

REALMWALKER: A NOVEL

by

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## ABSTRACT

ANGELA ELISE NELSON. *Realmwalker: A Novel*.  
(Under the direction of PROFESSOR BRYN CHANCELLOR)

It's been ten years since Lia's storyteller mother, Isolde, broke her promise to return from the Sinclair house, but the echoes of Isolde's sudden and unexplained disappearance ripple through every day of Lia's life. A high school senior with dreams of studying art, Lia struggles not only to mend the fractures her mother's absence created in her family, but to connect the fragments of fantastical folklore Isa left behind.

One night, on the anniversary of Isolde's vanishing, Lia's draw to the Sinclair house seeps from her dreams into reality. Unable to resist a trip inside, Lia's search for answers quickly becomes an accidental portal to a world called Andridora, a place where lines of political loyalty have been drawn in blood. Adrift and pursued by Andridora's police, Lia must team up with the mysterious councilman's son, Alistair, in the hopes of staying alive and finding a way home.

As family secrets unravel and long-sleeping powers wake, Lia must discover not only who she is, but decide who she will be.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Finally, I would like to thank my family, whose support helped me come to Charlotte in the first place and achieve this goal of mine. I truly could not have done it without you. I love you all.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Elisabeth and Jim Nelson, whose love and support for me has been unwavering and also to my friends, Emma, Britt, Aly, and River, who have been subjected to all of my drafts and late night questions.

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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

For my creative thesis, I wrote and developed the first five chapters of a fantasy novel titled *Realmwalker*. This novel, which is narrated in the first person point of view, falls within the category of Young Adult fiction. The story follows seventeen-year-old Lia Delgado ten years after her mother mysteriously vanishes from their suburban Virginia town. After accidentally crossing through a magic portal, Lia finds herself in Andridora, a new world full of magic, and confronts the fear that she may be stuck in this new place. While she tries to return home to her father and to the only life she has ever known, she uncovers the mystery of what happened to her mother and saves Andridora from a new villain rising to power. Over the course of the novel, she travels, learns to use her new powers, and encounters both allies and enemies. She explores both her individual identity and her familial identity and has to make a choice about what is more important to her: returning home to her father in Windsor Grove or stopping Andridora from being destroyed.

### **Development of Aesthetic and Approach to Genre**

I've always had an interest in Young Adult fiction. The genre always had a way of capturing my attention and pulling me deep into the world of the characters. I was captivated by their characterization, their world-building, and range of themes that these authors explored. So, as a writer, I wanted to do my own exploration on how these authors and these stories worked in more detail; how they utilized techniques like characterization to ensnare me and so many other readers. I wanted my work to do that. I started by finding a style—an aesthetic—for my story. What did I want the overall effect or perception of this work to be?

When searching for this aesthetic, I became heavily inspired by the subgenre of dark academia. In her article "Nostalgia in Dark Academia", Maryanne Nguyen describes dark

academia as a “Trump-era trend”, one that is representative of the fears and “anxieties surrounding the dismantling of higher education” (Nguyen 64). She further defines it as a subgenre that was created by fandom culture, one that takes its aesthetic from the gothic and applies it to academia (Nguyen 56). This aesthetic is fairly new, widely attributed to the 1992 release of Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History*. While it began to grow popular in online spaces in 2015, it didn’t really gain mass popularity until 2021 (Nyguyen 64). Typically, this subgenre incorporates education, gothic architecture, and the study of ancient art and classic literature. It also perpetuates an aesthetic of gloom or darkness found in tropes like colder weather, brooding and eccentric characters, secret societies, and murder. My story includes a few of these, but I’ve worked hard to try and make them my own. For example, the character of Alistair could be considered a brooding character, but I have spent time fleshing out his backstory and finding ways to show his personality that make him more three-dimensional and well-rounded.

I was also very inspired by the British Isles, specifically the rainy climate and the Lake District in England. This area of the world is reminiscent of the Romantic era, which connects to dark academia. Romanticism tended to focus on individuality, emotion, and rebellion, sometimes with the added supernatural element. The connection of this movement with the themes of my novel and the visual aesthetic that originally attracted me is something that I discovered more recently in the process of drafting and is something that I hope to explore further in the coming drafts.

### **Relationship between the author’s work and the work of other writers**

The process of discovering my personal aesthetic and where I see this novel fitting into the world would not have been the same without realizing and acknowledging the influence that other Young Adult fiction authors and works have had on me. One such writer is Leigh Bardugo.



Her *Six of Crows* duology, which consists of the novels *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom*, inspired me because of her complex characterization and her development of character relationships. The path that these relationships follow, where the characters begin as acquaintances or strangers and by the end have become inseparable, is commonly known as a found family. Within these first five chapters, I have started this arc for my characters as well. My protagonist, Lia, has lost her traditional family and comes to rely on her new allies Alistair Morvell and Nina Monaghan as she navigates this new world. As I progress in the novel, they will become better friends and feel like a family of their own.

A second author that has contributed significantly to the process of developing my first five chapters is Karen McManus. Her novels *One of Us is Lying* and *The Cousins* were good models for creating stories that dealt with family secrets rising to the surface. They demonstrate how to set up a mystery in the early chapters and thread it throughout the story in a way that makes the reveal believable but still surprising. They are also good at portraying relationships and showing how secrets can complicate the lives of those involved. I have started setting this up in my novel as well. With the introduction to Lia, the reader is also introduced to her mother, who mysteriously vanished. When Lia begins to travel through Andridora, she will learn secrets about her mother and have to face the fact that her mother isn't who she said she was. I have focused on setting up the relationship between Lia and her mother, and setting up the mother's disappearance in a way that makes it believable that she could come back.

A final author that I would like to mention is Maggie Steifvater. While I have not yet finished her book, *The Raven Boys*, I can already tell that it is going to have an impact on the way that I write. This book is well-known for both its dark academic aesthetic and its use of the found family trope when it comes to relationships between the characters. Though I am only ten

chapters or so into the story, I can already see how Steifvater is setting up the main conflict through the relationship that Blue and Gansey are going to have. I am doing something similar between my characters Lia and Alistair, whose relationship will foster one of the minor conflicts and turning points of the novel. In these first few chapters, I have worked on setting up that relationship so that it progresses reasonably and makes for a gut-punching betrayal later in the story.

Because of these influences and the interest that I have had in Young Adult fiction, I feel that my novel fits best into a few different categories. The first category is that of the bildungsroman. Bildungsromans usually follow a protagonist as they mature from a child to a moment where they begin to come into adulthood. The aim of my novel is to follow Lia as she transforms from a kid who grew up too fast and does everything for other people to finding out who she is and begins to make decisions that move her towards her own goals and desires. My story, however, also fits into the category of speculative fiction, specifically fantasy. Under the big umbrella genre of fantasy, I would put my story into the subcategory of cross-world or portal fantasy. Some famous works from within this genre are children's books, including Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*. While these stories are for an audience younger than the one that I am writing for, the method of transporting their characters from one world to another is worth examining.

### **Development of Writing Craft**

There were many craft techniques that I worked on in the development of this novel. The one that I value the most and the one that I think I improved on the most over the course of working on this project has been characterization. I started off describing a character's physical traits fairly well, but I was unsure of how to add in more interiority. A reader should be able to

see into a protagonist's head without the author having to say it directly. That was something that I really struggled with. It also was a bit difficult because I had trouble finding Lia's voice. I felt like I knew the side characters better than I knew my own protagonist. So, with each pass—each round of revision—I focused more and more on Lia. What does she like? What are her hobbies? Where does she see herself in five years? Some advice that I was given that really helped me was to add in flashbacks or memories as a way of showing the reader why a character acts the way that they do or how a relationship formed. It seems almost silly now to think that I hadn't really been using them before.

Another technique that was vastly important to my story was world-building. Not only did I need to write a fantasy world that was well developed, but I also needed to have a good, grounded basis for Lia in the regular world. To do that successfully, I wanted both the settings to be painted clearly and easy to visualize. I did, however, put most of my focus into Andridora, since I was starting from scratch. I tried to incorporate familiar grounding elements such as architecture and transportation. I have spent a good amount of time working through the recent history of Andridora and other details that influence Lia's story, such as where magic came from, the revolution that toppled the monarchy, and the level to which their technology is advanced compared to ours. I also thought that it was important, though, that the worlds be connected somehow. I was able to do that through Lia's mother, who brings some of Andridora into the regular world throughout Lia's childhood.

A third craft element I worked on over the course of this thesis was tension and stakes. Some of my previous drafts were lacking high enough stakes. For example, my characters had individual motivations for their actions, but there was no outside force to drive the story forward. Some scenes felt a bit stagnant, so I added in the Enforcers as a way to up the stakes. Adding in a

group like the Enforcers presented a real danger to my characters and added urgency and consequences for their actions

Finally, one craft technique I would like to continue to work on and develop a bit more is my style, in particular lyricism. This is an element I have struggled with, but like my improvement in characterization, I have narrowed my style a bit more. With each pass of revisions, my prose style becomes more refined and elevated, allowing me to create clear, vivid images. As I keep moving forward, I hope to experiment a bit more with a lyrical style and more figurative language and imagery.

### **Development of Theme**

From the beginning, this story has been about family. I want my creative work to explore what the definition of family really is. In these first few chapters, I have tried to focus heavily on setting up familial relationships that will then be tested as the novel progresses. Lia is conflicted about whether she wants to go home: does she want to go back to Windsor Grove and her father who only sees her as a child to be protected, or does she want to stay in Andridora with her friends who accept her for who she is? Essentially, the exploration of this conflict will allow my story to look at family as a matter of blood relationships versus chosen relationships and whether they are equal or if one is greater than the other.

As I have been investigating the definition of family, I realized that secrets have become a major part of the plot. Everyone around Lia has their own secrets, some worse than others. As Lia learns more about herself and more about Andridora, these secrets will begin to unravel and reveal who the trusted people in her life really are. For example, Alistair, one of her closest allies, secretly works for her mother and has been doing her bidding rather than acting of his own accord. I want there to be a twist or betrayal and the best person to betray Lia would be one of

her close allies. This reveal will become one of the main turning points in the narrative as Lia then has to figure out who she can trust.

This betrayal will also be important for Lia's character arc through the story. Since she is the protagonist, it is important for her to undergo a change or a series of changes. She begins this story as somewhat naïve, sheltered by her father's grief, but wants to explore the world around her. When she gets to Andridora, the world is more dangerous and people are out to get her. So far, her arc is taking a bit of a tragic turn as I currently plan for her to start following in her mother's footsteps by the end of the novel. Within these five chapters, I have set up her arc, mainly focusing on establishing how she has been sheltered by an overprotective parent. As I continue, I will try to make more subtle shifts in her personality and viewpoints to show the reader that she is beginning to change.

Another character who I want to be dynamic is Alistair. I plan for his arc to juxtapose Lia's, so his character development will have more of an upwards trajectory. He starts the story in a pretty dark place, when his father disowns him and his sister is kidnapped by the loyalists. While the reader does not find out this information right away, a major part of his arc will be him figuring out how to redeem himself for his misdeeds. I want to show this internal struggle in more detail through his actions and through dialogue. So far, I have started setting up his backstory and making it believable that he could act badly but not necessarily want to.

Furthermore, I have been working on expanding character interiority through the drafting process, adding more relevant details, memories/flashbacks, scene, actions, and dialogue. Learning to expand and dive deeper into my character's interior has really improved my writing overall.

## **Conclusion**

As I keep writing, I will look back to my own experience growing up and consider the stories that I wish were told then. How I wished for a character that complicated relationships and a story where the protagonist didn't always know which choice was the right one. My work with character, plot, and the themes of family and betrayal will help to build a compelling, immersive narrative, as will delving more into craft elements such as characterization and world-building. Now that I have found Lia's voice, I think she has a lot of promise as a protagonist, and I want to see how she and the rest of the characters evolve. Right now, my plan is to continue to work on this project after I graduate and one day develop into a full novel. After that, my hope is to get it published and on the shelves.

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## CHAPTER 1

I have dreamt of the Sinclaire house before. It had always loomed over me, observing me from its spot on top of the hill. It pervaded my thoughts. Lured me in.

Last night, my subconscious allowed me to pass through my memories and into the decomposing maze of the house for the first time. I had never actually been inside—my father never would have allowed it—but I could see its interior as though I had lived there my whole life.

An imagined version of me stood on the front porch. She turned the cold brass knob of the front door and it clicked open with ease. She crossed into the house and into the darkness it cultivated. A small orange wisp—a candle flame of light—appeared and led her through each room. She climbed the staircase to the second floor, watching the light flicker out and reappear at the top. The old wood shifted and creaked beneath her weight. Her body trembled, but she continued anyways. She did not care about her nervousness or fear: only about moving forward.

The other me came to the top of the stairs. Before her, a hallway stretched and twisted until it converged at a single door. She fought to reach it, struggled against the contorting walls and warping floorboards of the house. She extended her arm, straining it, pushing her fingers towards the cool brass door handle. But once she touched the handle, the dream was over. I woke up back in my bed, clenching sweat-soaked sheets in my fists.

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My pajamas, now washed and hanging from the clothesline in our backyard, rippled in the evening breeze. The sun was nearing the point where it would dip below the horizon. It shone through the trees behind our house and into a crystal sun-catcher hanging in the window above the kitchen sink.



The smell of smoke and the shrill scream of the smoke detector forced my thoughts back to the present moment.

“Shit.” I moved the frying pan filled with now burned vegetables off the stove and fanned away the smoke with a hand towel. My dad bounded down the stairs at the sound of the alarm.

“Lia?” he called, his voice frantic.

“I’m okay!”

He appeared in the kitchen doorway a few seconds later. He still wore his work clothes: a button-down shirt with a tie loosened to the point it almost came undone, gray pants, and a fading nametag that read *Felix*. It was missing the accent mark over the ‘e’ but my dad said the correction wasn’t worth the trouble of getting a new one made. Beneath his panicked exterior sat a layer of exhaustion. Dark, crescent moon shadows hung under his eyes, faint worry lines creased his forehead, and his salt and pepper hair was unkempt. A couple of strands fell in front of his eyes. He had been having bad days at the office more and more often, so I tried to help out where I could. Especially today. Today had been hard on us both.

