

Jade Pearson

Mountainview MFA

Jo Knowles

She Was a Teenage Heroine

Prologue

Maxon

The stone structure had been hewn into the cliff face through sheer force of effort, half-emergent like a creature of gravel and granite clawing its way to the surface. If Maxon hadn't tripped over the remnants of a stair, he might have missed it. His clothes were wet and heavy on his shoulders, the soles of his shoes doing little to protect his feet from the sharp rocks of the cliff base Braided horse-hair rope, swollen with river water, still bound his wrists behind his back; his face smacked onto mercifully damp earth, his chest on an errant rock.

Maxon's lungs emptied, which was a blessing that kept him from shouting as his right shoulder forsook its socket. His vision went dark and shiny in the same instant. He thought he might black out. Would he know if he had?

Adrenaline got Maxon onto his left side and curled his knees to his chest without the aid of oxygen. It rolled him onto his knees without the aid of sight. Adrenaline got his feet back underneath him and surged for two whole steps before breathlessness and vertigo brought him to the ground again. It was as though he had forgotten where the ground was. He'd put his foot down and somehow missed.

Maxon gave himself the proper time to gather a full breath before he tried again. He heard howling in the distance and willed his chest to rise. When it did, it did so in staccato, uneven jerks. Each one did its part to clear the growing darkness from his periphery.

Maxon stood and, though he swayed, he did not fall. The act of standing, however, had caused his left arm to pull at his bindings and his dislocated right shoulder. He groaned against a bitten lip and endured.

He reveled a moment in the silence that surrounded him. No lanterns shone from across the nearby river. No soldiers called down his location from the clifftop above. The howl from before had been too feral for a hunting dog, and there hadn't been another. Anyway, Maxon imagined he smelled more like freshwater griffish guts and less like a revered holy knight. Any hounds that might have been sent in pursuit of him wouldn't know him from cat's vomit.

He was, for the moment, safe.

Safe, but injured, he reminded himself. His shoulder would have to be dealt with sooner rather than later, and he needed his hands free. Maxon bent his knees and squatted low to work his bound wrists down and around the seat of his soaked linen pants. Ironically, it seemed that the dislocation gave him barely enough added length to his right arm to make the distance. He did scream this time, though.

Maxon fell on his butt and sobbed into his knees but only allowed himself five seconds of self-pity. He counted them aloud.

“One. Get up. Two. Get up. Three...”

At *five*, he made himself lean back far enough to tuck his left leg through the circle of his arms. He took a moment to rest and prepare himself for the next step, hands bound front-and-

back of his groin, then brought his right foot up and placed it on the rope between his hands. He took three short, sharp breaths and pushed on the rope.

Maxon knew to push straight out from his right shoulder and to increase the tension slowly, but he had never done this on himself before. The pain of the pull caused a tremor in his right leg that put it off course and left him feeling like a foal on new limbs. He stopped and spent a moment trembling and ratchetting together all his remaining resolve to try again. This time, he rolled forward and knelt on his left knee, the rope squashed between his boot and the beach. Doubled-over, he stood and used the combined strength in both legs and his back to stabilize the direction and strength of his pull.

He nearly blacked out, but a moment later was both rewarded and punished by the violent *pop* of the bone rejoining its joint.

Maxon quickly pulled his right leg back fell onto his left side, breathless and sweaty. He'd made too much noise not to be noticed, and yet there were still no signs that anyone had heard him. He must have been in the river much longer than he'd realized.

He pressed his face into the cool pebbles of the beach until he could see and breathe normally. That was when he first realized he was not on some untouched shore in the Llaren forest as he'd thought.

He blinked weary eyes, but it wasn't a hallucination. Moonlight glinted in neatly-arranged squares up the side of the cliff. They almost looked like...

“Windows?”

Maxon got to his feet and looked up, up, up.

It was a tower. Well, it was *shaped* like a tower, but towers were meant to be built in high places for surveillance and protection. This one appeared to have been fully built and then shoved into the cliff where it had become a part of the mountain.

