve my problems. In the Shadow World, I had none of those things. Plus, there was always the thrilling possibility that all my geographic knowledge would be useless in the Shadow World if they used a different coordinate system.

Waiting-for-Eleanor-to-find-me-AA-batteries had somehow turned into lying-half-conscious-on-the-couch-while-Kenny-hummed-the-theme-song-to-some-sitcom. I was awake enough to notice when he stopped singing, but not enough to move from where I was sprawled gracelessly across the couch. As tired as I was, I knew what was waiting for me if I fell asleep.

I heard Eleanor's footsteps and the study door closing softly.

"Found them?" Kenny whispered.

Cabinet doors opened and closed.

"What are you looking for?" he said.

"I don't know."

The fridge opened and closed, bottles clanging together.

"You're gonna wake him up," Kenny said.

Eleanor sighed. Silence.

"I've been fantasizing about pizza all day," Kenny said. "Should I get some?"

“Do what you want.”

“Would you eat some?”

“I can’t.”

“You can’t?”

A chair scratched across the floor.

“El...”

“It won’t stay down.”

Silence. Another chair moving. Cabinet doors creaking open. glasses clinking together.

“Kenny, don’t—”

“I bought this last week.”

Silence. Liquid gushing into a glass.

“Try it,” Kenny said. Glass sliding the across granite.

“There’s no point.”

“You want to figure out how bad it is, don’t you?”

Silence. A quiet sip.

“It’s just tea,” Kenny said, his voice gentle, like he was talking to a child. “Liquids should be easy to keep down.”

“Says the person who can still eat two pizzas by himself.”

A pen clicking. Sticky notes being torn from the pad.

“You know that doesn’t help, right?” Kenny said.

“Shut up. Not all of us have five brothers and a brat named after us.”

Silence. A pen scratching across paper.

“You’re being mean,” Kenny said.

Silence. A pen hitting the table. Another sip.

“I barely passed my last screening,” Eleanor said. “I can brush off Wolf for a while, but my thirty-year review is coming up.”

Another sip.

“How are you feeling?”

“Fine. Tea is fine, I think.”

“That’s good. See? It could be worse.”

“Could it?”

They didn’t speak after that, and somewhere in between Eleanor’s quiet sips and Kenny’s fingers drumming across the table, I wasn’t pretending to be asleep anymore.

“Longitude 35.3112,” I said, my cheek resting against the desk.

Kenny licked his index finger and turned a page in the atlas.

“That puts you... in Western Kenya.”

I groaned, smashing my head against the wood.

“If these are coordinates, then there must be another coordinate system here. None of the combinations make any sense and most of them are underground.”

Kenny hummed in acknowledgment, spinning the pen between his fingers.

“You know, I think I met someone like you once,” he said.

I opened one eye, cheek still squished against the table.

“Like me in what way? Living? Frustrated? Intellectually constipated?”

He shook his head.

“A mapmaker.”



*“What?”*

I shot up, making Kenny flinch and sending the pen spinning out of his fingers.

“It was years ago, so I’m not positive,” he said, “but she was working on city planning with the old Overseer. She used to play cards with Eleanor at The Inferno, I think. That’s a big fire pit on the South End where a lot of people go to make s’mores and drink really high-proof alcohol.”

“And neither of you thought to mention this until now?”

Kenny blushed and shrugged helplessly. “I know I don’t look it, but I’m pretty old. I’ve been around for a long time and met a lot of people. I have my senile-grandpa moments every now and then. And Eleanor... don’t tell her I said this or she would bludgeon me to double-death, but she has trouble remembering sometimes. Either that or she was hoping you could figure it out yourself so she wouldn’t have to see Brigid again.”

“Why wouldn’t she want to see her?” I said. “Did something happen?”

Kenny fidgeted in his seat, chewing his lip and wondering how much to tell me.

“They had some sort of falling-out. Something about a car bomb.”

I searched Kenny’s face for any signs that he was joking. When I found none, I groaned and forced myself to stand up, deciding I really needed some coffee to handle any more of this.

“Think she’d kill me if I drank some of her coffee?” I said. “I didn’t sleep much last night. Or this week.”

Kenny’s eyes flickered away. “I doubt she’d mind,” he said, his voice suddenly soft. “I’m going to watch TV.”

He stood up sharply and hurried out of the study. Kenny was an impressively terrible liar, but it was hard to think about that when I could barely keep my eyes open. I walked to the kitchen and stuck some sticky notes back to the cabinet from where they’d fallen on the counter, then

grabbed a mug from the top shelf. I fell into a sleep-deprived trance, watching my hands grab the coffee from the fridge and the spoon from the drawer but not really feeling the metal against my skin, like I was watching a movie of Sebastian making coffee.

Then Kenny screamed. I dropped the spoon in the sink, spilling coffee beans across the counter.

“Kenny?” I said, suddenly wide awake. “What’s wrong?”

No response. I dropped the coffee and hurried to the living room.

Kenny was hugging his knees on the couch, suddenly looking small and young, gesturing to the TV with an unsteady finger. I glanced at the dark screen and the remote lying in pieces on the floor in front of it.

“What is it?” I said. “What did you see?”

Kenny shook his head and bit down on his hand. I slid onto the couch and put a hand on his knee.

“Kenny. Come on, say something.”

His shoulders heaved with a dry sob and he pressed his face into his knees.

“Will,” he said.

“What about him?” I said, squeezing his knee a little harder.

Kenny shook his head and hugged his legs tighter, mumbling something I couldn’t make out.

“What?”

“He has cancer,” he repeated, louder. Then he started sobbing even harder, hands fisting at the fabric of his jeans. I moved my hand to his back, rubbing up and down his spine in what I hoped was a soothing gesture. I’d never been good at comforting people, mostly because I hated when people tried to comfort me. No one had ever done it in a way that didn’t make me feel even

more pathetic. But Kenny was so touchy even when he wasn't upset that it would have felt cruel to just sit rigidly next to him and watch him cry. If he objected to my touch, he didn't say anything about it.

"I mean, that's terrible," I said, carefully monitoring my tone to sound sympathetic but not overly-pitying, "but isn't it also good, in a way? Won't you get to see him sooner?"

"I didn't want it like this!" Kenny said, looking up sharply, his eyes red and desperate.

"How did you want it to happen?" I said, retracting my arm slightly.

He opened his mouth to answer, then closed it and shook his head, sniffing loudly.

"I don't know," he said, suddenly quiet again. "It's stupid, but I guess I just thought that one day, when he was really old, he'd die in his sleep and not feel a thing. I never wanted anything to hurt him. I'd wait here until I turned to ashes if it meant he'd be okay."

Kenny had quieted down, his face still streaked with tears but no longer sobbing.

"Sorry," he said, wiping his nose with his sleeve. "I'm sorry, you've got enough problems already."

"One more won't hurt."

Kenny smirked, wiping at his eyes.

The front door slammed. Kenny vaulted over the couch, barreling into the kitchen and wailing Eleanor's name. I hurried after him and saw him wrapped around Eleanor's torso, sobbing. She had both of her hands in the air as if she didn't know what to do with them, a bag of takeout swinging from her left wrist. She raised an eyebrow, seeming mildly concerned but not surprised, then shifted her gaze to me.

I mouthed the word "Will," shrugging helplessly. Eleanor nodded and set the bag on the floor, prying Kenny's arms off of her and shuffling him off to the bedroom. I stood in the empty

kitchen for a moment, then turned back to my coffee. Eleanor came back just as I was mixing in the sugar. She strode past me, yanking open a drawer and pulling out a hammer.

“Eleanor?”

She ignored me, stalking off to the living room. I abandoned my coffee and followed her, peeking into the doorway just in time to see her pull her arm back and smash the television screen into a million shards of glass.

## 15. And His House Is on Fire

I smelled The Inferno before I saw it.

Eleanor pulled over in a field of dead grass beside a few other haphazardly-parked cars, then killed the engine. Even from inside the car, the air felt hot and scorched. I slid out of the passenger seat and squinted in the sudden sting of smoke. The field overlooked a valley that glowed gentle amber from scattered bonfires, painting the parched grass warm shades of orange. The deep incline of the valley formed a pocket in the earth that enveloped the flames and tucked them away from the city, leaving only a soft glimmer, like a candle in a frosted glass jar. Faraway figures moved around the fires and the tents at the periphery. The deep roar of the flames hummed in the valley, the fire crackling so loudly that it sounded like the sky was shattering.

Eleanor had made the executive decision to leave Kenny at home. Before we'd left, I'd peeked in the bedroom at Kenny lying like road kill on the bed, but Eleanor insisted that he should be alone, though I didn't know if it was for his benefit or hers.

Eleanor pulled up the hood of her jacket, then grabbed a milk gallon of something that I suspected wasn't actually milk from the trunk.

"This place wouldn't exactly pass a fire safety inspection, so watch where you step," she said. Then she started trekking down the hill, gesturing for me to follow.

As we got closer, I realized that none of the bonfires strewn across the valley were actually made of firewood. One group congregated around an upright piano wrapped in flames, the keys dissolving into milk and dripping down the legs. Another group circled a staggering stack of doors and mirrors piled dangerously high, watching the flames gnaw hungrily through the wood and warp the mirrors into silvery syrup. Smaller groups were burning books or old toys across

the field, sitting in plastic chairs around their pyres, reaching for red cans of gasoline when the flames started to die down.

“What does everyone have against pianos?” I said, blinking to clear the smoke from my eyes.

“It’s art, you uncultured swine,” Eleanor said, gesturing theatrically around the field and rolling her eyes. “Yeah, I don’t get it either. I’ve been told it’s some sort of performance art. Some sort of ‘declaration of the ephemerality of life’ or ‘illusion of control over the destructive forces of nature,’ or an excuse to burn shit and get drunk.”

I shrank closer to Eleanor as a man with his hair in flames ran by screaming and flailing. The bonfires became smaller and more spaced out as we moved across the field, replaced by people sitting on the ground playing cards, drinking from soup cans and jam jars. Tents around the perimeter sold hot dogs on skewers and wrapped in tin foil for people to cook in the fires, along with a clear beverage cryptically labeled “DRINK - \$2” on a small chalkboard.

Eleanor approached one of the tents and asked for Brigid. The vendor pointed to a tent farther back with the flaps drawn closed. She looked over her shoulder to make sure I was still behind her, then stepped over a burning bible and headed for the tent. It was bigger than the others, the fabric a stormy blue that stirred in the wind. As we got closer, a white glove slid between the curtains and brushed the fabric aside. At first, all I could see was honey-blonde hair parted crookedly to the left. Then the woman stood up, apparently too tall to fit through the doorway without crouching, and froze at the sight of Eleanor.

Her patchwork outfit resembled a Mad Hatter, a dark green velour blazer with gaudy lace cuffs, dirtied yellow and scorched black at the ends. Her scarf was an inebriated paisley pattern knotted in an ostentatious bow and seemed to incorporate every color I’d ever seen before and some that I’d never seen, shades shifting as the fire changed the light. She had a can of what

looked like gasoline in one hand and a burlap sack in the other.

“Eleanor?” She smiled, then set down the objects and pulled a handkerchief from her coat pocket, wiping at her eyes. “The smoke must be getting to me, because there’s no way I’m seeing Eleanor Liu in *The Inferno*.”

“The smoke is definitely getting to you, but I’m actually here, much to my displeasure.”

Brigid pouted, pretending to sponge tears away with her handkerchief.

“I don’t barge into *your* home after five years and insult it.”

“This isn’t your home,” Eleanor said, crossing her arms, “and my home never explodes and lodges scrap metal in people’s eyes.”

Brigid winced, scratching the back of her neck. “If it’s any consolation, we banned car fires ever since that incident. I promise it’s safe now. Well, as safe as you want it to be.” Brigid elbowed Eleanor playfully, making Eleanor crinkle her lips like she’d tasted curdled milk.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not here to play cards.”

“But you were so good at it!” Brigid clasped her hands together like she was praying, looking imploringly at Eleanor. “All the good players left after you did. They got bored.”

“I got *blinded*.”

“Temporarily!”

Eleanor sighed and pressed a hand to her forehead, jerking her milk jug towards Brigid.

“Forget it. Just take this.”

Brigid grinned and snatched the gallon, popping the cap off and inhaling deeply, eyes rolling back in her head.

“This is good petrol,” she said. “You stole this, didn’t you?”

“I’m a law enforcement official. I can’t steal.”

Brigid smirked and capped the milk jug.

“You and I both know there’s nothing you can’t do, Eleanor.” She set the jug down and crossed her arms. “Now, are you ever going to introduce me to your friend?”

She turned her gaze to me, eyes sweeping unapologetically across my body like a real estate appraiser drinking in details.

“He’s working with me,” Eleanor said, stepping in front of me. “This is Sebastian. Sebastian, Brigid.”

Brigid smiled and arched around Eleanor, extending her hand.

“Pleasure to meet you, Sebastian.”

The second I reached out to take Brigid’s hand, she grabbed my wrist and flipped my hand palm-side-up, holding it close to her face and tracing the creases in my skin with her singed gloves.

“What are you—”

“Your life line is short,” she said, “which, as you can see, is quite accurate. Your sun line is blurred, suggesting a lack of focus, and your health line is a bit wavy... are you having digestive problems?”

Eleanor grabbed my wrist and yanked it away.

“Practice your cereal-box fortune telling later. We’re here for work.”

Brigid smiled from one side of her mouth and stood up straight. “You’ve grown boring in your old age. But alright, what do you need?”

Eleanor looked at me, which made Brigid look at me. I sputtered and cleared my throat when I realized they were waiting for me to explain.

“Eleanor said you’re a geographer,” I said.



Brigid nodded. “Among other things. I’m also a juggler, arsonist, and amateur psychic.”

“Geography is the only one of those things she’s actually good at,” Eleanor said.

“I’ll have you know that my juggling has drastically improved!”

“What kind of a geographer are you?” I said.

Brigid turned back to me and smiled, adjusting her bow. “I’m a geometician. I’m trained in land surveying and data capture. Have you ever used a GPS?”

I nodded.

“You’re welcome,” Brigid said, nonchalantly brushing soot from her jacket. “Before my accident, I worked on the original GPS Project in the 90’s.”

“*What?*” I took a step forward, seriously considering throwing myself on the ground and kissing her feet. “You worked with Roger Easton?”

“Getting and Parkinson too,” Brigid said, shrugging. I wondered how appropriate it would be to ask for her autograph.

“Careful,” Eleanor said, “you might make him faint.”

I quickly closed my jaw and stood up straight, trying to subtly wipe the drool from my chin.

“Do you know if there’s some sort of geographic coordinate system here?” I said, hoping they’d dismiss my blushing as a reaction to the fires all around us.

“Is there a geographic coordinate system?” she repeated, eyes wide. “Do red blood cells transfer light energy? Do the Lost have hyper-evolved predator capabilities?”

“That means ‘yes’ in English,” Eleanor said.

“Could you tell us about it?” I said, stepping around Eleanor to stand in front of Brigid. She pursed her lips and crossed her arms in mock contemplation.

“I could,” she said, lips curling into a Cheshire smirk, “but what will you give me in return?”

“High octane gasoline!” Eleanor said, frowning and pointing to the milk jug. Brigid waved a hand dismissively.

“I appreciate it, but we have plenty of that.”

“What, do you want me to axe my kitchen table and bring you more firewood?” Eleanor said.

Brigid laughed, then reached into one of her jacket pockets and pulled out a deck of cards, brandishing it between two fingers.

“Of course not. I just want to play.”

“No,” Eleanor said immediately.

Brigid turned to me, smiling like she hadn’t heard Eleanor.

“Do you like card games, Sebastian?”

“He doesn’t,” Eleanor said, stepping in front of me again. That didn’t deter Brigid, as both of us could see over Eleanor’s head.

“Umm, I guess I don’t,” I said, glancing nervously down at Eleanor.

Brigid sighed, then slapped a hand to her forehead and swooned melodramatically. “Oh no, I suddenly feel faint from the smoke! I can’t remember who I am, or where I am, or anything about geographic coordinate systems.”

“Are you an infomercial star now too?” Eleanor said, looking thoroughly unamused. “*I’ll* play with you, but Sebastian won’t. He can watch me mop you off the floor when I win.”

“Big words for someone who can’t see over her kitchen table,” Brigid said, unboxing the deck and lazily shuffling the cards, “but I want to play with my new friend, since we can see eye-to-eye. If you two impress me enough, I’ll tell you everything.”

Eleanor’s fingers twitched like she wanted to strangle someone.

“We’ll play Five Star,” Eleanor said, her teeth clenched.

“Five Star’s for kids. Let’s play Fireball.”

“I’m not putting fire anywhere near my face.”

“Fair enough. Grim Reaper?”

“That takes too long. Osiris Six.”

“That’s even more boring than Five Star. Are you scared of losing a real card game, Eleanor?”

“No, I just don’t want to waste an hour playing when you’re going to lose in ten minutes anyway.”

“Careful, Thumbelina.”

“Sasquatch.”

“Let’s play Spoons. I won’t go any easier than that.”

“...Only if I get to deal.”

“Jokers are wild.”

“Fine.”

“Good.”

Brigid tossed the deck to Eleanor and clapped her hands excitedly.

“I’ll get more players. Get ready to lose.”

She scurried off into the crowd, leaving Eleanor looking like she’d just pushed a bus uphill.

“Do you know how to play Spoons?”

I shook my head.

“I’ll show you,” she said, pocketing her gloves and staring off distractedly. “I figured she’d make me play a round with her, I just didn’t think she’d make you play too.”

I shrugged. “It’s fine. I’m okay with card games. I just need a few rounds to get the hang of

it.”

“These aren’t normal card games,” Eleanor said, her expression pained. “We want to clean this up fast. It’s tricky because Brigid is like a little kid who needs constant entertainment. We have to make it interesting for her, or she’ll want to keep playing. That means I can’t sweep this up in five minutes.” She paused to scrub at her eyes which were starting to turn red from the smoke. “Just let me handle it. Don’t worry about anyone but Brigid.”

“Why would I be worried?”

Eleanor frowned, flipping through the deck and examining a bent card. “She’s a card shark.”

“What? Then how are we supposed to win?”

Eleanor smirked and casually scratched her neck, revealing a playing card tucked into her sleeve. “I’m a card shark too.”

I sighed and let my shoulders drop, realizing just how useless I would be in the game.

“So you’re both cheaters?”

“Is it cheating if everyone does it?” Eleanor said, flashing a smile before turning back to shuffling the deck. “Just look like you’re trying to win, but don’t actually win.”

“Aren’t I trying to impress Brigid?”

Eleanor shook her head, her expression suddenly grave. “You don’t want to—”

“Ready!” Brigid materialized behind Eleanor, making both of us jump. “I found four unfortunate souls to play with us. Come on!”

She dragged us over to a circle of mismatched towels and couch cushions on the ground, four other people getting settled at the far end. One was a man in a hockey mask who would have looked terrifying if he hadn’t been so visibly drunk and hiccupping uncontrollably. Two girls sat to his left, one in an oversized Hawaiian print shirt and the other in a gray trench coat and

possibly nothing else, both sharing a plate of about twenty hot dogs. A boy who couldn't have been older than fourteen sat to the left of trench-coat girl, his glasses perfectly round circles and his expression so unnervingly sour that I half-expected him to bludgeon me to death if we made eye contact. Eleanor dropped to the ground, pulling up an impressively lumpy couch cushion and pointing at the torn beach towel to her left, gesturing for me to sit down.

Brigid knelt in the center of the circle, quickly untied the drawstring of a small burlap sack, then dumped a set of tarnished knives onto the ground.

I turned to Eleanor, trying to subtly ask *what-the-hell-is-going-on* with my puzzled expression, but she was too busy watching Brigid arrange the knives so the tips converged at the center, handles facing out.

"I, uh, I thought we were playing Spoons?" I said. I made eye contact with trench-coat girl as she took a bite of her hotdog and quickly looked down at my shoes.