“What were you thinking? Are you trying to burn the house down?” He waved his hands around at the state of the kitchen. His eyes found mine and he sighed, leaning on the counter next to him.

“Sorry,” I said. “I don’t know what happened. I just...got a little distracted.”

“I know. I’ve been feeling it too,” he replied, pulling at the golden band on his ring finger.

I looked at the floor. The alarm screeched again and he left the kitchen to find something better to disperse the smoke.

I can’t believe it’s been seven years already.

I had been called to the front office on a cold, gray morning. Everything had seemed normal. My mother talked with the receptionist as I pushed through the doorway into the office.

“Yes, I’m not sure what I was thinking,” she had said. “It must have slipped my mind. Natalia is supposed to see the healer this morning.”

“Healer?” the receptionist asked, one of her eyebrows raised. “You mean the doctor?”

“Apologies. Yes, the doctor. She has an appointment with the doctor.” She took my hand as we left.

I had waited until we were outside and tucked safely away into her old yellow Volkswagen before I spoke.

“I didn’t know I needed to go to the doctor’s,” I had said, climbing into the passenger seat.

“You don’t. We’re going home.”

She twisted the keys in the ignition and the car roared to life. She backed out of the parking space.

“I don’t get it,” I said.

“That’s okay,” she glanced at me before turning back to the road. “You don’t need to. Not yet.”

My mother had always been troubled. She was plagued with nightmares and insomnia and other symptoms that, at the time, I had been too young to understand. The days leading up to her disappearance were some of the strangest days I could remember. She usually kept her battles hidden from me, and every now and again, she kept them hidden from my father.

Taking me from school was one of those things she kept from him. For those first few days, I liked it. It was our little secret. We watched movies, and built forts, and she taught me more about drawing. Best of all, she told me stories.

“Momma, will you tell me that story again?” I had asked one afternoon while she brushed my hair.

We had been sitting on the couch, my mother behind me, and she had been humming the tune of an unfamiliar song. She had stopped and I could hear the smile in her voice. “Which one, dear?”

“The one about the princess and the falling star.”

She laughed, the sound echoing sweetly in my ears. “I think I can do that.” She set the brush aside and pulled me into her lap so she could hold me close. “Long ago, before you, before me, before even my parents, there lived a young princess in a palace on the edge of a village. Some say she was about your age when this story takes place. She was brave—an adventurer—and she wanted nothing more than to be extraordinary.”

My mother wrapped her arms around my middle and I leaned into her touch.

“But the world around her was dangerous,” she continued. “There were monsters of all shapes and sizes, some hidden right before the people’s very eyes. The princess’s parents were worried for her safety, so they kept her from ever leaving the palace.”

My mother paused, picking up the brush and using it to section my hair into three strands. She began to braid.

“Well, one night, the girl sat at her window staring up at the twinkling sky and counted the stars. And as she gazed up at the heavens wishing something interesting would happen, she saw a star falling from the sky and falling fast. She left her window and left the palace, running

into the gardens behind their estate. She followed the falling star and saw it crash into the back edge of the garden. She ran to it and it glowed brighter. Covering her eyes, she plucked it from its spot in the dirt. But as her fingers wrapped around it, its light flickered out.”

My mother tied off the bottom of the braid with a pink hair-tie. I’d spun around to watch her finish the story.

“The princess was disappointed, but then she herself started to glow. A ripple went through her and a large burst of energy exploded out from her body. They say that burst was so powerful the whole of Andridora felt it that night. And when the girl awoke in the gardens the next morning, she saw how the plants around her flourished just from her touch.”

“And then she had magic!” I interrupted.

“Yes, and then she had magic. She was one of the first,” my mother said, and her face fell. There was a weight to her words that I didn’t have enough context to grasp. She continued. “But that is a story for another day. Why don’t we get some lunch?”

My dad came back into the kitchen with an old magazine curved between his fingers. He waved it back and forth until the alarm stopped its screeching, then nearly collapsed onto the counter. His exhaustion showed through again. He was probably running on nothing but caffeine and snack bars. I had promised to cook dinner, and now that I ruined it, I had an idea that could cheer him up.

“How about I go pick us up some takeout?” I asked. “I bet Hopper’s is still open.”

Hopper’s was a restaurant on the outskirts of downtown Windsor Grove. I used to go there after school because my dad’s sister, Clarisa, worked the afternoon and evening shift and could watch me until my parents got off of work. He shook his head.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I still have a lot of work to do.”

“You need to rest and get out of your office,” I said. “I’m going to get us some food, and when I get back we’ll have a movie night. Okay?”

His office was an unused bedroom next to the top of the stairs. It was littered with books, files related to his investment work at the bank, a couple of computers, old pictures of our family, and boxes of my mother’s stuff. I wanted to clean it out because it seemed like a fire hazard, but in his grief, my father had become very particular about the stuff he hid away in there.

“Okay, okay,” he said, a smile making its way across his lips. He took his weight off the counter. “But if we have a movie night, *I* get to pick the movie.”

“As long as you don’t pick a disaster movie.”

“Oh come on, no disaster movies? You know they’re my favorite.”

“Fine,” I laughed, “just pick one we haven’t seen.”

That was my usual line, and as usual he said he would. I rolled my eyes and left the kitchen to grab my keys. Entering the foyer, I grabbed my shoes first. A beat-up pair of Converse I’d had for a couple of years; they were my favorites and often my go-to choice. I also grabbed a jacket from the coat rack. A forest green zip-up hoodie I bought at a thrift store a couple of months ago. My eyes lingered on a picture of my mom, dad, and me, which hung on the wall near the door. I was maybe six or seven. Brown eyes gazing past the camera at an unknown person or object. A finger twirling my then bright blonde hair. Mom’s hand on my shoulder.

A photo from before.

As the days went on, my mother's condition worsened. Her nightmares grew more vivid, more difficult to escape. Sometimes, when her cries woke me, I would stand in the hallway peering into my parents' bedroom, my fingers gripping tightly to the door frame. My mother would claw at her skin, sobbing, and try to catch her breath as she pleaded with no one in a language I couldn't understand. Dad was always there when she woke, whispering calming statements as he held her shaking form in his arms.

"It's okay, Isa. You are safe. I'm here. You are loved."

I wasn't supposed to witness these moments between them. These moments were for them and the darkness.

I prayed for my mother on these nights. My father believed in a singular God who was supposed to be good and have love for those He created. My mother spoke of several gods that created the universe and each of us in their image. I didn't care who these prayers would reach, so long as my mother's suffering would end. She was haunted and no one, it seemed, could help.

On nights like these, when I was woken from sweet dreams by the sound of my mother's pain and unable to return to sleep, I would paint. My mother was a painter. Her work was usually light, and impressionist, like Monet or Renoir. Her therapist recommended she use it as a way to focus on the beauty of the world rather than the demons she was facing. A way to calm her mind.

My favorite she had done featured a pond near our house. She included the wildflowers growing in the grass around the water, the lily pads floating on its surface, and a family of ducks swimming in a line. During that week, however, her work became dark. I had only seen one painting—my father wouldn't let me see the others—but the one I had seen was a self-portrait. It showed her bloody and crying, screaming in anger and in grief, as she stood opposite a crowd with hatred in their eyes and weapons in their hands. It had captured the gaze of my younger self

and despite the tears in my eyes and heaviness settling in my chest, the only thing that could tear me away was my father, pulling me into his arms.

Though my skill could not yet rival my mother's, my work often copied hers. If she painted birds on the birdfeeder in our back yard, I wanted to paint them too. I would watch her and try to mimic her. Her movements, her color choices, her artistic eye. My paintings, of course, were not detailed like hers, but the way she could turn brushstrokes on canvas into such a beautiful and realistic image fascinated me. A window into a moment now lost. On nights like those, when my mother was thrown back into a past she could not bear and my father sat with his arms around her, I painted my canvas with prayers.

Towards the end of the month, her paintings were not enough. She had told me the same stories over and over again, trying to etch them into my memory.

"And then, when my mother realized the people were turning on her too, she—" she had started.

"I'm tired of this, Momma. Can we play space pirates?"

"Natalia, these stories are important. Gods above, they are all I can give you of my homeland. They are your culture—your ancestry—you need to know them."

I wish now I could remember every single word she had told me.

I grabbed my keys from the little table next to the door, and left the house.

It wasn't completely dark out, but the sky was bluer, deeper, and the streetlamps would soon come on. In a few minutes, the sun would settle beyond the reach of the skyline and those lamps would be the only thing to keep the street from being plunged into darkness. The road was empty, aside from a few cars parked on the curb and a couple of trashcans left out a little too

long. It smelled like fresh cut grass and incoming rain. The neighbor's kids were playing in their yard, and I could hear the call of their mother, telling them to come inside for dinner. I stepped off the porch.

I passed my dad's station wagon to my old Honda civic. It was almost twenty years old, painted dark green, and its doors wouldn't close unless you slammed them as hard as possible. Clarisa bought it for me for my sixteenth birthday last year. She said I was growing up and I shouldn't have to rely on her or my dad to get around anymore. My dad wasn't too happy about it, but eventually accepted she was right.

I opened the driver's side door. Through the dining room window, I watched my father turn off the kitchen light and disappear into the back part of the house.

Hopper's Restaurant sat on the corner of Main and Birch Street and was exactly three streets over from the elementary school. It was a small place, cramped. Meant more for casual Friday evenings with family, though it often held bigger events like birthdays and other parties. The aging sign above the front door blinked and cast a glow on the red awning beneath it. I parked in their side lot rather than on the street despite the fading paint lines and growing number of potholes.

A bell jingled when I pulled open the front door. The dining area wasn't super busy; two families, one couple, and an older man sat in various sections. A few of them lifted their heads up as I came in, and a quick flash of pity crossed their faces as they returned their glances to their food.

That was the thing I hated most about Windsor Grove. How interconnected it was. Everybody knew everything about everybody else; and while the kids had mostly forgotten about



my mother's disappearance, the adults still saw me as a reflection of her. Someone fragile. Someone bound to go off the deep end.

A sign in the entryway read *Please Seat Yourself*. Instead, I walked towards the back, to the bar, where I knew Clarisa would be working. She wasn't a bartender, but on slow nights like this, she often made drinks as well as served them. Her dark hair had grown long and tonight, she pulled it up and away from her face with a clip and a few sparkly barrettes. She was on break, hunched over the bar, scrolling on her phone. She heard me approach, her eyes crinkling at the sides as she smiled.

"Oh, Lia, hi. I thought I might be seeing you today. How are you? How's your dad?"

"We're good," I replied. "I know it's been a while. Dad's just thrown himself into his work again and I've been really busy with art school applications—"

"Application time already? It feels like just yesterday you sat over at the corner table learning your multiplication tables. I can't believe you are getting ready to go to college." She shook her head and pulled out a notepad from a pocket in the apron tied around her waist.

"Anyways," she continued, "What can I get you? Your usuals?"

I nodded. "Yes, please."

She scribbled down the shorthand then left me alone to go put the order in to the kitchen.

My eyes landed on the corner table as I faced the dining room. It was small and round and pressed up against the wall so it could sit two people. I used to lean over that table for hours, doing homework for social studies, math, or art. When I was young, I would sit facing the window, so I could watch for my dad coming in from work. As I grew older, I turned my attention to the dining room. It often became a source of inspiration, or if not, a source of practice for my drawing skills.

After my mother left, my art began to take on a life of its own. I broke away from her image and focused on techniques and movements that interested me. In the dining room, I often fixated on realism. Sometimes it was the idea of drawing customers when they came in to eat. Learning to get their expressions right. Other times, it was objects like the napkin holders or the ketchup bottles and learning to recreate their textures. It always came easy to me. Easier than it should have. Once I figured out how to how to draw something, I could replicate it without a reference. My dad always said it was my mother's influence; Clarisa said it was a skill I worked hard to achieve.

Could it be possible neither of them were right? My mother hadn't taught me this; she hadn't been around long enough. I also didn't practice it enough for it to be considered a skill. It was like one day, I woke up with the ability to replicate whatever I saw in front of me on the canvas. I spent years thinking that I didn't deserve this talent, this affinity for replication. Eventually, I gave up trying to justify it.

I focused back on the dining room. And tonight, it was just that. A dining room.

I turned to the bar again when Clarisa returned. She leaned forward on her elbows. "What are you up to tonight? Any big plans?" she asked.

"No. Most of my friends are over in Norfolk for an art competition." I inspected the chipped surface of the wood. Traced a condensation ring with my finger.

"What? Why didn't you go?"

It wasn't that I didn't want to go. I wanted to go hang out with my friends, to see other people's art, to see if the painting I entered won anything. But I couldn't.

I didn't look at Clarisa, afraid to meet her eyes. "You know I couldn't do that. Not tonight."

“Lia...”

“It’s okay. There will be other competitions.”

“You should be able to go out with your friends on a Friday night.”

I looked up at her now, a bit of anger in my blood. “And if it were any other Friday night, I would’ve gone. You know I couldn’t leave him tonight.”

“My brother is a grown man,” she said. “He should be able to handle his grief and fear without putting it on you.”

I had heard this conversation hundreds of times, though it wasn’t until recently I had become a part of it. I used to sit at the little corner table pretending to do my homework and listen in on the argument they thought I couldn’t hear.

“She’s just a kid, Felix. She should be able to have a little fun,” Clarisa had said.

“No,” my father said, “what if something happens? If she gets hurt or lost— I can’t risk losing her too.”

“It’s just a field trip. The teacher will be there and there will be chaperones; it’s not like she’ll be wandering around by herself.”

“I said no, Clarisa.”

He had gotten better about letting me go since then. Or maybe I just learned not to go too far.