“What in the Five Nations—”

Maxon followed shattered steps that looked no different from any other rock on the beach up to a stone door. His heart leapt. Etched into the surface of the door—too faint to see from where he’d been standing—was a rising sun inside a diamond, but what was a symbol of the Immaculate doing all the way out here?

The Immaculate. Rosleana. It had been less than a day since her death, hadn’t it? Why did it feel like weeks?

Maxon opened the door and stepped inside.

The room in which Maxon stood was three times his own height and filled with corners filled with shadows. Moonlight’s only entry was a pair of windows near the ceiling. It wasn’t much, but it allowed Maxon to find an oil lamp and a firestarter on a table next to the door. Once that was lit, however, its light did little to reveal the purpose of this impossible place. The only guess Maxon could make was that this was one of the destinations of Rosleana’s annual pilgrimage, a place of prayer and isolated reflection.

Why, then, was it filled from floor to ceiling with a chaotic accumulation of filthy papers, rotting crates, and dull artifacts of arcane origin?

There were shelves full of books and handwritten journals. A glance through these told Maxon that they were diaries from those who had held the title of Immaculate before Rosleana had assumed the role, some of them hundreds of years old. They smelled of old binding glue and

mildew and made Maxon want to sneeze. The air near them felt somehow more damp than anywhere else in the room.

The crates, which were stacked on top of one another, carried everything from moth-eaten wardrobe to writing supplies to fishing tackle. Most of them were warped or eaten through by moisture and many of the stacks leaned against walls or one another. One, which had contained an assortment of the white robes worn by the Pristine had collapsed onto a workbench that had been used for soap-making. A wooden, three-legged stool had been crushed. Jars of animal fat had shattered, which explained the persistent smell of death he hadn't been able to shake upon entering, and a cauldron of wood ash had been knocked over. The ash clung to the fat in putrescent clods and lay in thick layers across the stone floor.

There was a knife, too, for cutting the soap into bars. Maxon took it and whispered an apology to the Immaculate as he used it to cut strips from a holy robe and fashion himself a fraying sling. He strapped his arm tightly across his abdomen so he couldn't move it. Doing so one-handed was awkward, but he managed to get it tied with the help of a higher-than-average tolerance for pain and a few swear words that would have made Rosleana blush.

On the far side of the room, a blackened fireplace had been built into a recess; above it, steps curved along the wall up to the second floor. He had to wrestle his way through the mountains of cluttered supplies to reach the stairs, but it was hard to keep his balance with one arm tied down and the other holding the heavy lantern.

The second floor was as bare as the first was congested. There was a bed and another fireplace, smaller than the first. At the foot of the bed sat a heavy, iron box. A lock had been looped through metal hasp, but hadn't been closed.

Maxon looked between the iron box and the bed, torn between his need to sleep and his need for answers and guidance. If divine providence had brought him to this tower, then perhaps that same providence had left this box unlocked for him to discover its contents. He wasn't sure how he could believe that a world in which the Immaculate had been murdered in front of him could provide any answers worth having.

Faith was a difficult habit to break, it seemed, for Maxon found himself approaching the box. He sat on the floor and placed the lantern next to him, then pulled the lock from its hasp and opened the iron box.

The greasy light of the lantern shone back at him from the eight polished metal spikes.

Maxon smiled.

Chapter One

Violet

The hospital room was cold and full of love. The speckled linoleum warred against teddy bears and hand-drawn get-well cards. The sheer, manila walls loomed over the indomitable occupant of the inclined bed. A rainbow afghan shielded her from the perpetual frown of the EKG machine.

Violet, in her scrubs with their saccharine teddy bear pattern, chewed her lip, and busied herself by rereading the chart she had already memorized. She avoided eye contact with her patient, a twelve-year-old who had been uncharacteristically quiet for the past excruciating half-hour.

A deep sigh. The nurse sank to her knees.