"The original version uses spoons," Brigid said, sitting back on her pillow, "but knives make it more... exciting."

"That's one way to put it," Eleanor said, splitting the deck again. "Sebastian's never played before."

"It's simple," Brigid said, leaning around Eleanor as she started dealing the cards across the circle. "Everyone has four cards in hand, and the goal is to have four-of-a-kind. Eleanor's the dealer, so she'll draw from the deck and either pass the card to her left, or keep the card and pass a different card on. The next person does the same, passing the cards around the circle. When you have four-of-a-kind, you grab one of the knives. Once you see someone else grabbing a knife, you try to grab one too. The catch is that there's six knives and seven players, so whoever doesn't grab a knife loses that round. Then we take away a knife and play again. Questions?"

“I don’t think Jason got any of that,” Eleanor said, nodding towards hockey-mask guy, who was busy figuring out how to eat a hot dog without taking his mask off. Brigid scowled and stomped across the circle, dragging the man away and setting off in search of a new victim. As soon as Brigid left the circle, Eleanor tugged on my sleeve.

“Throw down the sets I give you,” she whispered. “Get ready to grab if I pass you any aces or two’s. Pay attention and don’t screw this up, because I literally could not make this any easier for you.”

“I’m insulted that you think so little of me.”

“There’s no time for a learning curve with Brigid.”

Then Brigid came back, triumphantly dragging what looked like a flustered hot dog vendor and depositing him in hockey guy’s seat. She dropped back to her own cushion, cracked her neck, swiped her cards off the ground, and grinned.

“Let’s play.”

Eleanor had dealt me a three, four, five, and six. I made a mental note to ask her later how she’d gotten so good at stacking a deck. She passed me face cards for the first few turns, which I easily passed on to hot-dog man. Then I picked up her discarded ace, saw a sharp movement to my right, and snatched a knife a split second after Eleanor, a set of sevens laid out in front of her. Hot-dog man lost the first round because his hands were too sticky to drop his cards. He shrugged apologetically and stood up, looking relieved to get back to his actual job.

“Quick reflexes for a first-timer,” Brigid said, tucking her knife back in the burlap sack and arranging the remaining five in the center of the circle.

I shrugged stiffly. “I’m jumpy, I guess.”

I could feel Brigid’s eyes on me as Eleanor started the next round. She passed me a three,

which I tucked in next to my other three, passing my six along. A few face cards later, two more threes came around. I dropped my cards and grabbed a knife at nearly the same time as Eleanor and Brigid. This time, Hawaiian-shirt girl was too slow, scowling and scooting back out of the circle to wait for her friend.

As the circle got smaller, Eleanor's hands moved faster. I barely had time to glance at the cards before sliding them to trench-coat girl, almost dropping my hand twice.

Suddenly, Brigid snatched a knife. She had it curled protectively against her chest before anyone else had moved, then everyone dove for the remaining knives. The little boy was the slowest to react, but his facial expression didn't change when he lost. He merely dropped his cards, stood up, and headed back into the crowd.

"Reflexes not as quick anymore?" Brigid said, twirling the knife in one hand. "Or was my move really so unexpected?"

"It's funny, I thought I saw all the kings go around ages ago," Eleanor said, tossing her knife back in the center. "The smoke must be getting to me too."

Brigid just smiled, rearranging the knives.

"It must be."

After that, the cards went by so fast that I could barely hold onto them, but I managed to slap down a set of fives and grab a knife, finally eliminating trench-coat girl. Brigid scooted closer to me and Eleanor, arranging the remaining two knives.

By that round, Eleanor had either run out of tricks or was trying her hardest to make me lose. She shoved the cards at me carelessly, making me lean over or scramble for them, often two or three at a time because I couldn't keep up. She passed me two aces, making me tense up each time, but after five more cards went through, I realized no one was putting down four-of-a-kind.

I ground my teeth together and focused on speeding up my hands, irritated that Eleanor was double-crossing me this way. I knew she was competitive, but wouldn't it impress Brigid more if Eleanor and I were the last two standing?

“Sebastian.”

I looked up from my cards. Both Eleanor and Brigid were staring at me, knives in hand. I threw down my cards, not even pretending to be a graceful loser. This delighted Brigid, who clapped and ruffled my hair.

“Chin up, dear. You did well for a first-timer.”

“Right,” I said, backing up stiffly and pointedly avoiding eye contact with Eleanor. Brigid bagged the second knife, cracked her knuckles, then narrowed her eyes and focused on the game.

Then the round began, and they started tearing through the deck. Both of them had clearly been holding back before, because now their hands blurred with speed, their movements so swift that I wondered if they were even really looking at the cards before passing them on.

I heard the game end before I saw it — the metronomic rhythm of cards slammed down on the discard pile abruptly cut off, four Queens cast down on the towel. Two hands shot out for the knife. Someone dropped their cards and the wind spun them up in a flurry of spades. Then Eleanor grabbed the knife and I smiled for half a second before she dove forward and plunged it into Brigid's chest.

I yelped and scrambled back because Brigid's lace collar was turning red and she was making some terrible gurgling sound and Eleanor was sitting back and crossing her arms like she'd just killed a fly.

Then Brigid laughed.

She sat up drunkenly and yanked the knife out with a horrible squelching noise, pulling out



her handkerchief and wiping her face, then polishing the knife.

“One day, you’ll tell me your secret, Eleanor,” she said, dropping the last knife in the bag and adjusting her bow which now was torn on one side.

“There’s no secret,” Eleanor said, arms still crossed, “I just hate losing.”

Brigid smirked and stood up, brushing the dirt off her pants.

“Give me five minutes to lock up and I’ll show you my maps,” she said. Then she slung the bag over her shoulder and skipped off into the crowd.

I turned to Eleanor, jaw hanging open and mind scrambling for words. She looked back at me, then casually put her gloves back on.

“What are you staring at?”

I exploded.

“*What kind of sadistic card game was that?*” I said, nearly screaming, hands gripping my hair. “Exactly *how* is that fun for anyone?”

“Did you not hear Brigid saying that was one of the tamer games?” Eleanor said. “In Fireball, we burn whoever gets out, not just the runner-up.”

“Who the hell agrees to that?”

“Are you kidding? People *love* it.”

I blinked slowly, trying to voice a thousand indignant interjections at the same time and only managing to make a strangled squawk. “*Why?*” I managed.

“First of all, it doesn’t hurt as much as you think,” Eleanor said. “You ever get a flu shot? It feels more like that. Second, it’s exciting. The same reason that people go to haunted houses and roller coasters. It’s the adrenaline. What else are we going to do? Bet money that no one has that much of or really needs?”

“I don’t know, crossword puzzles? Knitting?”

Eleanor shook her head, standing up. “The point is to feel something. You wouldn’t understand.”

“But...” I paused, staring up at her stern expression, not entirely sure I could stand up without collapsing, “wouldn’t you want to feel something that isn’t painful?”

Eleanor watched me for a moment, her eyes vacuous.

“There isn’t anything else.”

Then she turned away, tightening her ponytail. “At least, that’s what people say. Clearly, I don’t come here anymore, so I guess I can’t understand the appeal.”

“She made it sound like you used to come here a lot,” I said, slowly standing up.

Eleanor shrugged. “I’m competitive. It gets dull after a while, though. Everything here does.”

“All done!” Brigid said, so loudly that a girl next to her jumped and dropped her hot dog. She skipped over to us and hooked one arm under Eleanor’s and the other under mine. She had changed her shirt to one that wasn’t saturated with blood. “Ready to be enlightened?”

“Where are we going, exactly?” I said. Brigid was already tugging us through the crowd. I tripped over a burning doll and tried to stomp out my flaming shoelace while walking.

Brigid turned to me and beamed, and I suddenly got the horrible feeling that everything had gone exactly according to Brigid’s plan.

“Everywhere.”

Brigid lived on Banks Street, at the very top of a hill that seemed, by all appearances, to be melting.

Shades of murky heather and teal dribbled down the slope, swirling together with the

rainwater into oil slicks that looked like tinted glass on the sidewalk. Unlike the other parts of the city that I'd seen, the houses here had stone pillars and paved walkways, glass double doors and balconies with hydrangeas in ceramic pots. Wrought-iron fences sectioned off the lawns and shut out the rest of the world behind tall gothic gates.

Brigid stomped cheerfully through the purple puddles while Eleanor tried to step around them with some bizarre hopping dance, a scowl stamped onto her face.

"Quit splashing me," she said to Brigid. "Your massive feet could cause a tsunami."

"Sorry, I forgot you could drown in puddles."

"Why is it purple?" I said, shouldering between them before Eleanor could get even more worked up.

Brigid shrugged. "I guess they must be painting with purple today."

"Who?"

"The painters, of course."

"And they are..."

"The ones who paint."

I turned to Eleanor for help, but she only rolled her eyes and dodged another puddle, hood pulled protectively down.

"They're right up here, if you really want to see," Brigid said, pointing to a street at the end of the block, nearly at the top of a hill. It seemed to be the source of the purple river, where the color ran the clearest. "You can watch them, just don't lean on any walls unless you want to be part of the mural."

I nodded and peered down the alley.

It looked like a rainbow grenade had gone off, splattering the entire color spectrum across the

brick walls. The passage reeked of paint, the chemical smell knifing into my sinuses and instantly making my head hurt. At the dead-end, four people in plastic ponchos were busily painting an image across the wall, the only coherent shape in the maelstrom of color.

It was a face.

Gaunt cheeks scratched black. A jagged line of bangs. Eyes small in the shadows of their sockets, dead and blind and sterile white.

The hair on the right side was combed with neon yellow and electric green and cough-syrup purple, a splash of sunlight on the bleached-white expression. Rain pulled the colors down across the bricks, and the painted boy's chin dripped into the shadows below his jaw. His multicolored hair stretched longer and lighter across his face, black tears bleeding down his cheek and into his mouth. Even as his face melted and slid across the bricks, his eyes never bled, still staring accusingly forward.

"Shouldn't they wait until the rain stops?" I said, unable to look away from the boy's eyes.

"It never stops," Brigid said.

"Then what's the point?"

No one answered. I turned to see both Brigid and Eleanor staring at me.

"I mean, why paint it if it goes away eventually?"

Brigid glanced at the mural and smiled, but this time it didn't reach her eyes.

"Everything goes away eventually."

I swallowed and turned back to the face, which by then was only half of a face and gray streaks over unflinching eyes.

"It's different every day," Brigid said. "You can sign up to paint it if you want, but the wait list is about a year long."

I said nothing, entranced by the white eyes that were now disembodied, the only clear shape in the assault of color.

“I think he’s in love,” Eleanor said, lightly punching my shoulder. “Come on, it’s wet out here.”

I finally tore my gaze away and looked down at Eleanor, aware again of the rain soaking through my pants and socks.

“He’s a bit spacey, isn’t he?” Brigid said, leaning down to “whisper” in Eleanor’s ear, even though I could clearly hear her. Then she stood up straight and smiled. “Come on, Sebastian,” she said, louder this time, “I think I’ve got something at my house that you’ll like even more than this.”

I nodded and followed them out of the alley, but not without one last glance at the eyes, sharp and white as May’s, fixed and hungry.

Brigid set a steaming mug in front of me.

I raised it to my lips but Eleanor put her hand over the rim before I could drink, my lips accidentally brushing her fingers.

“Eleanor, what—”

“What kind of tea is this, Brigid?” Eleanor said.

“Hmm?” Brigid glanced over her shoulder from where she was digging through a cabinet.

“Oh, I remembered you liked the Egyptian chamomile tea, Eleanor, so that’s what I gave you. I gave Sebastian a hemlock blend.”

Eleanor and I looked at each other, then quickly switched our cups before Brigid turned around.

I blew the steam away and pressed my lips to the rim, tipping the mug back to drink right as something cold and smooth glided over my foot.

I flinched and yanked my feet off the floor, smashing my knees under the table and splashing tea over both myself and the floor. A snake the width of my arm had curled around my chair, its tail looped around the legs of the table. Its scales were burnt brown spotted with black rings, glassy smooth and catching the overhead light.

*“What kind of satanic beast is that?”* I said, hugging my knees.

“Cornflakes!” Brigid frowned and crouched under the table, reappearing with the snake draped across her shoulders. She stroked its scales and pressed a gentle kiss to its back. “You’re supposed to stay in your room when we have guests. Don’t tell me your brother got out too.”

Then she was rushing out of the room, a few yards of snake trailing behind her. I turned to Eleanor.

“Do you have any normal friends?”

She smirked. “Am I the standard for normalcy?”

“It’s a spectrum.”

She rolled her eyes and grabbed a dish towel, wiping up the tea that I’d spilled everywhere. She’d clearly been to Brigid’s house before, since she knew about her selection of poison teas and peculiar system of organization. When we’d first entered the foyer and nearly been crushed in an avalanche of vintage board games, she’d simply stepped over the toy cars and half-dressed dolls, then reached for the light switch behind a shelf of miniature glass elephants and headed towards the study. Brigid’s house seemed like a defunct toy shop, packed tightly with treasures.

The study where we sat had large bay windows with beige curtains drawn across them, a brown upright piano against the far wall and two ceiling-high bookcases on the opposite end, a

gray armchair and lamp between them. The walls were covered in a metallic bronze wallpaper, each wall bearing a framed painting. I wondered how someone like Brigid earned so much money working in The Inferno while Eleanor, who'd trained decades for her job, lived in a barely-furnished apartment. Either the two of them had very different priorities or the economy was horribly skewed.

“Here it is.”

Brigid flew back in, this time without the snake, holding a long paper tube. She knelt down and spread the paper across the length of a table, gesturing for me to come to the other side.

The map was magnificent.

The grid looked hand-drawn, but each square was uniform. Elegant calligraphy spelled “SHADOW CITY, 2010” across the top. Thick brush strokes traced the different sections of the city, separating The Perimeter in the south from the Factory District and Central Headquarters. Smaller brush strokes had painted other landmarks, like the Exit Trains, while blue watercolors showed the path of the river through the forest. The compass rose in the bottom corner was a perfect star.

“How do you know which way is North?” I said, fighting the urge to touch every inch of the paper.

“I don't,” Brigid said. “I made a new North.”

“You can do that?”

Brigid smiled and took a long sip of her tea. “I should explain. When I was first commissioned to make this map, it took me all of three seconds to realize that it was damn hard to use a geographic coordinate system when I wasn't sure if the ‘geo’ part still held true. In other words—”

“You didn’t know if this city was on Earth or not,” I said.

Brigid seemed startled for a moment, then her face easily slid back into a smile. “Are you trying to take my job or something?”

“Sorry,” I said, looking down. Brigid laughed and waved her hand dismissively.

“No, no, I like your enthusiasm. You’re right, that was exactly the problem. So, naturally, I dug out as many star maps as I could find, drove a few miles out of the city, and watched the sky.”

I nodded. “That makes sense. I *have* seen stars here. That must mean we’re on Earth, right?”

Brigid grinned mischievously and held up her index finger. “Yes and no.”

I glanced across the table at Eleanor, whose eyebrows were arched in confusion, hands wrapped tightly around her mug.

“You can find your approximate latitude and longitude from the North Star,” Brigid said. “I measured its distance from the horizon at different areas outside of the city to get a range of values, then found the ratios of the distance between other points in the constellations for consistency. Surprisingly, the results were fairly uniform.”

“And?”

Brigid took another long sip of her tea, fishing out her handkerchief and wiping her lips before replying. “We’re in Boston.”

I looked at Eleanor, then down at the map, then back at Brigid.

“But... we’re not.”

“Clearly,” Brigid said. “Problematic, isn’t it? Somehow, our city occupies the exact same space as Boston, yet somehow the worlds don’t intersect.”

I rocked back on my heels and bit my lip. “Maybe it’s some sort of parallel plane?”



“That, only God can tell you,” Brigid said. “But, as it stands, I went with the traditional latitude-longitude system for the map.”

“And other people use this?”

She nodded. “This is the official map that they use in headquarters for city planning. Not this one, specifically, but copies of it. You’re looking at the original.”

I groaned and lay back on the carpet, pressing my palms to my eyes.

“Sebastian?”

“I don’t suppose there’s a Shadow City overlapping with Africa too?” I said, peeking out from between my fingers.

Brigid shrugged. “At the very least, I can tell you that there must be other Shadow Cities. I’ve looked at the census, and there’s no way that every person who dies passes through here. We don’t get that kind of traffic, not to mention that almost everyone who boards The Shadow Express is from some part of New England. But I don’t know anyone who’s found another city.”

“No one has,” Eleanor said. “You need special permission and a damn good reason to go more than ten miles outside of the city. I drove that far once, canvassing, and all I could see was dead grass until the horizon.”

I groaned and dropped my arms to my sides.

“Then the coordinate theory is pointless. Any combination of our numbers would put us somewhere in northern Africa.”

“What are you two looking for, exactly?” Brigid said.

“That’s classified,” Eleanor said.

Brigid rolled her eyes. “Of course it is.” She started rolling up the map and I briefly considered asking if she’d let me stare at it for a few more minutes. Her hands hesitated for a

moment before retying the string around the rolled-up parchment. “Well,” she said, cocking her head to the side, “there might be something else I could show you.”

“Really?”

She pursed her lips, tapping a finger against them thoughtfully. “Yes, there’s definitely something. I’ll go fetch it now.” She stood up, tucking the map under her arm. “Sebastian, come with me.”

“Um...” I faltered, glancing at Eleanor and tentatively getting to my feet, “just me?”

Brigid had already grabbed my wrist and started pulling me across the room, ignoring how I tripped over the edge of the carpet.

“I need something off a tall shelf,” she said.

“You’re taller than him,” Eleanor said, crossing her arms. She frowned, but didn’t move from her chair by the piano.

“We’ll be back in a flash, Eleanor!”

Then she shoved me out of the room and slammed the door, tugging me down the hallway. I glanced warily at the door behind me.

“Am I being kidnapped?”

Brigid laughed and shook her head. I caught a glimpse of something with a long, furry tail scampering behind a couch.

“Here,” she said, finally releasing me. She pointed to a high shelf in her kitchen. “Grab the blue box, will you?”

I looked at her for a moment, deciding not to comment on the fact that she could have easily reached it herself, then stood on my toes and fished around the cabinet over my head, finally pulling down a cardboard box the size and shape of a brick.

“You’re the best,” Brigid said, snatching the box from my hands and setting it on the table. She slipped a spidery finger along the crease, unhooking the fasteners and pushing the lid back. Then she pulled out a small, black square, held it up to the light and squinted, then popped it in her mouth.

“Want some?” She held the box out to me.

“Uh, what is it?”

“Chocolate.”

“Chocolate?”

“That is what I said.”

“This is what you wanted to show me?”

She grinned and shook her head, grabbing another square before shutting the box. “No, I just needed to get you out of the room. Come on, that’s probably enough time.”

“Enough time for what?” I said, watching Brigid abandon the chocolate and hurry back into the hallway. I jogged after her, stumbling into her back when she suddenly stopped at the end of the hallway leading to the study.

“Brigid, what—”

She shook her head and pressed a finger to her lips, then leaned back against the wall and slid down to the floor, patting the space next to her. I hesitantly sank down next to her, peering around the corner at the still-closed door.

“She won’t start unless she’s alone.”

“Start what?”

Brigid shook her head and pressed her finger to her lips again. I sighed and leaned back against the wall.

Then, from the end of the hallway, a single chord rang through the walls, deep and dark. I blinked, then looked around the corner again, half-expecting to see Eleanor storming down the hallway asking what the hell we were doing. But instead, another chord carried through the walls and floorboards, a high, plaintive echo of the first. More notes sparkled in the high register, demure and spaced apart like the first drops of rain before a storm, then the gentle sighs of the lower octaves echoed underneath, the two melodies converging into a harmony both tender and exquisitely sad.