I leaned on the bar as we waited for the kitchen to make my order. Clarisa must have seen the disappointment on my face. She sighed, her shoulders sagging a little. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“I just want what’s best for you.”

“I know.” My voice was quiet. “How am I ever going to tell him that the best art schools are in Rhode Island, or Georgia, or even New York? He’ll be crushed I want to leave.”

“He’ll learn to handle it.”

“Like he learned to handle mom leaving?”

She placed her hand on mine and squeezed it, but before either of us could continue the conversation, she was drawn away by the sound of the bell at the door.

The smell of burgers and fries filled my car as soon as I set the bag with the to-go boxes in the passenger seat. I got in on the other side, slamming the door behind me. My head fell back against the leather headrest and I sat there with the doors locked and the radio blaring an indie pop song in my ears. Clarisa was right. I knew she was. I should be able to go out with friends on a Friday night, especially to an event that could help me get into college, like an art show or competition. And one day I would need to face my dad and tell him that when I leave for college I actually want to *leave*. To get out of Windsor Grove and be inspired by somewhere new.

I, however, was also right. That conversation could wait. Today, was not about me.

As I left the parking lot and began the drive home, I kept thinking about my mother. About how different my life would be if she were still here. It wasn’t an uncommon thought for me but tonight it returned my mind to the dream of the Sinclair house.

From the outside, the Sinclair house seemed like a normal two-story house. An old colonial on the very edge of my neighborhood most people overlooked. Older residents of the neighborhood spoke about it like someone had once lived there, but it had been empty for as long as I could remember.

Rumors said it was haunted, that if you went inside, you would never come back out. My mother’s disappearance there then fueled that rumor further. I remembered how she had pulled

her car over, coming to a stop right outside the front gate. She had seen something inside. Something I hadn't. As she got out, she turned to the backseat where I was strapped in.

"Natalia, I'm just going to go inside for a minute, okay? I want you to stay here, can you do that for me?"

I had nodded.

"Good. I'll be right back. *I promise.*"

So much for promises.

The details of my mother's story had been lost and exaggerated over the years. In the beginning, the other kids always talked about her disappearance, as if the mystery of what happened was more important than who she was. They didn't care about who she was. Or the shattered family she left behind.

Eventually, it wasn't her story at all anymore. And she ceased to exist to people outside of when they looked at me.

I slowed to a stop on the empty neighborhood road and stared at the house. I couldn't tear my eyes from its boarded-up windows and rotten siding. A shiver rippled through my body. Then I saw it. A light in a second story window. Tiny and round and hovering, like the flame of a candle left on the windowsill. But there wouldn't be a candle burning, not in an abandoned house.

A sting, a muted burning feeling shot up my spine and for a second I felt heavy. Suspended. The air trapped in my lungs carved out a hollow chamber in my chest. When the light in the window disappeared—as though someone had blown the candle out—the sense of familiarity creeping up my limbs also vanished. I pulled my car over to the curb, put it in park, and got out. The house stood quiet and empty. Shrouded in the same darkness that had fallen

over the rest of the neighborhood. A chain-link fence separated me from the house. It presented me with several *No Trespassing* and *Keep Out* signs, but others had disregarded them—my mother had disregarded them. I pulled the fabric of my sleeves through my fingers in a repetitive motion, stretching it, scrunching it.

If my father saw what I was doing he would be freaking out. He would pull at his graying hair as though my actions added new ones. He'd yell at me. *I can't believe this. This isn't like you. How could you be so irresponsible?*

I don't know. I couldn't believe I was doing this either, but it was like I wasn't in control of my own body anymore. It moved and paused on its own volition.

I put the toe of my shoe into one of the diamond shaped holes in the fence and stepped up and over. I landed in the grass with a thud, the fence rattling behind me. Walking up onto the porch, the voice in my mind telling me to turn back faded. I was finally going to find out why this place mattered so much. Why I've felt like it has been watching me from the second my mother got lost within its walls. I twisted the cold metal doorknob until the door clicked open, and then stepped forward into the jaws of the old Sinclair house.

Complete darkness filled my field of view. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and switched on the flashlight. It was only bright enough to light up a small bubble around me. I followed the entryway to the living room and found it mostly empty aside from an old couch pressed flush against the underside of the staircase. It was faded in spots and foam and stuffing stuck out of holes on its maroon upholstery. I stepped forward and shards of glass cracked beneath my feet. They covered the floor; a mix of beer bottles and window panes. I paused near the cast stone fireplace and ran my finger across the top. A line traced in the dust.

"What were you doing here?" I mumbled to myself, thinking of my mother.

What was I doing here? What did I think was going to happen?

I continued towards the stairs, searching for something I couldn't quite put into words. I climbed them two steps at a time until I was face to face with the second floor.

The hallway was just as I had seen it in my dream, except now, it wasn't twisting and contorting like it had in my mind. It was brighter up here. A few of the original windows were intact and not boarded up, allowing a mixture of moonlight and light from the streetlamps outside to saturate spots on the wall. I turned my flashlight towards the end of the hall and there it was. *The door*. I froze in my spot at the top of the stairs, that sting in my spine coming back as an orange glow emanated out from under the door. It got brighter and brighter, crawling up the cracks between the door and the frame. I shielded my eyes with my arm, walking towards the end of the hall.

This was not the light of a candle or a lamp. This rivaled the intensity of a house fire. And yet, there was no smoke. No heat. Just the intensifying brightness behind the door.

The closer I moved to the door, the more the wood beneath my feet groaned and shifted. It was not prepared for my weight, and after one step that was a bit too forceful, it splintered underneath my foot. The decaying panels crumbled, and my foot plunged into the space between the floor of the hall and the ceiling of the room below. I tried to pull my foot out, before the light behind the door faded. It took a couple of attempts, but when I yanked it free, I lost my balance and tumbled headfirst through the door.

For a second I was falling. Falling and falling, blinded by the light surrounding me. Golden and shimmering and made up of a searing heat. But, as quick as it had appeared, it vanished. I landed on the floor of the next room with such force that I was momentarily stunned, unable to breathe.

Except I hadn't landed in a room.

The ground was rough beneath my palms as I pushed myself to my feet. In bracing myself from the fall, I had scraped them raw enough to bleed. The doorway behind me still glowed, casting rays of light into the darkness ahead of me.

The second floor of the Sinclair house was gone.

In its place was a circular stone platform surrounded by dense forest. A cool breeze danced through the trees, carrying the whistling songs of birds hidden in their branches. Goosebumps erupted on my skin. The moon and stars shined bright overhead, but graphite storm clouds were being drawn across the sky. The platform was worn, parts of it covered in moss. Jagged rocks of glazed stone circled the edge of the bricks, rising from the ground like claws. Letters of a familiar alphabet carved into their glasslike surface. I had seen my mother use symbols like that when signing her paintings. She had tried to teach me to read them, but when she disappeared, I stopped practicing. I pulled my jacket sleeves down over my hands, careful not to press too hard into my grazed palms.

This had to be the backyard. I had fallen through the door and out into the backyard. But what was this weird platform?

A light in the forest drew my attention from where I was standing. I squinted, gazing out into the black between the trees. It moved and flickered like a flame—like the candle flame in the house—and then it grew, roaring as it sailed in my direction.

A ball of fire speeding towards my face.

I couldn't move. My breath stuck in my lungs. My legs glued to the stone. Oh god.

A hand grabbed onto my forearm and yanked, and I stumbled into the arms of a stranger.

A boy about my age.



Dark clothes helped camouflage him in the shadows. His hair was made of messy waves and the shadows from the flames sharpened his pale features. He pulled us behind the cover of one of the tall glass-like rocks seconds before the fireball would have hit me. The rock reflected a muddy image of us as he pressed his back to it.

A crack of thunder and the shouts of men filled the air. The boy ran a hand through his hair and peeked around the corner only to be met with another fireball, and two loud bangs which echoed like gunshots.

The light began to fade as the door disappeared, letting the night creep in around us. I tried to go towards it—to get back through the frame of stones before the door disappeared completely. The boy pulled me back.

“Are you crazy?” he whispered. “They’ll kill you if they get a good shot. Stay here.”

The only thing I could get out was a phrase resembling “*I have to get back.*” I’m not sure if the boy heard me, but before I could move, we were consumed by the shadows.

The door was gone.

Another boom of thunder, this time followed by a flash of lightning. Whoever was shooting at us used the onset of darkness to get closer to the platform. The shuffling of feet came towards us and then another flame lit up the dark.

“You, on the platform!” a voice yelled. They spoke with a familiar accent; one that sounded similar to my mother’s. “Come out slowly with your hands raised.”

I looked at the boy with wide eyes. He shook his head, raising a finger to his lips. I peeked around the edge of the rock like he had done before. Three people surrounded the couple of steps leading from the platform to the ground. They wore matching uniforms: dark blue, shiny buttons, a strap crossing the chest from shoulder to belt, and a badge pinned to the folded flap of

the chest pockets. A glint of metal caught my eye and I saw one held tight to an old revolver. They looked like the police.

Why would the police be after me? The most I had done was a little trespassing, which while not great, didn't warrant being nearly killed. Maybe they were after him. But if they were after him, what had he done?

I ducked back behind the cover of the rock as they fired another round of flames and bullets. The boy was right. They were going to kill us.

"Open another portal," the boy said.

"What?" I replied.

"Open another portal," he repeated. "We need to get out of here."

"What do you mean 'portal'?"

His face dropped and a string of curses left his lips. He started to search around us for other options and I imagined his thoughts were racing a mile a minute. I was the opposite, my limbs heavy and hard to move as though I was in a tub of molasses. My gaze found the frame of stones the door had been under. Still empty—with no sign of the door reappearing. The boy turned back to me.

"Follow me," he said.

He held out a hand, but I didn't take it.

"Come out or we are coming up," a policeman shouted.

I looked at the boy again. "I can't leave," I said.

"Gods above," the boy muttered, "We don't have time for this."

That archway was my only way away from whatever this place was. My only way back to my father, to a sense of normalcy. I couldn't just leave it. But as our window of escape

narrowed, I found myself following after the boy. He grabbed my hand and pulled me along after him. We crossed the platform and once we were at the edge, he jumped down into the grass below. I hesitated, the first few drops of rain falling onto my skin, then jumped after him into the dark.

## CHAPTER 2

The cover of trees above our heads was thin. Thin enough that the rain soaked us to the bone in seconds. The leaves of the forest floor crunched under our feet as we ran. Branches and thorns tore at my clothes. My feet slid in the mud and I fell to my knees, but I pushed myself back up just as quick as I had fallen. The wind and water whipped around us and thunder shook the sky again and again. My chest heaved. A sharp pain stabbed between my ribs. Somehow, I kept pace with the boy in front of me. The darkness provided enough cover for us to escape the police and the force of the storm kept our footsteps from giving us away.

We kept sprinting for a few minutes, until we were safely encompassed by wilderness. Once we were out of sight from the police, we settled for a slower walk. The boy's lanky frame trudged through the brush of the forest and he clutched his right arm as though it pained him. He seemed unbothered by the weather but I was shaking violently. I clenched my teeth together to keep them from chattering and I counted my breaths, my steps, the seconds passing—anything to keep my mind off the miserable weather and the fact that I could've just been killed. This couldn't be happening. It couldn't be real. This had to be a dream and tomorrow I would wake up and none of this would have ever happened.

My mother once told me of a storm that saved her life. She had been traveling. Running. From someone she would not describe to me. The storm had come in one night when she was lost in the woods. The wind and rain had chilled her deep into her bones. She'd prayed to her gods for help and they'd answered. A glowing doorway appeared before her, offering hope and safety, and she'd taken it. She'd left her homeland and everything she had known behind. The events of her story replayed itself over and over in my mind. I always thought it was just a story.

An exaggeration. But the idea of a doorway that can appear and disappear—that can take you to another place... now I wasn't so sure.

If it was real, what did that mean for me?

I pulled at the drawstrings on my jacket and tears pricked at the edge of my eyes. How was I supposed to get home? Back to my dad? I couldn't disappear. Not like that. Not like *her*. I was supposed to be there for him. I was supposed to be the constant.

I felt my pockets for my phone. Empty. No phone, no means of navigation, nothing other than this boy leading me through the woods. My body shook, but whether it was from the cold or the rising panic in my chest, I couldn't tell. I let the tears fall. There was no one here I needed to stay strong for.

The tears hadn't even fallen from my cheeks when the boy spoke. "Are you always this quiet?" he asked.

He too spoke with an accent. The same one the people at the platform spoke in and the same one my mother had spoken in. Clipped, precise tones. The closest thing I could compare it to was an English accent, but it wasn't an exact match. It was the first time either of us dared to break the silence since we left the platform and now he had to speak over the rain.

I hugged my arms closer to my body. "Only when there are people trying to kill me."

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Lia."

"I'm Alistair."

"Who were those people?" I asked. "And why were they trying to kill us?"

"Are you serious? Don't you know what that place was?" He gestured in the vague direction of where we came from. Seeing the bewildered expression on my face, he continued.

“Right. Okay. I guess I’ll start with the simple and move to the complicated. The people shooting at us were enforcers. They’re in charge of enforcing the law here in Andridora.”

Andridora? That name sounded familiar. Had the door really taken me somewhere else? I watched Alistair while we walked.

“That doesn’t explain *why* they were trying to kill us,” I said. “If they are the police, isn’t it their job to help people?”

He tilted his head at me, laughing a little. “You really aren’t from here, are you?” he asked.

“No. Is it that obvious?”

“Listen, the enforcers would have shot at anyone who was up on Isolde’s arch. You just happened to be the unlucky person to come through that portal.”

“Yeah, you keep saying that. What do you mean by ‘portal’?” I asked.

He stopped and so did I, feeling the rain fall harder on us now than when we were walking. I shivered, but he didn’t notice. His eyebrows bent downwards.

“Isolde’s arch? It’s a Realmwalker’s portal. Or at least, it was theorized to have been. I guess we know now that it is. Are you really saying you didn’t know what it was when you went through?”

