

MARA'S INFERNO

by

Dina Schiff Massachi

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in
English

Charlotte

2015

Approved by:

Dr. Mark West

Dr. Paula Connolly

Dr. Paula Eckard

©2015
Dina Schiff Massachi
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ABSTRACT

DINA SCHIFF MASSACHI. *Mara's Inferno*. (Under the direction of Dr. MARK WEST)

Mara Weiss lives in her own private hell. Her father's suicide left her alone with an unhinged mother. High school offers Mara no escape, and outside of school, Mara unsuccessfully clings to her first love. Feeling engulfed by rejection, Mara and her friend Devon hold a séance in order to communicate with Mara's father. Accidentally, the girls channel Dante. Dante offers to guide Mara to her father. Devon offers to go too.

The trio's travels quickly become dangerous. The girls escape, and, at first they are unsure if their trip was a dream. Mara's sudden ability to see auras serves as proof that the journey was real. Interruptions from harassing classmates and Mara's mother cause Hell to look increasingly pleasant. After two failed attempts, the girls manage to call Dante again. Hell loses its beauty as the trio journeys further than before, but this trip causes Mara to reconsider her relationships and her self-destructive behaviors.

Mara's sense of power is short-lived. Hell has strained her friendship with Devon, and Mrs. Weiss is furious with her. Alone, confused, and desperately wanting answers, Mara summons Dante and begs him to take her to her father. Dante brings Mara into the forest of the suicides. Mara finds her father and learns why he killed himself. She wants to bring him back with her, but he is rooted by his guilt. Mara lets go of her father and faces an army of her worst selves.

Narrowly winning, the world turns to a swirl of color.

Mara wakes in the park with a better understanding of herself and a renewed sense of power. Her phone buzzes and she reconnects with her friends.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my committee, Dr. West, Dr. Connolly and Dr. Eckard. Without you, this would not have happened. I also dedicate this work to my husband, Jon. Thank you for supporting me throughout the process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: "I WOKE TO FIND MYSELF IN A DARK WOOD"	1
CHAPTER 2: "A BITTER PLACE! DEATH COULD SCARCE BE BITTERER"	8
CHAPTER 3: "AND EVERYWHERE I LOOKED, THE BEAST WAS THERE"	14
CHAPTER 4: "THEN GOOD HOPE GAVE WAY AND FEAR RETURNED"	18
CHAPTER 5: "ALL THOSE SWEET THOUGHTS, AND OH, HOW MUCH DESIRING"	22
CHAPTER 6: "WITH FEAR THAT SEIZED ME AT THE SIGHT OF HER"	27
CHAPTER 7: "I LOST ALL HOPE"	32
CHAPTER 8: "MY EYES MADE OUT A FIGURE COMING TOWARD ME"	37
CHAPTER 9: "FOR YOUR OWN GOOD, AND I SHALL BE YOUR GUIDE"	44
CHAPTER 10: "LEAD ME THERE TO THE PLACE YOU SPOKE ABOUT"	49
CHAPTER 11: "ALL THE WAY DOWN TO THIS POINT OF SPACELESSNESS"	55
CHAPTER 12: "WHAT SORT OF SOULS ARE THESE YOU SEE AROUND YOU"	60
CHAPTER 13: "THERE STANDS MINOS GROTESQUELY, AND HE SNARLS"	64
CHAPTER 14: "THE WAY ONE IS WHEN SHAKEN OUT OF SLEEP"	70
CHAPTER 15: "ALREADY I CAN SEE THE CLEAR GLOW"	77
CHAPTER 16: "ONE DAY WE READ TO PASS THE TIME AWAY"	80
CHAPTER 17: "LEAVE HERE THROUGH HIS MERIT OR WITH ANOTHER'S HELP"	86
CHAPTER 18: "O SHE, COMPASSIONATE, WHO MOVED TO HELP ME"	91
CHAPTER 19: "INTO THE SECOND ROUND THAT HOLDS LESS SPACE"	99
CHAPTER 20: "THAT GAUDY BEAST, WILD IN ITS SPOTTED PELT"	106
CHAPTER 21: "WE WERE ALONE, INNOCENT OF SUSPICION"	112

CHAPTER 22: “NOW HERE, THEN THERE, AND UP AND DOWN, IT DRIVES THEM”	117
CHAPTER 23: “UPON THE BRINK OF GRIEF’S ABYSMAL VALLEY”	124
CHAPTER 24: “THIS WAY I WENT, DESCENDING”	130
CHAPTER 25: “WHEN THE SLIMY CERBERUS CAUGHT SIGHT OF US”	136
CHAPTER 26: “YOU ARE MY CONSTANT STRENGHT WHEN I LOSE HEART”	144
CHAPTER 27: “KNOCKING MY SENSES OUT OF ME COMPLETELY”	150
CHAPTER 28: “MORE DEEPLY, NOW, THAN ANY TIME BEFORE”	156
CHAPTER 29: “SHAPING A PATH FOR A DIFFICULT DESCENT”	162
CHAPTER 30: “AND ASK HIM, FOR MY PART, WHAT I WOULD ASK”	170
CHAPTER 31: “BUT FIRST I MUST GO DOWN TO THE VERY CENTER”	179
CHAPTER 32: “IF ONE OF YOU SHOULD GO BACK TO THE WORLD”	184
CHAPTER 33: “LIKE ONE RETURNING WHO HAS SWUM BELOW”	190
REFERENCES	192

CHAPTER 1: “I WOKE TO FIND MYSELF IN A DARK WOOD”ⁱ

“Maybe we’re in some sort of hell,” Mara mused out loud as she crammed yesterday’s clothes into the bottom of her backpack in an attempt to hide the fact that she had spent another night at her friend Devon’s house. Confident that today would be the day she would finally see Ryan, Mara had decided to resurrect her favorite jeans and his favorite of her t-shirts. Mara glanced at Devon—who was momentarily distracted by her phone— before discreetly trying to sniff herself to determine if either item of clothing smelled bad enough to justify needing a wash. “My dad once made me watch this movie where this guy is stuck living the same day over and over.” She carefully stacked books on top of her dirty clothes. “High school is remarkably like that movie, and that was like a curse or something and...”

“Want coffee?” Devon asked, cutting off Mara’s rant. She did not look up to see Mara nod. She grabbed her backpack and headed toward her kitchen.

Mara zipped up her boots before turning to her reflection. She tried to suck in and stand straighter, but she could still see the slightest bulge, just below her belly button. Sighing, she sprayed detangler in her hair before realizing that she had waited too long— she could wash it again, or live with the knots.

“Girly, if you want coffee get your flat butt down here!” Devon’s voice drifted up the winding stairs.

Mara glanced once more around her friend’s bedroom. Huge windows and well placed skylights made Mara feel as if she were in a tower in the sky, not trapped, but

floating on a cloud. The floor, the bed, and two oversized chairs were all white and soft as can be. The walls usually matched the sky so perfectly that Mara could almost think that there were no walls; only today's grey sky and the large built-in bookcase behind the bed ruined the illusion. *Quit stalling* Mara prodded herself. She pocketed her phone before heading downstairs into a living room space filled with dark leather and high tech electronics. Mara veered right into the kitchen. She grabbed a mug and poured some coffee. Devon motioned to the milk, bowls, and cereal she left for Mara on the granite countertop.

"Come sit at the table. I'll read your cards." Devon moved gracefully toward the breakfast table, her tarot cards and book already in a pile next to her bowl. Mara topped off her mug with milk and slid onto the stool next to Devon.

"No cereal?"

Ignoring the question, Mara began to shuffle the cards.

"You can't keep crashing here if you won't eat. I can't support this."

Mara walked toward the bowls, grabbed a spoon, and slowly stirred her coffee. "I need to go home anyway. I'm out of clothes."

"Just be careful."

Mara breathed in the scent of coffee before wistfully declaring, "This time will be different. I know it."

Sighing at Mara's optimism, Devon picked up the cards. "Think of a question that you want answered," Devon said, motioning toward the stool Mara had vacated. "That'll focus the reading."

Mara followed Devon's instructions in a habitual way— they were always consulting the cards, their palms, and the stars for their futures. She shuffled the cards and tried to think about Ryan, but her thoughts keep steering toward her family.

“Mara, I think the cards are shuffled,” Devon said, trying to save her cards from permanently creasing in her friend's hands.

Mara pouted. “But I haven't focused properly yet.”

“Hand them over.” Devon took the cards and laid them down in a Celtic Cross spread.

“The first card represents what's happening in your life right now.” Devon turned over the first card and revealed a man hanging upside-down by one leg. Devon searched through her book, desiring accuracy over memory. She read aloud, “You're stuck at a crossroads. You want to do something, but you're confused. Stuck, but by choice. Notice he could free himself if he tried.”

“So I'm causing myself to be stuck,” Mara said in a monotone.

“We're one card in, girly. Take a breath,” Devon said. “The second card shows us the challenge or problem.” Devon turned over the next card— a man looking regretfully at three spilled cups, ignoring the two full cups behind him. “Well, the picture says it all. You're crying over spilt milk, ignoring what you still have.”

“What does the book say?” Mara asked, unsatisfied with her friend's dismissive answer.

“Dwelling on the past. Self-blame or doubt. Loneliness.”

“So I'm causing myself to be stuck. I'm lonely and filled with doubt.”

“So far, I think this is our most accurate reading, Mara.”

“You’re so going next, Devon, and I’m going to rub my bad luck all over your cards!”

“Accuracy is never bad luck,” Devon said. “The next card is the past events that lead up to the current situation.” She turned over the next card. An upside-down, old, bearded man sitting on a throne looked at them.

“Hold on now. Inverted cards are the worst to read. Let me find it.” Devon frantically turned the book’s pages.

“Add a tail and fork the staff and you have King Triton,” Mara mocked.

“The Emperor is very patriarchal. And here he is.” Devon pointed down at the page. “He represents the father. Stability, Authority, Power. Inverted usually means excessive control, inflexible, but I’ve got to say in your case, Mara, I think it’s just showing that your father has been removed. You have the opposite of the father.”

“And the opposite of stability, if you want to read it that way.” Mara twisted her hair. “Will you kill me if I smoke while we do this?”

“After we’re done. Outside. No need to stink up the house.” Devon paused. “Do you want to keep going?”

“Sure. So far we didn’t learn anything that we didn’t already know. I’m stuck, full of doubt, and my dad killed himself. Super.”

“The next card is the near future.” Devon placed down a card depicting a man rowing two huddled passengers facing six swords stuck in their boat. Devon deciphered, “Regretful but necessary move from the turbulent water on the left to the calm water on the right.”

“I know you’re cleaning it up, Devon. Those people do not look happy.”

Devon pointed at the card. “But the change of water is right in the picture!”

Mara rolled her eyes. “What else does the book say?”

“Rite of passage. It also mentions leaving something behind, and that it can literally be a journey across water.”

Mara leaned back on her stool. “Ah, the joys of vague future predictions. We can never understand the meaning until it’s passed.”

“Mara, that may be the most insightful thing you have ever said.” Devon stuck her tongue out. “Shall I continue?”

“Why not.”

“Alright. The next card shows us the best outcome.” Devon turned over Death on his pale horse. “It doesn’t mean death,” Devon explained quickly.

“I know, I know. I get this card in almost every reading. It means change, endings, transformation.” Mara’s scars itched. “What’s next?”

“The foundation of the situation.” Devon flipped over a lightning struck tower. “This is change, too.”

“Half of these cards are change. Maybe if you used the app I sent you, instead of some musty old book, these interpretations would change.”

“Tarot is an ancient art. It doesn’t feel right to use an app. Besides, I like books.”

The illustrated people jumping out of the flaming windows reminded Mara of the footage of September 11th that she watched in History class last semester. “What else does it say? I know this is a bad one.”

“Disaster. Upheaval. I think this is about the loss of your father, too.”

Mara rolled her eyes. “Okay Freud, it all goes back to my parents.”

Attempting to lighten the mood, Devon mimicked a German accent, poorly. “Vant mee sue konsinue?”

Laughing, Mara said, “You are an awful person for that, Devon.”

“Yah?”

“Yah. Continue, or however you said it.”

Devon read the remaining Tarot cards quickly. “The seventh card is a recommendation from the tarot gods.” The lone figure on the card held out a lantern. “Seems the cards think you’d benefit from some alone time and some soul searching. Next represents external influences.” The Devil glared at them. Mara suppressed a shiver as Devon pointed, “You see the lovers in chains before the devil’s throne. This card is all about lust, so it could be about Ryan.” Sensing Mara’s discomfort, Devon tried for humor, “Though the harpy feet on the devil could be your mother too.”

A smile tugged at the corners of Mara’s mouth. “Again Freud?”

Devon grinned. “Moving on to your hopes and fears.” An upside down a figure walked away from eight cups. “Damn, inverted again. Give me a second.”

While Devon consulted her book, Mara got up and crossed the kitchen to where the door and her discarded backpack lay. She palmed her black Bic lighter and moved back to the table. Sitting, she placed the lighter on the table top and spun it. It nudged the death card and an ominous feeling churned in the pit of Mara’s stomach.

“Here we go. Eight of cups in reverse. Aimless drifting. Clearly a fear.” Devon turned over the only unflipped card. “Last one. The outcome.” Four animals, one in each corner, and a naked woman, center, all looked out toward the girls. “The World. Journey

completed. Accomplishment.” Relieved that the reading ended on a bright note, Devon gestured to the door. “Outside? We’re running late now.”

CHAPTER 2: "A BITTER PLACE! DEATH COULD SCARCE BE BITTERER."ⁱⁱ

Mara picked up her lighter. "Do I have time to smoke?"

"Can you wait till we get to school? I can't be late, and I don't want you stinking up my car again."

"Can't ruin that new car smell." Mara rolled the lighter in her palm. "I might just skip today..."

"It's not so bad."

Mara gave Devon a look.

"Okay, so the kids are mostly rich and snotty. But you've only been there two years. If anyone should complain it's me." Devon gestured toward herself in order to emphasize her point. "I've known these peons since they ate their boogers in kindergarten. Did I ever tell you about the incident a few years ago that involved the mayor's son, a hotel room, prom night, and enough cocaine to put a child star into rehab?"

Mara's eyes lit up.

"Get in the car. I'll tell you on the way to school."

Mara stuck her tongue out. "Fine. But only because you promise to edit my French homework."

Devon raised her eyebrow. "By edit, you mean do it for you?"

Ignoring Devon, Mara gathered her things, went outside, and waited by her friend's black Civic.

Devon locked up the house before joining Mara. She unlocked the car doors, pressed start, and cranked the radio. The two girls danced through their short ride; they continued to sing along, loudly, long after the car was packed tightly between two cars in the tiny student parking lot.

“Ready?” Devon turned the music down. She glanced in the mirror and ran her fingers through her inky, black layers in an attempt to gain more volume.

Mara dug through her backpack, ignoring the question.

“Mara?”

“If I take five more minutes, how late will we be?” Mara produced her lighter from the smallest pocket of her backpack.

“Why can’t you use an e-cig like a sane person? Those things will kill you.” Devon paused, lowering her voice. “I already saw Harrison walk in, so you’ve successfully avoided him through at least homeroom.” Devon shut off her Civic and walked around to the passenger side. She opened the door, grabbed Mara’s arm and made a show of pulling Mara out of the car. “We’re already late enough!”

Mara grabbed the door handle and the center console, trying to stay in the car. Both girls laughed at themselves until Mara sensed her classmates' eyes on them. In longstanding agreement that their classmates should mind their own business, Mara nudged her friend and the girls immediately stopped their play, straightened their clothes and went into the school. They walked through locker filled halls painted crimson and gold, and parted ways to go to their respective homerooms.

Mara sat quickly. She took out her English homework in order to avoid the eyes of a group of very well manicured girls. *This is the world my mother wishes I'd take part*

in, Mara mused. To her credit, she had tried. When she first arrived at Springfield High she wore the designer labels her mother had laid out for her. She wore expensive make-up and did her hair just so. She fit in so well, she had been invisible. Shortly after, she met Devon.

Hearing a chorus of giggles, Mara looked up from her homework. She was surrounded by three blondes whose names she had never learned.

Spray tan asked Mara, “Did Harrison really ask you out?”

Pink lipstick fake whispered to spray tan, “Was it a dare?”

Short skirt fake whispered to pink lipstick, “Does Cecile know?”

The exchanges happened so quickly, Mara wasn’t sure she had heard any of it correctly. “What?”

Giggled erupted again.

Surprised by the attention, Mara said, “I have a boyfriend,” in a half-audible voice. The girls’ faces registered their disbelief as the bell rang. *Why did I say that out loud? I should just ignore them.* She stepped into the hall. *Besides, the way Ryan’s been acting lately...* Her Ryan-thoughts derailed when she saw Harrison walk toward her first-period chemistry class.

I knew I should have skipped school today! Mara took small steps, as if she were walking toward a death sentence.

Harrison waited outside the classroom, eyes searching for her. His Ken-doll body blocked the door, making it impossible for her to slip by unnoticed.

Why did I even agree to do it? Her mother had begged her to go out on a double date with her and the nice nephew of the very wealthy man that mommy was dating.

Harrison was the nephew, and he wasn't nice. The date was set for tomorrow night, and Mara hadn't successfully figured out how to fake malaria. *I'll be lucky if he doesn't club me over the head and drag me off to his cave.*

Harrison's eyes narrowed as he saw Mara. He shifted his hands to his belt loops as if trying to draw attention to his crotch. "Hey babe!" He moved his hands in an attempt to pull Mara in for a hug, but Mara ducked back and put her arms across her chest as a barrier.

"You'll warm up tomorrow night," Harrison winked at her.

"Does your girlfriend know about this?" Mara spat out the words before she lost the nerve. She studied her black boots in the silence that followed. Growing angry, Mara met Harrison's eyes. "I have a boyfriend."

"And yet you're still going out with me." Harrison made an obnoxiously suggestive gesture, implying how their evening will end.

"Whatever. The bell's about to ring. Would you please move?" Mara ducked under the Harrison's arm. She maneuvered between desks, side glances, and too loud whispers, finally reaching the corner back row desk. *Better to avoid you, my dears*, she thought, longing to be invisible once more.

Thankfully Mr. Wolfram talked for the full ninety minutes in a dry, monotone voice. Mara sat back, thankful that Devon had taken meticulous notes last semester, and Mr. Wolfram was not known for changing his lessons. *So long as Mr. Wolfram doesn't opt for a rare class participation moment, I'm safe.* Mara thought before drifting into her happy place.

Once upon a time, Ryan and I were friends. Great friends. He was the best. Took care of me. Beat up assholes like Harrison that tried to prey on me. Danced with me at that party when my crush of the moment ignored me. Friends told me to stay away from him. Said he was too old. Claimed that he parties hard, smokes anything that'll light and hits on anything with breasts. Pointed out that he dropped out of college and might be going nowhere. Anything they thought would scare me away. It was all true too. He also was the guy that calmed me down when we got lost in the city that night. Handed me a cigarette and told me to inhale, because then I couldn't hyperventilate. Got out of the car with me and held my hair when I needed to throw up after that first rush of smoke and nicotine hit me...

Everyone around Mara stood, and it took her a minute to realize the bell had rung. *Was I that deep in my head?* She went to join the vertical bodies marching out of the room, but Harrison blocked the door, waiting to continue their earlier conversation. With unusually flawless timing, Mr. Wolfram asked Mara to stay after for just a moment. Harrison shot Mara a to-be-continued look before leaving for his next class.

“Mara, I noticed you didn't take many notes this period,” Mr. Wolfram began, still in a monotone. “In fact, you haven't taken many notes the last few classes, and your last test was a C. Is there something I can clarify for you, or do you believe you can learn the material through osmosis?”

“I'm sorry, Mr. Wolfram. It won't happen again,” Mara said, big dark eyes peering through her eyelashes in an attempt to look innocent.

“I thought highly of your father, Mara. I know he would appreciate it if you understood some of the science he worked with.”

Hating how Mr. Wolfram's obvious manipulating struck her, Mara provided the perfunctory, "Yes, sir." She took the awkward silence that followed as permission to exit.

CHAPTER 3: “AND EVERYWHERE I LOOKED, THE BEAST WAS THERE”ⁱⁱⁱ

The halls were empty as Mara made her way to French class, the late bell ringing just before the heel of her boot crossed the classroom’s threshold.

“Vous etes en retard, Mara,” Ms. Pillot used a tone typically reserved for talking to a small, possibly slow child. “La class commence. Fermez la porte.”

Mara stared blankly at the glasses slipping down Ms. Pillot’s nose.

“Comprenez-vous?”

“Repetez, s’il vous plait, parlez anglais?” Mara hesitantly used one of the few French phrases she knew.

“Fermez la porte!” Ms. Pillot gestured toward the door, sweeping her pastel sweater clad arm left and right.

Mara closed the door and looked around the room. Her regular seat, back corner, was occupied. Someone thoughtfully left her a seat right up front. It would be a long class.

“Puis-je aller aux toilettes?” Mara quickly recycled another of her few phrases. Ms. Pillot handed her a bathroom pass.

In the safety of the empty halls, Mara contemplated ditching the rest of her classes. *If only the office wouldn’t call home!* Stalling for time, Mara walked into the bathroom and stared into the mirror. *My hair never did recover from this morning.* Mara tried to comb the tangles with her fingers and water. Dark wet spots appeared on her

black t-shirt, but her hair would not smooth. She gave up and made a nasty face at her reflection.

Cecile Augustin's golden coif appeared in the mirror, interrupting Mara's fun. "Ms. Pillot sent me to see if you fell in. I figured you were probably making out with Harrison in the stall."

Mara spun on her boot heels. "And what, you wanted to watch?"

"No, gross." Cecile's surgically perfect nose wrinkled. "I thought I'd YouTube it so everyone could know how nasty you are." Cecile stepped toward Mara. Her eyes were hateful. "Not that they'd need a video. Just a whiff of your clothes. Do you always wear the same thing?"

Mara spun back toward the mirror. She ignored Cecile while she put on a shiny, mint flavored gloss. Mara noticed Cecile's angry expression as she smacked her lips together. "Thanks, Cecile. Glad you've got that feminist-sisterhood anti-slut-shaming thing down." Not waiting for a comeback, Mara walked out of the bathroom and back to class.

"Est-c'quelle page?" The fight knocked out of her, Mara began copying the verb conjugations written on the board.

Mara considered it a blessing when the bell rang and a double blessing that she had lunch with Devon. She kept her head forward and her steps quick, avoiding everyone. It wasn't a long walk, but the human obstacles kept Mara on edge. She breathed a sigh of relief when she crossed the cafeteria's double doors. Devon was already seated at their corner table. Mara walked over and plopped her backpack down on one of the many empty chairs.

Devon shuffled around her mountain of veggies. “Where’s your lunch?”

Mara gave Devon a look.

“You’re going to do some serious damage to yourself.”

Mara’s face dropped down, her hair obscuring her world view. “He hasn’t texted me back. I know he read it.”

Devon shrugged. “So? You still need to eat.”

“Your sympathy overwhelms me.”

“Not what I meant, and you know it.”

Mara got up and walked over to the drink machines on the other end of the room. When she returned with an iced tea, Devon leaned toward her. “I’ve got practice after school. Wanna wait for me?”

Mara took out her phone. She glanced at it quickly, hoping that she just hadn’t felt it vibrate. She looked up, disappointed. “I’m trying to meet up with Ryan.”

Devon buried her fork in her vegetables. “You know even if he texts, he’ll still stand you up again.”

“Dev...”

Devon shook her head. “I just don’t think he’s good for you, Mara. He’s changing you.”

“Dev!”

“You never used to worry about how you look all the time, or...” Devon’s voice trailed off. “Never mind. I won’t start this again.”

Mara stared at the table. She stirred her drink.

Devon's hand brushed against Mara's arm. "I miss you, girly. You don't even see how much you've changed."

Mara looked out the window, searching for rainclouds. Slowly, she drank the last of her iced tea. "Mr. Wolfram brought up my dad."

Devon's forehead furrowed in disbelief. "As part of class?"

"No. After. Some B.S. about how disappointed he'd be."

"That sucks."

"And I had a Cecile run in during French. I think I'm going to skip gym. For my health."

Devon gave Mara a knowing look. The bell rang before she had time to say anything. They got up.

"Abandon all hope, ye who enter here," Devon recited as the girls stepped back into the cinderblock halls.

"Where's that from? I like it."

"Keep going to English class. It's just after the Shakespeare unit." Devon waved before making a left turn.

Mara walked slowly forward. She imagined Harrison trying to kiss her— an image that made her feel physically ill. It wasn't hard to convince Mr. Wall that she needed to go to the nurse after that. She continued her slow, stooped pace all the way back into the hall and to the nurse's office before handing the nurse a pass.

Mara loved laying on the cot in the nurse's office. Somehow the grandmotherly woman had the foresight never to call home. Mara shifted on the cot, nestling into the thin blanket. *A quick nap before English*, she thought before closing her eyes.

CHAPTER 4: “THEN GOOD HOPE GAVE WAY AND FEAR RETURNED”^{iv}

The dress was long, white, and clung to every part of her. The music started and the fabric around her bare feet swayed. She stepped forward, trying to find the source of the music. Instead she found him.

He looked younger than she remembered, more laugh lines, less worry eating at his face. She could tell that the girls all loved him when he was young and still played guitar. His callused fingers touch one of her old-time movie-star curls.

“Daddy!”

“Hey baby.” He lifted her up and spun her. The music grew louder, turning into a waltz. He took her hand and placed his other hand on the small of her back. Their feet move. One, two, three. One, two, three.

“Daddy, I’ve missed you...”

“It’s alright baby girl, I’m here now.”

“But why did you...”

One, two, three.

He pulled away a bit. She reached out to him. There was blood on her hand.

She looked down at her dress. Everywhere he touched there was blood. She panicked. “Daddy, you’re bleeding!”

One, two, three.

He stepped forward. Held her again. Smiled. “I’m fine, baby.”

She stepped back. Her hands were slick— covered in warm, red, thickness.

One, two, three.

“No, you’re not! You’re bleeding! Look at my dress!”

He turned from her. Stepped back. His face began distorting.

The blood kept running. Bloody words appeared on the stomach of the dress.

WHORE.

One, two, three.

He turned back. He was a bloated blue-green color. His eyes jutted. His mouth moved, but a woman’s voice, her mother’s voice, emerged from his monstrous face” You horrible, dirty thing! Clean this up! You’re the reason I can’t keep nice things.”

Hands. Hands were gently shaking her. “The bell’s about to ring, dear. I’ve let you lay around more than enough for a pretend stomachache. Off to class.” The nurse shooed Mara out the door.

Mara stood in the hall for a moment, running her hands over her jeans. She wobbled uneasily on her boot-heels, and shook her head, trying to shake the last of the dream out. Off balance, Mara stumbled into English to find Sonnet 138 written on the board:

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
 I do believe her though I know she lies,
 That she might think me some untutored youth,
 Unlearned in the worlds false subtleties.
 Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
 Although she knows my days are past the best,
 Simply I credit her false speaking tongue:
 On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed:
 But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
 And wherefore says not that I am old?
 O! love’s best habit is in seeming trust,
 And age in love, loves not to have years told:
 Therefore I lie with her, and she with me,
 And in our faults by lies we flattered be.^v

As if sensing Mara's perceived kinship with the poem's speaker, Mrs. Daskein called on Mara almost as soon as her denim pockets grazed the top of the desk's chair. "What do you think Shakespeare was telling us? Is this a love poem? Is it to the fair youth, or the dark lady?"

"It's a dark lady poem." Mara took a deep breath, worried her face would give too much away. "I think Shakespeare is trying to convince himself that he's in a good relationship by lying to himself, but he's really bothered by this, mostly because he knows it's all fake." She bit her lip before continuing, "He knows he's lying. Can it be love if it's rooted in lies?"

Seeing Mara's cheeks turn pink, Cecile Augustin chimed in, "Wasn't the dark lady some older mistress of Shakespeare's? Like, some whore? Of course it's fake. No one loves a whore." Cecile sent a meaningful look in Mara's direction, making sure the intent of her comment was not missed.

"You are correct in some ways, Cecile." Mara was amazed Mrs. Daskein could miss the tension held within her classroom. "The dark lady poems are more about physical love, where the fair youth is more thought and less action."

The class snickered. Mrs. Daskein finally seemed to understand and tried to redirect, "Now let's talk about form. Specifically, the pentameter."

Mara stopped listening. *Are my feelings for Ryan rooted in lies? I've tried temptress, I've tried friend, I've tried magic spells from Devon's books, I've tried making him jealous.... All with the same result. How many times has he lied to me and run off? Men I love... leaving...*

A pile of books hit Mrs. Daskein's desk, bringing Mara out of her head.

“Before I send you home, I want to get you ready for our next unit. We’ll finish this week with a test on William Shakespeare, but anyone that wants to get ahead can start reading an older, Italian poet. His comedy is just divine.” She laughed at her own joke, but no one joined her.