I turned to Brigid, who was smiling sleepily and leaning against the wall.

“Eleanor plays the piano?” I said.

“Plays it? She’s *infatuated* with it. Those two are like a newlywed couple that can’t be alone in the same room for thirty seconds without tearing each other’s clothes off.”

“She never mentioned it,” I said. “She doesn’t even have a piano in her apartment.”

“She used to,” Brigid said, smile dimming slightly. “When she first started coming to The Inferno, she brought a piano for us to burn. Don’t get me wrong, we love burning instruments. It’s just that, most of them are broken somehow or no one knows how to play them. But she brought in this beautiful Italian piano. It wasn’t even out of tune. I tried to convince her to at least sell it, but she was adamant.” She shrugged. “We all have our reasons, I suppose.”

The music cut off abruptly. A mangled chord rang out, then the lid slammed shut.

“And that would be the lover’s spat,” Brigid said, standing up. “That’s our cue.”

When we came back to the study, Eleanor was sitting in the armchair, staring up at the ceiling.

“Where is it?” she said. When neither of us answered, she turned towards us. “Weren’t you getting something?”

“Oh, we couldn’t find it,” Brigid said.

Eleanor stared at Brigid for a long moment, then nodded and stood up.

“That’s too bad,” she said. “We should go, Sebastian.”

It didn’t occur to me until we’d left Brigid’s house that Eleanor would have known that Brigid was lying.

## 16. I Am Still Learning

“There’s someone behind us,” I said.

Eleanor groaned, eyes flickering to the rearview mirror.

“Of course there is, because this day hasn’t been long enough. Who’s it look like?”

I turned around again, squinting at the distant gray vehicle.

“No headlights. Hard to say. They’re catching up to us, though. It looks like...”

“Wolf,” Eleanor said, gripping the wheel tighter. “What does he want *now*?”

The car sped up so fast that for a moment I thought it was going to plow into us. It hovered dangerously close to our bumper, honking rhythmically.

“I’m going to peel his pretty little face off,” Eleanor said, easing off the gas and pulling over to the side of the road. We were almost at the outskirts and the only buildings in sight were the skyscrapers far behind us, dead grass and weeds surrounding us.

The car came to a stop behind us and Eleanor sighed, shoving the door open.

“Stay in the car,” she said, slamming the door.

She stood defensively in front of her door, arms crossed and foot tapping impatiently as Wolf approached.

“I’m not flattered by your stalking, if that’s what you were going for,” she said.

“You’re in *my* jurisdiction, Liu,” Wolf said, his overly-gelled hair glowing platinum blonde in the sun. “Movement around the forest is suspicious.”

“I’ll say,” Eleanor said. “I heard you’ve been spending a lot of time there, recently.”

Wolf’s expression hardened. He pulled out a file from his briefcase and started flipping through it.

“Seriously? You screened me yesterday.”

“Name?”

“Eleanor Fucking Liu.”

“Date of death.”

“January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1985. Asphyxiation. Boston, Massachusetts. Do you want my bra size too?”

“Name of the person who killed you.”

Eleanor’s lips parted, her features going slack. Wolf noticed the hesitation and raised an eyebrow.

“Really, Liu? That’s a Tier 1 question.”

Eleanor snarled, then whipped her gun from her belt and pointed it at Wolf’s face. He drew his gun simultaneously and both of them glared at each other, fingers hovering over the triggers.

“You know it’s illegal to use armed force against a Light Keeper,” Wolf said, gently nudging Eleanor’s forehead with his gun.

“And *you* know that Bloodhounds can use any force necessary against a Lost Soul,” Eleanor said.

“You want to stake your career on that?”

Then Wolf noticed me sitting in the passenger seat. He smirked, shifting his gun away from Eleanor’s face and aiming it at mine. Eleanor’s shoulders tensed.

“Leave him out of this,” she said, grinding her teeth.

“Only if you hand over the gun.”

Eleanor swallowed, her eyes searing, then dropped her shoulders, holding her gun out to Wolf by the handle. He smiled and tucked it into his belt, then grabbed Eleanor’s wrists and spun her around, slamming her into the car.

“Eleanor!” I said, jumping in my seat and reaching for the door handle.

“Stay!” she said, even as Wolf bent her arms back and slapped handcuffs around her wrists.

“I don’t think so,” Wolf said, gesturing to me with the gun. “You get out too.”

Not one to defy someone pointing a gun at me, I slowly opened the door and stepped around the car. Before I could even blink, Wolf slammed me into the hood of the car and yanked my arms behind me. Cool metal bit into my wrists, so tight that my fingers started going numb.

“I said *leave him out of this!*” Eleanor said.

“As if I could trust him any more than you,” Wolf said, dragging both of us across the road.

“You’re both going back to town for further screening.”

“You mean back out to the forest so you can pawn us off to your Lost friends?” Eleanor said, trying to pull away from his grip.

Wolf scowled but said nothing, dragging us across the dirt. Eleanor seemed genuinely panicked, eyes casting around desperately. Wolf paused in front of the car, fishing for his keys with one hand.

“Choi,” Eleanor said, her voice cracking, “I’m really sorry for this.”

Before I could ask what she meant, she stood on her toes and kissed me.

Glass shattered. A cup hit the floral wallpaper and burst into glass raindrops over the linoleum floor.

My mind spun, trying to process the sudden change in scenery.

A kitchen. refrigerator oven dishwasher trash can cabinets all crammed together in the small space like a rush-hour train car, no room to breathe. Half a peanut-butter sandwich stuck to the side of the oven, the jar of peanut butter spinning across the floor. The refrigerator door hanging open, swinging uselessly like a broken limb. The faucet running, spraying sparks of water where



it hit the edge of a mug. And Eleanor, covering her face and stumbling back against the oven, glass rain scoring thin lines across her forearms. Even with her face hidden, I knew it was Eleanor because of her knocked knees and tiny feet with toes that curled under like claws.

But then she lowered her arms and suddenly it wasn't Eleanor at all.

Her eyes were an earthy brown instead of endless black. Her skin was flushed and sweat-damp, a creamy peach instead of bone white. Her hair was down and parted to the side, covering her left eye. She stood barefoot, feet turned inward and knees quivering together. The straps of a dandelion-yellow dress slid off her shoulders, revealing the violently stark lines of her collarbone and the amber necklace hanging around her throat.

"I'm just going to the store," she said, but the voice wasn't Eleanor's either. Eleanor's voice was the crack of a bullet tearing through the sky, but this voice was a flower petal trembling in a hurricane. "We're out of milk and I know you don't like black coffee in the morning." She smiled but her knees still shook.

"Don't lie to me!" said a man's voice from across the kitchen, crashing through the tiny space like a breaking wave, knocking Eleanor back with its strength. Another glass flew across the room, this time hitting Eleanor's face with a wet crunch and bursting when it hit the floor. She crumpled on top of the shards, jerking away when they bit into her palm, blood trickling from her nose into her mouth.

I tried to bend down and help her, brush the shards out of the way or hold a towel to her nose or *something*, but then I looked down and realized I didn't have hands or feet or legs, couldn't make a sound, didn't even exist. I was the hot air that smelled like ashes and honey, the floral wallpaper caging the room, watching the scene but not a part of it.

And all of it was wrong, worse than all my nightmares because Eleanor wasn't supposed to

look so small, her eyes weren't supposed to pinball around the room in search of an escape route, she wasn't supposed to flinch away from sudden movements or whimper like a scared child.

*Get up, I begged. Get up and run away.*

But she didn't get up. She didn't even try.

"I heard you on the phone," the man said. "I know you're trying to leave me."

Eleanor shook her head, her eyes wide with alarm.

"No, it's not—"

"What would you do without me, huh?" the man said, punctuating the last word with a crisp slap across Eleanor's cheek. She crashed back into the oven door, sobbing as dish towels fell over her. "Who's going to pay for your all your take-out? Who's going to give you money for all those copays when you pretend you're sick to get attention?"

"I didn't—"

"Shut up, Eleanor! You're damn lucky that I've stuck around to put up with your shit for this long. You're worse than a fucking dog, always humping my leg and begging for attention. Who else is gonna put up with that?"

Eleanor abruptly stopped crying, her eyes falling to the ground, unfocused, and I knew she wasn't in the room anymore because I knew what self-preservation mode looked like. If you started thinking of words as nothing more than sounds, they couldn't hurt you, could only wash over you like cold waves. If you turned pain into something else— sounds, colors, numbers— and scrubbed away the harsh edges, then nothing hurt.

"You think your parents will take you back?" the man said. "Even *they* know you're not good enough. You're too stupid to be a doctor but you keep trying anyway. I loved you because nobody else would."

Eleanor leaned against the oven, hugging her bare arms and tucking her knees into her chest, eyes closed.

“I didn’t mean any of it,” she said, her voice impossibly far away. “I just wanted her to stop calling.”

“Christ, Eleanor, you know how angry it makes me when you say shit like that.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, new tears streaking through the blood on her face. “I’m sorry.”

“Look at me,” he said, grabbing her face in his calloused hand and forcing it towards him.

“Tell me you love me.”

Eleanor swallowed a mouthful of blood and raised her eyes up to him. She lifted a trembling hand and placed it over the man’s fingers on her face, her touch unbelievably delicate. Her thumb lightly caressed the back of his hand like he was carved out the most precious gemstones in the world.

“I love you,” she said. The words were solid earth, firm and immovable, like they were the only truth in the universe. Forest fires raged through her brown eyes, promising to turn the entire world to ash for him. Her fingers clenched tighter over his, as if she could crush their bones together until all boundaries deliquesced and they shared a singular heartbeat, inhaled smoke-singed air into the same tired lungs, watched the miserable world veer violently off its axis through the same brown eyes and not even the force of the entire universe bursting into stardust would be able to separate them.

Then hands wrapped around her throat and slammed her against the oven door. His fingers pressed into her throat as easily as soft clay and kept pushing. Eleanor’s mouth fell open in a soundless gasp, blood vessels carving jagged red paths across the whites of her eyes, ink-blue fingertips clawing at his arms.

“You only love me when you fuck up,” he said, pressing harder and harder and harder, forcing her to slide down the oven door onto the linoleum. The back of her head hit the floor with a wet thud. “You think you can just cry and you’ll get your way? Stop playing games, Eleanor. I won’t let you leave me.”

Her bare feet thumped frantically against the linoleum, her hands no longer scratching but clinging to his. Her eyes rolled back for a moment, then settled on his face. And even though her vision had probably turned to watercolors and she probably couldn’t feel anything besides the violent convulsions rippling down her spine and her body’s tortured screams for *AIRAIRAIR*, she looked into his eyes with that same burning, foolish love that could extinguish every star in the sky.

The world started to collapse in on itself, the floral wallpaper peeling away to reveal a black expanse of nothingness, kitchen cabinets blurring together into a haze of brown that grew darker and darker until it disappeared, off-white ceiling swirling in circles like the starry whirlpool of the Milky Way.

Then her hands fell away, thumping softly on the linoleum. There was a moment of delicate silence that stretched infinitely across the dark. Her eyes watered and in the glassy sheen I saw airplanes taking off and white lily petals on church steps and piano keys and children sledding through new snow. Then the tear rolled down her face and all of it was gone, and I knew that all Eleanor could see was him.

Eleanor’s teeth sank into my tongue.

The dim street snapped back into focus. I let out an indignant squawk as Eleanor’s teeth lanced harder into my tongue and blood filled my mouth. She pulled back abruptly and spit a

mouthful of blood in Wolf's face.

He froze instantly, my blood trickling into his right eye and down the sharp angle of his nose. Then his eyes beamed a blinding white, like flash bulbs exploding, rivulets of black iris dye rushing down his face in inky tears. His head snapped towards me and his sun-white gaze locked into mine. He snarled as if imagining how he was about to peel my skin off like a clementine, then he clenched his teeth and charged.

Eleanor kicked him in the chin, making his teeth clack together and sending him reeling backwards. She squatted and stepped over her cuffed arms until her wrists were in front of her, then swiped her gun from Wolf's belt and aimed it at his face as he struggled to his feet.

A bullet hole appeared in his forehead. His expression went slack and he stumbled forward, hitting the pavement face-first.

"Sorry," Eleanor said, holstering the gun. "I had to be sure before I could shoot. He's right, it's illegal to use a weapon against a Light Keeper."

She pulled off one of her gloves, awkwardly, since her hands were still cuffed, and fished around Wolf's pockets until she found a key, quickly unlocking the handcuffs. She struck a match, dropping it disinterestedly on the back of Wolf's jacket and watching the blue flames surge across his back.

"Finally," she said, stretching her arms above her head. "He was annoying even before he was Lost."

Then she turned to me and unlocked my handcuffs, but all I could see was how empty her eyes were, sapped of all the color they'd had moments ago. The handcuffs fell to the ground and I let my hands drop limply to my sides. Eleanor looked at my face and pursed her lips.

"You're bleeding a lot," she said, hands dancing across her belt in search of something.

I licked my lips and tasted blood, looking down at the red dribbling down my chin.

She pulled out a knife and cut a section of cloth from the side of her shirt, then folded it up and held it to my lips.

“Hold it on your tongue,” she said. “Sorry about that. Tongues bleed a lot, but that was kind of the point.”

I took the cloth hesitantly and wiped the blood from my chin.

“Eleanor,” I said, finally finding my voice, “what was that?”

She blinked. “What?”

“I saw you. When you were alive.”

“Ah.” She looked away, scratching the back of her neck. “Yeah, that’s why the dead don’t kiss very much. Reliving your death is kind of a mood-killer. Sorry you had to see that, but it would have been kind of hard to get your tongue between my teeth without touching your lips.”

“Eleanor.”

She looked up, then looked down at our hands and I realized I’d grabbed her wrist. She didn’t pull away, just looked up at me expressionlessly as the blue flames murmured in the background. Everything about her seemed so hollow now.

“Eleanor, I—”

“Don’t.”

I felt her tense under my hand, but she still didn’t pull away.

“I know, okay?” she said. “Whatever you’re going to say, I already know. There’s nothing you could...”

Her words trailed off. She tugged weakly at her wrist and I let her slide through my fingers. My eyes fell to the amber necklace around her neck, capturing the glow of the streetlights.

“I’ve heard every empty platitude and I’ve looked at it a thousand different ways, blaming myself, blaming him, blaming God...and in the end, you know what I figured out?”

Eleanor smiled brokenly and shook her head.

“It means nothing,” she said. “I could spend the rest of my afterlife crying about the unbelievable unfairness of it all, but everything I do, or say, or *feel*, is meaningless. Because on the other side, life is still happening. No matter how loud I scream, no one there will ever hear me. No one will even know that I’m screaming.”

The wind died down, a cool stillness falling over the road. A raindrop caught on Eleanor’s eyelash and she frowned, looking up at a gray cloud above us as more drops landed on her face. The cloud only covered the two of us, the flames a few feet behind us still burning.

Eleanor reached up and touched her cheek in disbelief, then turned to me and shook her head quickly, her expression anguished. I blinked and realized that the salt I tasted wasn’t just from the blood.

“Don’t cry for me,” she said, reaching out and cuffing tears off my face with her gloved fingers. “I hate it when people cry for me. I don’t deserve it.”

I said nothing and she scrubbed more frantically at my cheeks. “Sebastian, cut it out,” she said, smiling tiredly and scrubbing a little too hard at my face. “You’re getting both of us all wet.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, hating the way she was looking at me but unable to look away because her eyes opened me up like a closet and tore all the clothes inside to shreds. “And I’m sorry that I don’t have anything better to say than ‘I’m sorry.’ I just... god, Eleanor. I just wish you didn’t hurt all the time.”

Eleanor smiled weakly and took the cloth from my hand, gently wiping blood from my chin.

“Everyone hurts all the time,” she said. “I’m not special because of that. But thank you, Sebastian.”

She tucked the cloth back into my hand and tilted her face towards the sky, eyes sliding closed as raindrops traced the shape of her face.

“No one has cried for me in a very long time,” she said. “I didn’t know if anyone ever would again.”

Then Eleanor smiled like clouds parting for the sun, and that singular second was the most beautiful moment of my entire life.

I wondered if anything could ever be that beautiful again, if the rain would turn the pavement to a sheet of black diamonds in exactly that way, if the winds in any city would ever echo the gentleness of her hands on my face again. I wondered how I could possibly feel so complete by something as simple as the cool kiss of rain on my cheek.

Then Eleanor opened her eyes, and the moment was gone. She bent down and grabbed Wolf’s briefcase, tossing it over her shoulder.

“You ready, Choi?”

I sniffed and scrubbed my eyes with my sleeve.

“Yeah, I just... yeah, okay. Sorry.”

“I told you not to say that.”

“You also told me not to cry.”

“That’s right, you disobedient little shit.”

I laughed. The rain started letting up, if only slightly.



### 17. Be Quick, They Are Waking up

“You know, it’s illegal to read these,” Kenny said, carefully perusing the files from Wolf’s stolen briefcase for names he recognized. “Ooh, I know this guy!”

Eleanor re-crossed her feet on the table.

“If we turn these in to Violet, she’ll have to log them into evidence and we won’t see them for three months. Believe me, we’re doing her a favor.”

Kenny nodded, seeming content with violating Wolf’s privacy. When we’d returned from Brigid’s house, Kenny had already cleaned up the shards in front of the television and was halfway through a large pineapple pizza, acting as if nothing had happened. I wasn’t convinced that he wouldn’t spontaneously combust into tears and snot again, so I found myself looking across the table at him every few minutes for any warning signs.

Since the coordinates theory was off the table, Eleanor and I were perusing waterlogged bibles from Kenny’s closet, just in case the colons after the 17 and 24 were meant to point us to bible verses. It made sense, since Ben was painfully religious, but there was also the small problem of the bible having 25 books with at least 17 chapters, which meant there were 25 thirty-second verses potentially containing clues and no way to tell which one was the right one. We also didn’t know if the numbers were supposed to be “17:32” and “24:00” or “24:32” and “17:00,” so I looked in all the 17<sup>th</sup> chapters while Eleanor looked in the 24<sup>th</sup> chapters.

“Wolf was carrying around a huge chunk of your file, El,” Kenny said, adding another paper to the “Eleanor” stack. “Seriously, he only has one page of Tier 2 questions for most people, but he has seventeen pages for you.”

Eleanor shuddered. “I told you he was after me.”

Kenny squinted at the next paper he pulled out, then slid it across the table towards me.

“Here’s Ben’s,” he said. “If you want it, I mean.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking the paper.

The top section was typed, a red five-pointed star stamped in the top right corner.

Name: Benjamin Byung-joon Choi

Date of Death: October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Time of Death: 5:23PM

Place of Death: Boston, Massachusetts

Cause of Death: Internal Hemorrhage

To my surprise, the section below the header was a series of typed questions and handwritten responses, and even though the ink had run I could tell it was Ben’s warped cursive.

The first few questions were impressively mundane and I suspected they’d been stolen from the American Express Online Banking password-reset page: “Mother’s maiden name?” “Favorite teacher in high school?”

Others were so oddly specific that I wondered why they’d even bothered asking:

“How do you take your coffee?” *Black, no sugar, so strong that it looks like melted asphalt.*

“Favorite Zoo Animal.” *What constitutes a “zoo” animal? Isn’t that all animals? Zebras, I guess?*

Then others were so intensely personal that it almost felt wrong to read them.

“Worst day of your life, excluding the day you died.” *There isn’t one single day that stands out. No one close to me has ever died in a freak accident or gotten cancer. My life was pretty vanilla until I died. But there were some days, more like moments, when I lay in bed trying to*

*sleep and suddenly felt so, so alone. It didn't make sense because my roommate was ten feet away, but I felt like I could scream and no one would hear me, no one would care. Those moments were the worst.*

I read the paragraph over again, still not quite believing that Ben had written it. Five simple sentences later and suddenly I felt like I didn't know my brother at all. I told Ben everything, but he had never once told me that he felt so alone and it hurt to find out so indirectly. I wondered what other parts of himself he'd been hiding. I turned the page over and scowled when it was blank.

