

The book cover features a dark, moody purple and black background. A large, detailed black silhouette of a bird's head, possibly a crow or raven, dominates the right side, facing left. Its beak is sharp and pointed. The bird's feathers are intricately detailed with fine lines. In the upper left, numerous small black silhouettes of birds are scattered across the sky. A single, dark, leafless branch with a few small leaves extends from the bottom left towards the center. The author's name, 'RAHA TAHERIAN', is printed in a clean, white, sans-serif font, centered horizontally. Below it, the title 'Damage' is written in a large, white, stylized script font that appears to be hand-drawn or painted, with some ink-like splatters and a slightly distressed texture. The overall aesthetic is somber and mysterious.

RAHA TAHERIAN

Damage

DAMAGED

Raha Taherian

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DISCLAIMER

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Any resemblance to events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

*For those who plucked a feather
whenever they were asked.*

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PLAYLIST

PART ONE

Twenty One Pilots - Drag Path
Billie Eilish - Blue
Kaleo - Way Down We Go
League of Legends, Teya - Bite Marks
Melanie Martinez - Is This a Cult?

PART TWO

Florence + The Machine - Mermaids
Mitski - A Pearl
Billie Eilish - The Diner
Ethel Cain - Ptolemaea
Melanie Martinez - Evil
Radiohead - No Surprises

PART THREE

Billie Eilish - What Was I Made For?
Mitski - First Love / Late Spring
Melanie Martinez - Dead To Me
Phoebe Bridgers - I Know The End
Ethel Cain - Strangers

CONTENT WARNINGS

This story contains mild profanity, violence, suicide, abuse, and death. While not graphic, some themes and scenes may be distressing or triggering for some readers. **Reader discretion is advised.**

If you or someone you know is struggling with similar issues, consider reaching out to a trusted person or local support services.

Remember, each damaged piece might have a chance at being fixed.

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PRONOUNCATIONS

Baleroe: Bay-lee-ro-ee

Esiliato: Eh-sih-lee-ah-do

Malaska: Muh-lass-kuh (like *Alaska* with an M)

Eterna: Eh-ter-nuh

Baler: Bay-ler

WELCOME
to
THE
world
OF
opposites

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Part 1

HALLUCINATIONS

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CHAPTER 1

Reopening of a Wound

L I Z Z I E

THE GHOSTS OF THE GRAVEYARD WERE ANGRY WITH ME. *Six years*, they thought, *and she still comes back to visit a rotten body six feet under.*

I wanted to tell them I was done grieving. That I wanted nothing more than to step out of this graveyard and never come back again. But my reason was beyond the realm of understanding for these untouchable spirits. Their presence could be sensed, the unwelcoming type. I was an intruder to them; a girl they couldn't draw any energy from. Considering their hunger, a safer person would have been scared. Someone who visited this haunted place with an aching heart, like a woman grieving her dead lover, lost to war.

I had somehow managed to numb my pain, bury it in my mind so it wouldn't surface. It would sometimes get hard, but I'd always find a way to distract myself. Right now, I was trying to think of anything but their bites. Yes, the ghosts were wild, digging their teeth into my coat every time the cold broke through.

Look at the graves, Liz.

What do you think of them?

My steps faltered once I forced myself to look down at what laid beneath my feet. There were thousands of them, with thousands of names, each marking a last day defined brutally by numbers, begging the questions; *who decided which lives were small enough to be reduced to numbers, and why do some of them feel unfinished? If death is inevitable, why do some endings feel improper?*

Just the thought made my head ache, like always, but it wasn't as sharp as the sudden twist in my stomach when I finally saw my sister's grave.

It was . . . destroyed.

The headstone leaned crooked, marred by a deep crack that split her name in two, like lightning tearing through the sky. And the footstone had shattered, dead flowers clinging desperately to cover its riven edges.

I felt an old wound reopen in my chest at the sight, a memory flashing before my eyes. There was screaming for a moment. Then she was gone again.

You're his favorite.

Her words came raining down on me. My fingers flew to my temple, and I stumbled back, nearly tripping over a grave.

Please.

Don't let him hurt me.

“Stop,” I cried out, clenching my eyes shut, hoping that when I opened them, the grave would be fixed. Except it wasn't. In fact, there was something nestled among the broken stones now, too. A scrap of paper. Shaking from head to toe, I crouched in front of the footstone, and carefully pried the paper free. There, in hastily scribbled words, it read:

Find me where darkness outshines my wings
in a hollow place the world left behind.

This isn't real, I thought.

Why would it be real?

CHAPTER 2
Breaking Rules
L I Z Z I E

THE STREETS OF BALEROE WERE ALWAYS FLOODED WITH merchants, loud with the ceaseless laughter of children and the bustle of the crowds. But today, everything felt different. I couldn't hear anything as I moved through the sea of people. All faces were blurry, and the world around me was painted in black and white, fading with every step I took.

I kept envisioning my father's expression, the way he'd react, the lives he'd ruin. It was all too clear.

He was the Commander of Baleroe, after all. No one would dare stop him if he wanted to imprison his own people and execute others until such a time as the demon who destroyed my little sister's grave confessed their sins. Not even me.

Especially not me.

Therefore, going home wasn't an option.

Not like it ever was.

So, while I still had the chance, I decided to play it safe and go to my friend, Vivian, hoping she would help.

After several sharp turns, I made it to a quiet residential area, where dozens of houses lined the street, including hers. It was very tiny, easy to find, but judging by the hearts that spotted its wooden walls, the family inside knew love.

Walking to the glazed front door, I pulled the string of the bell hanging outside and waited for a response, looking at the glass as if it were a beast. It was frustrating, the way I had to face my reflection every time I came here, the way I had to watch those tired brown eyes stare at me, land on my full lips, and fall all the way down to my dirty blonde waves.

God, why did I always look so exhausted?

"Elizabeth!" The door burst open, and in a blink, my face was replaced by a pair of abnormally big, blue eyes. They belonged to Valerie Grimveil.

She was the mother of the family, always so full of energy, bright and hopeful, as though the world she existed in wasn't evil.

"I was hoping you'd visit, dear," she said, flashing a big smile. "You haven't been around much."

"Sorry," I replied quickly, voicing the first thing that came to my head.

“Busy?”

“What?”

“Have you been busy, sweetie?” she repeated calmly.

“You could say that.” I shrugged. “I’ve been on several patrols this month.”

“Hell bent on earning that badge, hm?” she mused. “Or is it your father putting more and more pressure on you every day?”

My face froze.

She threw her head back and laughed loudly. “I’m kidding, dear. I know how much it matters to you.”

I attempted a crooked smile, searching the farthest corners of my mind for something to speak of, certain I wouldn’t find the right words.

“All right,” she sighed, spreading her arms open when the silence lasted too long. “Come here, sweetie.”

“Oh, yeah, sure.” Stepping into her warm embrace, I gave her an awkward pat on the back before peeking over her shoulders. My eyes traced the portraits that lined the corridor walls, landing on the curving staircase, where Vivian would usually sit and busy herself with drawing. She wasn’t there. “Uhm...” I cleared my throat and pulled away. “Is Viv home?”

“Oh, yes.” She loosened her grip on my arms and stood aside, gesturing for me to enter. “She must be upstairs in her room.”

“Thank you.” Nodding my head, I stepped around her, hurried up the stairs, and practically threw myself into my friend’s bedroom.

Vivian, sitting in her bed with a romance novel in her hands, jumped at the sight of me standing in the doorway like a girl possessed. Her pink curls were a circular mess around her head, her hazel eyes wide with surprise.

“You could always knock, Liz.”

“I need your help,” I panted, ignoring her words as I closed the door behind me and reached into my coat pocket, fisting the scrap of paper, then moving toward her bed, showing her the riddle. “I need to know what this means.”

She leaned forward, only to focus on me instead. “Damn, you look like hell.”

“Just read this!” I snapped, shoving the paper in her face.

Vivian put down her book and watched in confusion as the curse landed on her lap. The moment her eyes scanned the words, the blood drained from her face, and her lips parted in disbelief.

I blinked, taking a step back. “What?”

“No, no, no.” Vivian shook her head and jolted upward, returning it to me so fast, I nearly thought it had burned her. “You’re insane, aren’t you?”

Clutching the paper, I watched as she slowly backed away from me and asked, “Where did you even get that from?”

“A stranger gave it to me,” I lied, knowing the truth would spread like a wild disease if it were in Vivian Grimveil’s hands. By tomorrow morning, everyone would know, and Father wouldn’t be very happy about that. “Why do you ask?”

“Because, Liz, that thing is demonic!” she yelled, panicking. “It’s – oh, fuck – it’s very, very demonic!”

I frowned. “Why?”

She stared at me as if I had grown a second head. “Please don’t tell me you don’t know what Esiliato is.”

“I don’t.” I shrugged. “Although, I’ve certainly heard the name from my father.”

“Obviously,” she drawled, “its leader is a huge threat to the city.”

“Go back to the beginning, will you?” I asked. “I can’t understand a word you’re saying right now.”

“Let’s see,” she sighed, her shoulders sagging. “That curse will lead you to Esiliato, a village beneath Baleroe. It’s for outcasts.”

Wow, thanks a lot, Viv.

That did not help.

“I don’t see why that’s demonic.”

“Well, my mom says that humans turn into wild creatures in that village,” she explained shakily. “Law doesn’t exist there. Killing isn’t a crime. And the people? They’re all drugged and controlled by their leader. Rumor has it he wanted to do the same here. With us.”

“*Wanted?*” I echoed. “What stopped him?”

Vivian lifted a shoulder. “I don’t know. Apparently, your father sacrificed a thing or two. He made a deal with their leader to keep people safe.”

I took a step forward. “My father never told me about this. What deal?”

She hesitated.

“Viv,” I said slowly, “what deal?”

“It’s stupid,” she answered. “According to my mom, they’re forbidden from crossing into our land, and we’re not allowed into theirs. *Nothing to worry about.*”

“Deal’s changed then,” I muttered, looking down at the scrap of paper in my hand. A curse, written by someone who managed to break that rule and destroy my sister’s grave for no reason at all.

God, damn it.

“No, I don’t think so, Liz.” Vivian shook her head. “It’s like suicide. Last year, someone from Esiliato dared cross the border. He’s in the Malaska Cells now.”

I froze.

The Malaska Cells was a hulking penitentiary built on an island far away from Baleroe. It was known by many different names. I’d heard people call it the house of crazed stalkers, murderers, and addicts. But since the name was too long, I always preferred Half Asylum Half Prison better – the name my father often used. I was never curious enough to know more about it.

Although, somewhere around 2017, it was the talk of the city. From what I remember, those who committed great crimes were given two choices: be executed or exiled to Malaska Island. Those who chose the second option were often described as mad, because, according to our people, execution was the easy way out. No sane person would want to live the rest of their life in a place where they’d either starve or get beaten to death.

But was breaking a rule like that even a great crime?

“You think he’s still alive?” I asked quietly.

“Why, planning on visiting him?” Vivian chuckled, something she always did when she was nervous.

My eyes locked onto hers, certain, yet foggy. “Maybe.”

“For what?” she scoffed.

“Enforcer duties.”

“You’re not an Enforcer yet.”

“I know.” I nodded slowly. “But I will be.”

“In a year or two,” she mumbled.

“I’m going to pretend you never said that,” I told her, shoving the scrap of paper into my coat pocket before moving toward the door. “And I’ll knock next time.”

“Wait,” she called after me. “Do you want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I said innocently, the lie tasting bitter on my tongue. “I just don’t understand why my father would hide this from me, that’s all.”

“Well,” she huffed, “when you do become an Enforcer, make sure your first kill is the person who gave you that cursed piece of paper.”

I don't want to have a first kill at all. "I'll consider it," I whispered, my steps faltering when I reached the doorway. I had more questions, and I was desperate for answers. "Hey, Viv—"

"Elizabeth?" That was Mrs. Grimveil. "Will you come downstairs, honey?"

"Never mind," I muttered, swallowing the words as I spun around and quit the room.

Distant murmurs reached my ears when I neared the stairs. The voices of two or three men, talking over each other, echoed through the small house. We were no longer alone, and I thought I knew exactly who the unexpected guests were.

Leaning over the railing, I looked down and scanned the cramped space.

There, in the middle of the living room, stood two Enforcers. Azure uniforms, shiny badges.

Panic possessed me. I was no longer sure whether I wanted to head downstairs or jump out the window, and my body was beginning to shut down. My legs were too numb to carry me around, and my hands, still gripping the railing, were now trembling. Because, I knew, my father was already aware of the misery in that graveyard. Otherwise, he wouldn't have sent his men after me.

As good as dead, aren't I?

"Elizabeth?"

"Yes, I'm coming!" I shouted, sweating already. My heart was about to burst. I could feel it. And the shivers running down my spine were not helping. Anxiety had me trapped inside a cage, next to horror and hesitation and...

Oh my God, Lizzie, just go!

Then, as if pushed from behind, I tripped over my own feet and hurried down the stairs. "I'm here. I'm here!"

Their heads snapped toward me, and after a torturous moment of silence, the fat one laughed. "Just when I thought she had gone down the same path as her sister."

"No, not Miss Reyes," the other chuckled, studying me carefully. "It's time we go home now, don't you think?"

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CHAPTER 3
Wish You Luck
L I Z Z I E

"I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF THESE HEADACHES," FATHER COMPLAINED, his voice low. He stood before the large window in his workroom, hands clasped behind his back, eyes watching the city from above. "How many problems can a dead girl cause?"

"That '*dead girl*' is your daughter," I informed him, in case he'd forgotten. The Enforcers behind me went rigid, perhaps because it was very uncommon for me to speak that way. But I was uncomfortable, especially with two men breathing down my neck.

They weren't welcome.

"Was," Father's correction echoed through the walls, breaking the silence. "You cannot love a heart no longer beating, Elizabeth."

"Why do all this, then?" I asked. "By the looks of it, you don't care about the grave. So, why would you send the Enforcers after me?"

"For respect!" Losing his patience, Father spun on his heels and shouted, "The Council's already asking questions. What will our people think of us once they hear about the grave? We could replace it, yes, but the one responsible for all this misery has to be punished. That is a rule."

"Yes, but—"

"And you, Elizabeth, are not in the position to defy it," he cut me off by saying, "is that clear?"

I wanted to argue.

But the words were stuck in my throat, and even slicing it open with a knife wouldn't set them free. Probably because part of me still feared him.

"Is that clear?" he repeated sharply, his green eyes widening.

"There's no lead," I lied. "I can't find the demon. Even trying would be a waste of time. I need *actual* missions."

"This is your mission!" Father slammed his fist on the marble desk before him, knuckles reddening. "You are the one responsible, Elizabeth. You!"

I flinched. "I didn't destroy my sister's grave."

Father let out a heavy sigh, raked a hand through his golden hair, then turned to focus on the Enforcers, the fearless men, now trembling. "Have you had enough?"

They stopped breathing. I felt it.

“Get out!” Father screamed at them.

They never hesitated, fleeing the room, leaving me alone with the beast. Except...calling him that was quite unfair. Because Diaz Reyes, a man of rage, remained uncharacteristically quiet as he plonked himself down on his chair and scrubbed a hand across his pale face.

“Dad?” I said in a broken whisper.

“Tell me,” he drawled, eyes half-open, “why do you think I want you to do this?”

I watched him in silence.

He didn’t trust the Enforcers, and he needed a replacement. This was just a test – his way of training me – putting me in situations like this and making me do what his men should, because he wanted to see the potential in me.

Perhaps he is the one who destroyed the grave.

I shook my head. These thoughts were going to get me killed one day.

“You may have many reasons,” I said at last, “but Adelaide’s memory isn’t one of them.”

Father raised a brow, lowering his gaze. “Our people are weak, Elizabeth,” he murmured. “They cannot survive on their own, and they need someone who will keep them alive, no matter what.”

I looked away.

He exhaled a ragged breath, got to his feet, moved toward me.

“You see, possibilities, connections, access, power – you can never be correct about whose hand they belong in. How many people were there? How many commanders lived in this place?

Do you think all of them acknowledged their title?”

“Of course not.”

“Exactly.” He flashed a devilish smile, standing in front of me now. “And that, Elizabeth, is what got them killed.”

“Sure.” My brows furrowed. “I don’t really know why you’re telling me this, though.”

His hand lifted.

Instinct flared, and I was just about to take a step back when he cupped the side of my face and examined it. “Because you’re just like them,” he said, voice rising. “You’re my daughter. Soon to be my loyal Enforcer. You’re going to lead our people one day. Become a Commander. Fight your own battles. Have your own servants. For God’s sake, you’re seventeen and yet I

still have to remind you of that. Do you understand how that feels as a father? It feels like I've failed to do one job, and raise you *right!*"

I winced and pulled away.

He stared, hand dropping to his side. "Three weeks."

My thoughts stalled. "What?"

"You've got three weeks," he repeated, "to capture the demon."

"I don't..."

"I suggest you don't come back empty-handed, Elizabeth." His words made my blood boil. "I wouldn't like that."

I bit my lower lip hard. "What if I don't come back at all?"

He only shrugged. "Then you're dead."

"And you don't have a problem with that?"

"Grief is nothing I'm not used to." He walked toward his desk, pulled open a drawer, and whipped out a pistol: an ugly, unwanted weapon that lay in my palms before I even knew it. "I wish you luck, my future Enforcer."

CHAPTER 4
Acting Dumb
L I Z Z I E

I ARRIVED AT THE MARINA THE FOLLOWING DAY.

Father never offered to help me, but I knew someone who would:

Owen, the son of the marina manager.

He was my friend, I think. We used to hang out when we were kids. Now? Not so much. But he was still a very kind person, always caring, generous, polite. He taught me how to sail a boat, even though he knew how torturous it would be, spending three hours with me in the middle of the ocean. I almost tripped and fell into the water, but hey, at least I still managed to learn some things. I actually got us back to the docks on my own and impressed myself. I had a talent.

“You’ll be on the water for about six hours.” Owen gave me an old map the moment we got off the boat. I unfurled it, eyeing the jagged lines drawn around each location as he began to explain, “The island is southwest of the inlet. Things may seem a little misty there, but if you see a lighthouse, then turn left and *boom*, you’re right where you want to be.” He pointed to the map and tapped once or twice on things I should avoid. “Too risky, too deadly, too easy. I think you get it now.” He lifted his golden eyes to search my face, their shining irises a vivid contrast against the rich, chocolate tone of his skin, both glowing under the light of the setting sun. “Follow the markers, avoid the rocks, and *don’t* take shortcuts.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“Sea monsters,” he chuckled.

“Right,” I drawled, rolling my eyes. “Seriously, why can’t I take shortcuts?”

“Because those waters are pretty unpredictable,” he said. “They could swallow you *and* my dad’s boat in a heartbeat.”

I nodded. “No shortcuts then.”

“Now repeat it.”

My eyes widened in surprise. “You’re testing me? Again?”

“Can you believe it?” He mimicked my voice.

Releasing a breath, I pointed to a small spot on the map, with the words *Malaska Island* scribbled beneath it. “The island sits right here,” I explained, hoping to recall everything correctly. “And I won’t miss it, because...” My finger moved slightly, tapping on the drawing of a

lighthouse. “That’s right next to shore. I just have to veer to the left and then I’ll find the Malaska Cells.”

Seemingly impressed, Owen ruffled my hair and laughed. “I’m proud of you, Liz. You aren’t as dumb as you look.”

Swallowing a string of curse words, I glared up at him and said, “I do not look dumb!”

He studied me carefully, grinning now. “Fine, maybe not.”

I shook my head, rolled up the map, and started to walk toward the boat, calling over my shoulder, “I owe you!”

“You do,” he shouted. “But that won’t do me any good if you sink and die. So be very careful.”

-

The boat lurched to a stop five hours after sunset.

Once the sickening rocking finally ceased, I stumbled off the wild, stupid piece of fiberglass, my stomach twisted into knots. Screw the talent – I was not made for this. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have collapsed the moment my feet touched solid ground. Small rocks dug into my back, cold and merciless, when all I wanted was to rest my eyes for a second.

With a groan escaping my lips, I pushed myself up onto one elbow and looked at the enormous building looming over me. It was crooked, a mess of gray, with iron bars covering its broken walls, bending and tangling into one another like fingers holding on too tightly. Something about it made me shiver. I could already imagine what it would be like inside: prisoners doomed to suffer for eternity, the scent of blood lingering in the air. The possibility of turning back crossed my mind, but I wasn’t ready to face my father’s undying anger.

Well, I thought, bearing the bites of beasts it is.

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CHAPTER 5

The Wild Rabbit Hole

L I Z Z I E

THE PODIUM TOWERED ABOVE ME, DWARFING THE OLD man standing behind it. With every question he asked, he twisted the end of his white mustache and laughed at my answers.

“Ha!” he scoffed for the fifth time in two minutes. “Since when does Diaz have a daughter?”

“It’s been a very long time,” I replied, never letting my smile fade. Expecting him to remember things would be cruel, and pushing him too far would be dangerous. His memories were broken. “It’s his blood in my veins. I swear it.”

He frowned. “What was your name? Linny or Libby?”

“Lizzie,” I corrected. “Lizzie Reyes.”

“How strange.” He rubbed his chin, pensive. “He wants to sell you, doesn’t he? Is it because you’ve been bad?”

“No, sir,” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t—”

Before the words could crawl their way out of my throat, darkness swallowed us whole. The chandelier swinging above – the only source of light that cast its eerie glow over the hall – was now out. I stood frozen in shock, too stunned to reach for the gun holstered at my side.

“Give me a moment!” That was the old man.

I could hear his shallow breathing as he worked, the sound of a match striking too loud to be ignored. For a moment, I felt relieved. But then a flare of golden light nearly blinded me.

The old man had just lit a candle, although calling it that felt dishonest. It looked more like a thick, waxen tree trunk, dominating beside the podium, wiping the shadows from the farthest corners of the vast hall.

Was that even there before?

“I deeply apologize, Linny.” The old man cocked his head to the side, staring at the candle as if it were a gift. “Electricity’s barely alive around here,” he explained, sounding dismissive. “It doesn’t matter. Nothing ever does. State your purpose, will you?”

“I’m, uh, here to speak with an inmate,” I told him.

He blinked.

“He has crossed the border between Baleroe and Esiliato,” I hurried to add, “violating one of our rules.”

“Ah!” Realization flashed across his eyes. “Inmate 6927...” He stepped behind the podium again, digging through its drawers. “His file is more engaging than a fantasy novel, I assure you.”

I raised a brow. “Why do you say that?”

He returned with a thick file cradled to his chest, and a hint of joy dancing in his gaze. “I can read it to you!”

“Oh, no.” I threw up my hands. “I just need to see him—”

But the old man had already begun babbling and laughing as if he were reading from a book of puns. “*Aiden Russell has been implicated in the deaths of three individuals, including two people from the village, Esiliato, and one Enforcer from Baleroe.* Funny, he’s been arrested under eleven different names while impersonating some—”

“Yes. Wow. That’s exactly why I need to see him.”

“Right, my bad, Linny.” He vanished behind the podium once again, cursing under his breath before returning with a wooden fire torch in his hand. Igniting it wasn’t hard. He merely used the dancing flames of the candle, watching as it shone with red.

“What’s that for?” I questioned, eyeing it suspiciously.

“You’ll need this down there,” he replied, walking back to me.

I took it from him, squinting so it wouldn’t burn my eyes. “Down where?”

“I like to call it ‘*The Wild Rabbit Hole*,’ ha!” Laughing out loud, the old man took a clumsy step back and pressed the red button on the podium – which wasn’t there before, either.

“Hey, this isn’t—”

A low beeping noise echoed throughout the place, cutting me off.

I turned around.

A narrow stairwell had yawned open behind me, spiraling down into the darkness, where the haunting screams of prisoners rattled the walls.

I gasped, nearly dropping the torch.

“Still doing it, Linny?”

I glanced over my shoulder. “Would you mind coming with me?”

“Oh!” His eyes widened. “I couldn’t possibly. Folks down there don’t really like me.”

Great.

Feeling sick and scared, I inhaled the deepest breath I could, and descended the stairs, holding the red flare with one trembling hand.

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CHAPTER 6

The Deal L I Z Z I E

THERE WAS SOMETHING WRONG WITH PEOPLE DOWN HERE.

They weren't at all like prisoners – more like feral animals caged inside a box, trying to break free. Not a single one of them seemed sane.

Each time I swept the fire torch toward a cell, its red light revealed either a skeletal figure sitting on the cold floor, rocking back and forth, or something far too wild that hurled itself at the bars.

“You're blinding me!” one of them growled.

“You demonic thing!” another screamed, slamming herself against the wall. Her back arched, making a very nauseating sound.

I looked away and picked up speed, not stopping until my eyes landed on something different. *Someone different.*

He was human, punching the walls as though they owed him a debt. Blood dripped down his arms like honey, but he wasn't bothered. Actually, I believe he liked it. The pain, the hurting, the blood...

He paused the moment he heard my footsteps approaching. One fist remained buried in fractured stone, while the other dropped uselessly to his side. A breathless laugh escaped him. “Now, would you believe it?”

I froze.

Locks of golden hair fell across his face, nearly hiding the pale blue eyes watching me calmly. Dark shapes and symbols covered every inch of his bare back, with his number tattooed somewhere in between.

6927

I had found him.

Aiden Russell.

Given his fascinating file, I expected him to be another old man with broken memories. But he looked roughly my age.

“You're staring.” His voice caught my attention.

Normally, I would've looked away, mumbled an apology, mentally begged him to forget it. But something about him kept my eyes on the patterns staining his skin.

He threw his head back with a heavy sigh. "In what mad world would the Commander's daughter ever set foot on Malaska Island?"

"What, is there a world worse than ours?" I asked, finally meeting his eyes.

He lifted a shoulder. "Not sure. Have you ever been to another universe?"

I blinked, shaking my head. "No."

"Boring," he drawled. "Just send in whoever's going to kick the shit out of me and leave. I'm not exactly enjoying your presence."

"Too bad, you're going to have to tolerate me," I replied, offering a sweet smile. "Because I'm not doing that to you."

He chuckled. "Merciful, aren't you, Elizabeth?"

He knows my name. Of course.

"I don't like you," I told him.

"I'll get over it," he said in a whisper.

Swallowing the curse words that threatened to spill, I let out a sigh and stood still. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for a broken grave, but there was no going back now. I had to finish this, no matter what.

"I'm here to make a deal." My voice was steady, certain, quite the opposite of my thoughts.

"I prefer blackmailing," he said. "It's much more fun."

I inched closer to his cell with a frown, careful not to cross the red line etched in the ground. "Blackmailing, really?"

He looked away, facing the wall. "Get that away from me."

"What?"

"That damn fire torch."

"Oh." I took a step back, refusing to kill the only light I had. That was when I caught it – the way the corner of his mouth twitched, like he was trying not to smile.

Realization hit me then, and I couldn't help but feel frustrated. Manipulated, even. "Don't change the subject," I warned. "Why would you want me to blackmail you?"

"Because Balers don't *do* deals," he said. "You'll leave me out to dry as soon as you get what you want."

I shook my head. "When I make a promise, I keep it."

He glanced at me, as if to make sure. "What do you want?"

"I know what you've done," I told him. "You've crossed the border, breaking one of our rules—"

"What are you making, a deal or an accusation?" he snapped, frowning.

“First of all, it is *not* an accusation,” I shot back, losing my patience.

“Second of all, let me finish.”

He clicked his tongue. “Right. Sorry.”

I paused for a moment. Then: “I want you to help me do the same.”

He choked on air. “Hey, hey, hey, what?”

“I need to see Esiliato.”

He looked me up and down. “You’re asking for war. You know that, right?”

I rolled my eyes. “Please don’t make me remind you of the reason *you’re* the one behind bars.”

“Yeah.” He turned toward me. “You and I are different, Reyes. I didn’t cross the border because I wanted to be a tourist. I crossed it because I wanted out. Esiliato was hell. It still probably is. So, no. You’ll be dead before you even get close to that village.”

“I don’t want to be a tourist,” I hissed. “Someone from Esiliato destroyed my sister’s grave. I just want to find them.”

“Right,” he scoffed. “Something happens and then you Balers scream, ‘*We didn’t do this, it was someone else!*’ without even considering the possibility that one of your own dirty people might’ve been the sinner all along.”

“Watch it.”

“You’re not denying it.”

“I’ve got proof.”

“You’ve always got proof.”

“Sure. Fine. Whatever you say.” I spun around, walking away from the cell.

“Have fun living the rest of your life down here.”

“Wait.”

The prisoners snapped. Their screams erupted. But I still caught it. *Wait.*

It was sharp, desperate, too desperate, actually, coming from a criminal who seemed to have no problem with staying in this place.

I came to a halt, but I didn’t look back.

“What’s in it for me?” I heard him ask.

“I would’ve given your freedom back to you,” I answered, glancing over my shoulder. “But now, I don’t think I need you at all.”

A soft gasp escaped his lips.

His fingers curled around the metal bars, knuckles still bleeding. “I know you do, Reyes. You don’t even know where the border is.”

I lowered my gaze to the floor, pretending to think. “You’re right.”

“Then let me out,” he said, voice rising. “Just let me out, and I...I’ll figure out a way to help.”

I slowly turned around, smiling now. “Nice.”

He licked his lips, released the bars, took a few steps back, and began pacing in a circle.

My brows furrowed. “What?”

“Nothing.” He shrugged, then came to a halt. “Ah, can you check the cell to my right? My neighbor hasn’t responded in days. I’d like to say goodbye.”

I stared at him.

“He’s friendly,” he added.

I sighed and walked back, passed by his cell, stopped by his neighbor’s dark place. I kept the torch away, in case he disliked

it as much as the others did. “Hello?”

Nothing.

I tilted my head, hesitating before bringing the torch closer to the bars. I could see now. There was a thin figure slumped against the wall. His black eyes were wide open, so was his mouth, something slimy dripping from it.

My breath caught as a wave of nausea hit me.

He wasn’t breathing.

I covered my mouth and *ran*.

“Hey, how was he?” Aiden screamed after me.

I didn’t look back. Didn’t stop to flinch at the way those creatures growled and hit the walls and collapsed. I just ran.

-

“Commander Diaz gave the orders,” I said, handing over a forged document for that criminal’s release. I had spent enough hours in my father’s workroom to be capable of copying his signature perfectly. Although, I never really thought it would come in handy.

“They didn’t eat you alive down there, huh? I’m impressed.” The old man’s smile vanished as he reached for the papers on the podium. “What’s all this for?”

“Inmate 6927,” I replied. “Release him.”

“I’m no Baler, Linny,” he said, his words laced with laughter. “I don’t take orders from Diaz. And I don’t take orders from his niece.”

“His *daughter*,” I corrected, eyes flicking down to the papers. “These are all signed. Following them is not illegal, sir.”

“Told ya.” He dropped them. “I’m no Baler.”

“What do you want?” I raised my voice before he had the chance to turn away and disappear behind the podium.

He looked over his shoulder, the corners of his mouth twitching. “It really depends on what you’re willing to offer, Linny.”

“Anything,” I said thoughtlessly.

He tilted his head, lowered his eyes, gave a smile.

I sighed, following his gaze down to my silver necklace.

CHAPTER 7

Judge & Kill A I D E N

LOOK, I DIDN'T ASK FOR THIS.

If Yesterday Me knew I'd actually meet the Commander's daughter – and later, be forced to sit on a boat deck for hours – he would've done something to earn a spot in one of the Lockaway cells, despite all the torture. But she had freed me now, and as much as it pained me to admit, I had no regrets.

Not yet, at least.

"How much longer do we have?" I asked.

She sat at the helm, gripping the wheel. Waves crashed against the hull, making the whole thing rock like a cradle. It was beginning to make me feel nauseous.

"Uh...you see that?" She steadied herself before pointing toward a dock that wasn't swallowed by the darkness of the night. Dozens of boats were stationed there, with some pier lights that flickered over the water and shone through the fog. For all my effort to overlook Baleroe's silky blue flags fluttering in the wind, the place looked more promising than the Malaska Cells. "That's the marina," she said. "And as you can see, we're not very far from it."

"Yeah," I drawled. "But is it really where we're headed?"

"Maybe." She looked over her shoulder, and her dark eyes locked on mine.

"Stop asking so many questions."

"Why, don't you trust me?" My voice was playful. "Am I too much for your sunny personality?"

She shrugged, focusing on the wheel again.

I let out a heavy sigh. "I need your trust if I'm going to help you with this, Sherlock." Gesturing to my wrists, bound tightly with a rope, I added, "And *this* is not trust."

"Judging by what I read in your file, trusting you is going to be the most difficult part of this plan," she said dryly. "I'd rather stay safe."

"Judge," I echoed, tired. "Yeah, judge. That's what you Balers always do. Judge and forget, judge and lie, judge and kill. Hey, tell me, is that a cycle for you people?"

She looked back at me, and this time, she seemed offended. “No, what the hell is your problem? I freed you, did I not?”

“Doesn’t make me hate what you are any less.”

“Is that so?” She released the wheel. “And what are *you*? If I hadn’t freed you, you would’ve gone down your long path to rotting to death in your little cell. Like your buddy.”

“I—”

The boat shuddered.

It was a subtle tremor at first, but then it deepened, and the boat lurched violently.

Reyes stood, moments before a wave crashed over the side, spilling across the deck in sudden sheets. Cold water sluiced under me, soaking my clothes.

The wheel spun in the wind — then, in an instant, it was gone, flung into the ocean.

“The wheel!” she screamed.

“Don’t move!” Grateful to myself for untying the rope around my wrists minutes ago, I got to my feet and tried to keep my balance as I approached her. “You’ll make it worse.”

“How did you—”

“Stay still.” Despite everything, I actually smiled. “I doubt you even read my file at all.”

“God.” She clung to the railing, only succeeding in sinking the boat deeper.

“Are we going to die?”

I opened my mouth to say something. But the words just wouldn’t come. What would I even say? That we won’t die?

I shook my head and moved, checking the rails, the rigging, and the engine as quickly as possible.

“There’s nothing here,” I shouted. “I think something hit the boat from under—”

The faint sound of gurgling cut me off.

I turned around, leaning over the railing, my eyes scanning the hull.

Bingo.

Each wave was tearing at the boat’s insides, and water was gushing through a gaping hole near the waterline.

“Found the issue,” I yelled.

The girl trembled. “What?” she breathed, clutching her heart. “What do we do?”

“We swim,” I offered.

“We can’t!” she argued. “I don’t know how to swim!”

“We can sink, too, if that’s what you prefer,” I said, turning toward her. “The boat is going down.”