I dropped my gaze to the ground. “You say all that like it’s normal,” I said. “No, I didn’t know what it was. It just looked like a door to me.”

“Do they not have magic where you are from?” he asked.

“No, magic isn’t real.”

Another pause, this time broken by a gesture rather than words. Alistair held his hand out to me. I hesitated, unsure of what he was going to do.

He stepped closer. “Give me your hand.”

I slowly put my hand in his. It was warm—warmer than mine—and he held on with a tight grip. He stepped closer, frowning as he turned my hands over so my palms faced the sky. The torn flesh was no longer bleeding, but it was still red and angry. Heat rose into my cheeks when he ran his fingers over the scrapes. He traced the lines of my palm with his finger, a soft blue light emanating out from his hands. It illuminated the space between us and my own skin began to glow that same icy blue color. The warmth left his hands and seeped into mine and I watched the scrapes shrink bit by bit until they were completely gone. As the light faded, I fought hard to keep my mouth from falling open.

“What—how did you do that?” I asked, still staring down at my palms.

“I’m a healer.”

He started to walk again, but noticing I wasn’t coming with him, he stopped and turned back to me. “What?” he asked.

I didn’t know where to start. I already had a lot of questions but now there were so many thoughts flying through my head they reverberated against my skull. He stood there, looking at me, waiting for a response. I could barely form words.

My thoughts returned to my mother’s stories. How the tides followed her brother’s movements as he chased birds along the shore. How her best friend could change the winds. How she escaped the woods that night. The image of the glowing arch came back to mind. Was it possible they weren’t just stories? That my mother hadn’t just made them up to satisfy her daughter’s overactive imagination?

“Are you all right?” Alistair asked.

“I just—need a second to process,” I mumbled.

“We need to keep moving.”

“No,” I said. “That archway—that portal—is my only way home I can’t just leave it.”

“Well, we can’t go back,” he reminded me. The image of a fireball soaring towards my face flooded my mind. “I promise, I will help you find a way home—a safe way home—we just have to get out of danger first.”

I nodded.

It was quiet while we walked. Nothing but the sound of the rain and our feet trying to navigate the forest floor. The thunder became more distant with each boom. The rustling of leaves slowed. In this light, they were a million shades of gray and I wondered if they were as colorful as the leaves at home when they fell in the autumn.

Eventually, the stars won back their spot in the sky. The dense clouds crawled towards the horizon until they disappeared from view. Alistair held his arm again. I thought for a moment I could see the same blue light peeking out from between his palm and his sleeve, but he grasped it so tight it was hard to tell.

“Why were you on the platform?” I asked.

“What?” He seemed caught off guard by this question.

“Why were you on the platform?” I repeated, “It was obviously dangerous, and you knew the enforcers were there before I did. You knew they would shoot at me.”

“Well, why were *you* falling through a portal?”

I stared at the side of his face, my gaze doing nothing to get the words from him. We kept walking, and he refused to look at me.

“That’s not an answer,” I said.

Another beat of quiet; then he spoke. “You aren’t going to believe me,” he said.



“Tell me anyways.”

“I knew you would be there. I, um, saw it in a dream.”

“A dream?”

He nodded. “About the arch and about someone coming through it. I needed to see it for myself.”

At first, I thought he was crazy. You couldn’t know things about the future from dreams. Dreams were a part of the subconscious. A way to process things that already happened. Not things that would happen. Then I remembered my own dreams about the Sinclair house and how they had gotten me into this mess.

This topic seemed to make Alistair uncomfortable. He tried to hide it, but his shoulders curled in on themselves. “We’ve just got to get to Merisea.”

“Merisea?” I asked.

“It’s Andridora’s capital. It’s an hour from here at most.”

“An hour? I feel like it’s already been at least two.”

Another pause. Now that I’d opened the floodgates, though, I had no intention of letting them close.

“Are you from Merisea?” I asked.

“Just outside it. But I go to school there.”

School. I hadn’t even thought about school. I was supposed to be graduating at the end of this year. I was supposed to go to art school and get my degree and then get a job and move on with my life. None of that mattered if I couldn’t get back home. Alistair was rambling now—something about getting into the city—not realizing I was no longer responding.

We walked until the sun began to paint the sky red. The storm petered out, leaving us to squish in our shoes the rest of the way. The trees became sparse, transitioning into fields, farmlands, and then a city in the distance. The fields were undefined. Wide brushstrokes that bled into one another, green, then gold, then green again. In the east a range of mountains spanned the horizon; far away, another day's travel, maybe two. They were tinged purple under the red sky. We kept our backs to them, changing course toward the city.

It wasn't a city by any modern standard. There were no skyscrapers, no billboards selling products or services, no major highways full of cars. It was quieter. Something of a previous era. Extensively detailed, even from this distance.

Under the light of the rising sun, I could see Alistair better. In the dark he had been all angular shapes illuminated briefly by flashes of lightning. Now, the golden rays falling from the sky slowly revealed his appearance. He was pale but his skin-tone contrasted well with the dark auburn waves framing his face. He stood a head taller than me, walked with too perfect posture, and his hand still gripped tight to his arm. His clothes were not what I expected at all. A school uniform: gray pants, the collar of a white button-down shirt poking out from under the neckline of a navy blue sweater. A gold logo embroidered on the chest, a shield divided into four parts with a crown floating above it and a laurel wreath below it.

His storm cloud eyes met mine and my face flushed a second time.

"You look cold," he said.

"Yeah, well, walking in the rain will do that to a person."

It may have come out harsher than I intended. Alistair stopped. He pulled his sweater over his head, and held it out to me.

“Here,” he said. He ran a hand through his hair to straighten it. “It’s still wet, but its wool so it should be warm.”

“No, I couldn’t.”

“Seriously, take it.”

“Aren’t you freezing too, though?” Another shiver rippled through me.

“I’ll be fine.”

With his insistence, I took it and pulled it over my head, adjusting it so it covered almost the entirety of my jacket. The more layers the better with this kind of cold. Once I was happy with how it sat on my shoulders, we continued the walk to the city.

The sun was high in the sky when we reached the edges of Merisea. We came upon what appeared to be a main road, but Alistair was quick to move us past it. Instead, he walked a few feet more, to where there was a grate in the ground. A sewer grate. Just like the ones at home. Rectangular and rusted and a little loose.

“Come on, help me lift this,” he said.

My hands clenched into fists, nails digging into my palms, at the idea of going down there. I bit my lip and shook my head a little at the image of the tunnels narrowing and narrowing until they squished us. My fingers tugged at the sleeves of Alistair’s sweater.

“I am *not* going into a sewer.”

Alistair blinked, confusion written on his face. “Do you have a better idea? We can’t be seen by the enforcers, remember? Unless you want to get shot at again.”

A crowd gathered on the main road. There was a checkpoint slowing people down as they entered the city. An enforcer standing at the front took a miniature booklet from the person at the

front of the line, inspected it, and returned it to them before letting them through. Alistair followed my eye line. He stood up, the grate now forgotten at our feet.

“No. No, it’s too dangerous. They’d spot you in an instant,” he said.

“How?”

“Your clothes, your accent, the fact that you don’t have papers. Oh and don’t forget the enforcers at Isolde’s arch that saw you come through and probably notified every city in the surrounding area.”

“My jacket is hidden by your sweater,” I said, mimicking his accent. It wasn’t difficult having heard it from my mom growing up, “And I can change accents just fine.”

“That still doesn’t solve the problem of the papers you don’t have.” He paused for another moment before inspiration struck. “I’ve got an idea.”

Alistair’s idea of a plan was basically just to lie through our teeth. He paced a few steps across the grassy area we stood in.

“We’ll need a story that makes sense for you to not be talking,” he said.

“Or, I can just imitate the accent,” I reminded him.

“No, no. Our odds are better if we don’t risk it. If we get caught they could send us to prison—well, until they find out about the portal, then they’ll kill us,” he paused. “Or they could call my parents. Which is equally as terrifying. Our best chance is to keep the attention on me.”

After a minute more of thinking, he told me I should pretend to be his sister who ran away. He explained his real sister was only five and hadn’t done much traveling. He bit the inside of his cheek thinking of a way to make this work without me speaking.

“You need to be angry with me,” he said. “So much so you won’t even speak until we’re ‘home’.”

I twisted a piece of hair around a finger. “What if it doesn’t work? What if they ask me to prove it somehow?”

“They won’t. Just trust me,” he said, rubbing a hand across the back of his neck. Again, he wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“That’s all I’ve been doing.” I let out a frustrated sigh. It wasn’t that I doubted him. I just wanted a bit more. More than a flimsy story that relied solely on him to get us through.

“And it’s worked out fine so far,” he said. “We’re still alive, aren’t we?”

“When are you going to give me some real answers about how I got here?”

“Once we are safe. Now, let’s go.”

I wished I had even a fraction of his confidence, real or not.

After setting our plan in place, we returned to the main road. We approached the enforcers one step at a time, keeping to the back of the crowd. Alistair linked his arm with mine so we wouldn’t get separated, then leaned down so only I could hear what he said.

“Just remember what we talked about and everything will be fine,” he whispered.

His expression was soft, but the way he spoke made me think it was more to calm himself than to calm me. It took a few minutes to get to the front of the line and as we did, I also noticed we were coming to a gate. It was beautiful. Two tall statues on either side of wrought iron. One was a woman, the other was a man, their hands clasped above their heads in apparent triumph. Alistair caught me staring.

“Idla and Varos,” he said, “Life and Death.”

I nodded. I had heard my mother mention those names before. She had told me once that Life and Death were born from Light and Dark. That Idla and Varos were destined to be enemies. That like their parents, they were supposed to fight for eons to determine the fate of the universe. But they didn't. When they first appeared on the battlefield, and their eyes met, they realized this wasn't what they wanted and they decided to work together. To create a balance—a peace—in the universe. And when Idla created the first humans, Varos was there to even the scale.

I had always imagined them different. So godlike that corporeal forms couldn't do them justice. The Andridorans, though, had given them a face. Humanized them. Made them touchable. And if my mother was right, claimed that humans were made in the image of the gods.

We stepped forward again, this time coming up to the enforcers. I stood behind Alistair, knees shaking. Each step closer made the tight feeling in my chest constrict further. I gritted my teeth, trying to refocus. We needed to get this right.

The enforcers glared at us as we came to a stop in front of them.

"Names?" one asked. Alistair handed her a leather booklet like the ones other people in line carried.

"Alistair and Olivia Morvell," he replied.

The enforcer looked us up and down. Her eyes narrowed at the picture of Alistair in his book.

"You two are related?" she asked with a raised eyebrow. She was skeptical and had a right to be.

“She’s my half-sister,” he said. When their attention turned to me, I huffed and crossed my arms. Alistair continued. “She tried to run away again and my parents made me go all the way up to Elmora to get her.”

“And let me guess, she has no papers.”

“She just had to make it difficult for me.”

“Then, I can’t let her in.”

Alistair looked around before leaning a little closer to the enforcer.

“Listen, I promise I am not trying to make your job harder. It’s just that if I don’t get her back home by tonight, the tabloids are going to go wild.” The enforcer was about to call for backup, but Alistair continued. “Just look at my name,” he said.

She glared at him for a second before examining his book more closely. The color drained from her face.

“You’re the councilman’s kids.”

“Yes,” Alistair said, “So you can see how big of a deal this is. My father is a busy man and he has no time for scandals. If you could do us this one favor, I can assure you she will receive a punishment fitting for how irresponsible her actions have been.”

The enforcer stared at him, weighing her options.

“I mean, I could always have him come down here to get us, but then I’d have to tell him you wouldn’t let us in,” Alistair continued.

“No. No, that’s okay,” she said, rushing to get her words out. “Let’s not get the councilman involved. I’m sure he’s very busy. Just... just go through.”

The enforcer handed Alistair his booklet back and stepped aside to let us through the gate. Alistair then chastised me, talking about all the punishments I could receive until we were

out of earshot of the gate and the crowd of people. We ducked into a nearby alleyway and collapsed back against the brick wall.

Alistair voiced my thoughts. “I can’t believe that worked,” he said.

“Yeah, it’s kind of scary how easily you lied to that enforcer,” I replied.

“Life of a councilman’s kid.”

“Wait, that was true?”

“All lies are based in truth,” he said, “no matter how much we despise those truths.”



## CHAPTER 3

Merisea was a beautiful place. The streets were wide and made of smoothed-over cobbled stone slick from the rain. Reflections of the storefronts rippled in puddles on the street, disturbed by the hooves of horses pulling carts. Darkened lamp posts marked either side of the road, their lights having gone out when the sun rose. The buildings stood tall—four or five stories at least—and made of stone bricks. Statues lined their shingled roofs. Some of them were snarling creatures, gargoyles, cemented in place to ward off the unwelcome. Others, those guarding the street corners, were god-like figures, glancing down at those who walked beneath them. A bell tower rang in the distance, signaling the end of an hour. Eleven bells.

This main street was full of market shops, most made from brick or gray stone. Many of them had displays in their windows. Their signs painted with those same symbols I had seen on the rocks at the platform. The same ones my mother had tried to teach me.

People milled about, giving me strange looks as we passed. They dressed as though they were from an older time, but it was hard to nail down the exact era. There was a mix of styles, the most recognizable of them from the 30s and 40s, but also clothes I had never seen before. An abundance of wool and corduroy. Coats, sweaters, plaid printed skirts, and leather shoes. A sea of wine red, ivory, and browns.

It was how my mother dressed. No wonder Alistair thought I would stick out. There were no sneakers, no t-shirts, and no denim. I hadn't noticed the difference until it surrounded us.

We crossed the main street into another alleyway. Alistair seemed stiff, braced for something else to happen, some other threat to appear. His eyes scanned the street ahead of us while we walked, but before we reached the other side of the street, the smell of fresh-baked bread and roasting meat drifted through the air. My stomach grumbled.

“Are you hungry?” Alistair asked, looking over his shoulder.