"This is all of it?" I said, not realizing how demanding I'd sounded until Kenny flinched away.

"No," Eleanor said, not looking up from her bible. "Entrance surveys are two-hundred pages long. Light Keepers carry around randomized excerpts for screening."

I slapped the paper back on the table a little harder than I meant to, making Eleanor and Kenny look up questioningly.

"Sorry," I said, grabbing my bible again. Eleanor rolled her eyes and turned back to her notes, but I could feel Kenny staring at me while I pretended to read Leviticus.

"Can I?" he said, reaching for Ben's file.

"Knock yourself out."

Kenny carefully picked up the paper and set it in front of him.

"Incline your heart unto the Lord God of Israel," Eleanor quoted, slamming the bible shut and shoving it across the table. "Choi, none of these verses sound even remotely like a clue."

"I know," I said, dropping my forehead onto Chapter 12 of Deuteronomy.

"I need a break," Eleanor said, standing up and stretching her arms over her head. "It's been

a few hours, so I'm assuming I need to feed you now too? It's like I took in a stray cat."

"A few hours?" I said, glancing out the window and only seeing gray clouds and rain. "What time is it, anyway?"

Eleanor scowled and pointed to a clock on the wall opposite me.

"Did you stop using analog clocks in the twenty-first century, or are you just lazy?"

"I didn't see it!" I said, peering over Eleanor's head at the clock face just as the big hand clicked into place at the 25-minute mark. 6:25PM.

I stood up sharply, bumping the table back and ignoring Eleanor's swearing, my eyes fixed on the clock.

"Is it that difficult for you to tell time?" Eleanor said, face flushed red as she picked up the papers I'd knocked off the table.

"It's time," I whispered.

"Yes, clocks tell you the time, idiot."

"No, the numbers!" I said, snapping my gaze away from the clock and looking down at Eleanor. "They're not bible verses, they're time stamps."

"Seventeen-o-clock?" Eleanor said, raising an eyebrow.

"Military time," I said, sitting down and scrambling for my notebook, flipping to a clean sheet of paper. "So our choices are 12:23AM and 5:00PM, or 12:00AM and 5:23PM."

"The second one," Kenny said.

I looked down at him and raised an eyebrow.

He passed me Ben's file again, finger tapping the "Time of Death." 5:23PM.

"Kenny," I said, gripping the paper. "I love you. Seriously, I could marry you right now."

Kenny grinned, looking so pleased that for a moment I thought he might take me up on the

offer, then crushed me in a hug that made me sputter as he squeezed all the air from my lungs. I glanced over Kenny's shoulder at Eleanor, who sat back in her chair and crossed her arms, smirking while I slowly suffocated. I pounded weakly on Kenny's back with my fist and he finally released me, scooting his chair a few inches closer to mine and still looking immensely pleased with himself.

"So what does this mean?" Eleanor said. "We have two times, so what do we do with them?"

I glanced at Kenny for help, but he just shrugged.

"I'm... not sure yet." My gaze dropped to the floor. Kenny rubbed my shoulder in what was probably meant to be a supportive gesture but felt more like he was buffering off the top layer of my skin through my t-shirt.

"Let's get some brain food!" he said.

"Nothing he could eat here is healthy enough to help him think," Eleanor said. "But yeah, I could use a break."

Eleanor started to stand up, but Kenny shot out of his seat, bumping the table back.

"I'll go!" he said, practically shouting, his hand raised like a little kid waiting to be called on in class. Strangely, he wasn't smiling at all, his eyes wide and bouncing between me and Eleanor. "To get the food, I mean."

Eleanor squinted and crossed her arms. "You stay here. I need to talk to Violet while I'm out anyway."

Kenny shook his head violently, backing up and scooping his shoes off the floor, jamming them onto his feet.

"Nonononono, you two were out working this morning while I was in bed, so it's only fair that I go out. To get the food."

Eleanor pursed her lips but said nothing while Kenny's too-long fingers struggled to quickly tie his laces, ending up with his left pinky laced into his sneaker. He gave up and yanked it out, bouncing to his feet with one shoe still untied.

"Okay bye!" he said, grabbing his jacket in his rush for the door.

"Kenny—"

The door slammed.

Eleanor sighed, stomping across the kitchen and swiping a black leather wallet from the counter. She yanked open the door just as Kenny was jogging back to the apartment, freezing when the door swung open.

"You forgot this," Eleanor said, tossing the wallet at him. He caught it with both hands and smiled sheepishly, then waved and took off jogging. Eleanor sighed and shut the door.

"You want coffee or something? He probably won't be back for a while."

"You know where he's going?"

Eleanor rolled her eyes.

"I have a few ideas."

"And you're not stopping him?"

Eleanor took out a pack of sticky notes, yanking the cap off a pen with her teeth.

"Nothing Kenny does could possibly be that dangerous."

That night, when I felt myself dying, I saw Eleanor.

Everything looked like melting wax, but I knew it was Eleanor from the way she walked purposefully towards me, ponytail swinging behind her. She sat down beside me and said words I couldn't understand. She leaned closer and suddenly I could hardly keep my eyes open because

everything felt heavy, like my bones were being pulled toward the center of the earth. She whispered something in my ear and the words vanished as soon as I'd heard them, but somehow I knew that they were immensely important. Then the world folded in half, dark filled my lungs, and I was pulled underground again.

Eleanor jabbed a fork into her pad thai, stirring it but never raising the fork to her mouth. We sat on the windowsill of her bedroom, looking out at the streetlights slowly flickering off and the dim stars switching on one-by-one.

"I've never seen you eat," I said.

"I don't have to eat, but I can. It's not satisfying the way it is for you."

"Why not?" I said, spooning more noodles into my mouth.

"Because this isn't my body. Pasta and MSG feed your body, not your soul. It's like tasting without swallowing."

"I disagree. This pad thai is definitely feeding my soul."

Eleanor smirked, stirring her food but still not eating it. "You wouldn't know the difference."

"I guess not," I said, kicking my feet that dangled over the ledge. "Hey, Eleanor?"

She looked up from her untouched food. I wanted to ask her about my dreams, but wasn't sure how to broach the subject when I wasn't having a panic attack.

"Do you... um... Brigid said you played the piano?"

Eleanor dropped her fork, barely catching it before it fell down to the sidewalk. I'd thought this would be a safer topic, but apparently I'd been wrong.

"That was a long time ago," she said, slamming the cover on her takeout box and setting it down beside her.

“Oh.” I stirred my noodles, dragging my fork back and forth across the box. “Why did you stop?”

“I wasn’t good enough.”

I frowned, thinking back to Eleanor’s music wafting through the hallway in Brigid’s house, the way the high notes glistened overhead like stars and the low notes hummed in my bones.

“That’s not true. I heard you.”

Eleanor looked over at me slowly, her face solemn but unsurprised.

“Have you ever played an instrument, Choi?”

I shook my head.

“When you play it for long enough,” she said, “when you stop worrying as much about missing the notes, the music starts using you to say all sorts of things that you didn’t even know you were thinking. It turns into this violently intimate hobby, like carving out your heart and laying it on the table.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

Eleanor sighed.

“Sometimes you don’t want to hear what your heart has to say.”

I nodded and stared down at my takeout box, suddenly not hungry anymore.

“Eleanor... These dreams I keep having... they show how I’m going to die?”

Eleanor frowned.

“I told you already, I don’t know how it works for you.”

I swung my feet back and forth, watching them graze the morning sky.

“I saw you,” I said, before I could change my mind.

Eleanor paused, fingers clenching around her fork. “When you were dying?”



“Yeah.”

For a moment, her eyes seemed far away. Then she shook her head and drummed her fingers on the ledge.

“It means I’m going to die here, doesn’t it?”

Eleanor sighed and crossed her arms.

“I can’t go back to the other side,” she said, “so, hypothetically, if you see me when you’re dying, it means you’re still on the Shadow Side, yes. But that’s not going to happen.”

“How do you know that?”

She tipped the rest of her water bottle into her mouth.

“Because I won’t let you die.”

I laughed, but Eleanor set her water down and didn’t look at me.

“I’m responsible for you,” she said. “You’re not going to die on my watch, Choi.”

I leaned my head back against the window.

“I wish promises worked like that,” I said. “I guess it doesn’t matter. It’s not like I can do anything about it.”

“You’re remarkably calm about this.”

I shrugged, staring into my dinner that I didn’t feel like eating anymore.

“If you gave me the choice between going home alive right now, or getting to see Ben and dying...” I shook my head before I could finish the thought, feeling Eleanor’s eyes on me.

“That’s not what he’d want me to say, but I don’t care. I’m selfish, I guess. All I know is that without him, the other side is darker than this one. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I know that I want to see him more than I’ve ever wanted anything. You can’t ignore feelings like that.”

I stuffed my fork in my mouth, trying to stem the flow of words with food. It was dangerous to start thinking too much about Ben.

“You know,” Eleanor said, “you’re the only person in the entire Shadow World who actually cares about something enough to fight for it.”

I turned to Eleanor, but she was busy staring at the skyline.

“I don’t believe that,” I said.

Eleanor shook her head. “The things that the dead want are things that we can never have, and all of us know it. There’s nothing left for us to work for, just superficial pleasures. None of it makes us feel anything genuine. We can only mourn everything we used to have. That’s all that we can ever feel.”

“I don’t believe that you’re the apathetic robot you make yourself out to be,” I said, finding it easier to tease now that the focus had shifted away from Ben.

“I wish you’d stop trying to understand me,” she said, crushing her water bottle when her hand tensed.

“I think I understand you better than most people.”

“Oh?” The threat was clear in her voice.

“I mean, uh, yesterday...”

She looked at me expectantly, one eyebrow raised and her jaw tensed. I realized that saying “I saw you die” would be a bit callous.

“You kissed me,” I said, regretting the words before I’d even finished saying them. “That, uh, counts for something, right? That’s one up on Kenny, right?”

I frantically stabbed my pad thai and shoved a too-large bite into my mouth before I dug myself an even deeper proverbial hole. I stared at my food as if it was the most fascinating thing

in the world, unable to look up at Eleanor.

“I bit a hole in your tongue,” she said slowly, as if she didn’t really understand what I was saying. “If you really think that kind of kiss constitutes emotional intimacy, I’m worried. What kind of girls have you been kissing?”

I choked loudly on a mouthful of noodles, reaching for a napkin to cough it back up.

“I’d be lying,” I said, wiping at my lips, “if I said that was the worst kiss I’d ever had.”

Eleanor looked at me incredulously for a moment. Then she collapsed back against the ledge, laughing uncontrollably.

“You literally watched someone get strangled to death in the middle of kissing me and it wasn’t the worst kiss you’ve ever had?” she said, her eyes watering from laughing so much.

My face felt warm with something that wasn’t embarrassment. I leaned back comfortably against the ledge while Eleanor laughed, and for a moment the universe seemed a fraction less terrible than it had been a minute ago. The air smelled like Thai spices, the night sky was clean and quiet, and Eleanor was smiling again.

Her laughter died down and she wiped the last of the tears from her face.

“I needed that,” she said, picking up her water again. We made eye contact moments before she put the bottle to her mouth, and the ghost of the smile she’d had before vanished.

“Stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” I said, mentally ironing out my facial features.

“So…” Eleanor paused, clenching and unclenching her fist. “So *fondly*. It’s gross.”

“It’s not you,” I said, frowning. “I was just happy for a minute, okay? This pad thai is really good.”

“Dammit, Choi, I can tell when you’re lying!” she said, suddenly casting her water to the

floor. She didn't look furious like I'd expected her to. She seemed distressed.

"Whatever you're thinking, about me, or kissing me, or anything along those lines, stop it," she said, her voice softer and her eyes downcast. "I did what I had to do to get us away from Wolf."

Then she turned away, her words as soft as velvet. "I didn't want to do it."

The words stung for a moment, then I sighed and set down my food.

"You know, I can tell when *you* lie too."

Eleanor looked up sharply.

"It's really easy to tell. You forget to insult me."

She shook her head.

"Sebastian, I—"

"*Guys!*"

Kenny flew in through the doorway, a flurry of sticky notes like a swarm of bees chasing after him. "Guysguysguys, we have to *go!*"

Eleanor had already hopped to her feet, drawing her gun.

"They're here," Kenny said, tossing me my jacket. "They've found us."

"Who?" I said, scrambling for my left shoe and sliding on a stray sock

"May. The other Lost Souls. They know that Eleanor lives here."

"Shit." Eleanor was already pulling on her gloves. "Where are they?"

"Ground floor, working their way up. I jammed the elevator, so we've got three minutes, tops."

Eleanor pursed her lips and looked around.

"Kenny, can you take them down from the fire escape while Sebastian and I take the aerial

route?"

"Got it!" he said, running off towards the kitchen.

"Aerial route?" I said, letting Eleanor drag me away.

I peered over the edge of the rooftop and whimpered without meaning to, realizing that I probably should have told Eleanor I was scared of heights. From 27 stories up, the city below us looked like a dollhouse. The people who shuffled around were reduced to confetti dots moving around the cotton-ball snowbanks and the streets were the width of Band-Aids. I swallowed, already sweating profusely, and glanced at Eleanor.

"And where did you intend to go from here?"

Eleanor smirked, grinning so diabolically that there was no way she was unaware of my complete and utter terror. She grabbed my right hand and pulled me to my feet, locking my palm securely in her icy grip.

"It would be unwise to let go of my hand," she said. Then she took off running towards the edge.

"Eleanor!" But she was dragging me along beside her. "Eleanor, I can't—" but it was too late because we had reached the edge.

Every nerve in my body screamed like I'd been pierced with a million needles. My heart must have stopped entirely. My breath caught in my throat. My stomach clenched in on itself with the anticipation of the fall. My feet scrambled for purchase but I kicked feebly at the air instead. The street was an empty yawn of space below us that only seemed to grow wider, ready to swallow us completely.

We were still moving upward with the momentum of the jump, the world below shifting

under our feet. It was just like what I learned in physics about an object that goes up against the pull of gravity – there is one moment when it's suspended motionless in the air before it plummets back down. We had reached that point, entirely motionless thousands of feet in the air, nothing but sky on all sides of us.

Then the world rushed back up at us like an incoming truck on the freeway. The wind ripped my hair away from my face and suddenly all of my air was gone, my stomach and lungs and heart caught in my throat, ready to evacuate. I squeezed Eleanor's hand hard enough to break bones and closed my eyes.

"Bend your knees!" Eleanor screamed through the rush of air around us. I was in no position to analyze the order. My mind had been reduced to nothing but the sensation of falling and the knowledge that I was going to die. Without thinking of the implications, I bent my knees.

My eyes shot open the moment my feet crashed into solid ground, sending a jolt up through my bones. I stumbled forward into Eleanor, crushing her into the ground. I looked frantically around the rooftop where we'd landed, then spun around and looked at the roof we'd just jumped from, far behind us.

"Jesus," Eleanor said. "Let go of my hand, would you?"

I realized I still held her hand in a death grip and immediately dropped it. She inspected her palm and I saw that her pinky and ring fingers were bent unnaturally to the left.

"I'm so sorry!" I said, slapping my hands over my mouth in horror. "Oh my god, I didn't realize I was squeezing that hard, I just—"

"Relax."

I paused my panicking and looked down at Eleanor, who seemed surprisingly tranquil for someone who'd just had her fingers crushed. She used her other hand to jam her fingers into the

right positions with two sickening crunches, then flexed her fingers experimentally and proudly offered me her hand. I took it hesitantly and traced up and down her fingers that were now aligned flawlessly, unmarred by bruising or marks.

“I’m not that delicate,” she said. “But I didn’t know you were that strong, either. That could have come in handy when the Lost were chasing us. Or does your super strength only reveal itself when you’re about to pee your pants?”

Heat rushed up to my face. I shifted and realized with a heart-stopping jolt that my body was still pressed against Eleanor’s, her sharp hip bones pressing into my thighs. The wind had torn her hair loose from the elastic and it was spread like the night sky around her head.

“I thought I was gonna die,” I said, feeling the need to say *something* instead of just staring at her, star struck.

“Stop saying that,” she said, frowning and punching me lightly in the jaw. “I told you I won’t let that happen.”

I hadn’t been prepared for the punch, so I bit down on my tongue when her fist jolted my jaw to the side. I hissed and tasted blood.

“Shit,” she said, eyes going wide. She reached up and gently touched my jaw, her thumb grazing over my lip.

The softness of her touch felt like electricity. I reached down and cupped her cheek, mirroring her gesture.

“Sebastian,” she whispered, eyes even wider. I felt the word under my finger as her lips moved.

It might have been the adrenaline or the feeling that I could die at any moment, but something stronger than gravity pulled me forward, closing the distance between our lips.

Ice cold fingers stopped my lips before they could reach her face.

“Sebastian,” she whispered, holding me suspended an inch away, wearing an agonized expression. “You know what will happen.”

“I don’t care,” I whispered into her fingers.

Eleanor shook her head. Then the world spun around and she was on top of me, light as new snow, her forehead pressed against mine.

“There is no happy ending for us, Sebastian,” she said, the cool air blowing across my face like the caress of silk. “You know that, so why bother?”

Her hair fell over my eyes. I reached up and tucked it behind her ear.

“There’s no happy ending for *anyone*,” I said. “All of us end up here eventually.”

Eleanor closed her eyes, whispering something that I couldn’t make out, then leaned forward and pressed a kiss to my forehead. My skin tingled with the ghost of cold where her lips had been. She moved down my face, her lips like moth wings brushing over my eyelashes, my cheeks, my neck. I closed my eyes and tried to think of nothing but her cool and gentle touch.

She moved down to my chest, kissing the skin above my heart through my jacket, then rested her small palm over the same spot and pulled my hand on top of it until both of us felt how frantically my heart was beating. She took my other hand and placed it over her heart, but all I felt was smooth, damp leather.

“This is all I can give you,” she said, her grip tightening on my wrist. “There isn’t much of me left.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to take anything from you.”

“Then what do you want?”

*To see you smile, I thought. To go back in time and save you from thirty years of hell. To put*



*flowers on your grave and remember the way your eyes held the entire universe inside them, even when no one else remembers.*

I traced the outline of her jaw, my thumb brushing across her lips.

“Come here,” I said, gently pulling her closer. She eyed me warily, then leaned down and pressed her cheek to my chest. I let my arm fall across the small of her back, and when the cold from her skin made me shiver, I pulled her closer.

“This is what I want,” I whispered, my lips brushing the top of her head.

“To be cold?” she said, fingers worrying at the zipper on my jacket.

“No. Just this moment. For just a little bit longer. Please.”

I couldn't see her face, but I felt her arms tighten slightly around me.

“Okay,” she whispered.

I brushed my thumb back and forth along her back wondering what would happen if neither of us said we had to go, if we'd stay exactly like this for what was left of forever.

## 18. Saturn Devouring His Son

“I’m disappointed.”

Violet stood facing the windows, arms crossed. Thick raindrops battered the glass like a barrage of marbles.

“I thought I’d made the gravity of this assignment clear to you, Eleanor.”

Eleanor reclined on Violet’s couch with her feet kicked up on the armrest, watching the toy trains race each other around the carpet. I stood stiffly next to her, not sure where to sit when she was taking up the entire couch.

“I’m working on Sebastian’s schedule,” she said. “We can only cover so much ground in a day before he gets cranky and needs a nap.”

“Not *that*,” Violet said, turning around. “You erased a Light Keeper and told a Lost Soul confidential information. Now I not only have a lifetime’s worth of paperwork to fill out, but the Lost have been trying to sneak into the building all day.”

Eleanor sighed and clapped a hand over her eyes.

“Like I said in the report, he was going to—”

“I don’t care what the circumstances were!” Violet said. “You know we have a trial process for erasing public officials, but you decided to be spiteful. More importantly, you’ve put all of us in danger by telling May, of all people, what we’re after.”

