

A DREAM OF BURNING

by

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ABSTRACT

AUSTIN DEMEGLIO: A Dream of Burning (Under the direction of PROFESSOR
BRYN CHANCELLOR)

A Dream of Burning takes place in a not-so-distant future of an alternate Earth. The story focuses on a young woman by the name of Iris Ode and her found family. The story starts three years after a great storm caused tragedy. After the storm, Iris' father went missing, and she is missing him, and is hoping to that he is alive somewhere. The Giants are great divine beings that many individuals looked to in times of need, but after the storm, they vanished. A number of people, along with Iris and her friends, were mutated in a way that gave them 'special' abilities, but these abilities can cause harm. Iris is having constant dreams of fire, ones that she doesn't like to speak about. She meets a talking hammer on the train, and after that, everything gets even stranger for her. The novel chapters continue to follow Iris on the train as she encounters the weird and the strange on her way to her destination.

A Dream of Burning: Critical Introduction

My biggest influence is Neil Gaiman. Watching *Coraline* at a young age helped me realize my adoration for the strange and the weird, but then I had no idea that *Coraline* was written by Neil Gaiman. After my interest in him became obsession, and I learned that one of my favorite movies is a novel by my favorite author, well let me just say it was a euphoric epiphany. It was after reading *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* that I made that discovery of my infatuation. Anyway, the aforementioned novel is my favorite, and has become an anchor in my inspirations.

I am in awe of the way Gaiman writes where each world is comfortable with itself and pulls the reader in so seamlessly, so unafraid to be known. His work is so smoothly presented that it seems all too easy to fall into the words on the page. But he creates this story of fantasticality that might turn some away, where the strange and weird might be difficult to get into. But this strangeness is exactly why I love his work so much.

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* are among my favorite stories and are another monumental inspiration for me. It was a strange novel for its time, and still considered exactly that. I love the absurdity, the absolute nonsensical whimsicality. Another world where it's comfortable with itself, meaning the atmosphere of the story and rules of it are seamlessly explained. A fantastic land where nothing but insanity happens and Alice stumbles into it, becoming part of that world whether she likes it or not. There is another story that I mentioned previously where a young girl falls into a hall and ends up in a strange land: *Coraline*. Reading *Coraline* a second time I was baffled how I didn't see that Gaiman was drawing upon Alice, and my adoration for both books grew even more.

Another major influential piece, one more recent, is Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi*. The art of *Piranesi*'s cover happened to grab my attention, and when I started reading it, I was unable to put it down. This book is a beautifully crafted story in with a simple plot that erupts into mystery and tension. The novel's vastness of atmospheric characterization feels so alive as if it bleeds off the page; a genre bending novel that I found to be unique, I hope to find more like it.

I consider my work to be that of an alternate world, where there are things that are recognizable, but not everything is the same. I attempt to draw on the human experience after global tragedy, where the loss and trauma is common among all. It is by no means realistic regarding a result of the disaster and the disaster itself. I was feeling a bit inspired to write about calamity due to recent current events.

The setting of *A Dream of Burning* is not set in a specific place, but it is based on more rural landscapes and overgrown areas to show connections between the natural world and the unnatural. The natural and nonhuman play such a big role. The main character, Iris, relies on all kinds of different nonhuman *things* that it is impossible to avoid a grandness of the natural world, and I am overjoyed that has come to fruition.

As a child, I grew up in a rural-like area, where the grand landscape was almost as far as the eye could see. Before my passion for reading blossomed, I found nature to be a place of adventure and wonder. I was out there, bug watching, searching for running water, and looking for all kinds of flowers I knew nothing about. Nature was a big part of my childhood, and when I first came up with the idea that became *A Dream of Burning*, I wanted to make those natural environments an integral part of the story.

Writing the first chunk of *A Dream of Burning* was like experiencing parts of my childhood again, and it felt so wonderful. As I was reading the previously mentioned novels, Gaiman, Clarke, and Carroll incorporated these immense, not-so immense and wondrous atmospheres that reminded me a lot of exploring nature. I learned what happens when the adventures lull the wanderer so deep and down that the feeling of being lost is something to be yearned for.

The journeys through different landscapes led me to find myself as imagistic writer. If there is one style and/or one technique that believe I am capable of doing or incorporating, it's imagery. Over my academic career, this is the one skill I recognize that I have, and it may be my only one. I believe what makes a good story, novel, book, anything really, are powerful and strong, unforgettable images that leave the reader/viewer seeing it in their dreams.

The beginning and main idea of *A Dream of Burning* has changed multiple times. I was having a tough time coming up with a final decision. At first, the main cast of characters were stowaways, and the train was already moving, and they were eating tomatoes. For the most part, I actually hate tomatoes. I wasn't sure why I thought this beginning was a good place to start. So, I scrapped it the beginning entirely. I wanted to capture Iris' yearning for something; an image of her staring out into a sea of people waving goodbye at seemingly everyone except her. I thought that image might be a good start for setting the tone of the novel.

While finishing this chunk, I was presented with the idea of separating the novel into parts. All part one is the thesis. I figured it should end with a little bit of finality and resolution. I wanted to feel at least a little bit satisfied, with a sort-of ending. The final

scene of the first part is the main crew holding hands walking towards their destination, which isn't too far from where the train stopped. At first, I had them arrive at their destination, staring at it in huge disbelief at the fact that they made it there.

In these sixty pages, there are many images, but I feel they are so crucial to the story and characterization of Iris Ode, to hone in on important scenes and to highlight and dramatize the feelings of Iris. Without these images, I'm not sure the story works.

The process of writing my novel chapters was one I have never done before. In all of my previous writings I have always planned something out, at least a little bit. In those writings, I would always stop after a few lines or sentences. I always felt as if I was trying to write my second draft first. It was an excruciating experience every single time. But I learned something: how to write without thinking for a long period of time, to explain a bit further: a word vomit. I experienced it more than once, and working on *A Dream of Burning* in this way took me somewhere I thought not possible: actually getting words on the page. It's high speed, and very exhausting, but I was proud to see the progress I was making. I was astounded to see that I made it past page ten. I am so proud of myself and amazed to see a writing process that was working for me. I had no idea of the entire plot and story while writing this way, but my imagination had no choice but to fabricate something as I typed each letter.

I stuck with third person for my novel chapters. I usually write in third person, mainly because first person frustrates me to no end almost every time I attempt to write in or read it. I thought about giving it another go, but I didn't see the benefit in doing so.

I am interested in third person limited. It's always fascinated me because, I know for some, it is frustrating to read, but I love the practice of it. I did my best to stay in that realm of third person limited (although I am not sure if I stayed there the entire time).

Iris is the protagonist of the story, but she is accompanied by three of her friends who found each other during the disaster; a found family. But another character includes a talking hammer. In total, there are five characters who are always speaking. A lot of the story is dialogue due to the fact that they are on a train, which was tough in and of itself, and the characters are near each other a lot of the time. I thought maybe there was too much dialogue, but I found it to be necessary to the growth and development of the all the characters involved. I found it difficult balancing the dialogue between five different characters. It was a challenge, but a challenge I welcomed.

Ever since my love of literature, I have always been immersed in anything to do with fantasy. I love dragons and knights and castles and magic and wizards. I love it all so very much and I wanted to write my high-fantasy series. I was plotting and drawing maps, sketching all different variants of dragon. I created magic systems and everything in between. While all of that was fun, I wasn't writing the actual story. World building that much can be an exhausting chore, and maybe I will do that more later on. But I found myself world building as I was writing the text. Which I believe, worked out well.

As I grew older, the grand fantasy adventure in literature got a bit stale for me. I felt like I was reading the same storyline, and everything seemed to be diluted. After falling into the work of Neil Gaiman, I became obsessed with magical realism. Most of his work is in that genre, where the lines between fantasy and realism blur together. This genre became a favorite of mine, and before I knew it, I was drowning in these stories. It

was all I consumed, and all I wanted to consume, and eventually it became the very subject of what I wanted to write.

A Dream of Burning was once titled “Rails” being that it was about a group of people on a train. But that’s all I had. That’s all the idea was. A group of “different” individuals seeking something. I wasn’t sure what that was back then. Iris grew tomatoes for everyone to eat, and then there was a flower that she found. I had this idea that it would sit on her shoulder, but it also would be sucking the life out of her, unknowingly at first. The talking hammer was still there too. Iris would have two voices in her head at all times, and it was going to be that it would drive her to the brink of madness. But I scrapped that idea. I didn’t like that a flower was willingly destroying her.

A while back, I worked at department store, and there was a clothing brand by the name of Rails. I liked it. Simple and short. I wasn’t big into clothing back then, so I daydreamed a lot. And just seeing that brand over and over again, all I got was an image of a train. I couldn’t get it out of my head. Thus, the origin for *A Dream of Burning*.

I figured something hopeful, something the characters can hold onto might, be fun to play with. I wanted the society to yearn for something that is missing, especially Iris. The Giants are part of a mythos that spans the immediate timeline of the novel. These Giants are considered to be divine creatures, ancient and primal beings that roamed the planet but went missing seemingly immediate and without warning. Iris is hopeful. She doesn’t abandon the idea that The Giants will come back, some way or another. Her father was a Giant researcher, studied them, and learned from them. When she was a child, she met one, and it saved her life. So, she believes that they will come back, and maybe turn a tide of residual disaster.

I was hoping to include an element of horror. I'm unsure if that came across well, but hopefully in the future, the work will present that. Iris and crew are in a constant motion of experience weird and unusual occurrences, but I attempted to create a looming presence that seems to be bearing down on them, unknowingly.

I am happy with how Iris as a character is developed in these sixty pages. Her missing father is one of the main driving points of the story, and I hope its importance impacts the plot in a meaningful way. I wanted to show a missing part of her, and that she is looking for that missing part, even though in her heart, she knows she will not find it.

I attempted to write Iris as a character who is a calm and composed most of the time. She loves her friends more than anything and will do almost anything for them. The special thing about Iris is that she can talk to plants. Sometimes, she prefers the company of them, and considers them to be more than just plants in the dirt. She relies on them for a lot, hoping that she isn't asking for too much.

Iris, upon meeting Cinder (a talking hammer, sort of finds a piece of her that is missing, because the hammer acts a parental companion. But because of Cinder, Iris undergoes a transformation, although it is not immediate; its prevalence is revealed at the end of the sixty pages. The flames of Cinder are reacting to Iris' anger, and she is continuously getting angrier due to strange events. Upon arrival at the mansion and when she learns the truth, she transforms completely.

I painted Iris as strong and not so helpless. She has been more or less independent by the start of the story. She is a bit rugged, but I feel like almost every character in the story should be, at least close to it, because of the state of the world. Her found family

involves Axel, Blank, and Ghia. She and Axel fight a lot but care a lot for one another. Ghia and Iris are like sisters, but Iris gets upset upon learning something new about her. Iris will do anything to protect Blank. Having lost a bit of her youth, and since his character is so young, she is afraid for him to lose any of that as well.

A Dream of Burning is something I am proud of. Something that I can't believe exists. I am glad to have had the opportunity to write it. I believe that is has come very close my vision, and I couldn't be happier. I am looking forward to the future, to working on it, until one day, it is finished.