Mara considered taking a book just to make Mrs. Daskein happy. Cecile, standing by Mrs. Daskein’s desk, made her change her mind. *I survived this school day, why push it?* Cecile stuck out her tongue. With renewed defiance, Mara took a book on her way out of the room. The hardcover was heavy in her p

CHAPTER 5: “ALL THOSE SWEET THOUGHTS, AND OH, HOW MUCH DESIRING”^{vi}

Freed from class, Mara went to the bathroom to make one more attempt at looking pretty. In the safety of the stall, she texted Ryan, “@ Ez’s Starbucks. Join me?” Butterflies in her stomach, she left the bathroom and made her way down the hall.

Outside, rain pelted down. Mara stood inside of the school’s main doors and debated her next move. *Devon’s got at least another hour of practice.* Mara sighed. *I’ll look a mess if I walk... It’s not so far. What other choice do I have?* She stepped out into the downpour and started making her way through the streets.

Drenched, she ran into Ezra’s Starbucks. It had been two years since Ezra went to school with Mara, but he was still one of her best friends. *Too bad Mom moved us after...* Mara shook the thought from her head and went straight to the bathroom. The mirror showed her hair half plastered to her back. She tried to dry it with paper towels but the more she rubbed it, the more it frizzed. Giving up, she left the bathroom and ordered a drink.

She sat at her usual table, her usual high stool. She played on her phone to look busy, clicking on the pages of every person that had recently posted on Ryan’s Facebook page. Eventually she set her phone down, careful not to run the battery out. She glanced around the coffee shop, hopeful that Ryan may waltz in without texting. From her stool, she could see Ezra in his apron making drinks. Ezra’s hair stuck out of his hat in red brown tufts, accenting his coffee colored skin. Admiring Erza’s perfect curls, Mara twisted a lock of her hair and wished it were less disastrous.

She looked at her phone; still no reply. She considered texting again, but instead she called out, “Ez, can you make me another drink?”

Ezra did not look up from the steamer. “Still waiting?”

Mara sighed. “He’ll come.” She took out her lighter. She knew she couldn’t smoke in here; she had asked Ezra enough times when things were slow to know that there was no way he would ever give in. Just holding the plastic fire starter made her feel better. She turned it in her palm.

Ezra set a sugary coffee concoction he created especially for Mara down. She sipped it as he moved back to the counter.

“Do you think I should text him again?”

Ezra froze mid stride. “I think he’s an ass, Mara. Don’t lower yourself for him. The more you text, the more desperate you seem.”

Mara’s finger caressed the phone’s buttons. “I think I should text him. It’s been 45 minutes.”

Ezra moved back toward her table. “He’s blown you off for longer than that before. Do you know Devon and I call him the phantom behind his back?”

Mara nervously ran her fingers through her hair. “Do I look ok? I want to look good when he comes in.”

He looked at her and smiled. “You’re beautiful, Mara.”

Mara pulled at her hair again before picking up her phone. She reread her text. “@Ez’s Starbucks. Join me?” “I don’t think I was direct enough. Maybe he doesn’t realize I’m waiting.”

Too busy typing “Want me to order you a drink?” she missed Ezra’s poignant look. “Do you think this is casual enough?” She showed Ezra her phone. “I don’t want to be too pushy. I want to be cool. Suave. Sexy.”

Ezra looked around before sitting at her table. “Mara, you're throwing yourself at a guy that doesn’t want you.” He put his hand on top of hers.

Mara pulled her hand back. “Ryan loves me. It’s impossible to feel the way I feel about someone and not have them feel it back.”

He leaned toward her. “Your logic doesn’t match his actions, Mara.”

She crossed her arms. “He just has a funny way of showing it. His family’s all messed up. He doesn’t know how to show love.”

Ezra stood and mumbled something about a pot and a kettle.

Mara looked up from her phone. “What?”

“I gotta make another pot of coffee.” He walked back to the counter.

“Oh.” Mara hit send. She twirled her lighter in her hand and looked around again. She counted five other people sitting in the Starbucks, almost all of them students. One had a laptop out. Three discussed prom. One read, but kept glancing up at Ezra, who was coming back over to Mara.

“Want something to eat?”

“You know I gave that up for lent.” Mara tried for a joking tone, but her voice came out flat.

Ezra touched Mara’s back. “He’s killing you, you know. Just stop. Give me your phone. I’ll leave work early. We can get some food. I’ll take you anywhere you want to go.”

The phone buzzed. Mara grabbed it eagerly.

Beneath Devon's name read, "Hey! Almost done here, girly. Need a ride to your house? I can wait while you grab clothes."

Again Mara handed Ezra her phone. "Can you answer her Ez?" Her eyes were bright and wet.

"Do you need a ride?"

Mara blotted her eyes with a napkin. "I can walk."

Ezra looked out of the large storefront windows. "Mara, it started pouring five minutes ago."

Mara gripped her knees. "I need more time."

Ezra leaned down toward her. "If you wait till six I can drive you."

"I don't know! I DON'T KNOW!"

Eyes stared. Ezra's manager came out from an employees only door. He straightened and backed away from her slowly. "Chill, Mara. I'll be back over when I can." He walked back behind the counter.

Mara got up and began to gather her things.

"You leaving?"

"Maybe." Mara pulled out her phone again. "Maybe not. I can wait longer."

She sat. The group discussing prom left. Business suits began walking in. For the next thirty minutes Starbucks was slammed. Alone, Mara watched Ezra making drinks. The only time her phone buzzed was a text from her mother demanding that Mara come home.

The rain had not stopped by the time Ezra clocked out. “Want me to drive you to home? Or to Devon’s?”

Mara stared out the window. She took deep breaths, counting to ten with each inhale. *All this wet is so you don’t have to cry. The sky is doing it for you.* She gave Ezra a halfhearted shrug. “Sure.”

CHAPTER 6: “WITH FEAR THAT SEIZED ME AT THE SIGHT OF HER”^{vii}

Ezra pulled his beat-up clunker up to the door so Mara did not need to walk in the rain. The door stuck when she went to open it, so he leaned across and opened it for her. Inside it was warm. The radio had been torn from the dashboard, so the ride was comfortably quiet.

“You gonna be ok?” Ezra asked.

Mara’s driveway lit up automatically as the car pulled in. For a moment, Mara longed for her old house. Her dad built her a dollhouse to match that house’s exterior—peach with white trim. Ezra teased her through all of fourth grade, said she lived in Barbie’s dream house. She looked at the monstrosity before her and thought bitterly, *and now I live in Susan’s dream house.*

“Mara?” Ezra touched her. His eyes were full of concern.

Mara couldn’t meet his gaze. “I’m ok, Ez. Go home. Devon will pick me up if I decide not to stay.”

He leaned in, almost whispering in her ear, “You’re better than this, Mara. Too good for her,” he paused and touched her arm, “too good for him. End this.”

Mara leaned away. “Bye, Ez.” She didn’t mean to, but the car door slammed all the same.

Mara walked onto the porch and looked into the living room window. She could see no sign of her mother. She turned her key in the lock and entered. Every room in this new house reminded Mara of her father’s absence. She passed chenille sofas and

remembered a different living room that contained blue cotton ones. She passed decorative mirrors that hung in spots that, in a different house, held her childhood artwork. Mara moved quickly up the stairs and went straight to her room. She flicked on the light switch; everything turned a Pepto Bismol pink.

Quickly and quietly, Mara thought to herself as she emptied her books and dug out her dirty clothes. She dumped everything in a hamper. Opening every dresser drawer, Mara randomly grabbed shirts and underwear, stuffing whatever she could back into her backpack. An old purple tie-dye tee caught her eye, so she pulled it over her head and walked over to the standing mirror. *Am I too fat to wear this?* Mentally cursing herself for not doing crunches last night, she threw the shirt on the top of the pile and put her books back in the bag. Weighed down, the bag hit the floor with a thud.

“Baby, are you home? Come into my room. I want to talk to you.” The saccharine voice carried through the thin walls.

Inhaling sharply, Mara moved quicker. She finger-combed her hair, trying to be prettier. On a whim, she walked over to an old jewelry box on her dresser and put on a ring her father gave her. She looked down admiringly at the blue stone, then her eyes flitted over to a picture of her dad propped on her nightstand. “Why did you leave me alone with her?” Mara demanded at the picture. “You knew what she was like.” Her father stared back with dead eyes and a plastered smile, answerless.

An overstuffed white bear sat by Mara’s desk, the lone nameless survivor of the pre-move stuffed animal purge. Mara kicked it before grabbing her backpack and closing her bedroom door.

Accepting the unavoidable, Mara opened the door to her mother's room. Mirrors covered every possible surface. Mara's mother, Susan, sat at a vanity table applying makeup. She did not look up. Mara sat down on a leopard print chaise across from her mother's purple draped bed. As she watched her mother artfully apply paint as if it were camouflage protecting her in a war on age, Mara couldn't help but think, *it looks like a brothel threw up in here.*

Susan stood. "How do I look?"

"Overdressed for 4:30." Mara studied the tiny black dress not meant for a middle aged body. Her mother pulled it off though; she really was beautiful. "Your panty line is showing."

"What would I do without you?" Susan pulled a pair of Spanx out of her dresser. "Did you download that food tracking app I suggested? A body like this," she ran her hands over her waist, "takes effort. Best to get in the habit of tracking your calorie intake and burn now." She looked at Mara's backpack and wrinkled her nose. "How old is that backpack? It smells."

Mara had to fight the urge to roll her eyes.

Susan sat again, smoothing her dress. She began spraying perfume. "Maybe you'd like to get dressed up? Come out with me?"

Mara gagged on the lavender fumes. Coughing, she thought of a Harrison type trying to paw at her while she watched her mother flirt. "Dev and I have a project we need to work on. I might go to her house again."

"School will only take you so far and reading in the dark will make you need glasses." Susan walked over to Mara and grabbed her arm, examining. "Do you need a

nail appointment? We could go together. It'll be..." Her voice cut off as she saw the ring on Mara's finger. Susan's voice dropped an octave. "Where did you get that?"

Mara quickly made a fist. "It's mine."

"Did you come in here and take my ring?" Susan did not let go of her daughter's arm.

Mara tried to twist away. "It's mine. Daddy gave it to me. Don't you remember?"

Little red moons formed at the juncture of Susan's fingernails and Mara's skin.

"You little thief. Give it back."

Mara looked Susan in the eye. "I'm not giving you my ring."

Susan's hand flew out, catching Mara's cheek. Mara touched her stinging face. It was hot. Taking advantage of Mara's shock, Susan grabbed the ring off Mara's hand. Tears pooled in Susan's eyes and blue eyeliner began to trail down her face. "See what you made me do." Susan blotted her face with a tissue. "And you've ruined my makeup."

Mara rubbed at her arm. She struggled to hold her tears in. "If Daddy were here he'd..."

Susan threw the eyeliner she had just picked up. "Your father is dead. Stop living in a fantasy and, instead, help me find someone new."

Mara stared at her mother openmouthed. She tried several times to say something, anything, but her brain wouldn't create a snappy comeback.

Eyeliner fixed, Susan carefully traced her lips with a deep red pencil. "I expect better behavior tomorrow night. We need this, Mara."

The ring was next to her, close enough to grab. Instead Mara slowly walked out into the hall, down the stairs, and out of the house. Susan did not try to stop her. She did not even turn away from her mirror to say goodbye.

CHAPTER 7: "I LOST ALL HOPE"^{viii}

Mara stood in her driveway, debating her next move. She could still feel the rain in the air, but, thankfully, nothing was falling at the moment. She texted Devon. "Can you pick me up?"

Devon promised to be there in 10 minutes.

Mara walked to the curb to wait. She twisted her hair and lit a cigarette. As she took a long drag, she appreciated how the ash on the end grew as the rolled paper sacrificed its life for her pleasure. When Devon pulled up, Mara's eyes were red and puffy from crying.

Devon stared at the red mark on Mara's cheek. "Just this once you can smoke in my car. But keep the window all the way down and don't get ash inside."

Lighting another smoke, Mara carefully shielded the flame from the wind as Devon silently drove away.

Mara blotted at her eyes as Devon shut the Civic off. "You ready to go in and tell me about it?"

Mara stepped out of the car. "Not much to tell. Mom's crazy. Guys suck, and then they leave."

"Mara!" Devon raced to catch up to Mara.

"No, it's true. First my father left me for no reason, now Ryan's all hot and cold. It's so screwed up."

Devon muttered something inaudible under her breath.

Mara tried to open the side door to Devon's house, but it was locked. "Dev."

Devon unlocked the door. Mara stormed inside, heading right to Devon's room. She belly flopped down on the bed and hid her head in the pillows. Devon knelt by the bed. "Mara."

Mara could hear her own muffled sobs.

Devon rubbed circles on Mara's back. "Girly, I know it seems bad now, but it's not. You've got me. Ez thinks you're a goddess. Plus we can move to New York once we graduate and get away from all this."

Mara barely lifted her head. "You'll all leave me. Everyone always does." Mara rolled over. Her eyes were wet.

"I love you."

"That's what my Dad said. That's what Ryan says. Everyone says they love you, but they never mean it." Mara pulled her hair. "What if it's me, Dev? What if I'm the cause?"

"Of Ryan's issues, not likely."

"No, of everything. What if my mom's awful because I really am as bad as she says? What if she's not the awful one, but I am?" Mara stood.

"Girly, you're talking crazy here. Your mother's a producer away from being the real housewife of looney-ville. You're lucky she hasn't tried to pitch a mother/daughter dating show to some network." Devon picked her math book up off the floor and settled in for a long Mara rant.

Mara began pacing. "I'm serious. What if I'm not pretty enough? Not a good enough person? That I'm so awful that no matter what I offered him, he'd just rather not be near me?"

"You're the best person I know. Think about how good you are with kids."

Mara rolled her eyes. "Everyone at school thinks..."

Devon did not look up from her work. "Too much plastic, no brains. Who cares what they think."

"What about my Dad then? Why did he leave?"

"Mara, come on!" Devon slammed the math book shut and stared at her friend.

Mara could see tiny determined Mara's reflected in her friend's eyes. "What if my dad died because he realized what Ryan must be realizing. What my mom always tells me. I'm awful."

Devon patted the floor next to her. "Mara."

Still pacing, Mara ignored Devon's gesture. "Good enough for some strange guy to paw, but not good enough for a guy to take to dinner in a restaurant."

"What about Alex? He tried so hard...I

Mara crossed her arms. "He put me on a pedestal that I could only fall off of."

"But didn't he want you to come to Thanksgiving with his family?"

Mara's arms fell back to her sides. "I drive them away."

"Most of them won't leave you alone."

"Dad left me pretty damn alone."

Devon held an arm out in an attempt to stop Mara's pacing. "I'm sure it was an accident."

“I’m not. I have to talk to him, Devon. We’ve got to find a way.”

Devon dropped her arm. “What?”

Mara stopped her pacing. “Open all the damn magic books.” Her arms flew wildly, punctuating her words. Her pacing resumed. “There has to be a way. I need to know. I need to know why he died. Hell, Dev, I do all kinds of screwed up things Dad never did... What if whatever it is is something I can inherit— I’ll wake up one morning and blow my brains out too? I need to know it’s not me.”

Devon reopened the math book. “In the morning, Mara. It’s late. Right now we’ve got to get our homework done. Does your mom know your here? We don’t want her freaking over...”

Mara could almost hear her mother’s criticisms in her ear. “Maybe I’m the awful one. Maybe my life’s just going to be awful. Maybe I should be asking my dad if death is really that bad.”

The book Devon had been holding dropped from her face, revealing her mouth in a little O of shock. Mara froze, worried she has said too much. *How scared would Devon need to get before she’d stop being helpful... before she’d tell some teacher or cop or parent and actually be in my way?* She knelt by the bed. “I’d never actually do anything. You know that, Devon...” Mara trailed off.

“Lift up your shirt.”

Mara’s hands flew to her stomach. “What?”

Devon’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t pretend I haven’t seen the cuts before.”

Mara stood and slowly lifted her shirt; thin scars peak up from the waistband of her jeans.

“Unbutton your jeans too. Show me your beautiful handiwork and tell me how you’d never actually do anything? You act like I don’t know you. Like I don’t have eyes in my head. Like I’m too nice and perfect and clean to see you. Like I’m not right here. Seriously!”

“Devon. I.” Mara walked over to Devon and puts her arms around her. Both girls were in tears. “I love you, honey. I love you.”

“But you’re going to leave me. You’re all pissed about everyone leaving you, but you’re going to do the same exact shit to me.”

CHAPTER 8: “MY EYES MADE OUT A FIGURE COMING TOWARD ME”^{ix}

“No. I’m staying right here. We’re going to find a way for me to talk to my dad from here. You’ll go back to that magic book and I’ll google. If we can’t find anything, we’ll break your magic app boycott and download them all. We’ll find a way for me to ask him why he killed himself— I really do need to know. Only you’ll be next to me the whole time. No leaving.”

“Promise.” Devon pushed her homework aside and went to the bookshelves. Mara grabbed Devon’s laptop and sat on the bed. Everything was silent while the girls poured into their research.

“Devon, do you own a Ouija Board? It looks like that’ll work.”

“My grandmother has one, but nothing in the house.”

“Damn.”

Devon quickly turned pages. “What about a professional quality handheld recorder? There’s a sub chapter in the book instructing the reader how to record spirits talking to you.”

“You really think that works?”

“We could try it”

Mara made a face. “And if it does work, what if the spirit that talks to us is, like, my great great great grandmother or someone and not my dad.”

“It’s a risk.”

“Let’s keep looking... unless you have enough money to pay a psychic. There are a bunch of websites with offers.”

Devon wrinkled her nose. “You really think it’s worth spending the money? I think we’re more in tune than most. We can do this.” Devon pulled another book. “How about a séance?”

“That sounds like it’ll work. What do we need?”

“Do you have something of your dad’s?”

“I almost did.” Mara sighed. “Not without going home first.”

Devon looked up. “How about a picture?”

Mara’s fingers flew over the computer keys. “I could print one off Facebook.”

Devon shrugged. “It’s better if it’s something he’s touched, but we’ll make it work. You print it while I go downstairs for supplies.”

“Supplies?”

Devon listed supplies as she walked, “Salt, certain crystals that I left around, candles, a glass.”

Mara asked, “What do we need a glass for?”

Devon, halfway out the door, didn’t hear her friend.

Mara opened Facebook and looked for a good picture of her father. *One where he’s smiling*, she thought. The further back she scrolled, the less creased his face became. Further still were pictures with clear, unhaunted eyes. Eventually there was a picture from when she was small enough to be lifted onto his shoulders. There he smiled. Mara hit print.

Arm's full, Devon returned. Mara jumped up from the bed and raced to save the falling candles, which she carefully placed on the bed. Devon followed and soon the bed held a glass, four white pillar candles, four large chunks of quartz, several small chunks of black obsidian and the Morton Salt girl.

Devon walked to the center of the room, opened the compass feature on her phone, found exact north and put a candle down. She did the same with south, east and west, creating a sizable square. She put a chunk of quartz down at exact south-east before looking up. "When I'm done, I want you to make a circle around these points with the salt. A thick circle. Use the whole damn bottle. It'll help protect us."

We're going to have a lot of clean up to do before Mrs. Brown comes home, Mara thought. She used her nail to unhook the little metal spout and salt flowed down on the carpet. *When it rains, it pours.*

Careful not to move Mara's salt, Devon used the small black rocks to create a circle just bordering the white ring. "You've got that picture?"

"Right here"

Devon grabbed the glass and sits in the middle of the rings. "The book says to put the glass on a hard surface. Grab something we can use."

Mara looked around the room. Her backpack was the first thing that caught her eye. She opened her bag and took out the first hard backed book her hand reached—*Dante's Inferno.*

"Well, that's an appropriate hard surface if I ever saw one. Pass it here." Devon put the book on the floor and the picture of Mara's father on top of the book. She covered

the face in the picture with the glass. “Light the candles, turn off the lights, and join me in the center.”

Mara plunged the room into near darkness. She tried hard not to move or smug anything as she stepped into the circle. “Now what?”

“We both put our fingers on the glass, super lightly. That way your dad can use the glass to answer. We just need to establish what means yes and what means no.”

“So we just start asking questions?”

“No, we need to make contact first. We’ve both got to concentrate, clear our minds, and ask the elements, the universe, and every deity we can think of to send your dad to us so we can talk to him.”

Mara took a deep breath and tried to clear her mind. *Please work*, she thought over and over until she finally let that thought go as well. Across from her Devon’s eyes darkened until all Mara could see was small dancing flames in her friend’s pupils.

“Spirits of the North and Air, please help us reach the spirits there. Spirits of the South and Fire, please help us find the one we desire. Spirits of the West and Water, please help a father reach his daughter. Spirits of the East and Earth, help Mara find the man that caused her birth.”

Devon seemed to know exactly what to say. Mara’s mind was uselessly blank. The fire in her friend’s eye grew as her gaze moved down toward the man in flames on the book cover under the picture of Mara’s father.

“Persephone, Isis, Inanna. Goddesses and travelers in the land of the dead. Help us reach Samuel Weiss.”

If the flames are growing bigger, why is the room growing colder? Mara felt goosebumps on her arms.

“Orpheus, Odysseus, Virgil, Dante, travelers in the land of the dead. Guide us to Samuel Weiss”

Mara heard footsteps downstairs. *I hope Mrs. Brown doesn't walk in and freak out again.*

“Come to us”

Mara felt vibrations under her. *Am I sitting on my phone?* The crystals that surrounded them shook.

“COME Persephone, Isis, Inanna, Orpheus, Odysseus, Virgil, Dante. Lead Sam Weiss to us.”

The glass began to move— first to the left, then the right. It was cold under Mara's fingers.

“Spirits of the North and Air, Spirits of the South and Fire, Spirits of the West and Water, Spirits of the East and Earth,”

The glass shook and began to let off a humming sound, as if it was crystal and someone was running a wet finger over the lip. It slid off the photo. Mara, finally picking up on the rhythm of Devon's words, chanted with her friend as much as she was able.

“Bring us Persephone, Isis, Inanna, Orpheus, Odysseus, Virgil, Dante. Lead Sam Weiss to us. Lead us to Sam Weiss.”

The glass slid off the photo, seemed to hover, and then slammed into the book. Shards flew upward. The candles flared up enough light that Mara could see their

bleeding fingers dripping onto Mara's copy of the *Inferno*. The floor shook and the candles flared again. Suddenly the carpet around them blazed.

"A blood offering was missing," a male voice spoke with a strong accent like no accent Mara had ever heard before. Mara searched for a face to match the voice. "My assistance did not scare you too much, I hope. A wolf scratched me for my blood offering. It could have been worse." He looked old, both his hair and his short beard were white. He was wearing red robes and some sort of flowy matching turban. One thing was sure, this was not Samuel Weiss.

Mara jumped up. "Who are you?" Mara's voice quivered. "What are you?"

The man bowed his head. "No longer a living man, though I once was. I was a poet, and wrote about my journey through the Inferno. That copy of my poems now covered in glass calls me Dante."

Mara looked down at the glass, confused. "Are you seriously telling me you're from my English book?"

The accented man explained, "The poet Virgil took me on a journey down a road, away from my beasts. You sound like you have some beasts of your own."

She sighed. "I'm so lost."

"Exactly."

Mara shook her head. "No, no. What are you doing here?"

He held a weathered hand out. "You called me."

Her hand moved to her hip. "No, I called my Father."

Dante stared at the book. "I am quite sure you did not."

"We used his picture."

A crooked finger pointed. “On my book.”

“We called his name.”

“And several others,” The finger moved to the man’s chest. “Including my own.”

Mara looked for Devon, who sat trance like, hands still held out as if touching the glass. “I’m so confused.”

Dante held out his hand again, as if expecting Mara to place her hand within it. “I think it best you follow me, as I followed Virgil. I shall be your guide.”

“What?” Mara jumped back a little.

CHAPTER 9: "FOR YOUR OWN GOOD, AND I SHALL BE YOUR GUIDE"^x

Dante lowered his hand. "I can take you to your father, but it will not be pleasant. I would lead you through an eternal place where you shall see tormented souls."

"Tormented?" Her head shook. *No Father, no Ryan, no real mom... I doubt there's a soul more tormented than me.*

Dante shuttered. "You will know what death is from the screams of the souls."

Her body went rigid. "That sounds awful." *Except I'm already screaming, inside.*

He crossed his arms. The sleeves on his robe bunched, hiding his hands. "Your soul is burdened by cowardice." His dark eyes stared into hers. "You are scared."

Her feet stepped back as she nodded. "Who wouldn't be?" *A crazy person who imagines dead poets and cuts herself just to feel. Am I scared? Or is this what I've wanted all along?*

"You do not want to see your father?" Dante's arms lowered.

Daddy really did love me, right? He'll tell me this isn't my fault. He'll make me feel better. "I want to see him more than anything."

Dante circled around her. "Yet you let fear turn you from your noble enterprise?"

Am I scared of the underworld? Of death? And if I am... am I scared enough to let it keep me from Daddy?

"Let me free you from your fear. I am here to guide and protect. I feel pity for your soul."

"Why?"

One of the poet's hands touched his chest. "I, too, have been lost in a dark wood."

Mara glanced at her friend again. Devon's eyes began to clear. She shook her head, looked around, and noticed the fire around them. Her face went white. "What the hell!"

"We need to go," Dante said. As if illustrating his point, the flames around them grew, eating at Devon's bedspread.

Devon leapt up. "My room is on fire!!"

"Dev."

"Are you not seeing the freaking flames?" Her arms flew about her, motioning to the crackling wall around them.

Mara spoke slowly, "Devon, Dante says he wants to take me to the underworld."
And I have to find my father.

Devon's eyes finally left the flames. She noticed the robed ghost standing next to Mara. Her mouth flew open, but no sound came out.

Dante cleared his throat. "Ladies, I do not mean to be rude, but there is not a lot of time for a decision."

"No." Devon grabbed Mara's shoulder. "Mara, what's going on?"

Mara turned toward her friend. "Devon, somehow, because we used that damn book, we called up Dante. He's offering to take me through Hell to my father." Mara paused, taking in the words she just said. She turned back to Dante. "My father's in Hell?" *Why?*

Dante's dark eyes stared straight into Mara. "If someone believes something they did dooms them to Hell, it does. Your father clearly holds guilt over his act."

Mara's face went white. *Poor Daddy!* Heat radiated around her, making the room spin. She was sure she would pass out any second. *If Daddy's in Hell, there's no chance for me. What's the point of anything?*

Devon let go of Mara and moved toward Dante. "What's the catch? In almost every literary example of a journey to the underworld, the character has to sacrifice something."

Mara cut Devon off, "Seriously, Devon?" *Like I have anything left to lose.*

Dante held out a hand, stopping Mara. "I understand her question. I feared my own journey might turn out an act of folly. Your companion is very smart..."

I'm ok with feeling nothing, but the underworld? My father is in real Hell, I'm here in my hell. Anywhere must be better than here.

"...I believe this to be an act for good. I will guide Mara on this arduous road. Worry not, Devon."

Devon grabbed Mara's hand, feeding her strength. "Mara promised she wouldn't leave me."

"I'll come back, Devon." *Maybe.* Mara paused. "I can come back, right?" *If I want to?*

"Always the risk one will not come back, and if one comes back one is always changed by the journey."

Does it matter? "Dev, I've got to find my dad." Mara's eyes begged for understanding.

Devon's eyes were rimmed with tears. "You promised."

Mara plead, "I really need to know why he left." *And why he'd go to Hell. And if I'm better off there, with him.*

Dante held out his hand, reaching for Mara's. "We are running out of time, Mara. We need to leave."

Devon wiped her face. "Can I go too?"

Dante motioned her back. "You are a noble soul, Devon Brown. This need not be your quest though."

"But..."

"I understand the need to talk to one that is not there. You do not share this need." Dante's head slowly moved side to side.

Devon's hands flew out, begging. "I need to know she'll come back!"

"I have such a nature that neither the torments nor the fires of the Inferno offer a threat to me." Dante's long nose twitched. "I cannot promise you the same."

Mara squeaked, "Torments and hellfire?" *Worse than the torments here?*

Dante's arms stretched out as if to engulf the world. "Mara, why are you such a coward in your heart? Be bold and free of all fear. For your father." The poet leaned toward her ear but his voice did not drop in volume. "You yourself asked me to lead you to your father. He is in the Inferno. If you want to speak with him, you must go."

"You won't be alone." Devon snaked her fingers tightly through Mara's. "I accept the risk. I will go too."

The floor under the circle was changing. Mara could see something like a tunnel forming a few steps left of her feet, creating a deep road beneath the earth. Never mind that they were in an attic room and the earth couldn't possibly be beneath them. It made

as much sense in her mind as talking to a dead Italian poet about taking a walk through the underworld.