“Please, Alise. I’m begging you. Put me out of my misery.”

Alise raised her eyebrows but didn’t look away from the stack of loose-leaf pages stacked against her upward-bent knees.

“Learn a little patience,” the young girl told her. “It’ll make you a better nurse.” She removed the top page from the dwindling stack of pages and overturned it onto the stack of read ones.

“I’m a *very* patient nurse. Just not a patient writer. And who taught you to have such an amazing poker face, anyway, huh?”

Alise cleared her throat and turned the page. “My mom.”

Violet pulled herself up from the floor. “Are you done yet?”

“No.”

“Are you done *yet*?”

Alise broke eye contact with the pages. “How old are you?”

Violet grinned and adopted a terrible-on-purpose impression of Alise’s voice. “*How old are you?*”

Alise rolled her eyes, but the corner of her mouth twitched, and Violet tallied another victory. Even if the girl was on the mend for now, Alise’s prognosis was a series of hospital visits, medications, experimental treatments, and not-so-subtle sidelong glances from her long-suffering mother. There is no cure for cystic fibrosis, and Alise would battle it all her life.

But today was a good day. Today, Alise’s most recent lung infection had finally cleared up enough for her to be discharged, which meant that Violet had to release the next five chapters of her in-progress novel to the young expert. Several months prior, Alise had contracted a viral strain of pneumonia and extracted a bargain out of Violet. If Alise got better, Violet had to let her read some of the manuscript she’d been working on. Alise had gotten better and had been gradually making her way through the entire novel over the course of the past year.

Now, as Violet anguished over the relinquishment of a book she hadn’t even let her own husband read, Alise seemed to be teasing her, reading as slowly as possible. Violet wandered over to the stack of books on Alise’s bedside table. This infection had been a bad one, worse than the pneumonia that had led to the initial agreement. Alise had been in the hospital for more than three weeks this time and, during all that stress, she had still managed to consume eight books in addition to Violet’s. They had titles like *Prince Tree House*, *The Splintered Flame*, and *Confessions of a Teenaged Werewolf*.

One of them caught her Violet’s and she tugged it out from under several others. *How to Die*, the spine said. She turned it over in her hands. It was a YA contemporary novel about a teenaged girl with congenital HIV; it was a coming-of-age tragedy. Violet opened it to the

copyright page to check the dates. She frowned. It had only been published two years ago, after new breakthroughs with antiretrovirals had increased life expectancy by more than fifty years in HIV-positive patients.

Violet muttered something about irresponsible publishing practices and put the book back down. She thought about telling Alise that people with HIV, even children who were born with it, went on to live fulfilling lives, but Alise at that moment had turned the final page of the final chapter.

Alise took a deep breath and looked up at Nurse Violet.

“It’s okay.”

A deathblow. Violet’s shoulders dropped. “It’s okay?”

Alise held out her right hand, palm down, and see-sawed it to indicate the manuscript’s mediocrity.

Violet drew a cold breath. “So, not good?”

Alise shrugged. “It’s not *not*-good.”

Violet’s eye rabbitied between Alise, the manuscript, and the stack of likely terrible books on her nightstand. “What’s wrong with it?”

Alise looked away.

Violet’s voice took on a pitch of urgency. “If there’s anyone who’s read enough books to tell me what I need to fix, it’s you.”

Alise looked up at Violet, leaning back on her fluffed pillows. “I think you’re too close to the material to take the answer well. I don’t think you could hand the criticism, emotionally speaking.”

“Aw, c’mon, Alise. I can take it. How am I supposed to get better if no one tells me the truth, huh?”

Alise lifted her right eyebrow. “Promise not to take it personally?”

Violet paused. Nothing in her life had ever been *more* personal, but she needed to know. She thinned her lips and crossed her heart.

Alise pulled her chin down and looked at Violet from the tops of her eyes.

“I swear!” Violet said. “I won’t take it personally.”