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Chapter One: The Hammer

Iris looked through the train window and saw a crowd crying. A herd of people screaming and with arms outstretched as they waved goodbye. And she wished that, maybe, one of them was waving to her. She saw kisses being blown and she wanted to be a part of it, but she knew no one was there for her. No one was going to be. Through the bodies, the graffiti painted on the walls of the station was going to be the last thing she held onto before leaving. It read “Giants Save Us?”

The train whistled and then began to chug. Before anyone was a blur, before the crowd disappeared into the scenery, she saw a woman with a large smooth stone write ‘PLEASE’ under the graffitied words. And then the woman kneeled and clutched her head. Iris wasn’t sure if the woman was bowing or praying or neither.

Iris turned her attention toward the man who sat across from her. She took a deep breath. “Axel, do you think the Giants are coming back?”

He was poking at his skin with a needle, tattooed it in black ink. He didn’t break from his concentration. “All of the Giants are dead, Iris. You know that.” He wiped away little droplets of blood and put his needle down on the table that was in front of them. “No one has heard anything since the storm. They’ve been dead for years.” Even though Iris believed in the Giants, as did everyone else, and she thought they could save a broken life, she knew in her heart that they were not coming back.

“You’re right. What a silly question.” Iris leaned her head against the window. She asked where their friends were, Ghia and Blank. Axel told her that they were three rows behind them, and Iris wondered why Axel wasn’t with Ghia.

Iris could feel him staring at her. She met his gaze deep, his blue eyes that seemed to crack around his pupil “Because I need to talk to you.”

She was in a daze and the churning of the train almost put her in a complete trance. The man in front of her was weaving almost as if he was static, blinking in and out of an existence. “What was that?” Iris brought herself a daydream she couldn’t quite grasp. Axel had repeated what he said. “About what?”

He held his hands together. “About your dream.”

Iris leaned forward. She furrowed her eyebrows and said with a stern and loud voice. “No.” Murmuring on the train dimmed and Axel shifted in his seat. “Do the others know you’re asking me?”

“No, they don’t, Iris.” He slouched in his seat and stared out the window. Maybe he, too, was daydreaming about something he couldn’t get a hold of; something that was way off in the distance that he might have seen through the glass. Held his palm to the window. Iris couldn’t tell what he was thinking. But she knew that he was hoping that she would tell him.

“Then why did you think it was okay to ask me, Axel? I already told you, my dreams are my own. Please don’t ask again. We wouldn’t talk about it unless absolutely necessary.”

He let out a long sigh. “I know that.”

Iris balled her hands. “Then why did you ask me?” Her frustration was leaking off her and Axel swam in it. “How could we go back on our own word?”

“Fine! Damn it! Why don’t you go talk to plants or something?” He stood and left, and Iris was left alone. She relaxed in her chair and stared out the window once more, but all she saw were green blurs. She felt so close to what lay beyond the train,

partly wishing she was lying in a field of flowers. She wanted to hear their whispers, their singing, and even their grief.

Three years since the day of the storm. Three years since Iris realized she could speak to plants and speed up their growth. Not everyone was affected by the Storm. She was eighteen then and could barely remember life without plant-speak. She saw her own reflection that was barely there. She could look into her own eyes as if they were part of the moving scenery. She wanted to bury herself beneath a bed of flowers and sleep.

She thought of when the Hiants still walked. She was just a child, her and her father trudged hilltops and climbed trees just for a chance to see one. And one time they did. It was snowing, and Iris had just woken up. Her father had barged in her room and rushed her outside. She remembered feeling the ground shake. She was on his shoulders, and they were sprinting upward a slippery hill, but they tumbled, and the ground was even harder. But when they stood, it was towering over them. Its head blocked out the sun as if it were the moon causing an eclipse. But Iris remembered the eyes it had orange, burning and yellow like the stars. It radiated a heat that melted the snow on the ground. It gave a long look at her. It lowered its massive hand with its palm facing up and the fingers curled only slightly. Iris reached to touch the tip of its fingers and she fell from her dad's shoulders, but the Giant had caught her, and she sat there in its warm palm. She locked gazes with it. She still saw those eyes, and she imagined it was running with her, along the train following her. She saw her father there, too.

The sun was setting.

Iris felt a cold touch. Ghia had rested her hand on Iris' as she sat down in front of her. Ghia waved and smiled, and Iris waved back. Ghia had brown eyes and long dark

hair. Her cheeks were always rosy, her breath could always be seen. She let out a heavy breath on to the table and there was message written in frost. *Are you okay?*

Iris gave a shrug. "I guess I'm okay. Just been thinking about my dad. I miss him." *We all miss everyone who vanished.*

Ghia nodded she breathed again and another messaged appeared on the table. *I'm sorry about Axel.*

"It's okay. I know how he can be. This is difficult for all of us, we're just trying to figure everything out as we go. We barely know where we're going."

Ghia nodded once more. She pointed to Iris and then put her hands together as if she was praying and then put them beside her face, gesturing a sleep motion.

Iris nodded. "I can use some rest. Thank you, Ghia." They both made a heart with their hands, and Ghia left, and the cold went with her.

The conductors began to walk down the aisles asking for passenger tickets, but she and a few others would give the conductor a special pass: a bronze coin. The coin had an image on each side. On one, it was woman with wings sitting on a crescent moon, and the other was a man with four arms that held up the sun. These were the items given to them to board the train. The conductor came clad in a red uniform, and she showed him her coin. The conductor nodded, and he gave it back to her.

Iris drifted into sleep and dreamed of that day. She remembered waking up in a daze. She was up late, drawing pictures of Giants, wondering if they all looked the same. She'd rushed to class and missed seeing her father. She made it to school with just minutes before being late. Her teacher called her name: Iris Ode, she sat down. The lecture ran on for a while before alarms started to go off. She saw the light of day change

through the window. The sky became darker at midday. The sun had been covered by mean clouds. Iris could see the trees next to her classroom, and leaves were aimed downward. It was about to storm. A single bolt of dark red lightning flashed and then she woke up and was back in the train.

But she heard yelling and panic. There was a man hanging out of a train aperture, pointing and screaming. “There is something on the tracks. The train has to stop.” Iris groggily opened her window to see but couldn’t quite see through the foggiest. The murmuring of the crowd was getting louder. There were people jumping out of their seats into the aisle to get a closer look.

Iris rubbed her eyes and took another gaze towards the rails in front and saw something was on fire. She couldn’t quite make out what the object was, but there was burning, and there was heat. The train showed no signs of stopping. The panic grew. There were louder footsteps and there was shouting and shoving. She heard so many voices, it was like speaking to a garden all at once, but this was much louder and much more frightening; everyone was so close and the dread pouring off every passenger.

Iris looked for her friends but saw no signs. She tried feeling for a chill in the air looking for Ghia but felt nothing. The air was getting hotter. The trains felt as if it was getting faster. They were in the second to last train-car and there were people from the front cars trying to move back, and the bodies were overwhelming. The spaces got tighter, and the air was harder to breathe. She tried shouting for her group, but no answer. She couldn’t even hear herself yell. A screech from the brakes of the train pierced through the howls of passengers and the waves of people hurled and fell into each other and the pile grumbled and spat and cursed. Iris wedged herself out of the bodies and

reached the surface. Groans filled a quiet space, but Iris was searching for her friends and hopped and leapt over bodies.

But then the lights began to flicker and every time it did, there were fewer and fewer people. The herds began disappearing every time the light went out, and then Iris was alone. A single body standing in a train car that stopped moving. Her shirt pulsed from the intense beat of her heart. Wiping the sweat from her forehead, she turned and saw nobody around her. Not a trace of anybody. It was dark outside, and the only lights were the amber ones that were just flickering.

She walked forward hoping to see just at least one other person. She continued down each car passing rows and rows of emptiness. She made it to the steam engine. She peeked ahead of her through the main window and got a closer look at the burning object. She couldn't see, just a ring of fire. But the train was still, and so were the flames outside.

She could hear a hum coming from the steam room. She looked around the room and saw all sorts of mechanical gadgets and gizmos. A fierce heat came from the engine port, where the hatch was cracked. She opened it more and saw a brilliant swirl of blaze contained. It danced and danced and held her gaze, and Iris felt a trance gripping her.

The hum became louder, and she locked in, staring with the strong pyre, and she reached for it in a slow motion. The whirl of the fire beckoned her and then for a moment, she wished to be set ablaze too. The humming stopped; the engine clunked. The swirl of flames halted. Iris snapped back and sweat poured from her. Droplets beaded and pooled and fell into her eyes. The heat had disappeared as if it was sucked inside, like a vacuum inside the center of the chamber. It went dark for only a moment and then there

was a faint glow, and Iris saw something. She leaned in closer, afraid the heat was still there, but it had faded. She reached her arm and grabbed the object and pulled it out.

It was a hammer. An old iron carpentry hammer that one would find in a toolbox. The glow came from the bottom of the handle wherein lay a red gem that let off a low warmth. It had cracks and sharp edges. The handle was wooden and smooth.

“Hello.”

Iris shrieked and dropped the hammer for it had seemed that it had spoken. She looked around to make sure no one else was around, and there wasn't. She picked it up once more and heard the same voice. “Hello, again. Please do not drop me.” Its voice was smooth and flowed like winter water. It echoed, and Iris wasn't sure if the voice was inside her head or if it was aloud in open air.

“H-hi. You're a hammer.”

“Yes. You are human.”

“You're a talking hammer?”

“Yes.”

“How?” Iris scratched her head, and her sweat was not cold, and everything seemed a bit darker.

“Well, good question. I have not thought about it before. I just am. You know I was waiting for you.”

“You were?”

“Yes!” It sounded excited. “You were calling to me, and I heard you!”

Iris stared at the hammer, and it didn't feel all that unfamiliar. "I wasn't calling anyone. I was sitting on this train and then it was on a crash course and then I was alone."

"Yes. You were pulled into this space."

Iris' head was spinning, and her head was aching, and she felt the air change. And then she fainted.

She awoke in her seat with the hammer by her side. The train wasn't moving. She wiped the drool that glossed on her hands and the side of her mouth. She rubbed her eyes and saw people still standing in the aisle. She whispered to herself and asked if she was dreaming. She adjusted in the seat and the hammer fell into her lap and she jumped. She picked it up. And once again it greeted her. She said, "What the hell is happening?"

"Well, I was going to explain, but you fell! So, I brought you back."

"From where?"

"Well, that is a bit hard to explain. Oh! You have a visitor. You must hide me."

She rested the hammer right beside her as Axel sat across from her.

Axel tilted his head. "Iris. You all right? You look a little dazed? Holy hell, your eyes are red."

She massaged her eyelids. Her head still pulsed and ached. "What? Yeah, I'm fine. I just passed out."

"In the middle of all that chaos?"

Iris thought about that. Only a few minutes ago she was in the midst of flailing bodies as the train screeched. She didn't care about anyone in that moment. She felt a bit

of guilt and a bit of her heart sank and she thought of her father. “Iris.” She looked down at the hammer and felt the faint heat that it let off.

“Iris!” Axel’s voice. “Did you hear me? Can you pay attention?”