“If you enter with me we will walk down the vestibule that leads to the Inferno itself. It is nothing but a dark tunnel until we reach the gate. There is no danger until we pass the gate.”

“I won’t let go of your hand, Mara. I promise.”

Mara looked at the walls of flame surrounding her. *I’m already in hell here*, she thought her mind drifting out of the room and back to her mother, her boyfriend, and how utterly alone she felt. *The fire just accents it nicely.*

“What are we waiting for then?” Mara moves forward, into the tunnel, and was immediately engulfed in a tight darkness.

CHAPTER 10: “LEAD ME THERE TO THE PLACE YOU SPOKE ABOUT”^{xi}

Mara crawled forward. She heard Devon and Dante shuffling behind her, but she couldn't see them. In the pitch black, she tried to feel what was coming next. Soft dirt packed under her fingernails, and she could feel bugs living within the earth scrambling to avoid her hands.

“Eww.”

Dante's strangely accented voice told her, “Keep going.”

Light began to filter up ahead. Mara could hear far-off screams, but she was unsure if they were coming from ahead or behind her. She crawled faster. *A hole. There's a hole.* Mara's knees scraped as she made her way closer to the light. She used her arms to pull her body through. It was a tight fit; she had to wiggle. Finally vertical she brushed herself off.

Mara turned in a slow circle, taking in the underworld. Scorched earth surrounded her. It was so warm that just the act of slowly turning caused Mara's t-shirt to become damp with sweat. She squinted. In the distance was an imposing iron gate door connected to nothing. “What's that?” Mara pointed.

The accented voice called from the tunnel, “That is the vestibule that leads to the Inferno itself.”

How does he know what I'm talking about if he can't see it yet? “Why a gate door? There's no actual gate.”

“It is a metaphor. Everyone here is trapped by their internal gates.” The poet’s head poked through the hole. Carefully, he removed his turban. He shook the dirt off before rewrapping the fabric around his dark, close cropped hair.

Like you said Daddy was trapped? I understand why I’d be here, but Daddy?

“You okay, girly?” Devon popped her head out. Her body followed shortly after. Devon dusted her jeans off, but the hot red dust blowing around them replaced the dirt quickly. “Where to?”

Dante pointed off into the distance. “Mara’s father is well beyond the gate. We will have to enter to find him.” Dante beckoned, and the girls followed. The screams grew louder as they moved closer to the gate. Dante motioned toward the sound. “Those sad souls lived only for their own pleasure. Now that they realize their errors, they cry out.”

Mara choked on the dusty air. “My father was a great man. I don’t understand how he could be here.”

Devon looked at the barren desert surrounding them and put a comforting hand on Mara.

Dante’s steps were steady. He did not turn back to look at the girls. “Souls go where they believe they will go.” Dante turned back. He stopped his pace and shook his head. “There are many circles. I know only the ones I visited. Be careful to stay with me. I cannot guide you through the places I do not know. I knew nothing when I wrote the *Inferno*.”

The trio slowed their pace as they moved closer to the dark stone gate. Mara could see a long line of souls— dozens upon dozens of naked, howling figures. *How could*

Daddy believe he belongs here? Mara remembered standing on her father's shoes when he taught her to dance. She remembered the Halloween he stayed up all night to make her a purple pegasus costume. *Any man that wonderful can't believe he deserves this.* As her thoughts drifted, Mara inched closer to the line. The closer she moved the hotter it seemed. Her shirt clung to her damp back.

Dante reached out, grabbing Mara. "Stay on the path."

Mara stepped back toward Dante and Devon. *But don't I belong in line? It's like my mother says, I'm the awful one.* She shook her head and was careful to keep her eyes ahead of her and away from the line of souls as she walked. *Ignore the pull. Ignore your guilt. Focus on Daddy. Daddy teaching you not to talk to strangers. Daddy teaching you to ride a bike. Daddy kissing you after you fell.* After what felt like a million steps, her feet hurt. They didn't seem any closer, and the cries were hard to ignore.

Mara stopped. She sat and removed a boot and rubbed her foot before zipping it back into its leather prison. "This is boring." *And it's so hard to focus when I feel pulled toward the line.*

Devon reached out, mopping Mara's face with a tissue she had in the pocket of her jeans. "What did you expect? Pop through the earth and find your dad having a tea party on the other side? We're trekking through the underworld, girly, not Wonderland."

Dante scratched under his turban. "Your friend is correct. It is a long and arduous road ahead of us."

Mara settled back into walking. She could feel blisters forming under her toes. The dry air smelled like rotting eggs. "What's that inscribed above the gate?" Squinting, she was able to make out the letters set into the black stone.

I AM THE WAY INTO THE DOLEFUL CITY,
 I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL GRIEF,
 I AM THE WAY TO A FORSAKEN RACE.^{xii}

BEFORE ME NOTHING BUT ETERNAL THINGS WERE MADE
 AND I SHALL LAST ETERNALLY.
 ABANDON EVERY HOPE, ALL YOU WHO ENTER.^{xiii}

Mara had never seen anything so awful and intriguing. She had an overwhelming desire to look up the writing on Wikipedia or Spark Notes and find out what other people thought it meant. She reached into her jeans for her phone. Her fingers brushed along an empty seam. “I think I dropped my phone in the tunnel.”

“You really think Verizon has cellular towers in Hell? Hey, Dante! Are there cell phone towers in Hell?”

The confused look on the Italian poet’s face was priceless. “What is this you speak of?”

The girls’ duet of giggles echoed.

The gate cast an ominous shadow as they crossed beneath it. Mara looked back at the letters, distorted and grey on the ground that they spent so much time crossing. *We’ve come a long way.* Turning forward she saw dirt, darker and browner than the dusty stuff they had just crossed, cut off by a river. *And we’re no closer than we were before. Didn’t Dante say he’d take me to Daddy. What’s the holdup?* Shrieks echoed throughout the twilight air. A breeze hit Mara and goosebumps rose on her arms. She rubbed her hands along the raised hairs in an effort to reduce the chill.

Devon’s voice made Mara’s head turn. “Mara, don’t freak, but remember that Tarot reading? I think I understand that six of swords now.”

“What?”

Devon's arms were crossed. She rubbed her hands up and down her elbows. "Remember the card showing a man rowing two figures in a boat? I think that was this." Devon paused and looked forward at the river. "Literally." She shivered and pointed towards the churning black water.

Mara stared at the river a few miles up ahead. *It's so dark there is no way to tell how deep it is.* A small, pointed rowboat, similar to pictures Mara has seen of gondoliers in Italy, rocked in the middle of the lapping water.

Dante spoke loudly so he could be heard clearly above the cries of the dead. "We are almost to the shore of Acheron. Charon will row us across. Devon, he might grumble at you. A good soul never comes to make this crossing." He picked up his pace.

But he won't grumble at me. I belong here. I should turn back to the line and accept the enviable.

Dante turned back to Mara. "I meant no offense."

Mara shrugged. *How can I be offended when it's true? Even my mother would agree.*

The tiny gondola grew bigger as they neared the shore. The figure in the boat was completely cloaked in a dark cloth. No features were visible as he used a long stick to row toward the trio.

With a shaking voice, Devon asked, "Do we need some sort of payment? I know I've read..."

The bottom of Dante's robe streaked with mud as he steps onto the shore. "Greek myth."

Devon slowly put her boot into the mud, joining Dante.

Mara head started hurting. She paused at the edge of the mud. “As fascinating as this pseudo English class is, can we please move on and find my dad.” Her heels sank into the ground, making it hard to walk.

Devon and Dante ended their banter and resumed the trek toward the waters edge. Mara sighed. *I just want to find where I belong or an easy way to talk to my dad, not some evil mud road through the underworld.* Realizing she had no other choice, she trudged harder, trying to catch up. Her legs ached by the time they reach the river.

CHAPTER 11: “ALL THE WAY DOWN TO THIS POINT OF
SPACELESSNESS”^{xiv}

“Charon!” Dante screamed out.

The robed figure slowly rowed the boat onto the muddy shore near them. He held out a wrinkled hand as if it were a stop sign. “You, living souls, get away from this land of the dead. Dante, return from where you came!”

Dante’s thin lips curled into his mouth. “Vuolsi cosi cola dove si puote”

The foreign words brought silence. The boatman’s face was hidden by a hood, but Mara could just make out the anger burning in his eyes. The boat jerked back and forth as if it, too, was shaken by the poet’s comment.

Dante got into the boat with no hesitation. Devon followed cautiously. Head throbbing, legs shaky, Mara no longer felt the determined drive she had when she left Devon’s room. Last in the boat, she curled in a mud covered ball on the floor. *At least I can sit for awhile.* Devon patted Mara’s head. Mara closed her eyes. Rocked by the boat’s motion, Mara ignored the sounds of the underworld. Slowly she drifted into a dreamless sleep.

The boat crashed into the shore, jolting its passengers. The motion woke Mara, who opened her eyes to a glowing light. In the distance she saw acres of lush garden with a castle in the center.

Thinking it must be a mirage, Mara rubbed her eyes. *Can Hell really be this beautiful?* “Please tell me we’re going there.”

Dante offered Mara a hand. She took it and he pulled her upright. “It is one place we will need to pass through.”

“Is Daddy there?” *Because I can understand sending yourself to a place like that.* Mara took a step toward the oasis. The ground beneath her was soft and cool. “It’s so beautiful. Is it really Hell?”

“That is Limbo, where the virtuous atheists rest.” Dante moved a vine out of their path so they could step closer. “I am afraid that is not where we will find your father.”

Mara ducked under Dante’s arm. His loose red sleeve blocked her vision for a moment. “Why not?”

The question went unanswered. Devon put a hand on Mara’s back, guiding her forward. Free from the vines, Mara moved quicker. Flowers in every color imaginable dazzled her eyes. *So many colors. I could spend forever here. Maybe Daddy is somewhere just as great. I can’t blame him for leaving us for a place like this. I’d leave my life for this.* Remembering that this wasn’t supposed to be paradise, Mara stopped for a moment. “But why would atheists be in this underworld? I can’t imagine they believed in this.” She swept her arms around, gesturing to the nature surrounding them.

“This is the closest to Heaven they will allow themselves,” Dante said as he walked past Mara.

Awestruck, Mara slowly moved forward. The grass was wet. Mara couldn’t stop herself from bending down and running her hands over the dew covered blades. *It’s better than the park back home. This is too surreal to be real.* Looking ahead, Mara saw they still had a long way to go. The air was pleasant, and the grass smelled like spring.

The ground dipped down into a small hill. Mara squatted down and rolled away from her guide and her friend.

“Mara, your father is not here.”

Mara looked up at the source of the accented voice. *Wasn't Dante up ahead?* The poet offered a Mara a hand. She took it, and allowed herself to be pulled up. *He's right. I can't get distracted. I can always come back after I find Daddy.* “You lead, I'll follow.”

Devon ran over to Mara and started pulling on her arm. “Mara, look!” Devon pointed at a shady spot in the garden. They were close enough to see individual trees souls crowded under the shade. Mara squinted. They were not close enough for her to make out the individual features of the souls. Devon's finger remained outstretched. “Let's take bets... who do you think is a virtuous atheist?”

Mara shrugged. “Gandhi?”

A small stream blocked their path. Devon jumped over it. “Come on, girly. He was a Hindu, not an atheist.”

Can you stop being a know-it-all just once? Mara took a wide step, joining Devon on the opposite bank.

Devon breathed in the clean spring sent. “I bet we can find George Carlin.” Her pace quickened. She looked around, searching for famous faces.

If only Daddy were here. Mara trailed behind her friend. Her eyes darted about, searching, but not for a face. *Maybe I actually died in that fire, and this is all actually my afterlife. Flowers, green, sunshine...* She turned her face to the warm light and sighed. *It's a lot better than anything I imagined. I could do this forever, minus the walking.*

Mara turned around and saw Dante reluctantly following them into the garden. She turned back toward Devon and was surprised to see the distant castle much more clearly. Devon wasn't looking at Hell's version of Cinderella's castle though; she couldn't keep her eyes away from the people under a particularly large tree. "Look! That man!"

Mara tore her eyes away from the castle. "Who?"

Devon's hand shielded her face from the light. "I think I see Samuel Clemens"

Mara's face lit up at the name Samuel and frowned at Clemens. She twisted her hair and stared. In the distance was a tree that looked nearly the size of the castle. The branches seemed to twist to the top of whatever contained this strange place in which they had landed. "Who?" Mara couldn't make out the features that would differentiate one soul from another, but she could see fruit the size of her head hanging heavy in the dense leaves.

Devon's feet moved quickly toward the group. "Mark Twain."

Mara moved closer to the tree. There was not one group of people, but several. There were too many people to make out exact features, but Mara could tell the basics: height, build, hair color. Some were more distinct than others. "Dante, why, how are they wearing clothes when the souls on line were naked?"

"Once they have crossed over and been sorted, a soul retains some semblance of their living form. Of course, that assumes that form coincides with the souls chosen punishment..."

Dante's lecture continued, but Mara lost interest. She was more interested in the clustered groups under the tree. "Do they know where my father is? Can we go talk to them?" She pointed. Devon bounced with eagerness.

Dante walked quickly toward them. "Do you really want to delay seeing your father?"

Mara's eyes flitted to the tree, almost in reach. *No*. She looked at the castle in the distance. *But it's so pretty here*. "How far until we reach my dad?"

Dante placed a hand on Mara's shoulder. "We have a long way still. I warn you, it is not all like this."

Devon pulled Mara toward the group. "Come on, girly. We've got all night to find your dad. Let's explore just a little..."

Dante removed Devon's arm from Mara and shook his head. "For one smart enough to ask about price and return, are you really going to dally away from the quest? You think the powers that sent you here want to indulge teenage whims? That you are here for pleasure?"

"You stopped on your journey. You asked and learned. Why shouldn't we?" Devon's voice was forceful and her movements were quick. She bolted away from Dante and Mara, racing toward the tree.

Mara looked at Dante. Air hissed out of his pursed lips. "It is dangerous for her to leave you. This is your journey. She is not supposed to be here."

A sense of dread crept into Mara. Quickly, she followed after Devon.

CHAPTER 12: “WHAT SORT OF SOULS ARE THESE YOU SEE AROUND
YOU”^{xv}

Hundreds of conversations echoed from under the leaves. “Excuse me?” Devon called out.

Mara shushed Devon. She reached out to pull her friend back to the safety of their guide, but her arm missed and she fumbled, crashing to the ground. Several of the conversations stopped. Mara could feel her cheeks heat when the quiet souls looked up from their clustered groups. She kept her gaze down as she got back on her feet.

“Comment ca va? Are you ok?”

Mara’s head snapped up. Even though the voice was male, and the accent was perfect, she immediately felt like she was in Ms. Pillot’s class. Three men walked toward her, reminding her she was in a different sort of hell. *A Hell with Daddy. A Hell where I belong.* “Devon, we’ve got to get back to Dante.”

Devon moved closer to Mara. “I’m almost certain that’s Mark Twain,” she whispered.

“Mark Twain speaks French?”

“No. Je suis Michel Foucault.” The bald, academic-looking man walked over to them. “Il est Samuel Clemens.” He pointed to the man in a Civil War era suit that now stood next to him.

“Pardon our interruption.” Dante approached the girls, clearly intent on leading them away from the garden.

“No interruption at all,” The bearded, academic-looking man said with an Irish accent. “You do not appear to belong here though.”

But I feel like I do. “How can you tell?” Mara asked.

“Your energy does not vibrate correctly with this plane.”

“Tell us how you got here,” The Frenchman suggested.

Devon stammered, awestruck to be surrounded by legends whose works she had read. Mara, sensing her friend’s inability, said, “We were at Devon’s house, trying to contact my dead father. Somehow we called up Dante here,” she motioned to their robed guide. “And he lead us through this tunnel that appeared and...”

The bearded man interrupted, “I suspect you transported through a stable, traversable wormhole, and joined us in this area of space-time. Your energy does not vibrate correctly because you do not belong here.” The Irish man turned to his companions, then he continued, “This does create an interesting situation. Since the world is, in some sense, mind-independent, how will outsiders relate within this dimension?”

And, more importantly, where’s my father and do I have to leave?

Dante tried to lead the girls away. Devon ducked under his arm and announced, “You’re John Stewart Bell?”

The Irishman’s lips curled into a smile.

“Your question is intriguing, John,” the Frenchman interjected. “Realism aside, this place certainly exists based off of belief. It is well established that an individual’s belief is what dooms them here.”

Mara moved away from her guide and closer to her friend. “Dante said something about how a soul can’t go somewhere that they don’t believe in. But that doesn’t explain where my father is or how we get to him, or...”

Devon shushed her friend. “Mara, that’s Michel Foucault. Let the man speak.”

“She is right though. A person is punished the way they believe they would be punished.” Michel Foucault paused.

“But my father was an amazing man. Why would he believe he belongs in Hell?”

John Stewart Bell tried to help explain, “Each location within this dimension has a different vibration of energy that acts as a sort of gravity, pulling a soul to the location that resonates best with the guilt it carries.”

Which must be why I feel so pulled toward that line.

Michel Foucault’s eyes wrinkled beneath his glasses as he smiled. “Of course, not everyone believes they are being punished. We see no punishment in our being here.”

“He is in heaven now, and happy; or if not there, he bides in hell and is content; for in that place he will find neither abbot nor yet bishop,”^{xvi} Samuel Clemons quoted himself and the other men laughed.

Mara frowned. “I still don’t understand. Where does someone like Hitler go? How does a good person, like my dad, end up somewhere bad? And how do I get to my dad?”

“We don’t have all of the answers,” Michel Foucault responded. “From what we can tell, the one that initiated the journey controls the journey. You will see what you are most attracted to, what planes vibrate closest to your own. The souls you see are the ones that hold beliefs closest to your own. Since your father raised you, presumably your beliefs would match on some level.”

Can I match Daddy? He was perfect, and I... I probably belong in some dark pit of loneliness where I watch Ryan and some beautiful girl kissing while Mom yells at me.

Mara was so deep in thought, she almost missed Devon ask, “Should we be scared?”

The Frenchman shook his head. “Since everything exists based on belief, the best way to stay safe is to convince yourself that the thing you are experiencing is not real. But be very careful with this. You are still alive. We do not know what would happen to you on this plane if you stopped believing. There are varying accounts of the crossover process. Often there are consequences or complications.”

“We thank you, gentlemen.” Dante bowed his head in a gesture of respect. “We won’t take up any more of your time.”

The men walked back toward the tree. It was obvious that Devon wanted to ask more questions, but Dante held her shoulder firmly. “This way.”

Devon pouted. Mara was reluctant to leave the beauty of the garden, but her desire to find her father was more powerful. She rushed after Dante with Devon silently following. The further they walked, the less light they had to guide them. It was as if the sun set with their steps.

CHAPTER 13: "THERE STANDS MINOS GROTESQUELY, AND HE
SNARLS"^{xvii}

Mara glanced back wistfully toward the brightness. "There's no day or night here."

Dante did not turn back to look at her. "No."

The ground was losing its softness. Sand replaced the dirt and the surrounding vegetation looked uncared for. "Then why does the light change?"

Dante paused. He pointed back toward the light. "Think of what those men said." He lowered his arm and resumed walking. "Most souls in the Inferno believe they deserve punishment. Their will, their vibrations, the very essence of their soul creates that punishment. This is a dark journey, Mara."

Dark like me. I belong here. I should just get in line and...

Devon grabbed her friend's hand. "We've got this." Her hand trembled a little, exposing her fear. In the distance they heard the echoes of wails.

Mara shivered as they walk into the twilight. Overgrown vegetation attacked them from all sides. Mara put out her arm to fend off the thorny vines. Hundreds of tiny cuts appeared on her skin. "How long does this jungle last? When do we get to Daddy?"

Red fabric draped in front of her. Mara looked up. Dante shielded Mara with his arms. "We have some ways to go."

Mara walked beneath the offered protection. "Why did you do it, Dante?"

"Pardon?"

“Agree to be my guide?”

Dante continued to hold back the vine so Devon could pass unscratched. “Virgil led me. It seemed time to return the favor.”

Mara glanced back at her guide. “Really?”

He released the vine. It snapped back. “There is enough pain in the world, Mara. Any time you can ease another’s, you should.”

They walked on, silent. The sand became rocky and sound of the souls grew louder. The vines were thinning. Mara could see the line of naked figures omitting the noise. *Is it a new line, or the same line from before, continued?* The rocks beneath their feet grew sharper. Close enough to smell the odor coming from the souls, Mara covered her face. She started walking, fast. “Why do they smell so bad?” She turned, Devon and Dante were right behind her.

Dante veered around a large rock. “It takes a long time for a soul to make it this far. We are on an,” he paused as he tried to find the right word, “accelerated path.”

“Plus, I imagine not everyone vibrates in a way that allows them to take a shortcut through that garden.”

Mara slowed. “Why do they all stand in line and wait?”

Dante avoided another boulder. “They believe they have to.”

Mara rolled her eyes. “This is crazy! Who decides all this anyhow?”

“Come.” Dante waved the girls forward, following rocks outside the boundaries of the waiting souls.

The line curved many times, as if designed by the same people that create airport security lines. *Trapped in an eternity of waiting.* Mara shuttered. She squinted and could

almost see a large something beyond the twists of people, but she couldn't see it clearly.

“What's that up ahead.”

The poet turned toward Mara. He held a finger to his lips as he whispered,

“Minos.”

Mara turned toward Devon. “What's Minos?”

Dante's voice contained impatience, “If you want to make it through you must be as silent as possible.”

Although Mara believed that nothing could hear them above all the moaning, no one made a sound. Dante lead Devon and Mara through the throng of souls. The naked bodies were packed together tightly. Occasionally one would push another, making the line sway.

“Devon, it's the dirtiest mosh pit ever.”

Mara's whisper was met with a stern look. Devon held a shaking finger to her lips.

They neared the border of the end of the line. Mara could finally see the something beyond the souls. A grotesquely long snake tail changed midway into the body of a bald, snake skinned man. He hissed with a serpent tongue. His huge tail coiled around the closest soul once, twice, three times before squeezing. Mara instantly understood Devon's shaky hand.

Barely louder than a breath, Dante spoke, “When an evil soul appears before Minos, it confesses all. Minos judges the sins.”

Mara moved closer to Dante. “Why the coiling and squeezing?”

Dante's hairless chin grazed Mara's ear. "Minos reads the soul this way. Their vibrations, guilt— whatever word you choose, is how Minos sends the soul to its proper circle."

Mara turned back. The coiled soul had disappeared. Other souls crowded in front of Minos, impatient for their turn. Their weeping confessions echoed in every direction. Dante held a finger to his lips. He beckoned the girls forward. Mara tiptoed, despite the deafening noise.

The serpent man suddenly turned his head. Even the drop of sweat making its way down Mara's spine stopped. The souls became silent.

"You." Minos uncoiled his body and slithered over to Mara. Up close, Mara could see massive shoulders, powerful arms covered a black and tan diamond pattern. Minos pulled his tail up, as if standing. He towered over Mara like a skyscraper. "What are you doing here?"

I don't want to be here anymore. Mara shook. Her voice was gone. She felt dizzy.

"I bring her to this place of pain." Dante appeared, like a magical shield between Mara and Minos.

"And her?" Minos pointed at Devon. Fear lit her eyes as she moved closer to Mara and took her hand. Mara could hear her friend mumble "This isn't real" over and over under her breath.

Dante's voice was steady. "She, too, is with me."

Minos, careful not to harm Dante, moved the poet out of the way. He coiled his tail until he was closer in height to the girls. Mara could feel his hot breath. His forked

tongue flicked out and tasted the air next to her. “Be careful how you enter and whom you trust.”

Dante stepped forward again. “Minos, let us pass.”

Brushing the poet aside with less care than before, Minos thumped his tail. He uncoiled until he stood at full height. A hand snaked around Mara’s waist, lifting her to where she was level with Minos’s round red eyes. “Give me one reason not to coil you up now.”

Ghost white, Mara retorted with false bravado, “You’re just the traffic cop here. I’m guiltless. I won’t vibrate right.”

His laughter hissed around them. The souls around them silently quivered.

Losing her nerve, Mara asked, “If I believed, where would you send me?” Her voice cracked. “How many coils?” *What corner of torture do I deserve?*

The red eyes bulged. “That’s for you to decide. You’ve made no confession to me.”

“Mara!” Without the noise from the souls, Devon’s shocked voice echoed.

Minos turned his scaly body toward her. He lifted her in his other hand. “Good souls do not belong here.” Minos shrank a bit as he placed Devon in the coils of his tail. She shook and chanted, “This isn’t real,” louder. His coils did not tighten. He moved his other hand, the hand holding Mara, toward his tail.

No! Mara struggled, kicking her legs. “Let us go!”

Dante righted himself and rushed forward. “Vuolsi cosi cola dove si puote”

Minos puffed larger. “I have my doubts. Are you confident, Poet, in will and power?” His tongue flicked, catching Dante’s face. The coils around Mara began to

tighten. She wanted to call out, scream, beg, but she couldn't breathe. She turned her head just enough to see that Devon's face was rapidly losing color. Mara tried to convince herself that this wasn't real, but the snake-man's constrictions felt too tight, too real, on her muscles. *I wonder where he'll send us*, Mara thought, just before losing consciousness.

CHAPTER 14: “THE WAY ONE IS WHEN SHAKEN OUT OF SLEEP”^{xviii}

Huge, dark feathers covered a human sized body with Mara’s mother’s face. The bird-monster opened her wings, engulfing everything beneath her in shadow. The edge of the wings held hands with giant talon-claws. The creature scraped her claws at another bird— a small bird with Mara’s face.

The Mara-bird spread her wings. She circled a tall, thin tree before flying in closer. Pine needles fell from dead branches. The bark was scared by teeth marks and scratches. Her father’s voice came out of the pine, “Just a little further, baby.”

Suddenly there was fire all around. Mara turned and Minos stood before her.
“Not so fast.”

“Just a little further...”

A loud, beeping noise blared, as if danger was approaching.

“Don’t crush us! We’re trying to find my father!” Mara flailed her arms and legs in an attempt to fight the danger.

“Mara.”

A hand stroked her arm. She opened her eyes. Sunlight filtered through the windows. *Why am I on the floor? With my English book...* Mara jolted up suddenly. *The room was on fire. Shouldn’t things be... black? Burnt?* “I had the strangest dream.” She moved a crystal away from her elbow. “Deja vu.”

“Look at you, using French so casually!” Devon moved her arm away from Mara and a brilliant stream of color followed the movement. It was as if Devon’s shadow had turned into a rainbow.

Mara’s head began to hum. She blinked several times. From the periphery of her vision, the room began to take on different hues. “There’s something wrong with me.” She felt nauseous.

The colors around Devon changed to waves of bright pink and a very strange muddy grey. Mara tried to focus on the mundane details of her friend: *Devon’s wearing an oversized army green t-shirt. No jewelry or makeup. Strands of her hair are falling out of a small ponytail.* The bright pink and dull grey continued to glow, pulsing slightly with each of Devon’s breaths. Mara’s head throbbed with the pulsing. “My eyes.” She blinked several times. “I’m seeing things.”

“What are you seeing?” The dull grey grew darker.

Mara closed her eyes, unable to concentrate amidst the sea of colors. “It’s hard to explain. Everything is normal, only everything has an extra, colorful shadow thing around it.” Mara paused. “You don’t see it?”

“No, but it sounds like another thing to research.”

“Research?” Mara kicked something. She opened her eyes and stared at a burnt candle nub. “Was any of it real?”

Devon offered her a box of Band-Aids. “Was what real?” Her shadow glow changed to a blend of bright pink and pale yellow, only a touch of grey remained.

Mara closed her eyes again and shook her head. “I dreamt we went to the underworld. It was so weird. This dead poet from my English class...”

“I don’t think you dreamt it.”

Mara opened her eyes to give Devon a cynical look. “If it wasn’t a dream why are there no burn marks?” Mara motioned around the room. When she concentrated the colors were clearer and tighter to the object they shadowed. Her head still hurt, but it stopped throbbing.

Devon knelt. She put a bandage on the skinned knee poking through Mara’s ripped jeans. “If it was a dream, how did we both dream it?”

The colors were still distracting Mara. She had trouble focusing. “What?” Devon repeated herself and Mara shrugged. “Maybe we had the same dream?”

Devon rolled her eyes. “Did you dream about Michel Foucault and Mark Twain?”

Mara gasped. Suddenly she was able to ignore the colors. “You really think we went to the underworld? And we came back?”

“I think mysticism is beyond what humans are able to understand.” Devon stood and stretched.

Mara touched the Band-Aid on her leg. “It wasn’t so bad, you know.” The colors around Devon changed to a muddy blue. She moved away from Mara.