In truth, I hadn’t really thought about it. There had been so much going on. The fireballs, the running, the looming threat of death. I hadn’t even realized the last time I ate was at lunch yesterday. The dinner I had gotten for my dad and I was probably still sitting outside the Sinclaire house.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Just a bit.”

We stepped up onto the sidewalk and into the alley. Once we were veiled by shadows, Alistair faced the street. He glanced at the shops in the surrounding area, and spotted a sign on one that displayed a fork and knife painted beneath the name.

“Okay, give me a moment. I’ll be right back,” he said.

I tried to stop him—to pull him back so I wouldn’t be alone in this new and dangerous place—but he was out of reach. He disappeared around the corner and I was alone in the shade.

While waiting for Alistair to reappear, my thoughts returned to my home. I wondered how much time had passed there. If my dad even knew I was gone. If he had reported me missing yet. If the police had shown up at our doorstep saying they found my car. My father couldn’t handle another person vanishing from his life. He could barely handle the first. It took everything Clarisa and I had to keep him afloat when my mother disappeared. With one of his life preservers gone, he was sure to be engulfed by the waves.

My dad had tried, for a while, to pretend like everything was normal. Like he wasn’t hurting. Grieving. Like one day she would still come back. But when the police had no more leads, when they gave up searching, he completely fell apart.

One day, I woke up late. I hurried to get ready, to eat breakfast, to catch the bus. It was too late.

By the time I raced out the door, there was nothing except a trail of exhaust in the air.

I walked back inside, and treaded carefully up to his room. I couldn't hear him, but I knew he was in there. I knocked on his door as softly as I could.

"What?" he asked from the other side. "What do you want?" There was shortness to his words, a frustration with something greater than me. Why was he upset? Momma was going to come back. *She promised me.*

"Dad, I missed the bus."

There was silence from his side. I called out again. "Dad?"

"Go away, Lia. Quit bothering me," he snapped.

His tone was harsh, too harsh for ten-year-old me. I, too, began to cry, but rather than laying around in my room, I decided I was going to do something about it. With silent tears streaming down my face, I gathered my things. I threw my coat on, slung my backpack over my shoulders, and walked out the front door, making sure to lock it behind me.

I cried for a few minutes, but my thoughts soon became consumed with the journey to school. By car it would have taken ten, maybe fifteen minutes to reach the school. I soon found out that that did not translate to walking time. I trudged along and made my way into town as fast as my little legs could carry me.

I walked down the side of Main Street when a car slowed down. A silver Camry with a big dent in the passenger side door. Clarisa's car. It came to a stop and the window rolled down. Clarisa's face appeared before me, worried.

"Lia, what are you doing?" she asked. "Why aren't you in school?"

“I missed the bus.”

“So, you decided to walk? Where is your dad?”

I frowned. “He was busy.”

She sighed, smudging a hand across her face. “Get in. I’ll take you the rest of the way.”

She unlocked the door and waited until I climbed in before starting to drive. “You can’t be doing this,” she continued. “Next time you miss the bus, call me, okay? Don’t ever try to walk somewhere by yourself. It can be really dangerous. I don’t want you to get hurt. ”

“Okay.”

I pulled Alistair’s sweater tighter around me as a bitter wind blew through the alley. Leaves and bits of paper rolled across the ground like little tumbleweeds and when the wind dissipated, I realized something was caught on my leg. A piece of newspaper. It was the top half of the front page. I recognized a few of the symbols, but was unable to put them together to form words. My attention was drawn, instead, to a picture printed in the bottom corner. It was grainy and a little unfocused and part of it was cut off. It looked like the aftermath of an explosion. That couldn’t be good. I ran my fingers over it and held it closer to my face as if doing so would help me discern any new details.

As Alistair came back around the corner, I held up the paper to him. “Have you seen this?” I asked.

He shifted whatever he bought from the shop into one hand and took the paper from me. His eyes scanned the letters. “Yes. It’s from yesterday.” He handed it back to me. “It’s nothing to be worried about.”

I took it from him, and reexamined the bolded letters at the top of the page. “What does it say?”

“Why does it matter?”

“I just want to know. I mean—” I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear— “is this why they are after me? Do they think I did that?” I held it out a second time, pointing at the picture.

“No. Like I said, it’s from yesterday.” He shifted his weight to one side. “There was an attack a few days ago on a local government building a couple of cities over and the author of this is just mad the council hasn’t put out a statement. He thinks they are cowards who don’t want to face the crowd.”

“And that’s nothing to be worried about?”

“It has nothing to do with us.”

Alistair seemed confident in his stance, but I wasn’t so sure. My stomach grumbled again so I let it go for now. I threw the newspaper piece into a metal garbage can nearby. Alistair rifled through a brown paper bag and pulled out something covered in translucent wax paper. He unwrapped part of it, revealing what looked like a ham and cheese sandwich. It was made of thickly sliced bread which was toasted a little so the cheese melted.

“Ham and cheese?” I asked, with a small smile. It seemed so normal. He held it out to me.

“I hope that’s all right. It was all I could get; I only had a couple of silvers on me.”

I took it from him, the tips of my fingers brushing his. “It’s perfect. Thank you.”

We started to continue our walk through the streets of Merisea. I took a few bites of the ham and cheese before seeing the way Alistair’s eyes lingered on the bread in my hands. I knew that look. My mother had the same look when things were bad. For her, it was paranoia. She

would watch while my father and I ate, too afraid we were trying to poison her, but starving all the same. I hoped it wasn't the same for Alistair.

The sandwich had been cut down the middle diagonally just not all the way through. I broke it apart and offered the half I hadn't started to eat to Alistair. He paused, his eyebrows bent downwards.

"What's this for?" he asked.

"I'm not going to eat the whole thing," I lied. "You might as well have half."

He didn't take it at first. Instead, he glanced from me to the sandwich and back again, like he wasn't sure he trusted the gesture. I kept my hand extended, waiting for him to make his decision. He took it from me, whispering a soft thanks under his breath.

We walked for a while, crossing bigger streets and cutting through narrow alleys. Alistair knew the city well. He kept us out of sight from the crowds and enforcers. After a while we came to a footbridge that crossed a river. It, too, was made of stone and it arched over the water. The water moved lazily beneath it. Colorful fish swam beneath the surface, though the water was too murky to be certain what kind. Then, before the heart of the city began to fade into what appeared to be a residential area, we came upon a sign for *The McCalmont Academy of the Arcane Arts*. It was wide, spelling out the name in large pointed letters, and stuck up from the ground like a miniature monument for what lay ahead of us.

"We're going to a school?" I asked. He had mentioned he went to school in Merisea; I just didn't think we were actually going there.

"Just until we come up with something better," he replied.

We followed the school's entry road which, unlike the rest of the city roads, was made of gravel. It crunched under the weight of our steps and was short enough that it only took us a few

minutes to walk the length of the driveway. We came to the end of the road and it looped around into itself. A few students walked out on the grounds but not many.

I'm not sure what I was expecting, but it wasn't this. The school was giant. If it wasn't for the sign and Alistair's insistence, I would have thought it was a palace or a huge gothic church. Like the rest of the buildings in the city, it was made of sharp lines and spires. Its windows presented the viewer with intricate designs connecting the panes. Ivy clung to the surface of its brick walls, each vine reaching out for the sun. A bell in one of the towers rang as we stepped onto the grounds. It rang twice.

"Come on," Alistair said.

I followed him to the front entrance. For as much sneaking around as we did throughout the city, he didn't seem concerned about sneaking into the school. We followed a group of students in through the main door, crossing paths with a bigger bunch of students who were leaving a dining room. They all wore similar uniforms to the one Alistair was wearing. Navy, gray, and white. Some of them laughed, taking their time getting to their intended destination, while others scurried away with books pressed into their chest. One girl shaped and reshaped a piece of earth between her palms. She held it away from her trying to get a better look. The rock and clay mixture floated above her fingers. She apparently didn't like what she saw. Her hand curled into a fist and her piece of earth cracked.

The inside of the school was dark, at least compared to the outside world, so as the door closed behind us, it took my eyes a second to adjust. The buzz of old electricity hummed in my ears. The entry hall had vaulted ceilings and several arched doorways. Gold filigree sconces and paintings in intricate gold frames filled the walls. Most were oil paintings focused on landscapes. Dramatic with heavy shadows and deeply saturated colors. Picturesque and sublime. Those that

weren't landscapes were either portraits or depictions of battle. This place wasn't like any school I had ever seen.

"So, this is your school?" I asked.

"Unfortunately," he replied, not picking up on the amazement in my voice. He led me further down the hall, past more doors and more paintings. Most of the doors led to offices or common rooms or stairwells. Alistair seemed more tense, more guarded, now that we were inside. We passed another group of students and I felt their eyes follow us, but they weren't watching at me. Alistair kept walking.

"And you study magic?" I asked, trying to break some of the tension.

"Yes," he said. We turned down a hallway. "In the early days, it is just to get the basics down. Usually, there are signs we have a gift when we are children, and then around the time we turn ten our powers—our gifts—are narrowed, and we get put into classes to master our specific abilities."

"Narrowed? How so?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "It is said you are chosen by a god to master their skill, and so as you grow older, your abilities narrow. I think that's a load of shit. It's a game of chance. Some people are lucky and get useful abilities, some people don't."

There was a weight to his words about luck. A heaviness that could only mean something personal.

"What if it doesn't narrow when you get older?" I asked. "Or what if a person's magic narrows into an ability they don't want?"



“It doesn’t matter what you want,” he said. “Magic is something given, not chosen.” He paused, stuck in his own thoughts for a moment. “And for the ones who don’t narrow...well, they die. The magic burns through them.”

We rounded another corner, but before I could ask Alistair any more questions, a woman appeared in front of us.

“Alistair Morvell!” she yelled.

Her shrill voice echoed down the hallway. She was tall and severe-looking, her gray hair pulled back into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. Her lips pressed into a thin scowl and her eyes squinted at Alistair. He swore under his breath, then plastered a smile on his face. She walked over to us.

“Hello, Headmistress Vaughn. What can I do for you this afternoon?” Alistair asked. His voice even and his expression relaxed. A blank slate aside from that painted on smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. A practiced move.

“Mr. Morvell, this is the third time this week you have not attended your morning classes. What do you have to say for yourself?” Her accent was similar to Alistair’s, but the way she spoke sounded prim and proper.

“Would you believe I was helping this naïve underclassman find her way around?”

She trained her distrusting gaze on me and, for a second, Alistair’s façade faltered. He had thought too quickly. He may be good at fabricating stories but even I could see the problems of what he just said. We were both disheveled and covered in mud from running through the storm. I wasn’t wearing one of the school uniforms, aside from Alistair’s sweater. And if this school was small enough, she might know most, or maybe even all of the students that attend here. She would know he was lying. My palms began to sweat as she continued to glare at me.

“No, I would not,” she finally said. “You may be able to charm your way around others, Mr. Morvell, but not me.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think so, but it was worth a try. Your office then?” He replied, trying to distract her from the glaring issues with the story he just presented.

She nodded and pointed a finger in the direction we had just come from. Then she turned her attention back to me. “And you, young lady, where is your uniform? You know the rules about the dress code. Change out of those ridiculous clothes and get to class before I change my mind.”

I must have looked panicked. Once again, I was going to be alone. This time though, there were no shadows to hide in and no telling when Alistair would be back. The headmistress walked away but Alistair lingered. He leaned close to me, his voice low so the headmistress wouldn’t hear.

“Follow this hall, take the next right. The third door on your left is an old greenhouse.”

“But what if—” I started.

The headmistress shouted Alistair’s name in a harsher tone. “Coming!” he called back. He turned to me one last time. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.” He gave me a wink, then walked towards the impatient headmistress.

I waited until they left, then followed Alistair’s instructions. The greenhouse was right where he said it would be. I followed the hallway until its next intersection, then went right and entered the third door.

On the other side of the door was the greenhouse. Three of its walls were made of glass and iron. A couple of the window panes were broken, vines growing through the holes. A breeze came through them, dancing through a set of wind chimes hidden among the overgrown plants.

The black and white tile floor was chipped in a few places, and sported with rows of tables covered in clay pots and gardening equipment. I wandered among the cluttered tables. In the center of the room sat a couple of wooden chairs surrounding a coffee table. I walked towards them and as I did, a much bigger greenhouse came into view through the glass panes.

I sat down in one of the chairs, hands curling around the ends of the armrests. Finally, a moment of peace. A moment where I wasn't fearing for my life. My feet ached, and after all that running I was exhausted. Alistair said I would be safe here. Maybe I could sleep for just a minute. Maybe I could sleep for just a minute and when I woke up, I would be back home in my bed. My eyes fluttered shut, and the greenhouse was left behind.

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*"You have to take it slow," a voice said. Familiar. Soothing. "Break it down piece by piece, layer by layer. Watch the light. Watch how it casts shadows across the birdfeeder."*

*It was golden hour. The sun setting on the horizon line behind the house. Behind the garden. My mother sat on a stool next to me. Her blonde hair glowed bright in the gilded sun. Brush between her fingers, she wore her painting clothes. White, or rather, they had been. Now they were stained with all the colors you see when the rain and the sunlight hold tight to each other up in the clouds. She guided my hand; little, and clumsy.*

*But something was different. Wrong.*

*A jagged scar crossed through her eyebrow, past the outer corner of her eye, and down onto her cheek.*

*"Find me," she said. Her voice echoed.*

*"What?"*

*My head was full of water. Deep. Cavernous.*

*"I said, try some yellow."*

*The world around us started to shift. To break apart. Chunks of dirt rose into the air, floated, like icebergs to sink a ship. The easels and the birdhouse, gone. My mother, gone again.*

*The sky grew dark. And suddenly planet earth filled the sky, orbiting above us, casting a blue green halo over our heads. The stars twinkling in my eyes. And I was seventeen again, drifting away among the asteroids.*

*"Would you go back?" she asked. She was next to me again, staring up at the place we once called home. Her hair and clothes were fluttered by a breeze I did not feel. "If you could?"*

*"Go back where?"*

*"Before."*

*The island beneath my feet tilted. I stumbled. Fell. Collided with cool glass. And it was dark. Nothing but darkness in every direction. Except through the glass.*

*Through the glass there was a window. The silhouette of a girl perched on its ledge. She gazed up at the stars, and sighed.*

*I hit the glass with the side of my fist. Again. Again.*

*Let me out.*

*Let me out of the never-ending darkness. Don't let it consume me.*

*A streak of light grazed the sky behind the girl and she ran. Ran towards the glass. Ran towards me.*

*The glass shattered, but I was not free.*

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The sound of the door opening roused me from my troubled sleep. I stood up, not yet aware of my own consciousness. I blinked, trying to refocus. A girl stood in the doorway. Her

hair was a dark umber color highlighted with copper and it fell in tight coils down to her shoulders. Her skin a warm bronze. She wore brown pants that had dirt smudged across the knees and an off white button up shirt on which she had embroidered little flowers and vines. She looked my age, maybe a year or two younger. Her amber eyes met mine and she jumped.