She rubbed her eyes once more. “Yeah, sorry. I think I got knocked out by someone. Everyone was hopping over and shoving.”

“I know...I was there. You sure you’re okay? You seem way out of it.”

“I’m not really sure. I feel like I’m somewhere else.”

“Yeah...Definitely seems like it. Anyway. We’re stopped. There’s something on the tracks. They aren’t letting us out of the train. The people are getting antsy, and they’re about to bust some doors down. But if we get out, maybe you can use that plant-speak of yours to find out what happened?”

Iris scrunched her face and took a deep breath. “Just give me a few minutes. I gotta recollect my thoughts.”

“All right, just hurry up. Crazy shit is happening, and I am not even sure we’re that close to the destination.”

She touched the hammer. “Hello...Uh Mr. Hammer.”

“Hello!”

“Shh! Didn’t you want to stay in hiding? You’re loud.”

“You are the only one who can hear me!”

“What do you mean?”

“I am not sure how to be clearer. No one else can hear me but you! You also do not need to speak out loud! Just think your words while we are touching, and I will hear you.”

Iris was drowning in questions and confusion. She began to heave. She closed her eyes and started to feel angry, and her grip tightened around the hammer's handle tightened. She had asked herself, What the hell is going on? I hate this fucking train. She forgot about the hammer, but it intruded on her thoughts

“Well. I was trying to tell you before your friend arrived. You were in another space inside this train. It no longer exists! I had brought you out of it and back to the normal space. Please, relax. I did not mean to upset you.”

Iris relaxed her grip and apologized. “I still have so many questions. Just relax on all of the special information, or whatever you're talking about. Just...Do you have a name? I mean who even are you?”

It took a while for the hammer to respond. The light in the red crystal was dim and showed no signs of any sort of life or movement. It was as if it was thinking hard.

Finally, it said, “My name. I am only a hammer. I do not have a name. As for who I am, I am just a mere tool. I only ever remember keeping the train running.”

“If that's the case, then how come you were in that 'space'? As you called it.”

“I could feel someone was calling to me. I brought you to that space so you could find me.”

Iris wanted to ask more questions, but she could feel the hammer becoming upset. It didn't have every answer. Iris could feel a sense of frustration. “How about I give you a name?”

There was a burst of heat. “Yes! I like that. Please give me a name.”

Iris thought of the dance of flames of when she found the hammer. She thought of how it reminded her of that Giant so long ago. How fiery its eyes were. “How about Cinder?” She let the name hang in the air. The warmth from the hammer became hotter.

“I like it. Nice to meet you. My name is Cinder. What is yours?”

“My name is Iris.”

Cinder said her name slow and as if he was learning to speak for the first time. “Iris. Good name.”

“Thank you.” The air became colder, and Iris saw Ghia. She looked panicked. She gestured for Iris to follow. Iris nodded and followed Ghia through the aisle and off the train, while hiding Cinder behind her back. Axel and Blank were already waiting. They held flashlights and lanterns, for the night was dark and the moon was blanketed by clouds. “What’s going on?” Iris could see a wreckage in front of her. The train she was on had stopped only mere yards away before crashing.

Blank was on the edge of turning thirteen. Iris always felt a pain in her chest after finding out that his parents were so ready to get rid of him after the storm. After he had mutated, his aunt had taken him in, for she was affected too, and then went missing one day. So, he ended up with Iris and her friends. He could yell and shout with immense force. So, he spoke softly. “Iris! Iris!” She leaned in. “That crash was another train like ours. It was on fire! But it looked like there was just one car. Iris thanked him and looked toward the crash. There were scents of burning woods and plastics. Scents that she remembered from the day of the storm: skin and hair.

There were people pouring out of the train with their flashlights casting toward the wreck on the track. They were gasping. Axel was just a bit ahead of them trying to get

a closer look. He turned back and shouted. “Iris, talk to one of the plants. See if they know anything.” But they were in a field of grass. “Axel! I do not speak to grass! How many times must I tell you? Too many voices. Too much pressure.”

“Can’t you just try it just this once?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Yeah, I know, Iris. You can be so useless sometimes.” Iris wanted to chuck Cinder at him. It wouldn’t do anything. Axel wouldn’t feel the pain.

“Hey, Axel. You try talking to thousands of voices at a time, and then you come back to me. Stop being an ass.”

He threw his hands in the air. “Whatever.” Iris turned her head toward the crash. The flames died down on their own, and she felt the pull of it, as if it was calling to her. There was a sense of dread as she got closer, and she put her hood and pulled her jacket tight around her. Her friends were talking behind her as she slipped away from the group. There was a deafening hum the closer she walked towards it. No one paid attention, for the crowds were worried about how the wreckage would be removed. She pushed through more bodies and the blur of faces, as if like water, she almost felt like she was swimming on soft grass, but it wasn’t a crashed train car. It was a small one and parts of it were burned and charred. It was still upright and entered through an open door. Dust and ash wafted in the air. The smoke barreled around Iris, and she coughed and then she heard a voice.

“Hello...is someone there?” The voice was faint and raspy.

“Yes! Yes! I am here! Where are you?” She saw a small hand outstretched and over the edge of a charred seat. Iris sprinted and saw a young girl. She put Cinder on the floor. “What happened here?”

The girl had wavy brown hair and green eyes. Ash clung to her face, and she had burn marks up her left arm and left side of her face. “Hello, miss. My name is Amelia.” She coughed between words. “There was an explosion. There were only a few people, but our part of the train got detached and it blew up.”

“You’re the only one left alive?” Iris had tears in her eyes.

“I think so. I believe everyone else is dead.”

“Why did this happen?”

“I think they blew us up because we are gifted.” She held up the same bronze coin as Iris.

Iris held up her coin. “I have one too.”

“Oh! So, you are special just like us! We were heading towards a house. My mother said that there was a house that could help and get rid of our gifts, but I didn’t want to get rid of mine.”

Iris’ voice was faltering. “I can speak to plants.”

“I can take away the bad stuff. Hold out your hand!”

So, Iris did. Amelia gently placed her hand on Iris’ and dropped the coin. “Have my coin. It’s my gift to you!” The young girl closed her eyes. Iris no longer felt scared, her heart stopped beating fast, and her lungs no longer felt tight. Amelia didn’t open her eyes and her hand grew stiff. She began to scream and yell. Tears rolled down her face, and she heard voices and movement coming from outside. She picked up Cinder and

ripped a piece of fabric off her clothing and tied Cinder to her waist. She took her coat and picked up Amelia's body and left through a back door.

She carried the dead girl's body to part of the field where there was no one else around. And placed her on the ground. Iris wiped away the dirt and tears. She clapped her hands together and then slammed them to the ground, and then hundreds and hundreds of voices came barging through her mind. So many whispers and so many words. Her head began to ache as she screamed inside. *Be quiet and shut up!* Silence. *My name is Iris, and I can hear you.* Silence. *I have a favor to ask.* Silence. *Please, let this little girl be buried. Let earth swallow her so she returns to dust.*

Oh, she brings a body, said a voice. *Very well, Iris of the green,* said another. *We accept your offering.* All of the voices said together. *We shall swallow this body and return her to soil and dust.*

Thank you, Iris said.

You are welcome, Iris of the green. Never forget... We thank you for asking.

The ground began to open. Iris stood and took a step back. She put her hand together and whispered: rest in peace young one. "May we meet again."

The body was swallowed by grass and earth.

Chapter 2: The Earthshaker

Iris gripped Cinder as she walked back towards the crowd of people in front of the crashed train. “Hello.”

“Iris.” Its voice hung there. As if it was thinking of the right words to say. “What just happened...I am...”

“Shh. Let’s not talk about it just yet.” It sounded so worried. So, affected. It seemed so human.

“You are a plant-speaker?”

“Yeah. It’s not so different from you. I’m used to having a lot of voices in my head.”

“May I ask how?”

Iris forgot that she was talking to a hammer. She told the hammer of the Storm. The day it all changed.

“There are many like me.”

“Plant-speakers?”

“No. People with unique abilities. They can do special things. Everyone who has it is different. Just like you’re a hammer with fire power or whatever.”

“I see.” Its voice trailed off as if it drifted into sleep, but Iris wasn’t sure. Her friends were sitting in a circle on the grass, and she joined them. She put her hands in her lap, and they stared at her. Their gaze was hard and intent, but they didn’t say anything. For Iris was sure they could see remnants of the grief and pain and horror of what she witnessed. They felt her pain.

Axel spoke first. His eyes were wide. “What happened?”

Iris told them of the dying girl. She told them how the train crashed and of the explosion. She refrained from telling them about the coin and the burial. They all sat in silence for a while, their thoughts almost drowned out by the commotion. There were men and women in uniforms. Iris thought it might be the same people she heard just before carrying Amelia's body. They were herding everyone back in the train and they said that the train would resume operation soon. Just be patient.

They were back in the train sitting down in their seats, and Iris was alone. almost. She did have Cinder with her and before she had a chance to say anything, Ghia, Axel, and Blank sat with her. Blank sat next to her, Ghia and Axel sat across. Blank put a hand on her shoulder. "We're sorry, Iris."

She fought back tears. She gritted her teeth. "You know. Something was pulling me in there. I'm not sure what it was, but I think I heard her calling. I felt it. I know I didn't know her. But she was young. She had on this pretty little purple dress. Her name was Amelia. You know she wasn't even crying. She didn't even seem scared. She was just like us. Affected by the Storm. She knew she was dying, and for someone so young, she accepted it. Someone killed her and the others in that train."

Axel ran his hand through his bright hair. "I mean...are you sure?"

"That's what she told me. And no, I'm not sure. Why else would they kill them? We're going to the same place. We're the last ones to leave the train. She didn't want to give up her ability. She wanted to keep it."

Ghia pulled out a mirror and breathed ice onto it: *Do you think that's why they killed her and the other people on that train?*

Iris shrugged. “Maybe.” She was too tired to continue talking. “I’m not sure what any of this means.” Again, they sat in silence. Axel focused on the drawing on his arm. Ghia was reading. And Blank was out cold. Iris was exhausted. She leaned her hand against the window and stared into night and said one more prayer before drifting into sleep.

*

She dreamed of her father, of the red Giant, and of the dead girl. Her dream cycled among the three and all she could see were their faces, but they were on fire, and Iris could hear the cackling of the flames. Then she was falling into their ashes and awoke with a jolt in her seat. Her group was still sleeping, and the rest of the train car was silent too. She looked out the window and the scenery was moving once again. It was still dark out, but the moonlight breached clouds again. Iris tried not to think of the dead in the train car.

She touched Cinder’s handle. “Cinder, do you sleep?”

“No. I do not think so.”

“Do you dream?”

“I dream of nothing.”

“I wonder what that's like. To not dream. To not sleep. To constantly be awake and aware of everything around. How do you see? Can you even see?”

“You have eyes. I have the red gem. It is how I do everything.”

“So, it’s like your soul?”

“Sure.”

“And if it cracks and breaks?”

“Well, I believe I would cease to exist.”

Iris let the conversation end there. She was afraid of asking anymore questions, but she still wanted to know about the hammer. She needed to go to the bathroom but didn't want to wake the others. She shifted and maneuvered her way passed Blank, but he grabbed her hand. He yawned and rubbed his eyes. “Where are you going?” She told him she was going to the bathroom, and he said he had to go as well. “Come on then”, she whispered.