Mara sighed “Come on Dev, It’s relaxed on the whole fire, damnation... It’s nothing like I thought it would be.”

“Girly, we barely got in to the underworld.” Devon's voice shook a little. "We hardly saw anything.”

Mara stood. She winced when she bent her knee. “But what we saw was pretty cool.”

“Probably because we only saw people that didn’t feel guilt.” Devon shook her head. “You feeling better?” Mara nodded. Devon shooed Mara. “Then go shower. We’ll talk in the car.”

Mara walked into her friend’s bathroom and turned on the shower. The water ran over her body. Dirt swirled in the drain. *I swear we went to the underworld last night... and it had a beautiful garden, a castle, and some snake monster that kicked us out before we could reach Daddy.* “Am I crazy?” Taken back by the sound of her own voice, Mara shut the water off. She stepped out onto the memory foam bathmat and wrapped herself in a fluffy towel. The mirrors were fogged, and, somehow, the colors Mara was seeing had faded. Mara sighed in relief. She dried off quickly and returned to Devon’s room.

The carpet was clean and free of crystals. Devon had left a faded superhero t-shirt on the freshly made bed. Mara dug some clean underwear out of her backpack and put the shirt on. She pulled on yesterday’s torn jeans and looked in the mirror. Between the too large t-shirt and the tendrils of hair curling at her forehead, she looked childlike. A pale yellow glow haloed her mirror image, startling her. *What is wrong with me?* Mara squeezed her eyes shut. She breathed deeply and the smell of coffee permeated her nostrils. She opened her eyes. The colors faded, barely noticeable around the room. Mara looked in the mirror again, and was assaulted by the same yellow glow. She shook her head and turned away from the mirror, blinking until the colors faded again. Then she gathered her books and followed the rich scent down the stairs.

Mara expected to find Devon standing between the island and the mahogany cabinets. A French press, filled with black water, sat alone on the granite. “Dev?”

“In here, girly!”

Mara followed the voice through the living room. Her friend was not there.

“Dev?”

“I’ll be right there. Go ahead and start on the coffee.”

Mara returned to the kitchen and looked at the French press. *Too much work*. She dug a Snapple out of the fridge, silently appreciating how Mrs. Brown always stocked her favorite beverages. Ignoring the slight pink glow around the bottle, Mara took a sip. Her phone rang and 'Mom' flashed on the screen. The phone had an odd muddy red glow that Mara found particularly alarming. She flicked the volume button, ending the sound.

Devon walked into the kitchen holding two books, a proud look on her face.

“Look what I found!” She sets the books on the breakfast table. One cover has a picture of their red robed guide. The other depicted a squatting figure engulfed in flames. “It took me forever to find the one with my mom’s old notes.” Devon’s eyes met Mara’s. “You wanted to do research, right?”

Mara looked away from the strange blend of pink, yellow and orange-red surrounding her friend. Instead she traced Dante’s profile. *Someone added a wreath of leaves in his hair*. “You’re positive I’m not crazy?”

Devon grabbed the French press and a mug. She sat. “Do you remember telling me you thought Gandhi was an atheist?”

“Yeah...”

She pressed the plunger. “Did you see him on our journey?”

Mara leaned on the table, rocking on the heels of her boots. “He’s a Hindu. Dante said people go places they believe in. I don’t know what Hindus believe...” She stared straight at Devon, daring the colors around her friend to do something other than glow.

Devon poured herself coffee. She tilted the mug toward Mara in an unspoken question. Mara shook her head. Devon asked, “Did you know any of that yesterday?”

“No, why?”

“Not a dream.” Devon swallowed a sip of coffee before saying, “First, we saw the same things. Second, your unconscious mind can call up prior knowledge, but it can’t take in new information like that.”

Mara rolled her eyes and looked away. “You sound like a textbook.”

“I’ve started researching. Why do you think I look such a mess?” Devon’s hand swept her body, ending with her hair.

Mara braced herself and looked at Devon again. Although she found the glow confusing, she thought the little messy ponytail was cute. “You didn’t shower?”

“Research called”

Mara rubbed her eyes. “You didn’t happen to figure out why I’m seeing colors?”

Devon shook her head. “I didn’t know about the colors until you woke up and told me.”

“How long have you been awake?”

Devon stood. “We’re gonna be late. I’ll tell you more in the car.” She poured her coffee into a travel mug while Mara gathered the last of their things. Devon tucked the two copies of the *Inferno* into her bag and picked up her phone. “I’ve got three missed calls from your mom. You’ve got to call her back before she does something crazy.”

A dull, blood color coated everything for a moment. Mara took a breath, shook her head, and raced outside. She hunched over the Civic, her eyes shut tight. She could

hear Devon lock up and get in the car. When she opened her eyes, the red was gone. She got in the car.

CHAPTER 15: “ALREADY I CAN SEE THE CLEAR GLOW”^{xix}

The dark grey color shadowed Devon again. “You ok? You look sick.” Her hand shot out and touched Mara’s forehead. “You gonna make it?”

“Something’s wrong with my eyes. I’m not sure what.” Mara rubbed her eyes. “It’s got to go away. I’ve got to get through the day or my mother will blame you for my missing school.”

Devon started the car. “Let me tell you what I’ve learned. It might cheer you up.”

Mara stared out the window. The colors were dizzying.

“Dante’s mom, Donna Bella, died before Dante was ten. Remember how he said he understood what it was like to lose a parent?”

Mara shut her eyes. “What does this have to do with anything?”

Devon drummed her thumbs on the steering wheel. “It shows we didn’t dream it. How would we have known that?”

“Did you learn anything useful, Dev? What didn’t we see? Where’s my dad? If we want to go back, do we just put a glass on a book again?”

Devon stared at the road ahead silently.

Mara huffed. “All your studying and you can’t even find useful things!”

Devon's voice was cold. “Last night held a lot of drama, so I’m going to ignore that.”

“Dev.”

Devon slammed on her breaks, narrowly avoiding a bicyclist. “You think you can do better, do it. Start by reading the damn book. Dante writes nine circles.”

Mara opened her eyes, ignored the colors and readjusted her seatbelt. “What are they?”

Ignoring Mara, Devon pulled her car into the tiny student lot. She parked in a space just too tight; the girls had to squeeze out. “I’m not an encyclopedia. I’d have to look.” Devon slammed the car door. “I read it last semester.” She stomped toward the school's entrance.

“Dev.” Mara chased after. She could see brownish waves radiating off Devon. Mara focused on that color, ignoring the sensory overload caused by the crowd. She reached for her friend, trying to calm her.

Devon slowed her steps. “Besides, Dante told us last night he knew nothing when he wrote the *Inferno*.”

Mara touched Devon’s arm. “You’re right. As always, you’re right. I’ll read. Relax.” She held the door open for her friend.

Devon smiled at Mara and the brown changed back to pink. “Maybe I’ll use my world history paper as an excuse to write about different religious beliefs on death. That’ll give us something.” The girls walked into the crimson and gold halls.

Mara focused on her boots clacking on the dull floor. “You’re so smart.” She tried to count how many tiles she walked on in order to drown out the assault of colors.

Devon walked to her locker. “You ok? You don’t look so good.”

Mara looked up. Everything buzzed with extra colors. “I’m still seeing things.”

“I’ll see what I can find about it.” Devon took the two *Infernos* out of her bag.

Mara reached for the books. “Can I have them? Just till the end of the day?”

“Girly, you need to take notes to pass.” Devon did not put the books down.

“With my eyes like this, I can barely focus anyway.” Devon’s colors changed rapidly. Curious if it was because of something she said, Mara quickly readjusted her words. “I’ll find a way out of gym. Read them then.”

Devon waved the books at Mara. “I could always give them to you after lunch.”

Mara gave her a look. Devon handed Mara the books just as the bell rang.

CHAPTER 16: "ONE DAY WE READ TO PASS THE TIME AWAY"^{xx}

The girls rushed to their homerooms. Mara kept her eyes glued to Devon's book. *Page 11 has a list of diagrams and maps. Page 88 has a map of upper hell.* She turned the pages quickly. *Circle 1 is Limbo. We were there, I think. That's the garden? Maybe?* The bell rang. Mara closed the book and raced out the door, intent on making it to chemistry early enough to sit somewhere where Mr. Wolfram wouldn't notice what she was doing. The first one in the room, she took a seat by the large periodic table poster in the back. Mara shot a quick look at the clock before taking out the *Inferno*. She flipped right to page 88. *All these circles sound so judgmental— lust, that'll land you here, gluttony, that'll land you there— Didn't that Foucault guy say something about your guilt or your beliefs or something. How can the system be so... orderly?*

The book closed and began lifting in the air. Harrison stood in front of the desk, holding Mara's copy of *The Inferno*. "Whatcha reading?" He glowed different shades of red, a combination that Mara found particularly repellent. He flipped through the pages.

Mara stood, grabbing for the book. Harrison took full advantage of their height difference and held the book far beyond Mara's grasp.

"Give it back!" She jumped for it.

Harrison held the book higher and ogled Mara as she jumped. "That doesn't look like your shirt, Mara. Didn't sleep at home last night?"

Mara stopped jumping and crossed her arms. Waves of color flew in all directions as the room filled, making her nauseous. "Give me my book." Students gathered around Mara and Harrison, watching. Mara fought the urge to scream.

"I believe Ms. Weiss would like her property back, Mr. Enderlyn."

Mr. Wolfram's monotone had never sounded so beautiful to Mara. Harrison handed over her book. The onlookers took their seats and Mr. Wolfram began writing his notes.

Mara closed her eyes for a moment of relief. *I almost feel bad zoning out now.* Her hand itched for Mrs. Brown's book, but she didn't want to open her eyes again. *Am I going to make it through the day?*

"Ms. Weiss?"

Mara's head shot up and the colors immediately flooded her. Mr. Wolfram's lemon yellow struggled for control over the other colors around him. "Which equation represents the net reaction that occurs when gaseous hydrofluoric acid reacts with solid silicon dioxide?"

Of all the days for him to call on me. Mara's face heated. She squeezed her eyes shut but she couldn't focus enough to think of an answer. "I don't know."

His eyes narrowed. "Then I suggest you open your eyes and pay attention to this class."

Mara began to take notes. Her eyes focused as her world was reduced to the paper in front of her. *I've got to remember that the colors aren't so bad if I focus on inanimate objects.* Her attention drifted from the board to her notes and back. *Hell was much more fun than this. Perhaps there's a circle where they sit around and write numbers and*

equations that they know they'll never use in real life. I wonder if there's a way to ask Dante... Mara looked up for a moment. Everyone around her was writing. The colors were still too much for her. She put her head down and tugged a strand of hair. Is there a way to ask? Or was last night a one-time thing? What if I can never talk to Daddy, all because of that stupid snake thing. Eyes wet, Mara shook her head. There's got to be a way.

The bell rang. Mara jolted up. Mr. Wolfram motioned for her to stay. Tired of lectures about how much her father loved science, she darted past Mr. Wolfram. He called after her but she ignored him. Eyes focused on the floor, Mara raced to French.

Ms. Pillot's usually irritated face changed expression when she saw Mara enter early. She glowed yellow-green. "Bonjour, Mara."

"Bonjour." Mara moved to the back of the room and sat near a shelf that held French-English dictionaries. She pulled out the *Inferno*.

Ms. Pillot coughed. "I'm glad you're early. Are you excited about the project we are starting today?" The yellow-green around Ms. Pillot intensified.

Mara shrugged. *Project? What project?*

The noise of the other students entering caused Ms. Pillot to shift her attention away from Mara. The teacher threw a bright purple scarf over her shoulder and puffed out her chest. "Bonjour class. Je vais vous donner un projet. Aujourd'hui, nous allons aller a la salle d'informatique."

A hand near Mara's desk shot up. "Repetez, s'il vous plait, parlez anglais?"

Mara's eyes followed the turquoise arc until she was staring at the speaker—a pretty redhead whose name Mara did not know offhand. The girl smiled at Mara.

Ms. Pillot sighed. Like a punctured balloon, she physically deflated. “Je vais vous donner un projet. I am giving you a project.” Her voice was slow, her accent exaggerated. “Aujourd’hui, today, nous allons aller, we are going to go, a la salle d’informatique, to the computer lab. Tous ensemble!”

The chairs around Mara scraped the linoleum floor. Mara stood. She grabbed the handout that somehow ended up on her desk; beneath a slew of directions were the words Ivory Coast. She followed the line off to the computer lab, eyes down to avoid the onslaught of colors from the other students. Mara sat at her assigned computer and googled Ivory Coast. She wrote **in Africa, capital Yamoussoukro, protectorate of France 1843-44, colony in 1893**, but her pen fell as soon as Ms. Pillot walked away.

Mara looked around the room before opening a new search window. She typed **seeing colors** into the Google search box. The first item was a Wikipedia article on synesthesia that didn’t have any of the answers that Mara wanted. She changed her search: **seeing colors around people** and clicked on the first article, observing aura color. *Aura reflects the essence of a person—their thoughts, feelings, health, behavior. There are seven layers to an aura...* Mara looked up and focused on the redhead with the turquoise glow. Vaguely, beneath the turquoise, Mara could make out a pale yellow color. She did not see seven layers.

“Mara, que recherchez-vous upsurge?” Ms. Pillot stood over Mara. The teacher adjusted her glasses as she tried to read the computer screen. “That does not look like the Ivory Coast.”

“Je suis desole.” Mara apologized and quickly clicked back to her Ivory Coast search. She picked up her pen and Ms. Pillot walked away. Mara opened a new tab and

searched auras. *Color meanings... seems turquoise shows that someone is compassionate. Makes sense I'd be curious about someone with that color.*

“French too advanced for you? You have to revert to learning colors?” Cecile glowed a muddy green tinged with a muddy blue. Mara was getting the sense that she wanted to avoid anyone with a color she sensed as muddy.

“Langu, Cecile!” Ms. Pillot marched over. Mara closed out of her aura search. Cecile whined, “Ms. Pillot, Mara isn’t doing the assignment. She’s looking up colors.”

Mara turned around calmly. “Cecile was looking at prom dresses. I thought we were done researching for the day.”

Cecile hissed like a teakettle and her glow darkened. “At least I wear my own clothes!”

Mara looked down and rubbed her fingers over the tears in her jeans. Her cheeks tinged pink.

Angry enough to forget to speak French, Ms. Pillot interjected, “If you ladies can’t do the assignment here, perhaps you would like to do it after school.”

In unison Mara and Cecile mumbled, “Je suis desole.” Ms. Pillot stood over them for the remainder of the class. Mara took notes on the Ivory Coasts’ Pre-Islamic periods, governments and civil wars. Occasionally she would glance at Cecile and wonder if the muddy green could be some cliché version of envy. *But what could she possibly be jealous of me for?* The minutes ticked past painfully.

The bell rang. Mara gathered her things quickly. She kept her head down and her steps quick until she crossed the cafeteria's double doors. Devon wasn't at the table so Mara shut her eyes.

CHAPTER 17: “LEAVE HERE THROUGH HIS MERIT OR WITH ANOTHER’S
HELP”^{xxi}

“You ok?”

The voice was Devon’s, so Mara didn’t bother opening her eyes. “I’m still seeing colors. I think they might be auras.”

“Hmm. And it hurts?”

Mara opened her eyes. “Mostly it’s distracting and confusing.”

A muddy grey shot through Devon’s pink glow. “Want me to get you food?”

Mara closed her eyes again. “An iced green tea.”

Devon’s voice was stern, “No, to eat.”

Mara laid her head on the table. “I’m not hungry.”

Devon walked away. A few moments passed before she came back and handed Mara a cup. “Did you ever think you might be seeing things because you never eat?”

Hands on her temples, Mara opened her eyes.

“I’m worried about you.” The grey intensified when Devon said worried. She speared some of her salad and held the fork out.

Mara shook her head. “I’m fine.” She took a sip of her tea. The icy liquid cooled the burning feeling in her throat. “You staying late again?”

Devon blew on a spoonful of soup. “Not today. Why, you want a lift to wherever you’re trying to meet Ryan? Or we can swing by Ezra’s Starbucks.”

“Actually, I was thinking we should try again.”

Devon's muddy grey turned to a bright metallic silver. She stirred her soup before meeting Mara's eyes. "Try what?"

Mara leaned toward her friend and whispered, "Going back." She looked around, nervous someone had heard them. Then she shut her eyes.

"I was thinking about getting my grandmother's Ouija board. We can try our luck with that. Seems safer than our séance."

Mara opened her eyes and looked pleadingly at her friend. "No Dev, going back."

Devon sat silently, slurping her soup. Mara concentrated on the fake wood grain laminated onto the table until Devon said, "It wasn't exactly safe. Or fun."

"The garden," Mara sighed.

"The giant snake." Devon's voice was full of ambivalence.

Mara reached out, grabbing Devon's arm. "Come on, Dev. Consider high school. At least in real Hell there's someone I want to make contact with."

Devon's colors darkened again. She pushed Mara away. "And the Ouija board..."

"No, I want real contact." Mara's voice was firm.

Their display gathered eyes from several nearby tables. Waves of colors rolled toward Mara. Her face paled and she put her head in her hands.

Devon propped Mara up and grabbed both of their bags. "Let's take you to the nurse. You weren't going to go to gym anyway."

With Devon's help, Mara made her way out of the cafeteria. She stopped once they were in the hall. "I'm ok now. It's just... too much color at once. I can't explain it." She looked at the tile as she turned down the hall. "Besides, I must have walked a million miles last night. That ought to count for gym credit."

Devon smiled tightly at Mara, but Mara could somehow sense concern contained in her friend's muddy grey shadow. Once they walked into the nurse's office, even the nurse seemed to sense it. The kind woman didn't even ask what was wrong, she just lead Mara to a cot. "Do you need a blanket, dear?"

Mara closed her eyes. "Actually, can I call home?" Devon gasped and Mara opened her eyes. "I don't think I can make it through the day."

"And you think home is the place to be?"

Mara opened her eyes and was assaulted by the muddy grey growing darker around her friend. She eyed the nurse. The woman glowed a brilliant blue.

"You can always rest here a bit. See if you feel better before you call?" The nurse stroked Mara's back a few times. Mara closed her eyes again. The sent of Lemon Lysol helped calm her. She put her head down on a scratchy pillow. The nurse walked back to her desk.

Devon set Mara's bag down. "I'm going to go to class. I'll meet you after school if you're still here?"

"Sure." Mara heard Devon's steps as she walked out of the office. She heard the nurse's fingers clack on a computer keyboard. The bell rang once, and again five minutes later. Mara opened her eyes. In the stillness of the nurse's office, the colors faded. She pulled out her phone. She noticed a text from Ryan asking if she was free later. The text was followed by a series of emojis, like some sort of modern hieroglyphics. Mara was tired of deciphering Ryan. *Devon would tell me to play hard-to-get. Be smart for once.* With an unsteady hand, Mara closed the text box and opened an internet search. She stopped herself from reopening the text and typed **journeys to hell** into the search bar

instead. After several bizarre looking YouTube videos, she found an article titled Voyages to Hell. She clicked it. *Different religions have different myths where a hero journeys to the underworld, seeking an object or a loved one.* She saw links for Osiris, Dionysus, Heracles, Persephone, Orpheus. Remembering the name Orpheus, she stopped scrolling and clicked on the link and skimmed the page. *Greek musician. Attempted to bring Eurydice, his beloved, back from the dead.*

Mara gasped. *Can you do that?* The phone dropped from her hand. She looked at the nurse, certain the noise would bring her over. The older woman sat at her desk, typing away. Mara sighed in relief. She returned her attention to the list and saw the name Inanna. *Another name from last night!* She clicked the link. *Sumerian goddess. Goes to visit her sister. Is stripped of one item at each gate until she is naked. Her sister kills her. Two creature-things are able to bring her back to life.* Mara could feel her heartbeat in her earlobes. *That's two. What if I can bring Daddy back?* She returned to the list, clicking frantically. *Dionysus rescues Semele. Heracles rescues Theseus, Hermes rescues Persephone, Lemminkainen's mother rescues him... If there are that many stories, it must be possible.*

Mara heard the nurse's clacking steps coming toward her, so she hid her phone in the gauzy pillow cover.

"Feeling better, dear? Ready to talk about whatever made your friend so worried about you?" She sat on Mara's cot, practically covering the small bed in her blue glow.

Mara stared at nurse's dress pants, focusing on the stark contrast between their navy color and the white sheets. "I just have a really bad headache. It's not so bad here,

but I'm worried lots of voices might make it come back." She tried to meet the nurse's eyes, but the blue glow was too distracting. Mara quickly shut her eyes again.

"I notice you spend a lot of time in here." There was an awkward pause before the nurse asked, "Is everything ok?" She put a comforting hand on Mara's shoulder.

Mara squirmed out from under the hand. She gathered her things quickly. "The bell's about to ring."

"What about your headache?" The nurse smiled. "Believe it or not, I understand."

CHAPTER 18: “O SHE, COMPASSIONATE, WHO MOVED TO HELP ME”^{xxii}

Mara paused, unsure what to do. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I find that very hard to believe.”

The blue glow around the nurse intensified. “Let’s see if I can convince you then.” She patted the space next to her. Unsure of what else to do Mara sat back on the cot. The nurse continued, “Did you ever notice that I never question you staying here? I never call home, or push you back to class, or....”

Mara cut in, “I really appreciate that, really. I get your point. I should push myself more. I’ll just be going and...”

“Let’s try this again.... Say I had a friend once, and that friend was really good at understanding people’s moods. Almost like she could see them. Only that understanding made her feel confused, even sick, when she first noticed it. Am I right so far.”

What?

The bell rang. Mara stood and the nurse patted the cot again. “Well?”

“I really should get to my English class.”

“So your system can overload again? Why not rest just a little more. I’ll write you a pass if you decide to go later.” She stood. “I’m going to leave you alone. When you’re ready to talk, I’ll be at my desk.”

The nurse has gone crazy. My one safe place in school, and I’m trapped in it. The late bell rang. Mara stared at the ceiling wondering how to get herself out of this mess. If

I call my mother, she'll think I'm trying to get out of that... damn.... that frigging date she has planned for tonight. I can't. A tear fell into Mara's ear.

"I can teach you, you know."

The nurse was back. Mara wasn't sure how long she had been watching her.

"Teach me what?" She blotted her eyes.

"How to keep from feeling sick." She sat back down on the cot.

"I know. I need to eat..." Mara paused. *Remember who you're talking to!* "Better, take vitamins, exercise."

"Those are all good things, but they're not what I was thinking." The nurse paused. She looked at the shut door before asking, "I'm a bright blue, right?" Her voice was just above a whisper.

Mara's mouth gapped open.

The nurse smiled again. "I've been waiting for you to wake up."

No. "But how did you..."

"I could see the potential. You just needed to connect to it."

"But how? You don't even know me..." *Except that I spend almost every gym period hiding here!* "No offense."

The smile widened. "None taken."

Mara stammered, "I don't even know your name."

"It's Katharine dear. People like us, we've got to stick together." The nurse stood. "I'm going to give you a moment to take this all in. When you're ready, come to my desk."

Katharine's shoes clacked toward the desk. Mara didn't watch her leave. *All this time I've been in here, she's known? That doesn't make any sense. None of this happened until after Dante...* Mara jolted up. *Does she know about THAT too?*

Mara practically ran to the nurse's desk. "Do you know how this happened?"

Katharine motioned to a chair on the other side of her desk. She waited for Mara to sit before she answered, "I'm not sure, exactly. You've probably always been more in tune than most, but you held yourself back from your potential. I imagine you've had signs before this. Dreams that came true or a strong intuition about something."

Mara thought about her recent dreams— her father and her dancing while her dress bled, her mother as a bird attacking her— and shuttered. "What is it?"

"The colors?" Katharine shrugged. "Some think it's electro-photonic vibrations. Some think it's an individual's atmosphere. Basically you're able to see a person's energy."

Like the vibrations last night. Mara leaned in. She kept her voice low. "What do the colors mean?"

The nurse shook her head. "I don't know. Nobody knows exactly. I'm sure you've found stuff on the Web, but, honestly, I've always gone by how the colors make me feel." She looked around the room and glanced out of the window on the door before saying, "Do you want to try it?"

Without meaning to, Mara made a face. "Try what?"

Katharine stood and walked toward the door. "Let's see if we can figure it out together." She motioned Mara to follow her. "Once you can sense the emotion attached to

the energy, once your mind knows the emotion isn't yours, you won't find it so overwhelming.”

Still half shocked at what was happening, Mara got up and stood next to the nurse.

The nurse opened her office door and whispered, “Coach Lewis is about to walk by. Tell me what you see.”

Mara focused on the figure walking toward the nurse's office. His crimson track suit was surrounded by a mix of forest green, muddy brown, and grey. Mara told Katharine the colors she saw.

“Don't see. It's the seeing that's making you ill. Feel.”

Mara tried to feel toward Coach Lewis. “He's dissatisfied. It's eating him. He used to be happy, especially when he ran on trails and now....” Mara shook her head. “No. I can't know that. I'm just making stuff up. It's like when I people watch and make up stories.”

Katharine looked encouragingly at Mara. “You'd be surprised how accurate that so-called story was.”

Silently, they watched the coach walk past them. At the end of the hall, he turned left.

“School's almost over. Try to find a quiet place, a place without too many people. Keep trying to feel, Don't second guess your intuition so much. Focus on feeling the colors instead of seeing them.” Katharine paused. She scribbled something on a sticky note and handed it to Mara. “My personal cell number, if you should need me.” The bell rang. “Go, before the hall crowds and you get overwhelmed again.”

Mara grabbed her bag, smiled at Katharine, and raced out into the hallway.

Safely past the school's main doors, Mara pulled out her phone to text Devon.

Ryan's text was still there, waiting to be answered, and there was a voicemail from her mother as well. Following Katharine's advice to avoid crowds, Mara walked away from the school before listening to the voicemail. "I need you home by 7 for our double date tonight. Call me when you get this."

Mara touched the callback button on the screen. Her mother answered on the third ring. "I got your voicemail. I'm alive."

"Where were you last night?" Through the phone Mara could hear her mother's frown.

"I was at Devon's." Mara could sense the disapproving undertones in the silence that followed. She couldn't resist taunting "We held a seance and raised the dead."

The voice on the other end got angry. "Don't you lie to me, young lady. I don't appreciate your sarcasm."

Mara quickly changed the topic. "Mom, Mrs. Brown said I could stay with them till Sunday. Can I? I'll come by for our date and leave after?"

"You're grounded."

"Since when?"

"I just grounded you."

Mara took a deep breath. She tried to keep her voice calm. "Just think how nice and quiet the house will be without me."

"If you're not home by 6:45, you'll never leave the house again!"

“Thanks, Mom. You’re the best.” Mara hung up before her mom had time to realize she had inadvertently agreed.

A car honked. Mara looked up as Devon pulled up beside her. Devon’s pink glow was amplified by the car’s dark interior. “You skipped out early. Need a lift?”

Mara leaned into the window. “You don’t care if I crash with you for a few days?” Mara twisted her hair and tried to feel the pink.

Devon smiled. “Na. Mi casa es su casa. Want a lift there now?”

The sidewalk around them was filling up as students filed out. Mara began to feel overwhelmed again and decided to heed Katharine’s warning. “I think I’m gonna go somewhere to be alone for a bit. Mom wants me home for that date tonight. After?”

Mara felt the concern coming off of Devon as soon as she mentioned the date. She didn’t even have to look to know her friend’s colors had changed.

“You sure you don’t want company while you’re alone?”

Mara took her arms off the window. “You don’t have to worry. I’m not doing anything stupid.”

Devon leaned toward her friend. Concern swirled around her. “What are you doing?”

Mara closed her eyes and took a deep breath before explaining. “I’m trying to get my head around this color thing.”

“So, maybe I can help.” In the silence that followed her offer, Devon tapped her fingers on the steering wheel. Finally she asked, “Want a lift somewhere?”

Mara shrugged. “The library?”

Devon unlocked the car doors. “You’re not hoping to meet up with Ryan, are you?” The concern around her darkened.

Mara slid in and buckled her seatbelt. “He texted me, but no. Right now I really do want quiet.”

“So you’re blowing me off? Maybe I was ready to give in and try again.”

Mara could feel the hurt rolling off her friend. “Were you?”

Devon wrinkled her nose. “No, but all Ryan does is stand you up and act like an ass.”

“I’m not meeting him.” Mara sighed.

Devon shook her head. “Do yourself a favor, let him make the first move this time.”

“Fine. Come see for yourself. Just bring your homework or something so I can have quiet.”

The concern dissipated. “If that’s what you want.”