“Oh, you scared me,” she said, placing a hand on her chest. Her fingers fell between the strings of a green ribbon she had tied under her collar. “I didn’t know anyone else came in here.”

I thought about what the best way to respond would be. I tried my best to imitate the accent as I spoke. “Sorry,” I said. “If it helps, neither did I.”

She smiled and walked around the room, glancing at the pots until she found the right one. She pulled it from the pile and placed on the table next to her. I stood still, watching her.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Lia.”

“I’m Nina. I’m one of the caretakers of the academy. Well, right now I’m actually more of a groundskeeper,” she brushed her hands on her pants, “but that’s neither here nor there. Are you a student here? I don’t think I’ve seen you around.”

“No. No. I’m just visiting a friend.”

“I assume the person who gave you this, then?” She set the pot down and came closer to me, gesturing to Alistair’s sweater. She looked down at my mud-caked jeans and my stringy unbrushed hair. “Were you out in the storm last night?” She reached out and touched the sleeve of the sweater. “Your sweater is still damp. Would you like some dry clothes? I know where they keep all the uniforms.”

“That would be great. Thank you.”

We left the greenhouse and she led me through the maze of hallways until we came to a closet. She dug around in her pockets for a second before pulling out a key ring with dozens of keys on it.

“So, are you a student here?” I asked as she tried to find the right key. “I mean, I know you said you worked here.”

She froze, key in the lock. At first, I thought maybe the key hadn’t fit and she was going to search for the next one. Instead, she turned to me. “What happened to your voice?”

Shit.

I had forgotten I was supposed to be imitating my mother’s accent. We stood there in silence, just staring at each other. I went back and forth deciding if I should try to pretend I didn’t know what she was talking about or if I should just admit I had lied. I mean, this girl could turn me in. She could call the enforcers right now and I would be on the run again. Or, she could be like Alistair.

She spoke before I could. “You aren’t from here, are you?”

“No,” I admitted. “I’m sorry. Really. It’s just that my friend said I might draw unwanted attention if I spoke like I normally do.”

She laughed. “Well, your friend wasn’t wrong. But you have nothing to worry about. At least not with me. Who is this friend of yours anyways?”

“His name is Alistair.”

I didn’t think it was possible for her expression to become more shocked than it was a second ago, but it did. Her mouth fell open a little, her eyes wide. “Morvell?” she asked.

I nodded. “How did you know?”

“We used to be friends,” she said. She took her hand off the key and faced me. “Listen, I don’t know what he told you to get you here, but you should be careful. He hasn’t really been himself lately.”

“What do you mean?”

“You mean you really don’t know?”

I shook my head.

“He’s the son of a councilman,” she said. “But his father disowned him about a couple of months ago. It’s not often council members cut contact with their kids. They usually prefer the ‘happy family’ image.”

“Why would they do that? What did he do?”

“No one knows. He went missing one day... rumors say he tried to run away. They found him bleeding out in the middle of the woods a few days later. His father disowned him about a month after that. He’s never really been the same since. Dropped all his friends. Won’t even use his magic anymore.”

That couldn’t be true. I had seen him. He saved me. He had healed my hands. But she had no reason to lie to me, right? I mean, they were friends. Or at least she said they were.

Nina focused her attention back to the closet and turned the key. It clicked and she pulled it open. Inside, button up shirts, skirts, pants, sweaters, and even shoes filled the shelves to the point of almost overflowing. She dug around.

“So, are you?” I asked.

“Am I what?”

“A student here.”

“No,” she laughed, “fortunately for me, I don’t have magic.”

“Fortunately?”

“Magic just comes with a lot of rules, you know? It seems like such a hassle. I’m sure you understand.”

She pulled out a shirt and held it up to me. It nearly went down to my knees and the sleeves extended at least three or four inches past the end of my arm. She made a face and turned back to the closet to dig around again. I looked around the hallways to make sure no one was coming. She dug for another minute or so before pulling out another shirt and holding it up to me. This one she seemed satisfied with. This process repeated for each item of clothing until finally I had a new shirt, skirt, and socks.

“Do you want a sweater too, or...?”

I readjusted Alistair’s sweater. I could feel the heat in my cheeks and I hoped Nina wouldn’t notice.

“This one will be fine. Thanks.”

“Anyways,” Nina continued, “I can show you to the restroom so you can get changed.”

“Actually,” I said, “I was waiting for Alistair in the greenhouse. I should probably get back there.”

Before she could respond, another voice spoke. Nina and I both jumped, but I relaxed as I realized who it belonged to. Alistair was walking towards us. He must have just left the office. He clutched his arm again, but didn’t seem concerned otherwise.

“No need,” Alistair said, smiling. I couldn’t help smiling a little too. “I think I did pretty well finding you on my own.” He paused. “Hello, Nina.”

“Alistair.” Her voice was flat, and she crossed her arms.



“It’s, um—it’s been a while.” Alistair looked down at me, then gestured to Nina. “This is Nina. She’s a friend of mine.”

“Used to be,” Nina corrected.

“Used to be,” Alistair echoed. “Anyways, thank you, Nina, for looking after my friend here, but we really must be going.” He hooked his good arm through mine and started to lead me away only to stop when Nina continued to speak.

“What are you up to, Alistair?”

He didn’t turn around. “Nothing that concerns you,” he said. “In fact, I think it’s best you forget this interaction ever happened.”

Nina didn’t miss a beat. “Forget it happened?” she asked. “You disappear and almost die, then won’t talk to anyone—including me—and now you are sneaking people into the city? It’s like I don’t even know you anymore.”

He dropped his gaze. “I’m not sure I know myself,” he whispered.

I stood in front of Alistair so I blocked most of his field of view. “Maybe we should tell her. We could use all the help we can get.”

“No. It’s too dangerous.”

Nina walked forward and came to stand next to me. “Let me put it this way,” she said, “Let me help or I am getting the Headmistress. I don’t want to do it, but if it is as dangerous as you say, then I have to report it.”

Alistair sighed, closing his eyes for a moment. “Fine. I will explain everything—to both of you—when we are somewhere a little more...private. Now, let’s go. I want to get out of these clothes.”

## CHAPTER 4

After a series of twists and turns through the hallways and staircases of the school, the three of us ended up in a common room. It was square, about the size of a living room, and dimly lit. A Persian-style rug covered most of the floor. Three antique-looking couches made of polished dark wood and deep burgundy upholstery were positioned in a U-shape in front of a marble fireplace. Two archways carved an opening into the walls, one to the left and one to the right. They mirrored each other, each concealing a staircase leading up to another space. Alistair and Nina were still arguing over Alistair's original choice of meeting spot.

"But really? The old greenhouse?" Nina said. "Because that is *so* private. Its walls are made of glass, Alistair."

"You are the *only* one who still uses it and I knew she would be safe with you."

That put an end to it. Alistair started towards the archway to the right. "All right," he said, "I'm going to get changed. I'll be right back." He crossed through and went up the staircase.

Nina bent down to the fireplace, where there was a pile of logs, and picked up a few to position in its mouth. When she saw I was still standing in the entrance of the common room, she spoke.

"Oh, here, hand me your sweater."

I stepped forward and set the clothes she gave me on the back of the middle couch. I pulled Alistair's sweater over my head, revealing my jacket from home. I adjusted the jacket and handed her the sweater.

“Some of the girls’ dormitories are up that staircase,” she continued. She pointed to the archway opposite to the one Alistair had gone up. “There is a bathroom up there too. First door on the left.”

I nodded, then gathered up my new clothes and walked towards the stairs.

The bathroom was nicer than I thought it would be. Unlike the school bathrooms back home, this one seemed functional and like it had actually been cleaned recently. It was made up of pastel blue tiles, porcelain sinks, silver soap bottles, and toilet stalls with full-length doors, as opposed to the ones with a large gap at the feet. I stepped up to the sink closest to the door and set my new clothes on the tiny bit of granite colored counter-top extending out from the basin. An oval shaped mirror hung on the wall in front of me.

I met eyes with my reflection. Exhaustion and fear stared back.

My hair was back to its sandy blonde color now that it was dry, but it stuck to Alistair’s sweater in a couple of places, making it bend at weird angles. Shadows circled my eyes and I couldn’t tell if it was from my makeup—which had dissolved a bit in the rain—or from a lack of sleep. If my dad could see me now, he would worry over me. Make a fuss over how pale my skin was, how I shouldn’t have been out in the rain so long, or just the general state of my being. But he wasn’t here. And there was just silence.

I sighed, and headed to one of the shower stalls. I hung my new clothes on a hook to the left of the curtain, then dug around in the nearby cabinets for an extra towel. There were a couple, but my luck did not extend to finding shampoo or extra soap. It would have to do.

The golden rings holding up the curtain squealed when I pushed the thin fabric to one side. I stepped in, and put the curtain back into place. With the curtain concealing my body from

the outside world, I peeled each item of still damp clothes from my body and threw them out into the main part of the bathroom. Had it been warmer outside, maybe they would have fully dried on the walk through Merisea, and I wouldn't feel the bone chill creeping in once again.

I twisted and fiddled with the knobs on the wall until the water came on, then stuck my fingers under it a few times, waiting for it to heat up. I stood beneath the water, letting it encase me in a warmth rivaling the comfort of a ray of sun streaming through a window. The water spilled over the crown of my head, down to my shoulders, my hips, my knees. It searched out and eliminated the chill still left in my limbs. Replaced it. Cupping my hands beneath the stream, I tried to wash the fatigue and remaining makeup from my face. I rinsed the sweat from my hair, combing my fingers through it in sections to try and straighten it out.

Once the mud and rain water was washed away, I turned the water off. I dried my hair with the towel, then my body, then pulled on my new clothes piece by piece.

I pulled the shirt on first, buttoning it up most of the way. Its white sleeves stretched down my arms and came to a stop at the perfect spot on my wrists. The skirt came next. It sat high on my waist, so I tucked the shirt into it, then zipped up the side-seam. It was a heavy, navy blue and green plaid-printed material that was pleated and came down just above my knees.

The rings squealed a second time as I stepped out of the shower. Once somewhere dry, I pulled on the tall, black socks Nina gave me. I stood in front of the mirror once again. The exhaustion was still there. I tried my best to ignore it, focusing instead on a navy ribbon Nina had given me. I hadn't seen it at first because it had been tucked between the shirt and skirt, but there it was. Something to tie the collar of my shirt closed. Something to polish off the costume I was wearing. I gathered my old muddy clothes from the floor and made my way back to the common room.

I walked down the stairs carrying my old clothes in one arm and my shoes in the other. My shoes still squished, and since Nina hadn't given me a new pair, I hoped to put them by the fire.

Hearing voices in the common room, I paused at the end of the staircase. It was Alistair and Nina, and they were still arguing. I poked my head around the corner. Alistair wore another collared shirt. This one was a dark gray and he had tucked it messily into a pair of black pants. The sleeves on this shirt were slightly shorter. Just short enough to reveal the hint of a scar spiraling up the length of his arm. They stood near the fireplace. Alistair at the armrest of one of the couches and Nina at the coffee table.

"I told you," Alistair said. "It's too dangerous. I don't want you, or anyone else, to get hurt because of me."

"That's not up to you," she nearly shouted. "Believe it or not, Alistair, I'm your friend. And I'm not going to let you get yourself killed."

"I'm afraid there isn't much you can do to stop that," he said, his voice getting quiet. He fell back onto the couch with a huff, and held his hands over his eyes.

My foot slipped off the bottom step, slamming my shoulder against the wall. Alistair and Nina heard the thump and looked up at me as I came back through the archway into the common room. If either of them realized I had been eavesdropping, they did not acknowledge it.

Alistair sat up. Nina took a seat on the couch opposite him. Alistair's sweater was draped over the arm rest of the couch she sat on, so I placed my shoes near there to dry. Then, I plopped my old clothes on the coffee table between them.

"What should I do with these?" I asked.

Nina leaned forward and unfolded my jeans, running her fingers over the material and the seams. "Alistair, what have you gotten yourself into?" she whispered. "I've never seen clothes like these." Her eyes met mine, fear and amazement filling her expression. "Where *are* you from?" she said. "I never asked."

"That's not important right now," Alistair replied for me, staring into the flames. "We should burn them."

"Burn them?" I repeated, my hands shaking.

I stared into the flames as well. These clothes were all I had of home. The only physical reminder my home even existed. That my dad existed. But they were also a reminder I left him behind. That I *chose* to go into that stupid house. The weight of this decision made my shoulders feel heavy and numb. A knot formed in the back of my throat. I froze, unable to move, but Alistair seemed to read my thoughts. He got up from his place on the couch and stood next to me.

"Nina knows a lot about fashion," he said. "If she hasn't seen clothes like these then we can't risk getting caught with them."

He was right, but that didn't mean I had to like it. I grabbed my clothes off the coffee table and threw them into the fire before I could think too much about it. Tears spilled over my cheeks as I watched the flames slowly seep into the fabric, devour it, and turn it to ash.