“You think I would have done either of those things if I’d had a choice?” Eleanor said, sitting up so fast that she nearly crushed a toy train under her boot when she slammed her feet into the floor.

Violet shook her head and sat back at her desk, pulling out another file and slamming it down.

“I should have listened to you,” she said, uncapping a pen.

Eleanor blinked, anger drained from her face.

“What?”

“I should never have given you this assignment.”

Eleanor pressed her lips together into a thin line.

“You’re too volatile to handle someone with a heartbeat,” Violet said, pen moving smoothly across her paperwork. “Kenny would have been a more appropriate choice.”

Eleanor stood up, kicking a chair out of the way and slamming her hands down on Violet’s desk. Papers fluttered to the floor. Violet paused in her writing, looking slowly up at Eleanor.

“It’s been a long time since you’ve worked in the field, Violet. The Lost are a lot smarter than they used to be.”

“And you’re supposed to be smarter than all of them combined. That means keeping your temper in control and following protocol.”

“At least I still *have* a temper!” Eleanor said, slamming a fist onto the wood so hard that a crack appeared in the glossy surface. “At least I haven’t lost that part of my life yet. What does that say about you, Violet? When’s the last time anyone screened *you* to see how much of you is left?”

For a moment, Violet’s expression didn’t change. Then she set her pen down as carefully as one might handle a ticking bomb and stood up, eyes still fixed on the floor and shadowed behind her dark hair. I imagined her slamming Eleanor’s head into the desk until all the bones in her skull shattered. Maybe she’d make it quick and quiet, snapping Eleanor’s neck with a simple twist to one side. If she was angry enough not to mind the mess, she could gouge Eleanor’s eyes out with her ballpoint pen.

“It’s my fault,” I said.

Violet and Eleanor turned to me like they’d forgotten I was there. My face felt warm and I dropped my gaze to the floor, fingers tugging at the hem of my jacket.

“I’m the one putting everyone else in danger,” I said. “Eleanor was just trying to keep me safe.”

The silence stretched out for an uncomfortably long amount of time. When I finally dared to look up, Violet was staring at me with an eyebrow raised in disbelief and Eleanor was looking at me like I’d just set myself on fire.

“How chivalrous,” Violet said, expression easily shifting back to nonchalance. “It’s sweet that you think you can protect one of my Bloodhounds, but she doesn’t need it. As if you could stop me from snapping her neck, or crushing you and your brother like ants.”

I clenched my jaw, nearly biting my tongue off, then stormed forward and slammed my hands down on Violet’s desk.

“You keep saying how important this assignment is,” I said. “You should care less about the collateral damage than the fact that we’re getting closer every damn day. We’d be getting even closer right now if you weren’t so busy scolding us just to prove that you can.”

“Sebastian,” Eleanor said quietly, “shut up.”

“No!” I said, anger bubbling up inside of me and spilling like hot lava past my lips. I swept all of Violet’s papers off her desk, overturning the glass paperweights. “I didn’t come this far just so some coward sitting behind a desk could threaten the only people that matter to me! Out of all the monsters I’ve seen in this place, *you’re* the only one who doesn’t have a soul!”

“Choi, *stop it*,” Eleanor said, her voice harsher than I’d ever heard it before. Her words snapped me out of the trance, anger draining out of me when I looked back at Violet’s carefully

vacant face. She pushed her chair back and crossed the space between us, the temperature plummeting as she stood in front of me.

She leaned forward, her lips brushing my ear.

“You think that I don’t have a soul?”

She raised a hand to my chin, sending a full-body shiver through my bones. I tried to back away, but her other hand closed around my arm.

“You don’t understand *anything*.”

Then she grabbed my face, nails piercing my skin, and crashed her lips against mine.

Summer.

Redbrick suburbs and orderly rose bushes. Carolina blue sky scrubbed clean of clouds. Sprinklers waving lazy jets of water back and forth over lawns.

Violet sat in steel-blue Oldsmobile, applying red lipstick in the rearview mirror. She turned the keys and eased out of the perfectly-paved driveway.

Bump.

She frowned, eyes flickering to the mirror and not seeing any obstacles behind her. Then her gaze slid down to the unoccupied car seat in the back.

She paused, staring at the reflection of the car seat as if it she had no idea what it was. She blinked slowly, then sagged against the seat, staring dully out the tinted glass windshield at the plastic tricycles in the driveway. Birds chirped and bounced happily on the telephone lines beyond the garage. A neighbor across the fence had started mowing his lawn, filling the warm air with the smell of grass. But there was one sound that didn’t match, like a mosquito droning in her ear, bothersome but indistinct.

Violet shut the car off, and without the gentle purr of the engine, she suddenly recognized the sound.

Screaming.

A neighbor across the street was wailing, dropping her groceries on her perfectly-polished granite walkway and rushing over, organic tomatoes rolling across the lawn. Violet got out of the car and gently closed the door as the neighbor rushed over.

“Violet, what have you done?” The sound grated against her ears because you weren’t supposed to scream like that in suburbs like these.

Violet said nothing, frozen beside the car door.

“Violet, you have to call 911! It’s Penny! Oh my god...”

Violet shook her head.

“No, Penny’s inside. I made sure before I got in the car. She’s in the living room sleeping with that stuffed rabbit her grandma got for her. She loves that thing, won’t even let me wash it. She’s napping and Paul is going to feed her when she wakes up, if I’m still at the store. We’re out of blueberry yogurt, you see, and that’s the only kind she likes. That’s why I have to go while she’s asleep, or else...”

Violet paused, something wet tickling her toes through her sandals.

Blood.

Flowing in a clean line from the back tires down the slope of the driveway, pooling around her feet. The neighbor was staring at her, hands trembling and face sickly white.

Violet stepped closer, leaving sticky red footprints in her driveway that someone would have to wash later. She came around the back of the car.

She shook her head, slowly at first, then violently, taking a step back and tripping over the

dip where the pavement met the grass. Her skin matched the creamy off-white of the sidewalk.

“No, no, no...” She crawled backward in the grass. “Penny’s inside. She’s *inside!*”

The screen door creaked open and a man in pinstripe pajama pants stumbled onto the porch, rubbing his eyes.

“V? Is everything okay?”

Violet clawed through the grass until she managed to stand up, throwing herself at the man who cried out in surprise when he caught her, kneeling down on the porch.

“Where’s Penny?” she screamed, grabbing fistfuls of his flannel pajama shirt.

“What do you... oh my god, Violet!”

The man pushed her aside, leaping down the porch steps and kneeling in the driveway. The blood soaked into the knees of his pants. The stain would probably never wash out.

“Violet, what did you do?” he screamed, so loud that the birds on the telephone wire fluttered away.

“I didn’t!” She pressed her hands over her ears and rocked back and forth. “I didn’t... she wasn’t...”

More neighbors were opening their doors to see why there was so much noise in such a nice neighborhood. Children peered through the windows across the street before someone covered their eyes and yanked the curtains shut.

The sky started to collapse, great chunks of blue raining down and crushing the sloped roofs. The sidewalk squares fell away, leaving yawning chasms of nothing in their place.

Violet leaped off the porch and ran, the world disappearing behind her. Nothing existed but the winding sidewalk ahead of her. She ran along it until her makeup dripped down her face and she lost one of her sandals in the hungry dark behind her.

The world opened up again at a beach. Shadows stretched over sand dunes. A powder blue sky gave way to the first shades of sunset gold along the coast. Clouds hung like dreams and silver water trapped the sunlight.

Violet slowed down when she reached the sand, kicking off her right shoe and moving towards the water. The tide was pulling away from her, the whole world drawing back into its shell. She waded through the shallow water just before the sand bar, sitting down on the wet rocks while the gentle back-and-forth of the tide washed over her feet and pulled away again and again.

“Penny...”

She pressed her face to her knees, grabbed fistfuls of her hair, and screamed.

The ocean swallowed the sound, carrying it somewhere far away. The world started rotating faster and faster around her until she was in the center of the hurricane, everything a violent mess of broken colors. She got to her feet, as if to run away from it all, but she slipped on the slick rocks and folded into the sand, head colliding with one of the boulders.

Her shoulders went slack, her bones relaxing into the wet sand. And there was the tide again, rushing back out, filling her mouth and eyes with water. Back and forth back and forth back and forth...

A door handle clicked.

I twisted in Violet’s grip, catching a glimpse of Eleanor’s ponytail as she stormed out of the room, door slamming behind her. I pulled away from Violet and this time she let me go, her hands disappearing so suddenly that I fell to the carpet. She looked down at me for a long moment in that same way that Eleanor sometimes looked out the window, eyes wide open but



not really seeing anything at all. Then her eyes slid closed.

“Just go.”

She turned back to her desk and knelt down, gathering the papers I’d shoved to the floor. I swallowed, tasting the waxy perfume of her lipstick.

“I said *go*.”

Her shaking hands ripped one of the papers in half. She dropped both pieces and let her hands fall limply to the floor.

I wiped my mouth on the back of my arm, then got to my knees and crawled in front of her, gathering the last of the papers and offering them to her. She looked at the stack, then slowly up at me, her eyes like tarnished silver and impossibly old.

She grabbed the papers before I realized my hands were empty, then stood up and dropped rigidly into her chair. Her hands hovered over her desk for a moment, then picked up a gray handkerchief and wiped the rest of her lipstick off, folding up the cloth and tucking it into a drawer. Her lips were pale and small without makeup.

“I hope that answers your question,” she said. She picked up a pen and pulled the stack closer, pretending to read the first page. “I would explain what just happened, but I’m sure my death isn’t the first one you’ve seen since coming here.”

My mouth fell open. “I...how...”

“Don’t misunderstand me, Sebastian,” Violet said. She squinted at me, then pulled another handkerchief from her desk and tossed it at me. “You missed a spot.”

I caught the cloth, wiping my lips again and seeing more of the waxy red color on the fabric. I stared at the smeared color, starting to feel less like a disoriented time traveler and more like a discarded toy. I wiped my lips again, imagining scrubbing them with sandpaper until I could

only taste blood. Violet was beautiful and breathtaking and her lips felt like moonbeams but all of it was wrong.

I'd kissed a grand total of three people in my life, so I wasn't exactly an expert, but I was fairly sure that kissing wasn't supposed to make you feel dirty and small, that you weren't supposed to wipe the taste of the other person's lips away afterwards. My first kiss was noisy and sticky with strawberry lip gloss but felt like skydiving over open field because I was 15 and nervous and first kisses were always that way, no matter who you kissed. Then there was Eleanor, who took the gold medal for Successful Emasculation by bringing me to tears and was therefore memorable in a very different way. But Violet made me feel uncomfortably hollow, self-conscious and years younger. Standing in the middle of Violet's office, her hands caging me in and fingers forcing my jaw open as Eleanor stood behind me, I felt like I'd been ripped open.

"What exactly am I supposed to understand?" I said, unable to look at her anymore.

"I mean, don't see this as more than it is."

I flinched, locking my jaw and feeling thoroughly used as Violet went back to her work with the same polished indifference, meticulously penning perfect letters the same way she scrutinized the clean edges of her lipstick in the rearview mirror. I wanted to shred all of her paperwork, rake my nails into the glossy surface of her expensive desk, leave dirty handprints on her white walls.

But then I remembered Violet standing in her driveway wearing the same sterile expression when The Worst Case Scenario came true and the world broke into puzzle pieces that wouldn't fit together. I remembered her stumbling through sand dunes and dying alone. I sighed, relaxing my fists.

"Did you ever consider, I don't know... *talking to me?*"

Violet looked up, one corner of her lips quirked up in amusement.

“Did *you* ever consider talking to *me*?”

I said nothing. She smirked and turned back to her papers.

“Now, for the last time, get out of my office.”

When I shut Violet’s door behind me, I didn’t see Eleanor anywhere. I walked around the corner and found her sitting on a windowsill, arms crossed, staring out at the snow. I walked closer, keeping a careful distance in case she was feeling feral.

“Eleanor?”

Her shoulders jerked at the sound, which was odd, because Eleanor should have heard me coming. She hopped off the ledge and breezed past me, gesturing lazily for me to follow. She stopped in front of the elevator, punching the “down” button and tapping her foot impatiently, facing away from me.

“I didn’t know she was going to do that,” I said.

“What?”

“Violet. It happened so fast, otherwise I would have stopped her.”

Eleanor finally turned around and tilted her head to one side, looking at me like I was speaking another language.

“I don’t know why you’re explaining that to me,” she said. “I don’t care.”

I blinked, absorbing the blankness of Eleanor’s features. She was normally pale, but now her skin seemed almost translucent. The dark circles under her eyes almost looked like bruises. Her lips were bloodless, matching the color of her face.

“You don’t care?” I said, the words falling from my numb lips.

“Why would I care?” she said.

She looked at me expectantly, but I didn’t know what to say. Then the elevator arrived and she strode inside, thumbing the button and sagging against the wall.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “Idiot,” she added as an afterthought.

“You don’t look fine,” I said, taking a step closer. Eleanor looked at me warily but didn’t move. “Can dead people get sick?” I said, raising a hand to her forehead.

“No,” she said, shoving my hand away. She swallowed, then moved around me and pressed the button for the 21<sup>st</sup> floor, two floors below us and only halfway to the lobby where we needed to go.

“Eleanor?”

She said nothing. The elevator doors opened and she stormed out. I jogged after her.

“Eleanor, what—”

She jerked the handle of a door, finding it locked, then moved to the next door, stumbling into a janitor’s closet when the door swung in too easily. She punched the light switch, bent over the large gray trash can against the wall, and vomited.

I froze in the doorway.

“Eleanor, do you need—”

She spit and stood up straight, wiped her mouth, then hit the lights again and pushed past me, calling the elevator.

“Are you—”

“Stop asking that,” she said, turning to glare at me. Her eyes were bloodshot. The elevator came and we stepped inside, moving to opposite walls. I studied Eleanor’s face but she wouldn’t

look at me.

“Can I do anything?” I said, trying to sound so gentle that even Eleanor would be hard-pressed to snap at me.

She exhaled, shoulders sinking slightly. She shook her head.

“Can you tell me why?” I said.

She pressed a palm to her eye, then sighed and wiped her mouth again, scraping off some of the chapped skin around her mouth.

“Digestion is a function of the living,” she said, staring at the ceiling, head tipped back against the wall. “If you lose enough light energy, you start to lose those functions. Now drop it.”

I closed my mouth obediently.

“I’m dropping you off at Kenny’s apartment to think about the clue, then I’m going out.”

“...Alright.”

I thought she would have been better off at Kenny’s apartment, but I knew better than to say anything. Eleanor had always looked dead, but she’d never looked like the embodiment of death itself, her face so bloodless and exhausted that she looked like an extra in a zombie apocalypse movie. The chain of her necklace had caught on the collar of her jacket, pulling the petrified spider to the side. The lobby lights glowed across the amber and for a moment I swore the spider’s legs twitched. Then Eleanor’s hand yanked the chain away and tucked it into her shirt.

“Stop it.”

I quickly looked away, pretending not to notice how much slower than usual Eleanor was walking and wondering how anyone in the world could meet someone like Eleanor and then forget it.

## 19. Chained Prisoner

I woke up when my face hit the floorboards. Sweat had soaked through my shirt and the sheets lay in a tangled mess at the foot of the bed. I pushed myself up on arms that felt like origami paper, trying to wipe my forehead but doing little more than smearing the sweat around my face. I looked over at the window, but no one was there.

I went to the kitchen for a glass of water and found Eleanor on Kenny's couch, surrounded by purple sticky notes. She stared up at the ceiling, not reacting at all when I came in or when I grabbed a cup from the cabinet. I glanced at the clock on the wall and groaned internally.

"I think I should have you knock me out with a blunt object every night instead of trying to sleep," I said.

Eleanor didn't move and I started to wonder if she was somehow sleeping with her eyes open.

"El—"

"That's a dumb idea," she said, her voice flat. "I might shatter your skull by accident."

I took a sip of water and crossed the room, sitting down on the arm of the couch. All of the sticky notes around her were blank.

"Are you—"

"Go to bed, Choi," she said, still refusing to look at me.

"You know I can't sleep."

"That's not my problem. I just don't want you here right now."

She looked up at me impassively, her facial muscles slack, as devoid of emotion as a corpse lying on a coroner's table. I set the glass down on the coffee table.

"Did I do something?"

Eleanor groaned and tossed her arm over her eyes.

“Stop making this personal, Choi. The living are so self-centered.”

“Eleanor.” I pulled her arm back and glared down at her. “What’s going on?”

She yanked her arm away and rolled onto her side, sticky notes fluttering to the floor.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re insufferable?” she said. “What do you want me to do, read you a bedtime story? Just go back to sleep so we can find your obnoxious brother. Then I’ll never have to deal with you again.”

I froze, trying to digest her words. Eleanor was bitter, but she’d never been cruel. I sat on the floor so she was forced to look at me.

“Why are you acting like this?”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m nothing to you.”

“Because it’s true.”

The words felt like a bucket of cold water dumped over me. Whatever response I’d been preparing wilted and died before it left my lips. She sat up, vaulting over the back of the couch and grabbing her jacket off the floor. She slid into her boots and started heading towards the fire escape.

I grabbed her wrist.

“You’re trying to hurt me,” I said. “Tell me why.”

She yanked her wrist away, her eyes seething. Then her hands were against my shoulders and I was flying back, crashing into the back of the couch so hard that all my breath evacuated my lungs. I fell to my hands and panted as Eleanor’s black boots crossed into my line of vision.

“You don’t get to make demands,” she said. “You think that just because I felt like touching

you yesterday, suddenly I belong to you?”

“No, I—”

She ripped my shirt down the middle, her nails carving lines into my chest. I gasped as she bent down and latched onto my neck, teeth pulling at the flesh around my throat.

“Is this what you wanted?” she said, ripping her jacket off and casting it to the floor. She yanked at her neckline so hard that the fabric tore, exposing a white expanse of collarbone. Deep violet marks painted the base of her throat like an amethyst necklace.

“Is this what you wanted?” she said. “For me to take my clothes off? *Are you happy now?*”

I shook my head, unable to look away from the bruises. She grabbed my throat and pressed down. I could still breathe, but the threat was there.

“Are you happy now?” she said again. Her entire body shook against mine. “Are you scared?” she whispered, pressing down just a little harder into my throat.

I swallowed, feeling her fingers rise with the swell of my neck.

“Yes,” I said.

Then her hands vanished. She pulled back and turned away. The space where she’d been moments ago felt far too cold.

“Go to bed, Sebastian,” she said, her words gentle and broken.

I sat up, rubbing the tender skin at my throat.

“No.”

She sighed, shoulders hunching over.

“What will it take for you—”

“Nothing,” I said. “I’ll go lie in bed if that’s really what you want, but you can’t scare me away. I wouldn’t have come here if I was scared of fighting for people that matter.”



She looked slowly over her shoulder, moonlight glowing against her bloodless complexion.

“How dare you,” she said, but the words weren’t angry, just soft and paper-thin. “How dare you come here thirty years too late and try to change everything.”

She shook her head, hugging her knees to her chest.

“Everything in this world is dark,” she said. “I don’t even remember what light looks like anymore. Everyone here is just a shadow of who they used to be. But then you appear one day, and you’re idiotic and arrogant, but you’re the first person I’ve seen in thirty years who still has dreams, who still wants something enough to die for it.”

Eleanor blinked, and when she opened her eyes, a tear traced the sharp line of her cheek, white with moonlight.

“I’d never felt rain until you came here.”

She wiped a sleeve clumsily across her face, the most uncoordinated movement I’d ever seen her do.

“And how dare you,” she said, “how dare you come here and make me feel things that I thought had died with me. Don’t you understand that when this is all over, you get to go home alive while I stay here alone in the dark?”