They moved down the aisle toward the back of the train to the bathrooms. She told Blank to go first. She leaned back against wooden walls. Iris noticed a blinking red glow that came from Cinder. She touched his handle. “Cinder, what's wrong?”

The blinking stopped. “Well. I just wanted to show that my crystal will blink and glow if I have something to say.”

“Oh, all right.” The toilet flushed, and Blank stepped out. “Wait for me here, Blank. Don't move.” He nodded in agreement. She stepped inside and relieved herself. She washed her hands and her face. She wanted to shower and wash away the dirt and grime and bits of ash that clung to her skin and hung on her clothes. She stared at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were red, and they were dark and almost violet skin under her eyes. Her long hair smelled of smoke and sweat. In the mirror, she saw Amelia's face, so brief and so quick, it was gone when she blinked. She rinsed her mouth out with water and left.

But she didn't see Blank. Not at first. He was standing just a few feet ahead in the aisle and he was staring ahead at something. “Blank?” she whispered but he wouldn't turn around. He raised his arm slowly as if the air was dense. He pointed at something in

the distance but there was nothing. Iris saw nothing. She stood next to him. She asked him what he was staring at. She looked at his eyes from the side, and they were dead on forward. He didn't blink. He didn't answer. Iris looked forward again. A figure stood there, far enough away to seem smaller than the two of them. The white figure contrasted against the red interior and the dim amber lights. Iris knew that it wasn't there before.

Blank put his hand down. "You see it too, right. Please tell me you see it."

"Yes, Blank I see it."

The figure began to walk forward, but it moved slow and calm.

"Iris, what do we do?"

"I-I don't know."

"Should I yell?"

"No! Definitely not now. We'll figure this out."

Iris turned her head behind them and saw the door that led outside and into the other train car. "Walk backwards." She looked forward to the white body walking toward them, but she didn't hear any footsteps. "Faster." And they did, and the figure matched their movements. "Faster! Keep your eyes on it." Iris turned as they reached the door and she put an arm out to stop Blank from running into the wall. The figure was moving faster, and the figure began to take even more shape as it drew closer. It was almost jogging now.

"Iris, hurry!"

Iris cranked and pushed the metal handle on the door, but it wouldn't open. She pushed harder as the white figure was running, and then the door opened, and Iris and Blank flew through and slammed the door.

She and Blank were standing on a small ledge near the connector for the two train cars. The wind was loud, and it was cold in the dark night. "Shit, it's cold. Blank come here." She asked Cinder for warmth, and he agreed. She and Blank huddled together and a heavy warmth fell onto them.

"Wow. You're so warm." He was heaving. "Iris."

Iris could feel his breath. "Yes?"

"What was that? Inside the train?"

"I'm not sure."

"It looked like a ghost."

"I know". Iris wasn't sure if it was a ghost or not. It looked young, but Iris wasn't able to see its face. But its ghastly bright eyes hung in her mind. And all she could see was Amelia's face absent from life. Iris screamed in her own head: Why? Why? Why? Why! Why is this girl haunting me? She was just a stranger!

"Iris." Cinder's voice was soothing and calm. "I can hear. You are unwell."

"Cinder. I can't get her out of my head. She was just a child. And I only knew her for a minute and her death stays with me."

Iris was still huddling with Blank in the warmth of Cinder, but she was still shivering. Blank asked why she was shaking.

"I'm not sure. I think I'm just scared."

"Don't worry Iris! I'll protect you!" Iris hugged him with a tight grasp and didn't let go. "Please, Blank. Don't let go just yet."

They stayed in between train cars embracing each other in the hammer's warmth. Finally, Iris said, "Blank, let's go back inside." He nodded. "It's going to be okay. Just

stay behind me.” They opened the door and walked back in the train car. But everyone still seemed to be asleep. As she looked down the hall, she reached for Cinder. There was no white figure standing in front of them. It was not waiting. There was just silence and the sound of shuffling in seats. She grabbed Blank’s hand, “Let’s go back to our seats. Maybe we’re just tired.” They made it back to their seats.

Iris looked into Blank’s blue eyes. They were bloodshot and encrusted with gook. “Go ahead and get some sleep. I’ll make sure the ghost doesn’t come, okay?” He nodded and rested his head on her shoulder and closed his eyes.

“Cinder.”

“Yes, Iris?”

“Did you see that?”

“I did.”

“What was it?”

“I do not know.”

Iris knew that it was there. But she couldn’t see it. She kept a hand on Cinder. “I’m sorry for using you for warmth.”

His voice sounded reassuring. “Of course. I do not mind. Lest you forget, I was the one who heeded your call.”

“I’m still not sure what you mean by that.”

“I heard your voice calling to me. Calling for help.”

“But how did you know it was my voice?”

“As soon as you saw me in the engine furnace, as soon as I heard you, I knew you were the one.”

“Interesting...”

“Something wrong?”

“No. Not at all.”

Iris rested her head back and closed her eyes. She was exhausted. She fell asleep and dreamt of nothing that night. But she couldn't help but feel something watching her. So, she slept with her hand tight around the hammer's handle.

Iris awoke to daylight pouring in and the sound of the train's whistle. They had finally reached their first stop. The announcer had said that the train would be leaving in sixty minutes. The rest of her group was already up discussing getting off and stretching and what to eat. They agreed to get some fresh air and find something to eat. Axel asked what everyone was in the mood for, but nobody responded. “Fine then. I'll choose.”

Iris rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, still haunted from the night before. “Let's just find some breakfast. It's early.” They stepped off the train, and out of the station. They walked further into town, which was built upon a hillside. A wide river sung at the base of the hills. People milled out and about, shopping and looking happy. Iris and her friends wandered around looking for breakfast and found a small café. They sat together and ordered food and drink: pancakes and bacon and sausage and eggs.

Axel said, “Damn. I'm surprised to even see anything from an animal here. Especially this much. Can't wait to eat it.”

“I think we all are. Maybe they got a farm somewhere,” Iris said.

They looked around at the people filtering in and out, astonished by the atmosphere. Blank took a big gulp of his soda. “Wow! Everyone seems so happy here.”

The food arrived and everyone indulged hard and fast. No one spoke between bites, and they ate and drank until no one had food on their plates.

Iris had drunk four glasses of water. Axel wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “First time seeing water?”

She was breathing heavy. “I’m thirsty.” She called the server over to get another glass. And as she poured, Axel kept his dark eyes on Iris. She downed it in mere seconds. She still felt his gaze. “What do you want? Stop staring at me.”

Axel leaned in closer and spoke through his teeth. “When did you plant-speak?”

“I didn’t.”

“Liar!” Ghia put her hand on his arm and stared at him with utter disdain. “What, Ghia? She plant-spoke!”

“Axel! Keep your voice down!”

“Why are you lying, Iris?”

“All right, fine, yes, I plant spoke, but why do you care so much? I plant-speak all the time.”

He pointed a finger at her. “I haven’t seen you do it since we got on the train.”

“We should be getting back soon.”

“Don’t change the subject!”

“Fine! In that field after finding Amelia in that wreckage, I asked for her body to be buried in the grass.”

“You asked some grass to bury some dead strange little girl you, and wouldn’t even do it for us? Do you even care about us?”

Iris smacked him. “You shut your mouth. You weren’t there. I held her as she died. It didn’t matter if she was a stranger or not. She was a child who got killed.” Iris dropped some money on the table and left.

She left in a rage as the crowd stared at her and whispered. She held Cinder tight in her hand, but she didn’t say anything. Nothing to talk about. She marched through crowds along a cobblestone road. There were no signs of vehicles anywhere. She thought of what Blank said while they were eating. How everyone seemed so happy in this little town. It was as if the storm didn’t affect them. She wondered if it truly survived beyond it, and maybe this town was in pure bliss.

She needed to get back to the train, but the ambience of the town made her happy. The sunlight was strong, and the warmth brought a bit of life to her. She wandered and followed a path to what seemed to her the center plaza. A statue stood taller than the buildings that almost kissed the clouds.

It was a statue of a Giant. She had to block out the sun with her hand to get a full view. She got closer and stood in its shadow. The statue had long arms and legs, and it had a towering head. She whispered to herself. She couldn’t control how struck she was by this stone statue. Iris didn’t know how far she’d come with her friends on the train or how close she was to their destination, but she was glad she got to see this. There was a plaque at the base, and it read:

Carved unto this Earth

The Giant of Water

May It Protect Us All

We Await Your Return

Iris stared at the statue and was lost in it. Her mouth was open and her eyes wide, so struck she forgot to breathe for a moment. She couldn't help but keep staring and she walked up and laid a hand on the stone. She closed her eyes and there was a breeze. She waited for something to happen. She wasn't sure what, though. She stood there for a moment and with her hand on the stone. Nothing.

She walked over to an edge of the town square and looked at the hills below and watched the river run. The air was warm, but cool enough to be crisp. The sunlight barely beamed through the clouds. Iris almost wanted to abandon the train and live here. Wanted to forget about the storm and live in pure bliss. If the people of this town seemed to do it, why couldn't she?

Iris saw a small tree that stood by itself. She walked over and saw the valley way down low. Part of her wanted to fall into the water below and let it carry her somewhere else.

The tree bore fruit. Iris clapped her hands, and then touched the tree.

Hello.

Green one. Hi there. You have come to sit with me. How is the view.

It's beautiful.

Yes, it is. I am so fortunate to have been born here!

Wish I could stay here with you.

Why not? Stay and rejoice.

If only, young one. If only.

Please, let me share my fruit with you.

Iris plucked a fruit, and stared at the small dark red plum.

Please eat, green one!

Iris took a bite into the plum and it was soft and sweet. Her father would prepare fresh cut fruit for breakfast from their garden most mornings for breakfast. Her favorite would be pears. She'd always be excited for their season. The plum was her first fresh fruit in a long time. She ate until only a pit was left, and she put it in her pocket. *Thank you, young one.*

Goodbye, green one.

She stood and took another look at the land before her.

Cinder's voice broke through Iris' thoughts. "Iris, shouldn't you get back to the train?"

"Yeah, I should, Cinder. But do I need to?"

The hammer didn't say anything as she stood looking out toward the horizon.

"I think you're right, Cinder. I should be getting back. It's kind of upsetting they haven't come looking for me."

"Iris, are you sad?"

"I'm not sure what I'm feeling. I've been on this train a few days, and like, everything is so crazy. For a moment, it feels like I can breathe."

Upon taking a deep breath, and letting it go, a rumbled scream came from behind her. But then the whistle of the train seemed to come from the same place as the scream. "It's time to go, Cinder." Iris ran toward the loud sounds, afraid of what she would find. The ground shook. The people she ran past didn't seem to care about the shaking, or the scream. They just kept walking with their eyes forward, seemingly unaware of the world around them. She held tight onto Cinder. The shaking continued, and there was more

yelling. Another whistle from the train. And then she was in front of the station, and in front of her was a woman holding a knife to Ghia's throat. The ground continued to rumble.

The onlookers were still, only watched the scene that unfolded before them. Axel stood in front everyone else. He shouted. "Please! Put down the knife and let her go!"