“You think I can’t see that?” she cried, pressing herself against the railing and staring down at the dark water in horror.

The boat lurched again, causing me to rush her. “So, what will it be? Heaven or Hell?”

“But the water’s f-freezing!” she stammered, her brown eyes wide with fear.

“I don’t know how sick of life *you* are, Sherlock, but mine’s just getting started.” I was already pulling my wet shirt over my head and kicking off my shoes. “Thanks for the bail-out!”

Just as I was about to jump off the boat, she released a piercing scream.

“You’re leaving me here to die?!”

I shrugged. “Depends on your decision, darling. Are you doing this or not?”

She swallowed hard. “Will you catch me?”

“I’ll catch you.”

“Don’t lie.”

“How could I?” Grinning, I wrapped an arm around her waist, and as the boat jolted again, we fell into the water. Within seconds, she kicked me with her knee, and I lost her. I held my face above the water, waiting. Then, just when I thought I was rid of her for good, she surfaced and gasped for air, barely managing to keep afloat. “L—iar!” she choked out.

“You kicked me,” I shot back, swimming toward her to wrench her up in my arms once more.

She let out another scream, kicking me again.

“What are you doing?” I yelled at her, breathless, furious.

A wave washed over her head. “Jellyfish—sting!”

I stretched my arm forward, catching her wrist. “A jellyfish bite won’t kill you.” A gasp for air. “But drowning will. Swim!”

“I don’t—know how!”

I grunted in pain when she offered another kick to my ribs. “You’re strong.”

“I—didn’t mean to!”

“All right,” I breathed. “But if we want to make it to the marina, you’ve got to listen.”

“OK.”

“Visualize: there are people trying to get to you,” I shouted over the waves, trying to keep my mouth above the water. “You have to kick them with your arms and legs. Like how you’re kicking me.”

She did as she was told immediately.

And when I was certain she could keep afloat, I slowly let go of her.

“I can’t!” she cried.

“But you’re doing it.”

Her face froze. “You’re not holding me!”

“I let go two minutes ago.”

CHAPTER 8

The Compliment

L I Z Z I E

WE WOULD'VE DIED IF OWEN WASN'T OUTSIDE, WALKING on the dock with a cigarette dangling from his lips.

Salty water had blurred my vision, so I thought he was an Enforcer when he came to help. I might've thrown a few rocks at him. And two of them might've hit. But he wasn't very upset about it, and he sure as hell wasn't concussed.

Throwing the two of us into an empty villa nearby, he offered us towels and dry clothes of his own. There was also a panicked part of him that said we could stay. But I just knew that, sooner or later, he would realize why we were swimming instead of sailing his father's boat.

"That's stupid." After rubbing some sort of cream on my jellyfish sting, Owen sat down on the only couch in the place and dragged a hand down his face. "You're supposed to punish criminals, Lizzie. Not bail them out!"

"I heard that!" Aiden's voice came from the kitchen.

He was digging through the cupboards and the cabinets, living his first night of freedom in a desperate search for food.

"Pretend you didn't!" Owen shot back, slumping in his seat. He kept his eyes trained on me, giving me a chance to speak up before he tried to lecture me.

"Listen, I may be stupid," I admitted. "But I'm still alive, which means that I still owe you." My words were calculated. I knew I needed some time to soften him before casually mentioning that I had sort of, maybe, accidentally ruined and lost his father's boat. "I'll get whatever you need. I promise."

"I don't care, Liz," he sighed, closing his eyes.

I blinked in confusion. "You don't?"

He shook his head. "No, I'm just glad you didn't drown or anything while – for some wild reason – trying to swim in the..." Realization hit him fast.

No.

No, no, no...

Don't say it!

"Hey, where's the boat?"

I cringed, mentally cursing my life. "It's kind of..."

“At the bottom of the sea,” Aiden filled in for me, and I swear, I had never wanted to gut someone from the inside out more.

“So, hours of non-stop training weren’t enough?” Owen laughed. “I thought you were good to go.”

I hurried to explain, nearly stuttering, “I’m sorry. I don’t even know what happened – just that the boat started sinking, and I swear, once I get this over with, I’ll give you something to make up for it. A new boat, maybe? Exactly the same one. So that your father won’t get mad at you for trusting such a foolish person with one of his boats–”

“Liz.”

“What do you think about gold? I could give you gold. Lots of gold. And then–”

“*Liz!*” Owen snapped.

I paused.

“It’s just a boat,” he said slowly. “The only thing that matters is that you’re safe.”

“But your father–”

“My father can get over a stupid boat, Liz,” he interrupted. “But he’d kill me if anything ever happened to you.”

“The Commander wouldn’t give him the satisfaction,” said Aiden, leaning against the counter with nothing but an apple in his hand. “That man would slaughter his own army before letting his sweet, little princess die.”

I snorted, spinning on my heels in order to give myself some time to think. Would he really do that? I’m certain my ears caught different words when I had begged for a reaction before leaving him. Words that cut through me like scissors. “He doesn’t care.”

“Really?” Aiden tried to sound pitiful. “As far as I know, you’re all he has left.”

“Oh, yeah?” I snapped. “And what makes you say that?”

He examined the apple, testing my patience and smiling as if this entertained him. “You’re his one and only daughter.”

I folded my arms across my chest and leaned against the wooden wall, feeling numb as the truth growled like a beast in the back of my head.

I am not his only daughter.

“You don’t know anything,” I whispered.

“I don’t need to,” he replied with a careless shrug. “You Balers have always been predictable. It’s easy to write stories for you.”

I took a step forward, prepared to punch him where he most deserved it. If only Owen wasn't faster than me, I might have succeeded. He got up, blocked my way, gripped my shoulders, and pushed me back. "Easy, easy," he breathed. "You two are fighting like you didn't just dodge death an hour ago. Slow down."

"I can't," I raised my voice. "That guy is *mad*."

"Careful," Aiden warned, smirking. "That's a compliment."

"How is that a compliment?!" I was shouting now, my blood boiling. "How?!"

"Calm down." Owen cupped my face and made me look into his eyes. "I don't like you right now. You're not so Lizzie when you're angry."

I blinked.

The rage disappeared, like a candle snuffed out in a dark room. "I'm...I'm sorry."

"It's all right," he said, wrapping his arms around me.

I melted into him, into his warmth, into the steady beat of his heart.

Thump, thump, thump...

"I lost my gun," I mumbled after a few seconds.

"Doesn't matter."

"No, I'm going to have to head back home." I peeled away, tugging at the sleeves of the white shirt he had given me, slipping off my shoulders every two minutes. "I need better clothes than these."

"Shit." He rolled his eyes. "Is this you asking me to babysit that guy?"

I shrugged, offering a faint smile. "Maybe."

He sighed, but he still smiled back. "Make it fast."

CHAPTER 9

Pink Wallets

A I D E N

I WAS FAMISHED FOR FOOD, IF NOT FOR ROTTEN APPLES, and that was beginning to drive me crazy.

When we reached the marketplace, the sun had already cast its orange glow over the city, burning my skin in ways I had missed and still hated too much. Sweat clung to my forehead as I walked, already regretting this.

“I think someone picked my pocket,” said Reyes, marching beside me, dressed in fresh clothes. Her hair was braided away from her face, swaying in a rope made of golden strands, still damp from the shower she’d clearly taken. Let’s not forget the gun she stole from her house after losing the one Diaz gave her. “I swear, I dropped a fistful of lemon candies in it,” she complained dramatically, checking the small pockets of her bright dress. “Who even steals *candies*? A mad man?”

I drew in a deep breath.

She looked back at me, studying my face. “No offense. I’m also sorry for losing it earlier.”

“None taken,” I mumbled, barely paying any attention to her. The only thing I could think of was food. Not prison food. Real food, like a hamburger or a turkey sandwich.

“You’re quiet,” she stated, offering a crooked smile. “Did Owen torture you or something?”

“Hm” was all I replied, too busy sneaking glances at the food stalls as we walked through the streets. This city was so damn crowded, and loud, too. Nothing seemed to haunt this place, though. No screams, no cries, no blood. Everywhere you looked, you felt a strange energy, the good type. There was a smile on every face, a melodic laughter escaping every throat. Perhaps it was all foreign to me because I grew up in a wasteland, somewhere you could only describe as the exact opposite of what you saw here.

Reyes snapped her fingers in front of my face. “Hey!”

I blinked, my head snapping toward her. “What?”

“I’m not talking to myself.” She glared at me before asking, “Were you even listening?”

“Someone stole your lemon candies.”

“I—”

“Now.” My stomach growled once my eyes landed on the fresh sandwiches piled up high at one of the stalls. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to get some food.”

She scoffed. “Isn’t getting to Esiliato the reason I freed you?”

“You have no idea what prison food is like,” I grumbled, gesturing toward the stall. “And that serves the exact opposite.”

“God, I knew this was a bad idea,” she groaned.

“Relax,” I said, stepping around her. My hand snaked down to her new holster, pulling out a small, childish pink wallet. “You’ve got a plan. And it’s going to work,” I added, grimacing at the sight of what lay in my palm.

She noticed it too late. “What are you—”

I bolted.

“Hey!” She followed after me as I squeezed through the crowds, dodged clusters of vendors shouting their prices, and approached the stall.

The scent of grilled meat and solid food was stronger now, confirming how real they were.

“Two of those.” I emptied the wallet’s contents on the counter, examining the sandwiches while the old man stared past me in confusion. I frowned, glancing over my shoulder. Reyes was tugging at the sleeves of my shirt, pinning me with a deadly glare.

“Two of what?” he asked, eyeing the two of us. “I’ve got chicken, meat, turkey—”

“Turkey.”

He reached out to take the money before pushing the sandwiches over. “Here you go, kid.”

I grabbed them, shoving the bigger one against the girl’s chest in a weak attempt to free my sleeve from her claws.

“Of course.” It took a while, but she finally gave in and let out a heavy sigh.

“What did I expect? If you’re a murderer, then you’re a thief, too.”

“Don’t act like money matters to you.” I gave her stupid wallet back and took a bite of my sandwich. It tasted like *heaven*.

Her lips parted, but before she could protest, I swallowed and said, “I might be a thief and a murderer, but I don’t put my wallet in my holster.”

“That’s because you have neither of them,” she hissed.

I paused to glare at her.

She held my gaze for a long moment before her shoulders sagged. “Just lead the way.” Her eyes dropped to the sandwich. She took the tomatoes out

before biting into it.

“I need a map,” I said with my mouth full.

She stopped chewing. “You don’t know where Esiliato is?”

I swallowed. “I know where Esiliato is, darling – I just don’t know my way around *your* joyful city. Do you know where Gate Seven is?”

She frowned, thinking about it. “It should be right before Baleroe’s entrance, near the woods. My father says it’s ground zero for Balers. So no guards, no Enforcers. It’s abandoned.”

I smirked. “People abandon things for a reason, don’t they?”

CHAPTER 10

The Ravens

L I Z Z I E

GATE SEVEN WAS SWALLOWED BY VINES AND SMOTHERED in moss, as though the trees beyond its walls had claimed all the power as theirs, letting the guardians above watch the scene unfold without tears. Yes, two stone ravens sat on the cracked columns. They were watching. They were moving. They were real. It was all too clear: We were about to be doomed by two talking stone ravens.

“What brings you to the Bleeding Woods?” one of them sang, “and what sacrifices will you make?”

“None,” said Aiden, taking a step forward. “Let us through.”

“Oh, it’s you again,” croaked the second raven. “You broke the rules, and you refused to make a trade with us. Do be honest, how is this fair?”

Aiden sighed, impatient. “I shouldn’t have to *pay* in order to go back home. When will you birds ever realize that?”

“That place is far from home,” the ravens said in unison. “You mustn’t cross the border without a trade, young man. Last time was a mistake.”

Lost and confused, I watched the ravens as they spoke, trying and failing to ignore the thoughts in my head. Father had abandoned this place, knowing the statues would do a better job at protecting it than any other man – which begged the question, *why?*

“I’m sorry, what even is this trade?” I asked.

One of the ravens tilted its head. “Darkness in exchange for our silence, hearts and memories of the victims.”

I frowned.

The words written on that scrap of paper came rushing back to me, and I mentally begged my mind to unlock every single one, like a key.

Find me where darkness outshines my wings...

In a place others left behind?

“Is that a riddle?” I questioned. “Hearts and memories of the victims? Darkness and silence or whatever?”

Aiden looked at me as if I had betrayed him entirely.

“Not a riddle, dumb one. A choice,” the second raven corrected. “I smell Baler blood from you. Esiliato won’t take it well without a price.”

“Don’t listen to them,” Aiden warned. “They’ll inform the Enforcers anyway.”

I glanced back at him. “Why would they?”

“Because that’s what they’re made for.” Gripping my arm, he pulled me close and whispered, “They ask for the impossible. I say, we find another way in and leave these stones alone.”

“No!” I recoiled in horror. “We’ve wasted enough time already!”

“They’ll send me back to that shithole, don’t you get it?” he snapped. “And you won’t last an hour in that village if I’m not there.”

The ravens laughed.

I looked up at them, the way they moved so effortlessly, as though they had never known gravity. Creatures made of stone were supposed to be slow and heavy, but they were as free as living birds.

My lips parted, and the words I knew I would regret escaped before I could think better of it: “What will your silence cost me?”

“No, don’t—” Aiden’s protest died in his throat when one of the stone ravens let out a gurgling croak and replied, “Your humanity.”

I froze.

This wasn’t a price.

This was...

I don’t even know.

“Screw it.” Wrapping an arm around my waist, Aiden held me back and put his hand over my lips. “Let us through. No deals.

No trades.”

The ravens stared down at us.

“The people of Esiliato are violent toward unwanted guests,” one of them explained. “And if you don’t value our silence, then you best be exiled to Malaska Island for trying to break an important rule.”

Their words made me feel powerless. I wanted to shout at them, remind them of my title, tell them that they had to obey me, but *someone* had covered my mouth.

“Stone birds don’t need humanity.” Aiden glowered at them, tightening his grip to the point that I had to fight back a wince. “Especially not if it’s taken from Balers. Believe me, whatever’s inside this girl won’t do you any good.”

Asshole.

“You make sense for once, young man,” the second one replied, sounding more intrigued than convinced. “How about a cheaper offer?”

“Oh, yes,” sang the other one. “Your greatest memory?”

“You won’t take anything from her,” Aiden hissed.

I sagged in his arms once the weight of his words sat on my shoulders and made me realize something that terrified me.

He was fighting them.

And I was *considering* the offer, as cheap as they described it, because humanity was something I needed. But memories only ever hurt, good or bad.

I tried hard to remember my greatest one, even if, deep down, I knew I had lost it a long time ago. These ravens were just like the ghosts of the graveyard. They searched for something I no longer owned, no longer cared for.

So, why not scam them?

I lifted my head. Nodded.

Their gray eyes shone. “Trade accepted!”

Aiden released me at once and stepped back, a haunted look in his eyes, as though he expected to see something that would follow him for the rest of his life.

“Aiden—” A sharp tickle crept along the back of my skull, though I never saw anything leave. Another croak echoed through the air, and then...silence. Not ordinary silence, but the kind that swallowed the world whole, as if everything around me had dissolved into some vast, unnatural void.

My eyes fluttered open.

The ravens had returned to obeying physics, their hardened stone bodies frozen once more atop the cracked columns. Gray heads bowed, they stared down at the gate they had been carved to protect...

The gate I had destroyed.

CHAPTER 11

Unwanted Company

L I Z Z I E

“WHY DIDN’T YOU LISTEN?”

Several minutes had passed, yet I still hadn’t moved. The punishment of memory loss was only beginning to settle in. My thoughts churned like a storm beneath my skull, my legs weak and unsteady beneath me. Sound came muffled and distant, drowned beneath the violent pounding of my heart.

“Hey, I’m talking to you!” Rough hands seized my shoulders, shaking me until the world snapped back into a jagged focus. Aiden was there, his face inches from mine. Rage and reluctant worry blurred his vision.

“What?” I wheezed.

“We didn’t need a trade,” he spat. “You would’ve been fine!”

“What about you?” I was slurring my words like a drunk. “Those statues... they would’ve informed Baleroe. You said it yourself. And, uhm, that would’ve set us back hours. And...” I didn’t have anything else to say.

Aiden frowned.

“I’m not, ah, heartless?” I offered, my head lolling slightly. “I saw what it was like down there. Trapped with those creatures. You would’ve hated to go back to the Malaska Cells.”

He scoffed. “And you think that justifies burning one of your greatest memories?”

“I don’t have one, Aiden.”

“No shit. You literally just traded it away.”

“I’m not stupid.” A spark of heat returned to my voice. “I tried really, really hard to find a memory worth keeping, but there was nothing. So if I had to choose between a hollow void and saving you from years of torture...I don’t know. I guess I just played the better odds.”

He gave a sharp, breathy laugh and released me so abruptly I nearly stumbled. “You think I owe you now?”

I blinked, forced my knees to lock, swaying as I found my center. “I don’t—”

He threw up his hands. “Save your breath. And don’t expect me to feel guilty because you decided to be the sacrificial lamb.”

“Aiden—”

He took a step forward. "You forget that I'm from Esiliato. You forget that ruining you is like an instinct to me. And that I'll do it if, at any point in the village, I need to."

His tone carried the kind of coldness that acted like a splash of ice water, sobering my mind. "What about our deal?"

"Getting you to the village was what I agreed to," he replied. "Once we're there, we're done. I'm not your bodyguard."

I lowered my eyes.

He paused. "Did you think we were partners?"

Yes. "No."

"Good."

Damn you.

"We should...we should move." I spun around and stepped through the gate.

Entering the woods felt like leaving the world behind and walking into a fever dream. The air didn't blow, it bit, gnawing at my skin with a cruelty the ghosts of the graveyard hadn't even managed. Rotten leaves clung to the skeletal, crooked branches, and the grass beneath my sandals was a sickly, bruised gray, as if the earth itself had succumbed to a fungal rot. Everything was so quiet.

"Lead the way," I mumbled, glancing back at Aiden.

He stood there for a moment, hesitant to step back into the home he knew, suddenly far too easy to read.

"I need to tell you something," he muttered. His pale blue eyes were uncharacteristically clouded, flickering with a rare uncertainty.

"Just lead the way," I said slowly, turning my back on him.

He scoffed and brushed past me with a shoulder check. "Follow the river. See if it gets you killed or not."

"What river?"

He pointed toward a dry, sunken pathway that wound through the trees like the shed skin of a giant serpent.

I exhaled a ragged breath and fell into step behind him. We walked in a suffocating silence for several minutes, until the unspoken finally clawed its way out of my throat. "I'm sorry," I said quietly. "For not listening."

He glanced back at me, a smirk tugging at his lips. "What was that?"

"I said I'm sorry."

“One more time? I don’t think the trees heard you.”

“You’re insufferable,” I grumbled, looking away.

“You know,” he sighed, “I’d rather choke on the stench of these woods than spend my first day of freedom with a Baler like you.”

“Poetic,” I shot back. “Aren’t you talking about the freedom that you have *because* of me?”

He laughed, the sound echoing hollowly. “You’re dying for a ‘*thank you*’, am I right?”

“Ew.”

“What, too much?”

“No – be quiet,” I whispered, coming to a halt. The scent of blood filled my senses. It wasn’t a faint metallic tang – it was a thick, nauseating wall of gore. “Do you smell that?”

“The blood?” He sniffed the air casually. “Yes, Sherlock. I noticed that.”

“It smells like something died here.”

“It’s the woods,” he said, taking a confident step forward. “Keep moving. You’ll get used to it.”

I followed hesitantly, breathing through my mouth to keep from gagging. “What were you going to tell me earlier?”

He didn’t look back. “The Ravens made it too easy. They never offer a second choice unless they’re taking orders from someone specific.”

“Who?”

Silence.

“Aiden? Who are they taking orders from?”

“Forget it.”

“No, why won’t you just–” The words died in my throat. My stomach did a flip, and a scream tore itself from my lungs before I could catch it.

A red deer lay sprawled across the gray grass. Its wide, brown eyes were fixed in a permanent, glassy stare of terror. It had been systematically unmade – ripped open with violence, its ribs jutting out from the raw, matted fur like ivory teeth.

“Oh, God–” My knees finally gave out, and I hit the dirt, clutching my stomach as my vision blurred. “I’m going to be sick.”

Aiden glared at me, his expression a void, utterly calm, utterly cold. “Get up.”

I shook my head, burying my face in my hand.

“Aren’t you an heir?” he asked. “You’re going to see things that make this look like a playground. Get up.”

I couldn’t move.

He stepped behind me with a sigh. I felt the sudden, radiant heat of his body cutting through the chill as he leaned down. Then, his hand found the small of my back, tracing a sharp, grounding circle through the fabric of my dress. “You will run,” he whispered harshly into my ear.

I trembled. “Why?”

“Your scream just rang the dinner bell for whatever did this,” he explained, his breath hot against the back of my neck. “We need to—”

Something interrupted him.

From the darkness of the rotting trees came a sound: an uneven, rhythmic series of *clicks*. Sharp and rapid, like shears snapping shut.

I tried not to cry. “What’s that?”

Aiden’s head dropped, his forehead resting on my shoulder as he said, “Unwanted fucking company.”

CHAPTER 12

Click, click, click

L I Z Z I E

AIDEN LIFTED HIS HEAD. “WE’RE NOT FAR FROM ESILIATO,” HE said, his hand still braced against my back. The touch had never been gentle, but now it felt less like support and more like restraint. “But we need to make a run for it.”

I swallowed hard. “What is—”

“Be quiet,” he said, voice low, “and run.”

I went silent.

When I didn’t move, he seized my arm in a tight grip and hauled me upright, letting me lean against him. “I was never good with promises,” he croaked out, “but I promise, if you get me killed, I’ll strangle you on the other side.”

I blinked, my lips trembling. I wanted to tell him my body had shut down, that I wasn’t in control anymore, but I didn’t get the chance. Because Aiden spun me around and shook life back into me. “Wake the hell up, Reyes. I’m not carrying you.”

Click, click, click...

The sound grew louder, too soft for monsters, too sharp for the dead.

“Screw it.” He latched onto my hand like a lifeline and ran, dragging me behind him like a ragdoll.

click, Click, CLICK...

My limbs were numb, and I couldn’t keep up, at least not until I felt something breathing down my neck, and—

Aiden yanked me forward, sprinting harder. “Don’t look back.”

Right.

Don’t look back.

Don’t let go.

Don’t die.

I forced my legs to cooperate, tried to run with him.

But luck always runs out.

My foot caught on a rock.

The world lurched.

I went down hard.

“Reyes!”

“Aiden–”

A weight like a sack of wet cement slammed against my back, the impact crushing the air out of my lungs. I tried to scream, but the creature’s body collapsed over mine, its skeletal hands rolling me onto my back, its ribless torso flattening me. Its face hovered inches above mine, scanning me with a pair of purple eyes, gigantic and glassy, bulged from sockets too shallow to contain them. Veins pulse beneath the translucent skin, not red, not blue, but violet-black, like ink bleeding through wet paper.

I shoved at its chest, watching as my hands *sank* into its flesh.

Not even flesh.

It was gelatinous, warm, quivering, like a rotting fish. I felt something move beneath my fingers. It was a ripple of muscle, or maybe organs, slithering away from my touch.

I screamed.

The creature opened its mouth, its teeth blackened spines, jagged and uneven, some fused to its gums, others loose, clattering as it shrieked.

CLICK. CLICK. CLICK.

Its nails pressed into my ribs. The first inch felt like a burn, slow, searing, but the second was a tear. I knew it because I felt my insides unraveling.

“Stop!” I cried out, clawing at its arms, its face, its eyes, anything, but my nails skidded off its skin, which somehow healed the scratches before they could bleed. The creature let out a wet, bubbling gurgle, and bit me. Not my neck, my collarbone, as if it weren’t trying to kill me.

“No, no...” I tried to push it off, but the pressure was building, building, building...until there was a *pop*. My bone shattered.

I choked on a sob and threw my head back, stomach twisting.

This isn’t happening.

Close your eyes.

Close your eyes.

Close your–

“Hey, skeleton!” a familiar voice called out.

Then a rock cracked against the creature’s head. It went limp and toppled sideways, its nails ripping out of me as it fell.

I curled against the grass, clutching nothing, pain detonating in every inch of my body. Five deep holes on each side of my torso bled freely, too deep to live through. I felt myself dying.

“If I may,” Aiden rasped, hand slipping into my holster. He stole my gun and gave it a reload before shooting the creature in the forehead. Thick, purple liquid pooled around what was now just a heap of twisted limbs. I squinted. My vision blurred, tears or death, I couldn’t tell. I looked away and hugged myself.

“Hey.” Aiden dropped the gun, knelt beside me, rolled me gently onto my back. “Damn, you’re gutted.”

I only cried.

He shrugged out of his jacket. “It’s fine, I know someone in Esiliato. Smuggles medical supplies. Gonna save your ass.” He slid a hand behind my back. “But we have to stop the bleeding first, do you understand?”

I think I nodded.

“OK.” He licked his lips, lifted me, wound the sleeves of his jacket around my waist, tied them tight.

I screamed. Something close to it.

“You’re really, really stupid,” he muttered, “coming to Esiliato for a damn grave.”

“How much longer?” I gasped, ignoring him.

“What?”

“How much—” I swallowed. “How much longer ‘til Esiliato?”

“We’re almost there.” He steadied me, or at least tried to. “Get up.”

Standing felt like trying to assemble myself from broken pieces. I would have collapsed if Aiden hadn’t caught me.

“God,” he sighed, wrapping an arm around my hip, careful of the wounds.

“Esiliato’s going to eat you alive.”

“What...was that thing?” I whispered.

He hesitated. “An addict.”

“Addicts don’t...look like that.”

His arm tightened slightly. “In Esiliato, they do.”

I grunted in pain.

Stay awake, Lizzie.

Distract yourself.

Talk.

“Talk to me,” I murmured.

Surprisingly, he did. “There’s this family in the village. They lead what’s left of the population. And then there’s Maddox Heller. Bigwig, sells drinks,

cigarettes, drugs he makes using a dumb stone. That *person* took too much. They got infected.”

“Infected how?”

“Infected like a zombie.” Something flickered in his gaze. “The stone takes over their brain. Connects them. All of them.”

I tried to look back. “That means...”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “Almost everyone in Esiliato felt the bullet your buddy just took.”

I didn’t speak again, too exhausted to dig for more truth.

We walked in silence for minutes I didn’t have enough fingers to count, until Aiden suddenly exhaled and stopped. “We’re here.”

I lifted my head.

A cave mouth yawned open before us, draped in curtains of emerald leaves that swayed in a phantom breeze. From within, a dazzling light spilled out.

I made it.

CHAPTER 13

Miss Violet A I D E N

THE VILLAGE BELONGED TO THE DEAD.

The people had fled – same way the place had bled.

Wooden houses stood shoulder to shoulder down the street, their black paint peeling in brittle spirals, doors yawning open. Windows had shattered long ago, ripped and torn curtains peeking out at the cars slumped in place, dust settling into their leather seats like ash on graves. Evidence enough: anyone who could leave, already had.

The metallic sting of a drug threaded the poisoned air, silently mocking the addicts crouched on cobblestones, smoking violet-tipped sticks, with their sunken eyes locked on banners snapping between broken stalls.

CLEANSE OUR AIR screamed in bold, bleeding ink, a lie flapping in the wind.

I rolled my eyes, glancing at the shopkeeper slumped behind the counter, blowing smoke rings everywhere. He avoided the banners. That's how I knew we weren't lost.

Funny, nothing had changed.

Nothing was different.

Otherwise...

"Meat."

The Baler's fingers dug into my arm, trembling.

I turned.

An addict loomed behind us, gaunt, twitching with hunger. His skin hadn't melted off completely, his eyes not yet glowing that telltale purple. Fresh meat, new to the rot.

"She's not edible," I said, blocking his view of the injured girl. "Trust me, she's bitter as arsenic."

"I suppose..." He licked his cracked lips. "I like mine bitter."

"Oh, she's not yours." I shook my head. "I'm saving her for my pet, Ruel. Know where he is?"

The addict sighed, disappointed. "Coffeehouse."

"Gracias." I spun, nudging the Baler forward.

She grunted, dragging her feet, weak, always weak.

The addict flinched, tried again: "Can I buy her?"

“Not for sale,” I sang.

“Make her be.” His voice frayed. “I’m starving.”

For fuck’s sake.

I turned, mouth open to snarl—

“Don’t.” His buddy, sprawled across an old bench, yanked his cloak and hissed, “She’ll hear.”

I glanced at Reyes.

She shivered.

“Sorry,” I said. “She’s not deaf.”

“Not *her*!” he spat, eyes widening. “Take her away!”

Damn, these creatures are rabid.

“Move now.” I shoved her ahead.

She whimpered, needing rest? *Should have thought about that before feeding herself to an addict.*

I wrapped an arm around her waist with a heavy sigh, steering her toward the cabin-like coffeehouse at the market’s heart, its faded sign swinging:

HAPPY HAG HEXES

Never go back to yesterday

The metal bell above the door jingled.

Inside, the air smelled of burnt toast, chocolate, and the drug’s sweet rot. I never forgot this stench – would remember it even after living a thousand lives. But that was it, the only familiar thing about this place. Everything else seemed wrong: chairs stacked upside-down on tables, dust motes swirling in the gloom, no one here.

“Ruel?” I scanned the counter where he usually tinkered with espresso machines. “Rhea?”

“Don’t come closer!” a voice shrilled. “I’m very, very dangerous.”

Reyes halted.

I froze, then smirked. “It’s me.”

A round face peeked from behind the counter, studying us with a pair of massive brown eyes hidden behind glasses, curious but afraid. “...Aiden?”

I laughed. “Hey, little man.”

He blinked, then vaulted over the counter, tripping over his own feet.

“Where the hell have you been?!” he screamed. “We thought you died!”

Reyes flinched, vision swimming.

I steadied her before she collapsed. “Yeah, long story, no time.”

Ruel stared at her. “Who’s she?”

“Someone you’ll help,” I said. “I need medical supplies.”

He barked a laugh. “You vanish for a *year*, drag in some fucked-up girl, and demand my—”

“Where’s Rhea?”

He paused. “Don’t know.”

“Bullshit,” I muttered. “Where is she?”

“I don’t care!” he shouted, dark curls shielding his face.

Reyes whimpered.

I gripped her tighter. “Where is your sister, Ruel?”

His lips trembled. “Gone. For good.”

I exhaled. “Dead?”

“Don’t doubt it.”

I glared. “Did you two fight again?”

“No. Maybe. I don’t know.” He perched on a stool, dragged a hand down his face. “She joined the Hellers.”

My blood turned to ice. “She what?”

“You heard me,” he spat. “She left, joined the Hellers, now I work for them too.”

“What do they make you do?”

“Supply sales.” He shrugged. “Miss Violet says she’ll kill me if I don’t.”

I frowned. “Who’s that?”

“She’s...new,” he said slowly. “Showed up a few months ago with the Walkers already at her feet. She’s got this sort of...energy.”

I blinked, confused. “Walkers?”

“The addicts.”

I gaped. “They’ve got a name now?”

He raised a brow. “She says ‘*addict*’ hurts their feelings.”

I snorted. “Right. Put bows on their heads too while we’re at it.”

Ruel grimaced.

The Baler groaned then, aching in pain.

My head snapped toward the kid. “Supplies. Now.”

“I can’t, Aiden,” he countered. “She’ll kill me.”

My eyes widened. This wasn’t the boy I knew. “This girl is dying,” I yelled, nodding toward the trembling body sticking to mine.

“Not my problem.”

“Ruel—”

The bell jiggled as the door swung open, cutting clean through the curse rising in my throat.

A girl stepped inside, drifting toward Ruel wordlessly. A black tank top clung to her frame, too short to hide the artwork spilling across her skin.

Butterflies – dozens of them – with vivid, purple wings that unfurled over her stomach, like they'd been caught beneath flesh. She had tattoos, and no obvious fear of dressing like that in Esiliato.

She walked slowly, carefully, her dark hair falling so impossibly long that only the loose braid down her back kept it from sweeping the floor.

When she reached us, she didn't spare a single glance for the gutted girl bleeding in my arms. Instead, she brushed past me and vaulted onto the counter, perching there with lazy grace, eyes carrying a strange violet sheen as she looked down at Ruel. "Congratulations, kid," she rasped. "You've officially made rabbits extinct."

Ruel met her gaze, trembling so hard he nearly fell off the stool.

Fear looked ugly on him. "Uhm, I, uh..."

"I'm behind schedule," she continued, her tone sharpening. "Just give me the supplies and I'll pay you back later, hm?"

"Yep," he muttered after a beat. "Got it."

Then he vanished into the room behind the counter.

I sighed and grabbed a chair, dragging it across the floor and easing the Baler into it. She sagged immediately, limp as wet cloth.

The girl's smirk never wavered, even as her attention finally drifted toward the Baler. "Damn," she mused. "Who ate her?"

I looked away. "An addict."

She clicked her tongue softly. "Such an unfortunate name. The Walkers deserve better than that."

My gaze snapped back to her. "It's you."

She arched her brow.

What was the name Ruel used again? "Miss...Vi? Violet?"

"You're terrible with names," she murmured as she pushed herself off the counter and moved toward us.

Reyes threw her head back and closed her eyes, breaths thin and uneven.

"Hey." She dropped to her knees in front of her, sweeping damp golden strands from her forehead with startling gentleness. "You're so fucked."

"Leave her alone," I warned, standing close.

"I'd rather not," she replied softly. "But you don't need to thank me."

My brows furrowed. “For what?”

She glanced over her shoulder, smiling. “Convincing the Ravens.”

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CHAPTER 14

Red L I Z Z I E

FOR ONCE IN MY LIFE, I STOPPED *FEELING*.

And somehow, that was peaceful.

I felt the blood, hot and merciless, clinging to my skin like syrup, but not the pain it should have carried. I felt the girl's cold fingers brushing the bite at my collarbone, yet her touch seemed impossibly far away, as if it belonged to someone standing at the bottom of a lake. I felt time slipping through my hands, but not the fear, not the panic that used to be there. Against every instinct screaming inside me, I was letting my body shut down. All I had to do was close my eyes and pray the end came gently.

"This might be my fault." The girl's voice was rough around the edges, raspy, as though she had spent days screaming herself hoarse. And still, somehow, it soothed me. It reminded me of the dark, sharp and haunted, like the ghosts of the graveyard yet soft in the same breath, like the silence of the dead beneath it. "I let my dog off his leash."

I blinked, forcing my eyes to refocus.