Alise crossed her arms over her chest as though to put up a shield between herself and Nurse Violet before firing all phasers.

“It’s cliché.”

Violet’s life forced drained out through her toes. “Cliché?” she asked, desperate. “What’s cliché about it?”

Alise reloaded. “Uh, everything?”

“What?”

“I mean, it’s YA fiction, so I’m sure *someone* will read it, but it’s just the same stuff as every other YA book. You have your standard, misunderstood female protagonist, an orphan with a plant for a name.”

“*I’m* an orphan with a plant for a name.”

Alise gave Violet an apologetic shrug, but didn’t let up with her truth bombs. “She’s a bookworm who gets bullied and spends all her time in the library.”

“That happens in real life, though.”

“And some cute, mysterious boy shows up, tells her she’s the chosen one, and whisks her away to another world where she finds out she has magical powers. And, at the end, she fights

off a whole army, then goes back home to Nowhere, Idaho, and she's just a normal girl again with no powers, no cute boy, or anything.”

“No good?”

Alise shook her head. “No. First of all, *chosen-one* prophecies are totally played out. It totally undermines the urgency of your whole narrative if some ancient tree or witch or whatever lays out exactly what your hero needs to do to beat the bad guy. Good stories need more uncertainty.

Violet nodded, but frowned. She opened her mouth to ask a question, then closed it when she realized she didn't know how to ask it.

“What else?” she asked instead.

“Second of all, your dark, brooding mystery boy is so basic it hurts. The way he talks is like *‘I'm so deep and enigmatic; I see and understand your soul.’*”

“Well, he's actually based on someone I knew when I was young...”

“No,” Alise said. “No one talks like that.”

“Some people talk like that,” Violet protested.

“Who? No one else talks like that, even in this book!”

This caught Violet by surprise. “Yes, they do. Everyone from the same world as him.”

Alise picked up and waved the pages at Violet. “Not according to these pages. He talks like a reject from the court of King Arthur, and everyone else talks like the main character.”

“That can't be right...” Violet took the pages from Alise and flipped through them to inspect the dialogue. “How did I manage to...?”

“Face it, Nurse Vi. You caught feelings for an eboy is what happened. They say stuff sometimes that sounds like the dark poetry of your angsty teen soul, but it’s no deeper than public bathroom graffiti.”

Violet coughed and her mouth quirked up. She parroted Alise’s earlier question to herself. “How old are you?”

Alise leaned back and waved an encompassing hand. “Older than I should be.” She patted the haphazard stack of pages next to her. “The point is, though, this isn’t bringing anything new to the table, Nurse Vi. It’s all been done before.”

“It has?”

Alise throws her hands up and sighs in frustration. “Maybe you should crack open a book.”

“Hey, now.”

“I’m serious.” Alise clapped the back of her right hand into her left palm three times for emphasis. “Get. To know. Your genre.”

Violet couldn’t stop the wobble of her lower lip.

“See, I told you you weren’t going to be able to handle the truth.”

Violet went over to Alise’s bedside to rescue her eviscerated manuscript. “I just don’t understand how it could be cliché. I worked really hard on making it as realistic as I—” She interrupted herself with a cough before continuing— “as I could.”

“Well, I didn’t have a problem with your realism. Your story is cliché, and your characters aren’t believable, but your world building is actually really good.”

Violet paused while shuffling the pages back into a neat stack.

“My worldbuilding?”

Alise nodded. “Yeah, I mean, aside from the we-have-to-rely-on-a-teenaged-girl-to-fight-our-battles part, Steria is a great world. I love the lava pools between Tyr and Gostra with the living skeletons. The Flying Forest is cool, too, and the parts where she sailed on a smuggler’s ship are my favorite. The Immaculacy is cool, too. I like the idea of a religion that isn’t based on the worship of some old whitebeard in the sky.”

Alise shot a look to the windowsill across the room where a framed depiction of a suspiciously-white, basset-faced Jesus Christ prayed for her recovery. Alise’s mother had placed it there; Alise had turned it to face the far end of the room.