My last bit of home. Gone.

I needed to get back and the only thing that made sense to me was getting back to the arch. The arch was how I got here, the arch should be how I get home. But if I went back, would the door even be there? Would the enforcers? I needed another way.

Nina broke the silence first. “Okay, I think it’s time you two started explaining things to me.”

I spun around, my back warmed by the flames.

Alistair returned to his seat on the couch. “I agree,” he said. “But before we can, I need to know you won’t say anything. This situation we are in is life or death. You said you want to help, I need to know you won’t go talking to the enforcers.”

“Stop trying to scare me off,” she said, crossing her arms.

“I’m just telling you the truth. This is your last chance to back out.” He gestured to the door we had come through.

She sighed, pinching her nose. “Alistair, I am not backing out. I told you I wasn’t going to let you get yourself killed. I intend to keep that promise.”

He let out a breath, like he hadn’t thought she would be willing to side with him. He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. “I think Lia is a Realmwalker.”

There was that word again. *Realmwalker*. It had to have something to do with creating portals, but why was that weird in a place where other kinds of magic exists? Why would they be different from other magic users?

Nina stared at him, then started to laugh. Alistair looked taken aback, but he quickly masked his surprise with an empty expression. That same practiced move. When we didn’t laugh along with her, she stopped.

“Wait, you aren’t kidding?” she asked. “I feel like you may have jumped to a few conclusions here.”

“Nina, I swear to the gods, I saw her come through the arch myself. The enforcers nearly shot her off the platform.”

“Wait, Isolde’s arch? What were you doing all the way out there? You—”

“I know. I know,” he interrupted. “But listen, the enforcers know someone came through the arch. It’s possible they saw her face. There were guards stationed out there.”

“Why would they be watching the arch?”

They talked so fast I could barely understand what they were saying. They made my head spin. “Can we slow down a minute?” I blurted out. They stopped talking. I took a deep breath before continuing. “What the hell is a Realmwalker?”

Nina’s eyebrows bent downwards in confusion. “You mean you don’t know?”

I shook my head. “No one’s told me, and we don’t exactly have them where I’m from.”

Nina turned her gaze to Alistair. She looked like she wanted to hit him. “You didn’t even tell her what you think she is?”

“We haven’t really had a minute to sit and talk about it.” He stood up and started pacing in the space between the couch and the coffee table.

I sat on the couch next to Nina, hoping she would be able to answer my question. “So, what are they?”

“They’re myths,” she said.

Alistair whirled around to face her. “They are not,” he said. He grimaced and grabbed his arm again, the sleeve of his shirt diffusing the faint blue light coming from his palm. Nina didn’t seem to notice. Alistair continued. “Realmwalkers are those of us who can use their magic to open portals from one area of the world to another. They are extremely rare, but it was theorized that if they were powerful enough, they could even walk to other realms, hence the name.”

“But no one has ever met one,” Nina argued.

“People say Queen Isolde was a Realmwalker.”



“All the records were lost in the revolution though, and everyone who knew her personally is dead; it’s not even proven she had magic.”

“Well, she had to escape somewhere, didn’t she?”

They began to argue once again. My thoughts, however, went back to my mother’s stories. Of fleeing her homeland. Of being hunted. Of the door that saved her life. If all of this was real, was it possible my mother had been a Realmwalker?

“Anyways,” Alistair said, “it doesn’t matter who was and was not a Realmwalker, because I know for a fact that Lia is one.”

Nina was about to reply, but I interrupted. “I’m not so sure.”

They both turned to me, this time with their eyes wide and mouths open.

“What?” Alistair said. He ran a hand through his hair. “But you—”

“I didn’t open the portal,” I continued. “At least, I don’t think I did.”

“Well, there is only one way to find out for sure,” Nina said.

“You’re not serious,” Alistair replied, “It’s too dangerous. If Vaughn finds out we snuck someone into the testing room, she’d report us to the enforcers for sure.”

Testing room. I wondered what kind of test they were talking about. If I took this test and it was true that I was a realmwalker then my problem would be solved.

“Well, what’s your idea, Alistair?” Nina said. “You know as well as I do, that without at least some basic training, attempting to do any kind of magic at this age would—”

“What kind of test?” I interrupted.

Nina and Alistair looked at me, then each other. Nina shifted from her seat on the couch so her whole body faced me. She rested her forearms in her lap.

“It’s the test children take when they aren’t sure if they have magic or not. It’s pretty simple, however, I will warn you it is also a bit painful.”

I hesitated. I didn’t like where this was going. “Painful? How so?”

She smiled at me but it was one of those smiles that said she felt sorry for me. She tried to dance around the answer to my question. Alistair cut her off.

“You are going to have to bleed,” he said.

“Only a little,” Nina corrected. “Your blood will be drawn to one of the amplifiers, which will magnify your powers, if you have any.”

I shifted in my seat. I didn’t have any powers, at least, none that I knew about. Alistair and Nina kept talking. They tried to remember as much as they could about the test. They broke it down for me step by step so I could get an idea of how it worked and what the results should be if I decided I wanted to do it.

“First,” Nina said, tucking a loose curl behind her ear. “You’ll have to go into the test room. Usually there is a supervisor, but it is probably better if Alistair and I keep watch outside. That way we can come get you if anything goes wrong.”

“Once you are inside,” Alistair continued, “there will be a stone pedestal with a knife and a bowl on it. Traditionally, a cut is made on the left hand, big enough that at least a few drops of blood can get out. Then the amplifiers will be able to determine whether or not you have magic.”

“But why do they need blood? How does that even work?” I asked.

“We’re not sure.”

“I mean, we have our guesses,” Nina explained. “Blood is central to life. It flows in and out of the heart and throughout the body, just like magic does. And magic came from the stars so it would make sense the stars would be the ones to reveal the magic within a person’s blood.”

“So, the amplifiers are some sort of meteorite?”

“Sent by the gods if you believe in that kind of stuff,” Alistair said.

Nina stuck her tongue out at him for that one. “Yes,” she said. “They’re made of crystal. Each one has the symbol of a specific magical field on it. If you have magic, one of them will glow.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Nothing. Your blood will fall into the bowl and that will be it. So, what do you think? Is it worth trying?”

I thought for a minute. Right now, this was the only option. The only plan we had that could possibly get me home.

“Let’s do it,” I said.

Once they were sure dinner had started and a majority of the staff were in the dining room, they led me through the maze of hallways again to the administration section. We were all tense, each movement careful and each thought communicated by a series of frustrated gestures. The administration hall was similar to the others we had been through except there was a receptionist desk at the front. The desk was empty, allowing us to pass by with ease. I followed Nina and Alistair to where the hall became a dead end and they pointed me towards the last door on the right. I pulled the door but it didn’t open.

“Damnit,” Nina whispered. She dug through her ring of keys, discarding each until she found the right one. She twisted it and the lock clicked, opening the door. She held it open for me. I balled my hands into fists.

“We’ll be right out here,” Nina whispered. “If you need us.”

I nodded, then stepped forward into the testing room.

It was a circular room with no windows and very dim lighting. The stone pedestal Nina and Alistair described sat in the center with a spotlight shining down on it. The blade of the knife glinted in the bright white. I moved forward, cautious, as though it might jump up and stab me. I moved closer. A ring of crystalline shards floating above the pedestal ignited with a colorful glow that lit up the room. Those must be the amplifiers Nina described.

My teeth pinched the inside of my cheek as I took the final step up to the pedestal. I gazed up at the crystals and the symbols carved into their sparkling surfaces. They glittered in the darkness surrounding them, reflecting kaleidoscopic shapes across the floor. I picked up the knife, my fingers wrapping around the polished wooden handle, and pressed the cool metal blade into the palm of my left hand before dragging it across my skin. I grimaced, scrunching my nose and eyebrows together. The blood spilled from the sides of my hand, dripping into the bowl like the first raindrops of an incoming storm.

I held my hand beneath the glowing shards and watched my blood float up into the center of the ring. It pooled there, before spreading out like beads of water caught in a spider's web. One by one the stones began to glow brighter and brighter until the whole ring was intense enough I had to shield my eyes from them.

Something felt wrong. This wasn't supposed to happen.

Before I knew what was happening, I was falling again. No, not falling. Flying. Flying backwards at an unnatural speed. The room exploded outwards. Fragments of the pedestal scraped at my skin. The smell of smoke and the heat of flames filled the air.

The quiet was thick. A fog surrounding me. Suffocating. And a low voice echoed between my ears.

*Not yet.*

My body slammed into a hard surface with such force that my vision started to fill with spots. The walls groaned and the ceiling collapsed.

Coming into consciousness again was difficult. My lungs were full of something grainy and I coughed. A warm, sticky liquid dripped down the side of my face and into my mouth. It tasted of salt and metal. There were shouts around me, panicked words I couldn't make out between the ringing in my ears. Everything was covered in a thick haze. Gray and red. A heavy weight compressed my legs and I tried to move, but it was too much.

A shadow moved towards me. And suddenly, a face appeared in front of me. One I recognized. And their mouth was asking questions I could not hear. There was red. So much red.

## CHAPTER 5

Waking up a second time was easier. I opened my eyes, squinting at the rays of sunlight streaming through a nearby window. I tried to move my arm to cover my eyes, but something clanked and cold metal bit into my wrist. My wrist was chained to the metal frame of a bed. What? I tried to sit up and the room spun. I squeezed my eyes shut and a sharp pain cut across my palm. I opened them again. A white bandage wrapped around the middle of my hand, a line of red where the blood had seeped through. To my left there was a square side table. Its chipped wooden surface held nothing except a couple of condensation rings and a porcelain vase with bright, multi-colored flowers in it. Purple, then orange, then yellow. Their petals large and waxy and their stems woven together. A still-life waiting to be painted.

On the other side of the room were two blurry figures. I blinked. On either side of a set of double doors, two enforcers stood guard. A man and a woman, their dark blue uniforms neat, unwrinkled, and tailored to their exact measurements. The sunlight glinted off their brass buttons. A leather strap crossed their chest from their shoulder to their belt. The man's hand rested on an old revolver on his belt. He also sported a badge pinned to the folded over flap of his chest pocket and a stripe on his sleeves. The woman did not have these same decorations. Her sleeves were singed a little at the cuff. She stared straight ahead, eyes focused on the empty wall behind me. The man was more relaxed. Why hadn't they killed me yet?

The space between me and the enforcers was full of empty beds. Alistair and Nina were nowhere to be seen. Panic surged through my chest as the past day came back to me.

The test. The amplifiers. The explosion.

I wondered if their absence meant they got away unscathed. What if they hadn't? My chest felt heavy at the thought of them getting hurt because of me.

I wasn't even supposed to be here.

I wondered how much time had passed since the explosion. How much had passed back home. Had my dad been sitting by the TV watching the news describe my disappearance? Was I a scrolling byline or a featured story? Whatever the case, I hoped someone was there with him. Clarisa maybe. She had been a godsend when my mother disappeared. She had been able to help take care of me. Helped take care of him. Most importantly, she could handle his grief. He didn't do well on his own and, without Clarisa, who knows what would have become of him.

She had been the backbone of our family even before my mother's disappearance. She was all we had to lean on through my mother's illness and she took that job seriously. She attended every talent show, every play, every dance recital; sometimes recording when my parents couldn't make it for one reason or another. She had always answered the phone when I called, even if it was late, and she had been asleep. And in those days when my mother was slipping, falling, far beyond the line of what should have been considered dangerous, or unhealthy, she fought hard to get me out of the house. I was always appreciative of Clarisa's efforts, but I had never been able to find the words to properly thank her for them. And I might not get the chance to.

Now, as I sat in the infirmary, a healer came in to check on me. She peeked through the doors and scurried past the enforcers, mumbling about how she was supposed to check in on my vitals. She came over to where I was laying and held her hands above my feet. A blue light similar to Alistair's glowed from her hands. She slowly moved her arms up from my feet to my knees. From my knees to my hips, up my torso and finally over my head. When she finished, the light dissipated.

“Everything seems to be in order,” she said, avoiding my eyes. “Your injuries were quite severe. You’re lucky they brought you to us when they did.”

Before I could respond, she made her exit in a similar fashion to her entrance. The enforcers laughed as they watched her go. Their booming laughs made my head pound. I held my temple with my free hand. There had to be a way out of this. I looked around the room. Two-toned walls, a line of windows, and tile floors. The doors opened a second time. A severe-looking woman marched in and made her way over to the bed I was in. A clipboard sat in the crook of her arm and a fountain pen spun between her fingers. Her lips pressed into a thin line, her eyes narrowed. I recognized that expression. It was the Headmistress.

“Well, I’m glad to see you are awake,” she said. She sat down on the bed next to mine, her back straight, her legs crossed at the ankles. “I need you to answer a few questions for me.”

“And then you’ll let me go?” I asked, imitating my mother’s accent. I just had to remember to keep it up this time.

She shook her head and gestured to the manacle on my wrist. “It’s possible. We can’t release you until we prove for certain you weren’t involved. I already had to compromise with the enforcers to let you stay in the infirmary. They wanted to kill you right where they found you. Degenerates.” She dropped her gaze to her clipboard and began to write, muttering to herself as she did so. “We’re not at war anymore, and the gods know we already have too much senseless violence in this country,” she said. “Apologies. That is a tangent for another day. Besides, I told them one of my students would never do something so irresponsible and dangerous. We’ll start with a simple question. What is your name?”



I stared at her. Student? I looked down at my blood stained uniform. Parts of it were torn and singed, and one of my shoes now had a hole in the outer edge of the canvas that exposed my toes. I could work with that.

“Sorry, what was the question?” I asked when I realized she was staring at me, expectantly.

“What is your name? I need to know who to call.”

I was unsure what to tell her. Whatever name I told her wouldn’t be in her file system. I settled on something maybe I shouldn’t have. The truth. “Natalia Delgado,” I said.

She wrote down my answer then raised an eyebrow at me. “And what were you doing in the administration hall during dinner?”