They drove in comfortable silence. As soon as Devon parked, Mara left the car and walked toward the grass. She crossed the small bridge that led to the park behind the library. Without people to overwhelm her senses, her thoughts drifted to memories of a time when she used to come here with her dad. *He would lift me on his shoulders and put me down by the stream that connects to the park. I’d balance on rocks or race over the bridge before some imagined troll would snatch me. He’d meet me on the other side and, laughing, I’d run into his arms again. That was all once upon a time, when life was good.* She found her favorite bench and sat. Devon did not call out or run; she seemed to respect Mara’s desire for quiet. Mara watched the changes in Devon’s glow and tried to feel

instead of see. *Seems her only concern is Ryan. So long as there's no Ryan, she's happy to give me space.*

The large concrete path around the duckpond was nearly empty— only two power walkers did laps. Mara tried to feel their colors rather than see them. The woman pumping her arms too hard was pregnant. She hadn't told her friend yet because she was worried what the friend would say. The other woman had a new boyfriend, but hadn't told the friend yet for similar reasons. *I can't possibly know this. I've got to be making it up.* Mara glanced through the leaves hanging above her. The birds glowed a variety of earthy tones. Most, Mara sensed, were hungry.

It didn't take long for Mara to become restless. She felt less overwhelmed, but there were hardly any people to overwhelm her senses. As if Devon somehow knew Mara's exact tolerance, she chose that moment to join Mara on the bench. "We have time to try again before you need to be home for your date. Maybe if we reach your dad, he'll give you some perspective."

After a moment of silence Mara declared, "We need more salt."

CHAPTER 19: “INTO THE SECOND ROUND THAT HOLDS LESS SPACE”^{xxiii}

They walked back to the car. Mara kept her eyes glued to the passing colors as Devon drove to Trader Joe’s, but she struggled to feel anything through the window.

Devon parked. “You want to run in with me, or stay here?”

Mara shrugged. Devon went in to grab salt. Mara watched a little kid seated in a shopping cart. As soon as she rolled down the window of car, she sensed his disappointment—he had been denied a package of cookies. *Oh for life to be that simple again!*

The locks clicked. Devon got in the car and handed Mara the salt. “I’m not sure this will work during the day. And we’re lacking the... motivation... we had last night.” Hesitance colored Devon’s glow.

“I’m plenty motivated.” Mara shot her friend a dark look.

“My calves are still sore.” Devon sighed. “You sure you don’t want to just get my grandmother’s Ouija board?”

“Would you please drive back to your house?” Mara held up the salt. “I’m positive we have everything we need.”

Devon nervously tapped on the steering wheel. “New topic?”

“Let’s just sit quiet for a minute.” Mara watched the houses blur together as they drove across town. *We’ll bring Daddy back. He’ll make everything better, somehow.* Her body rocked when Devon stopped in the driveway.

Devon looked at the car's clock. "We've got about an hour before I should take you home." She got out of the car. "You really want to try this whole revisit Hell thing now?" Devon's colors were a tight ball of anxiety, fear, and guilt.

Mara twisted her hair. "You're just trying to distract me. Make me feel better about my date."

Devon jiggled her keys. "Caught. You gonna let that stop you from getting what you want?"

Mara took the keys. "Not today." She broke into a huge grin before racing into the house and up the stairs.

Devon chased after her friend, salt in hand. "We don't have a lot of time."

"It'll be enough. Or I'll trade a hellish date for a date in Hell." Mara smiled at her own joke. "What from last night is usable?"

They looked around the room. The crystals seemed a little smudgy, but otherwise the same. The candles were burnt to the end of the wick. The glass shards were in the garbage can, the mirror destroyed. Still radiating ambivalence, Devon went downstairs to get a glass and new candles. Mara began to put the crystals in a circle.

"Are you using a compass?" Devon entered the room and dropped the candles on the bed.

Mara smacked herself on the forehead. "No, crap!"

"Here, dump everything on the bed and let me." Devon picked a chunk of quartz up off of the bed. She opened the compass feature on her phone, found exact northeast and put the quartz down on the carpet. Her glow regained some of its pink as she moved. She followed the same steps with northwest, southeast and southwest, creating a sizable

square. She picked up a candle from the bed and put it down at exact south before looking up. “You can start pouring the salt.”

Mara stopped watching her friend. She grabbed the salt from the bed and unhooked the little metal spout. Slowly, she walked in a circle around Devon. Salt rained down on the carpet.

Devon grabbed the small black rocks and used them to create a larger, surrounding circle. She walked back to the bed and grabbed the glass. Careful not to move Mara’s salt, Devon walked into the circle and sat in the middle of the rings. “Don’t forget to grab the *Inferno*.”

Mara opened her backpack and took out both copies of Dante’s *Inferno*.

“Which one?” She held them up.

Devon shrugged. “Whichever. I can’t imagine it matters.”

Mara choose the copy they used the last time. She carried it into the circle as if it were precious. Devon took the book out of Mara’s hands and placed it in her lap. She put the glass on top of it.

Mara sat. She reached her fingertips out so they lightly brush Devon’s.

“Remember, clear your mind.” Devon’s aura swirled colors. Mara was certain her friend’s mind was not clear.

“You too, Dev.” Suddenly, Mara jumped up and glass tumbled between her legs. “Blood” Sensing Devon’s confusion, Mara spat out an explanation. “Dante said something about a blood offering.”

Devon's eyes narrowed and her aura muddied. “I don’t remember that.”

“You were all zen and frozen.” Mara moved around the room, looking for a sharp object. She reached into her backpack and pulled out a tiny Swiss Army keychain.

“In your backpack? Seriously? You carry that around school all day? No wonder you’re so...”

“Drop it, Dev.” Mara stepped into the circle. She pull out a small, thin blade and ran it across her palm before holding it out to Devon. “Your turn.”

Looking like she ate a lemon, Devon pinched the knife, holding it with two fingers.

Come on, Devon.”

Devon ran the blade along her palm. She hissed and held her hand upside down, shaking it over the book.

The girls looked at each other. Mara nodded at Devon. “Spirits of the North and Air, please help us reach the spirits there. Spirits of the South and Fire, please help us find the one we desire. Spirits of the West and Water, please help a father reach his daughter. Spirits of the East and Earth, help us find the man that caused Mara’s birth.”

Impressed by Mara’s memory, Devon smiled. They continued chanting in unison, but the room remained warm. The candle flame was steady. Mara chanted a little louder. “COME Persephone, Isis, Inanna, Orpheus, Odysseus, Virgil, Dante.” Mara shot Devon an expectant look. Devon raised the volume of her voice. “Lead Sam Weiss to us.” Mara chanted louder still, “Spirits of the...” She noticed Devon was not chanting with her. “Dev?”

Devon stood up. “It’s not working.” She seemed pleased by their failure.

Mara looked around the room, desperate to see anything that might contradict her friend. The sun was setting, casting reds and purples through the windows. The carpet surrounding them was white, fluffy, and most defiantly not on fire.

“We just need to try harder.” Mara scrunched her face, trying to will her body to conjure up some magic. “Spirits of the North and Air...”

Devon put her hands on Mara’s shoulders. “Maybe it was just a one time thing.”

Mara doubled over as if the air had been let out of her. “But I did all this research...”

Devon patted the back Mara’s t-shirt. “Let’s go meet up with Ez and get some coffee. You can tell me what you found, then...”

Mara sat up. “I’m not a child, Dev, you don’t have to always treat me like one.”

Devon crossed her arms. “What would you like to do then?”

Mara didn’t need to feel Devon’s aura to understand her friend’s frustration with her. She looked around the room one more time before sighing. “Fine, I give up. Let’s clean up and you can take me home. I have that hot date, remember?” Devon offered her a hand, but Mara pushed herself upright without help. A bitter taste in her mouth, Mara went downstairs to get the vacuum.

The girls cleaned in silence.

Crystals in hand, Mara drifted over to the bookshelf. She ran her hands down the wooden planks before placing the rocks next to a pile of hardcovers. “I looked up those names we chanted. Did you know most of those myths talk about bring someone back from Hell?”

The vacuum fell to the floor. Devon radiated shock and fear.

“I mean,” Mara gestured around the room. “This didn’t work, so who says anything else will.”

Arms crossed, Devon asked, “Did you think we were bringing your dad back?”

Mara accidentally let out a small noise.

“Girly, that’s impossible.” She shook her head slowly.

Mara looked Devon right in the eyes. “So’s calling up the dead. So’s visiting Hell.”

The girls stared at each other, unmoving. The silence became uncomfortable.

Devon shivered slightly. “You really want me to drive you home?”

Mara sighed. “I can’t avoid it forever.”

There was another silent pause before the girls went down the stairs and toward the door.

They climbed into the Civic. Devon drove cautiously through the end of rush hour traffic. Staring out the car window, thinking of her failure, Mara twirled her hair. Tightly packed cars waited in a neat line, trying to merge. “These lines of cars remind you of anything?” Devon shook her head. Mara cleared her throat. “Come on. Lines of people waiting forever to get to a more permanent destination...”

Devon took her eyes off the road for just a moment. “Maybe you should try to let it go.” Mara pouted. Devon ignored her. “We tried to go back. It didn’t work. Maybe it was a fluke. Maybe I’m wrong and it was a dream.”

“I don’t believe you. You’re always the one to look things up, see what’s possible, and then believe in it. I do all this research, and...”

“Relax.”

“No, you relax. You’re always talking about Tarot and palm reading and crystals. We finally do something cool and...” Mara’s voice trailed off, allowing the uncomfortable silence to return.

Devon drummed her fingers against the wheel. She took a few deep breaths. “You’re right, girly. You’re right. We’ll try again. Some other time. Right now, I’ve got to drop you off in a different nightmare.” She shut the car off and stared at the oversized house in front of them.

“Look, I’m sorry.” Devon reached for Mara, who avoided the contact. Devon unlocked the doors. “Call me when you need me. You’re still crashing, right?”

Mara watched love and worry swirl around Devon until the pink and grey tie-dye became too much to look at. “I can’t stay mad at you, Dev. You’re family. But I need your help. You’ve got to try harder next time.”

Devon hugged her friend. “I will. Call me.”

CHAPTER 20: “THAT GAUDY BEAST, WILD IN ITS SPOTTED PELT”^{xxiv}

Mara got out of the car and walked onto the porch. She turned her key and quickly moved up the stairs and into her room. A dry-cleaning bag laid on her bed. The plastic sheathed a short, pale pink dress with a black ribbon sash. *She can't expect me to wear this.* “Mom?”

There was no response. Reluctantly, Mara entered her mother's room. As soon as she opened the door, she could hear the shower running. She walked back to her room, grabbed her bathrobe, and headed for the sterile gray bathroom just outside her bedroom. Mara grabbed an old towel and plopped it on the end of the stone counter. Multiple mirrored walls created an army of Maras. She tried to avoid seeing the dark circles, like old eyeliner smeared around her eyes, but her image echoed to infinity. Each mirror girl reached for a pair of tweezers and plucked one stray eyebrow hair before reaching for the shower knob, fogging themselves into obscurity.

Mara showered quickly. She hated shutting her eyes, the loudness of the water when she washed her hair. Mara heard the door creak open, so she shut off the water and pulled the bathrobe around herself.

Susan slid in. Not one hair on her head dared to be out of place. “Did you get that mess of hair you always leave out of the drain?” Holding her silky bathrobe closed, Susan sat on the closed toilet lid. The humid air around her glowed red tinged with black. Mara didn't want to feel what was beneath the colors.

Mara wrapped her hair in a towel and closed the shower door. “I did, Mother.”

“Did you see the dress I left you?” Her voice was deceptively sweet.

Mara stepped out of the shower. “Isn’t it a bit much for a Thursday?” She grabbed for her toothbrush.

In the mirror, Susan’s dark eyes followed Mara’s movements, inspecting. “Its exactly what a young lady should wear on a nice date.” The red color surrounding Susan deepened. “I spent good money on it. A thank you would be nice.”

Mara sighed and gave a perfunctory, “Thanks.”

Susan began to walk toward the door. “I expect your best behavior tonight.” She turned back, locking Mara in her stern glare. “A little flirting won’t kill you.” She began fussing with her hair in the mirror. “And don’t start that ‘I have a boyfriend’ garbage again. You’re young.” She ran her hands over the silk that encased her body, accentuating her thin frame. “You’ve got to use your youth to your advantage. It’s not a lasting commodity.” As abruptly as she walked in, Susan left Mara alone in the bathroom.

Mara balled her fists and swallowed back a scream. She stomped into her room and threw on the frilly pink dress. Then she marched back to the bathroom and assembled her arsenal— overpriced curl defining gel, skin perfecting cream, plumping lipstick, super-lash mascara. *By the time I’m done I’ll be as fake as she wants me to be.* Satisfied with the doll like state of her face and hair, Mara went back to her bedroom and searched for a cleavage enhancing bra and the highest heels she could walk in. She studied the final results in the mirror, mentally pronouncing herself hooker-bridesmaid Barbie. She teetered out into the hall to show Susan how well she could listen.

Susan was waiting downstairs in a black dress with a pink sash, a perfect reverse of Mara's. "See, that's better." Her eyes narrowed as Mara sat on the couch. "Watch your posture, slumping makes you look heavier."

A moment later the doorbell rang. Mara stood to answer it but Susan stopped her. "A lady should always look busy." Her lips mouthed numbers and it took Mara a moment to realize she was silently counting. At thirty the bell rang again. Susan motioned to Mara to answer it before running off to the kitchen to hide.

A dashing man with thick black hair, greying at the temples, held out a bouquet of multicolored roses. His glow and his smile held the insincerity of a political candidate. "You must be Mara. You look just like your mother."

Mara wasn't sure how to respond to what the man must have meant as a compliment.

Harrison stood behind the man. Sheepishly he held out a smaller, matching bouquet to Mara. "My uncle picked these..." The man in the dark suit nudged his nephew and Harrison glowed with embarrassment. "These are for you, Mara."

The broad shouldered man in the crisp suit handed Mara his bouquet as well. "Is your mother ready?"

Susan took this as her cue for an entrance. She glided in and took the flowers from Mara, pausing to smell them and smile at their suitors. "I'll just put these in water and we can go." She rushed back to the kitchen, motioning at Mara to take the men out onto the porch. Moments later Susan sauntered out the door glowing. There was a limo waiting in the driveway; the driver held the door open for them as they climbed in.

The handsome man in the suit put an arm around Susan before offering Mara his hand. “We haven’t properly met yet. I’m James. I’ve heard wonderful things about you Mara.”

Mara couldn’t explain what it was about James’s orange glow that made him seem smarmy, but she felt she shouldn’t trust him.

James shot Harrison a look and Harrison draped an arm over Mara’s shoulder, but, thankfully, did not pull her in close. Mara wasn’t sure she could manage a closer proximity to Harrison while her mother snuggled with her slick boyfriend. She might throw up.

Susan purred, “Where are we going?”

James smiled charmingly. “Out for a wonderful evening. Would you like a glass of champagne?”

Mara managed to wiggle away from Harrison’s arm as the adults linked arms and toasted. He leaned over and whispered, “Look, let’s just be civil, alright? It’s one evening. You can go back to hating me tomorrow.” He glowed with sincerity.

Disarmed, Mara smiled at him. “So long as you promise to tell everyone I was horrid. I have a reputation to uphold.” The smile faded. “Besides, Cecile already has it out for me.”

Harrison leaned into the leather upholstery. “That’s my fault. We were dating, and...”

Mara cut him off. “I don’t really care about the dramas of the young and the wealthy. Let’s just call a temporary truce?”

They shook hands. Susan looked up from her conversation and smiled. “I see you kids are getting along better.”

Locked in Susan’s stare, Mara flushed pink. Harrison’s glow changed almost immediately, which made Mara worried that he interpreted her blush incorrectly. Before she could set him straight, the car stopped. Through the tinted windows Mara could see white letters spelling out The Capital Grille. Susan’s eyes lit up. Even though Mara didn’t want to read her mother’s emotions, she could practically taste the desperate hope pulsing around her. The driver rushed to open the door for them.

“At least you’ll get a good meal out of this.” Harrison whispered to her as they exited the car.

Rich wood paneled the interior of the restaurant. The hostess smiled and greeted the Enderlyn men by name before ushering all four of them over to a circular booth. James smiled and nodded as Susan sat and placed a napkin in her lap. Mara slid next to her mother. Harrison and James sat on the ends, effectively trapping the women in the booth. A waiter came by quickly with an offering of bread and water. Mara clenched and unclenched her hands under the table.

“It’s a bit much for a Thursday night forced date,” Harrison whispered into Mara’s hair. Hesitantly, she nodded agreement. He stood. “Would you mind if we left you two? I’m sure you wouldn’t mind dining alone. I’ll make sure Mara eats and gets home safely.”

Pleasure radiated off of Susan. “That’s so sweet of you, Harrison. Chivalry must run in your family.”

Mara rolled her eyes at the thickness of the insincere pleasantries flying about, but she pasted on a smile and held out her hand. “It was a pleasure meeting you, James.”

“And you, Mara.” James winked at his nephew. “Have fun.”

CHAPTER 21: “WE WERE ALONE, INNOCENT OF SUSPICION”^{xxv}

Not liking the colors she saw, Mara kept her eyes on Harrison’s shiny black shoes on the deep red carpet. She did not look up again until they were out of the restaurant.

“Well, that was awkward.”

Harrison unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. “Where to?” The colors around him changed too rapidly for Mara to feel them correctly.

“Can we just call it a night? You’ve been surprisingly decent, but this whole thing really isn’t...”

The colors darkened with Harrison’s displeasure. “It’s still early.”

“Look, I’ve had a really awful day and...”

“It won’t kill you to have dinner with me.”

“Food isn’t really my thing.”

“What if we just chill. I know where there’s a party. A small group of select people, very cool...”

There was something off about his aura, but Mara couldn’t tell exactly what it was. *If I blow him off, mom will rip into me forever.* Mara sighed. *An hour or two won’t kill me. Plus, maybe Ryan will hear about this and get jealous and...* “Ok.”

Harrison made a quick call and the limo came back. In silence, they rode to a subdivision where all of the giant brick houses looked exactly the same. The driver stopped at one and held open the door for them. Harrison lead Mara to the pool around

the back. He turned on some music, threw off his shoes and socks, rolled up his pants, sat next to the pool and plunged his feet into the water. He patted the stone next to him.

“Come join me.”

Hesitantly, Mara sat. Harrison brushed his hand against Mara’s. She scooted an inch away from him. “Good music.”

“You like classic rock?” He nodded along to the beat. “I’m a fan.”

Mara nodded along with him. *When are other people coming?* “Cool house.”

Harrison smiled. “Especially since my folks are gone so much.” His glow became murky.

Recalling that murky was bad, Mara shifted uncomfortably. “Good deal.”

“I can give you a tour.” Harrison nodded his head toward the house.

Mara put her feet in the water and splashed them around “Maybe later. I’m digging the pool.”

Harrison put a hand on the small of her back. “We could always go for a swim.”

Mara opened her mouth to proclaim her lack of bathing-suit, but quickly realized that that was exactly what Harrison had in mind. She shook her head no and, hoping she could turn the evening around, pulled out her phone to text Ryan an s.o.s.

“I’ve got some excellent music inside if you like classic rock.” He leaned into her hair and inhaled. “On vinyl. It’s kinda awesome.”

The feelings coming off Harrison made Mara gag. She leaned away from him.

“So...where is everyone else?”

He shrugged. "Who knows. They'll come when they come." He stood and grabbed her wrists to pull her up. "Let me show you these records." Gently, Harrison pushed Mara toward the deck.

Mara was about to text Devon an s.o.s when Ryan texted back asking her location. For a moment, Mara's smile was genuine. "What's the address here? Maybe I'll invite some friends to join us."

Harrison stopped at the door of the house. "Don't put your shoes on, leave them here. My Mom's a nut." He crossed the threshold and dumped his shoes on a small throw rug. "Come on." Harrison motioned up a staircase.

Mara did not get a good feeling from the glow surrounding him. She held up her phone. "Your address? I want to invite Devon to join us." Mara stepped onto the stairs and felt Harrison's eyes on her rear. She glared down at him.

"Why don't we wait and see who joins us. Not all of my friends get along with her." He smiled insincerely.

Mara took another step up. "Why is that?" At the top of the stairs, she stopped.

"She never told you about that time..." Without finishing the sentence, he steered Mara into his bedroom.

Shocked that she had entered this alternate universe, Mara took in this stranger's space. The catalogue perfect furniture was a light oak color and looked as manly as a twelve-year-old dressed in a Sunday suit. A black light hung above the bed, and a poster below it. *Harrison added to his mother's decor.* He sat on the bed; Mara watched his squinty eyes reflect in the floor to ceiling mirror that created a closet door. Not wanting

to look at herself, she let her eyes drift to the night table with the phone and alarm clock on it— 8:15.

Harrison patted the space next to him. “Come sit.”

Mara took a step back. “I don’t know how much longer I can stay.”

He reached for her arm. “Come on, your mom won’t mind.”

“When did you tell the others to come?” Mara’s voice was shaky. She could feel Harrison’s bad intentions radiating off of him. *This was a mistake.*

Harrison pulled her to him. “Two can be a small party.”

She pushed away. “I’m really not...” She couldn’t talk while he was kissing her. She tried to push him away, but he leaned his weight into her, knocking her back. His hands tangled in her hair. She tried to roll away, but the heavy body on top of her was still kissing her. *Get off me, asshole!* His hands moved toward the hem of her dress.

Mara thought fast. “You know what would be super fun? Why don’t I tie you up?”

A wicked grin tugged at the corners of Harrison’s mouth. “I always knew you were a wild one.”

She wiggled out from under him. “You don’t have any neckties, do you?”

Harrison motioned to the mirrored door. Mara opened it and walked in. Ignoring the hanging shirts, pants, and suits, Mara grabbed four ties and said a quick, silent prayer that her plan would work.

Imitating her mother, she sauntered over to the bed and grabbed the edge of Harrison’s shirt. “Lie down.” He happily complied. Mara carefully tied his hands to the headboard and his feet to the metal that held the box spring.

Bound, he squirmed with anticipation. “Now what?”

Mara looks Harrison in the eyes. “What’s the address here?” She backed toward the door.

Harrison’s eyes grew round with panic. “Where are you going?”

“I’m just grabbing another necktie.” Mara went back to the closet. She tied the silk over Harrison’s eyes before tiptoeing out of the room. *I wonder how long it’ll take him to realize I left.*

CHAPTER 22: “NOW HERE, THEN THERE, AND UP AND DOWN, IT DRIVES
THEM”^{xxvi}

Mara made her way down the stairs and back toward the roosters. She slid her feet back into her heels, opened the door, and quickly clicked it shut behind her. As soon as she was on the deck, she called Ryan. “Save me!”

“Okay, drama queen. Where are you?”

Mara looked up at the stars, willing the tears to wait. “Ryan, you don’t understand. This guy...” She hiccuped back a sob.

“Text me the address.”

Mara pulled out her phone and opened the maps app. She texted Ryan the address that popped up and then waited on the curb, twisting her tear dampened hair. *How do I always get myself into these messes? What’s wrong with me?*

It seemed a long wait before Ryan arrived. Mara was sure Harrison would escape and come after her any moment. Thankfully, Ryan’s ancient Ford Mustang finally rumbled to a stop on the narrow road. White paint flaked away as Mara opened the passenger door. Ryan ignored her; instead he smacked a cellophane wrapped cigarette pack into his palm. He glowed a dark blue with a muddy grey overlay that gave Mara a bad feeling. Nevertheless, she tried to hug him. Smoke got in her eyes.

Mara coughed. “What happened yesterday?”

He exhaled another stream of smoke. “Hi. It’s nice to see you too.”

“Of course, it’s nice to see you. Thank you for rescuing me.” She tried to hug him again.

He shifted in his seat. Mara got the sense that he couldn’t wait to be somewhere else. “How’d you end up stranded out here?”

Mara began telling him about the date her mother forced her to go on, but Ryan’s phone buzzed. He interrupted her story to answer the text and his colors changed momentarily.

Mara leaned over, trying to see the screen. “Who is it?”

“Nosey, aren’t you?” His colors became dark and murky as he put the phone away. He touched her knee. “Mara, I came to get you. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

Mara twisted her hair. Ryan grabbed his phone and resumed typing. Attempting to get his attention, Mara tried to kiss him again.

“Mara, I’m trying to do something. Stop.” His glow was so dark, it was nearly black.

Mara held her empty hand out to Ryan. “Give me one.” Metal clicked against metal as Ryan light a cigarette for her. Mara stared at Harrison’s house and took a long drag. “We should go before...” Mara turned back to Ryan, who was still typing. “If you’re just going to ignore me, why did you come?”

He touched her shoulder. “I like you, Mara.”

She shifted closer to him. “I love you, Ryan.”

Ryan scooted back and started the car. “Mara, let’s talk.”

Ignoring the warnings vibrating off of him, Mara snuggled closer to Ryan. “I don’t want to talk at all.”

He pushed her away and began to drive. "I can't do this."

"Ryan." Mara reached for his hand. He glowed darkly and pulled his hand away.

"Fine, let's talk."

There was a long pause. Ryan flicked ash off his cigarette. "I'm thinking of leaving town."

Mara pouted. "And do what?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. Join the army?"

Mara's nose wrinkled. "You'd fail any drug test they gave."

Ryan's glow changed to an angry red. "Way to support the dream."

They sat silently for a moment before Mara tried to regain ground. "Remember that time you tried to work for the airlines? You wouldn't call me back, and I got desperate and had Ez call you pretending to be a manager from Jet Blue..."

He cut her off. "See, that's the shit I'm talking about."

Mara tried to ignore the angry vibrations and cuddle into his body, but Ryan's hands remained on the wheel at ten and two.

"Earlier you texted you loved me." Mara grabbed for his hand again, but his aura warned her away. "Where would you go?"

He stared at the road ahead. "I have an ex in Florida. I could move in with her." He glanced at her distraught face. "Don't give me all of that now. Didn't I just pick you up from another guy's house?"

Mara sat silently. She counted the white lines ahead in order to keep from crying.

After a few moments, Ryan asked, "How's Devon? Did she tell you we met up the other day?"

Mara turned to face him. He was an indecipherable mix of emotions. “You think Florida will give you what you need?”

“Mara.”

“I give you anything I have... anything... what more do you want?” She was near tears. Ryan didn’t answer, so Mara tried to read his energy. “I’m not some little girl.” Mara shifted her arms to accentuate her cleavage.

Ryan shook his head. “Mara, look at you. You can’t even take care of yourself.” He knotted his fingers around the wheel. “We’ve done this enough times. I leave, come back, you cling and act all weird...”

Mara stared at her lap and picked at her cuticles.

“I’ve tried so hard to do this the nice way...” Ryan’s phone rang. His glow changed as he answered it. “I’ll be there in five.” He hung up.

“You’re leaving NOW?!?”

“I’m dropping you off at Devon’s first.” He said, pulling on to Devon’s street. “I’m over your clingy bullshit Mara. Making me feel like I need to care for you by starving yourself.” Anger radiated off of him. “You were never supposed to be more than a temporary distraction. We’ve got almost nothing in common. You don’t even really know me.”

“Ryan...”

“Let me talk. Stop making it all about you.” He turned into Devon’s driveway. “I can’t imagine anyone putting up with your crap.” He grunted with frustration. “You’re delusional, Mara.”

Mara twisted her hair, now wet from her tears.

“Go find someone your own age to date.” He gave her a side glance. “Maybe not that guy I just picked you up from, but someone.” Ryan shut off the car. “Try to be a kid again.” He glared expectantly at Mara.

Mara grabbed the door handle, then turned back toward Ryan. She studied his face and realized there was nothing she could say. She stormed into Devon’s house, ran up the stairs, and collapsed on her friend’s bed in a ball of tears. She heard Devon come into the room, but she didn’t look up.

“What happened?”

Mara struggled to catch her breath enough to speak. “The date was awful. Harrison was actually kind of ok at first. He got me away from my mom and out of this too fancy restaurant and so when he invited me to a party and I figured it’d be ok and maybe make Ryan jealous and stuff, only Harrison turned all rapisty, and...”

Devon glowed with concern. “Girly, you get yourself into the craziest messes.”

“Dev, you’re missing the point.” Mara’s face flushed with anger. “I thought Ryan came to rescue me, but then he broke up with me.”

Devon cleared her throat. “It’s been a rough night, girly. I’m sorry.”

“Seriously, rough as Hell.” Mara let out laugh. “I take it back. Hell wasn’t this rough.”

Devon stroked Mara’s arm. “We’ll find a way to get to your dad.”

Mara wiggled upright. “I’m sure there are ways we haven’t tried yet.” Her voice was flat.

Concern radiated off of Devon. “Exactly. Safe ways.”

Mara put her head on Devon's shoulder. "I'm so tired of guys leaving. Maybe I'll become a lesbian."

Devon didn't laugh. "You are so much better off without Ryan."

Wistfully, Mara announced, "He could come back."

"You'd want him to?" Devon scooted away from Mara. Still staring at her friend, she walked over to her bookshelf. "Aren't you tired of it?" She grabbed her Tarot cards off a shelf. "Pick a card."