I swallowed down a wave of guilt. Of course I’d known that we’d never have a future, but around Eleanor it was so easy to forget about things like time and death and tomorrow. I’d never thought about how much worse it would feel for Eleanor.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and it wasn’t enough, could never be enough, couldn’t fix anything at all, but there was nothing else I could say.

Eleanor sighed, reaching out and gently lifting my chin. She didn’t speak, but the look in her eyes was tragic and I felt like no one in the world had ever looked at me that way, like they could

see straight through me.

“Go to sleep, Sebastian,” she said. “In the morning, we’ll figure out the clue, find your brother, and send both of you home.”

I nodded and stood up numbly, stumbling back to bed. The word “home” didn’t make me feel safe the way it once did.

## 20. Hush

I was floating in that faraway numbness right before you fall asleep, when you can still hear the floorboards creaking in the cold and blurred words through the walls but you can't move, aren't really there. I heard the window sliding open, but I couldn't attach meaning to the sound. My fingers and toes started dissolving in the dark and the sounds moved farther away as my mind dipped into the waters of sleep. Then a cold hand clamped over my mouth.

I tensed, eyes shooting open to the blind dark, screaming into the hand that only pressed down harder. Knees sunk into the bed on either side of my hips.

"Shhh!" a voice whispered. "Sebastian, it's me."

I blinked until my eyes adjusted, finally focusing on Kenny's face in the dark. I let my shoulders relax and raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"I'll let you go if you promise not to make any noise. Eleanor's working in the other room." He looked over his shoulder at the door, gnawing his lip. His whole body quivered against mine and sweat dripped down the sides of his face. I nodded slowly.

He pulled his hand back, lip trembling like he was about to cry. I had a thousand questions, but I'd promised not to talk, so I waited.

"I made a mistake," he whispered, "and now they're after me."

"Who?"

Kenny shook his head, rubbing his forearms like he was cold.

"Come with me," he said, nodding to the open window.

"But El—"

"Please," Kenny said, his voice cracking.

I closed my eyes and exhaled, sparing a second to estimate how many of my bones Eleanor

would break when she realized I'd snuck out, but this was for Kenny. I nodded, sitting up and rubbing my eyes. Kenny watched me patiently, still looking like a soufflé that would collapse in on itself if I breathed too hard. He sat on the ledge of the open window and swung his feet over the side, stepping soundlessly onto the fire escape. I copied his actions, but before I could step onto the fire escape in my bare feet, he held out a hand to stop me, turning around and gesturing for me to climb on his back.

I glanced down at the pavement eight stories below us and grimaced, slinging my arm over his shoulder and holding on tight.

He climbed fluidly up the side of the building by the window ledges, like I weighed nothing at all. His feet barely made a sound as he stepped on each ledge, his fingers not so much as whispering with the friction of skin against metal.

"Climb up," he said when we reached the roof. I hesitantly grabbed at the ledge, hauling myself up and onto a paved roof damp with powdered snow. I kicked the snow away in one section and sat down, watching Kenny swing over the edge.

Under the roof lights, Kenny looked terrible.

Ashes left gray and black streaks across his face, his eyes red and watering from the dust. Part of his jacket had been singed off and his pants were torn open at the knees.

"What happened?"

Kenny fell gracelessly into the snow, head in his hands.

"I can't tell Eleanor," he said. "She'd kill me. I'm already dead, but she'd kill me all over again. She'd find a way."

"Why would she do that?"

"Sebastian, I can't be a Bloodhound anymore," Kenny said, tears smearing the ash into even

more of a watercolor mess on his cheeks. “They’re going to chain me up in the tower until I turn to dust!”

“Kenny, what did you do?”

“I went backwards!” he said, flinching away and covering his head like he expected me to beat him.

I blinked. “Backwards?”

He uncurled slightly, opening one eye.

“I got on The Shadow Express,” he said, hugging his knees. “I went back to your side.”

“How did you—”

“The coal car!” he said, flinching away again. “I snuck into the coal car. I just had to see him, Sebastian. I tried looking for another TV, but Eleanor already told everyone not to let me see. I just kept thinking about him lying in a hospital bed, scared and sick and all by himself. I couldn’t think about anything else!”

Kenny was practically shouting now, shuddering like he’d been dunked in ice water.

“But he couldn’t see me,” Kenny said, curling in on himself again. “No one could. I should have expected it. All I could do was watch him sleep. I couldn’t even touch him.”

“Kenny...”

“And I almost made it back,” he said, voice rising again, “but the conductor saw me getting out of the coal car. So I... I didn’t know what else to do, Sebastian!”

“Kenny, what did you—”

“I erased him!” Kenny screamed, hugging his knees and sobbing in earnest. “I panicked, okay? It was a mistake. I never meant to hurt anyone.”

My mouth fell open, feeling the gravity of Kenny’s words but not really processing any of it.

Kenny stared at me fervently, as if begging me to understand.

“Did anyone see you erase him?” I said.

“I don’t know,” Kenny said, lying back in the snow and covering his face with his hands.

“But someone will notice that he’s gone because there won’t be a conductor, and there are only so many people with matches.”

I sighed, kicking at the snow.

“Kenny, I think you should tell Eleanor. She’ll help you.”

Kenny shook his head violently, backing away from me.

“No, no, no, you don’t understand,” he said. “She’d tear off all my limbs just for being so stupid. That’s fine, I probably deserve it. But she wouldn’t help me. She’d turn me over to Violet.”

“I don’t think—”

“Sebastian,” Kenny said, “remember when I told you that Eleanor doesn’t consider anyone her friend? She’ll buy you food and laugh at your jokes, sure, but when it comes to things that matter, like putting her own job on the line, she doesn’t owe me anything. She made that clear from the start.”

“Kenny, she cares about you.”

“No!” Kenny said, suddenly glaring at me, his trembling fingers clenching into fists. “You don’t understand, Sebastian. Everything changes when you die. Nothing matters anymore, except for whatever mess you left behind. We’re not trapped here to make friends. We’re here because we can’t stop dreaming of the people we could have been, because we’re so damn angry that this is where we ended up instead.”

I reached out for his shoulder.

“Kenny, I—”

“No!” he said, slapping my hand away. “You don’t get it, Sebastian. We’re not like you. We’re not complex creatures with career goals and hobbies and thoughtful opinions on current events. We’re animals. The only thing that matters to me is Will, and the only thing that matters to Eleanor is whoever murdered her. She wouldn’t sacrifice anything for me, or you, or anyone else but him. Do you understand?”

I grit my teeth and turned away, glaring at the clock tower in the distance and mentally scrolling through 1,000 different impulses. I could slap Kenny and shout *of course I understand, you know damn well that I understand how it feels to only exist for someone else*. I could tell him how I knew Eleanor cared about more than just her past because I’d seen her eyes when she felt rain for the first time and felt her teeth locking angrily into my neck and her lips pressing powdered-snow kisses to my forehead and those weren’t things you could do if your heart was a vacuum. Or I could have jumped off the roof and ended the insanity once and for all because part of me believed Kenny and didn’t want to hear that everything I thought about Eleanor was a lie.

“I just came to say goodbye,” Kenny said, his voice gentler now, even though his body was still angled away from me. “I have to hide out. Best case scenario, I meet Will in a few months and we board the Exit Train together. Worst case scenario, they find me and Violet locks me in the tower. Either way, you’ll probably be gone by then.”

“You don’t have to leave,” I said, reaching out and grabbing his sleeve. I only knew a few people in the Shadow City, and Kenny was the only one that I didn’t think would shoot me on impulse.

He smiled sadly and gently lifted my wrist away, turning my hand palm-side-up and placing something on top, curling my fingers around it. I opened my fist and looked down at a small blue

matchbox.

“I’m a sniper,” Kenny said. “I like tall places where I can look down at the entire city. If you’re ever in trouble, try lighting one of those and holding it up.” He fastened the top button of his peacoat so his collar covered his mouth, then slipped on his black leather gloves, standing up.

“The weather here might be terrible,” he said, “but there are some advantages to darkness.”

Then he took off running, heading straight for the edge of the rooftop. I held my breath instinctively as he jumped, but I didn’t have to look down to know that he would land on another rooftop somewhere and keep running, maybe forever.

Just when I’d started contemplating how I was going to get back down, Eleanor swung over the ledge, landing lightly in the snow on the rooftop. I sputtered and stood up quickly, nearly slipping back down on the damp roof tiles.

“Come on,” Eleanor said, turning back to the ledge, her expression unreadable.

“Eleanor,” I said, “I was just—”

“I know,” she said, looking over her shoulder. “Did you really think I wouldn’t notice you and Kenny climbing out the window?”

“Were you listening?”

She shook her head. “I waited until I saw him leave. I figured it must have been important if he had to kidnap you. Now come on. I want to make sure you don’t slip off the side of the building on your way down.”

I nodded and hurried to the ledge, my fingers starting to feel numb with cold. Eleanor swung her feet over the ledge and waited for me to follow.

“Sebastian,” she said, pausing before she stepped down, “he’s okay, right?”

I fought back the urge to laugh. “Are any of you ever really okay? Isn’t dead the opposite of



okay?”

Eleanor shook her head, watching her feet dangle above the faraway street.

“Some things are worse than dying, Sebastian.”

## 21. The Sacrifice of Pan

“Gin me.”

Dry gin splashed into my glass, courtesy of Eleanor. I tipped half of it into my mouth while Eleanor took an impressively-long swig straight from the bottle.

We sat in the familiar attic above the Mountain Pine, Eleanor lying on her stomach on the bare mattress while I sat on the floor surrounded by 87-and-a-half pages of aborted ideas ripped from my notebook and crumpled into balls.

Eleanor sighed and blew a lock of hair out of her eyes.

“Any luck?”

I downed the rest of my gin.

“No. The only events at midnight I can think of are me boarding the Shadow Express and that one New Year’s when Ben and I found my dad’s rice wine and I threw up on the couch after the ball dropped.”

“Are you really that much of a lightweight? I’m cutting you off.”

“I was ten.”

Eleanor took another swig from the bottle. “Your face is already red.”

I leaned back, my head thumping against the wall.

“This is the hardest clue Ben’s ever left for me... and why aren’t you completely hammered yet?”

Eleanor finished the bottle, setting it on the floor. “The dead don’t metabolize alcohol that quickly without a working circulatory system.”

“Then why are you even drinking it?”

“Because drinking alone makes you an alcoholic.”

I let my head loll to the side. The gin wasn't helping me feel more creative or pulling me out of my self-deprecating mood the way Eleanor said it would. We'd spent almost two days churning out theories of how to interpret Ben's clue (practical ones at first, then when none of those worked, we jotted down any borderline-possible idea we could come up with, firmly drawing the line at anything that involved alien conspiracies) but nothing made sense and I could feel Ben slipping further and further away every second. It was growing increasingly hard to think of *anything* without getting sucked into a frustration spiral and beating my head against the table. Eleanor's solution was alcohol, but that only seemed to magnify my proverbial sea of misery with the added effect of turning my brain to mashed potatoes.

Eleanor sighed and flopped back on the bed, arms stretched out beside her.

"It just doesn't make sense," she said.

I raised an eyebrow, trying to make my face look skeptical but not sure if I was succeeding because all my facial muscles were responding too slowly and I was pretty sure my eyes had rolled a little before they settled on Eleanor.

"I'm drinking Tanqueray with a 30-years-dead girl who sets people on blue fire and turns them into butterflies," I said. "I've accepted that the world makes no fucking sense."

"No, I mean the times your brother left," Eleanor said, rolling onto her stomach and peering down at me over the edge of the bed. "Hardly anyone pays attention to the time here. There aren't rigid work schedules, no one has to wake up for school... it's just odd that he'd be so focused on meeting you somewhere at a specific time when half the people here don't even own a clock."

"Meeting at a specific time is theory number two," I said. "I thought we said that me remembering some event connected to midnight was our first theory."

“Yes, but, seeing as we can’t get back on the Shadow Express or steal your father’s rice wine, that’s seeming less and less likely by the minute. I can find a couch for you to puke on, but I don’t think that will help.”

I groaned and rubbed my eyes. “Where’s Kenny and his light-bulb moments when you need him?” I said, immediately tensing up when I realized what I’d said. Eleanor looked down at me, chin resting on her hands.

“Did he tell you where he went?”

I shook my head, the motion making my eyes roll around like marbles in my skull. I traced the rim of my empty glass with my finger. “He wouldn’t tell me anything. Jerk. Said I couldn’t tell you either.”

“Why not?” Eleanor tipped her head to the side.

“He said you...” I waved my hand in some sloppy gesture of how-do-I-speak-English and shook my head. “Something about you being angry because you only care about that guy and no one else.”

“That guy...” Eleanor echoed, frowning.

“Yeah, you know, that one.” I gestured vaguely towards her necklace. “That’s a pretty necklace, by the way. Even if the guy who gave it to you is a soggy lampshade. He said you wouldn’t call him your friend.”

“He... who said that?”

“Kenny. Kenny said it. Not the other one. Lampshade guy. Why do you still wear that? Cuz it’s pretty?”

Eleanor opened her mouth as if to say something, then closed it.

“I guess I shouldn’t talk, though. I still wear Ben’s stuff. And want to know a secret? I’ve

hardly washed any of it. Not like, underwear and stuff. I'm weird but not that weird. Just his sweatshirts and sometimes his shoes but they're too big and he laces them weird. I still want them to smell like him. The sweatshirts, not the shoes. His feet stink. Stank. Or stink, I guess, since he might still be alive. My parents hate it when I do that because I look so much like him now and when I come home wearing his clothes and smelling like him they act like his ghost just walked through the door or something. They hate it but I don't. I love it. I cut my hair like him too, or, I mean I don't cut it anymore because he had long hair too. Sometimes I look in the mirror and I smile and I pretend he's smiling at me. And then I'm crying at school so I shouldn't do that but it's weird because I always want to be this way. Like, all depressed and shit. I don't want to be happy again if he's not there. If I ever woke up in the morning and put on pants and ate cereal and he wasn't the first thing on my mind when I opened my eyes, I'd want to die. I'd just jump right out the window, because I'm supposed to suffer. I'm not allowed to be happy ever again for as long as I live because my brother is dead. And sometimes I think I should be dead too. Maybe I already am."

I cut off when Eleanor knelt in front of me, pressing a glass into my hand. I looked down and sloshed the clear liquid around the glass.

"Vodka?"

"Water."

"Ah."

I drained the glass and handed it back to Eleanor, feeling like I'd poured all of my words onto the floor and now there was nothing left inside me but darkness and gin.

"You sound like those people who live in shacks in the factory district with asbestos in the walls," Eleanor said.

I put an excessive amount of effort into raising my eyebrow, trying to look unimpressed.

“Shaming me out of my proverbial pool of tears doesn’t work. My parents already tried that.”

Eleanor shook her head and looked to the ceiling for help.

“When you die and the Shadow Express spits you out here,” she said, “you either get on the Exit Train and go forward, or you sit here until everyone in the world forgets you and a Bloodhound has to turn you to ash. I’m not telling you to be ashamed. All I’m saying is that the people I erase are always the ones who said things like ‘I’m supposed to suffer.’ If you don’t like where you are, get on a train and go somewhere else.”

I sagged back against the wall. Eleanor’s words had drained the heat from my face and stabilized the ground a bit and I didn’t like it at all.

“Why are *you* still here then?” I said, and as soon as the words floated up to my ears I knew I was being rude, but it was too late to do anything about it.

But Eleanor didn’t look mad. She didn’t look anything at all, and I started to suspect that there was an inverse relationship between how expressive her face was and how upset she was. Her fingers toyed with a loose thread where the knees of her pants were worn and unraveling.

“I feel like one of those white dandelions in the sidewalk cracks,” she said, her voice small, everything about her small as she hugged her knees to her chest as if she could fold herself up like a map. “Every day the wind blows more and more of me away until there’s just a stem left.”

She twisted the loose thread around her finger and snapped it off, casting it to the floor.

“It’s not that I want to be here,” she said, “I just can’t figure out how to leave, and I’m running out of time.”

I blinked in slow motion, then her words reached my brain and I lurched awake, sitting up straight against the wall.

“What do you mean you’re running out of time?”

Eleanor stayed curled up in a tiny ball, shaking her head.

“My memories are falling apart,” she said. “I close my eyes and picture my bedroom, and at first it seems like all of it’s still intact because the walls are still cream-colored and my clothes are still all over the floor. But then I try to look at my sister’s paintings on the wall, and they’re just empty frames. I try to look out the window by my desk and all I see outside is white, and I don’t remember what used to be there. People are forgetting me, so I’m running out of light energy.”

“*Nononono.*” I crawled closer, putting a hand on her knee. “Eleanor, you have to get on the Exit Train! We have to go—”

“Sebastian, I *can’t*,” she said, holding me back by my shoulders. “I don’t know which train to get on. I’m still tethered to your world.”

I groaned in drunken frustration and flopped down on her lap. She twitched in surprise, but quickly relaxed and laid her hand on my head. I pressed my face into her leg and held onto her knee, afraid she would float away like a balloon, just like everyone else.

“I’ll remember you,” I mumbled into her leg. “Doesn’t that count for something?”

Eleanor sighed.

“It’s not that you don’t help. You’re just not—”

“Enough,” I finished, the word stale on my lips. Because that was always what it came down to. Not smart enough to get a college scholarship. Not attractive enough to make girls see me as anything but a potential math tutor. Not American enough to sit with the white kids at school who said my lunch smelled like rotten fish. Not Korean enough to be friends with the international students who whispered about my bad accent. Not bad but not good enough, not

enough for my parents, not enough to save Ben or Eleanor or even myself.

Eleanor said nothing, her hand stiff where it rested above my ear. She didn't try to deny it, and that was what hurt most of all.

"I would never hurt you, even if it happened," she said after a moment, her hand resuming slow strokes across my bangs but still tense and cold. "That's why I made a blood oath. Before I could turn, I would go straight to Violet. So you don't have to worry."

"That's not what I'm worried about," I said, closing my eyes. "How long?"

She scoffed and gently flicked my forehead. "I don't have cancer, Choi. I don't know how long. We'll find your brother before then."

"Don't tell me that," I said, opening my eyes and glaring up at her. "Because if we can't figure this out and the Lost get to him first, I don't want—"

"They won't."

I frowned. Eleanor actually sounded angry.

"You can't—"

"They won't, because I'm not sending you back on the train alone, got it?"

Eleanor was looking at me in that oddly intense way again. I wanted to argue with her, tell her that you couldn't make things true just by saying them out loud and please don't make me hope because I can't lose him twice, losing him once almost killed me, you don't know what you're saying.

"Okay," I said. I turned so I was facing the wall. "You save my brother, and I'll get your memories back."

The lie tasted like gin on my lips.



When we got back to Kenny's apartment, it was dark and strangely quiet.

Maybe it was because Kenny wasn't there, but the silence made the room feel endless. I felt unsettled, because I knew silence always shattered eventually.

Eleanor flicked the light switch back and forth a few times, but the kitchen stayed dark save for the pale square of light from the window cast on the linoleum. She mumbled something I didn't catch and slammed the keys on the kitchen table next to a brown takeout bag.

"Shut the door," she said, already pawing through Kenny's drawers.

I realized I was still hovering in the doorway and quickly stepped inside. The door swung shut and the light from the hallway vanished.

"Kenny forgets to pay his bills," Eleanor said, tossing aside a package of gum balls and a handful of multicolored Q-tips. "Wouldn't be the first time."

I nodded and moved towards the window, feeling a bit like I was sleepwalking now that all the alcohol had drained out of my blood and left a vacuum inside of me. The snow looked especially bright on the rooftops. I glanced at Eleanor digging through the drawers, then pushed the window open.

I stuck my head out, elbows on the ledge. Snow caught on my eyelashes but the breeze cleared my thoughts. The hands on the clock tower jerked to 10:00, the face glowing moon-white. I looked out across the crooked skyline and high-rise buildings and wondered where Ben was and if he was cold. It had been three days since we'd gone to the forest and we weren't any closer to finding him.