“I’m new. I got lost.”

“I’m not sure I believe that.”

I didn’t say anything, so she continued. “The wound on your palm, dear. Our healers were asked to leave it as evidence. It’s obvious you were in the testing room when the explosion occurred. I will say, you are older than the normal time frame for needing to be tested. Usually the test is for children. If you really were a student, you would have been tested long ago.” She paused what she was writing and peered over the top of her clipboard at me. “But you’re not a student, are you?”

“No, I’m not a student,” I sighed. “I snuck in to get tested but I swear I didn’t cause the explosion.”

“What was your result?”

“Nothing happened,” I lied. “I was getting ready to leave when the everything exploded.”

“Your result doesn’t surprise me. If you had gotten to this age with no signs of magic it would be incredibly rare for you to possess a gift.” The headmistress wrote something else down. Her face was so void of emotion, I couldn’t tell if she believed me or not. I wanted to ask about Alistair and Nina, to make sure they were okay, but I kept my mouth shut. The headmistress continued. “You are lucky most of our staff were out at dinner. It seems you were the only one to be near the explosion.”

“Okay...”

“So, what are you, a loyalist?”

“Excuse me?”

“Or are you just very fond of destroying city property?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

She waited for me to speak, but I didn’t. It took every bit of my energy to keep from hyperventilating. I was hot. Her glare was a spotlight on me, searching the depths of my soul for a semblance of the truth. I was locked into her stare and she wasn’t about to let me go.

“Did you cause the explosion in the administrative building?”

“No.”

“Were you behind the other attacks?”

“No.”

The headmistress let out a deep sigh, then leaned back on the bed and crossed her legs at the knees. She began writing again, then looked back up at me. The frown lines on her face deepened.

“You have nothing more to offer in regards to aiding this investigation?”

“No.”

“Not even to name another suspect? Someone you might have seen before the explosion occurred but didn’t find suspicious until now?”

“No.”

“Fine,” she said. She slid her pen into the clip of the clipboard and stood up. “Those are all the questions I have for you at the moment.” She stood up from the bed and left the room and I was alone with the enforcers.

I leaned back against the pillow behind me and stared up at the paneled ceiling. I should try to come up with a plan. Something. Anything. If my mother were here, she would know how to get out of this. On her good days, she often charmed people. She always knew exactly what to say at exactly the right time and she had a certain air about her that made people listen. She could talk to these enforcers and they would set her free just because she asked. Unfortunately, I inherited my father’s penchant for never knowing the right thing to say. And I knew these enforcers, with the angry lines on their faces, wouldn’t treat me the same way they would’ve treated my mother.

There had to be something I could do. I had no hairpins or clips to try and stick into the lock. The cuff was a little bit loose. Maybe if I pulled hard enough I could get my hand out. But when I tried, the cuff didn’t budge. The male enforcer laughed.

“Ha! Good luck getting out of that,” he said, “Cuff’s made of iron.”

I sat up and turned around so I could have more leverage. It didn’t move. It started to dig into my wrist and I knew there was no way to get out of them without either having the key or dislocating my thumb. The enforcer was right. And even if I did get out, they would just kill me before I could escape.

I sighed, rolling over to face away from the two of them and away from the doors. I thought for a minute before another idea came to mind. The bar of the bed frame my manacle was chained to was a little loose at the top. Maybe. But I would need to wait for the right moment.

I sat up with a start. Someone was shouting. Maybe I had fallen asleep. Maybe I had fallen into the lull of tracing the patterns of wood grain across the ceiling panels. Maybe both. I couldn't really remember. It was dark outside now and the yellow tinted lights of the infirmary shined overhead. Over by the doors, the enforcers argued with someone else. A third enforcer. Perched in between the double doors. They argued more, then the older enforcer, the man with the gun, left. The woman resumed her post.

This was it.

I stood up and grabbed onto the cuff and tried pulling with as much strength as I could gather. Once, twice, a third time.

"Hey, stop that," the female enforcer shouted. She raced over to me.

I pulled again, this time using all my body weight, bending the frame out of shape enough that the cuff slid off.

The enforcer stopped at the foot of the bed, flames igniting in the palms of her hands.

But she faltered. The flames on her skin flickered. "How—how are you doing that?" she stammered. "Stop it. Now." Her flames grew stronger. They spread up towards her elbows.

I had no idea what she was talking about. I was just standing. My palms were sweating and my heart pounded in my ears. I grabbed the nearest item to me to use as a weapon.

The flower vase.

I shoved the top of the vase forward so the water and the flowers splashed all over the enforcer. It dampened her flames for a second. That was all I needed.

I gripped the vase on both hands and swung as hard as I could. The vase hit the enforcer square across the face, the impact sending a jolt up my arm and into my shoulder. It shattered, the pieces scattering across the floor. She fell to her knees, stunned, and I bolted.

I burst through the wooden doors and sprinted down the long corridor, not stopping to see if she was following.

It had been a long time since I had run like this. But in this past day or two it seemed this was all I was doing. It's exhausting, running for your life.

In the final days before my mother's disappearance, she once told me we had to escape. That the mysterious "they" were here and they were going to get us. She handed me my school backpack, filled with food, water, and blankets to the point of almost not zipping closed, and told me to go as far as I could and not to stop for anything. Her tears fell into my hair as she kissed me on the forehead and ushered me out the back door.

Racing through this school was no different. I didn't know where I was going, but stopping was not an option.

Until a group of enforcers came into view.

I ducked in through the open door of a nearby classroom, pressing my body close to the inside of the wall. The metal frame of a bulletin board dug into my back. I held the cuff and chains bound to my wrist against the fabric at my waist so they wouldn't rattle when the group walked by. Two, maybe three of them—taking their sweet time—and talking about their upcoming plans for something they called Revolution day.

“Yeah, we thought about it. My wife’s parents aren’t big fans, though, so we’ll probably just go visit mine,” one voice said.

“Not big fans? How can they not be big fans? Don’t tell me they are loyalists...”

“Oh, no. Definitely not. They just don’t like hosting large parties. What about you guys? Do you and your brother have any plans?”

“Yeah, I think we’re gonna go to the festival this year. It’s all the way out in Elmora, but it should be fun.”

They kept walking. As soon as they were gone, I took off again.

I made a series of random lefts and rights through the hallways and down a couple of staircases, but everything looked the same. Like I was running down the same hallway over and over. Like I was stuck in a loop and I would never find an exit. How did Alistair and Nina ever find their way around in this place? I tried to force air into my lungs and the sharp stab in my ribs returned. My feet hit the carpeted floor of the hall with a steady rhythm.

Until something shimmering caught my eye.

The image of a blonde woman stopped me in my tracks. It was a tapestry. One made of thick fabric and had the background deeply embroidered with lacy designs. She faced off against a large group of people. Their expressions were angry and a majority of them held weapons. Strands of golden thread encircled her hands, giving them the appearance that they were glowing.

That same sting spiraled down my spine. The air around me thicker than before. I knew this image.

The image of my mother’s painting flashed in my mind.

She had been here.

I reached out and pulled the fabric between my fingers, chains swinging at my wrist. But this moment where I was in my own world, where the danger didn't seem real, was cut short by the sound of voices carrying through the hallway. I prepared myself to run but I recognized them. It was Alistair and Nina. They appeared around a corner, bloody and covered in dust, but they were both up and moving so I tried not to be too worried.

"Oh, Lia, thank the gods," Nina said.

We heard more footsteps all around us, this time mixing with the shouts of enforcers. The enforcer I hit must have recovered enough to sound the alarm.

They knew I was gone.

"What are we going to do?" I asked.

"Come on," Nina gestured for us to follow her. She took a few steps past me, then lifted the tapestry up off the wall to reveal a hole big enough a person could fit through.

"What's this?" I asked.

"A tunnel," Nina replied, tilting her head towards the hole. "Get in."

"What?" My skin warmed as my heart picked up its pace. I felt the color drain from my face. "No. I'm not going in there."

"It's the only way out that the enforcers won't be guarding."

"There has to be another way."

Footsteps echoed down the hallway. Another group was approaching. Enforcers or not, we were running out of time. I was paralyzed by fear.

Then I was in a different kind of darkness. The bottoms of heavy winter coats swung into my head every time I moved and cardboard boxes filled to the brim of various items poked into my ribs. It was suffocating. I stood next to my mother, who was sitting on a small pile of boots.

A light turned on somewhere outside and shone through the crack underneath the closet door. I looked up at my mother. I couldn't really see her face, but I could feel the tears fall from her cheeks and onto my shirt.

"Momma?" I asked.

She shushed me and pulled me closer. So close I was almost sitting in her lap. Her arms held me in an iron grip, squeezing my tiny body so tight I could feel her trembling. Like she thought I would disappear if she let go.

"We have to be quiet now, Natalia," she whispered. "We can't let them find you. I promise, I won't let them find you."

I hadn't really understood what she meant, or what was happening to her, but I too, started to cry. I didn't want to be found. And I didn't want her to have to keep me from being found.

I heard my father's voice call out.

"Isa? Natalia?"

And I got excited. It was just Dad. The fear of the mysterious "them" my mother had been afraid of was gone for a moment. Just a moment.

I reached for the doorknob, but my mother snatched my hand back.

"No," she said. She was shaking, her eyes wild. "You can't trust your father. He's working with them. You can't trust anyone."

I stepped back from the door. Retreating further into the darkness. Squeezing myself further into the boxes. I didn't know the people that scared her were left behind in Andridora. I didn't know we weren't in any danger.

"Isa? Natalia?" my father repeated. "Where are you?"



The doorknob twisted and the door opened, revealing a tall figure.

And then I was back in the corridor. The footsteps were getting closer and closer. Alistair stepped in front of me, shaking my shoulders. “We have to go,” he said. “Now.”

I shook my head as if that would clear it from the memory mind had just conjured. They both stared at me, like my decision was the most important factor at this moment. I knew I couldn’t escape it any longer. I needed to get through this now, or it would likely be the death of me.

“Fine. Fine,” I said. “We’ll go in the tunnel. But I won’t be happy about it.”

With that, everyone climbed into the hole in the wall. Nina first, then Alistair. Alistair hunched a little as he got in. I hesitated, then realized I could not afford any more hesitation. I took a deep breath then climbed in behind him.

Once I put the tapestry back in place, the inside of the tunnel was in complete darkness. It smelled like dust and old plaster and my shoulders brushed at its edges as we walked forward.

My hands tightened into fists, the pain of the cut and the rattle of the cuff swinging on my wrist making my head spin. I held it close. It was hard to breathe. My lungs felt constricted by my heart, which beat like a drum into my ears.

Focus. Focus on breathing. Focus on the pain in my hand. Not the tunnels. Not the enforcers. Just breathing and pain.

The image of the tunnels closing in on us was now replaced by the idea of their collapse. That somehow, I would topple them like I had the testing room and my friends would be trapped beneath the debris. That we would suffocate in this shrinking space.

Nina was talking to us, but I couldn’t process what she was saying.

Then, there was a hand in mine. Alistair's hand. His fingers brushed the bandage around my palm then interlocked with mine. A cool reassurance that I wasn't alone in this tiny dark passageway. His left hand was latched onto his right arm like it almost always was. I wondered if something was wrong, but I knew we didn't have time for me to stop and ask. He pulled me along behind him until we caught up with Nina and I realized I had stopped walking. I looked ahead to Nina.

She now held a small lantern—a flame contained in an orb of glass. Where had she gotten that? When Alistair and I caught up, she continued.

After a while, we came to an intersection. Nina held the lantern up to where a number of symbols marked the wall, and she and Alistair debated on which way to go. I followed behind them, still trying to gain control of my body again. I chewed at the skin of my lips. There was a lull in the conversation but my body craved the noise. I needed something to distract me.

“How did you know about these tunnels?” I asked.

“What?”

Nina and Alistair paused, so I explained. “I need to focus on something other than the idea that these tunnels are extremely narrow and could collapse on us at any moment. So, please, just talk.”

“My girlfriend and I found them,” Nina said as she started walking. “We got tired of sneaking out to see each other after hours.”

“So, you made them?”

She laughed. “No. No. These were here long before us. We didn't even mark them. We did eventually figure out the code though. These tunnels go to so many places it can get confusing if you don't know where you are going.”

“Sounds like that was the intention. Not to be followed,” Alistair said. “How old do you think they are?”

“My guess is they go back to when the school was built,” She said. “It would make sense. I mean, the school was built during the war and they were planning for the royal kids to attend. I don’t like to think about it. Kids running for their lives.”

“You mean like us?”

Alistair’s words hung in the air.

We followed the twisting passageways for a few more minutes until we came to a long set of stairs spiraling down to a shadowy depth. Nina continued to tell me stories in the hopes of keeping me calm until we were in a safe place. I caught snippets of them. How she and Florence met, how she believes there are no coincidences, a girl and a fallen star. One day, I would have to ask her to retell them to me. One day when I wasn’t phasing in and out of the world around me.

Once we descended the staircase, we were back in the grasp of the tunnels. This section of tunnels was different, however. It was colder, damp even. The walls were no longer made of plaster and wood, but stone and dirt. Alistair noticed this as well.

“So, how deep are we, exactly?” he asked.

“We should be under the campus now,” Nina replied.

We stopped a few more times so Nina could read the symbols on the walls. She kept saying we were almost there. I was beginning to think she might be lying to me.

When we finally came to a stop, I could see a little bit of light coming from above us. Nina extinguished the lantern and set it down on the ground. She pressed her feet into narrow grooves in the wall, and pressed her ear to the door above us.

“Okay,” she said. “It sounds clear, but I’ll go first just to make sure.”

“No,” Alistair countered. “I should go. If it’s not, you’ll need to take Lia to another exit.”

Nina nodded. Alistair squeezed past her, climbed up the wall using the same grooves, then pushed up against the door and climbed out. Light flooded the tunnel. But it wasn’t daylight. It was yellowed, and that same buzz I heard at the school hummed in my ears.

We waited for the all-clear, then climbed up into the world again.