"Seriously?"

Cards in hand, Devon moved toward Mara. "Yeah."

Mara chose the one that glowed the brightest. She turned over the Devil. She imagined the lovers chained to the throne to be Ryan and herself before handing the card to Devon. "It's a sign."

Devon walked the deck back to the shelf. "You really want to try again?"

Mara sighed. "I've got nothing left to lose."

Devon put the cards back. "Only if you make me a promise." She looked at Mara as if she could see through her. "If we fail, you're not going to jump off the deep end."

"I've had enough swimming pools for one night." Mara stood.

Devon gave Mara a quizzical look before stating, "I'm serious. I'm really worried here."

Mara walked over to her friend and hugged her. "I know you are. But I love you too much to promise something I'm not sure about."

Devon broke their embrace. She paced the room, concern and fear clinging to her.

Mara threw up her hands. “Look, as long as I have hope, it’s all good... So let’s give me something to hope for. Let’s try to raise us a dead poet!”

CHAPTER 23: “UPON THE BRINK OF GRIEF’S ABYSMAL VALLEY”^{xxvii}

Devon stopped pacing. “I don’t know if I should hug you or strangle you.”

“Then don’t.”

“I did your research. Turns out, we might be able to use a mirror to scry our way to Dante.”

“How does that work?”

“You place a personal item of the dead person in front of a mirror. Light candles. Crystal. A lot repeats.” Mara gave Devon a *get-to-it* look. “You think about the person you are trying to contact. You ask them to come to you. Eventually you’re supposed to see the mirror cloud over.” Devon sat on the bed. “The cloudy mirror works like a portal, allowing the ghost to come through.”

Mara curled up next to Devon. “So we could bring my dad back.”

“He’d be a spirit, no body.”

“Dante felt pretty real when he grabbed us!”

Devon pushed off the bed and gathers crystals and candles from around the room. “Mara, do you want to try to call up Dante to visit your dad, or do you want to try to raise your father up from the dead like Frankenstein?”

Mara swatted at Devon. “You just want to see the atheists again.”

Devon batted her away and grabbed the salt. “If the princess wouldn’t mind?” She held the container out to Mara.

Mara rolled off the bed, held out the ends of her dress, and curtsied. “Where should I make the circle?”

Devon dragged a floor length standing mirror to the center of the room. “We’ll use this.”

Mara made a salt circle while Devon set up candles and crystals. “What do we use for a personal item?” She stepped into the circle.

Devon grabbed the *Inferno* before joining her friend in front of the mirror. “Let’s both hold it. I think that’ll make for better energy.” Both girls touched the hardcover. “No words this time, we just stare and focus. Keep your thoughts on Dante and off your dad, or who knows what’ll happen.”

Mara tried to envision Dante’s robe. She tried to picture his short beard and weird turban hat, tried to hear his accent. From the corner of her eye Mara could see something moving in the mirror, but she couldn’t make out what it was. She tried to focus harder, and recalled how Dante mentioned seeing a faint figure moving towards him the first time he met Virgil.

The room chilled. The mirror was no longer a cloudy grey, but a midnight black. Lightning streaked beneath the surface. Mara swore she could hear the booming thunder following it. Refusing to lose focus, she tried to recall Dante’s actual words, but she could only remember him saying he was lost in a dark wood.

“Girly?” Devon’s voice held fear.

“Shh, we’re supposed to concentrate.” Lightning hit the bed. Flaming feathers flew around the room. Mara’s concentration broke just as an old man in a toga emerged through the glass. His short hair was wreathed in leaves.

He glowed a blinding white. “How dare you?” His accent was unlike anything Mara had ever heard before. “You think you can raise the dead? Your hubris will be your undoing.” Lightning flashed again, striking and breaking the mirror. “You can call up nothing, you who try to endeavor through God’s realms without a Godly intent.”

“Please, sir,” Devon stammered.

“Silence!” His voice boomed like thunder. “I assure you, Dante’s journey was divinely blessed. He took pity on you and used his blessing to earn you a chance. You refused to listen. You learned nothing.”

“Who are you?” Mara asked, regaining her voice.

He pointed to the *Inferno*. “I’ve led this journey before.”

Devon’s mouth fell open. “Virgil?”

Mara begged, “Virgil, sir, I want to learn. Please take me back.”

His form became translucent, matching his white glow. “You have no regard for your life?”

“My life is awful, sir. My..”

“Silence.” He moved toward the largest mirror shard. “I’ve seen you. Scared, dumb, selfish, no love of learning. No. I will not guide you.” He stood on the glass.

“But... Please...”

The mirror sucked up his ghostly form. He was gone.

Tears streamed down Mara’s face. “He’s gone. Everyone always leaves me.” She caught her reflection in the broken mirror bits. “This time I know it was me.”

Devon rushed over to hug her. “What does a ghost know anyway?”

Mara shook her head. "I can't do this anymore." She ran downstairs to the kitchen. She grabbed the sharpest looking knife she could find, took it up to Devon's bathroom, and clicked the lock. Devon banged at the door.

Mara striped off her dress and stood before the mirror. Letting the blade kiss her belly, she drew her arm down. A thin red line ran left to right. Her reflection smiled just a little.

"What are you doing?" Devon pounded harder. "Talk to me, Mara!"

Mara readjusted the knife before he ran it in the opposite direction. Her stomach was a bleeding X.

The door clicked open, a nail hung out of the hole in the doorknob.

Devon gasped. Tears tracked down her face. "You promised you wouldn't do anything stupid."

In the mirror, Mara could see a dark glow surrounding her. Blood ran along her pale skin. Her voice was hollow, "Didn't you hear Virgil, everything I do is stupid." She sat on the counter, putting a bloody hand on the mirror for support.

Devon sat next to Mara. Gently, she took the knife away. She wiped away tears, leaving wet fingerprints on everything she touched. "Think of all the research you did today. You're the furthest from stupid..."

Mara pushed away from Devon. "Even Dante stood me up. I'm nothing. Good for gossip, but not much else. Just a sad little girl lost without her daddy." Mara cried chest heaving sobs. Devon held her and cried with her.

If they could have seen the mirror behind them, they would know it had turned a strange, dark, cloudy gray.

“Two more years, girly. Just two more years.”

“I need something now. I can’t hold out two more years.” Mara’s whole body shook. “I really thought I’d find him. I really thought he’d make things better.” Her tears slowed. “I also thought Ryan loved me.” She curled into herself, head touching her knees. “I’m so lost. I have no idea what to do anymore.”

She moved her head to look at Devon, but her eye caught a red robed figure, barely visible in the foggy mirror. “*What the?*” It took her brain several seconds to process. “*Dante? Is that Dante? Please be Dante! Please come to us. Help us.*”

A light mist started to fill the bathroom, as if the shower had been on too long.

Transfixed, Mara spoke to the mirror, “Please, if it’s you, I’ve never been more lost. It’s so dark.... I can’t imagine death could be worse. Take pity on me once more. Take me to my father. You can leave me there if you’d like, just guide me to him. Please.”

Clearer, closer in the glass, the red robed figure held out an arm. The arm pushed through the mirror and touched Mara. “Poor girl.” He patted her back before pulling himself completely out of the mirror. “I apologize for my teacher. I do not believe you to be dumb or selfish, Mara. Just in need of guidance.”

She stared at his glow, as bright and white as his teacher’s, as she wiped her face dry. “So You’ll guide us? You’ll take us back again?”

His dark eyes stared into hers. “What is your goal, Mara?”

Mara spat out the first answer that popped into her head, “To find Daddy, of course.”

Dante folded his arms. “You believe that to be true?”

Mara considered everything that has happened while slowly putting the awful dress back on. She thought about her mother, Harrison, Ryan, and the garden in the underworld. She lied smoothly, “Yes, that is the only reason.”

“Very well then.” Dante held a hand toward Devon. “I suppose you would like to join us again.”

Devon paled a little. Mara could practically taste her friend’s hesitation. “You don’t have to, Dev.”

“But... you’ll...” Slowly, Devon nodded at Dante. “I’ll go.”

“Then follow.” Dante moved through the mirror.

CHAPTER 24: “THIS WAY I WENT, DESCENDING”^{xxviii}

Mara pushed her arms and legs through what seemed like an endless sea of metallic jello. Panicked, she wondered how long she could hold her breath. The blubbery substance around her kept her from moving faster, and she had no idea how far she needed to go. Muscles straining, Mara struggled through the sticky mess, finally emerging in a line of naked souls. The stench of warm bodies standing for who knows how many years was powerful. Mara stared at the skeletal body closest to her to distract herself from the smell. Muddy colors swirled in every direction, making it hard for Mara to perceive of what the glow meant. She felt sharp rocks dig into the soles of her feet and realized she forgot to grab shoes.

Suddenly Mara could sense Devon close by. She moved through the waiting souls, gross obstacles in her path to Devon. Sweat dripped down her dress. As she shoved toward her friend, Mara could see the snake skinned, and tailed, man. All at once, she realized, “We’re back by Minos!”

“Shhh,” Devon hissed at her, clearly scared.

“How do we get past him?” Mara tried to see ahead, but the swirls of color were thicker here, like a dense fog.

“Where’s Dante?” Devon asked in a small whisper.

As if the name conjured him, Dante put a hand on Mara’s arm. “We need to slip out of line and around him.” He motioned the girls to follow. Pebbles rumbled as they

move, but the screams from the center souls cover the noise. Dante turned toward the girls and held a finger to his pale lips. Suddenly, a huge hand snaked around Mara's waist, lifting her until she was face to face with Minos.

With the fog of colors now beneath her, Mara could suddenly breathe. She looked down at the throng surrounding Minos's coiled body, but the colors were so dense that she couldn't pick Dante and Devon out from the crowd. She raised her head until she was level with Minos's round red eyes.

"You." Minos lowered his bald, black and tan diamond patterned, head in a bow. "Are you enjoying my gift?"

Gift? Mara's face betrayed her confusion.

"You can see the vibrations, as I do." He paused. His forked tongue flicked out and tasted the air next to her. "You still do not understand them. Try with me." He thumped his tail and it landed next to a young woman with particularly beautiful hair covering most of her nakedness. He wrapped his tail around her and lifted her away from the others. "What do you see?"

Without the distractions of the other colors Mara could see layer upon layer of color around the woman. When she tried to feel, as Katharine had suggested, it was as if she was watching a movie montage of the most emotionally charged moments of this woman's life. She was reliving a meeting the woman attended and felt the waves of guilt the woman had for prioritizing work over family— especially since that meeting took place while her sister gave birth, dying along with the child due to complications. As the guilt flooded Mara, Minos squeezed his tail and the woman disappeared.

The crushing guilt dissipated as soon as the woman vanished. “Is that what you do?”

Minos bowed his head again. “Learn to use my gift. It will help you on your journey, but do not let it make you overconfident.” He uncoiled his body until Mara was level with Dante and Devon again, then he released her. “You three may pass.” He held his arm out and the nearby souls parted, making a path.

Glowing with fear, Devon practically raced away; Dante was not far behind her. Mara turned back to say goodbye to Minos, but he had already resumed his duties reading the souls. She rushed to catch up to her companions, and yelled as the rocks cut into her feet. “Can you slow down!”

Devon glared at Mara. Dante held a finger to his lips.

“Oh come on. Minos and I are friends.” The rocks beneath her feet were slowly shrinking to gravel. “Really I don’t think this place is as bad as you think.”

The howls were growing fainter, making it easier to hear Devon whisper, “You’ve seen movies! You NEVER say things like that. You’re jinxing us!” The fearful part of her glow grew bigger.

Dante pointed to a colorless, sandy, wasteland a few miles away. “We are closest now to the lustful.”

Mara glanced down at her disheveled dress and shuttered.

It grew darker as they walked forward. A hot wind blew in Mara’s face. The gust stung her eyes with sand, making it impossible to see anything, even the colors clearly. Chains rattled in the distance. Mara lifted a hand to shield her eyes and she could see her own colors resonate with the place. They swirled with the atmosphere until she could see

Ryan's name flying in the sand in calligraphic letters. She followed Dante and Devon slowly, the wind a wall pushing against all three of them.

Devon grabbed her hand tightly. "Mara, this seems like the kind of place we should run through, not linger in."

Mara squinted as bits of dust flew into her face. Clanging metal overpowered her ears. The wind pounded Mara's body. Her eyes watered and blur. Feeling her feet lift, Mara grabbed Dante's sleeve. "I can hardly walk."

Devon's hands tightened to a vice like grip. "I've got you, girly."

Pelted with bits of sand, Mara turned her head this way and that. "I feel like I'm going to be blown away any minute."

Dante's robes fluttered behind his thin frame like a flag. He spoke, but Mara could barely hear him over the wind, now carrying the sounds of a thousand arguments. Dante licked the tip of his index finger and held it up. "Wait. Ground your feet."

Glowing with concern and fear, Devon squeezed Mara's hand. Suddenly there was pressure on her back and Mara was able to right her posture.

Dante undid his turban. He shook sand out of his short, white hair before retying it. "Warring winds attack from both sides. We have a few minutes before the Northern wind gains strength and blows us backwards."

Devon pulled Mara's arm. "We should use these minutes to get as far away as possible!"

Mara only half heard Devon. Sight no longer impaired, she looked around at miles of dirt, sand, and boulders scattered about. The boulders glowed with different shades of regret and shame. Mara squinted and was able to see chains attached to each

boulder. Without the whooshing and clanging, shrill arguments echoed throughout the flat brown expanse. “Why the chains?”

Dante began walking forward. “Part of their punishment.”

The studious quality returned to Devon’s voice as she asked, “You said this was an area for people that felt guilty over lust.” She motioned toward a boulder. “So is this like the ball and chain cliché? Or is it so they can’t be blown away.”

Mara squinted. She was barely able to make out two people, each had a chain loosely looped around their neck that connected to a boulder. “Dev, it kinda looks like that Tarot card...”

Devon narrows her blue eyes, trying to see. “Which?”

Mara took another step forward. “What’s the one with the lovers with chains around them?”

“The Devil.”

Mara looked around the dark, earthen landscape and grinned. “Ha, fitting.”

“More than you know, Mara.” Dante motioned about. “Feel how it vibrates.”

Mara immediately shivered. Dante was right. This did not feel like a place for laughter. It felt like the place where hopes and dreams died. The longer she stared at the chained couple the more she felt the wistful hope of any sort of life with Ryan vanish. It was as if she were trapped in his car, stuck feeling the moment when he told her she was temporary, she didn’t know him, she’s delusional. She felt a rage unlike anything she had ever felt before— a mix of jealousy, anger, and a general sense of entitlement to whatever she wanted— but she also felt as if she were shattering. She felt as if she had been made hard and broken all at once.

The dueling winds began to pick up. Mara's hair smacked her face, drawing her out of her head. "Dante, are the punished souls the people we see, or are the souls the rocks and the people memories?"

Dante touched Mara's shoulder. "We must go now, before the Southern wind picks up again."

Mara and Devon raced forward as fast as they could manage. Dante glided in pace with them. The winds started to change. The three travelers clung together, fighting to stay on the ground.

"Hold hands!" Devon shouted over the howling.

They grabbed hands just as they were lifted up.

CHAPTER 25: “WHEN THE SLIMY CERBERUS CAUGHT SIGHT OF US”^{xxix}

Mara held tight to Devon and Dante. As suddenly as they were lifted, they were dropped. They fell in a pile of cold, sludgy mud. “Gross!” Mara lifted a hand covered in grey brown goo. A mix of snow and rain fell down from a seemingly endless smog cloud above them. Occasionally a chunk of ice hit them. Mara’s lifted hand collected the falling slush. “This is disgusting!”

Dante scooped up a fistful of the frozen mud. He balled it up, as if it were a snowball. Dante threw the filthy goo ball. Mara watched its arc, wondering what Dante was trying to hit. She heard it thud, but she couldn’t see more than a few feet away. From out of nowhere, a giant three-headed dog ran toward their path. *If Clifford the Big Red Dog had three heads...* “What is that?” Mara pointed at the beast headed toward them carrying Dante’s mud-ball in one of its three mouths.

Devon explain, “Cerberus. The three-headed dog who guards the underworld.”

Mara tried to sense the creature’s glow but her eyes were obstructed by the falling icy mess. *I can’t see much of anything...* “Where are we?”

“Your lungs.” Devon let out a laugh.

Even though Mara couldn’t see, she could sense her friend’s anger so she shot her another confused look.

“Come on, girly. With all the crap you smoke they probably look just like this.”

In spite of the cold sludge surrounding her, Mara's ears grew hot with anger. Dante looked at Mara's face and stepped between Devon and her. "Actually, this is where the gluttons rest."

"Perfect." Devon took a step back to fling a slug ball at Mara. "Gluttony... too much. Like too much smoking."

Mara wiped mud from her face. Her whole body was now covered in frozen filth. "Gross Dev." One of the the three-headed dog's tongues tried to licked the mud off Mara's fingers, but she twisted away. The beast whined.

Devon gave an innocent shrug, but anger radiated around her. "What? You were already muddy." She brushed her hands over her jeans, streaking them with the runny, gray sludge.

Mara flicked the filth off her dress, toward Devon. "What's with the sudden inquisition?"

Devon grabbed a glob of muck and her hands rolled it into a ball. All three of Cerberus's heads barked, begging for another ball to chase. Kindness crackled through Devon's aura as she threw the mud ball to the beast. Cerberus raced off and anger darkened the love in Devon's glow. She started to ball up more gunk. "I'm sick of standing by while you starve, smoke, and carve yourself to death!" Goo dripped down her arms. "I think it's time you look at what you're doing." She held a dirty hand toward Mara's face.

Mara pushed her back. "Chill with the health class, alright. I just decided to quit one bad habit tonight."

Dante silently tried to step between the girls. Devon almost hit him with a dirt ball meant for Mara. “You didn’t quit Ryan.” Devon pelted her friend with another clump of cold mud. “He dumped you. For once, you do something good for yourself.”

Mara wiped mud from her hair. “Seriously, Devon?”

“I’m tired of it.” Devon punctuated her point by throwing another dirt ball.

“You’re selfish and you don’t care what the consequences of your actions are.”

Arms out to separate the girls, Dante smiled an ironic half smile. “As your guide, I’m obligated to point out that you just defined gluttony.”

“Fine.” Devon huffed. “You’re gluttonous, and I’m sick of it.”

Ignoring the concern she sensed around Devon, Mara bent down, scooped up her own ball of filth, and threw it towards her friend. It accidentally hit Dante’s turban. “You sound like my mother.”

Dante wiped mud from his head.

“No.” Devon yelled. “Your mother yells because she cares about how things make her look. I’m yelling because I care about you.” Tears left clean marks down her dirty face.

Cerberus trotted back and Dante threw another slime ball to the pooch. Mara watched the beast as it ran off. *Is this where I’m headed?* Sludge sucked at her bare feet. Her legs were harder to lift as the muck grew beneath her, clinging to her calves. She sighed. “The cutting helps me feel, Dev, when everything feels unbearable and uncontrollable.”

Devon came closer to Mara, close enough that Mara could feel the waves of concern rolling off of her friend. Devon grabbed her hand. “I’ll make you a deal...” She

looked right into Mara's eyes. "Wait a whole day—twenty-four hours—if you're still feeling like you need to cut, I won't stop you."

Mara considered her friend's offer. "I suppose that's fair."

"I bet you'll be surprised to see how many of your dramas are solved in that time."

Mara pushed Devon away. "That's seriously judgmental of you."

Devon pushed Mara. "Like you're not judgmental? You judge others to cover your own insecurities."

Mara gave Devon a hard shove before trudging off behind Dante, who seemed to follow an unseen path. The dog returned, begging Dante for another ice ball. Devon ran up behind Mara, shoving her. Mara lost her footing. She tripped, falling off the path.

The slug padded her landing. Beneath the cold cushion, Mara felt as if she was laying on large logs. She put her hands down to push up, and screamed when she felt hands under her own.

"Stay on the path, Mara." Dante's accented warning was muffled by the falling icy mix.

Mara practically leapt to her feet. "Dante, what exactly is under me?"

He did not turn to look at her. "Use your gift. Then you will understand."

Hesitantly, Mara tried to see what laid beneath her. The muck falling around them was too thick for her eyes, but she could sense the vibrations. Everything felt empty. The harder she concentrated on the frozen souls beneath her, the more she wanted to curl up in the fetal position. She felt a desperate wanting for a womb-like state where all of her

needs would be met without any effort from her—no feeling, no pain— numb nothingness. Mara closed her eyes as if she were floating into a dreamless sleep.

Dante grabbed Mara's arm and shook her. "Escape too much and it stops being an escape." He threw another goo ball at Cerberus.

It took Mara several moments to recover, and it wasn't until they began walking again that she felt the heavy numbness begin to dissipate. Her skin prickled with pins and needles as feeling returned to her body. Slowly, Mara became aware of Devon's vibrations. Her friend was terrified of what had just transpired. Goo seeped between Mara's toes as, silently, they walk on. "Can we just get to my dad? I'm tired of all this grossness."

The poet motioned forward.

The gunk was not falling as hard as before, so Mara tried to take in the landscape around her. Off to the left, she could make out two mountains. Tiny figures rolled rocks much larger than themselves up one mountain, only to have the rock roll back down to the mountain base. Then they would try the other mountain with the same results. "That seems terribly cliché, and a big waste of time."

Dante put his hand on her dirty shoulder. "That's what they did, Mara. They wasted."

Devon wiped goo from her hair. "Like you, with food. You must feel so at home, between your lungs and your stomach."

Mara eyed her friend. "What's gotten into you?"

"Oh I don't know." Devon shoved Mara. "I'm just in Hell with my best friend who just carved her stomach up like a Thanksgiving turkey."

“Relax, Dev.” Mara tried to put a hand on her friend’s back. Devon shook it off. She glowed every color from upset to concerned, so Mara put her head down and walked silently. The slush thinned until their legs began to create sucking noises with each step. Dense vines hung from the odd tree and bush that colored the dull brown landscape. As they continued forward, the foliage became denser and the sludge was melting, becoming muddy water beneath them.

The trio had to dodge around spiky cattails, floating in the shallow water gathering around their feet. Again Mara reached out to Devon, but Devon would not take her hand.

Dante put a hand on each of the girls’ shoulders. “We are coming towards the River Styx.”

Devon shook off Dante’s hand. She trudged forward, shoving viney branches out of her way.

“That is not the way.”

Mara was not sure if her friend was too angry to hear, or if she was ignoring Dante, but hazed in color, Devon continued forward. Mara looked to Dante for guidance.

“I am your guide, Mara, not hers. She must not leave you.”

Mara took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’ll bring her back.” She walked off the path, toward her friend. “Dev?” There was no response. Mara tried to feel her friend, but anger vibrated within the water covering her ankles, making Mara’s gift useless. “Dev?” Mara pushed her way through the vines that surrounded her. Through the clearing, she could see that the ground dropped off about a foot ahead. Carefully, Mara moved forward until she stood on a cliff. Devon struggled in the deep, dark water

below— Mara could see hands pulling her friend down. Without a moment of thought, Mara dove into the water.

Mara's body sank quickly. She kicked her feet, fighting towards the surface. Fingers brushed against Mara as she rose and a shiver of emotion ran through her. Mara felt irrationally powerful. She felt as if she could fight a monster, or her whole school, or, at the very least, beat Harrison to a bloody pulp. Every ounce of her suddenly craved a fight, and she struggled to remember why she was in the water. She broke through the surface and saw semi-submerged figures splashing and bobbing nearby. One of the figures yelled for help as the others pulled it back into the water. Mara ignored the fingers that brushed against her as she arrogantly swam over to the group. As she got closer, she recognized Devon as the yelling figure. Mara swam faster.

“Mara!” Devon screamed before her head was pulled under again.

Mara dove and the feeling of power flooded her again. Twisting and pulling, she dragged Devon to the surface, but the hands did not let her friend go. She had to keep pulling just to keep Devon above water, and hands were pulling her down too.

Struggling to keep her head above water, Devon kept mumbling, “This isn't real. This isn't real.”

Mara understood what her friend was trying to do, but she was hesitant to join in. She was enjoying the power she felt. Hands pulled at her, but every dunk only made her feel stronger. It was easy for Mara to swerve out of danger. Devon was having a much harder time. The hands pulled her away from Mara's grip. Struggling against the hands, Mara barely managed to get her friend's head above water. “You need to fight. Don't you feel the power, Dev? Fight.”

An arm wrapped around Devon's head, submerging her again. Mara fought to get her friend above water, but feared she was taking too long. Kicking at invisible hands, Mara tried to convince her mind that none of this was real. *Then where are we if this isn't real?* Mara thought as something leapt out and wrapped her in a headlock. Power rushed to her head. The desire to fight was overwhelming. Struggling to stay focused, Mara tried to find Devon. She couldn't see far in the brown water, and she was running out of air. *You don't need air if this isn't real,* Mara thought as she fought her biological urge to resurface. She used her arms to push deeper into the water until she reached the point where she could just grab Devon's hand. *This isn't real!* Her lungs hurt as hands pulled her down deeper. *This isn't real!* Slowly Mara began to lose consciousness.

CHAPTER 26: "YOU ARE MY CONSTANT STRENGTH WHEN I LOSE
HEART"^{xxx}

Mara was suddenly aware of the cold, unyielding ground beneath her. Without opening her eyes, she tried to roll somewhere more comfortable. Her leg banged into something hard and she opened her eyes. Artificial light stung her retinas, momentarily blinding her. Mara blinked several times before Devon's beachy bathroom came into focus. A bloody kitchen knife lay on the counter and it took Mara a moment to remember how it had gotten there. *I feel so much stronger now. So much more in control.* She breathed deeply, remembering the water. *Devon!* Mara let up and found her friend slumped over the jetted tub, her clothing covered in dried gunk. Mara knelt on the bathmat and shook her friend awake.

"What time is it?" Devon mumbled. She tried to roll back over before she realized there was a bathtub beneath her. She jolted up. "We made it? We're alive?"

Mara looked down at her filthy dress. "I can't tell you what time it is without my phone. And yes, we're alive. I wouldn't say we made it though. We still didn't reach my dad." She watched the colors swirl around her friend until anger became dominant.

Devon pulled off her once green shirt and stood. She walked over to the counter and picked up the knife. "Where's your phone? Didn't make it to your dad?" Even her reflection glowed a muddy red. "We wake up from yet another trip through Hell and you're worried if you have any missed texts?" Still holding the bloody knife, Devon stormed out of the bathroom.

Mara rinsed off her disgustingly dirty feet before following Devon's trail of dirty clothes into her bedroom. "What's up with you yelling at me so much?" Bits of mirror were embedded into the carpet, Mara had to dance around them to avoid cutting her toes.

Devon used the knife to point at the floor. Burnt feathers blended with the glass. "You should clean this up. It's your mess."

Mara's hands flew up. "Chill, Dev. I'll be happy to." She noticed the clock. "Damn. We're super late." Although Mara would not have thought it possible, the anger around Devon glowed brighter.

"Great, just great." Devon dropped the knife and flopped down onto the bed. Bits of dirt fell from her hair. "Ugh. Now I'm going to have to wash these sheets too."

Hesitantly, Mara walked to the bed. "Dev, what if we skip today?" She put her hand on Devon's back, trying to calm her. "We'll clean up, get some breakfast, and..."

The anger around Devon expanded. "Breakfast? You think you're going to fix this by finally eating?"

"I feel different today. I think I'm ready to..." Mara trailed off. Devon's aura wasn't right. She looked depleted.

After a moment of silence Devon calmly announced, "I'm done." She rose from the bed. "I've tried to be helpful, but I don't think I can help you. You're the kind of person that thinks trips to Hell are normal school night activities. I can't do it anymore."

"Dev..."

Devon struggled to keep her voice level. "Let me talk." Mara watched anger, disappointment, fear and exhaustion swirl around Devon. "It's not that I don't love you. It's not that I don't care. But I gotta love myself too, girly. I almost died last night. Now

I'm missing school." Devon's voice cracked. It took her a second to regain her composure. "You're dragging me down with you." She paused before saying, "I need you to leave." Devon began to pace as she talked. "I can't be around you until you're a little more stable." She was near tears. "I'm sorry, but please go."

Mara stared open-mouthed at her friend. She wasn't sure what to say.

"Please, go. Now."

Not knowing what else to do, Mara gathered her things and left. She wasn't sure where to go, so she just began walking. *She's my best friend. For two years she's been there for me.* A tear slowly rolled down her cheek. She raised her hand to wipe it and remembered how dirt she was. *How can I feel stronger than ever and broken at the same time?* One of her too high heels caught in a sidewalk crack. *Ugh. She's right. I am a mess.* A noise brought her out of her thoughts; her phone was ringing. Mara answered it without looking, "Dev?"