The woman looked broken. Her skin seemed to be peeling, and her eye drooped. There was an odor around her, and Iris couldn't quite put it together; sweetened rot smell that turned Iris' stomach. Her hands looked as if they had been in dipped in wax and covered in fish scales. She was shaking. "Give me your bronze coins, or she dies! Hurry! I know what you lot are!" Her teeth were yellow and fanged. "I need to get there. I NEED to get there! You don't know what it's like!" She pressed the knife harder into Ghia's throat, hard enough to draw blood.

Axel looked at Iris in desperation, and Iris noticed how scared he was. Iris looked at Ghia. "Ghia you need to breathe. You need to really *breathe*." But Ghia looked directly at Iris and shook her head. Iris whispered to herself through her teeth. The ground rumbled and shook once more. The train whistled. Iris realized Blank wasn't there. She thought that he must be on the train waiting for them, and Iris knew the train was about to leave. But she had come up with an idea, as the ground continued to make noise.

Iris walked a bit closer, but Axel grabbed her hand and mouthed: what are you doing?

Iris replied with trust me. And so, he let her walk on.

The woman stepped back, still holding the knife to Ghia's throat. Iris walked closer, with Cinder in hand. "Let go of her."

“Or what? What are you gonna do, missy?” The woman spat as she spoke.

The ground rippled and people were yelling and shouting and falling. Iris hoped that maybe the woman would fall over and free Ghia. She still stood there. Iris looked toward the station but didn’t see the train moving. She knew they had little time. She had an idea. She grabbed Cinder, and said, “Let her go, or pay the price. I’ll continue to cause these earthquakes. That’s right! It’s me causing theses quakes.”

The vile woman pointed at Iris. “I knew it! But I’m still not letting her go, until you hand over those damn coins!”

She heard Cinder’s voice.

“Use me.”

“What if I hurt you?”

“I will be fine. Trust me”

Iris thought of Amelia, and how she gave her coin. For a moment, Iris wanted to give this woman hers. But she wouldn’t give it up. Not to her. “Fine then. You were warned.”

Iris gripped Cinder tight with both hands and held it high above her head. She brought the hammer down, letting go of her strength as Cinder touched ground so as not to damage it. Everyone stared at her, and then the earth and ground began to break. Cracks formed in the stone they stood on. Everything rumbled around them, and the frenzy increased. The buildings began to collapse, and houses caved in, and the train began to chug without them. Iris braced herself; she crouched and watched as everything crumbled. Ghia broke free from the woman and ran towards Axel and Iris, and they ran as everything fell behind them. They weren’t far from the train, but it picked up speed.

Blank hung out of the window waving his hands. Axel sprinted and leapt just barely touching the metal balcony. He hung over, extending his arms, and grabbed Ghia's hands, and then they both reached for Iris, but she was getting too tired, and she couldn't grab their hands, and the train got faster.

Axel yelled, "You're running out of time. Hurry." Iris extended her reach with Cinder in her hand, Axel's entire body hung over, with Ghia holding his legs, and he got a hold of the hammer. "Jump, Iris, and we'll pull you!"

She leapt towards them. Axel grabbed her and she hit the side of the metal gate. They pulled her up, and in between the metal bars, she could see the town collapsing. The head of the Giant statue seemed to be looking at her as it crumbled and fell in the distance. She looked at Cinder, to make sure there was no damage. There was none that she could see.

She was heaving and said in between breaths, "What the hell?" Axel and Ghia sat beside her as the train bloomed into full speed and the last of the town disappeared into the horizon. She had almost forgotten about Ghia. Iris turned her head, and Axel was already tending to her wound. "Ghia! Are you okay?"

Ghia shook her head and waved her hands, and then she pointed at Iris. She said she was fine and held tightly on Cinder. She had put it away in the sash she tied it around her waist. "Guys, what happened when I left?"

"After you stormed out of that place, we just sat for a while. Blank wanted to go back to the train. Ghia and I walked around, and that disgusting creature of a person took Ghia hostage and that's about it. I'm sorry, by the way."

"For what?"

“For what I said. About that girl. And the grass and stuff.” His eyes were bloodshot and had dark circles under them.

“I’m sorry I slapped you. I was angry. And I still don’t think I’m okay after what happened with her. There is so much crazy stuff going on.” She hoped he wouldn’t ask about Cinder. She thought that maybe carrying around a hammer that looked normal wouldn’t be strange.

“Speaking of that...That was an earthquake...right?”

“Yeah. That was perfect timing although, maybe not so much for them.”

Axel sighed and said, “Let’s go back to Blank. He’s probably freaking out a bit.”

They walked in the train and walked down the aisles until they found their seats, where Blank was waiting anxiously for them. He asked all sorts of question of what took them so long and what happened and why the ground was shaking. It was question after question. Iris blinked hard and rubbed her eyes. “Blank, please. One thing at a time. We aren’t even sure what happened.”

“What do you mean? You guys were there!”

“Blank! Calm down. Ghia was held hostage and got injured. There was an earthquake. There was a weird woman who look liked a creature or monster or something, and now that town is destroyed.”

Blank looked down. “I see. I’m sorry. I was just worried about you guys, and I didn’t want to be on the train alone.”

Iris put a hand over his and held it gently. “I know. I understand. I’m sorry too. Let’s just all take a deep breath and talk for a few minutes.”

But they didn't, at least not for a while. They all looked down at the table in silence. Axel looked upset. He scratched his nose. Almost ready to begin a conversation he wasn't ready for, but he said, "Iris. That earthquake. It wasn't you, was it?"

"No, Axel. I just was timing the intervals between the shaking. I was just acting. I didn't think that everything was gonna start crumbling."

Ghia took out her mirror and breathed upon it and it read, *That lady...She looked frightening.*

Iris played with a ringlet of her own hair. "She was very frightening. And she knew about us, how did she know about us?"

Axel looked as if he was biting his lip. "Who the hell knows. We got out alive, right? We are all still here. We left that weird ass town behind."

Ghia breathed on her mirror again. *All of those people...*

Iris stared beyond them while she spoke. "Yeah. All of those people. We didn't even try to help them."

"So, what? We barely interacted with them. And they were strange. All of them looked like they weren't alive. "

Iris clenched her fists and thought of the Giant statue. "I noticed that too. But that doesn't mean..." Her voice trailed off. She thought of the exploded train car with Amelia and then back to the earthquake.

Axel waved a hand in her face. "Doesn't mean what, Iris?"

"Nothing. We probably should have helped them."

"How? The train would have left without us. The train couldn't fit all of those people"

“I don’t know, Axel, doesn’t it bother that we just left them. Just like that?”

“One of them hurt Ghia, and she’s pregnant!”

Everyone stared at Axel. Iris couldn’t get any words out. Even after Blank had said, “Ghia has a baby in her belly?”

Iris felt a tide of fear and anger wash over her. What if Ghia had actually gotten hurt. Iris looked away from them, and at the ground. At her own black shoes. It looked as if she had been walking in ash. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Well, I just did, didn’t I?”

“Not on purpose!”

“So!”

“What do you mean ‘so’?”

Ghia slammed her fist on the table. She gritted teeth, and she put her finger to her mouth to shush Iris and Axel. She gave a look at Axel as if she was calling him an idiot, and all he did was give her a blank stare, and say, “Sorry. It slipped.” She held up her mirror. *It’s okay.*

Iris said, “That’s why you looked so scared. That’s why you were so angry with me earlier?”

He nodded his head. “Yeah. I thought this was going to be a normal train, turns it would the train ride from hell.”

Iris looked at Blank, but she was twiddling with his fingers. Iris ran her fingers through his shaggy hair and thought of the ghost. Thought of Cinder, of Amelia. “It only keeps getting weirder. I don’t understand what’s happening. None of us do. Although, I

am upset you both didn't tell us before getting on the train, but I am happy for both of you. Congratulations."

They both said thank you. Even though each of them had something they wanted to talk about, a burning of questions they couldn't get out, they remained silent.

Iris reached for Cinder's hilt and rubbed the gem at the hilt. "Hi, Cinder. Are you Okay?"

"Yes!"

"I'm sorry for almost smashing you into the ground. And that you were being yanked. I was worried you were gonna come apart."

"I am intact. Nothing seems to be broken. Miss Iris. Are you okay?"

"No. I don't think I am. I'm not sure what the hell is going on Cinder. Right from when I met you, everything started to become strange." For a moment, she thought she could hear him breathe. But she knew that couldn't be true. Iris looked out of the window and saw an ocean. Or maybe a great lake. Then she thought of the river that ran through the hills at the base of the town that crumbled. Again, she thought of the people. How lifeless and how she left them behind. She was almost mesmerized by the glisten of the surface of the before Axel interrupted her trance. "Iris, what are you thinking about?"

They all watched her now. "I'm starting to get paranoid. I'm getting scared."

Axel leaned in closer. "Why?"

"Because. Of all of these weird things keep happening since we got on the train. We have to be getting closer to the place, right?"

Axel shrugged. "Who knows. I hope so. We have to be at least somewhat almost there."

“Well, that’s just it. What if it’s all fake?”

Blank didn’t look at her when he spoke. “Do you really think that?”

“No, she didn’t, Blank. She’s scared. We are all a bit scared. Especially after that.”

Blank’s voice faltered and became higher than usual. “Iris and I saw a ghost.”

Iris put her hand on his shoulder. “Yes. We did. Or at least we think we did.”

Ghia wrote on her mirror. *When?*

“I think the night of, or the night after Amelia died.” Iris told Axel and Ghia how a white figure chased her and Blank out of the train.

Ghia wrote, *Why didn’t you tell us?*

Iris couldn’t speak. She’d been keeping secrets from them. Blank gripped her hand tight. “It’s because she didn’t want to worry you guys.”

“I couldn’t get Amelia’s face out of my head. I still can’t. I thought it was her ghost following us. We ran away from it and kept running away from it. I thought maybe she was chasing me because she was angry.”

Ghia breathed on her mirror. *Maybe she was. Let’s get some rest.*

Everyone agreed. Iris reached for Cinder’s hilt, but she decided not to. She closed her eyes. Blank leaned against her, and she put her arm around him. Ghia and Axel cuddled against each other. They fell asleep to a sun just barely setting.

Chapter 3: Falling

Iris awoke to the stopping of the train. Another station. She and Axel were the only ones awake. He nodded at her. “Let’s skip this one, yeah?” She nodded her head. She looked out the window. But there was no one on in the station. She tried to see beyond it but there was nothing. Just empty streets and buildings, but the train was still stopped.

A message played over the loudspeaker. “The train will depart in one hour.”

Iris and Axel looked at each other in bewilderment. Iris realized how silent the train was and looked around her. “Axel, there is no one on the train.”

“What do you mean?” He looked around and saw the absence. The dust dance swirled from the breeze of the door opening. “No one’s here.

“Yes, I know that.”

“Right. Let’s wake -up Blank and Ghia....” Ghia and Blank weren’t there either.

“Iris, what do we do? It’s just you and me.”

Iris was surprised. That was the first time in a while Axel looked to her for something. “I don’t know.” Iris reached for Cinder. “Hi, Cinder.” There was no answer. She called for him again, but she was reaching out to nothingness. Her breathing became heavier. Her ears began to ring.