Violet didn’t have to ask why. She’d seen enough sick children to know that chronic illness had a tendency to push people either closer to or further away from organized religion. Alise had been pushed further. Her mother, closer.

“She means well,” Violet said.

Alise nodded. “She believes because she’s scared not to.” The weariness in her voice prodded at Violet’s heart. She knew fifty-year-olds whose voices couldn’t match the exhaustion in twelve-year-old Alise’s.

“It just doesn’t make sense to me anymore,” Alise said. “There’s this guy, and he’s supposed to be so powerful. He can do anything. And he’s the embodiment of goodness and righteousness. *And* he knows everything that has ever happened, *is* happening now, and ever *will* happen in the future.” Alise tried to laugh, but it sounded hollow to Violet, like an echo. “But he doesn’t *do* anything about bad stuff.”

Violet listened quietly. She had to be careful here—had to walk a narrow line between being emotionally supportive to Alise without undermining her mother’s beliefs either. She cared

deeply for Alise, but there was a wall of professionalism that couldn't be uncrossed, and religion was one of those walls.

There was always an equilibrium to be maintained.

“How can someone be *that* good, *that* powerful, and know *literally everything*, and still not fix the bad stuff?” Alise asked.

Alise looked up at Violet with questions and tears in her eyes. Maybe it had been a bad idea to let her read the manuscript. This infection had taken a lot out of her, physically and emotionally.

Violet sat down on the edge of Alise's bed. Honesty was best with Alise; she hated being patronized.

“Honestly, sweetie, I don't know. It may be a *cliché*,” she said with a grin, “but I grew up in the foster system. I was about six when I went in, and I aged out at eighteen. I didn't have the sort of horrible experiences some kids have, but I also didn't stay in one place long enough to really soak up any religion from any of my carers. Have you tried talking to your mom about this?”

Alise looked down at her hands and picked at her cuticles. She shrugged. “I talked to my therapist about it some, but she doesn't have anything useful to say. I asked her if she believes in God, and she didn't answer. She asked me what I believe.”

“What did you say?”

“I told her that I thought God was just my mom's ‘happy place.’”

Violet again chose silence.

Alise leaned forward and finished squaring the loose manuscript pages on the bed. “I wish Steria could be my happy place.”

There she goes again, playing my heart like a xylophone.

Alise moved to hand the stack to Violet, but Violet put her hand on it and settled it back down onto the girl's lap.

“Keep it,” she said. “At least until I’ve got a second draft.”

Alise smiled. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

Chapter Two

Elliot

The vending machine gaped at Elliot with its cycloptic window and dumb, yawning mouth. Its wide, mechanical flap mocked him with a thick, embossed message: PUSH OPEN. This break room terrorist, a frequent denier of midmorning pick-me-ups, held hostage Elliot's cheese-and-sausage combo pack. The heart-clogging snack bridged the gap between its spiral dispensary canal and the glass facing.

I will beat the hell out of you, Elliot thought at the machine. I will kick you until you release my greasy prize.

But Elliot didn't kick the machine. Kicking company property was an excellent way to receive corrective action. Kicking company property was an excellent way of encouraging rumors about your "rage issues."

"Don't talk to Elliot," they would say. "He kicks inanimate objects. He gets angry for no reason. Elliot's violent. He's crazy."

Then, all of a sudden, you were the guy who people always suspected had a violent streak. Everyone had always known you would snap one day and throw a computer monitor out an open window or rip the doors of men's bathroom stalls.

Who is the guy who keeps doing that, anyway?

Elliot wasn't paranoid. Well, by nature he had always been *somewhat* paranoid, but it wasn't because of office politics. Elliot had seen this scenario play out before. It had happened to Janet, who had been sighted smacking around the copy machine when it had eaten her report on the best ways to treat diarrhea in cancer patients.

Bisocodyl and Senna: Effective Colon Rebooters, or Unimpactful Impactors?