Mara's mother's voice, on the other end, was frantic. "I just got a call from your school..."

"I'm sorry Mom." Mara took a breath before launching into a half lie. "Devon had an emergency. Cut herself pretty bad on a broken mirror. I had to drive her to the hospital."

"You're very lucky to have me for a mother, Mara. Most girls your age wouldn't be allowed out with their friends so often."

Mara was silent.

"I want you to come home."

Mara struggled to keep a grip on her phone. "Now?"

“Yes.” The phone clicked.

She hung up on me. Mara stared at her phone in disbelief, then she dislodged her heel and began the long walk home. *Just when I was starting to get a hang of my gift, everything has to get all...* A car honked at her. Mara looked up and realized she had begun crossing at a red light. She stepped back.

A familiar white mustang pulled up nearby and rolled down its passenger window. “Need a lift?”

Slowly, as if her strength would wear out at any moment, Mara walked toward the car.

“You ok? You look awful.”

Anger flooded her. It was as if she were back in the water with the weight of Ryan trying to drag her down. “I didn’t think you cared.”

“Mara, I want to talk.”

What could be left to say? You think I’m clingy. I’m starting to think I lusted after you. She took a deep breath and was surprised to feel a sudden rush of control. *Invincible.* She sat down before looking over to meet his hazel eyes. “What do you want?”

He lit a cigarette and held it out to Mara. She shook her head. *I don’t need your silly vices to feel calm. I’ve been to Hell and back.*

Uncertainty swirled around Ryan as he put the roll of dried leaves and paper in his mouth. He placed his hand on wheel. “Where to?”

“Home, I guess.”

“Really?” Ryan looked at her, but she kept her eyes straight ahead. “Last night was all wrong.”

Mara watched as rain began to fall on the windshield. *Hard and broken all at once, just like the rocks in the lustful circle. All I'm missing is a few flashbacks from our relationship.*

His fingers entwined with her limp fingers and his colors swirled again. "I want to be friends."

Mara pulled away from him. She was surprised by the doubt that clouded the other colors around Ryan. *For someone that always seemed so cool, he doesn't know what he's doing any more than I ever did.* There was a long pause before she asked, "Were we ever really friends?"

Ryan took a drag off his cigarette. "When you used to babysit..."

Mara could see the undercurrents in his words— *when you were taking care of my family. When you were conveniently there.* "I always liked you. I just didn't think I could get you." Mara fanned the smoke with her hand. "When I did, I felt like the most special person in the world." She took another controlled breath and let her eyes return to the road. "You crushed that. Every time you left, or ignored, or cheated you took a piece of that special person until there was nothing left."

He reached for her hand again. "You're different today."

And the difference intrigues you. You want what you can't have. "Can you put that out? It's bothering me."

Ryan dropped the cigarette out the window. "Happy? Will you let me touch you now?"

No. I won't be chained to you anymore. "I'm done. This dance. We're together. We're apart. I'm done. Go to Florida." *If only Devon were here to see this.*

Ryan leaned in. His dark hair fell into his eyes. “What if I told you Florida fell through.”

“I’m not your backup plan. Not today.” Mara leaned away from him.

He sputtered, “You were never my backup.”

Mara glared at him disbelievingly. *Some part of him actually believes that.*

Ryan ran his fingers through his hair. “You’re so young. How could you understand?”

But I do understand. I see so clearly now. “I tried.” Mara put her hands on her bag. “I tried and I tried and I tried. Now I’m done.” *And I mean it too.* “Let me out.”

“Want me to come with you?”

You think if you protect me that I’ll come back. I don’t need your protection. I’ve survived Hell. I can survive my mother. “No, Ryan. I don’t want anything from you. Like you said yesterday, we’re done.” Mara did not glance back as she walked into the rain.

CHAPTER 27: “KNOCKING MY SENSES OUT OF ME COMPLETELY”^{xxxix}

Mara walked up the porch steps and braced herself before unlocking the door.

Susan was waiting in the living room. “Where were you, baby? I was so worried.”

Mara was surprised to see that her mother glowed with sincerity. *I always thought the only thing my mother worried about was what other people thought.*

“You look awful,” Susan added.

“Thanks, Mom”

“Go shower. Then you can tell me about your date.”

Glad to have a moment to herself, Mara rushed to her bathroom. The mirror Maras looked like horror movie extras, their pretty dresses caked in filth. Mara marveled that her mother hadn't yelled about her appearance as she stripped and stepped beneath the stream of water.

A dark ring of dirt formed around her feet. She ran her fingernails against her scalp. *I've mastered auras. I can see through all the bullshit. If only I could tell Devon about Ryan.* The confidence drained from her body as she let the loss of her best friend sink in. *Dragging her down.... I saved her.* She lathered the loofa and scoured every inch of skin. *Granted she was only there because she followed me.* She scrubbed herself a second time. *It's all my fault. Again.* The water circling the drain finally ran clean, but Mara still felt dirty.

Towelings off, Mara walked into her Pepto pink room. She grabbed a grey t-shirt and pulled on a clean pair of jeans and an old pair of flip flops before heading downstairs.

Susan was waiting, car keys in hand. “Are you hungry, baby? There’s a new crepe place that just opened. It has good reviews.”

“French? Is that on your diet plan?”

“One splurge won’t kill us. They have dessert crepes. I bet you’d love to eat a s’mores crepe.” Susan grabbed an umbrella and motioned toward the door.

Is this my mother? Mara said, “Sold” quickly and tried to get a better read on her mother as they ran through the rain to the car. *Happy? Hopeful?* It had been a long time since Mara had seen her mother like this. Not knowing what to expect, she pulled the door handle and slid in. “Music?” Mara held up her phone, offering to connect it to the speakers.

“If you can choose something that isn’t garbage.”

That’s more like the Mom I know. Knowing Susan preferred Eighties pop music, Mara founds the Madonna station on iTunes radio before plugging into the speakers. As Mara and Susan sung along together, Mara marveled at the sense of camaraderie. Three songs passed before Susan pulled up to a tiny breakfast spot across the street from an old music shop.

Mara looked at the shop and wistfully thought of her father. Her mother exited the car, opened her umbrella, and walked around to get Mara. They huddled together and walked into the crepe shop. A bell rang, announcing their entrance. They filed past tiny tables for two on their way to the hostess, who dutifully walked them to a table. She handed them plastic coated menus before returning to her post.

“What to get...” *Am I really ready to eat?* Mara scans rows of options.

“Cheesecake crepes? S’mores crepes? Some combination of fruit and chocolate? Look, they even have a low fat hazelnut for you!” *If I’m strong enough to let Ryan go, maybe I can test my limits here too...limit how much I limit.*

The waitress chose that moment to fill their water glasses. “Would you like to hear today’s special crepe? It has spinach, feta, and...”

Susan cut her off. “I think were ready.”

The waitress took out her pad and pen.

“I’ll have the low fat hazelnut crepe. I believe this lovely lady here,” Susan smiled at Mara. “will have the s’mores crepe.”

“And two lattes.” Mara added. *Maybe things can be different. Maybe I learned something valuable. Maybe Mom’s changed.*

The waitress left.

“That Harrison is very handsome.” Susan smiled at Mara as if she were a coconspirator

Of all the boys for her to like! Mara didn’t like the hope radiating off of her mother, especially because she did not want to be responsible for crushing it. Cautiously she said, “He’s not really my type, Mom.”

The waitress brought two waters and their coffees. “Food will be out in a second.” She rushed off.

Mara fiddled with the wrapper hanging off her straw. Disappointment and desperation hovered in the air.

“You don’t like boys that take you to nice dinners?” Susan’s voice was low. It was obvious she was afraid the waitress would hear.

Mara tried to feel the courage and strength that she had felt in Ryan’s car. “I don’t like boys that try to force me into things.”

The waitress set down their plates. The fingers Mara used to hold her fork shook, but she willed the metal toward her mouth. *I’ve been empty for too long*, Mara thought as her mind flashed back to the sludge filled area of Hell where Devon started fighting with her. *I can’t be numb forever*. Slowly, she took her first bite. Graham cracker crumbs clung to the melted chocolately marshmallow, giving Mara something to chew. Greedily, she licked her sticky fingers.

“Good?”

Mara let out a delighted noise. She felt guilty, but she also felt strong. She nodded to her mother before taking a larger forkful. “How’s yours?”

Susan shrugged, chewing. “It’s alright.” Mara barely had time to swallow another bite before Susan insisted, “Tell me about the date.”

The two bites sank in Mara’s stomach like a weight. They began to churn as acid built around them. Feeling slightly sick, Mara said, “I’d really rather not talk about it.” She sipped her water.

Susan’s glow darkened with determination. “I want to know, why is that nice boy not your type.”

“He’s not so nice, Mom. He...”

Susan hushed Mara. “Inside voice.” She glanced around before adding, “Tell me calmly.”

There was nothing calm about Susan's aura. Mara chose her words carefully. "We went back to his house and he..." Mara's voice cracked. She tried to feel strong, tried to hold back her bubbling emotions. *She wants this so badly. She really believes that my happiness lies with some rich guy, no matter how awful. How do I tell her that everything she believes is a lie?* Mara took a deep breath and pretended she was swimming for Devon again. "He tried to push me, physically, and..."

Susan began to talk rapidly, "Why wouldn't you want his advances? Handsome, wealthy..."

"Is that all you ever thing about!" Mara's voice grew louder. She could tell that her mother didn't believe her. "He nearly raped me!"

Susan hushed her again. "I'm sure you're overreacting." She covered Mara's hand with her own, applying a tad too much pressure for the gesture to be loving. "You're a very pretty girl Mara..."

Mara tried to explain, "I'm not overreacting, Mom. He..."

Susan didn't stop talking, "And beauty fades. You need to capitalize on it while you have it. You don't want to end up..."

Knowing that she was not getting through to her mother, Mara's voice grew louder. "You're not even listening. He..."

Susan cut her off. "You're never listening, and you're attracting attention. Do you really want everyone knowing how emotional you can get?" Susan motioned to the plate in front of Mara, hoping that food would keep her quiet. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to be an older, single woman? What do you think we're going to do when..."

"You don't even care what happens to me, so long as your perfect..."

“Of course I care what happens to you. I’m trying to make sure you don’t end up like me.”

All at once, Mara understood. *My mother makes all of her decisions based on who can support her and make her look good. No love— she’s too empty for love— just things. She’s just like the bodies frozen in the muck. And she’s trying to raise me to be like her...and worse, I’ve been letting her succeed.* “Mom, how come you don’t get a job or...” Mara swallowed the words as Susan’s aura tinged with shame. *She doesn’t think she has any value past whatever she has superficially.* Feeling empowered by her sudden ability to see through her mother, Mara asked the question that had bothered her for the past two years. “How come we were suddenly able to upgrade our lifestyle after Daddy died?”

“Life insurance.” Susan’s face twisted into something hideous. Mara began to fear she had gone too far. “Your idiot father ruined his career chasing dreams and he ruined my body knocking me up with you. The only thing he did well was insure himself properly before he died.”

Mara could see things under the words. She knew her mother once believed her father was the man of her dreams. She sensed disappointment after crippling disappointment over her father’s career. She saw how Susan was trying to use her as a conduit for her own displaced dreams, trying to relive her youth through her. She understood, but she didn’t care. “Don’t talk about my father that way.” Anger flooded her and she lost her ability to reason. She ran out of the shop and into the rain.

CHAPTER 28: “MORE DEEPLY, NOW, THAN ANY TIME BEFORE”^{xxxii}

Mara ran, ignoring the storm. *Is there anyone who doesn't want me for their own twisted, selfish shit?* She crossed the street and ran downhill, flip flops clicking with her rushed steps. *If my mother could just make me a pretty puppet she would. And Devon....* Mara exhaled a long sigh. *What am I going to do about Devon?* She stopped for a moment, leaning against a stop-sign. *I could call Katharine and ask her what to do.* Mara searched her pockets before she realized she left the post-it in yesterday's filthy jeans. *Ezra's still in school. It's too early to text him.* Her anger waned as the sadness underneath it bubbled up. *I'm all alone.* Gathering her resolve, Mara slowly resumed her walk. *If no one is around to observe, what stops me from being my worst?* She glanced longingly at the swings as she passed her elementary school. *Daddy loved me. Me, me. Not pretty, fake smile me. Not pretending to care, but secretly wanting something from me.* She focused on the sidewalk, trying to hold in tears. *I miss him.* Through wet eyelashes, Mara saw the traffic light was green. She crossed. *Aren't girls supposed to have a Daddy to protect them? Sit on the porch with a shotgun and all that? Where's my white knight Daddy? Why do I have to be all alone in this?*

Thunder sounded as Mara reached the library. The white building shadowed the trees in the parking lot. Mara crossed the little bridge that lead to the duck pond but avoided the path, veering left. Thick trees and bushes scraped her skin, but she ignored them. She knew what lay just a little further— the stream she rock walked as a kid turned

into a small waterfall, into a small pond that was bird free. There was no bench, and hardly enough grassy for two people to sit. It was the perfect place to be alone.

She sat on the wet ground and watched her reflection in the water. "I see you, little girl. You used to be so happy. You were so proud when you found this hidden place. Only you and Daddy knew it existed." Her chest felt like it would explode with emotion. She curled into a ball and sobbed uncontrollably. "I'm so alone." Thunder rumbled. Mara stood and took several shaky breaths. Her face was hot, her clothes soaked. She threw a rock into the water. "How could Devon do this to me? She knows I can't handle losing anyone else. She made me promise not to leave her and then she left me." Her shoulders shook. It was hard to breathe. "I need you, Daddy. I tried so hard to find you. Twice. I'm such a failure."

Mara looked up into the stormy sky. "I'm so freaking lost. I have no idea what to do anymore. All I know is that I can't take two more years of this." Lightning streaked the sky as Mara dug her nails into her palm hard enough to pop skin. Four little blood moons smiled in her palm. All of Mara's illusions of strength, power and control were lost. Regretting not having a blade to take to her skin, Mara crumbled to the ground. Her body shook with each sob. "I failed, I failed."

"Perhaps I failed." The accented voice startled her. She sat up. A familiar red robed man stood in her private pond.

"Dante? But..."

"The reflective surface of the water, the blood on your palm, the desperation. You had all of your spell ingredients."

Mara gasped, unable to form intelligent thoughts.

“Let me take you to your father Mara. No long journey, the fast route. You’re ready.”

Wordlessly, as if in a dream, Mara took his hand.

Dante plunged into the water, dragging Mara with him. She gulped in air before submerging, but it was not enough. Her lungs quickly hungered for more. The water grew thicker and darker around her as she kicked upward and broke through the surface. The thunder was gone. Mara could feel thick slime cling to her as tremendous power flooded her body. Her secret pond was gone, replaced by swampy river as far as her eyes could see. The water glowed with angry currents. *I think I’ve been here before.* Fingers beneath the water brushed against Mara and she turned to ask Dante if this was where Devon had nearly drowned. His turban was drenched, grey hairs peeked out at odd angles. He coughed up the dirty water.

“Are you ok?” Fog pushed between them. “Dante?” The poet bobbed in the water. Mara fought to keep her head above the dark current. “Where are we?”

“You are back in the River Styx.” Dante waved his arms above him, as if trying to signal a lifeguard. “Look there.” The poet pointed toward a tower in the distance. “See the flame on top? And there.” He pointed in the opposite direction. Mara was just able to make out another flame. “Those signal Phlegyas. His boat will provide safe passage for us.” The poet waved his arms in the air before returning his attention to Mara. “Beneath the slime there are souls that wish to draw us into the black sulkiness beneath us. Be careful.”

The power within the water flooded Mara. As her sadness was replaced with anger, she wanted the hands to pull her down, wanted to fight. *I am strong. Strong enough to reject Ryan. Strong enough to walk away from my mother. Strong enough to...*

Dante grabbed the back of Mara's shirt and pulled her upwards. "We will be safer in the boat." He resumed his bobbing and waving.

Following Dante's lead, Mara began waving her arms as she bobbed. Her hair felt heavy as the thick water clung to it, and she desperately wanted to submerge and feel powerful again. She started to yell, "Over here." A surge of brown water rushed into Mara's mouth. Grit rubbed her tongue. She could taste iron in the back of her throat. The taste made her feel invincible.

"Your yelling might attract more than the boatman."

So? I am strong. Nothing can stop me. I... A hand twinned around her leg. She kicked at it and something splashed in the distance. "What happened to a quick journey?" Mara felt the hand again, fluid and twisting. She kicked out, hard, and lost a flip flop in the process. She was pulled down, but the water only made her feel stronger. Submerged, she began to wrestle with the figure trying to hold her down. Another hand grabbed her other leg. She twisted, trying to pull her body away. The effort made the hands pull harder. She was running out of air. Another hand grabbed her, this time by the hair. A hard tug, as if someone were trying to pull out every hair at once, pulled her upward. She kicked out, and surfacing.

"That hurt." Dante rubbed his shin.

"You pulled me up?" Mara rubbed her eyes trying to clear the gritty feeling.

"I warned you about the submerged souls," Dante scolded.

Mara wiped the last of the gunk from her face. A boat floated nearby. “He found us!”

“You called attention to our location, attracting all sorts of souls.” Dante’s brow furrowed.

And you ruined my fun. Mara stared down at her dirty bare feet. “You look like my dad when you're angry like that.”

Dante’s arm grabbed the wooden side of the boat. He laughed as he hoists himself in. “I suppose you remind me of my own daughter, in some very small ways.” He reached an arm out to Mara.

Mara pulled herself up, with some help from Dante. “You had a daughter?”

He lowered Mara into the boat and turned to the boatman. “Thank you, Phlegyas.” The boatman, if he was a man, was covered head to toe in some sort of stone armor. a blood red scarf waved like a banner from his neck. Phlegyas grunted a reply to Dante. Mara quickly turned away, staring into the fiery horizon. The poet sat next to Mara. “Yes. Her name was Beatrice.”

Mara gapped at Dante. “Didn’t you have some serious romantic feelings for Beatrice? I read...”

“Not that Beatrice. It is a funny thing, names. They all have a story. Take yours for example.”

Slime rose from the oar as Phlegyas rowed. The boat rocked as souls beneath the water grabbed at one another. Mara missed the powerful feeling the water gave her. She wanted to jump back in. Instead she lay back. “My name?”

“I do not know why it was given to you, but it is from the book of Ruth. Naomi changed her name from pleasant to bitter, or Mara, when tragedy struck her. When her life regained some of its sweetness, she changed it back.” Dante moved closer to Mara. “That is my wish for you, Mara. That you move back to all things pleasant and sweet.”

A lump had formed in Mara’s throat. Phlegyas rowed on, making no indication that he heard Dante and Mara talking. The flames in the horizon grew larger, large enough to differentiate between the patches of fire and the patches of smoke. Mara could sense anger and violence wafting up from the water, swirling in the smoke. It was as if every moment someone— her mother, Harrison, a teacher— anyone had made her feel powerless was contained somewhere deep beneath the earth and the atmosphere itself was defending her. Deep within her stomach, Mara felt a scream that desperately wanted to escape. A howling voice, like an echo through a cave, suddenly said, “I can take you no further.” It took Mara a moment to realize it was the boatman and not something within herself.

CHAPTER 29: “SHAPING A PATH FOR A DIFFICULT DESCENT”^{xxxiii}

Dante dipped his head toward the large rock man. “Thank you, Phlegyas.” He jumped out of the boat. Murky filth covered him to his chest.

Mara paused, unsure if she wanted to wade in her own anger again. The boatman turned to her; his eyes burned like coal. Dante reached out, pulling her overboard. She fell sideways into the water. Her nostrils and ears felt as if mayonnaise has been crammed into them. Iron flavored slime coated her throat. Dante pulled her up and she coughed.

“You almost made him angry. You are lucky I pulled you overboard.”

Mara pushed her slime soaked hair out of her face. She flicked some of the dark muck at Dante. She tried to focus on the white glow surrounding him instead of the angry entitlement that flowed around her. “My hero.”

He trudged through the water toward the flame pits. Mara struggled to follow. Sludge weighed down her feet, sinking her in deeper. *Its not enough that I have an awful mother and a dead father. Its not enough that I have to fight off creepy guys and get ignored by the people I love. Its not enough that I lost my best friend because she thinks I'm dragging her down. Oh no, I have to walk and swim and get covered in the grossest crap.* Beneath the rage, Mara felt tremendous anguish. She tried to stay angry, to fight the growing despair. Her clothes were heavy. She trudged toward the fire pits, realizing, as she got closer, that the pits were stone coffins lining the shore.

Dante looked back at Mara. His eyes demanded silence. Without the sound of the oar scraping through the thick muck, Mara could hear the hiss of steam beneath the groans of the souls in the burning sarcophagi. *Focus on why you're here. For Daddy.* Sadness pulled her again. *Because there's no one left.* Mara took a deep breath, hoping to find her lost courage. She coughed on the sulfuric taste of the air. *This isn't you. You're feeling the vibrations. This isn't you.* Silently, looking only at her feet burning on the charred rocks beneath her, Mara followed the hem of Dante's robe.

Dante broke the silence with a whisper, "Last time I walked through this place the souls here recognized my accent."

Lifting her eyes from her dirty, callused feet, Mara noticed gauzy figures hovering over their fiery tombs. She shivered and tried to suppress her gift. She didn't want to taste the emotions rising from these graves. She could hear whispered voices, echoing like her classmates when they gossiped. The air was thick with lies. Taking small breaths, Mara walked quicker, matching pace with the poet. "Where is your accent from? I've never heard..."

Dante shoot Mara a 'be quiet' look. He turned his head about, looking for signs that they had been detected. Confident Mara went unheard, Dante whispered back, "It is a Tuscan dialect, from my time."

Mara shrugged, unsure what the poet meant but happy for the distraction. The voices from within the tomes pulled at her. She felt as if she needed to defend herself, as if the phantom whispers were talking about her. She wanted to yell or run; she didn't want to feel helpless and attacked. Mara tried not to feel the vibrations as she quickly tiptoed around the largest tomes. She was disappointed to find that the statuesque stones

had obscured their view of the smaller burning pits in the distance— they still had a long way to go. Fire, smoke, and screams surround them.

Dante glanced around, nervous. “I have several political enemies here.” He took off his turban and wiped his face with a corner of the cloth. Carefully, he wrapped it back around his dark, close cropped, hair.

The whispers called to Mara, accusing her. They sounded like her mother, like Cecile. She tried to block them out, shutting her eyes to the muddy reds and greens that swirled from the pits. Deprived of her sight, she lost her balance. Dante grabbed her arm and righted her just in time.

The farther from the shore they walked the less ornate and further spaced out the sarcophagi became. *We must be nearer to... whatever awfulness is next.* Mara squinted at the landscape ahead, but it seems to drop off into nothingness. The air wasn't as thick with smoke. The whispers had stopped.

Mara breathed deeper than before, giving her more energy. “There’s a ravine up ahead?”

Dante let out a low laugh. “Hardly. There is a drop-off though, caused by a great landslide.”

Mara moved closer to what seems to be the edge. “Are we going down?”

Dante nodded.

She moved closer, hesitantly allowing her toe to cross the edge of the dirt. *Some drop-off. That’s like a whole skyscraper down.*

Dante’s arm darted out, pushing Mara. For a moment, she teetered on the edge. Mara fanned her arms trying to right her balance. She tumbled, jostled by every lump in

the earth beneath her. She could feel the beginnings of bruises forming on nearly every surface of her skin. She tried to tuck her head, protect her neck, but she was falling too fast. Large clods of dirt rolled and spun around her, one of them, a large red blur, spun particularly close. Beneath her, the ground quickly rose. Mara braced for the impact. It felt like running headfirst into a mountain. Her ears rang and her vision blurred. Her whole body felt bruised, but nothing felt broken.

The ringing lessened. Mara could almost make out something like hoof beats in the distance. She blinked several times, trying to adjust her eyes to the semi-darkness around her. Her grey t-shirt was shredded, her jeans torn to rags, but, thankfully, everything still covered her enough to count as clothing. Her knees, elbows, and hands were scraped, but that looked to be the worst of her injuries. Mara pushed up from the hard dirt beneath her. Behind her was a cliff of dirt and rocks. What looked like a mile up ahead was another river, blood red and bubbling.

“Dante?” Mara turned, looking for her guide. A pile of red fabric lay in a heap to Mara’s left. “Dante?” Mara knelt, trying to determine if the poet needed medical attention. Slowly, working together, they untangled his feet from the robes. They moved Dante into a seated position. His turban sat to the right of his head, torn and dirt smeared. Mara brushed at Dante’s robe. “Are you ok?”

“We need to be very quiet.”

Mara heard steam releasing from the bubbles, but, amazingly, little else. “I don’t hear anything. Not even a groan or a scream.” She used her gift to feel the steam and felt as if she had been struck by her mother, as if she were pinned by Harrison. She did not

like the violence contained in the hot mist. She did not vibrate with it. The realization made her dizzy, as if everything around her was shifting away.

Dante held a finger to his lips and motioned to Mara to help him upright. Mara held out her hands. Dante grabbed her and she pulled upward, surprised at how a man so tall could feel so light. *It's hard to remember he's a ghost sometimes.* She shook the thought out of her head, hearing a clopping sound as she moved her neck back and fourth. Mara closed her eyes and took three deep breaths. *Daddy. I've come this far. I can do this.* Dante held tight to Mara as he raced off, a red arrow shooting through a stark landscape.

Mara raced beside him as best she could, but her bruised legs were hurting more now that they were moving. "Wait." She wasn't sure if it was because she did not resonate with the landscape, but she felt as her mind was moving away from her body. It was hard to move or to think clearly.

He paused a half mile away, his feet practically touching the boiling red water. "You need to master silence," He hissed through his teeth. "This place does not vibrate well with one that has only committed self violence. We must hurry, before..." Dante stopped mid sentence. He held a finger to his lips before beckoning for Mara to join him on the shore of the bloody river. Her head felt foggy, and she wondered if Devon had experience this feeling when she followed her through all those circles that must not have vibrated with her. Hobbling as fast as she could, Mara made her way toward the putrid red current. The hoofbeats grew louder. An arrow flew past Mara's head.

"Duck!" Dante called to her. He ran into the darkness. "Nessus!" He called into the the twilight enveloping them. The hoofbeats stopped.

Three creatures— horses below the waist, men from their belly buttons to their heads— stood before Dante. The creatures blocked Mara and the poet from the blistering river. Mara would have taken comfort in their glow— the same white color of Dante’s aura— if the creature with a reddish beard and chestnut colored horse body hadn’t cocked another arrow into his bow. He took aim at Dante.

The darkest, black-bearded horse-man stepped forward. “That is my name.”

Dante walked forward. His hand extended, waiting to shake the centaur’s hand. “I am the poet, Dante. Many years ago you carried me across to the other bank. I am here to ask you...”

“Silence.” Nessus’s deep voice echoed across the desolate landscape.

The reddish-brown centaur lowered his bow and stepped closer to Nessus. “Have you noticed how the girl leaves a path of destruction? This is not what dead feet do.”

The third creature— a man with long white hair, the body of a pewter horse— added, “She does not resonate with the souls here.”

Nessus neighed in agreement. “She is alive?”

Dante lowered his hand and stepped back toward Mara, who watched the whole ordeal silently. He put his arm around her and dragged her forward, toward the centaurs.

“And so alone.... She travels by necessity, as I did when you offered me help.”

The pewter centaur shook his long, thick hair. “Too young for a journey like this. It cannot be ordained as your journey was.”

The reddish-brown centaur took aim again. Nessus shook his head. “At ease, Polkan. I journeyed with Dante. If he says her travels are necessary, I believe him.”

Polkan did not lower his bow. Nessus drew a sword and aimed it toward Polkan. “You would fight me over our honor?”

The pewter centaur stepped between them. “Withdraw your weapons. I will guide them.”

Nessus lowered his sword but Polkan was not as easily placated. “Chiron, our duty.”

Chiron’s white tail flicked. “She is no escaped spirit. It is not our duty to ensure her imprisonment.”

Polkan withdrew the arrow, but did not lower the bow. “She does not belong. Neither of them do.”

Chiron cantered between Mara and Dante. “So I will help them leave.” He offered a hand to Dante. “Mount.”

Dante took the offered hand and used it to help propel himself onto the centaur’s back. Both Dante and Chiron offered Mara their hands. They pulled her up, the centaur’s body in front of her, Dante behind. Mara grabbed Chiron’s long white hair for balance as he galloped into the blood. She bent her head low and tightened her knees, afraid to fall. She could feel the river’s heat kissing her bare feet. Chiron surged forward. Dante leaned over her, shielding her with his form.

Safely across the river of boiling blood, Mara slid off Chiron’s back. She left one hand on the horse part of his body, trying to steady her legs. “Thank you. I don’t know how we would have crossed that ourselves.” She liked the feel of the centaur. His energy felt pure, fatherly, the way she hoped her father’s would.