“Iris. Iris! Are you okay?”

“Hm? What? Yeah, I’m fine, Axel.” Her voice trailed off and she stared out the window once more and looked in the absence of the town. She felt a pull. Heard a distance noise that she couldn’t quite make out. She thought it was a song. Or maybe just screaming. “Let’s get off the train.”

He threw his hands in the air. “Why would we do that?”

“I can hear something.”

“Hear what? What do you hear? I don’t hear anything.”

She grabbed his hand. “Trust me.” They left the train. And out into the openness and there was nothing but the howling of the wind and a distant humming. “It is getting louder.”

He walked next to her with his hands in his pockets fiddling around with something in his pocket, Iris assumed it was his needed he tattooed his skin with.

“There’s no noise.”

“How could you not, it’s getting louder.” She walked faster, getting farther ahead of him. She focused on the sound. Around her were sunken buildings and old vehicles. The road was cracked and full of overgrowth. Deep verdant roots breached concrete and asphalt, like arms hammering themselves against a dark sky just only reaching the clouds with their fingertips. She brushed her hands against the tall stems, and the voices poured in. *Hello, green one. Come follow us. To the tree. Yes, to the tree. Speak with the tree. Do not stop now, green one. Keep going.* She didn’t respond, she just kept walking and there was a fog in front of her. The singing grew louder.

She forgot about Axel. She thought she was alone. She even forgot about Cinder. It was just her and the fog and the hum. She felt a hand on her shoulder, and she spun and saw Axel looking at her. “Are you okay?”.

“Yes. Are you?”

He nodded. He was sweating and Iris could feel the panic dripping off him. “Iris, where the hell are we?”

“I am trying to figure it out. I don’t know I saw some roots and stems and talked to them, but they said to keep going.” She extended a hand for him to grab it. He did and they walked together. Amidst dense fog. Axel gripped her hand tighter, and the sound was even louder. She could feel the vibrations in the ground. She asked Axel if he could feel it too.

“Yes. I can. What is that?”

“I think it’s coming from the song.”

It was soft and harsh. But still so gentle. He said, “I can hear it.” They stepped out of the dense white cloud and onto green earth. The sky was black and starless. In front of them was a gigantic tree that was set ablaze, but the flames were amber colored as if they were drenched in sap and caressed in sunlight. The flames danced on tree bark and twirled in leaves, but none of it was burning—the air didn’t smell of fire or of ash. It smelled like lilac and honey. It was dizzying, and Iris and Axel walked close entranced by songs and aromas.

“Iris...”

“Shh. We need to keep listening.”

They were in front of the towering tree. Iris touched the bark, listened close, all she heard was screaming. She tried to remove her hand, but it was stuck to the tree. It was freezing. “Help!” He couldn’t hear her over the piercing sound. He trembled from it, too. Then the ground shook, and the green earth opened and swallowed them.

They awoke with a jolted inhale and were covered in cold sweat. They were on the train holding each other's hands tightly from across table. They let go of each other and stared.

Axel spoke first. "Are you okay?"

Iris nodded and said, "I think so. Are you?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine. Iris. What was that?"

"I don't know." They were heaving and sweating. Blank and Ghia were still asleep. The train was still dark, the lights dimmed. "Axel. That was..."

"Terrifying?"

"Yeah."

He rubbed his eyes. "I need to pee. Just...uhm. Take it easy, okay? He put his hand on her shoulder. He walked away. Iris' heart was still pounding, and her head began to hurt. She put a finger to her temple. Her vein pulsed and she saw the image of the tree burning. She thought of Cinder.

She put her hands around Cinder. "Can you hear me?"

"Of Course, Miss Iris! Are you okay?"

"No. I just had the strangest dream. At least I think it was a dream. I'm not sure I felt as if it were when I met you. In that weird space. But in that dream. Or whatever, I tried calling for you. But you didn't answer. I got scared."

Iris wanted to ask more questions. She wanted to know more. But she was tired. The pull of sleep was washing over her again, but she refused it. Afraid of a dream or nightmare. She waited for Axel to come back. But her eyelids grew heavier. The headache pulsed. She closed her eyes tight, and her head felt numb for a moment, and the pain subsided.

Dawn broke through, and as the train passed, Iris cast her eyes out to the landscapes. Everything was so verdant and so rich of natural life. She was happy to see land untouched by humans, especially this much of it. After a while, she saw charred grounds, a bit of scorched earth that no life, even three years later, bloomed. Black and burnt. No trees, no flowers, no animals, no people. Nothing She stared until it passed from view, hoping that one day, it would just become a forgotten layer of mud, covered so deep in dirt, it would birth anew. She remembered that crimson lightning that turned her home into a destructive ground-zero. The air never stopped smelling like electricity. That's why she and so many others left. With her eyes closed, she hummed to herself.

She forced herself to stay awake, and Axel still wasn't back. She got up and walked to the bathroom and knocked on the door. No answer. "Axel!" She yelled, not caring if she woke anybody else up. She knocked again and nothing. "Answer me." The headache was getting worse, and she could hear her heartbeat in her fingertips. "Axel!" She grabbed Cinder with two to bash the door down, but then he opened the door.

"Whoa! What are you doing?"

"You weren't answering!"

"I fell asleep!"

"Standing up?"

"I had to shit!"

"You fell asleep on the toilet?"

"Yeah, I'm tired! Excuse me, but you and I just had the weirdest damn dream, nightmare, or whatever that was."

"Sorry. I got worried. I'm just exhausted."

“Let’s go get some sleep then. Oh, and where did you get that hammer?”

“Oh, this thing?” She held Cinder up. “It was what you pulled me on the train with before.”

“Oh, okay. But where did you find it?”

She dared not tell them just yet. “I found it in the train. On the ground when I was walking around. I think when we first got on.”

Axel shrugged. “All right. Whatever. I guess it’s useful to have one.”

Iris nodded. And they reached their seat and sat back. They stared at each other. “Hey, Axel.”

“What’s up?”

“Let’s try not to have any crazy dreams this time.”

“Yeah. Good idea, Iris. Good idea.” He leaned his head back and dozed off.

Iris crossed her arms flat against the table and laid her head down. She thought of her father. She would wake up early as a child to explore the outdoors. He would already be awake, painting and drawing portraits of her mother. She could only remember her face through those images, like looking through a vague fog going in and out of light. The only feature Iris remembered about her mother were her green eyes, for Iris had them too. Her father would always say that. Iris would watch him focused on each brush stroke, not even noticing she was there looking at him and the painting. He would mess up because of a sneeze or cough, or a bug would land on the canvas, and he would slump in his chair. That’s when he would see Iris. In the low light of the late dawn, where the sunlight filtered through his glasses-- where one lens was cracked because she had stepped on it, and she cried about it. He would tell her that he could see better now. He

would pick her up and cradle her, “Not to worry, sweet girl! The world is much sharper in my eyes! And it’s because of you!” She would stop and smile, and her dad would take her outside, with her on her shoulders. She would tower over everything else. She would reach for tree branches and feel leaves between her fingers.

They lived at the base of a great hill, surrounded by willows and aspens. She loved when it became spring, and the bees would hum around her as she waded through flower gardens and the scents would waft them together. The bees and she would dance together, and her father would watch and laugh and smile.

Iris remembered when she would smell lavender and lilac. Then she thought of the burning tree. She remembered that falling into nothing, which felt so real. Then she thought of Amelia’s scarred face. She thought of the day of the storm, where she stared through that classroom and saw beyond her reflection the first of the storm. The air changed. Ebony clouds amassed and grew into each other. Iris saw the first bolts of lightning strike ground, and small craters were formed. The sky poured a white rain, and she remembered someone dragging her away from the window, but she couldn’t look away. She was forced away and followed the herds of her classmates. The teachers and professors at the university were herding everyone together. Telling everyone to go to the nearest auditorium, and she couldn’t help but think of her father, how she was in that moment only thinking of how she was going to leave and go home.

That was when the ground started to shake, and parts of the building cracked. The whirlwinds of the white rain grew even fiercer, and the cars outside were moving as if on their own, crashing into each other. The bolts of red lightning came even faster and harder, and the electrified air began leaking inside, and bolts began to whip around

people crackling and twirling through fearful and running bodies. Iris remembered the sensation, when it seared up her skin: a tingled spiraling blaze of heat and cold that trailed along her back.

Iris brought herself back from her memory, back to the train. She stopped thinking to try and fall asleep, but the pain in her head worsened. She felt her heartbeat through her whole body. She sat there, with her head in her arms, and with her eyes closed. She felt a cool hand move through her hair and cold fingertip on her head. It was soothing, and the pain subsided, and she was finally able to fall asleep.

Iris awoke with her friends looking at her. Blank wished her a good morning. She stretched her arms and wished everyone the same as she ran her hand through Blank's coarse and greasy hair. She couldn't wait to have a proper shower, and she thought that her friend couldn't wait for that either.

She realized the train was not moving. "Another stop, huh?"

Axel responded. "Yeah. Not too much longer now. The train seems to be emptying out."

Iris rubbed the crust out of her eyes. "Closer and closer. I'm almost scared. How long are we stopped here?"

Ghia breathed, and it read, *I think for another hour.*

Iris sighed. "We need to get more food. I'm tired of eating train meals and snacks. The food we had in..."

Axel interjected, "Earthquake town?"

“Yeah. Earthquake town...” Her voice trailed off. She looked down at the table, and folded her hands together, but also fidgeting with them. Ghia placed her own on Iris’ and Iris looked at her. Ghia looked a bit angry and upset. Her eyebrows were furrowed, and then she shook her head at Iris, as if she knew what she was thinking. She pointed at herself and then at Iris. “You want to come with?” Ghia nodded. “Axel is that okay? Actually, you know what. Just stay. Please. Not after what happened before.”

Blank stood up. “Let me come with you! I wasn’t there to help you guys last time!”

Axel stood and grabbed his chin. “It was a good thing you weren’t! If it weren’t for a damn earthquake who knows what would have happened! None of us should go out there.”

Iris looked to see Cinder l behind her in the seat. She grabbed the hammer and tucked it inside her sash. “I’ll go and see what I can bring back. Blank, excuse me—”

Axel slammed his hands on the table. They were bleeding from where he was tattooing himself. “Iris, stop!”

“Ghia’s pregnant! She needs real food.”

“Ghia’s fine! We can’t risk someone getting injured! We got lucky! With all this weird shit going on, who knows what will happen! We will be fine until we get there!”

“You do not speak for her. We barely know what there is! How do you know what we will find?”

Ghia stood, and her fists were balled tight, veins protruding from her skin. She breathed hard and clapped her hands. The frost from her breath chilled the air around them, clinging to the window and surfaces.

Murmuring started around them. Complaints about the chill in the air. The frost began to spread further, and it crept and spread in radial tension, but then it vanished quicker than it came. Iris apologized first, and then Blank and then Axel. Ghia shivered; her face was drained of color. Her lips were even more blue than before, and the frost dust clung to her eyebrow and eye lashes. She clapped her hands once more, and the frost receded even faster but a message was left on the table. *Everyone shut up. We're all staying here We already wasted enough time arguing.* She pointed down, and then everyone sat in their seats.