I wished Kenny were with us because it was hard to feel hopeless when he was bouncing around the room and humming our theme song. I should have asked him for more ideas about Ben's clue before he left. I didn't want to force him to come out of hiding just because I wasn't

smart enough to figure it out myself, but I was starting to feel like Ben was a silk scarf blowing away in the wind and I was watching him dance higher and higher up into the sky.

I fished the matchbox out of my pants pocket, struck a match, and held the blue flame up into the night.

“Sebastian.”

I jumped. The match slipped from my fingers and sailed down to the ground, instantly extinguished by the wind. I spun around to face Eleanor, who was watching me with her arms crossed.

“What are you doing? It’s freezing.”

“I... nothing.”

I closed the window and locked it.

Eleanor dropped a fork on the table, handing me the Styrofoam box of takeout and pouring herself a glass of water.

“Eleanor?”

She looked up behind the rim of her glass.

“I think we need Kenny’s help.”

She blinked slowly, took a quick sip of water, then set her glass down.

“No, we don’t.”

“We don’t?”

“I can pay off his electric bill,” she said, leaning back in her chair. “It’s only fair, since I’m taking over his apartment.”

“I... no, that’s not what I mean.”

“Sebastian.” She leaned forward and the moonlight flared in her eyes. She was giving me

that look that made me feel like she was peeling my skin away and seeing me all the way down to my bones. “*I know what you mean.*” Then she leaned back again and crossed her arms. “But it’s fine,” she said, her voice airy again, “I know how to use a wrench too, you know. I can fix the leak in the bathroom. Eat your sandwich.”

I frowned. As far as I knew, there wasn’t a leak in the bathroom.

“Are you going to bludgeon me with a cheese grater again if I don’t?”

A light smile curled the corner of Eleanor’s mouth.

“I don’t even own a cheese grater,” she said. “It’s called a colander.”

The next bite of sandwich felt like a rock scraping down my throat. I consciously told my shoulders to relax and made sure my breathing was even and calm. If Eleanor didn’t want me to talk about Ben’s clue, it meant someone was listening. The air behind me felt colder as my mind flipped through 1001 nightmare-inducing images of what could possibly be hiding in the dark corners of the kitchen.

“Oh!”

She spoke so suddenly that I twitched, squeezing mayonnaise out of my sandwich and onto the table.

“I just remembered something,” she said. “I need sticky notes.”

Then she swiped her bag off the floor and slammed a pad of notes onto the table, biting the cap off a pen.

“It’s something from when I was ten,” she said. “You’re tall. Help me hang these up somewhere.”

She stuck a note to the table in front of me. I picked it up and squinted at her tiny handwriting.

## DON'T TURN AROUND

I swallowed, running my tongue over my painfully chapped lips. My shoulders had locked up again. I looked up at Eleanor, but she was still writing frantically.

“My mom and I used to play Monopoly on Saturdays in the living room,” she said, stamping another note to the table.

## SOMEONE'S HERE. HIDING IN BEDROOM.

I picked up the second note, willing my hand not to shake.

“Are you sure that’s what happened?” The words came out choked, like a frozen faucet that couldn’t spit out a steady stream of water.

“Yes. Sometimes she made green bean casserole, which I hated.”

She slapped another note next to the others.

## TOO MANY. GET TO DOOR AND RUN.

I stuck each note to one of my fingers.

“Where do you want me to put these?”

Eleanor chewed on her pen, eyes casting around the room.

“I think there’s some space above the door,” she said, glancing airily over her shoulder.

I nodded and turned towards the door, feeling less like a person and more like a puppeteer

manually lifting every limb by a thin string. Left foot forward. Right hand swings back. Right foot forward. Left hand swings back. As I moved farther from the light, I felt like I was walking into an inky black lagoon, blind to whatever creatures swam below the surface. I wanted to look back at Eleanor for some kind of reassurance but knew I couldn't. The delicate silence was back again, unfolding endlessly all around me. I raised one hand to stick a post-it above the doorframe, the other ready to reach out for the doorknob.

Then everything imploded.

A shot went off and the silence finally shattered, violently loud and ringing in my ears. I spun around, sticky notes fluttering from my fingertips. The darkness reduced everything to sounds and silhouettes. A figure flashed through the strip of light by the window, then wood splintered and glass shattered and something crunched wetly and blood splashed across the illuminated square on the floor.

“Go!” Eleanor shouted. My eyes finally found her in the subtle shades of dark, her hands behind the table, elbowing a Lost Soul that had latched onto her back. One of her hands covered her left eye, blood gushing through her fingers and painting that side of her face red.

An arm hooked around my neck, wrenching me back against a rigid chest and making white lights flash across my vision when the arm constricted into my throat. I raked my fingers down the forearm but it wouldn't budge. It was pressing too hard into my throat and I knew organs weren't meant to withstand that kind of force, that they couldn't keep working if they were squished and flattened like Play-Doh.

I could only watch as another Lost Soul tackled Eleanor on her blind side, holding down her left arm as May appeared from behind the couch and stood over her.

Eleanor shouted something I couldn't hear over the ringing in my ears, then tried to spit a

mouthful of blood at May's feet but only managed to dribble blood down her chin. May put her boot over Eleanor's cheek, forcing her head to the side.

Her visible eye watered and locked onto mine, her blood-slick lips screaming words I would never hear. Her shoulders heaved as she tried to break away from the hands holding her down, and even when May's boot ground harder into her cheek she wouldn't look away from me, wouldn't stop shouting. But church bells were ringing in my ears and *damn* my head hurt and I couldn't make out a single word.

After that I couldn't see anything anymore, could barely feel, wasn't even sure if I existed. The last sensation before everything ended was a single drop of water, cool as it rolled down the back of my neck.

## 22. The Captivity is as Barbarous as the Crime

A door slammed.

I tried to stand up before I even remembered where I was or who I was. The lights were too loud and the trellis wallpaper kept shifting patterns and colors and I knew something was *wrongwrongwrong* but I couldn't remember what because time was bleeding out of my nose and my head felt like a cracked egg.

My spine thumped against the wooden back of a chair. I tried to flex my fingers but I couldn't feel them, couldn't feel my hands at all, *oh god, were they even there anymore?* My head lolled against my shoulder and I caught a glimpse of my wet sneakers, ankles tied to the legs of the chair with thick rope. I arched my back again, feeling like a fish flopping helplessly on the dock, but the movement only lifted the back legs of the chair off the ground, threatening to dump me face-first onto the tiled floor.

"I told you you hit him too hard. If he throws up, *you're* cleaning it."

May.

The memories hit me like a head-on highway collision. *Eleanor. Where was Eleanor?*

I yanked at the ropes again, rocking the chair violently back and forth. Then my head throbbed, a dull ache radiating from the right side of my head. My muscles gave out and I slumped against the chair like a limp sack of flour.

May sat in a chair in front of me, chin resting on her palm as she watched my pathetic struggle with mild amusement. We sat in a dim office space with nauseatingly-patterned wallpaper and a painfully bright overhead light fixture. Another Lost Soul leaned against the only door, gun cocked and ready.

I tried to speak but started coughing so hard that I forgot what I was trying to say. May

watched me sputter, re-crossing her legs.

“Are you finished?” she said after a moment, still leaning back in her chair.

I glared at her, panting heavily. When I didn’t answer, she sighed and uncrossed her legs, setting her hands on her knees and leaning forward, close enough for me to see her shattered glass eyes.

“I don’t like to waste time, Sebastian,” she said, lips pouting in mock-sincerity. “I’m not like all those pencil-pushers in Headquarters who need a ten-page contract to wipe their asses. That’s why I’m going to skip the bit where I threaten your life, because we both know that if you valued your life above all else, you would have left a long time ago.”

She drew back sharply, then reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a small blue box.

“Do you know what this is?”

She held the box between two fingers, waving it in front of my face so quickly that for a moment my eyes couldn’t focus on it. I squinted through the sweat in my eyes and focused in on a blue match box. I nodded stiffly. May smiled and tucked it back in her pocket.

“I don’t know what those dogs told you, but they aren’t the only ones who can erase souls. Anyone who has one of these matches can do it. So here is what I’m going to do: I will kill you, and then I will erase you. You will not get a second chance living in the shadow world. You will die, and you will never wake up.”

I shuddered involuntarily, the sweat that burned my face suddenly turning cold.

“Or,” May said, leaning forward until she was a breath away from my face and the cracks in her eyes seemed to deepen, “you can tell us where your brother is.”

I spit in her face.

“*Fuck you.*” My voice was raspy, the words tearing at my throat. “You think I came all this



way just to hand over my brother? I can't wait to see Eleanor turn you to ashes and scrape you into a dustpan."

May laughed, tossing the match box in the air and catching it with one hand. And there was something about her voice, something in the way her laughter felt far too easy, like a buoy gently bobbing in the sea, that made a feverish chill shudder down my spine. It felt like there was something I didn't know.

"Sebastian," May said, leaning forward and tenderly brushing my bangs out of my eyes, "where do you think I got these matches from?"

My eyes flickered between the matchbox and May's eyes.

"Eleanor is here, actually," she said. "Would you like to see her?"

Before I could answer, May turned to the man behind her and told him to fetch Eleanor. I felt dizzy. My head started to hurt again and I thought for a moment that I was going to pass out. May sat back down and crossed her legs, watching me with a dangerously unperturbed smirk.

The man returned after a moment, holding a tarnished silver jar. He stood in front of me, popped the lid off, and poured a wave of ashes over my feet.

The pale gray powder coated my sneakers like a morbid snowfall, translucent clouds coiling upwards and stinging my eyes. Something hard clinked against the tiled floor, and when the dust settled, an amber necklace gleamed beneath a thin layer of ash.

I shook my head slowly, then frantically, unable to look away from the spider in the amber.

"What is this?" I said. The numbness in my hands had crawled all across my skin. I couldn't feel my lips forming words, couldn't even tell if my heart was beating because I was suspended on the precipice of a canyon, trapped in that terrible time-stopping moment right before falling.

May smiled and cocked her head to the side.

“It’s Eleanor.”

I shook my head harder, tugging at the ropes so violently that my shoulders locked up.

“I’ll admit it was easier than I expected,” May said, strolling through the ashes. She bent down and picked up the necklace, holding it up to the light.

“She could rip your head from your shoulders!” I said, lunging forward so hard that I almost knocked the chair over, the scream grating at my throat. “She’s a hundred times stronger and smarter than you’ll ever be! I don’t believe you!”

May watched me panting, a bemused smile curling her lips.

“Maybe she was,” she said, “but you’re not.”

Then suddenly she was next to me, pressing a gun to my forehead.

“All I had to do was put a gun to your pretty face, and she did everything we asked. Would you believe *that*, Sebastian?”

I let my eyes slide closed and choked on a sob because *yes, I could believe that*. Eleanor had always seemed invincible, but I knew that she should have been here by now, shouldn’t have let May take it this far, and the only way she would be this late was if she wasn’t coming at all.

Then something moved behind May. I glanced up at the small square window at the far end of the room. A figure shifted behind the off-white curtains. The silhouette of a hand pressed against the glass, then an eye lined up with the gap in the curtains, huge and dark gray. The window jolted quietly as the hand tried to pry it open. Kenny vanished a split second before May looked over her shoulder. She turned back to me, pressing the gun harder into my face.

“Hey, Amsterdam,” she said, still glaring at me as the man by the door turned to her. “Take care of the voyeur by the window, won’t you?”

He nodded and drew his gun.

“W-Wait,” I said, eyes flashing between May and the window. But the man with the gun kept walking and I started to truly panic.

Without Kenny’s help, I was going to die.

Eleanor had given everything for me, but if I died in that room, her sacrifice had meant nothing. For the first time since I came to the Shadow World, I was scared of dying. Not just because I knew from my dreams exactly how much it would hurt, but because I’d tried so damn hard. I’d chased my brother across dimensions and made maps of haunted forests and jumped across rooftops and all of those things counted for something. Maybe I hadn’t lived spectacularly, but I had *lived* and kept on living no matter how much the world took away from me. Even if every single day of my life had meant nothing to anyone else, it mattered to *me*.

The man raised his gun.

I opened my mouth and bit down hard into my tongue.

Everyone in the room spun around, their eyes blazing white suns. May tackled me, overturning the chair and slamming my back into the ground so hard that all the air left my lungs. I heard glass shattering, but then May was licking the blood that dripped down my chin, her teeth bared and lips crashing into mine.

And then May was drinking my soul and days were flying past me like scarves blown away in the wind. There was Ben on the edge of a pier, smearing sunscreen on my nose while I squirmed and kicked and knocked his Red Sox snapback into the water, then the white sun ate the sky and bleached the color from our faces and May inhaled the memory and I couldn’t remember what had just slipped away from me. I was lying in the grass in Namsan Park looking up at the sky. I was eating pork *bulgogi* with my parents. I was in my bed. I was in Ben’s bed. I was at Ben’s funeral. I was on the roof with Eleanor. The images sped up until they were only

colors moving too fast and too bright and no matter where my eyes reeled everything was blurred and I felt sick, felt weak, felt like I was dying, just like in all of my dreams.

Then all of it stopped, so suddenly that I felt like I'd been dropped from the sky and slammed into the ground. I gasped, back arching against the chair where I was still tied, the ceiling still swirling above me.

The world flipped and the chair righted itself, making me bite my tongue again and sag into the chair when all the blood drained from my face. Hands grabbed my shoulders and forced me to sit up.

“Are you okay?” Kenny said, hands running all over me, angling my face towards his, eyes huge and panicked. My gaze rolled down to May lying on the floor, blue flames slowly crawling down her arms and eating through her jacket. I looked down at the necklace on the floor and considered a thousand different words to articulate just how not-okay I was, but in the end, I said nothing.

Kenny put his gun away and pulled out a switchblade, sawing through the ropes around my wrists. When they fell away, I let my arms hang limp at my sides.

“Hey,” Kenny said, kneeling in front of me and taking my face in his hands. “Sebastian, talk to me. What did they do to you?”

“Finish untying me.”

Kenny watched me for a long moment, then bent down and cut the ropes at my ankles. I slid down to the floor, sending clouds of ashes into the air as I scooped up the necklace.

“Sebastian, you're freaking me out. Where's Eleanor?”

I gripped the necklace tighter.

“I have to get out of here,” I said, making the decision as I said it out loud. I got to my feet

unsteadily and headed for the door, but Kenny's hand around my wrist yanked me back.

"Where are you going? It's dangerous!"

*"I have to get out of here!"* I said again, pulling my wrist away so forcefully that I thought my hand might pop out of its socket.

"Okay, okay!" Kenny said, shifting his grip so that he held my forearm and not my wrist.

"I'll go with you, okay? Where do you want to go?"

I shook my head frantically. I needed to get away from Kenny, from all the people with black eyes and no heartbeat, from the Lost, from this whole nightmare city.

I wound back and punched Kenny in the face.

His hand fell away, touching his cheek and looking at me with so much concern that it made me sick, made me wish he'd punch me back because I deserved it.

Instead, I ran.

I flew through the building, throwing doors open until I found the exit and I slid to my hands in the snow, scrambling to stand up on the black ice and sprinting across the street. I'd never been to that part of the city and all the buildings looked the same at night but it didn't matter where I was anymore, only that I needed to be Nowhere.

I'd only been to Nowhere once before. It was a map I'd drawn a few months ago. I'd ripped out a clean sheet of blueprint paper, grabbed a dull pencil, and colored the entire sheet a solid gray.

I skidded through another patch of ice and this time my elbow collided with the curb, my face biting into a snowbank. All my momentum was gone, and even peeling my face out of the snow seemed to sap all of my energy. I rolled over and laid my head back against the snowbank, watching the streetlights turn on one-by-one. The night was quiet.

I fished Eleanor's necklace out of my pocket and held it up to the sky, watching the glowing face of the clock tower in the distance illuminate the petrified spider. I watched it swing back and forth and felt alarmingly calm now that the adrenaline had fizzled out and the night was just cold enough to numb my fingertips. I knew the shock wouldn't last and soon the starry ceiling would fold inward and crush me into the pavement so hard that I would consider never getting up again, but I tried to convince myself that maybe if I didn't move at all, time would forget about me and I could stay in the dark island of Nowhere until I died, and that would be fine. Everything was fine in Nowhere.

The necklace stilled and I exhaled a cloud of water vapor, lowering the amber to my chest and closing it in my fist. The black iron hands of the clock slowly locked into place at 11:45.

Something shifted in the window above the clock face. A bird trapped inside, or maybe a maintenance worker. I hadn't noticed the window before, but then again, I'd probably never seen the clock from this side of the city before. The minute hand ticked a degree closer to the 12, and then the realization hit me so hard that I clamped my hand over my chest, genuinely concerned that I was having a heart attack. I was on my feet and running before I remembered telling my legs to move.

At midnight, both of the clock hands would point straight at the window in the tower.

5:23 stood for "Ben" and "12:00" stood for "in the clock tower."

I had never run so fast in my entire life. Ben was so impossibly close, had been waiting just outside my window the whole time. And I knew that maybe I was too late and the Lost had chased him out already, but I also knew that it didn't matter because I'd spend the rest of my life chasing after him if I had to, reaching out for his shadow and watching him turn to water vapor between my fingers.

I reached the clock tower, circling the white marble base until I found the door. I grabbed the brass handle and pulled and pushed and threw my shoulder against the wood and screamed in frustration but of course it was locked.

I kicked a rock and whimpered when it felt like I broke all of my toes, falling back in the snow and grimacing up at the clean line of marble jutting up into the sky. As I fell, the strings around my neck shifted and scratched at my skin, metal clanking together inside my shirt.

I yanked out the keys, and I didn't remember which was which but it didn't matter because I was already jamming the first one into the lock above the doorknob. It sunk in smoothly, and with a sharp twist to the right, the lock clicked and the door creaked open.

I pushed through the doorway and stumbled into a stairwell, barely grabbing onto the railing before I slipped backwards down the stairs. The cool stone steps spun jaggedly upwards along the walls, converging at some distant point that I couldn't see through the dark. I brushed the glass shards from my pants, took a deep breath, and ran.

I thought that I'd run more in the last fifteen minutes than my entire life, but for the first time I couldn't feel my sneakers chafing against the back of my heels or the scorching pressure in my lungs because I was so, so close.

The end came so suddenly that I slid into the railing, earning myself one dizzying glimpse of the ground a million miles below. The staircase cut off at a thin white door.

This was it. The part where I found out if my impossible adventure was over or if I'd spend the rest of my life running.

I threw the door open.

Ben stood at the window wearing a white #34 Red Sox jersey —and how did he even get that because he definitely wasn't wearing that when he died but that was so like Ben— and it was too tight across his shoulders, just like most of his shirts, and his hair was exactly the same length, still curling just a little behind his ears, and he was barefoot because he always hated shoes and—

“Seb?” He blinked at me, feet still angled toward the window but upper body twisted towards me, mouth hanging open stupidly.

I closed my eyes tight, and when I opened them he was still standing there gaping at me. He turned all the way around and stepped hesitantly across the room and then there was that soapy smell, the same as Ben's pillow when I came home and curled up in his bed or stood in his closet and pressed my face to his clothes and breathed in. He stopped just in front of me, finally closing his mouth and reaching out a trembling hand, smoothing down my hair and tracing the cuts on my face. His fingers were warm, burning against my icy skin. He raised his other hand and cupped my cheek.

“Seb,” he whispered. Then his hands trembled against my cheeks and his eyes glazed over, tears streaking down his face. He wrapped his arms around me and I felt his heartbeat against mine, my face against his collarbone smelling his soap and sunscreen and hearing his ragged breaths rush in and out of his lungs.

“I'm so sorry, Seb. I never wanted you to come here. I wanted you to be safe.”