Something about her was familiar, surely not her scent. Her perfume was thick with cedar and smoke, expensive enough to sting my nose, but failing to hide the smell of burnt chemicals underneath.

"I got them!" The kid, Ruel, stumbled toward us, dragging a stuffed bag across the floor. It scraped loudly against the tiles, full of supplies that wouldn't mean a damn thing now, not with the way I was bleeding.

"You're being stupid," Aiden snapped, his face blurry now.

Ruel shrugged. "This stuff won't save her anymore. What she really needs is a doctor. And those are pretty hard to find around here now, aren't they?"

"Actually—" The girl smiled then. "—I'm not exactly inexperienced. I could help."

Ruel froze. "You're offering charity? *You*?"

"Maybe." She swept my hair away from my face before rising to her feet and approaching the kid. She plucked the bag from his hands, slung it over her shoulder like it weighed nothing at all. "I can be generous sometimes."

"Or maybe you're trying to get her killed," Aiden muttered, leaning against the counter.

She seemed unimpressed. “I’m not the one who left her here to paint the floor red.”

“*Thank you!*” Ruel blurted, nodding.

Aiden shot him a look.

At the same time, the girl returned to me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders.

Agony exploded through my body. I bit down hard enough to taste blood just to keep from screaming. There was no way she could lift me without breaking something else. No way this wouldn’t end me completely—

But she did and she didn’t.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Aiden barked, pushing off the counter. “She’s not from here. She doesn’t know shit. I’m coming with you.”

The girl paused. “I’m headed to the Hellers’ mansion.”

He faltered for a second. “I’m... still coming.”

“All right.” With a careless shrug, she tossed me straight into Aiden’s arms.

This time, I did scream.

The world lurched, my vision worsening, black swallowing color while pain ripped through me so completely that I *wanted* to die.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” Aiden snapped, holding me tightly.

“She’s dying!”

“Says the guy who stood there like a statue when she was bleeding out.”

She tilted her head. “My car’s outside.” Then she disappeared out of the coffeehouse with impossible speed, letting the bell ring.

CHAPTER 15

The Lifesaver A I D E N

WE WERE IN UNCHARTED TERRITORY, GROUND ZERO FOR every poor, dying individual in Esiliato.

The Hellers' mansion was basically a tomb, and yet the wretched, lingering ounce of humanity left in my bones had dragged me here, straight into what could have been my own doom.

Tires screeched against gravel as the car entered a wide, colorless yard. The mansion loomed, a cube of black stone, with a singular intrusion at its flank: a small, purple tent.

"Okey-Dokey," the girl sighed, leaning forward, her elbows biting into the steering wheel. "Let's do this."

I kicked the door open and surged out with Reyes in my arms. Her skin was a terrifying gray, so cold to the touch it seeped through my shirt. She was actually dying. And for what? A crazed man who let hunger control him? It was a pretty pathetic way to go.

"Be gentle with my car, Gold Rush," the girl called out, moving toward the trunk. "She's, my lifesaver."

"Fuck the car. This is a small, dead *village*," I spat, eyes fixed on Reyes. "She's losing blood. Move."

"Whose fault is that?" She slammed the trunk and slung the supplies over her shoulder, cutting toward the tent.

I swallowed the curses rising in my throat and followed her.

Before parting the flaps, she glanced back. "Listen, you might want to stay outside."

"What? Why?"

"For the sake of your own sanity."

"I'm not leaving her with you. That's hideous."

She offered a careless shrug. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Then, she slipped inside, swallowed by the dark.

I stood there for a moment, missing that cold cell.

Why did you leave?

I shook my head and walked in.

A sharp smell filled my senses, the chemical bite of drugs floating uselessly in the air, before my vision adjusted. Tables groaned under instruments of steel, gleaming beneath a single bulb hanging from the apex. It cast a silken glow over everything, revealing the cot at the heart of the tent, stained with a dark, dried thing I refused to name.

What the hell have I dragged a Baler into?

“Where have you been?” asked an unfamiliar voice, severing my focus. A boy leaned against a far table, treating a gash along his wrist, his blood tracing lazy paths down his arm.

“Everywhere and nowhere, Eli.” The girl crossed to the table fast, tearing the bag open. Her fingers moved until they closed around a syringe. She didn’t look up when she said, “If you’re not going to help, get out.”

“Ouch,” he muttered. “Do you not care for the wounded?”

She stilled, glanced his way. “You too?”

“Relax. It’s a scratch. The Hostage lost it for a second.”

Her lips parted. “She...”

“Get over here!” I roared. “I’m not *letting* another Baler die on me.”

The boy frowned. “What’s a Baler even doing here?”

“Maddox’s orders, remember?” she replied, eyes flicking over to me. “Put her down.”

I glared at her. Every instinct screamed at me to run, dodge another year on Malaska Island. But the Baler’s blood was still warm, still tethered to me.

Screw it.

I lowered her onto the cot, but deep down I knew... she wasn’t going to survive this. Trusting a Heller was a death sentence.

“Keep her still,” the girl commanded, approaching the cot. She gripped a syringe, drawing up a fluid that pulsed with a noen-violet luminescence beneath the bulb.

I knew that color.

I knew that light.

I knew that poison.

It was the same thing that turned addicts into what they were now. Eterna.

“No,” I growled, stepping forward. “You’re not turning her into one of those things. She needs stitches, not fucking drugs!”

Her eyes widened. “A half-dose won’t do anything. It’s just a restart. She’s already gone.”

“Yeah? And how do you know that?” I grabbed the Baler’s wrist. “I can feel her pulse.”

The boy leaning against the table smirked. “I wouldn’t test her,” he crooned. “Unless you want to be next.”

She grunted then. Her hands clawed at the cot, her nails tearing at the steel as if she were trying to peel herself away from her own fucking skin.

“Fuck it,” the girl muttered, worry piercing her mask. She pressed a hand to her shoulder, pinning her down, as she drove the needle into her neck.

“No!” The Baler’s eyes snapped open, wrong, no longer brown, but violet, flaring from within. Her veins glowed beneath her skin, and I watched in horror as a burning web of molten purple crawled up her throat, over her chest, down her arms.

She was being unmade.

Leave. Leave now. She’s going to die and you can’t be seen with another dead body. Not again. Not again. Not again.

“Gold Rush!” the girl screamed. “Quit staring. Hold her down!”

I lunged thoughtlessly, my hands finding her limbs. As soon as I touched her, she screamed, splintering the last of my resolve. Then, her hand shot out, locking onto mine with a grip that I knew could crush bones.

“What’s happening to her?” I asked.

The storm of her flailing ebbed, her tremors fading into an unnatural stillness. Her hand fell limp.

I staggered back. “What is this? Why is she quiet?”

The girl dropped the syringe.

I looked up, met her gaze. “What did you do?”

“I saved her,” she said, her voice devoid of regret.

“You killed her,” I breathed. “You killed her and you made me an accomplice to the murder.”

The boy in the corner let out a chuckle. “Funny, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, hilarious,” I spat, glowering at them both. “Especially if it were you on that bed.”

The boy’s smile vanished. He pushed off the table. “You want to join her?”

“Both of you, shut up,” the girl hissed, kneeling by the cot, tracing the Baler’s side, where the bloody holes were miraculously closing. She lifted her hand to her broken collarbone, and I could see things moving beneath her skin, as though her body was rebuilding itself. “Her heart’s going to

start beating again. But the process is going to be slow,” she explained.
“She won’t stay dead.”

I stared at her. “How... how slow?”

“She’ll be good as new in less than a week,” the girl said, rising to her feet.

“Three, maybe four days. It depends on her.”

Relief flooded every inch of my body.

“You could stay,” she offered then. “If you care.”

“I don’t,” I lied. “But I think I owe her.”

“That’s harsh,” she replied, brushing past me.

I spun around. “Why did you help, Violet?”

She came to a halt and glanced back, grinning. “It’s Destiny.”

The name sounded like a curse.

“Yep.” I looked away. “I already hate you.”

“And I like that,” she murmured.

Wind rushed into the tent when she parted the flaps and stepped out, pulling the furious boy after her.

Destiny.

She was a mystery.

Part 2

THE MONSTER

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CHAPTER 16

My Crow D E S T I N Y

I THOUGHT I HAD MORE TIME.

Yet nothing went as planned, and I nearly got the Commander's daughter killed, trying to get a better look.

The boy was the target; the true reason I convinced the Ravens to move at all. He had to die before I ever reached her. I only wish I'd known that sending the Walker after them would ruin everything.

That's the price of underestimating fear, isn't it?

"Why are we helping them?" Elion's voice found me in the throat of the mansion: those endless black corridors that folded into themselves. Candles hung from the ceiling in iron hooks, their flames trembling weakly against the walls paneled in dark wood that swallowed every scrap of light and gave nothing back. A claustrophobic person would have died here long ago. By the time Elion caught up to me, I was already searching through the maze of servants. Then I saw her.

Kailea walked toward us with her face hidden behind a tower of boxes nearly larger than she was. The stack shook violently in her trembling arms, threatening collapse with every step. The moment she noticed us, she stumbled. The boxes slipped from her grasp, falling onto the floor with a crash.

"I'm so s-sorry. I didn't see you," she stammered, staring at me as though I were a demon.

"We're good, Kailea." Warmth coated my voice as I knelt to gather the scattered boxes.

Her wide black eyes never left mine. Fear lived in them. "You d-don't have to do that, miss," she whispered quickly.

"No trouble at all." I stacked the boxes neatly back into her arms. "Though I'm beginning to wonder if there's anything inside them at all."

"Yes!" A soft gasp escaped her as she struggled beneath their weight, something I hadn't felt. "T-thank you."

"All right," I said, drawing my braid over my shoulder. "We have guests waiting in the medical tent. One of them is badly injured. Could you escort them to a room?"

Kailea blinked rapidly. "I'll... I'll ask Heller if we still have empty rooms. The merchants arrive tonight, remember? We're expecting more guests."

"Well." With a quiet sigh, I slipped a hand into my pocket and withdrew a pack of Eterna cigarettes. "That's unfortunate."

The white box gleamed between my fingers, and I smiled. Because I knew our people did not worship gold. They worshipped Eterna.

"The third room on the second floor is empty," I informed her. "So is the fifth."

Her gaze dropped instantly to the cigarettes, not lingering, but *devouring*.

"Let's keep this between us, hm?" I murmured.

She nodded. "Yes, miss."

I slid the pack into the topmost box and watched her disappear down the corridor.

"Well, that was weird." Elion leaned against the wall, curious. Years ago, he'd been nothing more than a starving street rat trying to sneak into the mansion for food. He managed to steal a loaf of bread before Maddox caught him. Unfortunately, he never left. "I thought Maddox was handling this with you."

"He is," I replied. "Things just... didn't go as planned."

He grinned then, his black hair disheveled as always, his gray eyes glittering with a spark of calculation. "You messed up."

"I didn't."

He continued to stare at me.

I surrendered faster than usual. "I don't know what to do with the boy. He's loyal."

Elion chuckled softly. "You know, I doubted your little graveyard stunt at first. Thought destroying a grave to lure her in was ridiculous. Turns out it was clever."

I folded my arms across my chest. "Where exactly are you going with this, Eli?"

He threw up his hands innocently. "I'm saying the rest should be easy for you, and I'd be more than happy to help."

I groaned and turned away.

He followed.

The corridor bent sharply left before narrowing, the walls drawing close enough to brush our shoulders.

“Funny thing,” Elion began, “the boy used to be locked in the Malaska Cells.”

“That’s impressive.”

“He’s a murderer,” Elion continued. “A thief. Worse things too, probably.”

I paused at my door. “How do you know that?”

He gave a smile. “You keep underestimating how educated I’ve become.”

I sighed, turning the knob. Cool light spilled out into the corridor like water.
Water.

Forever water.

Not snow.

I shook my head, glanced back. “Keep your mouth shut for now.”

“Wait.” Elion’s hand wrapped around my arm. “Are you coming to the rooftop tonight?” he asked quietly. “I’ve wanted a few minutes alone with you for a while.”

“Thanks, but no.” I spun around, smiled sweetly enough to wound. “I’d rather spend time with someone civilized.”

Disappointment flashed across his face. “Your crow?”

“Yes, my crow.”

“That’s a bird, Des.”

“Yeah.” I pulled back and stepped backward into the room. “But he understands me.”

“You don’t even—”

I slammed the door in his face.

And suddenly all I wanted was my bed: cold sheets, silence, darkness. I wanted to bury myself beneath blankets and convince myself that, despite everything, I had still succeeded. The plan was ruined, but she had found me, and I had kept her alive.

Then, just as I was about to drop dead on the bed, something near the wardrobe caught my attention.

It was a canvas, small, half-finished. A palette rested beside it, the paint still wet.

I hadn’t touched a brush last night, which meant *she* had. My reflection, my parasite, my ghost: someone I knew through screams, through nightmares, through the pain she carved into my thoughts. Her name was Estelle. I remember because she told me herself.

A few years back, I sat before a mirror for six straight hours without moving, facing a girl with lifeless brown eyes and short, dark hair, convinced that if I stared long enough, she would answer me.

Eventually, she did, not with a voice, but with my own hands. Like a puppet pulled by invisible strings, I watched myself drag trembling fingers across the glass, spelling out letters in the mirror.

E S T E L L E

Everything unraveled after that.

The screaming got worse, endless and distorted and inhuman, a storm of voices clawing at the inside of my skull. The only time she ever shut up was when I obeyed her, gave her what she wanted. Until I dared to stop listening to her. She faded for a while, then came back. The canvas was a sign she had.

It was born of bruised violets and oil-black shadows. Something writhed at the center, desperate to emerge. An eye or a mouth or a hand clawing upward? I couldn't tell, and I liked to think it meant nothing.

"Go away," I whispered into the silence.

Nothing moved, nothing changed, still I knew she was there.

"Go away," I repeated, louder this time. "Just go away—"

Bang. Bang. Bang.

My head snapped toward the window.

My crow perched on the ledge outside, pecking impatiently against the glass. A smile pulled at my lips, rare enough to feel foreign on my face, as I crossed the room and lifted the window open, relieved to see my anchor.

Cold air rushed inside with him, stirring the curtains.

He landed on my arm, his black feathers shimmering blue beneath the dying light.

I laughed softly, letting Estelle fade into the background.

He tilted his head and nudged against my shoulder with a low caw, asking for affection.

My fingers stroked the sleek curve of his neck. "You too, huh?"

He responded with another quiet caw. Such a strange creature: loyal, watchful, merciless in memory. A bird that never forgot.

Just like me.

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CHAPTER 17

Secrets & Threats

A I D E N

FOR SOME WILD REASON, I WAS GOING MAD.

Two hours had passed since a woman shoved me into this grand, suffocating room. I tried to ask about Reyes, but she only replied with ‘*She will get a separate room. She needs to be taken care of.*’

And that was that, if we were to ignore those two hours of maddening silence, of pacing, of walking in so many restless circles that the black rug beneath my feet had begun to wrinkle like troubled water.

“This isn’t on you,” I muttered to myself for what might have been the hundredth time. “She won’t die, and the second she wakes up, you’re hauling her back to Baleroe whether she likes it or not. Screw a destroyed grave.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

I nearly leapt out of my skin.

She stood in the doorway – Destiny – her shimmering purple eyes so sharp and measuring they made her gaze feel like a blade pressed to the throat. A black key dangled from her slender fingers, an object clearly stolen from the woman who trapped me in here. Why did she have it?

“How long have you been standing there?” I demanded, my heart slamming against my ribs.

“Long enough to enjoy your little episode,” she answered, shaking her head slowly as she stepped inside and closed the blackened double doors behind her. “But I’m afraid I’ll be asking the questions here, Gold Rush.”

“Leave me alone,” I breathed.

“With your suffocating thoughts?” Her words carried anything but pity. “I’d rather be cursed.”

God, help me. “What do you want?”

“The truth.” She crossed the room in a few unhurried strides and stopped directly in front of me. “The Commander’s daughter is here. And Balers don’t just stumble into this village. They usually have a reason.”

I said nothing.

“Someone here trespassed,” she stated. “They ruined a gravestone. Her sister’s. Am I right?”

My face froze. “How the hell do you know that?”

She shrugged lightly. "I like watching in plain sight."

My eyes narrowed slightly. "You followed us, didn't you?"

"I was bored."

"Or you were working for the person who destroyed that grave," I guessed.

"Something like that." Her gaze dropped as she moved past me and lowered herself onto the king-size bed. The shadows of the room threatened to swallow her, and she seemed to go willingly. "So, Gold Rush, let's make a deal."

I blinked. "Pardon me?"

"A deal," she repeated patiently. "You know, when you want something badly enough to offer something in return."

"I know what a deal is," I countered. "I just don't know what you want."

"Let me give it to you straight." She shifted against the dark sheets and inhaled slowly. "I'll tell you who destroyed that grave if you help me solve a mystery of my own."

I scoffed, though the sound came out hollow. Part of me screamed *no*. It clawed at my ribs, and I was desperate to refuse, to deny, to pretend this had nothing to do with me. But another part, the part that couldn't hide the truth and the fact that Elizabeth Reyes had saved me from years of torture, didn't let me lie to myself.

We had struck our own deal.

"It's perfectly fine if you refuse." Her voice cut through my thoughts. She lifted her gaze to mine. "But let me ask you this: what would you do to a bird with broken wings?"

My brows furrowed.

"Pay attention," she said, "if the bird is suffering, then what *can* you do?"

"Why are you asking?"

"You'd put an end to it," she answered. "With a brick or a gunshot, you would kill it so it's no longer in pain."

"Where are you going with this?"

"That bird is the Baler, Gold Rush," she explained. "She's suffering, and if I can save her, then I can finish her off too."

I knew it.

I fucking knew it.

"You're threatening me."

She only smiled.

"What do you want?" I asked. "Drugs? Money?"

“The truth,” she said quickly. “Where was Eterna created?”

“How am I supposed to know?” I shot back. “You’re the expert.”

She shook her head, her smile fading. “I don’t know everything.”

“You don’t need to!”

“I do.” She rose from the bed, blood slowly boiling. “I can’t tell you why. Not yet. But I do.”

“Then go ask the god himself, Maddox Heller,” I said. “Don’t you live with him? He’s somewhere in this twisted mansion, isn’t he? Go talk to him, because I don’t know shit.”

“No, I don’t want to – damn it, are you even listening to me?” She raised her voice, took a step forward. “Just help me figure this out. That’s all you have to do.”

“Fine.” I threw up my hands. “The gemstone itself has something to do with that weird hospital in the Bleeding Woods. My mom told me about it years ago. I don’t remember every detail. I was younger then.”

Her eyes sharpened again. “Your mom lives here, doesn’t she? Can we speak to her?”

My expression faltered.

Understanding flickered across her face. “Shit.”

“Yeah,” I said, “shit.”

“What about your dad, is he available?”

“No, he’s not fucking available,” I snapped. “Can you stop dragging my past into this?”

“Traumatic, wasn’t it?” She tilted her head, offering a crooked smile, one that didn’t quite reach her eyes this time. “We’ll start by paying a little visit to the hospital, then.”

“Tonight?” I asked, incredulous.

“No, not tonight. There are a few special guests visiting the mansion,” she answered quietly. “I’d honestly really appreciate it if you stayed in your room and rested without pacing like an animal.”

A bitter laugh escaped me. “Right, threatening me wasn’t fun enough, so you want to lock me up.”

“No.” A shiver traveled down my spine when her fingers brushed mine. Her touch was deathly cold as she held my hand and turned it over, dropping the keys in my palms. “No one’s going to lock the doors. But if it happens, you have this.”

I frowned, suspicious. “Why would you trust me?”

“You won’t bolt,” she replied, almost confident. “You won’t leave that girl. And you can’t take her with you. She’ll die without our nurses anyway.”

I opened my mouth to prove her wrong, but nothing came out. Because deep in my heart, I knew she was right.

“A servant will bring you dinner,” she announced before turning away and moving toward the exit. “Sleep. No one’s dying tonight, and you’ll need your energy for tomorrow.”

Then, the doors closed with a click that left the room feeling even larger, and infinitely smaller at the same time.

CHAPTER 18

Cracked Doll D E S T I N Y

A THIN BLANKET HUNG OVER THE MIRROR IN MY ROOM LIKE A shroud over a corpse. It made getting ready for the evening's spectacle in the grand dining hall unnecessarily difficult, but I went for inconvenience over confrontation. I didn't dare pull the dusty fabric down and face a reflection that wasn't mine. No, that ghost had to stay out of my head tonight. Makeup ruined or not, I wasn't going to let her out.

By the time I finished, my arms felt heavy, my thoughts frayed at the edges. Truly, I had no patience left to braid my hair, so I let it fall loose down my back in dark waves, careless and uncontained.

"You ready?" Elion's voice came from behind me.

I glanced at him.

He stood in the doorway, eyes fixed on the disaster I had become.

"This dress sucks," I muttered, glaring down at myself.

The fabric was black and off-the-shoulder, the sleeves long and sheer as smoke, with the skirt flaring out in dramatic obedience. It clung where it should not and floated where it should. It was elegant, which was precisely why I hated it. "Maybe I should've worn something else."

"The dress is perfect." Elion stepped inside. "But..." He came closer.

I stiffened when his hand slipped beneath the curtain of my hair, lifting it gently away from my neck. His fingers trailed downward, slow and careful, until they curled lightly at the base of my throat.

"You missed a spot again," he murmured.

"What do you mean I—"

His fingers traced upward, from the hollow of my throat to the line of my jaw, then across my cheek.

And then I saw them: thin, branching veins of inky violet pulsing beneath my skin, like cracks in porcelain.

They were not an illness.

Just... consequences of Eterna.

Twice a week, sometimes once if I was fortunate enough to delay it. The injections kept me steady and functional and useful. But they took.

They took and took and took, until my body rejected even the sharpest weapons, became a shield for bullets, gave me the title *immortal* when all I

ever did was play Russian roulette with Death and win every single time.

“Give me a second.” Elion moved around me and began sifting through the mess scattered across my vanity desk – powder, brushes, and spilled pigments.

My heart did a little flip when he found a concealer and uncapped it.

“Eli, please.” The plea surprised even me. “Don’t.”

“You can’t go downstairs like this.” He used the back of his hand to tilt my chin up, his thumb nearly brushing the disgusting veins. “Maddox will lose it.”

I made a sound of frustration, though it came out softer than intended.

He always handled me like something fragile, as if I were a cracked doll that had been pieced back together with glue, one he shouldn’t drop.

“When was the last time you had your injections?” he asked quietly. His breath brushed the side of my neck, warm and far too close.

“Three weeks ago.”

The concealer spread across my skin like paint. He blended it with more care than necessary, trying to bury the violet lines beneath layers of artificial smoothness.

“Des,” he said softly, “I’ve seen what happens when you lose track of time. Just go to Maddox. Get it over with.”

“Why does it matter to you?” I frowned, staring at a point beyond his shoulder. “Do I scare you when it gets bad?”

“No.” His voice did not waver. “I’m not afraid of you.” A pause. “I’m afraid of the things you do to yourself.”

I lowered my eyes.

He pulled away at last and capped the concealer with a soft click. The veins were hidden now, allowing me to pretend they never existed.

“Just go to him,” he murmured.

“I can’t.”

Something changed in his expression. He almost looked mad. “Why do you insist on doing this to us? Just take the damn drug. Get rid of those veins.”

“Why, because they provoke you?”

“God.” He dragged a hand through his hair. “Why can’t you understand?”

My stomach tightened, knotting into something painful and cold.

“Understand what?”

“That you, Destiny Heller,” he said, his voice rising, “are selfish.”

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CHAPTER 19

Mad Hatter's Tea Party D E S T I N Y

SITTING AMONG THESE MERCHANTS FELT AS THOUGH I HAD attended Mad Hatter's tea party.

The black dining table stretched the length of the hall like a dark river, its surface reflecting the chandeliers hanging above. Rows of guests lined either side. Silks, jewels, perfumed arrogance. It was making my head ache. I glanced at Elion across the table. He seemed just as unimpressed as I was, his fingers tapping once or twice against the stem of his untouched glass. When he caught me looking, he straightened slightly, trying to look indifferent.

What he had said echoed in the back of my mind: *you are selfish.*

I hated that I wanted him to take it back.

"I've stabilized the gemstone." Maddox's voice broke through the mumbles, sharp, steady, clear. He had arrived with the merchants and hadn't yet spoken to me. For that, I was grateful. "I have to admit, it was a demanding process. I hope it was worth it."

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry." Willow Cameron tilted his head, swirling his wine lazily. He was one of the most influential merchants in the western territories. "We don't get to talk before I see it."

Others laughed.

Until someone choked.

Lilith, the youngest merchant, dropped her glass and clutched her chest. Her coughs, wet and wrong, made her entire frame tremble. Then, she spit it all out: three, tiny marbles rolling on the floor, glowing the one shade of purple I'd recognize anywhere.

"Are you trying to kill me, Heller?" she choked out, furious.

The merchants laughed again. No one stood to rub her back or offer her water. That's all people were: horrifyingly foolish creatures that made a beast seem kind.

"Well, that was creative," Cameron told Maddox. "You've improved, brother."

“Yeah,” Thea agreed, the oldest among them, her smile thin. “How many of those can you make?”

Maddox only glared, his amber eyes sharp and calculating. The light of the chandelier above caught in the streaks of gray in his black hair, carefully combed back. “Three stabilized marbles took away half of the stone. Or what remains of it.”

Everyone gasped.

“Can you find another one?” Lilith asked, voice hoarse.

“There is only one,” Cameron informed her. “And I think our brother here wants us to do our job. Market it.”

“Right,” Lilith rasped, “I believe we can all see Eterna’s potential. Positioning it for discerning buyers from Baleroe could bring us one step closer to, uh, true success.”

“I’m unsure,” said Maddox, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

“But it’s the perception, Heller,” Thea insisted. “Come on, think about it. If we market it as something exclusive, something for the elite, then it’ll create respect. And that, my dear, drives value.”

Maddox shook his head. “Eterna was brought back to trick Balers. Then defeat them. It doesn’t need respect. Not before it’s weaponized.”

“Tricking Balers isn’t difficult,” said Lilith. “We could capture early buyers.”

“Early buyers could work,” Cameron conceded with a shrug. “But Eterna has the potential to be far more than just an appetizer.”

Maddox’s eyes narrowed.

“Wake up, Heller.” Cameron tilted his head, gesturing toward me with the rim of his glass. “You already have the weapon you need.”

“I—”

“Agreed!” Lilith cut across my attempt to speak. “The girl is an undying, unbreakable weapon. She could take Baleroe down herself.”

“She does look like a leader,” Thea added thoughtfully, toying with her brown curls. “If only she could wield the Walkers and her gift the right way.” Her gaze sharpened. “What do you think, Destiny?”

I don’t remember signing up for this.

I looked at Elion, then at Maddox. There was something in his fiery eyes, something almost protective, as he gave the slightest shake of his head.

It startled me to realize he didn’t want this.

“I’m not interested,” I said at last, forcing myself to meet Thea’s stare. “My immunity doesn’t make me your sacrificial lamb.” Cameron let out a humorless laugh. “Yes, of course, I don’t know why I expected gratitude.” He dropped his empty glass, letting it roll over the table. “Tell me, how much sweat and blood do you think it took to raise you, young lady?”

I opened my mouth, closed it when nothing came out.

“Destiny’s intelligent,” Maddox said calmly, “and as the man who raised her, I know that her potential does not come to an end with the Eterna in her veins.”

Thea rolled her eyes. “She is supposed to train for war.”

“No,” Maddox disagreed. “If she doesn’t want it, then she’s not.”

Cameron swallowed. “My apologies, Heller. But I don’t think she understands how much this means to us.”

“I do understand,” I told him. “I just don’t care.”

He scoffed openly. “Then what good are you to us?”

“Excuse me?”

“What good are you to us?” he repeated, harsher. “Can you invent weapons? Can you fight? Can you kill? Can you do worse?”

“Enough.” Maddox slammed his glass against the table.

It shattered. “This discussion is about Eterna,” he said coldly. “Not my daughter. If you cannot respect her, you may all leave.”

The merchants fell silent, and the quiet that followed was suffocating.

I stared at Cameron, his questions replaying in my mind.

Can you invent?

Can you fight?

Can you kill?

Can you do worse?

The truth coiled low in my stomach.

I could do worse.

In fact, I wanted to.

If only the table kitchen knife resting against my palm were sharper—

The massive doors of the dining hall creaked open.

A servant slipped inside, moving quickly and quietly between chairs until she reached me. She bent low, her whisper brushing my ear, “We have a very tiny problem, miss. I went to check on that young man. I also brought

him food like you'd asked. But he wanted to see the injured foreigner. I...I let him. Now, he refuses to return to his room."

I closed my eyes briefly. "I should've actually locked his door," I mumbled, dropping my head.

Maddox noticed immediately. He leaned forward, brows drawn into a sharp V. "What did you do?" he hissed.

"We'll talk later," I murmured, rising from my seat. Before leaving, I turned to Cameron.

He was already glowering at me. "What is it?"

I stepped toward him, stopped at his side, and bent low. "You know, Cameron, you're so upset with your wife fucking all those other men that you can't even see how worthless you are," I whispered into his ear. "I understand *that*."

His jaw tightened.

I straightened with a smile and glanced at Maddox one final time before quitting the hall.

CHAPTER 20

Hearts & Bones

A I D E N

HOW DID I COME TO THIS?

If a demon hadn't destroyed her sister's grave, I would still be rotting in my cell: splitting my knuckles against stone walls just to prove I could still feel pain. If I had ignored the hunger for freedom, if I had never made that reckless deal with her, never opened my mouth at all, she would have been fine.

Instead, she lay in a bed, struggling for each breath.

"I warned you," I murmured, staring down at her motionless body. The color had drained from her cheeks, perhaps because fingerprints left by death itself had marked every inch of her.

"I warned you," I said again, louder this time.

She didn't answer.

Why would she?

She was dead—

"Gold Rush!"

My heart slammed against my ribs. I spun around, wide-eyed and flustered. Destiny stood in the doorway like an entity dragged from a fever dream. A black dress clung to her figure, turning her into an angel corrupted by darkness, while that same unbearable innocence lingered across her face. Her hair spilled loosely over her shoulders in dark waves, and her wide, unblinking eyes remained fixed on me.

She was undeniably...

No.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

"When are you going to stop scaring the hell out of me?" I snapped, harsher than intended.

She shrugged, silent, effortless, perfect.

I swallowed. "What can I do to make sure it never happens again?"

"Nothing."

Of course.

I turned back toward Reyes, unsure whether I was trying to drown in guilt or hide from her entirely.

“I thought I told you to stay in your room,” Destiny said, her voice sharpening as though she couldn’t stand my attention being anywhere else. “You failed me. I’m disappointed.”

I sighed. “Don’t care.”

“All right, fine. You did save me from the tragic little war downstairs,” she replied lightly, almost amused. “I suppose I should thank you for that.”

I lifted a shoulder, not nearly curious enough to ask what she meant.

She studied me for a moment, then crossed her arms against her chest. “I take it you’re not interested in resting.”

“Boring.”

“In that case,” she said, pushing herself off the doorframe, “let’s move. We have a hospital to find.”

I let out a dry laugh. “Right. And what makes you think I’m insane enough to walk into the Bleeding Woods at this hour?”

She paused, glancing toward the Baler’s unmoving body.

“Fine,” I muttered. “One condition.”

She arched a brow.

“Give me a gun.”

Her eyes locked onto mine, hesitation flickering there for the briefest moment. “The Walkers won’t follow us.”

“Yeah,” I said, “but I’d rather be safe than sorry.”

-

And... back to the woods.

The air reeked of rot: dead animals, damp soil. The stench clung to the back of my throat, sour and suffocating, making nausea twist harder in my stomach than it had that morning.

She, however, walked through it untouched and unbothered, not even slightly afraid.

“Why are you so concerned about a dumb stone and its even dumber history?” I asked, mockery dripping from my voice, as I watched her move ahead of me.

She had snuck us out of the mansion, and now she navigated the woods with such unnatural certainty that I almost believed every safe path had been carved into her memory. As though instinct alone would guide her straight to some hidden hospital buried in the dark.

Deep down, I knew all she would find was death, and somehow, I was still following her toward it.

“Searching for something that might just be the end of the world sounds a lot better than crossing a border for a grave, am I right?” she replied, scanning the darkness ahead.

“OK, the Baler was forced into it,” I said defensively.

She glanced at me. “You’re saying she didn’t care?”

“For a dead girl? No, why would anyone care?”

She fell silent after that, one step, then another. And as the quiet stretched between us, something ugly twisted in my chest: something restless, desperate for noise to break the silence before it swallowed me whole. Then it happened.

Crunch.

The sound beneath my shoe was wrong.

I looked down, squinting through the dark.

Something pale jutted from the overgrown grass.

A rib cage.

Broken and old.

“Well, fuck.”

Destiny’s head snapped toward me. “What is it?”

“The Walkers have been busy, apparently,” I muttered, staring at what remained of something that had once been alive.

She stepped closer and followed my gaze.

I braced myself for horror, disgust, a scream or something.

But she just crouched beside it.

“Oh, hell no,” I groaned, covering my mouth, as her fingers brushed against the bones. “What are you doing?”

“A Walker didn’t do this,” she said calmly, examining the remains. “They don’t treat their prey this way.”

“That’s exactly what your pet tried to do with the Baler,” I told her.

“You’re wrong,” she replied evenly. “There’s a difference between attacking something... and dismantling it.” Moonlight caught in her eyes as she looked up, turning them into shards of amethyst glowing in the dark.

“This wasn’t a Walker.”

A hollow laugh escaped me. “So, you’re saying something worse lives out here?”

“No,” she said, but uncertainty lingered beneath the word as her gaze drifted downward again. Another bone protruded from the grass, then another, and another.

A trail, I realized.

It's a trail.

“What the hell...” I breathed.

The bones stretched deeper into the woods like markers left behind by something that wanted to be followed. And I knew – *knew* – she was going after them the second she rose to her feet and said, “Come on.”

At first, I hesitated.

But standing still suddenly felt just as dangerous as following her, so I moved.

Bones cracked beneath every step, and still, I followed her.

CHAPTER 21

Dead End

A I D E N

THE PATH DIDN'T VANISH.

It simply ended.

The scattered bones led us to a wall of thick, crooked trees, their trunks twisting together so tightly, they formed a barricade of shadow, while their branches knotted overhead like gnarled fingers, sharp enough to tear through your skin if you dared pass by.

"Great," I muttered. "Dead fucking end."