They sat there in silence, their own total silence. Iris noticed ice around Ghia's eyes. She must have been crying. Iris wanted to say more than just an apology. She put a hand on Cinder, but it was the hammer who said hello first. "Oh, hi Cinder. You sound a bit excited."

"I'm just happy to hear from you. I'm sorry we haven't chatted that much."

"A lot has happened." The cheerfulness disappeared from the hammer's tone.

"Yeah, it's been strange. Ever since getting on this train. It's been one thing after another. Life is strange. I'm just so tired of being in this train." Her stomach growled. She said to her friends, "I'm gonna go find some snacks on the train. For all of us." They all stared at her. "Don't worry. I won't run off. I promise".

Axel asked her if she had enough money. She said yes and then walked on.

She said hello to Cinder again. "Hello again, Miss Iris. Off somewhere?"

"Yeah, just to get some food or something. We are all just so hungry. Cinder, I have a question."

"What is your question, Miss Iris?"

“Do you remember when I asked you about dreaming and sleep? And how what you can and cannot see?”

“Yes.”

“Well, are you aware of everything?”

“What do you mean?”

“When you and I aren’t speaking. Do you see or hear what goes on around you? I think I asked you something like this already.”

“It might be hard to understand for you. Since you are human. You ask me if I sleep. When you and I are not speaking, it is like sleep for you. Although sometimes the sounds and visuals go in and out. In this moment, I see what you see. I can hear what you hear for as long as you allow me.”

“Even though you are tucked inside my jacket?”

“Yes!”

“How?”

Cinder didn’t answer right away. “It is a sharing of vision. Your touch allows that to happen.”

“I see. Is that what happens when you are held by anyone?”

“I...I do not know. You are the first person and only person to have picked me up.”

“You sat in the...other train waiting for someone to pick you up?”

“I’m not sure I was waiting for anyone else. I was just powering the train. Then I felt that someone else was there besides me, and that was you, Miss Iris.”

“If you are powering the train, then how is it even running? But weren’t we in a different place completely?”

“Yes and no. I remember being buried beneath a pile of coal.”

“But there was none when I found you.” Iris remembered that beautiful blaze saw upon seeing Cinder for the first time. That mesmerizing swirl of warm orange light. “I heard you. I heard some sort of singing to me. You had said when we first met that you were calling for me.”

“Yes.”

“How and why?”

It was as if she felt Cinder thinking. Like the hammer was remembering something it had forgotten, or something it simply was supposed to know. She passed the rows of seats and most of them were empty, but once in a while she would catch a glimpse of other people living in those almost private spaces. She saw a family of four. A mother, a father, a boy, and a girl who looked like twins, except she was a bit taller. She wore an ivory dress, and he was dressed in black. The girl wore a sun hat with a purple bow. The boy wore a bowtie that was the color. The parents matched them. *A cute family*, Iris thought. They were smiling at each other, having fun. Laughing and playing. Iris wondered where they were headed and where they came from. Maybe they were going to the same place, if they weren’t, she hoped they were going somewhere warm.

As she passed empty seats, there was a savory aroma. Pungent scents that were beckoning and swirling and dancing around her as she arrived at the counter. There was a young man who wore a red uniform. He had sunken eyes. “Hello, there! How can I help you?”

“Uh hi, I’m just looking for- “

“Oh, my goodness! You’re her?”

“What?”

“The Earthshaker.”

“No, please don’t call me that. I didn’t do anything. It was just a coincidence. I was just trying to help my friend.”

“That lady was scary! I saw it all from a distance.”

“I just came here to get some food.” He began to speak again, but Iris slammed money down on the counter and asked him to quiet. The moment he called her ‘earthshaker’ she felt like she was falling.

She saw all kinds of different pastries: croissants, sausage wheels, muffins, rolls, cheese and walnut puff pastries, lemon poppy bread. Iris pressed her forehead against the glass in a pure desire of an unyielding gluttony. “Did you make these?”

“I did.”

“They look delicious.”

“Thanks. It’s really the only thing I know how to do. So...yeah.”

“I’ll take one of everything.”

“Uhm...Okay.”

She placed a pile of money on the counter. “Will this cover it?”

“That should be more than enough.”

She grabbed the food. “Thanks.”

She almost forgot about Cinder. “Cinder.”

“Your previous question.” Iris noticed the hammer’s voice sounded intense and metallic. “I believe that we were calling to each other. No one was supposed to find me, but you did.”

“All I did was wake up in a stranger version of the train.” Iris saw someone standing next to her friends. She walked closer and closer and saw that the figure was a bald woman, and her voice was almost shouting. “Uh, hello. Can we help you?” Her friends shifted in discomfort.

The bald woman turned to look at her and she looked Iris in the eye. “There you are! Earthshaking woman.”

“Again? Don’t call me that!” Iris made a fist. “Why do you call me that?”

“You made the earth shake!”

“No, I didn’t! There just happened to be an earthquake. It’s amazing how many people saw that but didn’t help.” She pointed at Ghia.

“Well, you had it under control, didn’t you?”

Iris gave the bag of food to Axel. “We don’t even know who you are. What do you want?”

“I was looking for you. You can help us.” She put a hand on Iris’ shoulder and gripped tight. Her nails were long and sharp. Blank jumped out of his and tried to push her away, and the woman turned and slashed at his arm and howled.

Iris, in angry reflex, grabbed Cinder, and pulled the bald woman away. She raised the hammer to her face. Iris felt Cinder almost burning; the heat radiating from it, and through the handle, it was hard to hold on to. Iris stared into cold dark fearful eyes.

“Don’t you dare touch him!” She gripped Cinder tighter, and the heat continued to rise. “I

don't want to help you! *We* don't want to help you. So, leave us. Now." The woman ran toward the back of the train. Iris dropped the hammer, and almost fell in a draining daze.

"I need to sit. Blank, are you okay?"

"I am okay, it is just a small cut."

"I think there are first-aid kits under the seats." Axel and Ghia looked for a first-aid kit, but they didn't find any. "Damn it. Do we have any napkins or anything?"

"Iris, I'm fine. It's not that bad."

"Yeah but now there is a hole in your shirt. Axel, do you have an extra shirt?"

"Uh maybe, let me check my bag." He stood up and reached in the overhead and searched his bag. "I don't have anything. Wait...here." He pulled out a violet shirt and tossed towards Blank.

Blank said, "I really don't need this. Plus, it smells. Really bad." He tossed it back to Axel. "Just keep it."

Iris knelt with Cinder still in her hand. She looked at it, not able to speak, and the sounds of everything around faded, seemingly distant, as if she were falling from them, or they falling from her. She heard her name, and thought she was close, it still sounded so far away. She thought she heard Cinder's voice too, but there was another pounding in her head. She was cold, and the sweat clung to her body, her inner clothes were sticking to her skin. All she heard was her heartbeat, and then felt the warmth in her hand breezing from Cinder. With a shaky breath she closed her eyes, and saw Amelia's burning face, and then Iris fell asleep.

Iris awoke lying down in the seats with Cinder right next to her. Her friends had gone, but there were some leftover foods for her in a brown bag. There was no one on the

train, but there was a note left for her on the table. It read: outside. She looked out the window. People stood, and she saw her friends sitting next to each other in grass. A lake in the distance not too far from where they were. She was in a haze and dehydrated. She held Cinder in her hand. “Cinder. What happened?”

“Miss Iris.” The hammer’s voice almost sounded coarse, like the grinding of metal. “You fainted.”

“I know. I think. There was that strange girl.” She thought about what happened. She remembered getting angry. “Yes. I was so mad.” She looked at her hand and saw burn scars, they still felt hot. She was almost afraid to grab Cinder again, she held the hammer with her left.

“I apologize for the pain and the scars.”

“What even happened?”

“There was a resonance between us. I’m not sure what happened, but your anger called on the heat. I was suppressing it. It could have been much worse. I’m sorry, Iris.”

She grabbed some of the pastries to eat, and then she gathered the rest of things, and walked off the train. “Don’t be sorry. It’s okay. We scared that stranger away, didn’t we? You said it could have been a lot worse, so thank you.”

Cinder sounded so shaky. “You are welcome.”

“How do you feel?”

“I do not know. I believe I am all right. Your friends were worried about you. They laid you down and set me near.”

“They are some good people. I haven’t told them about you yet. Weird things keep happening. I feel like it’s never a right time to tell them.”

“I understand.”

“Cinder, let’s chat later, okay?” The hammer didn’t respond to her, but she knew it heard her. Iris walked off the train to meet with her friends. She waved to everyone as they continued to eat. Blank had a bandage covering the cut on his arm. “Blank, are you okay?” She knelt next to him and gave him a hug. He nodded and gave her one back.

“Ghia made sure the wound was clean. We found some stuff in her bag. Doesn’t really hurt all that bad.” Iris said how glad she was to hear that. And ask Ghia and Axel how they were doing. They said they were okay, but they were all worried about her.

“I’m fine but what happened with the train?”

Alex leaned forward. “It just stopped.”

“Without warning?”

Ghia nodded, and Axel said “Yep. The Conductor in the red uniform came and told everyone to get off the train. Haven’t heard anything since. Been here about an hour probably, maybe more”.

“I’m glad they let me lie there. Any sign of that weirdo?” She looked at Ghia, and she shook her head.

“No.” Axel said. “Thank the Giants.”

Iris looked around to see the others that were with them on the train. There weren’t many, not as much as when she first boarded. They were all in their own little world, some of them looked skinny and sickly. Some of them seemed normal. Iris wondered if she would ever see these people again. The attacker sat next to another woman, who looked just like her only with longer hair, and there was color in her face.

She was leaning against the other's shoulder. Iris wasn't sure if she was asleep. "Do you think that everyone here is like us?"

Axel laid down, with his back flat against the grass. "Why do you keep wondering about that?"

"I'm just curious. Amelia. The young girl. She must have been going there too. She was like us." She remembered what Amelia said to her. Remembered how she used that word 'special'. "That woman who attacked Blank..."

"What about her? She was a creep."

It was Blank who spoke. "She was just looking for help. She seemed desperate. She looks so scared."

Axel sat back up. "Yeah, well she couldn't take the hint to leave."

Ghia brought out her mirror and breathed upon it. *But why did she come to us?*

Axel waved his hands in the air. "Who the hell knows and who cares?"

Blank asked, "Can she hear us? Shouldn't she be around here?"

Iris pointed in her direction but told them not to look. She said she was probably far away enough not to hear. Iris stared at the lake, the way the sun reflected off the surface. The way it blinded her. The call of the water. "I'm going over to the lake over there. Anyone want to come with?" Axel said no. Blank said he would stay. Ghia stood. "Let's go then!"

They walked toward the lake, not speaking, letting the silence float in the air with the wind. Iris was glad to spend some time with Ghia. They reached the edge of the lake and sat just above where the water meets the surface. The lake was big enough to stretch toward the horizon, almost like an ocean. But Iris was able to see the left and right sides

of the body of water. She wanted to dive and soak in cold water and drink it all up.

“Thanks for coming with me.”

Ghia smiled and put her arm around her. She pulled out her mirror. *Of course! I never got the chance to thank you.*

“For what?”