He pulled back and kissed my forehead. Something about the tenderness of the action snapped me out of my trance. I raised my hands to his back, feeling each one of his ribs, the bumps of his spine.

“I hate you,” I said, squeezing tighter.



“I know,” he said.

“I *buried* you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You left me all alone.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“I hate you so much,” I said, even as I hugged him so hard that my ribs ached and I could hardly breathe. “I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.”

“I love you,” he whispered, crushing me closer. “I love you so much, Seb.”

Then neither of us could talk anymore and a pipe in the ceiling was leaking over both of our heads and I had never loved anyone as much as I loved my brother in that moment. I tried to memorize the gentle pressure of his hands on my back, the shape of his fingers and the way his thumb stroked slowly back and forth across my jacket. My hands crushed him tighter against my chest as if I could anchor him to Earth. I was so afraid that he was just a trick of light that the shifting shadows would wipe away if I blinked, that I would open my eyes and there would be nothing but dust and moonlight between my fingers, that Ben would be dead and I would be alone.

Ben stopped crying before I did because he was the big brother, and even though we both knew he cried over animated dog movies all the time, one of us had to calm down first. I felt his even breaths in his chest, his hand patting down my hair. He tried to pull away but I only latched on tighter.

“Just a little bit longer,” I said, digging my nails into his shirt so hard it must have hurt.

“Please let me keep you a just little bit longer.”

“Seb...”

He put his hands on my shoulders and gently pushed back so I could see his face.

“Hey,” he said, smiling even though his eyes were red and there was snot running into his mouth. I was sure I looked even worse. “I’m not going anywhere, Seb.” Then he lifted a hand to my face and gently brushed away the tears under my eye. “Are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere?”

“M’okay.” I sniffed and finally released my grip on his shirt, glancing around for a tissue. Ben had turned the small room above the clock into a studio apartment, clothes spread out in a makeshift bed by the window. He picked up a shirt from the floor and offered it to me sheepishly.

“My clothes are pretty dirty anyway. A little snot won’t hurt.”

I wiped my eyes and then my nose until I felt reasonably human again, then tugged his sleeve, pulling him down onto the pile of clothes with me. He pulled my head into his lap and stroked my hair, leaning back against the wall.

“Do you want to know how I did it?” he said, thumb brushing over my eyelashes.

I smiled and rolled my eyes, shifting so I was looking up at him.

“You’ve been dying to brag about it, haven’t you?”

Ben nodded enthusiastically.

“Have you ever seen those old Dr. Frankenstein movies?”

“Don’t tell me you did that. That is such a cliché.”

He laughed and shook his head. “There wasn’t a lightning rod or anything. I just had to find a way to harness the light energy from the other side and channel it back into the heart. Kind of like a defibrillator.”

“So you defibrillated *yourself*?”

Ben's smile fell and he averted his eyes.

"Well, uh, there were a few cats who helped me with the first few runs..."

I blinked up at Ben.

"You're saying that the light energy from people remembering you is strong enough to literally raise the dead?"

He shook his head.

"No. I tried that with Ronald, my first cat, may he rest in peace. Though, I guess he was technically already dead and I just... double killed him? But yeah, you need exponentially more energy than that."

"What, like, a million people remembering you?"

Ben smiled, but suddenly his eyes glazed over and looked like he was about to cry again. He brushed my bangs out of my eyes. "That, or one person who really loves you."

I punched his knee. "You're full of shit. Poetic shit, but still shit."

"No, I'm completely serious," he said, shaking his head. "It's you. You're the reason. Seriously, I don't know what I did to earn a little brother who would literally take a train to another dimension just to bring me back home."

"I expect your undying gratitude, you know," I said. "The crown for 'Superior Choi Brother' is mine forever."

Ben smirked, purposely messing up my hair. I batted his hands away and sat up, combing my bangs down.

"Don't make me regret saving your ass. Hey—"

Ben grabbed the collar of my jacket, tugging it down to my shoulder.

"Ow! Ben, what the—"

“What’s that?”

“Huh?”

Ben tapped a tender spot just above my collarbone. “This bruise.”

“Oh. I might have been strangled a few times by some Lost Souls, but it’s fine. No damage done.”

Ben shook his head. “No, that’s what *these* bruises are.” He tapped another sore spot above my jugular. “I saw those already. This one has teeth marks.”

I blushed, brushing Ben’s hands away and zipping up my jacket.

“Oh, um, I was just, uh... I accidentally...”

Ben flopped back onto the bed of clothes, laughing hysterically into one of his college sweatshirts. “Are you gonna try to convince me that you gave yourself a hickey? Because that’s not how it works, Seb.”

“No, I just... ugh, fuck you, Ben. I just saved your ass and this is how you repay me.”

Ben snorted and sat up, putting visible effort into holding back his laughter.

“So, who is it? Girl? Guy?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, fingers tracing over the necklace in my pocket.

Ben raised an eyebrow. “Okay, sure, gender doesn’t matter. That’s cool too, but—”

“No, I mean it doesn’t matter because she’s gone now.”

“Gone how?” Ben said, frowning.

“The Lost erased her.”

Ben’s lips parted in surprise. He reached out and squeezed my arm. “Seb...” His lips trembled.

Then he threw his head back laughing.

“What the fuck, Ben? I’m—”

“Seb,” Ben said, grabbing my shoulders and smiling too damn bright when I’d just told him— “no they didn’t.”

“W...what?”

“Maybe they thought they did, sure. But it won’t be permanent.”

“How the hell do you know that?” I said, grabbing his forearms.

“Because you care about her,” he said, as if it was obvious. “Therefore, at least one living person is giving her light energy. You can only erase the Lost because they’re forgotten. I worked in the Light Energy Lab, so I’m positive that’s how it works.”

My fingers gripped Ben’s arms so hard that I was definitely hurting him, but his smile just got bright and brighter.

“Oh my god.”

I let go of Ben and shot to my feet, stumbling over to the window and shoving it open. My fingers fumbled for the matchbox in my pocket, almost dropping it once before I finally managed to strike a match and hold a blue flame outside.

“Seb?”

“Oh my god, Ben. So she’s okay?”

Ben came up behind me and put a hand on my shoulder.

“I’m sure she’s more than okay, if you’re that worried about her. I know you don’t let a lot of people in, so the ones who worm their way into your cold little heart are pretty damn special to you. Your love’s pretty potent.”

A twin flame appeared on the roof of a building a few blocks away. I blew the match out and closed the window, turning to Ben and hugging him again. He jumped in surprise, then wrapped

his hands around my back. We stood like that for a long time, until frantic footsteps echoed up the stairwell and I took a step back.

The door burst open.

Kenny stumbled in, face streaked with ashes and twisted with worry.

“Sebastian,” he exhaled, eyes dancing between me and Ben, forehead creasing in confusion.

Then a gloved hand shoved him out of the doorway and Eleanor stomped inside.

Her hair hung loose over her shoulders, the ends singed a few inches shorter. She was wearing a black rain coat that was far too big for her and her face had a powdery ash coating, her eyes rubbed red from embers. She winced and wiped her eyes with her sleeve, then looked back at me and Ben, eyes wet.

Then she smiled, and for the first time since I’d met her, it looked like she meant it.

“Congrats.”

## 23. Then and Now

“This is all of it?”

“Yep. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“Don’t joke, Ben.”

Violet sighed and massaged her forehead like it physically hurt to be in the same room as Ben. She flipped through the thick folder of research he’d dropped on her desk, frowning at the near-illegible handwriting and coffee stains.

“Eleanor?”

Eleanor nodded from her perch on the arm of the couch. “He’s telling the truth.”

Violet relaxed her shoulders, then closed the folder and handed it to Eleanor.

“Take care of this.”

Eleanor hesitated, eyeing the folder like it might bite her, then slowly took it from Violet and tucked it under her arm.

“And you swear you have no idea where Kenny went?” Violet said.

All three of us shook our heads quickly. Violet frowned but didn’t challenge us.

“I’ll find him eventually, you know.”

“You and me both,” Eleanor said.

Violet stood up and Ben flinched, still trembling from Violet’s thorough chewing-out five minutes prior. The second the three of us had entered her office, she’d slammed him against the wall and admonished him for nearly enabling a zombie apocalypse, endangering my life, interfering with her Bloodhounds’ other responsibilities, and, worst of all, thoroughly pissing her off. I’d never seen Ben’s face so pale before.

“Eleanor, you’ll show them the way out?” Violet said.

Eleanor nodded, tugging her gloves on. She'd managed to avoid eye contact with everyone from the moment we'd entered Violet's office, her sentences clipped and toneless.

"Well, gentlemen," Violet said, "I would say that it's been a pleasure, but I swore off vacuous social pleasantries fifty years ago. Get out of my office."

Ben shot to his feet and rushed for the door, stumbling over the train tracks.

"Oh, Eleanor?"

Eleanor looked up. She hadn't moved from where she stood next to Violet, staring blankly at the floor.

"You're fired."

Eleanor blinked slowly. Her mouth fell open like she was about to say something, lips shaping several aborted words before snapping closed into a firm line, her expression gray.

"Hand over your gun and matches. You are no longer a Bloodhound."

Eleanor's eyes fell closed, her hands shaking where she clutched the folder to her chest. When she opened her eyes, they were wet.

"Violet, why—"

"I hired you because I thought you were rational, impassive, and impenetrable. This assignment has shown me that you are none of those things."

I stood up, ignoring Ben's terrified eyes and Eleanor's agonizing silence. Something crunched under my foot and it might have been one of the toy trains, but I didn't care.

"How can you say that?" I said, rage kindling in my fingertips and rapidly boiling up to my face. "She's the only reason Ben and I are still alive right now!"

But Violet wouldn't look at me and I wanted to shatter her cool porcelain expression and perfectly-painted lips. It wasn't fair. Nothing about Eleanor's short life and long death had ever



been fair. Eleanor was a Bloodhound, not a girl in a yellow dress bleeding out on the kitchen floor. She was meant to protect people who stumbled into the Shadow World scared and bloody. She was supposed to be trigger-happy and fierce and stubborn and undefeatable. She was supposed to be a Bloodhound.

Violet didn't respond, and I took another step forward to start shredding paperwork or throwing glass paperweights or setting things on fire, but Eleanor held up a hand to stop me.

"Sebastian," she said softly, "don't."

Eleanor slid her gun out of her belt and gently set it down on Violet's desk, then fished out her matchbox from her jacket pocket and placed it down carefully beside the gun.

"Come on," she said, turning and walking stiffly towards the door.

I glared back at Violet as we left, but she was already tucking Eleanor's things into her desk and pulling out more paperwork.

As soon as the door shut, Eleanor froze, crushing the folder against her chest. Her body curled around the folder, chin pressed to her chest and shoulders shaking. I didn't realize she was crying until I saw the teardrops hit the carpet.

"No no no, don't do that," I said, grabbing her shoulders and bending down. I wiped some of her tears away with my sleeve and glanced at Ben for help, but he looked at me like I was dismantling a bomb. "Hey, Eleanor, it's gonna be okay," I said, words panicked and coming out mashed together. "Violet's terrible, but you've been through worse, right?"

"You idiot."

Eleanor looked up. I paused, my grip on her shoulders loosening because she was *smiling* even as more tears streaked down her cheeks. "She gave me the folder."

I blinked, gaze sliding down to the folder that Eleanor still clutched against her chest.

“She told me to ‘take care of it,’” Eleanor said, “not to burn it. I’m supposed to ‘show you the way out,’ not send you back. Violet knows exactly what she’s saying.”

“You mean that—”

“She fired me,” Eleanor said slowly, “so that I could go back with you.”

William Shepard died on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015.

I read his obituary in *The Boston Globe* twice, did a few mental calculations, then threw my fists in the air and cheered through a mouthful of corn flakes and milk.

Ben had just stumbled through the kitchen doorway, still in his (my) pajamas, all of his hair jutting out to the left side. He blinked at me groggily, then raised his arms and cheered, echoing my enthusiasm.

“Why are we happy?” he said, grabbing my spoon and stealing a bite of cereal.

“Will died!”

He blinked, milk dripping from his lips.

“And that’s a good thing?”

I huffed and snatched my spoon back, curling protectively over my cereal bowl.

“It’s *Kenny’s* Will. It has to be. The dates make sense and the picture looks just like him.”

Ben’s eyes brightened with understanding. He fist-pumped the air and cheered again, this time with enthusiasm. And also spit.

“Oh my god, Ben, I should have left you dead,” I said, wiping milk and soggy corn flakes off my face.

Ben only grinned and stood up to get his own bowl, pausing to hug me on his way to the cabinet. He pressed my face to his chest with disarming gentleness, kissed the top of my head,

then released me and started banging around in the cabinets. Moments like that happened every so often between us—I'd be yelling at Ben to *buy his own underwear, goddamnit, or feed the fucking cat because it was his idea in the first place* and I'd stop because instead of looking like a kicked puppy he was smiling at me fondly, then wrapping me up in a hug and telling me that he loved me *so damn much*. It was sweet at first, but I was slowly starting to suspect that he was just trying to distract me from how terrible of a roommate he was.

I'd signed a lease on a two-bedroom apartment near my school, since Ben couldn't stay in my dorm and couldn't exactly live at home again without giving my dad a literal heart attack. The business of being resurrected came with an alarming amount of paperwork. Suddenly, Ben was a nameless alien with no green card, no proof of a Harvard education, no license and no idea what to do about any of it. We were in the process of figuring out how to get him a new identity and he was having far too much fun coming up with new names and backstories for himself.

*"You and I escaped from North Korea on a life raft. Our names are Sam and Frodo."*

*"Don't you dare drag me into this."*

In the meantime, he'd charmed the manager of a Korean diner near the Theater District into forgetting about his lack of paperwork and letting him bus tables. In typical Ben fashion, he never acted like washing dishes was beneath someone who had literally reversed death.

I was in the process of transferring to a nearby school that, according to the U.S. News and World Report rankings, was so unknown that it basically didn't exist, but prestige didn't matter to me because they had a geography and cartography program. My career counselor had assured me that people did, in fact, get paid to do field work collecting geographic data and turning it into maps, so I decided to give it a try.

"You should tell Eleanor," Ben said, slamming a bowl of Froot Loops on the table and

pouring half a gallon of milk over it.

“I don’t want to bother her. She got up early to study and said not to talk to her before lunch unless I was literally on fire.”

Kenny waved his hand dismissively.

“This is good news, though. It’ll make her happy.”

I spooned some more soggy cereal into my mouth, then nodded.

“Yeah, okay.”

I tipped the rest of my bowl in my mouth and threw my spoon in the sink, tripping over Tam as he purred and nuzzled my leg, then grabbed the obituary and knocked on the door to the room Eleanor and I shared (even though Kenny seemed to think it was his room too and ended up spooning me in bed most nights). No one answered, so I opened the door.

Eleanor was sitting in the same place she’d been since 6:00AM, hunched over the desk by the window with one of my notebooks and Ben’s old biology textbooks. She’d been brushing up on anatomy so she could eventually train to be an EMT and drive an ambulance. We were hoping to somehow enroll her in one of the nearby colleges, but everyone we spoke to had told her it was too late in the semester and she’d have to wait until next Fall.

She didn’t look up when I came closer and I realized she’d taken my headphones again. She was fascinated with the concept of in-ear headphones and more often than not, I found her “borrowing” mine. One of my favorite things to do was show her *The Wonders of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, aka all the things that had been invented since she died. Her favorite things so far were YouTube, automatic-flushing toilets, and Hershey’s Cookies ‘n’ Cream bars.

I sat down on the bed. She glanced at me, held up a finger, finished the paragraph she was writing, then yanked out her headphones.

“Hi?”

“Hey.”

I smiled and held out the newspaper. She took it tentatively, scanned the page, then looked up at me in surprise.

“Is he—”

“Yeah.”

The newspaper fell to the floor and suddenly I had an armful of Eleanor, hugging me so hard that I almost fell back.

“We should go change the flowers on Kenny’s grave soon,” she said, pulling back. She was straddling me, fiddling with the strings on my (Ben’s) sweatshirt. I nodded and tucked her hair behind her ear just because I knew it made her blush. I loved watching all of her new expressions, how life had carved her face with emotions I’d never seen before, ones that she wouldn’t have been able to express before. I marveled at the way her lips parted when her eyes widened and the way she nervously pressed them back together, the way she blinked faster when she looked at me, eyes flickering to the sides and pink blooming in her cheeks.

Most of all, I loved her eyes.

I had never seen a more beautiful shade of brown than Eleanor’s eyes. They were autumn firewood crackling and warm black tea with honey. I could see green mountain ranges and endless fields of cotton, a lifetime of golden sunsets and bronzed canyons a million miles deep.

About a week after we’d all made it home alive, she’d thrown a little blue box with a red ribbon at my head, then sat in bed with her arms crossed and refused to look at me.

“What’s the occasion?” I said, holding it up to my ear and shaking it gently.

“It’s a thanks-for-resurrecting-me present,” Eleanor said. “Not that I owe you anything, so

don't you dare hold that over my head."

I smirked and untied the ribbon, taking the top off the box.

It was an amber necklace with a spider trapped inside. I stared at it for a moment, then looked at Eleanor sitting on the bed so tense and uncomfortable that she looked seconds away from imploding, and that's when I realized that the necklace she'd always worn since the day I met her was no longer around her neck.

"You're giving me jewelry?" I said.

She smacked my arm, but her shoulders relaxed slightly.

"It's just... I don't need it anymore, so do whatever you want with it. Sell it, throw it away, I don't care."

I closed my fingers around the necklace and tucked it into my pocket.

"Okay," I said.

"Okay?"

I lay my hand on her cheek, delicately, because sometimes I still didn't believe she was really here and I woke up in a panic, convinced I'd find a corpse next to me. But she didn't vanish under my touch and my fingertips brushed warm skin.

"Thank you," I said.

I leaned closer, our foreheads pressed together, still staring into her eyes.

Then she smirked and I saw the same fearless spark of light in her eyes that I'd seen the first time I met her in the Mountain Pine.

"Get on with it, Choi."

Then she grabbed the strings on my sweatshirt and yanked forward, crushing her lips against mine.

These days, when I kissed Eleanor, I didn't see anyone's death. I stayed right where I was, my arms wrapped tight around a girl who had the entire universe in her eyes, who learned to live in the darkness without letting it destroy her, who said "I love you" with takeout food and smiles like solar eclipses, who gave up everything for people who didn't deserve it.

But the second time I kissed Eleanor (which she liked to call our "Second First Kiss" because she was technically dead the first time), when Ben finally let me into his lab to see her after he'd successfully brought her back and checked her vitals, I saw my death for the last time.

I was staring up at a ceiling fan spinning in leisurely circles, my back sinking into a firm mattress and a quilt pulled up to my chest. Everything felt impossibly heavy, and even the effort it took to roll my eyes to the side exhausted me. Air barely grazed my lungs and made a raspy noise when I exhaled.

I felt pressure on my chest and looked to the side. A woman lay on the pillow beside mine, and even though her hair was the color of ashes and her smile lines were carved deeper into her skin, the brown eyes were the same. Her hand lay across my chest, her face by my shoulder.

"When you get there," she said, rubbing circles across my chest, "I don't want you to wait for me."

"I know," I said, my words a broken whisper, "but I will."

"Idiot."

I tried to lift my hand, but could only lift a few fingers. Eleanor saw and gently lifted my palm, laying it over her back as she snuggled in closer.

"El—"

"Don't talk anymore," she said. "I love you, okay?"

Her voice cracked a little, and I did my best to squeeze her tighter when she started to tremble against me.

“Don’t cry,” I said.

In typical Eleanor fashion, she didn’t listen to orders. I started to feel very far away, even though I was conscious of her warmth beside me, like a kite moving higher and higher into the sky but still tethered to Earth by a thin string.

“It’s okay, El,” I said, managing a weak smile even though I couldn’t see her, couldn’t see anything but white.

“I’ll see you on the other side.”

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