Destiny didn't move. Her eyes swept over the gray grass at our feet, searching for answers clearly hiding from her sight. "It can't be. The bones are still here."

"We should come back in the morning," I said, "when you can actually see."

She went rigid. "What if that morning never comes?" she asked quietly, not turning around. "You don't even know what's going to happen in the next five minutes. You could be killed.

You could drown. You could lose your mind. No one knows."

I stood there, feeling as though the alphabet had been erased from my mind. All I could do was stare at her.

She stood there in the fog, looking less like a monster and more like something wounded.

Something damaged.

"You're right," I told her. "I don't know what will happen in the next five minutes. I could die, drown, go mad." I stepped forward, crushing more bones, just to stop her from getting the both of us killed. "But what I choose now matters."

She froze when I pressed my palm against the small of her back.

"If we stay here in the dark," I continued, "whatever did this will find us, too."

She said nothing.

"...Therefore, it's safer if we go back," I added carefully.

"Be quiet."

"Excuse me?"

"I said, be quiet," she hissed.

Her eyes were fixed on the twisted wall of trees, narrowing, as if she were listening to something I couldn't hear.

After a painfully silent while, I asked, "What is it?"

"I don't know," she murmured. "You tell me."

Then, she stepped forward, gripped a crooked branch, and snapped it.

The sound echoed like an explosion, wiping the trees from existence. Don't get me wrong, they did not fall, and they did not part, they just *vanished*. One by one, they dissolved into the night, as though they had never been anything more than an illusion.

Behind them stood a building, a hospital, or what remained of one. The massive structure loomed over us, its walls blasted inward, like something had exploded from within. Black scorch marks smeared across the stone, and bloodstains painted the surfaces where the fire had not reached. There was only one window, high above, shattered into jagged fragments that glittered faintly in the moonlight.

And the bones no longer hid in the grass.

They lay everywhere, a wider, clearer path that led straight to the entrance.

"How did you do that?" I asked, stunned. "How did you know?"

Destiny's eyes shone with curiosity as she tilted her head and looked at the building. "Lucky guess."

CHAPTER 22

Convince Me D E S T I N Y

ESTELLE'S SCREAMS TORE THROUGH ME.

Feral. Relentless.

It's all an illusion. It's all an illusion. It's all an illusion.

"Be quiet," I hissed, pressing my fingers to my temple as if I could physically cage her there.

"Excuse me?" Aiden's voice drifted toward me.

Lies. Lies. Lies.

"I said, be quiet!" I snapped, teeth grinding as my skull throbbed.

Illusion. Illusion. Illusion.

"Shh," I whispered to myself, daring to lift my gaze.

The trees had grown eyes, blinking slowly as they stared down at me. Their branches stretched toward me, like arms yearning for contact, aching for it.

Break it. Break them.

"What is it?" Aiden's voice came from somewhere behind me.

Touch it. Kill it.

"I don't know. You tell me." With my blood experiencing a painfully slow burn of anger, I reached out and curled my fingers around a crooked branch to snap it. A deafening *crack* rang out once I did, and for a moment, Estelle fell silent, letting me have that immediate relief, until the trees dissolved. They thinned into smoke and vanished one by one, peeling away from reality as though they had never belonged to it.

A hospital sat in the dark, with letters that were carved into its broken walls.

+

NEVEN HOSPITAL

"How did you do this?" The boy breathed, disbelief flashing across his pale blue eyes. "How did you know?"

"Lucky guess," I answered, taking a steadying breath.

"Lucky guess," he echoed. "You're possessed."

Ignoring him, I took a step forward and followed the widening trail of bones toward the entrance.

"No, no, no," he protested sharply. "Get back here!"

I glanced over my shoulder. "You're not bossing me."

He frowned. "And you're not finding anything in that place."

"If Eterna was created here, then I might," I said, my voice rising, "I have to."

"No." He shook his head. "You don't."

I looked away from him. "Stay here if you're so scared. I'll be back."

He grabbed me.

I don't know how my instincts failed me, but before I could take another step, his hand seized my wrist and pulled me back so abruptly, my spine collided with his chest.

For a moment, I couldn't move.

For a moment, I couldn't breathe.

"It's dark in there," he murmured close to my ear, his voice low and urgent.

"We don't have flashlights, and if that hospital collapses, you'll be crushed before you can even scream. So please, just listen to me. We have to go back to the village."

My lips parted, trembled, but they did not form the words I knew I had to get out before it was too late.

His touch was different, and while it burned, it was addicting.

I should've turned away, shot him down when I had the chance to get rid of him, but I didn't.

"I promise to keep you alive 'til tomorrow morning," he added, quieter now. "Despite myself, I won't let you get killed, drown, or go mad."

His words nearly convinced me.

And damn Eterna for not letting it happen.

Damn my body for taking a drug the wrong way.

Because, if I weren't immune to death, I would've easily surrendered to the offer. I wanted nothing more than to close my eyes, go home, and sink into a sleep that was untouched by screaming voices and stupid canvases.

"Let go of me," I mumbled, making no effort to pull free.

"Come on." He exhaled slowly. "If you die now, the girl will never know who destroyed her sister's grave. She'll never be able to go back."

"Oh." My shoulders dropped. "So you want me alive for your own reasons."

"Something like that," he admitted. "I still hate you."

A sigh slipped from my lips as I twisted from his grasp and turned to face him fully. "And I still like that."

His brows knit together. "You sure? You don't act like it."

"Tell me," I drawled, feeling exhausted, "how would you like me to act?"

"Like yourself," he replied, a faint smile tugging at his mouth. "It's beginning to impress me."

"And..." I trailed off. "Do you think I'd still impress you if I walked into that building?"

"Probably not."

I laughed, the sound surprising even me.

It startled him, too, even as something flickered across his face, brief and unguarded. Something warmer than just disbelief.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing." He stepped back quickly, masking whatever had surfaced. "But honestly, I'd appreciate it if you came back to the village with me."

I hesitated. "Will you keep your promise?"

He held my gaze and smiled. "Only because you asked."

CHAPTER 23

The Consequence D E S T I N Y

THE MANSION WAS PAST ITS LOUD HOURS.

The merchants were asleep – or hopefully gone. Elion was nowhere to be seen, and our dear servants had withdrawn into whatever corners they vanished to when Maddox no longer needed their assistant. It was the safest, quietest time of the day.

“You can stop following me now.” I stopped before my door and looked back at Aiden. “I did make you promise, but I don’t need protection.”

He laughed under his breath. “Step inside and I’m gone.”

“Wow,” I scoffed. “You really do care.”

“If that’s what you want to call it,” he said. “I just take one look at you and think: there it is, the Baler’s coup de grâce.”

I smiled. “You fear me.”

“I fear what you can do,” he corrected.

“You’re right.” I let the doorknob be my anchor as I leaned forward, my face inches from his. “Everything here can kill you, but I can do it the most efficiently if you break my trust.” I tilted my head. “We’re a team now. There are rules: you will not manipulate me, you will not use me, and you will not lie to me. Are we clear?”

“Yeah,” he drawled. “I’ve got a question, though.”

“Shoot.”

“You said *‘the end of the world’* when I asked you about Eterna,” he said lightly. “Why?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I answered, pulling away.

“I’m not worried. I’m just asking.”

“Don’t waste your breath, then.” I stepped into my room and closed the door in his face.

The walls I liked to call *safe* turned into a prison the second I walked in, but I was too exhausted to care. I collapsed onto the bed and dragged a hand down my face, a yawn slipping free. Then, just as my body began to shut down, I realized something was out of place.

The canvas was gone.

I’d meant to check it, to see if it was finished, to see if I could finally sleep without worrying about Estelle forcing me back to work.

Apparently not.

I sat up, forcing my vision to sharpen.

“You paint so beautifully.” A voice drifted from the shadows.

I recognized it instantly, the hairs on the back of my neck rising as if tugged by invisible strings.

Maddox stood in the corner, his amber eyes glinting. He held the unfinished canvas, staring at it with a quiet, unsettling intensity. “Your mind must be a terrible place,” he murmured. “I wonder why.”

“What the fuck?” I threw myself off the bed, staggering back and pointing at the door. “Get out of my room!”

“I had the situation under control,” he said, ignoring me entirely. “And yet, you ruined everything. Why? Because you couldn’t follow a simple plan.” He let out a heavy sigh. “The merchants left the second they realized there was a Baler in the mansion.”

My thoughts stumbled. “How did you...?”

“Elion could never keep his mouth shut.” His gaze finally snapped to mine. “But I’m here for different reasons.”

No.

He let the canvas fall. It hit the floor with a crack that made me flinch. Then, he reached for the small blade he always kept in his coat pocket.

“Not now,” I groaned, dodging his first strike with a speed that wasn’t human, Eterna glowing violet through my irises. “I’m not doing this.”

He growled and snatched a handful of my hair, yanking me back, pinning me against the wall. He held the blade inches from my chest, his hand steady, as if he expected my body to just accept the steel. “Then you’ll die.”

I did not fight it when the blade bit into my skin.

But I realized, in a moment that horrified me, that he had already set me on fire without matches.

Eterna snapped, spreading through me fast as a snake. Every inch of me burned, but I didn’t scream. I didn’t call for help. I didn’t cry. I just stared at Maddox with lifeless, unfocused eyes, showing him the look of someone who had been here a thousand times before.

His breath hitched. He pulled the blade back.

Only half of it came out. The rest had melted into me.

“That’s not possible.” He shook his head, his composure slipping. “You’ve been skipping your injections. Your body shouldn’t be able to resist a stab.”

“Stop treating me like I’m a dead girl walking,” I spat, shoved him away with a force that surprised us both, and stepped around him. “I’m not a corpse.”

“Don’t lie to yourself,” he said, “a corpse is all you are.”

The words stung. “Two hours ago, you were calling me your daughter.”

He scoffed. “Is there a difference?”

My lips parted, but the response died in my throat as two skeletal hands burst from behind me.

One covered my mouth, crushing the scream before it could form, while the other drove a needle deep into the side of my neck.

The world dissolved into nothingness. It felt as though my lungs, my mind, and my heart had been emptied in a single heartbeat.

Maddox gripped my chin and tilted my head up, forcing me to meet his eyes. Oh those cruel, merciless eyes, watching my pupils blow wide.

“When you make choices, remember to consider the consequences... daughter.”

Then the darkness swallowed me whole.

CHAPTER 24

Directionless D E S T I N Y

PAIN FOUND ME BEFORE SIGHT DID.

It tore through my body as my senses flickered back to life. I tried to move, to curl inward, to escape the fire beneath my skin, but my limbs wouldn't obey. They were pinned, strapped tight against something unyielding.

Metal, I realized.

A metal chair.

I was back in the lab.

Light burned against my blurred vision, and somewhere inside the haze, I felt the needle still lodged in my neck.

Another surge came, my body arching violently against the restraints, muscles spasming as the drug flooded my veins. "Stop," the word clawed its way out of my throat, even though I knew there would be no mercy, no way a man like Maddox would ever let me walk away from this. Not until he was done with me, at least.

Through the blur, I caught a flash of red hair.

Nurse Janet was here.

Maddox's right hand.

Her presence used to be comforting. She would give me candies, saying the pain is nothing but cuts on knees. However, a young girl would only believe her for so long. The woman was a devil in disguise.

She stood beside me, hands clasped too tightly, watery green eyes flickering with something that might have been pity. She was the one who usually handled the injections, but this time, Maddox had taken the syringe from her.

He leaned over me, his shadow swallowing the light as he pulled the needle out, only to bring it close to my throat once again. "The patterns have gotten worse," he muttered. "And concealers won't hide them forever."

"Stop," I cried into deaf ears.

The needle pierced the same tender flesh again.

Something inside my mind splintered.

I was breaking.

And I wasn't dying.

That was the cruelest part.

His gloved fingers brushed over my skin, almost gentle. "I give your life back to you every time," he said, "and the only thing you must do in return is take this damned medicine. I've told you, over a thousand times, that missing a single week could kill you." His gaze swept over me, trembling, restrained. "Now look at you."

Agony poured through me in waves, relentless, claiming every nerve. "Fuck you, this *isn't* medicine," I hissed, clinging to consciousness. "You say I'll die, then you call me *immune to death*. You lie."

He straightened slowly. "And you don't?"

"God, I don't!" I snarled. "I brought the Commander's daughter to you, did I not?"

"Yes," he drawled. "Right after nearly killing her."

"It was an accident!" I screamed, my throat burning like I had swallowed knives.

"Oh, I know." He filled the syringe with Eterna once more, studying the purple liquid glowing inside, amused. "Accidents happen."

Nurse Janet shifted uneasily. "Sir, I believe Miss Heller needs rest—"

"I don't see why you're still here, Janet," Maddox snapped, irritated.

"No, no, no, don't go—"

But she was already backing away, already fleeing, quitting the room to pretend she wasn't involved.

The restraints bit into my wrists as I twisted, desperate, useless, trying to run just like her. Still, leather cut into my skin, and metal refused to bend.

"I hate you!" I cried as he drove the needle into the same wounded place again and again. "I hate you!"

"You can't," he replied evenly. "Because I made you."

Another injection.

"You were nothing," he continued. "Just a broken, directionless girl." He brushed my hair, slick with cold sweat, away from my face. "I found you. Gave you strength. Gave you purpose." His fingers grazed my cheek. "And I called *you* my daughter."

My mouth opened, then closed.

Because he was right.

I became *his* the moment he saved me.

It was simple.

He gave me his last name, and I said goodbye to my mind,

my soul, and my body.

It wasn't worth resisting.

"Don't you remember? Don't you feel it?" His thumb brushed above my brow, where a gash had been, now sealed and gone for good. Then his hand moved down my throat, my chest, my torso. "You were buried under snow, and it's still somewhere in you, deep in your bones. That night, when everyone ran to save their own lives, I came for you."

He then grabbed my face and tilted my head, driving the needle back into where it belonged, in my skin.

I gasped, my body jerking violently against the straps.

"You are what I created," he said, covering my trembling hand with his.

"Don't disappoint me again, Destiny Heller."

A shudder tore through me. "You're created a monster."

"I created perfection." His fingers returned to my throat, pressing lightly over the pulse he controlled. "Which is why you must let me do my job."

The needle sank into my neck one last time.

My lungs seized, my heart hammering, once, twice, and then slowing down.

"From now on, everything is going to change," Maddox said in a whisper.

"Go to sleep now. You'll need it."

My vision dimmed at the edges, black swallowing white.

The last thing I felt was him, wiping away tears I had never meant to shed.

CHAPTER 25

Evil Things

A I D E N

SOMETHING WAS WRONG.

And the damn thought wouldn't loosen its grip.

The bed beneath me was soft and cool against my skin, something you could only dream of in the Malaska Cells. It was quite the opposite of everything this Mansion stood for, considering the halls that were beyond quiet. Still, I couldn't sleep.

There was this tightness in my gut, unreasonable and stupid, as a single sentence circled like a vulture inside my head.

Something is wrong.

Something is wrong.

Something is wrong.

Over and over, until it felt less like a thought and more like instinct.

At some point, I gave up.

I threw the covers aside and stepped into the corridor, Destiny's warning forgotten.

The mansion was different at night. The walls loomed higher, the air felt heavier, and my footsteps echoed too loudly, betraying me.

Then, there was a flicker of light.

A door down the hall creaked open, spilling a thin line of brightness into the dark before snapping shut again. The boy from the tent stepped out.

Beside him hurried a red-haired woman, her movements frantic, her face pale and strained. "I tried to m-make him stop," she stammered. "I swear, I did. But he told me to get out, and I don't know if he's still doing it. He'll feed me to the Walkers once he finds out I told you, sir. But her screams won't leave my head."

"Shut up for a second," he hissed, lifting a hand to silence her. "I'm trying to think."

"Please," she begged. "Just help her. Get her out of here. She shouldn't come back!"

"She's not leaving," he snapped, stopping abruptly and turning on her. "Maddox knows what he's doing."

"With a-all due respect, sir," she pressed, shaking now, "that poor girl is tortured. She weighs less than she did two years ago. She barely fights.

When I grabbed her, she didn't even struggle properly. She used to e-escape. And I... I used to end up with a broken jaw." Her breath hitched. "The medicine worked faster this time. She's getting weaker."

His expression hardened. "*You* drugged her?"

"I had no choice..."

"What did Maddox do to her?"

"Injected her. That's what he always does."

"No." His jaw tightened. "Other than that. Did he touch her?"

"He carried her into the lab, sir."

"So he touched her?"

Realization dawned in her watery eyes. "Oh, God, no! Heller would never do that!"

His shoulders sagged. "Good."

Good?

My mind had already leapt to the worst possibility.

To Rhea.

She was supposed to be here, part of them, and I hadn't seen her once since stepping into all this.

What if...

No.

Fuck, no.

Before I could stop myself, I stepped forward, my voice too loud for a place so quiet. "That's a fucking kid you're talking about!"

Their heads snapped toward me.

"There's not an ounce of humanity in you Hellers, is there?"

Rage flooded my veins. "You can't show mercy to what, a defenseless thirteen-year-old child?" I shoved the boy hard in the chest, and he stumbled back, glaring at me like an animal, not that he wasn't one.

"Oh, God, stop!" the red-haired woman cried, rushing between us. "What thirteen-year-old are you even talking about?"

Before I could answer, the boy caught her by the shoulder and pulled her aside. "You're excused," he said. "Let me handle this."

"He's accusing us of doing evil things!" she argued.

"And yet he's not wrong, Janet," he replied, lifting his wrist slightly. "I know who he's talking about. Go now."

She hesitated.

Then she fled.

“What have you done to her?” I growled, stepping closer again. “If you’ve hurt her, I swear to God—”

“Relax, Blondie,” he drawled, irritation slipping back into place. “It wasn’t your white-haired friend.”

The description had fit Rhea too well for comfort.

He wasn’t lying.

My anger faltered. Now, I was just confused. “Then who?”

“That’s our concern.” His gray eyes searched mine, something twitching beneath the surface, something I couldn’t name. “But if I were you, I’d grab that Baler and get the hell out of here.”

“I quite like it here, thanks,” I said, annoyed.

“I doubt you’ll feel that way in a few days.”

“What does that mean?”

He shook his head. “I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” he said flatly, “you should leave before you lose your fucking sanity.”

I was ready to protest, but he was already gone.

Well, I decided, that leaves one person for me to find.

And then I turned away, heading toward a room that wasn’t mine. If that asshole wasn’t going to speak, then his partner in crime owed me answers.

After all, it was Destiny who liked to watch in plain sight.

CHAPTER 26

The Game

A I D E N

DESTINY WAS NOWHERE TO BE FOUND, AND THIS MANSION WAS less a house than a living labyrinth.

I couldn't count how many walls I slammed into in the dark, how many doors I opened and thought that, this time, I was right, but somehow, my legs carried me upward, higher and higher, until the twisting corridors finally ceased to exist.

At the end of the third floor stood a pair of golden double doors, the knob warm beneath my fingers. Before caution could catch up to me, I pushed one of the doors open and stepped inside.

My breath caught.

The room unfolded around me like a cathedral painted in bruises. Massive canvases stretched from floor to ceiling, drowning the walls in shades of black and purple. Above, an enormous chandelier swayed lazily, scattering amber light across the studio and forcing even the darkest corners into view. An old velvet couch sat in the center of the room, worn with age.

To my utter surprise, Destiny was right there, sitting upon it like she belonged nowhere else.

Her knees were pulled tightly to her chest, her impossibly long hair spilling onto the floor beside her. A small canvas rested in one hand, a paintbrush in the other. She stared at the unfinished piece with such intense concentration that the rest of the world might as well have been nothing.

"You disappeared," I said quietly, careful not to startle her. "I looked everywhere for you."

Her violet eyes snapped toward me instantly, and for a moment, she stared as though she didn't recognize me. Until she did. "You're not supposed to wander."

"I couldn't sleep." I took a few steps forward, my gaze drifting across the paintings. Every single one bore the same signature at the bottom.

D.H.

"Damn," I murmured, genuinely stunned. "These are yours?"

She only nodded before returning to her painting.

The dismissal irritated me more than it should have. I hadn't spent the last hour tearing through this cursed mansion just for her to shut me out.

“You never mentioned you were an artist.”

“You never asked.”

I turned slowly, taking in the endless collection of haunting faces and fractured bodies. “So, this is what you do when you’re not threatening little kids? You just sit up here painting... these?”

One dark brow lifted. “*These?*”

“No offense,” I added quickly. “They’re incredible. Just a little...” I searched for the word. “Disturbing.”

A sigh escaped her lips as she spun the paintbrush between slender fingers. *Still no progress.*

Refusing to give up, I pointed toward the nearest canvas: a girl with four pairs of eyes, every single one crying black tears. “What’s her story?”

“She cries for the people who can’t.”

I clicked my tongue. “Right.”

Silence stretched between us again.

Finally, I exhaled. “Do you actually plan on telling me what’s going on?”

She shook her head no.

I sighed and wandered deeper into the room instead, studying the paintings one by one as though understanding them might somehow help me understand *her*.

“What did you see?” she asked quietly.

I stopped and glanced over my shoulder. “More like, what did I hear?”

Something flickered in her glowing irises. “Talk.”

“There was a red-haired woman downstairs,” I said carefully. “She mentioned a girl being tortured. Said Maddox was handling it.”

Destiny rolled her eyes, twirling the brush again like the conversation bored her. “No idea what you’re talking about.”

The arrogance would’ve been convincing if I hadn’t noticed her thumbnail digging viciously into the skin beside her finger, peeling, breaking, bleeding, purple.

Destiny Heller was on Eterna.

That much was obvious, considering the strange, metallic-violet shimmer that was dripping down her hand unnoticed.

What I didn’t understand was why I cared more about the fact she was hurting herself.

“You’re breaking your own rules.” Before I could reconsider, I crossed the room and sat beside her on the couch. “And you’re angry with yourself for

it.”

“No.”

“But that has to hurt.”

A pause. “It does.”

“Then why do it?”

She still wouldn’t look at me. Instead, her eyes dropped to the canvas trembling faintly in her hands. “It distracts me.”

“Try pinching yourself next time,” I suggested. “Less violent.”

She stiffened. “Less effective.”

I leaned back with a dry laugh. “You’re unsettling, you know that?”

“You don’t seem very unsettled,” she snapped suddenly. “Why aren’t you asking about my blood? Aren’t you curious? Or are you scared?” Her voice sharpened with every word, her chest rising and falling too quickly. “Because I’m insane and drugged out and maybe one day I’ll lose my mind and kill you—”

“Whoa,” I warned. “Slow down – asking questions won’t magically make you answer them.”

Her eyes shimmered beneath the chandelier light, wild and exhausted all at once. In that moment she resembled neither a girl nor a monster, but something dangerously in-between. Beautiful in the same way thunderstorms were beautiful.

Her gaze drifted toward the abandoned paint palette on the coffee table. With a quiet sigh, she set her unfinished canvas aside and picked up another brush. “Let’s play a game.”

I frowned. “What kind of game?”

“Questions.” A faint smile tugged at her lips. “If someone refuses to answer honestly, the other person gets to paint their face.”

A laugh escaped me before I could stop it. “That’s your version of torture?”

“It’s fun.”

“Fine.” I settled deeper against the couch cushions beside her. “Ask.”

“Elion told me you were imprisoned in the Malaska Cells,” she said immediately. “Why?”

Straight for the throat. “At first? Crossing Baleroe’s border.” I exhaled slowly. “Then they accused me of murdering three people.”

She looked interested. “Did you?”

“No.” I paused. “It was two.”

She tilted her head. “Who?”

“A pregnant Enforcer,” I admitted, the memory flashing before my eyes, “and my father.”

She dipped the brush into purple paint. “Accidents?”

“The Enforcer was.” My jaw tightened. “My father...” I swallowed. “I don’t know. I was a kid.”

“All right.” She rested her chin atop her knees. “Your turn, Gold Rush. Don’t waste it.”

I studied her carefully. “When I snuck into the Baler’s room earlier, I heard someone mention you’re immune to death. True?”

She bit the inside of her cheek. “Yep.”

“How?”

“I got shot once.” Her tone remained strangely casual. “The bullet shattered before it could pierce me.”

I frowned. “What shattered it?”

“My blood.”

“Human blood,” I asked slowly, “or Eterna?”

That made me pause entirely. “How old were you when you first took it?”

She froze, then silently handed me the paintbrush.

I blinked. “Seriously?”

Something flickered behind her eyes – hesitation, maybe even fear – as she took the brush back from me and answered, “Ten.”

I sighed. “Why?”

“It wasn’t my choice.” Her voice trembled. “Maddox found me injured in the Bleeding Woods. He injected me once and...never stopped.” She lowered her eyes. “I think that’s why my body reacted differently. The others became hosts. I didn’t. The drug became part of me.”

I watched her carefully. Hatred toward Heller had always existed somewhere inside me. But this wasn’t hatred, and it wasn’t toward him, it was toward her. “That means he isn’t actually your father,” I stated.

“Right.”

“So Destiny Heller isn’t your real name either?”

She shook her head.

“What is it?”

Again, she handed me the brush.

I stared at her. “You seriously won’t answer?”

A single nod.

“Absolutely sure?”

Another nod.

“Fine. Then you’re getting devil horns.” I leaned closer, carefully brushing dark strands of hair away from her forehead.

She stopped breathing.

“That hair is absurdly long,” I murmured. “Have you ever considered cutting it?”

“No.”

“I could always do it for you. Revenge for forcing Ruel to work with you Hellers.”

She scoffed. “Touch my hair and I’ll shave yours off, Gold Rush.”

I laughed under my breath and painted the curved black horns above her brows.

“There,” I said, leaning back to admire my work. “It’s perfect.”

“Told you this game was good.” She held out her hand expectantly. “My turn.”

“Oh, no.” I surrendered the brush carefully. “Should I be scared?”

A wicked smirk appeared. “What happened to your mother?”

Damn you. “Go for it.”

Her laugh, soft and sudden, echoed through the studio. “I’m thinking... a mustache?”

“Don’t you dare—”

She did it anyway.

And then wiped it away with the hem of my shirt, lifting the fabric just enough to leave me painfully aware of how close she’d gotten.

“Horns,” she decided. “So we match.”

“How fun.”

Her first attempt wavered.

She shifted too quickly, frustration flashing across her features.

Without thinking, I slid an arm around her waist and pulled her into my lap.

She turned into a statue.

“Careful,” I muttered roughly, pretending my pulse wasn’t suddenly out of control. “You’re terrible at this.”

Her breathing trembled against my cheek as she painted.

We were impossibly close now. Close enough that if either of us leaned forward—

Her eyes widened.

The brush slipped from her fingers, and suddenly, she was tearing herself away from me before finishing the second horn.

I tightened my grip. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Her hands clamped around my wrist. "Let go."

I released her immediately.

She stumbled back onto unsteady feet, violet eyes distant and wrong, as though she were staring at something invisible standing behind me.

"What the hell happened?" I pushed myself upright. "Did I hurt you?"

"No." She covered her ears abruptly. "No, no—"

"Hey." I reached for her hands. "What's going on?"

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to steady her breathing, but failed miserably.

"Destiny." Gently, I lowered her hands from her face. "Look at me."

"I just need a minute," she whispered, backing away from my touch.

"You're shaking."

"It's just a headache."

"A migraine?"

A nod.

Terrible liar.

Absolutely terrible.

Before I could think better of it, I caught her wrist and pulled her firmly against my chest.

She gasped sharply as she collided with me, panic flashing across her face.

"You hallucinate?" I asked.

"No." She struggled weakly. "Let go."

"Hear voices, then?"

She went very still.

Yeah.

That answered enough.

Slowly, carefully, I slid a hand through her hair. It felt impossibly soft, cool as water slipping through my fingers.

"Fuck you," she whispered eventually, her body sagging against mine, letting exhaustion win. "What are you doing to me?"

"Have you ever been comforted before?" I asked.

Her fingers curled weakly into my shirt, not quite holding on, not quite pulling away. "I don't know."

"Well," I murmured softly, "that's what this is."

“Why?”

“What a great question.” There was a smile in my voice now. “Considering I’m apparently comforting someone who just threatened to kill me.”

Her forehead pressed lightly against my chest. “I still can. I’m just tired.”

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CHAPTER 27

You Can't Die D E S T I N Y

HE WAS AN INFECTION.

A sickness, a fever burning beneath my skin.

Yet despite the sepsis, despite the slow and inevitable ruin he promised, he was also the cure for the riot raging inside my mind.

The realization planted something dangerous in me, a hunger. Not to destroy him, not to use him, to *keep* him. Which, of course, would be catastrophic.

So I fled.

At the first spill of dawn across the floorboards, I slipped from the room and from the warmth I had no right to crave. I didn't look at the couch, I didn't look at him, and I tried not to think about the fact that I'd fallen asleep beside him.

The moment I reached my room, I threw myself inside and rushed to the bathroom, scrubbing paint from my hands. Purple and black swirled down the drain. Across the sink, the colors bled together as I washed his artwork from my forehead.

For a moment, they became something ugly and beautiful: a perfect reflection of my thoughts – before the water cleared.

I wiped my hands on the towel hanging by the door, then walked out of the bathroom and collapsed onto my bed, squeezing my eyes shut, willing my mind to conjure anything except the way he'd looked at me the night before. The way he'd held me, as though I were worth more than the damage I could inflict.

The memory struck a match inside my chest. A small, dangerous flame I hadn't felt in a very long time–

Bang. Bang. Bang.

“Destiny?” The voice sliced through the thought, sharp, familiar. “Destiny, are you in there?”

Mister Elion.

I kicked off the blankets and lunged for the door, wrenching the knob so hard I nearly ripped it from the frame.

The second it swung open, gray eyes met mine.

“What?” I asked, leaning against a wall that wasn't there.

The world lurched as the aftereffects of the injections crashed into me all at once. My stomach dropped, the floor tilted, and I would've introduced my face to the carpet if a hand hadn't shot out and caught my arm.

"Whoa." His grip tightened. "Are you high?"

I jerked away, forcing my spine straight. "No, Emerson. I'm not high."

"Emerson?" A laugh nearly escaped him. "Haven't heard my last name come out of your mouth in months. What's the occasion?"

"I can call you whatever I want." I blinked hard, fighting to keep my vision from doubling. "Now tell me what you need."

His amusement vanished. "I don't need anything. Janet told me what happened. I wanted to—"

"Nothing happened." The words came too fast. "I'm fine."

His eyes narrowed. "Are you?"

"Yes."

"All right," he sighed. "Maddox wants you downstairs. Breakfast."

I looked away. "I'm not hungry."

"Des." The irritation in his voice softened into something dangerously close to concern. "Neither of us would enjoy me carrying you downstairs. So don't make this difficult." A pause. "He also wants to meet the Blondie you're refusing to kill."

My head snapped back toward him. "What is he planning?"

Elion shrugged. "You know Maddox. He doesn't tolerate strangers in this house."

Panic crawled beneath my skin. "He can't kick him out."

He scoffed. "Weren't you the one desperate to get rid of him?"

"Yes, well..." I searched desperately for an explanation less incriminating than the truth. "He's useful. I'm not done with him."

"I don't like him," Emerson said flatly. "He's leaving."

"He's not."

"He is."

"Over my dead body."

"You can't die," he deadpanned.

An innocent smile tugged at my mouth. "Exactly."

He dragged a hand down his face. "Just come downstairs."

"Fine." I spun on my heel, fully intending to slam the door in his face.

His arm shot out and blocked it. "Should I go get him?"

"No," I answered quickly, *far* too quickly. Because suddenly, I remembered

Aiden sprawled across the third-floor couch, a horn still decorating his forehead, limbs tangled, completely defenseless. "I'll handle it." I pointed at my dress. "But I've been trapped in this torture device for twenty-four hours, so I'm changing first."

His jaw tightened. "Don't be late."

"Yeah, yeah." I pressed a finger against his chest and pushed him backward before shutting the door, because if I had slammed it at full force, he would have left with bruises.

-

"Wake up, Gold Rush!" I leaned over the couch and screamed directly into Aiden's ear.

His eyes flew open. "What the—"

Pure horror flashed across his face as he bolted upright, nearly launching himself onto the floor.

I smiled sweetly.

The horn I had drawn above his brow last night was still there, standing proud.

"Let's hope you're a morning person," I said. "Maddox wants to see you."

"That," he breathed, clutching his chest, "was deeply traumatizing."

"You'll survive."

A glare landed squarely on me. "Will it happen again?"

"Possibly."

"Disturbing."

"You'll get used to it." I looked down, braiding the ends of my hair, giving my hands something to do besides remember the shape of him.

"I've got a question, but I'm sure you won't answer," he announced with a yawn.

My eyes snapped to him. "No."

"You don't even know what it is yet."

"My answer remains no."

"Impressive commitment, Miss Violet."

"I work hard."

He gave a short laugh, then tilted his head. "Why does your non-biological father want to see me?"

I tossed my braid over my shoulder and headed for the double doors.

"Come downstairs and find out."

“Sounds suicidal.” He pushed himself to his feet with a groan. His expression shifted. “Is...the migraine gone?”

I came to a halt. “Huh?”

“The migraine,” he repeated. “The one you claimed to have.”

My lips twitched, forming something close to a smile. “If you know I lied, why ask?”

“That’s what you called it, isn’t it?” His gaze lingered on me. “So, is it gone?”

It disappeared the moment you held me.

“Yes,” I replied.

He believed that. “OK.”

“Well,” I said, taking a step forward. “I’ll be downstairs.”

“Yeah.” He raked a hand through his hair. “I’ll take a quick shower first.”

“This room doesn’t have one,” I informed him.

“I know.” A crooked grin appeared. “I’ll use the unnecessarily fancy room your servant shoved me into.”

“Then I’ll be—”

“Downstairs.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Downstairs.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Twice.”

I shrugged. “I’m just making sure.”

He released a breath. “I know where downstairs is, Destiny.”

My eyes narrowed. “Do you?”

“Go away.”

I nodded once, spinning on my heels. “Downstairs.”

He didn’t argue, but his groan followed me all the way into the hallway, and I considered that a victory.

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CHAPTER 28

Never Unwanted DESTINY

I LOST THE STARING CONTEST WITH MY MUG THE MOMENT

Maddox cleared his throat.

He sat at the head of the table, watching Aiden adjust the cuffs of his sleeves, once, twice, again, as though dressing like that offended him as much as it suited him.

"I wish we'd met sooner," Maddox said pleasantly. "I don't like mysteries in my mansion."

Aiden shifted in his seat. Nervous or irritated, I couldn't tell. Not until his gaze flicked toward me, quick and questioning, silently asking me to approve whatever reckless response was forming in his head.