For saving me.

Iris looked upon the mirror and stared at the words until they faded. “Just got lucky. That earthquake saved us.” Ghia shook her head and pointed at Iris. “I’m just glad you are okay. Blank too.”

Iris watched the ripples in the lake pull towards her and Ghia. She looked at Ghia, wondering what her voice sounded like, if she ever had one. “Ghia, did you lose your voice because of the storm?”

She nodded. On her mirror, it read, *I never told anyone, but I used to sing. The more I used my frost breath, the more I lost my voice until eventually, it went away.* Ghia stared out into the distance, and Iris could see her breath.

“What kind of music”

Opera. I miss it so much.

“I’m so sorry, Ghia.” Iris was angry, she didn’t know Ghia used to sing.

She shrugged. She breathed on her mirror. *I think I have gotten over it. There are more important things to look forward to.* She put a hand on her belly.

“How are you feeling?”

Fine, for the most part. It’s still early. There are moments when I get nauseous, and the movement of the train makes it all worse.

Iris noticed a lone flower not too far away, but it was on the edge, hanging over, as if it were trying to dip its petal into the water, but couldn't quite reach. A blooming white and red sunflower. She knelt down beside it, clapped her hands put a finger touched the stem. *Hello, little one.*

Hello, big green one. Its voice was airy, like a rolling nimbus cloud.

Do you need some water?

No, we are nearing the end, green one. There is no need for water.

Is there anything I can do for you?

No. But you need to be careful, green one You are close. Be wary. Do not stop dreaming.

Your voice. It's much different from the others.

We grow in ash. We live in short. Keep going, green one. Keep dreaming.

Goodbye.

Iris parted her hands and felt the connection fade away. She stood over it, heaving. She stared down at it with her head just below the top of the sun; a pale crowned light that left the dead flower wilting in her shadow as it curled into itself.

Iris turned toward the lake, and she saw peeking just above the trees, a house—mansion-like that seemed to touch the belly of the bottom-most cloud. An almost blanket of fog wall. Iris knew that might be where they were headed. She lifted her arm to point but dropped Cinder into water. It sizzled and vapor rose from the surface. Iris bent down and let her arm fall into the water, and it warm, almost hot even, but there was a vibration. She grabbed Cinder. She heard screaming coming from the hammer. It was Cinder's own. The screaming bellowed and tore through Iris, so much she began to

scream, and her hand was around Cinder. She felt as if she was on fire in, but in a cold blaze. Cinder kept yelling, and Iris couldn't get through, she tried to speak, but the noise was too loud. She closed her eyes and saw a pale flame looming over. It was loud and raging and fierce. "CINDER!" Iris fought through as much as she could. "HEAR ME NOW!" She heaved out of the water, with both hands as if she was pulling the hammer out of stone, moving through solid rock and crystal.

She held the hammer in the air above her head, and the screaming faded. Cinder took in a sharp and deep breath as if it was drowning. "Miss Iris, I hear you."

There was a chill on Iris' back she'd about Ghia but was glad that she was still there. "Cinder. Are you okay?"

"I think so. I need to rest. Please. We shall talk later."

Iris was still heaving. "Ghia." She looked her in the eye and saw a small reflection. "Let's go back."

Ghia shook her head pointed and Iris. She looked scared, and Iris knew that she wasn't going to let up. "I'm fine."

Ghia pointed to Iris' throat. Iris realized she must have been screaming too. Iris tucked Cinder in the strap around her waist. Ghia snatched Iris' hands and faced her palms toward the sky. Her hands were red and hot and burnt and blistered. There was pain from Ghia's gentle touch. Iris winced. "Fuck, that's bad, huh?" Iris let out a small chuckle. Her hands hovered just above Iris' and let a cooling around swirl around them. Not too cold. A right amount for a soothing chill. "Thank you."

Ghia pulled out her mirror., *What happened?*

“I dropped the hammer in water. Hammer got hot and I heard screaming. Enough of that. I’m fine. Look!” She pointed toward the house that was in a cascaded cover of mist.

Chapter 4: Arrival

Iris and Ghia returned to Blank and Axel, and after having told them about house in the distance, questions came directed at Iris. First was Blank. “What did it look like?”

Then Axel. “So, we’re that close, huh? How far was it?”

Blank again. “Did it look awesome?”

Iris couldn’t focus on anything else but the pain in her hands. “Yeah, sure. It looked cool, I guess.” She cast her eyes at the train.

Blank asked her if she was okay, but she felt silence weigh on her.

Axel said, “I think they’re making us walk the rest of the way.”

Iris looked at him. “Really? So, it’s just done then?”

“I guess so.”

The red-coated conductor marched down the steps of the train door. “We will be walking the rest of the way. It will be only a short distance. Gather whatever belongings you have, and we will be on our way. We apologize for the inconvenience.” He walked off towards the front of the train.

Iris ran her hand through her hair. “I’m so thirsty. I’ll go ahead and get some water and our stuff.”

Axel said, “Get some for all of us.”

“I planned to.”

She walked onto the train, down the alley, passing the bald woman, who stared at her in a longing and hateful glance. Iris dared not look in her direction. She strolled past the empty seats and rolled into a disturbing quietness. She thought about how now there

would have been enough room for the citizens of the quaked town. She clenched her fist but forgot about her burns and winced from the pain and cursed to herself.

She made it to the counter, and the same young man from before was there. “Hi welcome back,” he said. Iris said hello and asked for water five water bottles. “Yeah sure.” He placed them on the table and Iris paid. Before she could walk away, the young man kept her from leaving. “Hey, uh miss. I am sorry about before. I didn’t mean to make you upset.”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

“Here. Take this. For those burns.” He placed some cloth on the counter. Iris asked how much, but he shook his head.

“Thank you.”

“Thanks again.”

“What’s your name. So, I can remember you.”

“I’m Iris. You?”

“Cal.”

“Nice to meet you.” She turned away, grabbing the item on the counter and just before she did, noticed an object hanging around his neck: a gold coin. Just like hers. She stopped by their seats to grab their stuff. Stood there for a moment and looked around and took a deep breath. She gazed within the train, and for the first time took in the interior, where the wood was deep and dark and red. Iris thought of the day of the storm. She remembered burnt air. Outside every car stopped, so the people inside could look up. To seek an answer they might find in the corrupted clouds. But the air continued to change, and lighting struck. People chanted in the streets and prayed.

She ran for her car and drove, passed parked cars. The sky was a haunting beauty. Like it was lit on fire, and the layers of smoke were thick and fused within nimbi, unable to tell which was which. She was happy to be free of the mass of people huddled in the university. Scared of seeing more, she panicked. She tried calling her father, but no answer. Her phone wasn't working. She parked on the side of road and screamed in anger. Stared at her rearview mirror, looking at herself, and the memory shifted. In the mirror she saw herself, her father, and then Amelia, each face on fire and heaving. She was no longer in the driver seat, and the car moved on its own down a hill, passed blazing flowers, and the car crashed, and she was flung, staring at her shattered reflection and she heard whispers of her name.

She opened her eyes, stared at a face, just a breadth away from her nose. She stared at ghostly eyes and her breath broke. Cinder spoke. "Iris."

"Hello, Cinder." The apparition continued to look at her, unmoving. "I'm glad you are awake."

"Thank you, Miss Iris."

"Cinder. Do you see this?"

"Yes."

"The ghost from before." The ghost stood in the aisle and watched her. It was bright and let off an incandescent glow. Iris stood. "Cinder, what do I do?"

"Stay still, keep your eyes on her."

Iris walked into the aisle, and the ghost moved out of the way, keeping her eyes on Iris. The ghost's back faced the front of the train. Iris took a step forward, and the ghost moved back one step almost in reverse mimicry.

Cinder said, “She’s not chasing you this time.”

Iris walked forward, and the ghost walked backward. They moved down the train, past the other passengers. Iris only heard her own footsteps. “Who are you?” Iris thought at first that maybe this apparition was the ghost of Amelia, but it didn’t quite look like her. The ghost’s face was a shimmering mist that Iris couldn’t quite focus on. “Who are you?” The ghost seemed to smile, but she wasn’t sure. The ghost turned around, its back towards Iris, and now they walked in the same rhythm. Iris began to run after it, but it sprinted too, faster than Iris. She was tired and her body ached, but she ran as much she could. The inside of the train was a blur. She could hear the ghost laughing, and for only a moment, she lost sight of it.

They reached the end of the train. Almost in complete darkness except for the intense glow from the ghost. The ghost seemed taller than before, the same height as Iris. It faced the wall, standing and it seemed to be breathing. But it turned slowly and then Iris was looking at an image of herself. Or she believed she was. She was losing a grip on what she looked like.

“Miss Iris. Is that you?”

“I think so. The ghost is me?” Iris tightened her grip around Cinder. But Iris looked at it—herself—she saw it crying.

It closed its eyes and said, “Almost there now.” Then it ran it at her in full force and then for a moment, she looked as if she was burning. It crashed into Iris in bright evaporation and dust.

Iris was left in complete darkness. Her head was spinning, and the sound of silence was loud. She asked if Cinder was okay. The hammer said that it was fine, and then asked if Iris was okay.

“I think I’m okay.” Iris sat in the dark held Cinder close. “Cinder. How are you? Since the lake?”

“I want to apologize for burning your hands.” The hammer sounded sincere, and worried. “I do not know what happened. I felt so much pain. All I heard was screaming...”

“I’m the one who dropped you. So, it’s my fault. That flower who spoke to me...I wonder what it meant. I’m wondering what anything means.”

“Iris, you sound exhausted.”

“I am... Let’s leave. ...” Her hands pulsed with pure pain. She took her final step off the train and gave it one final look before joining her friends.

Iris stared at her hands. It was hard to touch anything, and she knew that keeping this a secret was going to be difficult. “I need a favor. Can someone wrap my hands?”

Ghia and she stared at each other from across the table. Axel almost choked on his water after seeing the burns. “Damn, Iris. What the hell happened?”

“The pond Ghia and I went to was hot. Uh, very hot.”

Blank couldn’t help but to keep staring, intrigued by the damaged skin.

Axel capped his water bottle. “I’ll do it.”

Iris let her hands hover facing up. Axel unfurled the cloth and wrapped it tight around her left hand, tore the extra and off and tied around her hand. He did the same for the other. “How’s that?”

“Not too bad.” She said thank you.

Red-coat conductor stood in a line with others who wore red, and they shouted, saying words to herd the passengers, to ready them for the walk. Everyone stood together in a circle., and they motioned for everyone to follow them.

Iris and her friends were in the back, they huddled close together. She saw the bald woman and her friend; Cal was by himself with a bag thrown over his shoulder.

The red-coats marched on, and the herd of people followed.

Iris leaned her head back and stared at the sky. Axel put a hand on her shoulder. “Getting to be that time, huh?”

“Yeah. I guess so.” She looked down at the track and noticed a sprout in between the metal rungs. She looked ahead, past the group, toward the trees, to the mansion. A lull of hope bloomed in her chest.

Iris stood next Blank. He stood next Ghia, and Axel was on the end. They all held hands, and walked, connected by a loud a silence, with nothing but a song of the wind and a hymn of the leaves.