Dante dismounted. He shifted Mara's weight off the centaur. "Thank you Chiron."

Chiron nodded. "Polkan is correct. You do not belong here. Do not stay long." He turned, galloping back into the river.

The poet released Mara, holding his hand out toward the trees before them. "We are here."

CHAPTER 30: “AND ASK HIM, FOR MY PART, WHAT I WOULD ASK”^{xxxiv}

Mara exhaled loudly, pausing for a moment to catch her breath. Dense branches blocked her ability to see, so she used her gift. Everything felt hollow. She felt sucked in by the void within the vibrations. Self-doubt rushed her. *Ugly. Worthless. Going to turn into Mom. Stupid.* Mara felt pulled toward the branches. Large black leaves reached out from twists covered in thorns.

“Beware the thorns. They are poisoned,” Dante warned.

Mara could barely hear him over a horribly loud wailing sound. “What is that?” Mara had to shout to make herself heard over the mournful moans.

“Wails of grief.” Dante broke a branch off of the nearest tree.

“Why are you ripping me?” The trunk screamed. A blood like sap ran darkly down from the broken bough. “Have you no sense of pity?”

The wails around the travelers intensified. Dante yelled over the noise, “Reach out to them, Mara. Then you will understand.”

Mara shuddered. She was afraid she would be trapped in the empty feeling that permeated this forrest, but she listened to Dante. She could sense how going through the motions of every day life hardened the exteriors of these souls while holding in their sadness made them feel depleted to the point of emptiness. *Until they became hollow trees, rooted by cycles of pain, guilt, shame...* She fought her gift, pulling back as much as she could.

Dante, sensing her struggle, placed a hand on her shoulder. “We must travel through them and discover the tree that holds the soul of your father. Beware the harpies feasting on their leaves, recreating the pain the souls sought as an outlet.”

Mara saw the cold, reptilian eyes hidden high in the trees, following them.

Wolf like howls sounded over the moans of the trees. “Be wary of their dogs too,” the poet added.

Mara tried to walk silently— toe to heel, not lowering her weight until she was sure what was under her. *My Dad is trapped here? Forever?* Sadness filled her; the inside of her chest felt heavy. She tripped over a root and a loud howl of pain echoed in the chorus of howls.

“Owww.”

“Mercy. Mercy!”

Feathers rustled overhead and Dante pulled Mara into the twisted branches of the closest trees. Mara could feel the thorns scratch at her sensitive skin, but they failed to draw blood. She looked around. Thousands upon thousands of trees stared back at her. *Awful... and hopeless. Why did I ever think I could do this? I'm nothing without Devon. Without Daddy. Just a worthless little girl that can't do anything...* Mara tried to shake off the feelings that emitted from the branches around her. *You've come too far. Don't give up.* “How do we find my father?”

“Mara, you know him. Use your gift. Feel him as a tree.” Dante’s voice dropped. A clawed foot perched on a branch not far above Dante’s head. “Think about the energy he would give off.”

Mara stood frozen in the branches. She didn't want to feel this place. "If I move, the harpies will get me." *I've failed, just like I fail at everything.*

Dante looked at Mara. Without a word, he ran. The screeching woman-birds circling above followed after him.

Alone, Mara began to untangle herself from the prickled bark. *These are not my feelings. I can do this. Just breathe.* She inched her feet forward.

Mara moved from one tree to another, terrified that the emotions would suck her in again. Without her gift, there was nothing to guide her. She wandered from tree to tree, trying to ignore the twists, the howls, the pain. *My poor Daddy. This is the loneliest, the most awful.* The air stunk of isolation and failure. Everything seemed haunted and horrid.

"Dante?" Mara's call was met with silence. "Dante come back." Despite every effort to hold back, tears began running down her cheeks. *I'm alone. Alone with bleeding trees and horrible beastly women.* Blinded by saline, Mara fumbled from tree to tree.

"You left me. I wouldn't be here if you hadn't left me. Why? I was your princess. Your baby. Didn't you want to see me grow? Didn't you want to be there for me?" Completely losing her footing, Mara crashed to the ground. She crumbled, curling at the root of a tree scarred by harpy claws and teeth. Her moans blended perfectly into the moans of the trees. *I belong here. I'm a failure. Just as alone and empty as any of these souls.* Mara's fists pounded at the ground as she cried, producing a strange hollow sound. "Hollow like you, Daddy. She ate you alive. She's eating me and you're not there to stop it. No one is. I'm alone. I'm so alone."

"You're not alone, baby."

Startled, Mara's tears stopped falling. Her head popped up. "Dad?" Mara swore the branches of the tree in front of her were moving, reaching out, trying to touch her.

"Dad!" Mara ran over to the tree. Cautious of the thorns, she reached out to touch it.

"Hi baby."

A new set of tears slowly trekked down Mara's cheeks. "Daddy."

"Why on earth are you here?"

Her hands caressed the tree's bark. "I came to see you. I miss you." She didn't like the emotions she felt within the tree. *I must be broken. This is Daddy, everything is supposed to be okay now.*

The voice of Samuel Weiss, rising from the tree, sounded scared. "You're not dead, are you?"

Mara dropped her hand and looked down at the torn clothes framing her bruises. "No." She swallowed back the shameful tone and tried to sound brave. "Dante took me, like in that book he wrote."

"It's too dangerous. Go home. Now." Leaves moved as if shooing her.

"Daddy!"

"I love you, baby. Now go home."

Mara planted her feet. "I'm not leaving without you. It works in myths. I'm here. There's gotta be a way." Mara held tight to a branch, wishing desperately it could be a hand.

"Baby..." her father's voice trailed off, cracking before regaining strength. "I don't see how that's possible."

Mara squeezed the branch. "I'm not leaving you." With her hand on her father again, Mara's gift was more intense. It was impossible not to feel his sense of desperation. He wanted her gone. It was the first thing he had wanted in a long time. It echoed through him, clanging through his trunk. *So very empty.* "Why did you do it, Daddy?"

In the long silence that followed, Mara was flooded by a hopeless feeling that the world would be a better place if she were not in it. It wasn't until she dropped her hand that she realized the feeling wasn't her own. Finally her father spoke, "Do you remember what I did for a living? You were very young. It's ok if you don't."

Taking comfort in the fact that her father always tried to make her feel smart, Mara answered, "Some sort of science. I don't remember exactly what."

"I studied psychiatry. I did alright. Between a private practice and a research team working for a drug company, I usually made enough to pay the bills. Your mother loved to spend though, so, when I didn't, we charged it. Then you came along. You were so beautiful. Your mother was a goddess holding the sun. I couldn't say no. We remodeled, making the basement into a playroom. We bought only the best for you. I couldn't keep up. The bank gave us a second mortgage."

Mara touched his branch again. "So this is my fault." She felt a sudden surge of burden. *Everyone would be so much better off without me.* She moved her hand and the feeling lessened. *Why, Daddy? How am I better without you?*

Oblivious to Mara's gift, the tree continued, "No. Baby, it was my fault. You were still playing with stuffed toys, much too young to make a real adult mess. I set out to fix things. I led my research team into some really experimental ground. See, you're

mom was acting stranger. I thought I could fix her too. There was some amazing advances with fetal cells and the brain. What if I could find a way to cure mental illness and market it? I'd make billions. Only, no one likes where fetal cells come from, how we get the materials needed for miracles. It took years, but I lost my research team, I lost my private practice." The tree made a pained hiss.

Mara could see droplets of blood hit the ground near her. She heard something fly off. *A harpy must have eaten one of Daddy's leaves.* She reached out again to offer comfort and sensed what her father hadn't said. *He thinks a man's job is to provide. He thinks he failed. He really believes we are better off without him, that he was burdening us with his failure.* "I'm so sorry, Daddy."

"Let me finish, baby. I want you as far from here as possible. The sooner I answer you, the sooner you leave."

Mara bent down, grabbing her father's roots. "Please, let's try to get you free. I can't leave you like this!" *So hopeless.*

"We're rooted here by our own guilt, Mara. If you stay, I'll be here forever."

"But I'll be with you!" Her chest hurt again, as if her heart was literally breaking. *I can't leave you alone in the bleakest of hells.*

"No. Once you're found—it's amazing you haven't already been caught—you'll be punished. I don't want you judged and sent to your own circle. You're no suicide. You're not even dead. I have no idea what'll happen, but I know you won't be here. Once you're caught, I'll root here forever. Let me finish, then go home and never come back. Where was I in the story?"

"You lost your job. I never knew, Daddy."

“I’d never share an ounce of my pain with you. That’s why you must go home.”

He doesn’t know I can feel it. That I already know he believed he was a burden.

“So I lost my job. The bank wanted to take the house. Your mother was still spending. I failed as a provider, my biggest job as a father and a husband and I failed. The feeling was awful. I wanted to cease to exist.”

Mara tried to comfort him. “You were a great dad. You didn’t fail.”

“I needed to take care of you. While cleaning out my office, I found a copy of my insurance policy. I noted that it would pay out not just for a natural death, but also for suicide. I felt I found my golden ticket. I couldn’t provide for my family in life, but my death would provide for years and years. I thought I was taking care of you. It wasn’t until I started rooting here that I realized how shortsighted I was. Do you know the harpies can mimic the voices of our loved ones? They whisper in our leaves things you say that can cause us more guilt. I’ve heard everything, Mara. I’m so sorry, baby.”

Mara felt guilt strong enough to root her own feet. What exactly had her father heard? What had the Harpies told him? Shame colored her face as she thought of the cuts, the boys. *I hope he doesn’t know.* The thought overlapped with *I’ll do better, Daddy.* “I love you, Daddy. I always will. I won’t cause you more guilt.” The hope inside of her overcame the vibrations around her as she declared, “Let’s try. You’ll come with me. Everything will be ok.”

“Mara.” Her father’s voice sounded stern.

“We’ve just got to reduce your guilt and you’ll be free.” Mara paused, trying to solve the problem. “I forgive you.” Nothing happened. Her voice grew more desperate. “None of this is your fault.” Her father’s roots remained firm in the ground. “I’ll do

better.” She reached out and tried to send feelings of hope toward her father. His hollowness overwhelmed her.

“Mara.” His voice was wistful and sad.

Mara’s tears crept back. “I’ll stop finding ways to make Mom mad. I’ll study harder. Please, please. Nothing is your fault.” Mara felt one of the roots move, but she could not tell if it was growing deeper or shrinking. For the first time since she began her journey, Mara wondered if she had made a mistake. “I guess my being here isn’t helping.” *I’m hurting him. I hurt Devon. I deserve to be punished. I deserve pain. I...*

Samuel’s branches rustled as if he were trying to push Mara away. “Go home, baby. But keep those promises. Study hard. Let go of your anger, your sadness. Your mother isn’t a bad person. She just...”

Not wanting to make her father feel any worse, Mara cut him off, “You’re right, I’ve got to go.” *No I don’t. I belong. I cause pain.* She hugged her father’s roots tight. “I love you, Daddy. I don’t blame you. You wanted to protect me, to provide for me. You didn’t mean to abandon me, you meant to take care of me.” Mara leaned forward, carefully kissing a root. She felt it shrink under her lips, just a little. “Daddy!” She jumped back in her excitement and the feelings of worthlessness lessened. *He feels that. All the time.* She wasn’t sure if she wanted to rush to hug him again or if she wanted to run away so she wouldn’t keep feeling his pain.

“No, baby. I wanted to save you. Now here you are, saving me. Go now, before I root deeper.”

She touched him again and failure coursed through her. Slowly, she stepped away. *I don’t want to feel like that.* She let out a breath she didn’t realize she had been

holding. *I can't bring him back.* Cautiously, heart broken, she turned and searched for familiar red robes hiding among the trees. *How do I even get back?* Spotting a round, unblinking eye staring at her she choked out a whispered "Dante?" She stared into the forest, numb and exhausted. Wings rattled the branches overhead. Mara ducked behind a twisted trunk, careful not to touch it. She heard a high pitched scream and ducked down. *Dante warned that the Harpies bite the suicide trees, causing them to yell out in pain.* Her heart in her throat, she choked back tears for her father. *I've got to get out of here before I lose it.* She took a deep breath before running wildly from tree to tree, her eyes scanning through the vines for any sign of her guide. "Dante?"

CHAPTER 31: “BUT FIRST I MUST GO DOWN TO THE VERY CENTER”^{xxxv}

Mara heard another agonizing scream, this time closer. Roots grabbed at her feet, tripping her. Shielding herself from thorns, ignoring the sense of failure held within the air, she pushed herself upright and ran. “Dante!” Mara didn’t try to keep her voice low. She heard the bird-women flapping toward her, their wings louder than the cries from the trees. “Dante!” She desperately searched the branches, but saw only beady reptilian eyes staring down at her.

Mara backed into the trunk of a tree, out of breath and clutching her sides. *Don’t lose hope. Not yet. Got to keep moving.* Something grabbed her, and she let out a piercing shriek. The wails around her intensified, swallowing her scream.

“Hush, before they carry you off.”

Relief rushed through Mara as soon as she heard the familiar accent. “Dante.”

His hands shifted her body further behind the tree. “You are lucky they have not gotten you. Half of the forest could hear your calling.”

A bird woman shrieked out an unrecognizable caw. Mara could feel fear vibrating around her, but she couldn’t tell if it was the tree’s or her own. Dante put a reassuring hand on her shoulder while he ushered her out of the creature’s sight.

Mara turned to the poet and asked, “How do we get out of here?”

Dante’s eyes drifted up the tree. Deep in the foliage, round unblinking eyes stared back. He pulled Mara down until they were both kneeling on the ground. “You could convince yourself this is not real, as the atheists suggested.”

Not real? I just spoke to my father. I need that to be real. “Is there another way?”

“There are choices.”

Her eyes begged him to continue.

He whispered into her hair, “You seem to have an easier time returning to your world when your life is at risk. You could let a harpy get you.”

Mara shivered. “You warned they’re dangerous.” *And, after seeing this place, I don’t ever want to die.*

“No more than Minos, or the wrathful in the River Styx.”

Mara could feel the color draining from her cheeks as she considered the option. “You said choices. What are the others?” A shadow glided across the forest floor. Mara did not like the way it hovered over them before shuttling off.

Dante’s voice was apologetic. “My journey ended when I reached the center of the underworld. I had to climb down Satan, through the center of the earth. I would hardly call that the safer choice.”

Mara fought the sense of defeat surrounding her as she asked, “Is there another option?”

Dante looked at Mara with sad eyes while a chorus of trees cried out. The harpies were closer. Mara curled closer to the poet. His muscles were ridged. “Perhaps I am too old for this.” He sighed. “Phlegethon.”

“What?”

“Go back to the river of boiling blood. If you drink the water, your inner demons will manifest. If you conquer them, you will be freed.”

Mara shook her head, confused. “I either face a monster, or I fight myself?” She tried to feel the sense of invincibility she felt in the river Styx. “I left Ryan.” Her hands moved toward her stomach. “I ate.”

The poet put a hand on her shoulder. “Do not fool yourself, there is no easy option.”

Mara’s hands crawled up the tree, pulling herself up. “I’d rather drink boiling blood than be torn up by a harpy...” she shivered. “Or face Satan.”

The poet slowly unfolded and stood. “Satan is like your father. Every creature here imprisons themselves.” He paused, trying to demonstrate the importance of his words. “The third option is the hardest, and it has the most lasting effect.” He paused again to make sure she was listening. “If you conquer your demons you will not be able to journey back here.”

Daddy... Mara envisioned her father, a tree rooted by guilt. “It would help my father, too, wouldn’t it? The harpies couldn’t root him with my mess?”

Dante motioned toward a path trampled through the trees. “It is the noblest choice.”

Mara walked through tangles branches, her body bent in an effort to keep the bird women from spotting her. *I can do this. If I can let go of Ryan and walk away from Daddy, I can do anything.* Fighting the emotions from the trees that made each step more difficult, Mara walked closer to the boiling river. The rocky ground created an unsettling feeling that everything beneath them was about to crumble to dust. Surrounding shadows shifted, allowing Mara a full view of the boiling river's stark crimson streaking against jagged ebony peaks.

"What do I do when we get there?" She tried to swallow the quiver in her voice.

"You drink." The wind shifted. Heat that had been coming off the river gave way to air cool enough to bite. Dante wrapped an arm around Mara. "Once the blood water touches your tongue, violence and death will fight you from within. I cannot guide you further. You must use the images you see to convince yourself that this is not real. When you have gained control, you will be expelled from this plane."

A tremor ran through Mara's body. She closed her eyes, concentrating on her breath.

Dante rubbed her arm. "You came without Devon. You spoke to your father alone. You are ready."

They reached the shore. Dante retracted his arm and gently pushed Mara toward the rushing water.

Mara stared into the warm thickness. Something ghostly gray bobbed in the current. She back away from the shore as a dead man lying face up was pulled deeper into the water by something unseen. "You want me to drink from a blood river that contains dead bodies?"

The poet's ancient eyes met hers. "They are imprisoned here too, Mara. If you conquer your fears you need not worry about the bodies, and, if you fail, they may be the beastly means you need to scare your soul back."

Unable to pretend that she was not scared, Mara turned her head back to the forest. In the distance she could hear the wailing trees. *Daddy*. Blinking back tears, Mara slowly knelt by the river and cupped her hands.

Dante touched her shoulder. "What you are about to do is extremely difficult. I am sorry you must do it alone."

Mara plunged her shaking hands into blood warm enough to make her skin tingly and numb. She tried to ignore the putrid smell as she lifted the liquid to her lips and swallowed its metallic thickness. Her vision blurred. Shaking uncontrollably, she sunk to the ground. Twinkling darkness spun around her, as if she were falling into the night sky. Closing her eyes, Mara submitted to the spinning vortex rising up from beneath her.

CHAPTER 32: “IF ONE OF YOU SHOULD GO BACK TO THE WORLD”^{xxxvi}

There was a buzzing, like a florescent light about to burn out, followed by a thud. Mara opened her eyes. A hazy fog enveloped the shore in a bright silver glow, but she could still see the river before her and the forest behind her. The only sound was a constant hum.

“Dante?” Mara’s eyes scanned the shore. She was alone again. Her body felt heavy, as if the metallic thickness permeated her bones, weighing her down. She sat on the warm, sharp rocks and waited for whatever was supposed to happen.

“Little girl,” a female voice called out from the forest.

Mara turned to look, but she couldn’t see anything beyond the silver glow. She fought the heavy feeling of her body and stood.

“I see you,” another voice called in a judgmental tone.

A shiver ran through Mara. She took a cautious step toward the trees.

“Come play,” a third voice suggested in a manipulative sing-song.

A fourth voice quickly interjected, “No. Stay there. It’s safer!”

Ignoring the fourth voice, Mara walked closer to the forest. The air was notably colder, the fog denser. Something darted through the branches. Mara’s eyes followed the streak— a girl with dark hair running through the trees. *Is that?* For a moment, Mara was convinced she saw herself running through the trees. *It can’t be.* Mara began to trek through the woods. Around her

the fog grew denser and the silvery glow brighter— even the trees seemed silvery. From the periphery of her vision, Mara saw another tangle-haired girl run in the opposite direction. *I thought...* Mara stepped closer to the fleeing figures. The silvery color emitting from the trees caused their bark to be reflective, as if someone had replaced the wood with mirrors. Mara's eyes were transfixed by her image reflected in the bark, which caused her to misstep and stumble. Something vine-like snaked around her ankle and pulled her upward.

Tied to the tree, Mara hung upside down. She moved her hands toward her ankle to untangle herself, but had only just reached around her back when she heard the voices again.

"I'm proud of you," said a voice from one of the trees. The reflective bark showed a girl with a bird's nest of tangled dark hair— a girl that looked exactly like Mara. "You've come so far. You deserve some sort of reward or..."

"Ha." A different tree reflected a Mara with hard, judgmental eyes. "You don't deserve anything. Stuck in a tree. Abandoning your father. What kind of selfish..."

A tiny voice cut in, "You're lost, aren't you." The newest reflection pulled her hair. "You know you can't do this alone."

This isn't real. I must be dreaming. "This isn't real." Mara blinked and shook her head. The movement caused her to slip downwards, so she held tight to the tree. "Wake up, Mara."

"Of course this is real," A studious sounding voice interjected. Mara glanced toward the voice and saw herself in Devon's clothes, books in hand. "The question is, which of us is the real you."

From her bound position, Mara did her best to look around. The trees around her had shiny, mirrored bark that reflected an army of Maras. “None of you are real. I’m the real me.”

“Is that so?” A nasty faced Mara asked. “Look at you. Your disgusting. Dirty, stuck, lost. You really want that to be the real you?” The reflection transformed into a perfectly manicured, well coifed, designer label wearing Mara. “Wouldn’t this be a better you? Wouldn’t your life be easier. Certainly your mother would...”

“Don’t talk about our mother,” The studious, book carrying Mara demanded. “Use your brains, Mara. You’re smart, capable. You know I’m real. I’ll prove it. You’re just like that tarot card, trapping yourself. Once you choose me as the real you, you’ll be free.”

So this ends when I choose. How do I know which is the real one?

“Use your gift, Mara.” A Mara with a particularly strong silver glow offered. “Read the glows.”

Mara tried to follow the advice, but every glow matched some part of her. *They’re all me. How can I pick the real one?*

“You can’t,” said a Mara that held a cigarette. “There’s no point. Hell, high school, one annoying self, another, it’s all the same. Just hang. It’s the only thing you can really control.” An emaciated reflection nodded, but said nothing. Smoking Mara continued, “You’ve burnt your life down. Devon hates you. Might as well accept death.”

A Mara in pigtails cried, “Nobody loves us. We’re all alone. No parents. No friends...” Her sobs made anything else she said impossible to understand.

“Oh come on!” said the Mara with a bird’s nest of tangled dark hair. “You know you’re not some weak little brat. You’ve overcome hellbeasts. You’re fearless.”

“Ha,” Manicured Mara laughed. “You’ve got so many fears, you just mask them. And isn’t this a pretty mask? You know you’d rather look like this than tangles over there, or geeky the bookworm.”

“Geeky? Hardly,” book carrying Mara interjected. “Think, Mara. You’ve seen through Ryan and your mother, now see through yourself, which one of us is you?”

Which is me. Am I a skinny, self-mutilating Mara? Am I smart? Proud and fearless? Masked like my mother? And what happens if I pick wrong?

“You’re bound to pick wrong.” The reflection took a deep drag. Then she added, “Hell isn’t so bad. Stay.”

“And root your father in more guilt?” asked the Mara with the extra strong glow. “Choose. You know how to.”

I do? Mara studied her reflections. Manicured Mara studied herself. Pigtailed Mara continued sobbing. Emaciated Mara tried to shy away from Mara’s gaze. *I don’t want to be any of these.* She felt stuck, as if the rope around her foot was tightening. *I can’t do anything, stuck here.*

“Think. You know the answer,” book carrying Mara encouraged.

Feeling a surge of bravery, Mara reached up the tree and untied herself. Instantly she crashed to the ground.

“Hurts, don’t it.” Cigarette Mara blew smoke at her. “I told you to stay put.”

Mara brushed herself off and angrily walked toward the smoking reflection.

“You’re not very helpful.”

The reflection took another drag.

“You might be part of me, but you’re not me.” As soon as the words were said, Smoking Mara disappeared, tree and all.

“Yes!” exclaimed studious Mara. “You’re understanding.”

“Feel the vibrations. You can do it.”

They all feel like me. Like different parts of... Mara thought about the words she used to make her cigarette holding alter ego disappear. “You’re all me?” Her voice grew louder, more confident, “You’re all me.” Mara walked over to manicured Mara. “You’re the me I put on to please my mother. The part of her that’s in me. I may not like you, but you are a part of me.” Manicured Mara disappeared as Mara walked over to tangled hair Mara. “You’re the part of me that’s brave enough to tie up Harrison, or jump into the water after Devon. You’re pretty awesome, but you’re not me— only part of me.”

Tangled hair vanished as Mara moved over to the reflection of herself with pigtails. She stroked the reflective bark that showed her crying self. “I feel bad for you, for us. Maybe brave me can parent you somehow, because you’re the part of me that feels Daddy’s loss the most. You need someone to care for you. I need to take better care of you.” Pigtailed Mara faded as Mara held her hand toward her emaciated self. “You’re what happens when I don’t care of myself. I can’t keep trying to feel nothing, to be empty, but I can’t pretend you’ve vanished either. I’ve always got to watch out for you, don’t I?” The emaciated reflection nodded as she dissolved.

“Go on,” Studious Mara called out. “I’m next.

Mara touched her form in the reflective bark. “I don’t recognize you as myself. I’ve never felt like the smart one. I’m sorry for ignoring you. Wherever you are within

me, you're probably the key to getting Devon back. Welcome to the party." Book-carrying Mara evaporated, book and all. Mara walked over to her final reflection.

"You're new too. This gift."

"No, Mara," The glowing form said as she faded. "I've been in you all along."

The buzzing noise returned as the last Mara faded. The hum vibrated in Mara's skull until she felt her head was splitting. She shut her eyes and sunk to the ground. Everything felt as if it were spinning. Mara wasn't sure if the feeling was from her head, or if the earth were actually moving. Abruptly, it stopped. The only noise Mara could hear was the sound of running water. Preparing for the worst, she opened her eyes.

CHAPTER 33: “LIKE ONE RETURNING WHO HAS SWUM BELOW”^{xxxvii}

A small, familiar waterfall poured into a pond. Mara lay on a narrow streak of grass, surrounded by trees. The rain had stopped, and she could hear people in the park behind her. *I'm back? Just like that?* She stood and brushed off her tattered clothing. “Dante?”

Mara stared into the water and called the poet's name. The only reply was the water rippling with the current. *He said I wouldn't be able to return. I hope he's alright, that he made it back to wherever he came from.* Mara whispered, “Thank you,” before pushing her way out of the trees.

There were people walking around the larger duckpond, dogs running off-leash. Mara could see them glowing with feelings. A studious voice from within her asked, *And what did you learn?* Barefoot, she walked on the grass, rejoining civilization. *I've learned I'm strong, smart. I've learned I have parts that need better care. I've learned to understand others. I've learned...*

A ringing sound interrupted Mara's train of thought. *Where did....* She dug her phone out of her back pocket, and was surprised to find it there.

“Ez?”

“Where are you?” Ezra's voice was panicked. “We've been worried sick!”

“We?”

“Dev and me. Haven't you gotten any of our calls or texts?”

Devon. I have so much to tell her. So much to apologize for.

Ezra had not stopped his frantic rant, “Your school nurse called Devon’s house in a panic. She said something about having a bad feeling. Devon called me. We’ve been searching all over town since. Where are you?”

“I’m okay.” *For the first time in a long time.* “I’m at the library.”

“And you stopped answering your phone?” Ezra sounded furious. “I’m coming to get you.”

I don’t need to be rescued, Mara thought as she walked toward an old bench beneath a knotted tree. *But I do want to see my friends.* “I’ll be waiting. And Ez, can you bring me some shoes?”

REFERENCES

-
- ⁱDante Alighieri and Mark Musa. *The Divine Comedy: Volume 1. Inferno*. London: Penguin Books, 2003. (Canto 1, line 2)
- ⁱⁱ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 1, line 7.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 1, line 34.
- ^{iv} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 1, line 44.
- ^vWilliam Shakespeare. "Shakespeare's Sonnets." Accessed October 22, 2015. <http://www.shakespeares-sonnets.com/sonnet/138>.
- ^{vi} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 5, line 113.
- ^{vii} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 1, line 53.
- ^{viii} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 1, line 54.
- ^{ix} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 1, line 62.
- ^x Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 1, line 113.
- ^{xi} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 1, line 133.
- ^{xii} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 3, lines 1-3
- ^{xiii} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 3, lines 7-9
- ^{xiv} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 2, line 83.
- ^{xv} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 4, line 32.
- ^{xvi} Mark Twain. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. New York: Bantam Books, 1981. Print (p. 172)
- ^{xvii} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 5, line 4.
- ^{xviii} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 4, line 3.
- ^{xix} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 8, lines 70-71.
- ^{xx} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 5, line 127.
- ^{xxi} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 4, lines 49-50.
- ^{xxii} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 2, line 133.
- ^{xxiii} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 5, line 2.
- ^{xxiv} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 1, line 43.
- ^{xxv} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 5, line 129.
- ^{xxvi} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 5, line 43.
- ^{xxvii} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 4, line 8.
- ^{xxviii} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 5, line 1.
- ^{xxix} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 6, line 22.
- ^{xxx} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 4, line 18.
- ^{xxxi} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 3, line 135.
- ^{xxxii} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 8, line 30.
- ^{xxxiii} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 12, line 9.
- ^{xxxiv} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 13, line 83.
- ^{xxxv} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 16, line 63.
- ^{xxxvi} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 13, line 76.
- ^{xxxvii} Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 16, line 133.