Sorry, Gold Rush.

Immortal, yes.

Telepathic? Not quite.

Maddox leaned back in his chair. "I believe this is the part where you apologize, young man."

Aiden's pale eyes snapped toward him. "What?"

"Never mind." Maddox waved a dismissive hand and smiled. "I've hosted many special guests here. None quite as valuable as the Commander's daughter." His voice roughened. "I suppose I've been very lucky."

"Lucky?" Aiden scoffed. "One of your monsters attacked us. That '*valuable guest*' of yours nearly died."

Maddox's smile faltered. He glanced at me. "I cannot imagine how a Walker found its way into those woods."

My lips parted.

Across the table, Elion noticed and gave the slightest shake of his head. A warning, a command: *keep your mouth shut*.

"I'm afraid this has all been a misunderstanding," Maddox continued. "You were unexpected, yes. Never unwanted."

Aiden frowned. "What's that supposed to mean, Heller?"

"Do not dive into it." Maddox ladled himself a bowl of colorless soup, certain he wasn't going to eat it when he realized how awfully unappetizing it looked. "What happened to your friend, I can assure you, it won't happen again."

Liar.

“And to make amends,” he said, “she’ll remain here until she’s fully recovered. I’ll personally ensure she receives the finest medical care available.”

Time stopped.

Aiden and I mirrored each other without meaning to: same stiffness, same silence, same refusal to breathe.

For a moment, everything was quiet.

Until Elion’s chair scraped violently against the floor. “I’m sorry, Maddox,” he said, standing straight, “but that poor Baler isn’t your prisoner.”

“She’s under my roof.” Maddox’s gaze shifted to Aiden. “So now that we understand each other, let’s enjoy the chef’s newest recipe.”

I looked at Aiden immediately, held his gaze.

The words formed silently against my lips: *Don’t eat anything.*

Because with someone like Maddox, paranoia wasn’t paranoia. It was survival.

Elion caught the exchange. Thankfully, he said nothing.

Neither did Aiden, though his nearly invisible nod told me he’d understood.

“Oh.” Maddox inhaled sharply.

My heart stumbled.

“I nearly forgot.”

No.

“We have another guest.”

The wrought-iron doors groaned open before anyone could question him.

A servant entered, broad shoulders, thick arms, built more like a weapon than a person. One hand was wrapped around a pair of thin wrists, an unyielding restraint on a girl who struggled uselessly as she was dragged forward.

The second I recognized her, my skin started to burn.

Rhea.

Silver hair hung around her face in tangled knots, streaked dark with dried blood. Fear lived openly inside her blue eyes, jagged scars carving cruel paths across pale skin.

Fortunately, they weren’t my crimes.

Aiden’s chair screeched. “You’ve got to be joking.”

Rhea’s eyes landed on him, then widened. “Oh, sweet baby monkeys!” She pointed. “I’m losing it. I’m actually losing it. I’m seeing ghosts!” Words

came spilling out as she spiraled. “This is fantastic. Absolutely fantastic.”

Aiden ignored everything.

He crossed the room in seconds, tore her free from the servant’s grip, and pulled her into his arms.

Just like he’d done to me.

His hands buried themselves in her hair, blood and all. “You’re alive,” he breathed, relief cracking through every syllable. “You’re alive.”

“Ew!” Rhea flailed wildly. “A ghost is hugging me! A ghost is hugging me!”

Aiden tightened his hold. “I’m real,” he countered.

“Nuh-uh.” She shoved against his chest. “I don’t negotiate with the undead!”

“For fuck’s sake, Rhea.” He pulled away and planted both hands on her shoulders, shaking the living daylights out of her. “I’m *right* here. Fuck. What happened to you?”

She broke free, staggering backward until she collided with the servant’s chest.

The woman glared down at her.

“Seat her,” Maddox ordered.

The servant obeyed immediately, forcing Rhea into the chair beside me.

Rhea scooted as far away from me as physically possible. “Ghosts,” she whispered. “Definitely, surely ghosts.”

Elion exhaled slowly. “Why is she here?”

“She’s an offer—”

“Can I kill you?” Rhea smiled brightly at me, her left eye twitching.

“Please? Please, please, please?”

“No,” Maddox said flatly.

She trembled. “Not even a tiny bit?”

“No.”

“That’s not fair. She murdered a black cat in front of me!”

“That cat is the reason your face looks like that,” I snapped before I could stop myself.

“Yeah, so what? It was still alive!”

“So were you.”

Elion pinched the bridge of his nose. “This is getting hideous.” His eyes opened, gaze cutting toward Maddox. “*Why* is she here?”

“Well.” Maddox set down his spoon, and leaned forward, focusing entirely on Aiden, who still stood in the middle of the room, half-turned toward Rhea. “I was thinking perhaps we could make a deal.”

No.

No, no, no.

What are you doing?

Aiden’s jaw tightened. “I’m getting very tired of deals.”

Maddox smiled. “Then I’ll make this one simple.” He folded his hands together. “You may take your friend home. Only if you leave Elizabeth Reyes here.”

Aiden laughed.

Not because it was funny.

But because it was insane.

“You’re an unreasonable old man,” he stated.

Maddox’s amber eyes shone with amusement. “I may be unreasonable, but I am not unclear.” His voice dropped, cold, patient. “If you refuse, she dies. Not for the dagger I’ll bury in her chest, but for every wrong decision you make afterward.”

Aiden didn’t move, didn’t blink, didn’t breathe.

“And when she’s dead,” Maddox continued, “you’ll stand exactly where you are now and admit you brought it upon yourself.”

The color drained from Aiden’s face.

Maddox waited for a response, even though he knew it wouldn’t come.

Elion groaned and stepped around the table, stopping by my side. His hand wrapped around my arm, pulling me up. “Let’s go. I don’t need to be here.”

I got up, only to stand taller as I shouted at Maddox with all I had left. “Haven’t you had enough?!”

Elion’s fingers dug into my skin, but he didn’t stop me.

Maddox looked at me. “Our mansion is not a hotel. He is not welcome.”

“It’s not a slaughterhouse either,” I fired back. “God, what are you thinking?”

“Look who’s talking,” he said. “We had a plan. I’m following it.”

“No, you’re not!”

“Des,” Elion warned. “Let’s get out of here and let him decide, huh?”

“He’s just going to kill them,” I argued, turning in his arms. “I know he will.”

“Yeah, and you shouldn’t have a problem with that.” He raised his voice, then lowered it. “Who even are you now?”

I went very still.

My eyes flicked to Aiden.

He was already watching me.

Then there was Maddox, rising from his seat and approaching the exit. Before he left, he spared a glance over his shoulder and said, “You have until midnight to decide.”

Everything fell apart after that.

CHAPTER 29

Family or Not A I D E N

“YOU’RE *NOT* LEAVING,” SAID DESTINY.

She was furious, pacing the same tight circle she’d been carving into the floor since she stepped into my room. Her head stayed bowed, hands clasped behind her back as if that might hide the tremor running through them. It didn’t. The shaking climbed her arms, rippled through her shoulders, traveled down the line of her spine.

I didn’t understand.

Heller’s words were supposed to be eating *me* alive.

Not her.

She wasn’t even supposed to care.

“Toughen up, Cat Killer,” Rhea drawled.

She was sprawled across the bed, a towel hanging loosely from her thin frame. Damp silver hair clung to her neck, darker at the tips. The blood had been washed away, but the scars were still there, more than before, more than I remembered. “So Maddox kills me,” she added, offering a careless shrug. “Big deal.”

I shot her a look from across the room.

“What?” she asked innocently. “Is it supposed to be a big deal?”

“Shut up for a second,” Destiny snapped, her hand flying to her temple. “I need to think.”

“You don’t,” I said, my voice steady despite the storm grinding through my head. “I’m leaving with Rhea. But our deal still stands. You keep Reyes alive, and I’ll help you solve your precious mystery.”

Destiny stopped. Slowly, her eyes lifted to mine, bright, sharp, dangerous.

“Take one step out of this place and watch what I’ll do to her.”

You’re kidding me.

“For fuck’s sake, Destiny.” I pointed at the bed. “Look at her. Just look at her!”

Rhea blinked up at us, unconcerned.

I’d known this girl for a very long time. She had always been a little unhinged. But that bigwig had done something worse. He had broken her: a fourteen-year-old girl, helpless and defenseless. The thought made my blood boil.

I should've been there.

"What about her?" Destiny asked, shrugging.

I stared at her, surprised. "Nothing. She has *nothing* to do with this." A humorless laugh escaped me. "Do you seriously want me to step back and let your old man slaughter her?"

"No." She shook her head, gaze softening. "I want you to stay. That's different."

"You're crossing a line," I warned. "My family comes first. You don't get to ask me to gamble one of them for... *this*." I gestured around the room. "Whatever this obsession is."

"She's not your family," she said.

"Neither are you!" The words came out louder than I meant them to.

"You're... not even close. She's my priority."

Destiny's face fell.

"And you're the reason I'm in this mess," I went on. "If I hadn't trusted you with Reyes, we'd be fine right now. On our own."

"I saved her," she said after a moment. "Did I not?"

"You put her in a *coma*," I corrected.

She flinched like I had slapped her.

"Boring," Rhea announced. She had curled into herself, knees drawn to her chest, eyes fixed on the ceiling. "When are we leaving?"

I dragged a hand down my face, feeling tired and betrayed and angry.

Until: "Fine."

My head snapped up.

"Take her," Destiny said. "You can leave first thing in the morning."

Relief had just started to open in my chest when she finished the sentence.

"But today, you keep your promise."

I was speechless. I could only stare.

She held my gaze. "You're coming back to the woods with me."

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CHAPTER 30

Baleroe A I D E N

THE AMOUNT OF EFFORT IT TOOK TO CONVINCE RHEA TO STAY behind drained the life out of me.

She paced, shouted, argued, called me a traitor, as though she thought I would leave her there. Her supply of energy was endless, and her tongue was worse – unrolling like a carpet of impressively made-up curses. She was holding us back, doing a great job at it.

“Miss Heller!” A familiar voice called out just as *Miss Heller* swung one leg over the windowsill.

She immediately slipped back inside, brushed past me, willed the door open a fraction, and peered into the hallway.

A woman stood there, bright red hair, eyes just a little too large for her face. I recognized her at once: the trembling woman from last night. Funny, worry still clung to her features.

“Oh, fuck my luck,” Destiny muttered, gaining back my attention.

“Language,” Rhea warned, burying her face in a pillow as she rolled onto her side.

“I know her,” I said, far too exhausted to sit through another argument about cats and dogs. “Isn’t she just a servant?”

“No.” Destiny shook her head. “That’s Maddox’s pet.”

Damn it. “Is she looking for Rhea? What if–”

Destiny was already gone before I could finish, her dark braid swaying against her back as she approached the woman in a corridor that stretched endlessly, branching into distant wings like veins spreading from a heart.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. “This part of the mansion is off-limits.”

“Oh!” The woman startled before recognizing her. Relief immediately softened her face. “I-I’ve been looking for you. There’s something I need to say.”

“What?” Destiny’s voice was quieter now. “Is Maddox not finished with me?”

“No, no, it’s not that.” The woman shook her head quickly. “I’m...I’m just here to help.”

“With what?”

“The hospital?”

Destiny raised a brow. “What about the hospital?”

The woman glanced over her shoulder before stepping closer. “You snuck out last night, went to the hospital,” she whispered, her hands twisting together nervously. “But what you’re looking for isn’t there anymore. And even if it once was... it isn’t now.”

Destiny froze. “Have you been following me, Janet?”

“No!” the woman blurted. “Never. But I couldn’t do anything for you that night, so... if I know something, I think I should tell you.”

I frowned.

What is she talking about?

“Can they stop yapping?” Rhea groaned from behind me. “Some people are trying to sleep.”

“Be quiet,” I whispered.

She answered with a huff.

“He knows,” the woman continued. “About you. About your...questions.”

A humorless laugh escaped Destiny. “Of course he does,” she said. “It’s my fault. I underestimate how bored he is sometimes.”

The woman hesitated. “You know a family in Baleroe, don’t you?”

The faint smile on Destiny’s lips faded completely. “What about them?”

“Think.” The woman’s eyes widened. “They were there the night the hospital was bombed. In Baleroe. They saw what happened. They know.”

“Janet?” A familiar voice echoed from another corridor.

The woman – Janet – flinched. “People in Baleroe aren’t allowed to speak about it,” she rushed, grabbing Destiny’s shoulders. “Anyone who does is executed – or sent to the Malaska Cells.” She swallowed hard. “But you can make them talk. I know you can–”

“Janet?” the voice called again, closer this time.

“I’m here, Sir Elion!” she shouted back, quickly releasing Destiny. “Just a moment. The crows got in again.” She turned to leave, then failed to move as Destiny’s fingers curled around her wrist, causing her to freeze.

“Can I trust you,” she asked quietly, “or is this another candy incident?”

Janet offered a smile. “I want what you want.” And then she was gone, the sound of her footsteps echoing down the corridor.

I waited, listened, and caught Elion’s voice again.

“Did you find them?” he asked.

“No,” Janet answered.

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CHAPTER 31

That Insane Girl

A I D E N

“WHERE ARE WE GOING NOW?” I ASKED, FALLING INTO STEP BEHIND her as she moved through the mansion.

“Not the hospital,” she replied. “Scratch that. We’re going to Baleroe.”

“Great.” I gave a casual shrug. “So, we’re marching straight into the Ravens’ nest?”

“No.” She shook her head and turned into a narrow corridor veiled in darkness. “We’ll take a shortcut.”

I arched my brow. “Tell me more.”

She glanced over her shoulder. “The four main entrances are heavily guarded. The gates are too exposed. But there’s a tunnel. It leads directly into the marketplace. Crowded, loud, nobody notices anything there.”

I let out a low whistle. “That’s brilliant, but suicidal.”

“Usually it’s both.”

That sounds about right.

A few moments later, Destiny stopped before a black-painted wooden door. Time had not been kind to this one. Deep scratches scarred the surface, and chunks of wood had been gouged away as if some enormous beast had tried and failed to eat its way through.

And the worst part? Damn thing was locked.

“Looks like we need keys,” I said, leaning a shoulder against the wall.

“Honestly, it would’ve been easier to just use the ga—”

The rest died in my throat when she pulled out a pocketknife.

“Whoa,” I drawled. “Let’s not get violent.”

“Shut up.” She grabbed my hand and sliced my palm open.

“Ah,” I hissed. “Give me a warning next time?”

Not even a flicker of regret crossed her face. She only dragged me forward and pressed my bleeding hand against the door.

A soft click rang through the corridor, and the door creaked inward without a key.

Beyond it waited a small room drowning in shadow, a low table sitting at its center, surrounded by candles. Four had already burned out. Only one remained alive, its frail flame trembling.

Destiny dropped my hand and stepped inside, lifting it carefully. Golden light flickered across her face while she watched the tiny flame consume what remained of its wick. "This will have to do."

I clutched my hand, hesitating. "You Hellers spy on Balers like this? How fun."

She shot me a look. "What are we, Gold Rush? Jobless creatures dying to eavesdrop on Balers' pointless conversations and their even dumber fights?"

"Maybe," I offered. "You *did* stalk us, though. Reyes and me."

"That was necessary." She knelt beside the table and planted both palms against its edge, shoving it aside with a heavy scrape.

A small wooden hatch had been hidden beneath it.

Destiny grinned, turning the handle.

The door swung open.

Below lay a narrow staircase spiraling into darkness so complete it seemed to devour the candlelight itself.

Seriously?

Hadn't I had enough surprises for one day?

"I won't fit in there," I muttered, eyeing the cramped passage.

"Too bad." Her voice drifted upward. By then, she was already several feet below the surface. "Remember, Gold Rush: the longer you stand there, the more time your *family* has in the mansion."

The words hit exactly where she intended.

I released a slow, ragged breath.

Then, I pulled the other magic door shut behind me and started down.

One step, then another.

For Rhea.

For Reyes

For that insane girl.

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CHAPTER 32

The Tunnel

A I D E N

“YOU’RE STEPPING ON MY HAIR,” DESTINY COMPLAINED, WAVING the candle close to my face. The flame flared, gold and blinding.

I blinked against it, already annoyed enough to commit murder. “The length of your hair can’t possibly be my fault.”

“Careful,” she warned lightly. “There is a perfectly good source of light in front of you. You could use it instead of trampling me like livestock. Do you know how many times you’ve yanked my braid?”

I squinted at the dark rope trailing behind her. “Cut it. Trust me. It’d be one hell of a transformation.”

She scoffed, offended. “You’re simply desperate to see me with short hair.”

“It would look good on you.” I ducked beneath a hanging web. “Cut it and admit I’ve won.”

She threw a sharp glance over her shoulder. “You have not. Now walk faster.”

“I’ll step on it again.”

“Forget that.” She immediately dragged her braid over her shoulder and clutched it protectively. “Just move.”

I sighed. “Consider my offer. I can handle scissors.”

She didn’t answer.

The tunnel narrowed around us as silence settled in for exactly three seconds before I decided to keep talking. “Hey.”

“What?”

“Why Destiny?”

She slowed slightly.

“What do you mean?”

“You said it’s not your real name. So you chose it. Why?”

A quiet chuckle escaped her. “You seem to have a problem with every part of me, Gold Rush. My hair. My name...”

I shook my head.

Truth was, I didn’t necessarily hate *everything* about her.

She fascinated me with her eyes, her hair, her words – but admitting that felt like volunteering for execution. So, I chose a safe answer: “I’m just curious, that’s all.”

She shrugged, the candlelight dancing across her face. “I read something once. A line in a book. It said, ‘*Once changed, destiny cannot be earned or returned.*’” Her voice softened around the words. “And I liked that.”

“Poetic.” I watched her carefully. “So, have you changed?”

“It depends.”

Something about the way she said it silenced me, as though she had proof.

For a while, neither of us spoke.

The tunnel stretched ahead as the candle burned lower, and lower, and lower, until the flame finally surrendered with a faint hiss.

Darkness swallowed us whole.

Immediately, Destiny hissed, “Watch my hair.”

“I’m not even moving.” I folded my arms. “Where are you?”

“Where are *you*?”

“To your right. Or left. One of those.”

She didn’t answer.

I frowned. “Destiny?”

Nothing.

“Destiny, you there—”

BANG.

A sharp crack split the air, and a groan followed: “Ah, damn it.”

“Hey!” I stumbled forward blindly, hands outstretched. “Are you alive?”

“I’m fine.” She was offended by the question. “Ran into a door.”

“Another one?”

BANG.

“Destiny?”

BANG.

“What are you doing?!”

“I’m trying to open it.”

BANG.

“A little help would be appreciated.”

“Keep talking.” I broke into a run, following the sound of her voice.

A second later, my palms collided with rough wood.

Found it.

I felt along the surface until my fingers closed around something resembling a handle.

She had to be standing right beside—

BANG.

Agony exploded through my hand.

“God—” I jerked backward as pain shot through my fingers, up my wrist, and straight into my arm.

At the same moment, a thin beam of light seeped through splintered cracks in the door, just enough to illuminate Destiny’s face.

She stared at me, then glanced down at my hand. “Did I just break your fingers?”

“Damn it, girl,” I hissed, quite literally burning. “You’re targeting my hand today.”

She looked confused for half a second, long enough to make me think she felt guilty. Then, she started laughing.

Actually laughing.

“You’re a psychopath!” I shouted.

“I’m not!” she choked out. “It’s just funny.”

“It is *not* funny.”

She giggled, turning back toward the door. “It’s stuck. We might have to go back.”

“With a crushed hand?” I questioned. “You think I’m quitting now?”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you—”

I planted my shoulder against the wood and twisted the battered handle before she could finish.

“All right, love the enthusiasm.” Still laughing, she pressed her elbow beside mine and helped shove.

I braced myself. “Push.”

Once.

Twice.

On the third shove, the door opened.

We stumbled forward, crashing face-first into sand.

And dirt.

And stone.

“Ow.” Destiny rolled onto her side, clutching her arm.

I blinked against the sudden daylight, ears ringing as familiar noises welcomed us: laughter, bargaining, children shrieking with delight.

At first, I was confused. Then the scent of spices hit me, mixed with soy and smoke.

My eyes widened.

We'd made it.

Baleroe.

Right in the middle of the marketplace, we lay sprawled behind a stall draped with bright bracelets and strips of colorful fabric swaying gently overhead.

Two broad backs blocked most of my view.

"Shit," I hissed.

One of the shopkeepers turned, slowly, far too slowly, like an owl. His bruised eyes went wide when he spotted us half-buried in the sand.

I held my breath.

One scream.

That's all it would take for the Enforcers to have us both executed for trespassing. Maybe they'd even give me a special reward for being stupid enough to do it twice.

But then... the man didn't scream.

"Ren," he whispered instead, gripping his partner's shoulder. "Look."

"Damn it," Destiny muttered, burying her face in the sand.

The woman spun on her heels. "Oh."

"Hello there," I offered weakly, pushing myself upright with a suppressed groan.

"Take over the stall." The woman spoke so quickly I barely processed it.

I opened my mouth again, only to say nothing as she unbuttoned her uniform, hurled it at the man, seized both of us by the arms, and dragged us through a narrow door behind the stall.

The world changed instantly.

She threw us into a small wooden house bathed in warm sunlight filtering through thin, floral curtains.

An old man slept peacefully on a sofa in the center of the room, while a bird sang from a cage hanging near the ceiling.

Everything felt... safe, peaceful, almost normal.

I glanced at Destiny.

She looked just as stunned as I felt.

At least until the woman slammed the door shut and pulled her into a crushing embrace.

"Oh, thank God." Her voice broke. "Thank God."

Instinctively, I stepped forward, prepared to intervene.

Then, Destiny surprised me by wrapping her arms around the woman's waist. "Renna," she choked out, "I can't breathe."

"Oh!" The woman pulled back. "Sorry, sorry." Tears glistened in her eyes as she cupped Destiny's face. "Look at you." Her smile trembled. "All grown up."

I stood frozen, trying to understand.

Who was she?

Family?

"Oh, my sweet girl, I—"

"Ma!" A boy around my age burst from a room on the right. He wore a torn white shirt and loose trousers, with a strange moon-shaped necklace resting against his chest, looking undeniably exhausted. "The petals didn't last. If you want answers, you should probably find—"

"Nick, look!" Forgetting the rest of whatever insanity he had been about to say, Renna gestured excitedly toward Destiny and smiled. "You kids remember each other, right?"

Part 3

NEVEN

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CHAPTER 33

Little Dove DESTINY

A LITTLE GIRL STOOD STILL IN THE MIDDLE OF A MOVING WORLD.

The marketplace stretched around her in every direction: vast, crowded, and alive, voices tangling together beneath a winter sky. Coins clinked, vendors shouted, laughter burst through the night like sparks from a fire. People hurried past with purpose, arms laden with bread, bolts of fabric, baskets of vegetables, and children tucked close against their sides, while smoke rose from roasting meat, drifting upward, rich and warm. Yes, no one spared a glance for the small figure standing motionless in the snow.

She was dressed for a gentler season.

A thin dress clung to her body, offering little protection against the cold, as her breath escaped in pale clouds, snow melting in her dark hair, running her cheeks.

Her bruised, curious eyes still searched the crowds – not for a face – for something else.

A place, perhaps.

Just somewhere.

Anywhere.

She knew she was running out of time. Enforcers walked between crowds, blending in perfectly. If they found her, they would drag her back to him.

The thought alone made her stomach twist into knots.

“Well, look at this little dove,” someone drawled, causing her to snap out of her zone.

Three men had stopped in front of her. They wore no badges. And, for some reason, that frightened her even more.

One of them whistled, crouching to study her face. “Is that...?”

“It is, baby,” said another – broad-shouldered, blond hair brushing his collar, as a grin spread slowly across his face. “What a valuable little thing.”

Rough fingers brushed the circular wound carved into her forehead. The edges were still red, still raw.

His smile faltered. “It’s broken, though.”

She flinched.

“You look lost,” the third man said. “Why don’t we take you somewhere warm?”

Her stomach went hollow. She wanted to scream, and she couldn’t, because she had done enough of that already. Her voice was ruined, though that wasn’t the only damaged part of her body. Bruises darkened her arms, her legs, and her cheek, while the worst injuries hid beneath her skin, buried deep inside her chest. She didn’t know why it hurt so much to breathe.

“Don’t be shy,” the first man said with a chuckle. His hand shot out, tangled in her hair, and he jerked her closer. “We’ll keep you safe.”

A gasp tore from her throat, but she didn’t cry.

There was no world where she could fight them, no world where she escaped, no world where she won. There was no point in trying.

So, when the man’s arm wrapped around her waist, she let herself be lifted.

“Get your hands off her!”

The little girl blinked. She searched for the voice she hoped she hadn’t just imagined.

There.

A woman was forcing her way through the sea of bodies, shoving people aside as though they were reeds in a river. “Let her go!”

The blond man laughed. “Do you know how much her father will pay for her return, woman?”

The woman did not cave. Her huge brown eyes flicked to the man holding the little girl. “Put her down. We both know that’s not really the reason why you’re doing this.”

All three men hesitated. But only for a second, only long enough to be stupid.

The first man smirked, yanked the girl’s hair, a fistful of dark strands tearing free.

The little girl’s mouth opened, instinct demanding a scream. Nothing came.

The woman snapped.

“You vile creature!” She lunged, fist crashing against his jaw, blood splashing across his fingers. He stumbled backward, releasing the little girl. The world spun, and her knees gave out, snow rushing up to meet her. She closed her eyes, welcomed it, but warm arms caught her first.

When her vision refocused, she realized that the other two men had already melted into the crowds as quickly as they had appeared, and the blond one

was finally backing away. "I could just yell," he said. "Let everyone know you're kidnapping a child."

"That's when I'll let you have her," the woman replied, carefully shifting the kid against her chest. Only then did the little girl notice the gentle curve of her stomach.

A baby.

And the woman was crouching despite it. "Oh, sweet girl," she whispered, her trembling fingers brushing the bruises on her face. "Did they do this to you, baby?"

The little girl glanced over her shoulder.

The blond guy was gone.

It was safe to shake her head.

The woman frowned. "Then who—"

The crowd moved faster, a ripple spreading outward. People stepped aside as conversations died, the marketplace opening like a wound.

Enforcers. Close. Right here.

The little girl went still again.

"What is it?" the woman asked softly. "Do you want me to take you back to your family?"

The little girl's chapped lips parted. She meant to shout, to warn her, to tell her they were too close, but what came out was barely a breath. "No."

"All right." The woman shrugged out of her coat and wrapped it around the girl's shaking shoulders, the fabric swallowing her small frame whole.

"Cover your face. Stay close to me. We'll—"

The ground thundered as a deep, rupturing blast split her words.

The little girl nearly leapt out of her skin.

For a moment, she didn't know what to think. Then, the wind tore the snow sideways in a violent, screaming gust.

Another explosion followed, closer, rolling through the earth like something alive, shaking bone and stone alike. The marketplace broke. People screamed, and stalls collapsed, a child dropping a paper bag of sweets, the little girl watching them spill across the ground like scattered gold teeth.

Beyond the rooftops, an orange glow began to rise, smoke reached them next, burning, metallic, crawling into the back of her throat.

"Fire!" someone shouted. "The woods!"

"It's Neven!"

"Clear the streets!" A familiar voice. "Move! Now!"

The little girl looked back, and through the rushing crowd of Enforcers, she saw him.

The Commander.

“No,” she said in a whisper, smaller than before, more broken.

The woman followed her gaze immediately, her hand tightening. “We have to move.”

The little girl gave a quick nod – even that made her head ache.

“Get up!”

Her legs screamed with every step, but she clung to the woman’s dress as they ran. Through bodies, under a collapsing wagon, around the corner of a bakery, behind a stall lined with cheap earrings that clattered as they passed.

A door stood open, a little boy sitting in its frame, small, curled inward, arms wrapped around himself as though holding his own ribs together. His brown eyes locked onto them, widening. “Ma!”

“Inside, Nicholas,” the woman ordered, pulling the little girl forward.

The boy moved instantly.

They ran into the house, and warmth wrapped itself around the girl’s body so suddenly she nearly passed out. The place was messy: a bird singing in a rusted cage, feathers rustling softly, blankets laying half-folded over a worn sofa, and the faint smell of bread lingering in the air.

An old man stood near the hallway, blinking slowly, disoriented. “What were we saying, Gabs?” he mumbled. “Ah, fire! Wait, no, what was it?”

The little girl watching in confusion, then flinched when another man rushed in from the kitchen.

He grabbed the woman immediately, held her too tightly. “The hospital. They bombed it,” he said, breath breaking between words. “You. Are you hurt, Ren? The baby. Is she all right?”

“We’re safe,” the woman replied. “For now.”

The boy didn’t seem to care. He was still staring at the little girl. “Who is she?”

The man followed his gaze and went pale. “She’s...She’s been reported missing,” he stammered. “Do you know what that means, Ren? If the Enforcers find her here–”

“She’s not abducted,” the woman snapped.

“Then what is she?” He released her, gesturing at the girl’s bruised, shaking form. “Look at her!”

"The Goranems had her," the woman argued. "You know what they do."

"She can't stay," the man countered. "Renna, I will not risk this family, baby."

"What about her?" the woman cried. "She's a kid and she's alone."

"Renna—"

"Nick." The woman looked at the boy. "Take her to your room. Now."

The boy blinked, then nodded, and stepped forward cautiously. "Hi." He gave a crooked, uncertain smile. "I'm Nick."

The girl recoiled instinctively, her fingers digging into the soft fabric of Renna's dress.

"It's OK," he said, dragging the word out. "Come with me. I can... show you my room, if you want. Or give you a blanket. You're soaked."

The little girl didn't move.

Men were bad. Boys were worse.

Trusting him would be a mistake—

"Your face is fucked up."

Her green eyes widened in surprise.

His face flushed red. "Sorry, uh, is that... is that a red word for you?"

She said nothing, just stared.

"Right," he muttered after a moment, turning away. "Just...follow me."

She watched him walk into his room, and with a gentle push from the woman, she followed.

Inside, everything was blue: from the shelves crammed with upside-down books and the soft bed, to the canvases leaning in the corners, painted cars and deers living freely in them.

"You like it?" The boy was suddenly beside her, curiously watching her with dark eyes half-buried beneath messy brown curls.

She offered a weak nod and sat stiffly on the edge of the bed, tucking her throbbing legs beneath her.

The mattress sank like a cloud, making her want to disappear into it. Maybe it was magic. Maybe it was the cure to dying.

"Do you not like talking?" the boy asked quietly.

She did — once, but not anymore — so, she shook her head.

"Stupid question," he muttered under his breath.

For a second, the little girl thought he was angry with her for not speaking.

But then he knelt in front of her, making her heart jump.

Was he going to hit her?

Was he going to do worse?

Would he act like her father?

No, he wouldn't.

The little girl was sure of that when he looked up and smiled and said, "I'm just looking for something."

She leaned closer, saw the notebook he pulled from under the bed, a pen already in his hand.

"I write when I don't feel like talking." He scribbled something down, placed the notebook beside her. "See, like this."

What happened to you?

She bit her lower lip, hesitating.

"Come on," he said. "You don't have to speak. Just write it down."

She nodded, wrapping her aching fingers around the pen.

I made Daddy angry

She then looked up, searching his face for the disgust, the pity, the shock she had grown used to. But he stayed calm, focused, like he understood her exactly the way she needed, as he grabbed the notebook.

How old are you?

Then he gave it back.

And the little girl answered fast.

Ten.

He chuckled, flipping to a clean page. "I'm twelve."

What is your name?

She took the pen.

A/

The bedroom door slammed against the wall, and the little girl flinched so hard, the pen slipped from her hand.

The boy's father stood in the doorway; face flushed with anger. "She's leaving." He crossed the room in three long strides and seized her arm. His grip hurt, deep and familiar.

Her new friend was startled. "Da, no, what are you doing?!"

"Step back, Nick," he growled, dragging the little girl out of the room. "She has to go. Now."

“Wait, wait!” Nick stumbled after them, horror twisting his face as his father yanked her toward the front door with such brutality it almost sickened him. “Da, bezar bere! Let go of her!”

But the man was deaf to everything but his own panic. And the woman...

She was waiting in the doorway.

“Take her, Ren,” the man hissed, shoving the injured girl into the arms of the only person she had dared to trust: a traitor.

“Come on, sweet girl,” the woman murmured, guiding her outside. She pointed to a cluster of broken planks hiding something small in the wall: a crack, a tiny door she wasn’t supposed to notice. “You’re going to get inside, all right? I promise, when this is over, I’ll come for you.”

“No, no, what if she’s claustrophobic?” the boy cried, nearly tripping as he ran toward them. “She stays, she stays.” His brown eyes met hers. “You are staying.”

The girl shook her head, unsure, terrified, taking one step back.

“No, sweetheart, you’ll be okay,” the woman insisted, pressing a hand to her chest as if swearing an oath. “You can fit inside. I promise I’ll get you out.”

I shouldn’t trust any of them, the girl decided.

People always left.

She would end up alone and left for dead.

That was her curse.

So, she took another step back.

Again.

And again.

“No, don’t–”

Despite the fire in her legs, she trusted only the cold air, and ran across the empty street.

She ran until their voices disappeared.

Until the woods swallowed her.

Until snow and blood became the same color.

Until someone found her.

And she could no longer recognize herself.

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CHAPTER 34

My Ghost D E S T I N Y

THE SAME BOY WHO HAD ONCE SEEN ME AT MY WORST WAS

now staring at the version of me I'd spent years perfecting.

Despite everything Maddox had done to my body, it took Nicholas less than a second to recognize me. And I couldn't tell whether I hated that or not.

"Hilda!" The old man pushed himself upright on the sofa, waving a trembling hand, his face lit with sudden delight. "You dyed your hair again, girl?"

"That's not Hilda, Baba," Nick said, his eyes finding mine, something ugly dancing in them. Not confusion, not surprise, but pure anger.

"Hm." The old man rubbed his chin, drifting somewhere only he could see. For a moment, recognition flickered, causing my heart to skip over a beat.

Don't say it.

Please, don't say it.

"Hilda."

Relief washed over me.

"No, Baba," Nick argued, shaking his head. "Not Hilda."

Beside me, Aiden leaned closer, his breath brushing my ear. "That your real name?"

"No," I mumbled. "I have no idea what they're talking about." My gaze returned to Nick, searching for answers, finding none. The pity was gone. So was the boy I remembered. Only the hatred remained. It sat behind his eyes.

I watched him carefully, expecting him to lash out. Instead, he blinked, looked away. "Ma, those petals *didn't* last."

Renna folded her arms across her chest. "And whose fault is that?"

"I forgot."

"Nicholas," she said, her voice rising, "you were out all night with Hilda. Your Da was worried sick!"

"I wasn't out with her because I wanted to be," he muttered. "I was just making sure she got home safe."

"Mhm." Renna didn't sound convinced. "And when she was... you know."

Nick dragged a hand down his face. "You can't be serious."

“But, baby, I am.” Renna sighed. “That girl has a talent for ruining her own life though. Someone needs to stop her.”

“Fantastic.”

She took a few steps forward and patted his shoulder. “We’ll talk later, OK? We have guests. *Azashoon pazirayi kon.*”

The words snagged in my mind, not foreign, but familiar.

Years of Maddox’s endless lessons finally paid off, and from somewhere among the seven languages I had learned, I realized they were speaking Farsi, or something close to it.

“I don’t even know who they are,” Nick muttered, clearly annoyed.

“You know her.” Renna gestured toward me.

Nick didn’t look. “*Velesh kon.* I’ll deal with the flower.” He then disappeared into the kitchen. Cabinet doors slammed and glass rattled before he vanished down the hallway, carrying a tiny paper packet.

At the same moment, a kettle began to whistle.

Renna shook her head. “Please. Sit.”

Aiden leaned toward me again. “Do we trust them?”

The answer came fast. “Yes. Come on.”

I approached the sofa and sat beside the old man. He smiled at me as though I were something worth smiling at. “Hilda.”

I huffed. “Yep, whatever you call me.”

Aiden followed, perching on the edge, silently refusing to trust anything in Baleroe.

“Straighten up, young man.” Renna crossed the room carrying a tray of tea. “You’re folding like a lawn chair. By my age, your spine will be ruined.”

Aiden rolled his eyes before sitting up.

Renna offered a smile and a cup of tea.

“I don’t like that stuff,” he said.

She shrugged and walked past him, bending and lowering the tray for me instead.

I leaned forward, wrapping my hands around a warm teacup. “Thanks.”

Renna beamed and sat on the floral carpet after grabbing one for herself and placing the tray on the coffee table, forgetting the old man entirely.

I took a small sip. “So, how did you know it was me?”

“Oh, baby.” She tilted her head, studying me. “You’ve changed a lot.” Her brown eyes, nearly hidden beneath layers of long, dark curls, swept across

my face. “No chubby cheeks. Darker hair. No bruises... and your eyes. Weren’t they green?”

My fingers tightened around the cup as I forgot how to breathe. Still, I stared at her because looking at Aiden would’ve been worse.

“Anyway.” She waved a hand. “I guess I just knew.”

I lowered my gaze, my shoulders sagging. “That’s nice.”

Silence stretched before Renna licked her lips and said, “I blamed myself, you know. When they said you were dead.”

“Dead?” Aiden sounded confused. “Why would she be—”

“I’m sorry for coming back.” The interruption escaped before I could stop it. Perhaps because I didn’t want him

to get an answer. “But I need your help.”

Renna’s face fell. “You shouldn’t be here, sweetie. What if the Enforcers see you? If they recognize you, you’ll end up in the Malaska Cells before sunset!”

“Please.” The word slipped out before pride could stop it. “I know what happened that night. And I know about the hospital. And I need details.”

Renna’s eyes widened a little more with each word. “I don’t remember.”

“You do,” I told her. “December twentieth? 2011?”

She gave a humorless laugh. “Six years, and that’s what you came back for? Buried history?”

“Renna—”

“My husband nearly died helping you.” Her voice cracked. “And my...”

She didn’t finish, looked away instead, eyes already glistening. “I can’t. So don’t make me say it.”

“I just want to—”

The front door burst open before I could finish, light flooding the room, turning the man in the doorway into a dark silhouette.

My heart lurched, because for one terrifying second, I thought: enforcer.

But then he stepped inside and the light shifted, revealing a torn shirt, dirt-stained trousers, and a body marked by fire, burn scars crawling up both arms, pale and twisted against his skin. Silver hair fell messily across his forehead, but there wasn’t a wrinkle anywhere on his face. He was probably in his twenties, and yet nothing about him resembled an Enforcer. “Ah, sorry, Gabriel said Nick is home. I guess he just didn’t see him leave again.”

Renna wiped her cheeks with rough hands, then faked a smile and said, "He's in his room. Hi."

Aiden and I exchanged a glance.

We were equally lost.

"Hello," the man sang. "That's great, but never mind. Stupid boy didn't tell me you had guests over—" He cut himself off the moment his blue eyes landed on me. "Who's she?"

Aiden and I answered at the same time:

"Who are *you*—"

"—No one."

The man didn't seem impressed. "I asked for a name."

"Davin, son," Renna said carefully. "Close the door. They're only visiting."

He obeyed unconsciously, slamming the door shut, taking two steps forward, too focused on me to care about the woman on the carpet. "Do I know you?"

I stiffened. "Well, I don't know *you*."

The man – Davin – finally let his eyes flick downward to Renna, each word laced with surprise as he said, "She looks like her. Why does she look like her?"

Who?

I parted my lips to ask the question, but before I could speak, Nick emerged from his room and froze. "Shit, where did you come from?"

Davin, however, ignored him and remained as still as a statue.

"Oh, come on," he drawled, moving closer to his paralyzed friend. "Don't talk to them. They're from the damned village."

I glared up at him, the teacup nearly shattering under the force of my grasp.

"Damned village? you mean the one you Balers conveniently ignore because facing all that suffering would ruin your day?"

Nick's head snapped toward me. "Funny," he spat. "I thought you hated speaking."

"You—" I bit down on every response fighting to escape.

Nothing good would come from this argument. So, I focused on the peculiar man, who was now staring at me again, as though he were seeing a ghost.

"What?"

He blinked. "Estelle."

The name hit me like a fist.

Estelle.

For a moment, everything inside me just stopped.

He wasn't supposed to know that name. He never got to hear it, never got to say it, never got to know.

So how the hell did he?

How could her name fall from his lips like it belonged in his mouth? Like he had already said it enough times to know the weight of it?

"Oh, no, no, no, no, no." Nick crossed the room in two strides and grabbed Davin's arm. "Davin, look at me, *no*." His voice was urgent, his eyes wide. "You've got the wrong person. Trust me."

But Davin didn't react, his gaze still wandering across my face as if searching for something hidden beneath my skin. "Estelle..."

Beside me, Aiden muttered under his breath, "What the hell did you drag me into?"

I barely heard him as I placed the teacup on the coffee table and pushed myself up to my feet. "Who are you talking about?"

Davin pulled free and moved closer. Slowly, he lifted a trembling hand, his fingers hovering inches from my face. "No..." he said. "No, her eyes were different."

My mind wasn't fast enough to come up with words, so Aiden stood, slapped Davin's hand aside, and stepped between us. "OK," he warned, "boundaries."

Nick looked ready to explode.

But Davin didn't seem to notice as he leaned sideways, trying to look around him. "I know her," he murmured. "At least I think I do."

My thoughts stalled. "But—"

"All right, I've had enough of this bullshit." Nick grabbed the man's shoulders and spun him around as if he were a child, staring straight into his confused eyes as he said, "She's *not* Hilda, and she's *not* your Estelle. She's just—"

"Destiny." Aiden cut him off cleanly. "That's her name." Nick paused. "Is it?"

"Yeah." Aiden stepped aside, and I thought he was going to let this go, but his hand settled firmly on my shoulder instead, causing me to go still. "And I don't know who any of you are or why we're here, but whatever weird family psychodrama is happening in this house *isn't* our problem."

I blinked, then looked up at him: *what the fuck?*

He tilted his head down, met my gaze. "We're leaving."

“No!” Davin’s shout rattled the room. “You can’t!”

On the sofa, Baba, who had drifted off to sleep early in the conversation, stirred. “Ah, shut it.” He smacked his lips, settling more comfortably against the cushions.

Davin zipped his mouth shut at the mumbled warning, and so did Aiden. Silence stretched.

Then, Renna put down her cup of tea, rose to her feet, and looked at each of us in turn, brown eyes wide, searching. It didn’t take long for her to give up. “Fine. If fate insists, I’ll pay the price.” She turned to Nick. “Take the boys to your room, baby. I need to speak with her alone.”

“No.” Aiden answered immediately. His hand remained on my shoulder. “We’re done here.”

But I needed answers.

I needed to know how he knew that name.

I needed to know who Estelle was.

I needed everything.

“No.” The word left me too fast, too desperate. “I’m not going.”

Nick barked out a humorless laugh. “You’re lucky we even let you stay this long.”

Renna flinched. “Nick!”

“What? It’s not like—”

“Please,” I surprised myself by saying, stepping away from Aiden, stopping in front of Nick. “This is really important to me. I just need her to talk. Then we’ll get out of your hair, and you’ll never have to see me again.”

His eyes locked onto mine. For a moment, he seemed surprised, but that was quickly replaced by frustration. “I see you everywhere,” he whispered.

“*Everyone* sees you wherever they go in this messed up city. Have you forgotten who you are?”

I went very still. “You can’t—”

“Don’t beg him.” Aiden’s voice cracked behind me.

I turned.

His jaw was clenched, his irises darker than before. “I’m starting to think you’re not even *you* right now.”

The accusation stung because part of me agreed. “Hm.” I glanced away.

“Baleroe does that to former citizens.”

His eyes widened.

I ignored him entirely, looked back at Renna instead. "I'm not asking for too much. Let's just talk."

Nick snorted. "So now you like talking?" He spread his arms. "Bravo, girl. Bravo."

"Boro, Nick!" Renna snapped.

He rolled his eyes as he grabbed Davin by the sleeve and started dragging him toward the hallway, toward his room. Before stepping inside, he glanced over his shoulder and said, "Tell your boyfriend to follow. Though he isn't really invited."

My face went red. "He's not my boyfriend!"

The bedroom door slammed shut.

"Screw him. Look at me." Once again, Aiden's hands settled on my shoulders, turning me toward him. "Do you want me to stay?" he asked quietly. "Or do you want me to leave?"

I stared at him, lost somewhere between fear and want.

Across the room, Renna gave the slightest shake of her head. It was almost nothing, and yet, it was all I needed. "I want you to leave."

CHAPTER 35

All the Tragedy D E S T I N Y

MY HEART HAD FORGOTTEN ITS RHYTHM.

It skipped and stalled, racing to catch up with everything the last three days had carved into me.

I kept waiting to break, because the fact that I hadn't felt like a postponed collapse.

"This needs to end fast." Renna crossed to the floral curtains and drew them shut with a firm tug, sealing us inside a world of lamplight and shadow. Then, her gaze flicked toward the front door.

Outside, her husband stood at the stall, selling bracelets. He was a good cover. But time was bleeding away, and I couldn't afford to lose another drop of it.

"Could you get in trouble for this?" I asked, perching on the edge of the sofa, careful not to wake Baba.

"I might. That's why we need to hurry." She turned to me and lowered herself onto the carpet, one elbow settling against the coffee table, as though she needed something solid to keep her upright. "Listen, seventeen years ago, an illness spread through the districts – people dropped where they stood – families vanished in weeks – we thought it was the end – blah, blah, blah–"

"Renna, I get it. You've got to speed through this," I interrupted. "But can you please slow down just a little bit?"

She paused, her gaze drifting somewhere beyond the walls. "There's no gentle or easy way to say this, baby. What happened is that a handful of idiots decided to play God, and ended up killing thousands of people."

I blinked, intrigued, confused, afraid.

"They found a stone," she continued. "Nobody knew where it came from – no history – no explanation." A bitter smile touched her lips. "Apparently, it could bring people back."

I leaned forward. "You believed that?"

She let out a heavy sigh. "When people are desperate enough, they'll believe anything."

"All right." I nodded. "What does that have to do with the hospital?"

“That’s where they experimented,” she replied. “Shortly after the rumors spread, Balers started selling their children to Neven, handing them over willingly.”

My stomach turned. “Animals.”

“That’s not even the worst part.” She lowered her eyes. “The doctors treated them like guinea pigs. Therefore, most died – some survived – years passed – dosages changed – procedures evolved.” She swallowed. “And a few years later, they thought they’d finally perfected their miracle.”

I already knew there would be a *but*.

Renna looked at me. “The stone never healed anyone, baby. It *fed*.”

My mind went back to the patterns on my skin, the ugly, tangled veins dancing across my body.

Maddox was a liar.

Eterna wasn’t fixing me.

It was eating me alive.

“The patients lost themselves,” she whispered. “One by one.”

My head dropped, my shaky hands running through my hair, seeking comfort.

I was right.

Eterna wasn’t merely connected to the hospital.

It was the hospital.

“Everyone involved knew there was no fixing what they’d done,” Renna went on. “That explosion? It wasn’t a terrorist attack.”

I looked up. “It came from the inside.”

“Yes.” Her voice trembled. “A doctor’s choice.”

My eyes glistened. “Who?”

She lifted her shoulders. “I don’t know. He just took thousands of innocent lives and then... disappeared.”

He got away?

He’s walking free now?

“What happened after?” I asked.

Renna laughed once, a hollow, broken sound. “The Commander was drowning in public outrage. Families demanded answers – bodies – justice.” A tear slipped down her cheek. “So, he created a new law. Anyone who talks? Thrown into a box. Anyone who protests? Executed.”

I leaned back with a scoff.

Diaz Reyes wasn’t a leader.

He was a child.

“Were there survivors?”

“There were.” She gestured toward Nick’s room. “Davin is one of them.”

My breath hitched, the air vanishing from my lungs, as everything clicked into place at once.

If Davin had spent his life inside those walls, then he’d known Estelle. And if he’d known Estelle, then the girl haunting me had lived in this world. She was real, important enough that seventeen years later, she was still reaching through the cracks of a mirror to find me. But why *me*?

I swallowed. “Were they all infected?”

She rubbed her eyes. “The Enforcers were ordered to kill anyone who showed symptoms. Most never made it beyond the gates – out of the woods.”

“And Davin?” I knew I was pushing too hard, but I was too close to stop.

“Was he... untouched?”

“He likes to think so.” Her voice softened. “But surviving isn’t the same thing as living, baby.”

I stayed silent.

Renna looked toward Nick’s room again. “Davin says some patients couldn’t carry it – the memories – the guilt – whatever happened in that place. So... they put an end to their own suffering. He almost did it, too.”

My chest tightened, my heart nearly aching for him.

“Thankfully,” she said, “Nick found him near the lake at the park before he could.”

“And he never tried again?”

She didn’t seem to love that question. “What do you think?”

Right.

“Estelle.” The name tasted bitter on my tongue. “The girl he thought I was. Do you know who she is?”

Renna’s lips parted, but before she could answer, a scream exploded through my skull, violent, familiar, *her*. My hand flew to my temple, pressure blooming behind my eyes.

Not now. Not now.

“Are you all right?”

“Tell me.” I wasn’t sure whether I was speaking to Renna or the wild thing living inside my head. “Who is she?”

“Don’t ask me that, baby.” She shook her head. “Please.”

I lifted my head. “Renna.”

“Ask Davin.” The words rushed out of her. “Just ask him.”

Another scream ripped through me, louder, closer, like a knife scraping bone. I squeezed my eyes shut.

Suddenly, something crashed. A curse followed, then another. The bedroom door burst open.

My head snapped toward the sound just in time to see blue spores spilling into the living room like smoke.

The boys inside were already coughing, Nick doubled over, Aiden stumbling after him. Even Renna began choking, tears springing to her reddening eyes.

But me? Nothing.

The spores brushed against my skin, tickled my throat, yet my lungs never seized. So, I was on my feet before I realized I had moved.

“Come here.” I caught Renna’s shoulders, helped her stand, guided her away from the cloud. “What the hell is that?”

Her eyes widened. “You’re not—” A cough cut her off. She tried again. “You’re not affected?”

“Apparently not.” I rushed toward the nearest window and pulled the curtains aside before shoving it open.

Renna immediately tore free from my grip and lunged forward, gasping for breath, exposed completely to the outside world, the marketplace.

I took a few steps back and turned my face away.

Balers were nosy.

One look at me and we would all go to prison.

“Move!”

Nick and Aiden stumbled from the bedroom, both aimed for the same window, both slammed into each other.

“I told you not to touch it!” Nick wheezed.

“Then learn how to give instructions, asshole!” Aiden shot back between coughs.

“You want instructions?” Nick pointed furiously at the front door. “Get out of my house!”

“If I could, I would!”

Nick opened his mouth, probably to insult him.

But the front door creaked open.

Renna's husband rushed inside, having seen his wife's head hanging from the window, coughing her lungs out. He saw Nick, he saw Aiden, he saw me, and somehow, he didn't seem to care as he sprinted toward Renna, his arm slipping around her waist.

"How many times do I have to tell you?" he snapped at Nick once he was sure he had her. "Keep that flower out of this house!"

Nick only glared.

I wanted to hear the rest, wanted to know more about said flower, but curiosity died the moment cold fingers closed around my wrist.

My body went rigid. But I quickly tore free and spun around.

Davin stood behind me, silver hair, blue eyes, calm. While everyone else fought for air, his breathing remained perfectly steady. And the moment our eyes met, the screaming stopped, silence flooding my head. All voices were gone.

For the first time in years, my mind was clean.

Because I'd looked at *him*.

Exactly what Estelle wanted.

Someone who knew her.

So if Renna wouldn't tell me the truth, he would.

He had to.

"You—"

"Come with me." His hand closed around my wrist again.

This time, I let him.

And so, without another word, he led me into the hallway and toward a narrow wooden staircase disappearing into the darkness above.

CHAPTER 36

My Community D E S T I N Y

I WASN'T SUPPOSED TO BE HERE.

He led me into an attic cluttered with old boxes, a lone lamp hanging from the rafters, spilling amber light across the room.

Everything about this felt right and wrong at the same time. Because the moment I stepped into this house, everything went to shit, just like it had six years ago. The difference was that this time, someone else was here, someone who seemed to understand.

Davin dropped cross-legged onto the floor, dug a lighter from a box, pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. "We...have a connection."

"I figured as much." I wandered between stacks of boxes, running my fingers across layers of dust.

"So go on."

I stopped and turned around. "What?"

"Ask questions."

I didn't hesitate. "The spores. The flower. What's their story?"

Davin lit a cigarette, drawing smoke deep into his lungs. "Don't waste our time, ghost girl." He looked up, blue eyes locking onto mine. "Ask questions only *I* can answer. I know you want to."

"Fine." I leaned against the wall, arms crossed against my chest. "Who's Estelle to you?"

Smoke leaked from his nose as he exhaled, a failed attempt at steadying himself. "A memory I wish I could forget."

I arched my brow. "Just a memory? Or a person?"

He sighed. "What do you believe?"

"I believe you're lying."

A scoff escaped him.

But his refusal to listen didn't stop me from talking. "I've been hearing her voice for years, and the second I looked at you... she went quiet."

"Right."

I clenched my jaw. "I also see her."

"Yeah? What's she like?"

"She's got short brown hair," I said, "brown eyes, sometimes a sad smile."

Davin flicked the cigarette away and lowered his head, laughing under his breath. "Deer-brown eyes."

I frowned. "Was she one of the survivors? Did she kill herself too? Because you couldn't save her?"

He rubbed a hand over his face. "Don't remember that."

Liar, she whispered in my ear.

I swallowed. "War's coming. And Eterna's involved."

That caught his attention, causing his head to snap up. "Impossible," he whispered. "The stone... it was destroyed. Blown to pieces. The doctors made sure of it!"

"Doctors lie all the time," I drawled, tilting my head to the side. "Trust me. I live with one."

His brows furrowed. "Eterna's strong evidence. Why would they keep it?"

I lifted a shoulder. "Don't know. But it's in me."

"In you?"

I lowered my eyes. "I'm basically dead. And that shit's in my veins. And it's the only thing keeping me up. Isn't that exactly how it works?"

"Yeah, but—"

"I'm immune now," I interrupted him. "And I'm a weapon in this war whether I want to be or not." A pause, because there was too much information in my brain, too much to say, too much not to say. "I...I just want to know why. So, if I'm fighting for this community, I'm doing it for a reason—"

"Fuck the community!"

The cigarette pack came flying at my head.

I caught it before it hit me, the cardboard crumpling in my fist, the smell hitting immediately, familiar, unmistakable.

So much for peace and quiet.

Davin shot to his feet, furious. "Do you want to know about *my* community?" His voice cracked. "My community was slaughtered in front of me while I was forced to fucking watch!"

I didn't flinch, said nothing, just stared.

"They killed Estelle in front of me," he went on, every word coming out sharper than the last. "And they made me watch, slowly, painfully. For what? Some stupid patterns on her skin they called an infection?"

I froze.

Patterns.

A knot tightened in my stomach.

“Wait.” My hands moved before my brain caught up. I lifted my shirt just enough to expose my stomach, violet veins coiling across my skin, threading through the butterflies tattooed there, swallowing them inch by inch. “Did it look like this?”

The color drained from his face. His eyes widened, his lips parted, no sound came out.

“Was it an Enforcer?” I asked quietly.

He glanced up. “What?”

“Did an Enforcer kill her?”

He shook his head, looked away, tears already threatening to spill. “Not an Enforcer.”

“Then who?”

“A doctor,” he replied. “A man she trusted.”

“Do you remember his name?” I knew this was too far beyond the red line.

I knew I should stop. But I couldn’t. “Or what he looked like?”

For a moment, Davin didn’t answer.

Then he raised his eyes to mine.

“Heller,” he said. “Maddox Heller.”

CHAPTER 37

The Runaway
A I D E N

EVERYTHING IN ME BURNED, THANKS TO THE FLOWER THAT
brainless bastard destroyed.

Yes – I touched it, so he yelled at me, I panicked, dropped the pot, and then *boom!* Spores everywhere. But it was his fault for not telling me flowers could release fireworks, though I really didn't want to know, not even now. All I could think of was Destiny: why did she disappear, and when would she come back so we could leave? Because I'd seriously had my fill of these people.

"Nick," Renna said softly. Her husband had left for the stall after making sure she was going to live, while her weird son sat on the sofa, shoving water down his throat, watching me like a hawk. "Stop that."

He continued to stare. "Stop what, Ma?"

"That." She gestured faintly between us. "You're looking at the poor boy as if you wish to throw him off a roof."

"Hm." He gave a shrug. "Maybe I do."

"Glad the feeling's mutual," I shot back. "Thought it was one-sided."

He scoffed and shook his head, gaze finally drifting toward his mother.

"Just kick him out already, Ma. I lost the petals because of him."

She gasped, hard pressed to her chest. "He's our guest, Nicholas!"

"Then maybe he should act like one."

The woman huffed, rolling her eyes as she walked back into the kitchen, mumbling something intelligible.

I dropped my head, laughing under my breath.

His wide eyes found my face again, his lips curling back in a sneer.

"Remind me, what's so funny about this? Your Ma doesn't curse the shit out of you, does she?"

"She used to," I replied evenly. "But I'm afraid being six feet under has taken her advantages away."

He fell quiet.

Please.

Is he going to pity me now?

That's the last thing I need—

“We’re leaving.” A familiar voice sliced through my thoughts, causing my gaze to snap toward the source. Destiny raced down the stairs, that silver-haired man following right behind her.

Her purple eyes shimmered, the curtains of her dark hair failing miserably to hide her tear-streaked face.

She had been crying.

“I was just about to make dinner,” Renna announced, half-hidden behind cabinet doors that slammed shut one by one. When her figure was fully visible, pots and plates in her arms, she gave a sad smile. “Don’t mind my silly boy. He made a mistake. You’re welcome to stay as long as you want.” Destiny froze in her tracks, halfway through the room. “Thank you,” she said, “for everything. But we can’t stay.”

“Oh, come on, you’re running away again?” Nick’s voice carried pure mockery. “Is that all you know how to do?”

“Watch it,” I warned.

“And if I don’t?” He stood up and cocked his head to the side, as if he were bored. “What are you going to do, Blondie? Punch me?”

“Oh.” I let out a short laugh, stepping toward him, ready to strike. “You’ll see—”

“Enough.” Destiny moved between us before things could escalate, planting herself squarely in Nick’s space. “What the hell is your problem, huh?” she demanded, her voice loud and steady despite her trembling body. “What did I ever do to you?”

The boy didn’t flinch. “Do you not get it?” he asked, voice rising, then breaking. “My Da could’ve died because of you. Because of the stunt you pulled that fucking night!”

“But he didn’t!” she fired back. “He’s alive!”

“Is he?” His brown eyes, so sharp when he was glaring at me, were now beginning to soften, glisten, change. “Because last I checked, he hasn’t spoken to me in years. He sits at the table like a damn ghost. Fuck, he looks through me like I’m not even there!”

“Nick,” came Renna’s warning.

“No, Ma, let her hear it.” He held Destiny’s gaze, equally as tearful as his. “He was accused of murder and he was nearly executed. Sure, I was a kid. I couldn’t understand. But what about my Ma? She suffered while he was in prison. Had nothing to eat, nothing to wear, no money. Do you have any idea what that does to a pregnant woman?”

The room was painfully silent now.

He swallowed, tears running down his cheeks. "My sister was born dead."

Destiny's shoulders dipped. She went very still.

"Yeah." He didn't yell this time. "She didn't mention that over tea, did she?"

Her voice trembled. "Stop."

"No," he cried. "You don't get to tell me to stop. You were selfish then, and you're selfish now."

"Nick!" Renna hurried forward, grabbing her son's arm, trying to pull him back. "Please, baby stop it."

"You know what?" he continued anyway, shaking her off. "We would've been fine, better than fine, if you hadn't decided to run away like a damn—"

"Nick." The silver-haired man stepped in before I had the chance to say anything, trying hard to help the woman restrain him. "Don't go there."

"Let go, I'm not doing anything!" The boy struggled against their hands.

And Destiny...

Destiny looked paralyzed.

She was no longer angry, no longer defensive, and I took that as a chance to get closer.

Slipping an arm around her shoulders, I drew her back from the line of fire, stupidly gentle with a girl who had threatened to kill me. "I don't know what kind of fucked-up shit happened between you and this family," I whispered in her ear. "But I don't need to. You have your answers, I have my questions. It's time we go back."

She didn't answer.

So, I guided her toward the front door, tightening my hold on her as I led her out, past the curtains, past the scent of tea gone cold. For people like us, home wasn't a city called Baleroe. We belonged in Esiliato.

"Don't bolt again!" Nick called after us. "You ruined our lives!"

I felt her tense.

"Don't listen," I told her softly. "You've had enough for one day."

After that, I vowed to never cross the border ever again.

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CHAPTER 38

Recognizable Sorrow

A I D E N

SHE DIDN'T SPEAK AS WE MOVED THROUGH THE TUNNEL.

She didn't tease me when I complained about spider webs. She didn't get angry when I accidentally stepped on the end of her braid. And she didn't catch it when I apologized under my breath.

Without a candle, the tunnel was pitch black. I couldn't see her, couldn't hear her breathing. At some point, the quiet grew so complete that I wondered if I had imagined her entirely, if I had been walking alone all along.

"Destiny," I whispered, hoping for an answer when I asked, "What did he do to you?"

The silence stretched for a moment longer.

Then, surprisingly, tired and distant, "You saw it all, Gold Rush."

I never thought I'd feel so relieved to hear her voice, so glad to have her with me. "I don't mean *that* asshole," I said quickly, worried that I might lose her attention. "The silver-haired one. Did he..." I hesitated, hating the shape of the question. "Did he do anything wrong when you were alone?"

"No." Her words echoed faintly. "No, he didn't."

"Then what—"

Bang!

My face met wood with a crack, pain flaring across my nose.

"You alive?" she asked, unable to see, yet not curious enough.

I cupped my face, blinking through stars. "I think so."

"Good. Open it."

I frowned into nothing. "Open what? My nose?"

A breath that might've been the ghost of a laugh escaped her. "The door, Gold Rush."

"Oh." I reached for the knob blindly, my hands finding and twisting it by instinct.

The door gave way with a groan, spilling a ribbon of light into the tunnel.

Home.

We climbed the remaining steps in silence, emerging into the small room above.

Immediately, I sank onto the cold floor and let out a long breath. "I have never," I said to the ceiling, "missed this miserable village more."

She looked down at me, hollow-eyed, then walked to the magic door, willing it open.

"Hey, wait!" I pushed myself up on one elbow. "You won't tell me why you're angry with me?"

She paused, glanced back. "I'm not angry with you."

"Then what is it?"

I watched her shoulders rise with a ragged breath. "Look, the deal's over."

She spun on her heels. "I got what I needed."

I stood up, frowning. "What about my part?"

"Oh, right." She rolled her eyes, but they lacked their spark. "The Baler should be awake. Go find her and leave. Take your insane friend, too. I'm sick of her."

"What about you?" The words came out before I weighed them. "You can't stay here. Come with us."

She huffed. "You wouldn't like that."

"Why?"

"Because I've lied to you, Gold Rush." She held my gaze, wrapping her arms around herself. "I kept things from you. Uncover them and you might decide I deserve to die."

"All right." I let out a sigh. "But you forgot something."

"And what's that?"

"You never told me who destroyed the grave."

"I didn't forget," she replied. "Just thought you'd have it all figured out by now."

My chest tightened as her words sank in.

Then, realization hit me hard, like a train.

"Was it you?" I asked.

She didn't hesitate. "Yes."

My thoughts stalled. "Why?"

"It doesn't matter. It never did." She shook her head. "That hole in the ground was empty anyway."

"What do you mean?" I demanded. "Adelaide was buried there. You know that."

"No." The word was a whisper I barely heard. "She wasn't."

"So, you're telling me," I said slowly, "that the Baler

went through hell and back for nothing? She almost died.

For *nothing*?”

A small nod.

“Where is the sister, then?” My voice sharpened. “Where is she?”

Silence.

“Don’t go mute on me now.” Losing my patience, I crossed the distance between us, and grabbed her shoulders. “Talk!”

She stared into my eyes, and there it was: the same recognizable sorrow I had seen flicker through her gaze a hundred times, the one that I finally understood.

She never answered.

But she didn’t have to.

I let go of her and stepped back, my mind racing to outrun the truth. The grave was empty *because* the girl never died. All this time, she was standing right in front of me. Not as Destiny Heller. As *the second heir*.

“You’re her,” I murmured. “Adelaide Reyes.”

CHAPTER 39

The Key
D E S T I N Y

EVERYTHING HAD COME UNDONE.

I'd always known it would. Sooner or later, he would see me clearly, every rotten piece of me, and then he'd decide he'd seen enough.

"Aiden, say something."

His pale blue eyes lifted to mine, uncertain. "I don't understand." His voice was rough around the edges. "Why would you do all this?"

"I had to." The words scraped their way out of me, painful but true. "There wasn't any other way!"

"You threatened to kill your own sister," he countered. "Why? What did she ever do to you?"

I stared at him for a long while before turning away. He didn't need to look at me right now. Every part of me was ugly, disgusting.

"Don't turn away," he said. "I need to understand, and you're not helping."

I glanced back deliberately, then made the mistake of holding his gaze.

"I didn't ask for riddles, Adelaide."

My chest tightened.

That deadname.

On his tongue.

Again.

It was like stabbing me with shards of glass, every time he said it.

I spun on my heels. "She ruined me."

Aiden pinched the bridge of his nose. "For once in your life," he muttered, struggling for patience, "drop the act and say what you mean."

Say what I mean.

Fine, Gold Rush.

You asked for it.

"You want the truth?" I laughed, the sound thin and brittle. "Fine. Elizabeth Reyes solves all these wonderful little cases now. Hands them to her father and gets a smile, a gift, approval." I swallowed hard. "But when she was a child? What *could* she give him?"

Aiden did not speak, did not ask questions, did not guess.

Good.

Let it stay that way.

“She gave him reasons.” I tasted rust as my thoughts and memories came spilling out. “Reasons to drink, to come home angry, to take whatever messed-up shit inside him and aim it at someone else.”

He stared.

I stared back. “She’d point out something small. He’d make it huge. And then he’d go to his little Adelaide.” Another glass shard, straight to my heart. “He’d hit her. Again, and again. Until there wasn’t a place left that didn’t hurt.”

Aiden went still, looking at me the way Janet always had, or the way Elion sometimes did when he thought I wasn’t paying attention; the look I hated more than anything. *Pity.*

“One night...” My throat felt tight. “He was extra mad. And he hurt her badly enough that...” I couldn’t finish. Not because I didn’t remember – I did – but talking about it meant having to relive it, and I wasn’t ready for that. Skipping it felt like a better choice. “She ran,” I said. “She ran, and she never went back.”

Aiden seemed confused. “But the Commander said that–”

“That she was dead?” I laughed, short, humorless. “Yes, because he was scared, and telling everyone that his daughter had passed away was easy.”

Aiden was speechless.

Silence pressed against my ribs, against my throat, against every scar I had spent years trying to bury, and I knew it would kill me if I didn’t speak. “I didn’t destroy the grave because I wanted to. I did it because Maddox asked me to.”

Aiden clenched his jaw. “That bastard fooled you?”

“He thought if I lured my sister to Esiliato and kept her here, our father would finally come after her,” I explained. “He planned to kill him. I don’t know why. Maybe he wanted power. Or Baleroe.”

“But your father never came.”

I shook my head. “He didn’t care enough.”

Aiden scoffed.

I couldn’t tell whether he was angry at me or horrified by what I’d just handed him. Honestly, I wasn’t sure I cared anymore.

“I used to think my father was the worst of them,” I whispered. “Turns out it was Maddox.”

Aiden lifted his gaze to mine, a forced smirk playing on his lips. “You’re realizing that now?”

I glared. "He used to be a doctor in the Neven. And he killed someone I know."

Something flashed across Aiden's face. "Well, that's twisted."

I lowered my eyes.

He exhaled a ragged breath, then took a careful step toward me, as if I might bolt if he moved faster. "You could've told me."

I chuckled, looked up. "Would you have believed me?"

"Of—"

"I mean, come on," I interrupted. "Who wants to believe a dead girl? Who *cares*?"

He paused. "I didn't mean what I said."

"Yes, Aiden, you did." I began to spiral. "And I can't blame you for that. Because you hate me. And I'm disgusting. And I should've just stayed dead—"

"Hey, hey, hey, easy."

I froze when I felt his hand on my shoulder. Then nearly said something when he used the other one to tip my chin upward, to make me look at him.

"You did what you did to survive," he said. "I'm not going to blame you for that. But it doesn't have to keep going." He then lowered his hand, slid it into mine. "Come with me."

For one terrible, reckless moment, I almost considered it. But Estelle's scream stopped me, pained and sudden and intentional.

I pulled away.

"Hey." Aiden reached for me again. "Just shut it out." His voice softened.

"That voice in your head. Shut it out."

I tried, but deep down, I knew the truth.

If she'd wanted to leave me alone, she would've done it years ago.

"Please." I cursed the tears slipping free. "You have to go."

He shook his head. "I'm not leaving you."

"Yes, you are." I dug my thumbnail into my palm until the skin split. Eterna welled from the wound, and before he could stop me, I grabbed his hand, smearing it across his finger.

"Adelaide—"

"Take my sister back to Baleroe."

His eyes widened.

"Show that to the Ravens. They'll let you through the gate."

"Fuck." He jerked back. "What are you going to do?"

“It doesn’t matter.” I took two steps away. “Just get her home.”

“Adelaide, wait.” His voice sounded different now, nothing like the guy I had met in the woods. “You don’t have to go back to him. It really doesn’t have to be like this. If you just stay, we can figure something out, and—”

“Gold Rush.”

The nickname stopped him. “What?”

A small smile found its way onto my face. “Thank you,” I whispered, “for being a good teammate.”

He paused, giving me a wild stare.

I didn’t give him the chance to understand.

I just turned and walked out of the room.

CHAPTER 40

Caged Birds D E S T I N Y

I WAS TIRED, SO TIRED, IN FACT, THAT EVEN THE MARROW IN my bones ached for mercy.

All I wanted was to lay my head down somewhere dark, let the world end without me. But Estelle's screams rang through my skull in violent waves, refusing to let me rest. She wouldn't shut up until she led me to her killer, and to my savior, surprisingly enough the same person.

Maddox would be in his office, lounging in his leather chair with a cigarette smoldering between his fingers as he read letters and pretended to be a god. I could walk in, finish him, and then disappear.

It sounded so simple, so tempting, yet the moment I turned the corner and saw Elion standing in the corridor, the world became soundless. Even the screams quieted.

He looked wrong there, gray eyes wide, frantic, lost, as though the mansion had spat him out, and watched him wander into a stranger's home. Until he saw me.

"For God's sake." Before I could move, before I could even breathe, he crossed the distance between us and pulled me into him, one hand cradling the back of my head, pressing me against his chest like I might dissolve if he didn't hold me tight enough. "Damn you, where have you been?" he hissed into my hair. "I looked everywhere for you. I thought—" His voice fractured. "I thought something bad happened."

Here he was, once again, treating me like a cracked doll. I should have shoved him away, and I didn't. I was too numb to fight, too empty to protest.

So, I just let him hold me.

It felt nice.

But then, he pulled back to cup my face in his cold hands, forcing me to look at him. "I'm sorry," he croaked. "For everything I said. For not helping you that night. Nurse Janet told me what happened, and I thought she was exaggerating. I thought it couldn't be that bad." His breath shook. "You were gone for one day. One fucking day, Des, and I was already imagining coffins."

Under different circumstances, I would've laughed in his face. Because... *coffins?*

For a girl immune to death?

"It's always bad, Eli." I stared somewhere past his shoulder. "You just decide it isn't."

He trembled. "What does that mean?"

"The injections."

He flinched. "I—"

"You promised," I cut in. "You told me that if they ever hurt, if he ever crossed the line, you'd stop him. You said Maddox would never touch me again if I said the word. That was four years ago." I met his eyes. "You remember four years, don't you?"

"Of course I do," he said softly. "I meant it. I still mean it. I'll kill Maddox if he so much as—"

"You're too late."

Understanding flickered across his face.

"No," he breathed. "No, you're not saying—"

"Let go of me."

His grip, already hard to escape, turned into something unyielding. "I'm not too late. You're still here. You came back. You came back to me!"

A brittle laugh escaped me. "I didn't come back to *you*."

He searched my face desperately. "Des..."

"I came back to Maddox."

Something inside him broke. I saw it happen.

"No," he said again, though it sounded smaller now, like a child in denial.

"Don't say that. It's not funny."

"I'm serious." I tried to peel his fingers off my skin. "Let go."

"Don't do this." His voice cracked. "Just...let me fix it. Let me make it right. I swear to God, I can't keep living like this. I never meant for you to—"

"Then die." The words slipped like venom, quick, irreversible.

His face froze, and regret hit me so violently I almost reached for him. But pride, or hatred, or something worse kept my hands on his, still trying to make him pull away.

I succeeded.

His grip softened, then fell away completely.

“I think I will,” he whispered then, a little broken, a little tired. “But one day, before that happens, I’ll get you out of here.”

I stared at him.

A faint smile touched his lips, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Nothing ever reached his eyes anymore. “A bird has to be caged to free the other one.” He repeated the same exact words we had once carved into the underside of the staircase when we were still just kids. “Remember?”

I remembered.

That was the problem.

CHAPTER 41

That Was a Gun
L I Z Z I E

BLOOD BURST FROM MY MOUTH.

I choked on it, rolled onto my side, coughing, my neck stiffening. Pain consumed me, tied like a ribbon around my ribs, hanging all the way down to my feet. Everywhere. It was everywhere. And, somehow, I wasn't dead. Or perhaps I was, and instead of heaven, I had ended up in hell.

I spat again, dark red against darker sheets, then forced my body upright. Every movement felt borrowed, my heart pounding like it had been stopped and restarted, my skull splitting with each pulse, as the room swam in and out of focus.

Black.

Everything was black.

The walls, the ceiling, the floor.

Only the double doors stood apart, their golden knobs gleaming like unblinking eyes.

With a grunt, I threw my legs over the covers, to the ground, and tried to stand, my knees trembling as though I were a child learning how to walk again, each step experimental, miraculous, uncertain.

"God..." I breathed.

My dress was soaked through with blood.

Hands shaking, I lifted the fabric to inspect the damage beneath.

Nothing.

No torn flesh, no gaping wounds. Only faint, twisting purple lines mapping my waist like veins drawn by Death himself.

My breath hitched. The room tilted, and I nearly collapsed twice before catching myself against the wall. The black paint was cool beneath my palm, solid enough to make me feel better. Because the dead didn't feel anything.

The dead didn't ache.

The dead didn't tremble.

Therefore, I was real.

I had to be.

Look on the bright side, Liz, I told myself, this isn't hell.

I let out a sigh, reaching for a golden knob, managing to open one of the doors.

The world beyond was thin and suffocating, stretching like a throat waiting to swallow me. Candles hung upside down from the ceiling, their flames licking downward, defying reason. Shadows pooled along the walls, and at the far end, corridors branched into darkness. From one of them came voices, overlapping.

“I said we’re leaving.”

“No. I’m not leaving her behind.”

“Screw her. And screw this place. I’m done.”

“Rhea, let go of my arm.”

“Make me.”

“Stop hitting me!”

“Then stop resisting.”

“Don’t.”

Silence.

“Don’t!”

Glass exploded.

“Jesus Christ!”

“Missed.”

“I hate you.”

The door burst open.

A familiar figure stumbled into the corridor first, blond hair a mess, blue eyes flashing with irritation.

Hanging off his arm was a silver-haired girl, pale scars cutting across her face like faded lightning.

As he struggled to peel her off, he saw me. “...Reyes?”

“Aiden.” My voice barely worked. I started toward him anyway, limping.

Something raw crossed his face. Relief? “Thought you were dead.”

“How long was I out?” I asked. “Where are we?”

He released a breath. “I’ll explain later.”

“Aiden—”

“Later.” His eyes flicked toward the far end of the corridor. “Right now, we need to move.”

“Thank you,” said the girl. “I’ve been saying that for the last ten minutes.”

Aiden shot her a look. “I’m still coming back for her.”

“For who?”

Neither of them answered immediately.

Then, Aiden carefully untangled himself from the girl’s grip and stepped toward me. “Listen.” His voice dropped. “This is going to sound nuts, but you’re going back to Baleroe.”

My stomach dropped. “No.”

“Reyes—”

“No.”

“You need to—”

“I said no.”

His jaw tightened. “The demon? I found her.”

I blinked. “H-her?”

“If I’m telling you to go home,” he said quietly, “it’s because it’s the only smart move you have left.”

My pulse hammered. “I don’t—”

“Just trust me.” He reached for my shoulders.

I stepped back.

His hand froze.

“Aiden,” I whispered shakily. “Who did it?”

His gaze flickered away. “It doesn’t matter.”

My breath caught. “What do you mean it doesn’t matter?”

He looked exhausted. “The grave was empty. You came here for nothing.”

“No.” Denial was all I had left.

“And your father knew.”

“No.”

“Lizzie—”

“No!” The word cracked apart coming out of me. Empty. That wasn’t possible. It wasn’t. He was lying. He had to be. “Tell me the truth.” My vision blurred. “Please.”

Aiden stared at me. “Your sister is alive.”

Something inside me folded in on itself. Sharp and sickening and wrong. I couldn’t breathe, tears flooding my eyes. “You don’t get to do that.”

“I’m not lying.”

“Don’t talk about her.”

“But she’s alive.”

“Aiden!”

He just kept going: “And if you stay here, you’re going to die.”

“Again,” the girl added.

Aiden closed his eyes. “Rhea.”

“What?” She threw up her hands. “I came back from the dead, too. She understands me.”

“Not helping.”

“Neither is making her cry.”

I bit down hard enough to taste blood, the nausea climbing higher, the corridor swaying around me. I felt like I was going to—

BANG.

A gunshot ripped through the mansion, the walls shuddering.

For a long while, nobody moved.

Rhea was the first to speak. “That was a gun.”

“Yeah.” Aiden’s voice was flat.

Fear finally broke through the fog in my head. Then he grabbed my arm.

“We’re leaving.”

I tore myself free.

His patience snapped. “All right, that’s enough.”

Before I could react, his hand locked around my wrist again, painfully hard.

“You don’t trust me? Fine.” His eyes locked onto mine. “Be angry. Hate me. Call me a liar.”

Another distant *boom* echoed.

He didn’t get distracted. “You’re not dying again.”

“I—”

“No.” For the first time since I’d met him, he acted as insane as the prisoners of the Malaska Cells. “You get one death. And you’ve already used it. Do we understand each other?”

I couldn’t answer.

“Lizzie.”

A beat.

“Do. You. Understand. Me?”

Slowly, I nodded.

His grip loosened, but just barely. “Good.” He looked toward the stairwell.

“Now run.”

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CHAPTER 42

His Daughter D E S T I N Y

TEARS BURNED BEHIND MY EYES AS I MADE MY WAY
toward Maddox's office.

The mansion felt different tonight, every step dragging at me as if the walls themselves were trying to pull me back, away from him, away from whatever waited at the end of this.

And Elion's face wouldn't leave me alone.

The way I had walked away from him sat wrong beneath my skin, the things I had said, like no matter how hard I tried, I would never be able to take them back, never be able to apologize.

Stop thinking.

Estelle's voice cracked through my skull once again.

Just stop.

But thinking was all I had left.

I stopped in front of the wrought-iron doors, my hand hovering over the black knob, shaking.

You can't run when you know you will always end up back with him.

I pushed the door open.

The office? Empty.

No Maddox, no monster, no god.

His chair sat bare behind his desk, papers covering the black surface, folders and documents and photographs; a total mess.

I released a breath, walked inside, my fingers brushing the edge of the desk. Then I rounded it and dropped into the chair, leather creaking beneath me. It still smelled like him, smoke, expensive cologne, and something sharp I had never learned the name of.

My gaze drifted over the chaos, snagged on a folder.

Project E

E?

My stomach went hollow.

E: Eterna.

I opened it. My eyes went wide.

Children.

Page after page of children. Clinical photographs, medical records, birth certificates, bloodwork, purchase orders, *prices*.

Actual fucking prices.

I turned pages faster, faster, faster, until one photograph stopped me cold.

A little boy.

Silver hair and blue eyes.

Davin Wolf

“You really weren’t lying, were you?” I muttered, the chair spinning slightly beneath me, as my eyes scanned the desk, something catching my attention: a half-burned page wedged between two other folders.

I reached for it.

A picture of a young man – black hair, a fiery amber eye, unmistakably Maddox, but from years ago when he didn’t deserve the title ‘*Old Man.*’

Underneath:

WAN...
DEA...
RESPONSIBLE FOR...

My pulse spiked, and I lunged forward, papers flying everywhere, folders crashing to the floor. I tore through the desk until I found the missing half, pressing both pieces together, the words aligning.

WANTED
DEAD OR ALIVE
RESPONSIBLE FOR DELIBERATE DETONATION OF THE NEVEN HOSPITAL

For a moment, I didn’t understand.

Then Renna’s voice came crashing back:

What happened is that a handful of idiots decided to play God, and ended up killing thousands of people. A doctor’s choice. He took thousands of innocent lives and then... disappeared.

Disappeared.

Disappeared.

Disappeared.

A laugh almost escaped me, not because it was funny, but because if I didn't laugh, I'd scream.

Estelle wasn't the only person he had killed.

Thousands of people had lost their lives because of him; the same man who raised me, taught me how to fight, how to lie, how to live without guilt, when his own hands were stained with blood.

I sank deeper into his chair, numb, too numb to stand, to think. My eyes drifted back to the open file, emotionless now.

From the random page, a little girl stared back at me. Short brown hair, dark eyes, the softer version of a familiar face.

Wait.

I pushed myself up so that I could read the name scribbled beneath her photograph.

Estelle Reyes

Reyes?

I blinked, must've been seeing things, but no, it was still there when I opened my eyes.

It *said* Reyes.

No.

No, no, no, no—

"You're here."

I looked up.

Maddox stood in the doorway.

"Elion and I searched the entire house." His eyes found mine. "Where have you been?"

I moved.

Desk drawers flew open. One, two three, metal gleamed. His gun.

My fingers closed around it.

I turned, raised it, pointed it directly at his head.

He didn't flinch. "Destiny." His voice was quiet, careful. "What are you doing?"

My hands shook. "Tell me you didn't."

His eyes flicked toward the scattered papers, the photographs, the poster.

"Oh."

That was all he said.

Just *Oh*.

"That's it?" My voice cracked. "That's all you have to say?"

“Well, I thought—”

“Don’t move.” The gun trembled. “Don’t fucking move.”

Maddox took a step forward.

I scoffed. “Seriously?”

“Sorry.” Another step. “Habit.”

“You’re a murderer.”

“I know.”

“And I want to kill you for that.”

His eyes never left mine. “I know that too.”

“You lied to me for years!” I screamed at him. “And you drugged me.”

Silence.

“You watched me look for people you already knew were dead.”

A shadow crossed his face, small, gone instantly. “You don’t understand.”

I laughed. “Oh, there it is.”

“Destiny—”

“No, don’t call me that!” I gestured toward the poster. “It was all you. The hospital.” Then toward Estelle’s file. “A sister I didn’t know I had.” Then myself. “My entire life, you lied!” My voice broke. “What part am I supposed to understand?”

For the first time, Maddox looked tired. “I was saving you.”

“From *what*?”

His answer came immediately: “The truth.”

I stared at him.

Then barked out another laugh, almost hysterical. “The truth?”

His gaze softened. “It would’ve destroyed you.”

“*You* destroyed me.” The words tore out of me. I believed my throat would start bleeding. “My sister. You killed her.”

“No.” Maddox shook his head, smiling faintly. “No, Destiny, that wasn’t me.” He looked at the gun, aimed right at him. “If anything, I was the only one who fought to keep her alive.”

“Liar!”

“I’m not.” He didn’t shout. “You think I wasn’t going to tell you about her? You think I wanted you to find out like this?”

“Then when?” I asked. “When would you have told me?”

“When you were ready.”

I was close to pulling the trigger. “When I was ready?”

“Yes,” he said. “You are sixteen. Not nearly old enough to get it. I knew you’d react like this.”

My breathing quickened. “You—”

A knock, three soft taps.

Both of us turned.

“Sir Heller?” Janet stepped inside, clipboard pressed against her chest, completely unaware. “I’ve been working on an idea and, you know, I was hoping—” She stopped, her eyes finding the gun, confusion flashing across her face, then fear.

She opened her mouth.

And screamed.

Screamed, screamed, screamed, then didn’t.

She just collapsed, clipboard going with her, hitting the floor.

A dark hole appeared from the center of her forehead, leaking thick crimson.

I stared.

Then, so slowly, forced my gaze to return to the smoking gun in my hand.

Had I...?

“Destiny.” Maddox sounded terrified.

I looked at him.

His face had gone white.

“Your eyes.” His voice shook. “They’re green.”

Green?

My blood ran cold.

Green was bad

Green was before Eterna.

Green was Adelaide.

Not Destiny—

I quickly noticed the way Maddox reached into his coat. He pulled out another gun, bringing it up, close to me. “Stay still,” he warned.

“Something must’ve gone wrong with the injections.”

I dropped my weapon. “No.”

“It’s all right. We’re fine.”

“No. I... I killed her.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“She is dead.”

“Not your fault, Destiny.”

“SHE IS DEAD!”

He still stepped forward. “We can fix her. Eterna, remember? She’ll be all right. But let me fix *you* first.”

“No...” My back hit the desk, hard, more papers and folders falling off.

“Don’t touch me. Please don’t touch me.”

“I’ll give you a sedative,” he promised, gripping the gun as though preparing himself. “You won’t feel anything. It’ll be over before you even know it. And then we’ll be—”

A loud *bang* rang out, echoing in the room.

Something nudged my chest, gentle, slow, like a finger. A few seconds later, I felt my veins *moving* in my body, changing directions, twisting, melting, ready to reject the bullet.

The bullet.

He had shot me.

And I hadn’t felt anything.

I looked up.

Maddox blinked, once, twice, a dark stain spreading across his coat.

My breath stopped.

The hole wasn’t even in me.

It was in him.

He swayed, blood blooming across black fabric like a dying flower. Then he fell.

“No.”

Maddox hit the wall, slid down it.

“No.” I moved, dropping beside him. “No, no, no, no, no.” His blood covered my hands as I touched his chest. Too much, too fast. “Fuck, no! You don’t get to die now. That’s stupid!”

A weak smile touched his mouth. “Bad timing?”

Tears were streaming freely down my face now. “Please shut up.”

“I’m sorry.” The words barely existed. “I’m sorry, Destiny.”

“No.” I pressed harder against the wound, dying to stop the impossible. “I don’t... Tell me what to do.”

He didn’t.

More blood poured through my fingers. “Maddox.” Nothing was working.

“Maddox!”

His breathing hitched. “The stone.”

“Eterna?” Stupid question.

“Find it.” His voice was fading. “And find her. Your sister.”

“Where?”

“Hospital.” His eyes struggled to focus. “Neven.”

I was sobbing, openly, violently, like a little child. “What do I do?!”

His fingers found my wrist, weak, shaking. “Shh.”

I couldn’t stop crying.

“Go catch the monsters,” he whispered. “You’re my daughter. You don’t... run from them.”

“Stop talking!”

“Destiny Heller. Not... Adelaide Reyes.”

“Maddox!”

His hand slipped from mine.

My eyes snapped to his chest – it wasn’t rising anymore – then went to search his face, completely still now, gaze fixed on a point so far away, it wasn’t even here anymore.

I swallowed. “Dad?”

He didn’t answer, wasn’t going to.

I broke, burying my face against his blood-soaked coat, screaming and screaming and screaming. For the monster, the father, the murderer, the man who saved me, the man who ruined me, and the only person who had ever been both; a savior and a tormentor.

CHAPTER 43

Trust Me L I Z Z I E

MY STOMACH GROWLED AS I TORE INTO A PIECE OF BREAD, trying to ignore the thick scent that saturated the place: coffee, tea, then somehow even more coffee, the smell clinging to the back of my throat.

I breathed through my mouth, turning my attention to Ruel, Aiden, and the girl, busy tearing each other apart.

"I didn't *willingly* go to them," the girl countered for what might have been the tenth time. "They took me, Ruel!"

"No." Ruel shook his head, too little to understand, too big to be fooled.

"You left me, Rhea. That's what happened. You left me and ran to the Hellers."

"I didn't run to them!" Rhea snapped. "I swear to God, Ruel! I thought Aiden would come back."

"Oh? Well, newsflash, sister: he was locked away." Ruel folded his arms, poor kid. "And while you were fed and pampered in that fancy mansion, I was out here eating rabbits for lunch."

Rhea recoiled, blue eyes widening. "You ate what?"

Ruel gave a proud nod. "It's called survival, sister. Something you know nothing about." His gaze flicked to the scars on her face.

Rhea glared.

"OK." Aiden stepped between them before either sibling could lunge at the other. "I think you two need some space." He glanced over his shoulder at me. "Should Reyes and I leave?"

I frowned around another bite of bread. "Leave and go where?"

"Back to the woods," he replied. "Like I said, you're returning to Baleroe."

"No, I'm not." I swallowed hard, the bread tasting like stone now that he was bringing that up again. "I don't care what you say. My sister is dead, and I can't go back empty-handed."

"She *isn't* dead."

"Yes, she is."

Aiden released a long sigh before raising his hand. "Explain this, then." He pointed to the violet stain darkening the tip of his finger. "If she's really dead, how on earth is her blood on my skin?"

I had just taken another bite. Stopped chewing.

“Uh...” Rhea’s thick brows furrowed. “I hate to break it to you, but nobody bleeds purple.”

“I’m pretty sure Destiny does,” Ruel said.

We all stared at him.

He shrugged. “And some Walkers.”

My stomach twisted.

The addict that had thrown itself at me in the woods, the one that tore me apart, had bled the same shade after Aiden shot it.

So Rhea was being foolish.

Purple blood wasn’t impossible in Esiliato.

“Wait a minute.” Ruel’s gaze, hidden behind glasses, slowly drifted toward Aiden. “That’s her blood?”

“Yeah!”

“Destiny’s blood?”

“Yeah, Ruel.”

“Damn,” he said. “You’re weird.”

Rhea rolled her eyes, pointed at me. “You’re saying Heller, the Cat Killer, is *her* sister? That ray of sunshine sitting right there?” Her voice shook with laughter. “No way.”

“Right!” Frustration surged through me as I shoved myself off the stool.

“No way. Because that’s not even my sister’s name.”

“Obviously,” Ruel said before Aiden could answer. “I think she picked that one herself. Hellers’ kids never keep their real names.”

“That one, he’s not being stupid about.” Aiden’s eyes locked onto mine.

“Her real name is Adelaide,” he announced. “Adelaide Reyes. She told me that herself.”

Rhea winced. “Oof, that doesn’t suit her at all.”

“Of course it doesn’t!” I yelled. “That name belongs to someone who’s six feet under now. Not some stranger I know nothing about.”

No one said anything.

“Whoever you’re talking about,” I continued, “can’t be my dead sister.”

Aiden dragged a hand through his golden hair, the exhaustion in his face almost painful. “Fine.” His voice was flat. “Believe whatever you want. But when you find out your father lied to you, don’t come running back to me.”

“You’re telling me to leave?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

I gaped at him. “Asshole!”

“Uhm, guys?”

“Get out,” Aiden said.

“Guys.”

“I seriously can’t believe you,” I scoffed.

“Guys!” Ruel’s shout cracked through the coffeehouse, and even Rhea flinched.

Aiden and I spun toward him, then yelled in unison: “What?”

He pointed toward the windows.

Outside, people had swallowed the street, addicts stumbling and sprinting between houses and shops and stalls, violet veins pulsing beneath their skin, glowing tears streaming down every face as they crashed into one another, hit the ground, and scrambled back up. Among them, moved women dressed in black uniforms, terrified.

“Pfft.” Rhea slouched against the counter. “What’s up with these crazies now?”

“I don’t know.” Ruel adjusted his glasses. “I wonder if those women are—”

“Heller’s servants,” Aiden finished. Panic splashed across his face.

“Something’s wrong.”

“Three heads,” Rhea drawled, “and not one brain between them. Since when is something *not* wrong in this village?”

“No,” Ruel argued. “Something’s more wrong than normal wrong.”

“What are—” Before I could finish, the doorbell chimed. I turned in time to see Aiden stepping out into the mass of people, and, making the kind of reckless decision that always seemed to find me, I followed.

The moment I walked out, noise crashed into me, screams, cries, shouts, as everyone surged through the street in multiple different directions, sending confused shopkeepers stumbling out of doorways to stare at the madness unfolding around them.

“Move!” Someone slammed into my shoulder.

I staggered sideways as a woman barreled straight toward Aiden, colliding with him hard enough to nearly knock him off balance, too.

Big mistake.

His hand shot out, and in an instant, he had her by the collar of her uniform, pinning her against a brick wall.

I tried to stop him. “Aiden!”

The woman struggled beneath his grip.

He barely noticed. “What the fuck is going on?”

She coughed. “Heller’s dead!”

I froze. So did Aiden.

The woman sucked in a shaky breath once he softened his hold. “Something happened at the mansion. Things went to shit. I didn’t see anything, I swear!”

Aiden clenched his jaw. “Who killed him?”

She shook her head frantically.

“Was it the Commander?” he demanded, surprising me with each word that came out of his mouth. “Is he here?”

“No!”

“Then who did it?” His voice cracked across the street, people nearby actually turning to look.

I stared.

Aiden wasn’t angry.

He was, for once, terrified.

“Answer me!” I heard a tiny *crack* when he slammed her head against the wall.

“I don’t know,” she sobbed. “Let me go!”

Aiden glowered, then finally released her with a disgusted scoff.

She bolted, not wasting a second, not even pausing to check for injuries, or internal bleedings. She just ran, joining a crowd that continued to churn around us, purple tears and violet veins and panic spreading like wildfire.

“What’s happening?” I dared ask him a question, my voice small compared to the noise.

Aiden stared down the street before grabbing my hand, harder than before.

“I’m giving you one last chance before I throw you over my shoulder and carry you all the way to Baleroe.” His fingers tightened around mine, wild.

“It’s not safe here.”

“But—”

“There is no ‘*but*.’”

I opened my mouth, but he beat me to it. “The grave *was* empty. You know it was.”

Suddenly, the screams around us seemed to fade, rage ringing a buzzy tone in my ears.

“I was there when they buried her,” I hissed. “I saw the coffin.”

“But did you look inside it?”

“I was eleven!”

“You still act eleven, Reyes, that is not an excuse.”

I paused.

He sighed. “I need you to trust me. Please.”

My chest went tight.

Because a small, traitorous part of me screamed to do just that, to trust him, to believe my sister never rotted beneath a broken grave. But I’d learned the hard way that wanting something didn’t make it true.

“Come on.” His thumb brushed over my knuckles, a small gesture, too gentle for a criminal, too soft for who I just saw beating a woman his age merely because he needed answers. “Just trust me.”

I bit the inside of my lip. “I’m going to regret it if I do.”

He stared at me.

The disappearing crowd screamed, someone cried, glass shattered in the distance, and yet all I could see was *him*.

“No,” he said at last. “Not this time.”

CHAPTER 44

Goodbye LIZZIE

THESE WOODS WERE A TRAP.

With every step, I relived another second of what happened: the addict pinning me to the ground, its nails digging into my skin, those enormous, rotten purple eyes staring down at me. I could still see them when I blinked. Forgetting them wasn't an option, because no matter where I went or how fast I ran, the memory would follow. I escaped the village, but I wasn't ever going to escape what happened in it.

"There we go," Aiden's voice sliced through my thoughts. "We're here."

I lifted my head.

The two stone ravens sat still atop the gate's crooked columns, their gray wings folded neatly against their bodies.

"What dared flee the Bleeding Woods," one sang immediately, "and what sacrifices will it make?"

"Nothing," Aiden said, holding up his hand, showing them the stain marking his fingertip, now dry and colorless. "Let the girl through. That's an order."

The second raven moved, tilted its head. "Worthless Walker," it asked, "or worthy blood?"

"Worthy blood?" Aiden answered, seemingly confused.

I glanced at him. Did he even know what he was doing?

"Is that your sacrifice?" The ravens spoke together, their rough voices drawing my attention back to them.

"I'd call it proof." Aiden gave a shrug. "But sure."

The birds fell silent.

I braced myself, another necklace, another memory, another trade, but then the gates groaned, and the moss-covered doors swung inward.

The sounds of the city spilled through the opening: children laughing, vendors shouting, wheels rattling over cobblestones, as the scent of fresh bread drifted closer, followed by cakes, roasted meats, spices, and warmth and *life*.

Baleroe was right there – nothing to stop me now – with the ravens gone, yet again nothing but two still statues.

"Go on." Aiden nudged my shoulder.

I blinked. Looked back. "Huh?"

"Go. Home's right there."

I lowered my eyes.

Home?

Was it really?

Back to a place with a destroyed, empty grave?

The thought had circled my head for so long, it no longer sounded like Aiden's voice when he said it.

It sounded like my own.

I hated that.

Because I was questioning everything else.

Father had told me Adelaide was dead, and I had mourned her, buried her, built my whole life around her absence and blamed myself.

If Aiden was telling the truth, then Father was the liar, and I didn't know which possibility frightened me more.

"Reyes."

I snapped out of my zone. "Yeah?"

"Go."

I remained where I was. "It feels weird now."

"What does?"

"Going back," I admitted. "Facing my father."

"He's an asshole," Aiden said. "Make sure to tell him that when you see him."

I glared.

He held my gaze playfully. "No? Fine."

"Aiden."

"What?" he chuckled.

"I'm going to make sure you're back in prison when I find you've lied," I told him, seriously.

His smile didn't fade away. "Good thing I haven't, then."

I cocked my head to the side. "Why so confident?"

"Cause I have proof and he has money," he explained calmly. "Whose side are we taking?"

"Never yours. I can't seem to wrap my head around how you're suddenly so..." I couldn't find the right word.

"So what?" he teased. "Happy because Heller's dead?"

"Whoa," I warned. "You didn't seem *happy* about that."

“I’m worried,” he said. “But that’s not something you should be concerned about. What were you trying to say?”

I thought about it. “You’re different. A bit distracted, a bit more... I don’t know. Not the guy I remember before the coma thing.”

He observed me quietly. “I guess that’s what spending three whole days with your sister does to someone like me.”

My face froze. “Not funny.”

“Wasn’t trying to be. Now go.”

I let out a sigh, looked toward the city, then back at him. “Will I see you again?”

He lifted a shoulder. “Try not to.”

I managed a faint smile, took a small step back. “Goodbye, Aiden.”

“Goodbye, Reyes.”

CHAPTER 45

Damaged Beyond Repair

A I D E N

BY THE TIME I REACHED ESILIATO, THE RAIN HAD ERASED THIS small world.

The streets looked scrubbed clean by the storm; no walkers, no merchants, no servants hurrying to get out. Given the abandoned feel of the village, I should've gone back to Ruel's. Instead, I headed straight for the mansion, its towering double doors standing open, waiting, getting pushed back and forth with the wind and long, mournful groans.

Inside, the chandeliers flickered weakly overhead, a handful of crows perched over the crystal arms, watching.

Had they flown in through the doors?

Weird, no matter how hard I stared, the birds didn't caw, move, or blink. They simply stared back.

Screw it.

"Adelaide?" My voice ricocheted. "Adelaide!"

Silence answered me.

I sighed and took the staircase two steps at a time, the upper halls darker, colder, every candle burned out. Shadows pooled in the corners like standing dark water, and for one dizzy second, I felt like I was sinking beneath them.

No.

Keep moving.

Find her.

Get out.

That was the plan.

I reached her room, shoved the door open.

A figure sat on her bed holding a canvas, looking up sharply when the hinges creaked.

Tent guy.

Elion.

And holy shit.

He looked wrecked: black hair hanging in tangled strands around his pale face, gray eyes bloodshot, swollen, raw, as if he had cried until there was nothing left. "You again?"

I stepped inside. “Where’s she?”

He paused, but he was quiet only for a moment before a bitter laugh escaped him. “I think you’re... a little bit late.”

My stomach turned upside down. “The fuck does that mean?”

Elion looked away. “Go see for yourself.” His voice cracked. “Maddox’s office.”

I immediately backed toward the door, but did not yet leave. My focus was on him. He was alone here. “I’ll come back for you.”

His hollow gaze found mine, and I wasn’t sure he believed me. Hell, I wasn’t sure I believed me. So I ran, not knowing how many wrong turns I took, or how many corridors swallowed me, or how many times I doubled back. The mansion, now empty, had become a maze. But I still managed to find the office.

The doors stood ajar, welcoming in a way that felt horrifyingly wrong.

I walked in, and nausea hit me like a punch.

Blood.

The smell was everywhere.

I looked around.

The red-haired woman, Janet, lay sprawled across the floor in a widening pool of crimson, dead.

Heller sat slumped against the wall nearby, his eyes staring at nothing, a pistol dangling loosely from his hand, blood soaking through his expensive coat. He was also dead.

And then I saw her, and my breath caught.

Adelaide sat curled in the far corner of the room, her knees hugged tightly against her chest, as she rocked back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, her wild eyes never leaving Maddox’s body.

Wait.

Her eyes.

They were different.

One shone a light shade of green, while the other shimmered violet; a deep, impossible violet, darker than before and even more terrifying.

No.

No, no, no.

“Adelaide.” I crossed the room and crouched in front of her, took her hands, ice-cold. “Hey.”

Nothing.

A statue.

“Look at me.”

Still nothing.

“Adelaide, please.”

Her lips parted, barely, and spilled words that were so quiet I almost couldn't hear them. “You're still here.”

I swallowed hard. “Yeah. It's me. Look at me.”

She did – slowly and painfully and unblinking, but she did. “Why are you still here?”

I squeezed her hands. “Because I'm getting you out of here.”

A faint shake of her head. “No.”

“Then tell me what to do.” I released her hands, only to reach up and gently turn her face toward mine. The sight sliced me open. She looked exhausted. Not tired or sleepy, but exhausted in the way dying stars must be, the kind of damage that lives in the soul, carved into it. “Talk to me.” My voice came out rough. “I'm right here. Me. Gold Rush. Remember?”

Her eyes glistened, more purple taking over her green iris, splashing across it. “You shouldn't be here.”

“Well, that's bad. I'm not leaving.”

“Why?”

Why?

Because somewhere between the gore and madness, she'd become the only thing I couldn't walk away from. The thought of losing her hurt.

“I'm all in,” I told her. “The deal's not over, Adelaide. Not until I get you out of this place.”

She looked at Maddox's still body again. “The hospital.”

I blinked. “What?”

“I need to go back.” Her voice was ragged. “I have to go back there.”

I stared at her. “The hospital? Again?”

She tore her gaze away from him, fixed it on me instead. “She'll scream forever if I don't.”

“Who?”

She shook her head.

“All right,” I said, rising to my feet, offering her my hand. “No questions.”

She didn't take it. Stood by herself. “Don't come.”

“I *am* coming.” I smirked. “Too late.”

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CHAPTER 46

The Mistake

L I Z Z I E

I WAS A FOOL TO BELIEVE FATHERS WERE ANYTHING MORE than knives.

I went to him.

I actually went to him, thinking he would tell me the truth, thinking he would explain, thinking he would care. Instead, he called me hysterical and ordered the guards to lock me in my room. Now, the door wouldn't open, the handle rattling uselessly beneath my grip every time I tried.

Pacing the room like a trapped animal didn't help. I'd worn a path into the carpet, and my head still refused to shut up.

My sister is alive.

The thought circled through my skull.

She is alive.

Alive.

Alive.

Alive.

I whispered that word to the walls, the floor, the silence, as though I had to convince myself before I could convince *him*.

"Adelaide is alive!" I slammed both hands against the door, exploding.

"Father!"

Nothing.

"Dad!" My voice cracked. "You're lying!" My fists struck the marble hard.

"To Baleroe, to me! She never died! My baby sister never died!"

Not a word, a creak, footsteps. I was alone.

"Stop lying!" I screamed, pushed off the surface, my gaze landing on the nearest object: a glass jewelry box, my mother's gift, the last thing she'd ever given me.

Without hesitation, I grabbed it and hurled it across the room, the box exploding as it hit the door, glass raining across the floor, shattered ice.

For a painful moment, I stared at it.

Then, a sob clawed its way out of my chest. I stumbled backward until my spine hit the wall. Slowly, I slid to the floor, my knees coming up to my chest, and I cried, furious, helpless, alone. I cried for what felt like forever. I

cried and cried and cried, felt like I was running out of tears, and I did, and then *footsteps*.

I lifted my head.

The door creaked open, Father stepping inside carrying a glass of water, as if he were checking on a sick child, as if he hadn't imprisoned me, his shadow stretching across the floor, swallowing me whole.

"Oh." His green eyes drifted to the shiny, broken pieces of the box. "You ruined your mother's gift."

I laughed, a horrible sound. "Can you blame me?"

He looked at me, sighed. "No."

The answer startled me.

I watched as he walked over to me and crouched, his fingers curling beneath my chin, far too gentle. "My poor daughter. I can't imagine what you saw in that village. If I'd known you were going to Esiliato, I would've stopped you."

I jerked away from his touch. "Why? Were you afraid I'd find out about Adelaide?"

He smiled with pity. "You're still on that, Elizabeth?"

"I'm—"

"Here." He lifted the glass slightly. "It's warm."

I eyed it suspiciously, very, very thirsty.

"Remember when you were little" he said softly, "I always brought you warm water whenever you woke up screaming. Thought it might help again."

I looked away, because I remembered – his hand in my hair, his voice when it wasn't so rough with smoke, his silly stories, and for a second, I wanted to feel that comfort again. He knew it. I hated him for knowing it, hated myself even more when I reached for the glass.

He watched me drain every drop. "There she is."

I glared, eyes burning, throat sore. "What's wrong with you?" I stood, trembling, unsteady, but I stood. "She's alive."

He rose with me. "Elizabeth—"

"My sister is *not* dead!" I dropped the glass, letting it shatter, join the box, and shoved him, but he didn't budge. "Instead of looking for her, bringing her home, you're pretending she doesn't exist!"

“Oh, sweet Elizabeth.” His hand settled against my forehead, and he was dangerously calm, his touch lasting a few seconds before he pulled away. “You have a fever.”

I stared at him. “What?”

“You should rest.”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Yes.”

“No, answer me!”

His eyes hardened when I dared raise my voice. “Your sister is gone. We buried her.”

“No, *we* didn’t!” I argued. “You...you buried an empty coffin—” My vision swam, and the room went sideways. Something was wrong. Something—Father caught my shoulders when I stumbled. “You need sleep.”

My stomach dropped.

No.

The water.

The water.

I looked down at what remained of the glass, then back at him, fear flooding through me. “What did you do?”

His fingers slipped through my hair. “There was a little something in it.”

My face froze. “You drugged me.”

“Relax,” he said. “It was enough to help you calm down.

Nothing more. Nothing less.”

“You’re sick!” I tried to pull away. My limbs didn’t listen.

His arms wrapped around me, trapping me. “It’s all right.” His voice drifted around me like poison. “I’m here.”

“No.” The word came out weak, pathetic. I hated it. I hated myself. “You don’t...”

“Shh.”

The room melted: white walls bleeding into white ceilings, shapes dissolving, moving, dancing, colors crashing into one another, everything so incredibly weightless.

“You went through a lot,” he murmured. “It is normal to be confused.”

“I’m not...lying.” My voice was miles away. “She’s alive...” My knees buckled.

He didn’t let me hit the floor, holding me against his chest, rocking me gently. “I wish, Elizabeth.”

“But he said...he said that...”

The darkness closed in.

Father released a breath against my hair. “Trust me, it’s better this way.”

I should’ve stayed with Aiden.

Coming back was a mistake.

CHAPTER 47

Here We Go Again

A I D E N

RAIN DRUMMED THROUGH THE WOODS, BLURRING THE WORLD into thin streaks of gray.

Adelaide walked ahead of me, never once looking back, bones again underfoot, white, slick, half-buried. And in that frustrating emptiness, Elion's face kept surfacing, a flash, gone, then back again. We'd left him there with corpses.

I told him I'd come back, but staying with this girl, not losing her, had made me forget all my promises.

Getting her out of that mansion took everything I had. She hadn't spoken since. Like she was trapped somewhere inside her own head, like she was trying to escape the truth, like she wasn't a murderer.

No, I thought to myself.

She didn't have a choice.

She didn't want to kill anyone.

It just happened.

"All right," I said when we reached the hospital after circling back so many times. "What now?"

It was worse than I remembered, less like ruins and more like it was leaning toward the earth, something paused mid-collapse.

Adelaide kept walking.

"Hey."

She stopped, looked back, her hair sticking to her face in dark streaks. "Stay outside. Watch for movement. The Walkers couldn't have gone through the gate. They're still here."

My hand was already in my pocket, reaching for the pistol she'd given me.

"And if I see one?"

Her eyes narrowed, both violet again, both wild. "Why do you think I gave that to you?" A pause. "Don't miss."

"God." My head tipped toward the stormy sky. "You've got everything in that mansion. We could've stopped to get a damn umbrella."

"No time." She turned and walked into that cursed building, never giving me the chance to speak, to stop her; no glance back, no change in pace. The crooked doorway took her piece by piece.

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CHAPTER 48

A Servant
L I Z Z I E

“LIZ!” ADELAIDE CALLED OUT, DASHING INTO MY ROOM, HER EMERALD eyes wide and horrified.

I perched on the windowsill and pulled my boots off with a scowl. “Not now, Del.”

“Liz!” she said again, always so frustrating, as she moved toward me and wrapped her thin arms around my neck. “Daddy’s angry again,” she cried into my shoulder. “He is going to hurt me. He will, he will!”

I groaned, tried to pull away, but she clung to me like a koala. “I said not now!”

“Please!” she begged. “Don’t let him hurt me. Please, please, please.”

“Gosh, let go!” My hands pressed against her chest, pushing her away, unkind and rough.

She fell, face dropping, too.

“You’re pathetic,” I spat, shrugging off my coat. “He’s mad at me, not you. I was the one who wanted to visit Vivian.”

“He’s never mad at you!” she said. “Daddy always goes to my room first.”

“Then pretend you’re asleep.”

“No, I’m s-scared,” she stammered. “Can I stay with you? We could share your bed. We used to do that.”

“I need to be alone right now,” I countered. “And you? Pfft, you need to learn how to live without falling apart every single day.”

“But it’s painful inside.” She was crying again. Always saw her life through her tears. “My belly hurts. And my arms. And my legs. He says it’s not him. He tells me God is punishing me because I’m wicked.”

“You are,” I told her. “Honestly, Del, when are you not throwing tantrums?”

“Lizzie!”

“What?” I glared at her. “You’re dramatic, all right? Now go to bed. He won’t come. He’s not evil.”

“Easy for you to say.” She sniffled. “You’re his favorite.”

“No, I’m not!” I shot back. “He was yelling at me, too. Couldn’t you see?”

“He yells at you, but he beats me,” she said. “He loves you. Not me. Why?” I thought about it. “Maybe because he gets drunk every time he tries to.”

She went very still.

Then, just as she was about to speak, heavy footsteps thundered down the hallway. A moment later, my bedroom door flew open, slammed against the wall.

He stood there, still in his work clothes, face twisted with something beyond fury and bloodshot eyes. "You're supposed to be in your room, girl!" he roared. "I told you, I would check on you!"

Adelaide froze like a deer caught in the headlights. "Dad, I'm—"

Clap.

Father's palm connected with my sister's cheek, sending her small frame several steps back. She hit the wardrobe, cried out in pain. "Dad!"

He grabbed her chin, forced her to look up. "What did I tell you, Adelaide?"

"You told me to go to sleep. I didn't. I'm wicked," she sobbed.

"Say it again!" he growled.

"I'm wicked!"

"Again!"

"I'm. Wicked."

He slammed her against the wardrobe, then pulled her up, her back sliding roughly across the wooden surface. "Devil's child," he hissed. "You killed your mother."

"She didn't," I said quietly.

His head snapped toward me. "What'd you say?"

Mom died during childbirth. It wasn't my sister's fault. But I didn't dare say that. "Nothing."

He sighed, focused on Adelaide. "Tonight's not good. Do you hear me? Tonight's dangerous, bad. And you're making it worse!" A kick to her belly, her cries filling my ears, making me flinch. "Why can't you listen for once? Why can't you be like Elizabeth? Why are you so damn difficult to deal with?" A hit to her ribs. I heard a crack. "How stupid are you, Del? It's late at night. Good girls should be asleep. So why are you not?"

I was awake, too, sitting right there on the windowsill, and I didn't want to point that out.

"Because I'm wicked," she choked out.

"Exactly." Another kick, a slam of her head against the wardrobe. "Next time, you're going to pay attention to my words, girl. Or you'll go to hell. Do you want to go to hell?"

Her voice was weak. "No."

He hit her harder. "Louder!"

I looked away. Couldn't watch this. "Stop, father," I mumbled. "Stop."

"Louder!"

I glanced at them.

Father's eyes, fogged by alcohol, were fixed on my sister, demanding words she could not form.

Adelaide's lips were stained with blood, as though she had coughed it up, because the one thing that hadn't split was her mouth. "No," she tried again. "No, I don't..." A hard swallow. "Want to...go to h-hell."

"LOUDER!"

Adelaide screamed, and it was broken, wet, weird.

I didn't see what happened next. I didn't hear it. I'd covered my ears, pulled my knees up against my chest, clung to the window, the cold, anything but this moment.

Then the noise stopped.

I peeked.

Father had released Adelaide.

She was on the floor now, barely conscious.

"Now you and your sister will turn that on," he croaked, gesturing toward the old radio above my bookshelf. "Full volume," he insisted. "And you won't get out of this room. Neither of you. Not even if the whole house trembles."

"Why would it tremble?" I asked, afraid he'd bite.

He didn't. "It just might. So do we understand each other?"

Adelaide didn't answer.

I did. "Yes, Father."

He watched us for a minute longer. Then: "Good."

After that, he was gone.

I inhaled a deep breath, scrambling toward my sister, so still, so quiet, just shaking so terribly. "I guess you're staying," I told her, not sure whether she could hear. "Just for tonight." And so I moved and turned the lights off.

That was the last time I ever saw her alive.

"Sis?"

Terror ripped my eyelids open.

I sat up immediately, heart racing, chest rising and falling too quickly. My head was spinning, vision not yet focusing, my legs screaming in agony as though I had run through countless fields.

Father was gone.

And I was in bed, my body tangled in soft sheets.

I pushed them aside, climbed out clumsily, limbs refusing to cooperate. Still, I forced myself to move, grabbing for the door handle, trying again. Nothing. Still locked.

“Hello?” I called out to no one, my voice even weaker than before. “Hello, is anyone out there?”

Silence.

I let out a sigh and looked out the window. The moon stared back from the depths of a starless sky. Alone again, just like me.

How long did I sleep? I asked myself.

What time is it?

I observed my room for answers I knew it didn’t have. The walls stretched high, the aftereffects of the sedative consuming me, the floor beneath my feet feeling thin as paper.

With a groan, I slammed my hands against my bedroom door, too tired to be strong, too tired to stay locked up like an animal. “If anyone’s out there, please answer!”

Nope.

Nothing.

“Please,” I croaked, knocking harder, using every bit of energy my body could muster. “I want out. Let me out! Please—”

Something changed.

I felt it.

I heard it.

A key turning in the keylock.

I staggered back.

The door creaked open, Father stepping inside, closing it behind him, green eyes scanning my face. “You’re awake.”

I bit my lower lip, and even though I wanted to scream, all that escaped me was a rasp. “How long?”

“A while.” He brushed past me, moving toward my bed, perching on the edge of it. “Long enough for me to think.”

I remained quiet.

His gaze lingered. "Your words didn't leave my head." A humorless smile touched his mouth. "And that, Elizabeth, is torturous. But it's also true."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I want to believe you." The answer came quickly. "If Adelaide is really alive..." His voice softened. "I want that to be right more than you know."

I blinked.

"But wanting isn't enough, is it?" he continued. "I've spent my life making decisions based on facts. That is what a Commander should do. We can't afford the luxury of faith."

"So, what are you going to do?" I asked.

"I need proof, Elizabeth." He patted the empty space behind him. "Come sit."

"No."

A flicker crossed his face; disappointment. He sighed. "You're making this harder than it needs to be."

I gave a short laugh. "And you're not?"

"I'm not." He slipped a hand into his coat, withdrew something gold: an object flashing through the air, an enforcer badge.

I shook my head, tears coming back. "No."

"No?" His brows furrowed. "This badge carries authority, Elizabeth. Doors open for it. People obey it, fear it."

"I don't care!"

"But I'm giving you an opportunity," he said.

"No," I sobbed, taking a step back. "No, this is just another one of your sick training sessions. I'm—" My voice broke. "I don't want that anymore."

"Hey." He stood up, approached me as if I were a cornered creature.

I flinched when his hands found my shoulders, and he pulled me into his arms, one hand cradling the back of my head, running through my hair. "It's all right."

I melted into him, crying harder now. "What— what happened? What—"

"Shh." He pulled back and cupped my face. "This is your chance, daughter. I'm not asking you to put that on to kill people. I'm asking you to put it on because I want you to find her."

I sniffled. "What?"

"Find your sister," he countered. "If she's alive, then bring her to me."

Suspicion flooded through me. "Why?"

"Because I'm tired," he replied.

I stared.

"I'm so, so tired of this family being broken."

"You broke it," I told him. "This is your fault."

"Maybe." His gaze lowered briefly, as though carrying a burden only he understood. "I've made mistakes. I know that. But I'm willing to fix everything."

My throat felt tight. "You..."

He leaned forward slightly. "Isn't that what you want?"

It was.

I wanted it more than anything. More than revenge, more than freedom, more than life, I wanted my sister back.

"Yes," I whispered.

"Then help me bring her home." He placed the badge in my palm and closed my hand around it. "Become my Enforcer."

I looked down.

Once.

Just once.

That was all it would take; one choice, *one* wrong choice, and there would be no returning from it.

"If I do this..." I could barely speak. "If I find her... will you love her?"

"Oh, Elizabeth." He reached out, brushing a strand of hair from my face.

"I'm a changed man. I'll give you my word."

My mind knew better.

But my heart? It had always been weak where Adelaide was concerned.

The badge shone in my hand.

I stared at it, at the tiny piece of golf that somehow felt capable of deciding an entire life, or ruining it.

Perhaps it already had.

Perhaps my ending had been written long before this moment, long before this room, long before I ever had a choice.

"Hurry, Elizabeth." Father's voice pulled me back. "Time doesn't wait."

I closed my eyes, took a breath, and clipped the badge onto my bloodstained dress.

A *click* echoed; a judge's gavel, a coffin lid, a chain locking into place.

Father exhaled, satisfied. “Good.”

I couldn’t look at him, couldn’t bear to. So I moved, numb and empty, dead in all the places that mattered.

As I reached the doorway, he said, “One more thing.”

I glanced back.

“There are other Enforcers waiting downstairs,” he informed me. “You’ll have subordinates.”

Another sound escaped me, more like a sob, less like a hollow laugh.

“Subordinates?” I shook my head. “No.”

He paused. “What, then?”

I opened the door, stepped through. “If they’re servants,” I said, “then so am I.”

CHAPTER 49

The Flash
A I D E N

THREE HOURS PASSED, THEN ANOTHER FEW MINUTES, THEN A FEW more, and... nothing.

She didn't come back.

At some point, I stopped staring at the hospital, hoping for a glimpse of the girl that had recklessly, stupidly stepped inside. There was only so long a person could look at the same cursed building before it started looking back. The shattered windows, the collapsed walls, the black mouths of empty hallways, exposed where the explosions had done the most damage. Every single crack in the structure had become familiar – every shadow and every corner – and still no Adelaide.

I sighed and dropped onto the crumbling steps at the entrance.

Rain drummed against the roof above me, against stone, against earth, against the thousands of bones buried beneath this godforsaken place.

I buried my face in my hands and listened.

The storm swallowed almost everything, and for a while, things felt peaceful.

Then I heard something.

Thump.

My eyes opened.

Scrape.

I lifted my head.

Clatter.

I immediately looked toward the hospital. Nothing. No movement, no danger, no crows pouring out of crooked trees.

The noises hadn't come from here, and oddly enough, that was the part that unsettled me.

Slowly, I rose to my feet and pulled out the pistol.

Just in case.

The rain grew heavier, droplets sliding down the barrel as I scanned the woods. And then, I saw them.

Lights.

Pale beams slicing the darkness.

Flashlights, I realized.

Fucking flashlights.

They moved between the trees like wandering ghosts, sweeping over leaves and tangled roots, searching.

My grip tightened.

Then, murmurs reached my ears as they got closer. Distant and somewhere uphill.

My first thought was: Enforcers.

But that was impossible, right?

Balers couldn't cross the border. Not without starting a war. And no Commander was stupid enough to risk something like that. At least... I hope not.

"Fuck it." I stepped forward.

Crunch.

The sound came from beneath my foot.

Right.

Bones, a pile of them, shattering loudly enough to make every flashlight freeze.

"I think I found something!" a voice called out.

Shit.

Someone else answered immediately, "Yeah, no, I think that was me. Sorry."

A pause.

"Whoa, is that a bone?"

"It's everywhere."

A few groans followed.

"Would've been nice to do this during daylight, you know."

"You heard the Commander. No time to waste."

I blinked.

Commander.

So, they *were* Enforcers.

Why?

Had Reyes sold us out?

No.

She wouldn't do that.

She couldn't.

Maybe she'd been caught. Maybe she'd talked. Maybe—

A hand slammed over my mouth, another ripped the gun from my grasp,
someone dragged me backward.

I twisted sharply, wrenched free, spun around—

“What the fu—” The words died.

Brown eyes.

All I saw were brown eyes.

Familiar ones.

For a second, my brain refused to process them. Because they didn’t belong
here anymore. Not after every horrible possibility I had imagined.

Yet there they were.

Wide, real, staring straight into mine.

Yeah.

I wasn’t seeing things.

Reyes was here.

She’d come back.

CHAPTER 50

See Us
DESTINY

THE HOSPITAL HAD BEEN LEFT TO ROT.

Grime clung to the walls in dark smears, cracks crawling through the concrete like the patterns beneath my skin, splitting the structure apart inch by inch.

Something felt heavy here, an invisible hand on my shoulder, pushing down harder every time I moved.

I tried to take a breath, but even that didn't work here. Dust coated the back of my throat, mold seeping into my lungs, and I coughed.

The hand stayed there, then gave a light squeeze.

I lifted my gaze and scanned the lobby.

A broken elevator sat between two spiraling staircases that twisted upward into darkness. Once painted white, the railings and steps were now stained a rust-red color that I knew was dried blood. Yes, that was everywhere, proof of the detonation.

I exhaled slowly, then went up the stairs, one step, another, then another.

The second floor greeted me; an enormous hall stretching before me, abandoned tray tables and overturned equipment scattered throughout the space like relics.

Two sets of double doors stood partially open, one to my left, opening a few more hallways leading to two rooms each, the other at the distant end of the corridor. Still, the peculiar architecture wasn't what surprised me. It was the cleanliness.

My eyes drifted over the walls, the floor, the ceiling, and nothing. No dust or blood or decay. Not even a footprint.

The contrast was wrong.

If I hadn't seen the building from outside, I would've sworn someone still lived here—

Fingers tapped on my shoulder.

I jerked away, looked behind me, and noticed something painted across the wall in dripping red letters.

SEE US

“See us?”

The second I read that aloud, a scream ripped through the silence, then another, and another, not in my skull, but out there, here.

I spun around.

The double doors to my left flew open, dozens of figures flooding into the hall, young, some my age, maybe even younger. They stumbled forward in shredded gray dresses and suits drenched in blood, their skin corpse-pale, their eyes staring wide and glassy, most of them fixed on nothing at all.

They crashed into walls and equipment and into each other, thrashing like puppets whose strings had been yanked by a madman.

One girl slipped.

I instinctively lurched forward, not quite fast enough.

She hit the corner of the wall headfirst. *Crack*.

My stomach went hollow.

But she didn't cry, didn't stop, didn't even react, only pushed herself upright and staggered forward again. That was when I noticed the veins pulsing wildly beneath the skin of her neck, purple and thick and so very similar to mine.

“Hey!” The word tore from my throat, and it hurt that she didn't hear me. Maybe she couldn't. Because before I could even reach her, her body convulsed. She slammed into another wall, this time collapsing.

I stopped dead.

Then a boy stumbled past me, mouth stretched open in a scream.

I grabbed for him, my hand passing straight through his arm.

No.

No, no, no—

“Emalyn, wait!” a familiar voice came next.

My head snapped toward the source.

A girl skidded to a halt directly in front of me, short golden hair, pale skin, blue eyes wide with terror.

I thought she'd seen me, but she wasn't looking at me, she was looking *through* me, as if I wasn't there at all.

Behind her, a silver-haired boy was still running, one arm wrapped around a girl's waist, holding her upright, the other locking her arm around his shoulders as he practically dragged her forward through the screaming crowd.

Davin.

“Fucking wait!”

The girl standing before me spun around. “What are we going to do, Davin?” she snapped. “She’s infected!”

The injured girl lifted her head.

And my heart stopped.

Short brown hair, wide dark eyes, veins curling beneath her fair skin like roots beneath ice...

Estelle.

That was Estelle.

My sister.

“I don’t care, Ema, I’m not leaving her behind!” Davin argued, his grip tightening around her. Only then did I notice the shard of glass buried deep in her side. Blood soaked through her clothes and yet he wouldn’t let go, wouldn’t loosen his hold. “We’re getting out. Together. All of us.”

The girl, Emalyn, hesitated for a moment.

Then, a freezing sensation tore through my chest as their bodies passed through mine like smoke.

I turned around. “No, don’t go that way!”

My feet moved before my mind registered, and I ran after them, almost reached them, almost got my sister, but the staircase trembled beneath me, the entire thing groaning. I grabbed the handrail to keep from falling, watching in horror as the stairs began to move, the spiral twisting, shifting, turning upward.

“No, no, shit, Davin!”

He was gone.

So was my sister.

And everyone else.

The screaming patients, the blood, the memories. *Gone.*

Just me, standing paralyzed and alone as the staircase carried me to the third floor, like the building had chosen a destination.

Locked double doors stretched along the left wall.

And at the very end of the hall, stood a single room, its metal door hanging open, a sliver of light spilling through the massive gap.

I walked forward, reached the doorway, looked inside, and saw *him*.

Diaz Reyes, the *Commander*, slumped in a leather chair, exhausted, defeated, somehow still human.

And in front of his desk? Another man.

Black hair, broad shoulders, a face I had spent hours trying to push out of my mind.

Maddox.

Alive. Breathing. Worried.

“This is bullshit!” He turned sharply, raking a hand through silky strands, anger radiating from him, raw, uncontrolled in a way that felt too familiar.

“Life might’ve stopped for you, Diaz,” he spat, spinning around once again, as he pointed directly at my father. “But that doesn’t mean it has to stop for me.”

Green eyes glared up at him. “It’s over, brother. We failed. It’s time to accept that.”

“I do accept that,” he snapped back. “But killing kids just because we failed to do one job isn’t necessary.”

My father frowned. “What of our deal?”

“Our deal? Fuck our deal!” Maddox yelled. “I don’t want a part in this slaughter. And neither do you.”

“We don’t have a choice.”

“We don’t... Wake up!” His voice cracked. “Wake up, Diaz. Let me save them instead of killing them!”

Hesitation crossed my father’s face, a rare thing.

“Think about your daughter,” Maddox said, and I felt my heart shatter into a million pieces. “What about her?”

“Estelle is already infected!” He exploded, fist crashing onto the desk.

“She’s dead, Maddox. There is nothing we can do. Do you understand that? She’s gone!”

Maddox froze. So did I.

Father leaned back, covered his face. “She’s fucking gone.”

“I could save her,” Maddox offered weakly. “Give me a chance. We might still be able to fix this.”

He looked at the desperate man. “Get out.”

“Wha—”

“Get out,” he countered. “Go ahead and save her if you believe you can. But I’m still doing it.”

Maddox stared at him.

The man I knew would kill him right there. But this... this version of him was different. He merely turned away and whispered, “There’s a special

place for you in hell. Hope you reach it soon.”

And then he walked toward the door, toward me.

I stepped aside, watching as he passed through without even noticing me.

Because none of this was real. Not anymore.

I wasn't here. I was only watching, watching, watching, and slowly being torn apart.

Rage erupted inside me.

I stormed inside and slammed both fists onto my father's desk. “It was you.” My voice broke. “You killed her. You took everything from her. *You* were the doctor.”

As the words left my mouth, the realization made me feel sick.

It was never Maddox.

It was him.

Always him.

“You did it,” I choked out.

He remained still, slumped in that chair, gaze fixed on a point far away. He couldn't see me or hear me or feel me. No one here could. It was torture.

I growled and grabbed a pen from the desk, drove it downward. “I hate you!”

The wood splintered.

Again.

“You killed her.”

Again.

The desk shook.

“You killed all of them!”

Again.

“And you mindfucked me!”

Again.

Again.

And again, as the words escaping my mouth dissolved into sobs, into screams, years of grief clawing their way free.

“You made me a murderer!”

The pen snapped.

I collapsed, knees hitting the floor.

The tears came so hard they stung.

But I couldn't stop, couldn't breathe, couldn't think.

I screamed until my throat felt scraped raw, kicked furniture apart, threw everything my hands touched, destroyed all there was except the one thing I wanted broken most.

Him.

Because my hatred had survived. Because he brought three children into this world and only learned how to love one of them. Because even his name tasted poisonous. Because the effort to stand, every step toward him, made my legs shake. The legs that he had broken. Once, twice, again. Because looking at him felt like swallowing glass shards, and because there he sat, head bowed, shoulders slumped, a monster, a killer, a stranger, and my father.

I stopped in front of his desk, bloodshot eyes staring down at his face. They hurt, and so did my chest. But with whatever remained of my voice, I whispered, "Why couldn't you love us?"

-

None of it was real.

But it used to be.

The hospital, Maddox, my father, Estelle... they were ghosts, echoes, fragments of something that had already happened. The truth inside them lived. Estelle had shown it to me on purpose. Every second, every room, every wound, was intentionally a gift, a punishment, maybe both.

But Maddox had known.

The realization settled into my chest.

He'd known exactly what would happen when I entered this place. That Estelle would find me, drag me through the rot buried beneath our lives, force me to see it all. He knew it would destroy me. Had planned his revenge before I even killed him. He saw it coming.

"Bastard." The word barely made it past my lips.

I felt hollow.

Completely hollow.

As though somebody had scooped out everything inside me and left behind a shell that just happened to look human.

I needed time to think, to breathe, to figure out how I was supposed to exist. So, I left. But my curse did not; everywhere I went? Fucking chaos followed.

The second I stepped back into the real world, white lights exploded around me.

Flashlights, every single direction.

“Hands where we can see them, Adelaide Reyes!”

I froze.

Enforcers.

At least six of them emerged from the rain-soaked clearing, weapons raised, already aimed, already waiting. “You don’t have to make this difficult, Adelaide,” one of them called, badge gleaming under the lights. “Drop any weapon you—”

I bolted, instinct, nothing more.

I turned toward the trees, toward the darkness, toward anywhere but them. And I made it two steps before a pair of hands slammed around my wrists, pain shooting through my arms as I was yanked backward.

“Don’t move,” a very familiar voice hissed into my ear.

My heart dropped.

No. No. Not him.

“Aiden.” The name came out strangled. I twisted around. “What the fuck are you doing?”

His grip only tightened, fingers digging into my skin as he pulled me against his chest and shouted over my shoulder, “Lower the guns!”

My eyes searched his face desperately, looking for him, looking for Gold Rush, for the boy who would never do this, and I couldn’t find him.

He went behind your back, Estelle screamed, didn’t we all know that?

Panic flooded my bloodstream.

“Let go of me,” I said, my heart pounding so hard it felt painful. “Let go!”

“Adelaide.” His voice was low. “Just listen.”

I stared at him. Then laughed in his face, a horrible sound. “I trusted you.”

His face crumpled. “No, I—”

“I trusted you.” The words felt heavier the second time, as if they weighed more now that I was beginning to believe this, believe him.

Why would he do this?

“Adelaide?”

Another voice, soft and shaken and familiar.

I turned, and there she was.

Lizzie.

The look in her eyes gave me the tiniest slice of relief.

But then I saw the badge pinned to her chest.

Of course.

My laugh grew louder. “This isn’t real.” Rain slid down my face as I looked toward the hospital. “This isn’t real, Estelle.” My eyes drifted back to Aiden, to the stranger wearing his face. “He would never do this.”

“No.” He held me tighter. “No, you’ve got to give me a chance to explain this—”

“Destiny!”

My head snapped toward the trees where I heard that voice.

It was him.

Elion.

Running, toward the guns, toward the danger, toward me.

“Eli!” I screamed. “Eli, don’t—”

Too late.

One of the Enforcers fired.

“ELI!”

She fired again, and again, and again.

Again.

Again.

Again.

And the worst part was, he almost dodged them all.

Almost.

One bullet slammed into his chest.

“NO!”

His body folded, knees hitting the mud, and suddenly he was falling. Just falling. Like the world itself had let go of him.

“Fuck, let go!” I kicked backward, hard.

Aiden’s grip loosened.

That was all I needed.

I threw myself against him, hands searching in a quick, desperate move for the gun I’d given him. Found it, held it away, pulled the trigger.

It hit his knee.

“SHIT!” Aiden released me, collapsed, and I was already running, sliding through mud, ignoring the screams behind me, ignoring the guns, ignoring everything but him.

Elion sat slumped against a fallen tree. Blood soaked his shirt, dark, endless, rainwater mixing with it as it poured down his chest. His breathing

sounded wrong. Wet and broken and dying.

“Eli.” I dropped beside him. “It’s OK. I’ve got you. It’s OK.” My hands shook. *Stop the bleeding. Stop it.* “It’s all right. Breathe. I’m here.”

His gray eyes opened slowly, searching, finding me. “Des.”

“Yeah.” I pressed against the wound, as if I could force the blood back into him, as if anything about this could stop him from leaving me. “It’s me. I’m right here. You’re going to be OK.”

Relief flickered over his features. “I’m...sorry.”

A sob climbed into my throat. “Don’t waste breath, idiot. Just shut up.”

“Step away from him! Hands in the air!” The Enforcers were shouting again, weapons clicking, reloading, preparing.

I didn’t even look at them. Only leaned forward to shield him with my own immune body.

Let them shoot now.

See how that ends.

“No!” Lizzie cried somewhere behind us. “Don’t fire, she’s my sister!”

Elion laughed, a weak, wet, broken sound. “You’re...in trouble.” Blood spilled from his lips.

I flinched, looked up, and nearly stopped applying pressure. “Stop talking.”

“I should’ve—”

“Don’t!” My hands trembled, crimson all over me.

His fingers twitched. But his hand still came up, holding my wrist. “I thought... you’d left.”

My chest shattered. Tears blurred everything. “Don’t be stupid. I might hate you sometimes. But I don’t leave you behind. Ever.”

His eyes began to drift, slowly, stars disappearing. “I hate that...I—”

“Elion, stop talking!” I yelled, looking around, something that might be stronger than my hands, something to tie the chest with, to stop the bleeding.

“Adelaide Reyes, there won’t be a third warning!”

Shut up, shut up, shut up.

“Des...”

My eyes snapped toward him. “Stop.”

He was watching me.

“I’ll find something. I’ll do something.” I lifted the hand he was weakly gripping and pushed my hair back from my eyes. “You won’t die. I won’t

let you.”

His eyelids fluttered.

“Hey, no!” I tapped his cheek.

But his eyes remained closed.

And his hand relaxed.

“No, Eli, no!”

His chest rose once beneath my palm, fell, never rose again.

I stared. “Eli.”

He was gone.

I pulled my bloody, trembling hand back, then folded over him, clinging to him, begging, crying, before hands grabbed me, dragged me upward and away from him, away from the last person who looked for me.

Pain shot through my shoulders. I fought anyway. Kicked, clawed, screamed. “Don’t touch me!” Mud splashed beneath my boots. “Don’t fucking touch me!”

The Enforcers held on. Iron hands, iron hearts, pulling me farther and farther away.

“Let her go!” Lizzie shouted.

I looked at her.

She was bent over Aiden.

Blood pooled beneath his leg, and yet his eyes found mine, accusing, wounded, as if I were the traitor here. The sight did something to my raging heart.

It satisfied me slightly.

Because that wound was nothing, and part of me wanted him to understand exactly how little it was compared to what they’d done, compared to what they’d taken.

I memorized every face around me, every badge, every pair of hands and every trigger finger, every future corpse, focusing especially on the girl who shot him.

Black hair, fair skin, blue eyes, thin lips, crooked nose.

“Please,” Lizzie begged. “Let her go—”

I looked straight at her, straight through her. “I’m going to kill you.”

She froze, horror flashing across her face.

“I’m going to kill every single one of you.”

An Enforcer squeezed my arm. “I think it would be wise for you to stay quiet, Reyes,” he said. “The dead don’t speak.”

THE END.

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And... take a deep breath.

I have to admit, writing all that chaos back-to-back was extremely difficult. It ruined my mood through writing *and* editing, so it's OK if it ruined yours, too.

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Just kidding.

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