Of course, Janet had actually been a bitch. Anyone who brought empty tupperware to an office pitch-in luncheon was a sociopath.

So Elliot had few options for retrieving his snack. He could go the Janet route and attempt to rough up an eight-hundred-pound vending machine. Or he could go to the company security task and ask for his two dollars back.

The trouble with that was that Becky at security would make him show her the withheld snack. There was too high a likelihood that he would bring her back to the break room to find that someone else had bravely knocked some sense into the vending machine and stolen his treat. Elliot would look like a liar. Becky would give him an annoyed look. She wouldn't say—but her abusive eyebrows would imply—“It's only two dollars, Elliot.”

Or, worse. The trans-fat treat would still be there and Becky would have proof that Elliot had been attempting to jump off the wagon of the company weight loss challenge in which the entire office had agreed to participate. Or that no one had strenuously contested, in any case. She would shame him with her thinned lips and doubtless tell the whole office that he wasn't as committed to working off his desk weight as everyone else was.

Elliot's foot tap-tapped while he weighed his options. He didn't need the fat or the sodium. He wasn't even that hungry. He had come to the break room out of boredom. Out of avoidance of writing his own uninspired article for the inter-office newsletter about data reporting etiquette. But he had already put his money in the machine. To walk away at that point would be wasteful.

Elliot reached out a hand to smack the glass but considered the possibility of breaking it and slicing his hand open. He would bleed out on the floor of the break room, which was cleaned

barely to minimum standards and smelled like day-old microwaved fish thanks to someone who clearly had no sense of smell or courtesy, next to a broken dishwasher.

The dishwasher hadn't been cleaned since he'd joined the company five years before and released the rotting stench of desiccated food remnants that brought to mind his Advanced Anatomy class and the putrid fog that tumbled out of a fermented corpse. There was no sign warning people not to open the dishwasher. It was a rite of passage for new hires to make this grim mistake, and though the entire office paid for it with their nasal linings, a bitter satisfaction was gained from the knowledge that someone younger and better with computers had suffered for their hope of a clean dish.

Elliot didn't want to die surrounded by corpse-stench.

But he would at least be exempt from writing his article on data reporting etiquette if he did.

Data Reporting: Creating a Compendium of Common SQL Queries for Office Use

Or, in plain English, *Data Misers: No One Benefits From You Coming Up With More Efficient Queries and Hoarding Them for Yourself*, Kenneth

Elliot sighed. He knocked on the glass face of the machine with his first two knuckles, Mormon-like. Polite.

The door of the break room opened and Elliot flinched like he'd been caught doing something shameful.

"Jeezus, Elliot, take a pill. Get a massage. Switch to decaf. You're always so goddamn tense!"

A small but deceptively strong hand smacked him between the shoulder blades. He tripped forward and hit the glass of the vending machine with his whole face. The glass rattled. The snack dropped into the vending receptacle.

“Hey, free snack!”

Maggie, the office nuisance and Elliot’s best friend, reached into the PUSH OPEN mouth and claimed the cheese-and-sausage combo pack. She slapped it into Elliot’s hand with an amount of force Elliot felt was unnecessary.

“Courtesy of your face,” she said.

“Thanks.”

Elliot ripped it open with her teeth and ate both cheese and sausage simultaneously. Normally he would have at least had the decency to finish one before starting the other. (Cheese first, he decided.), but it hardly mattered since he was only eating out of boredom in the first place.

“Hey, you coming to the barbeque this weekend?” Maggie asked.

“Barbeque?”

“Yeah, at my house on Sunday. The wife and I are celebrating.”

“What are you celebrating?”

“My surgery, my guy.”

So much information, so quickly.

“Surgery? Maggie, how did I now know that you’re having surgery?”

“Oh! I thought you knew already. Anita was in charge of the invitations.”

Elliot felt like the victim of whiplash. “Are you talking about the dinner party on Sunday?”

Maggie fed a dollar into the soda machine. “Yeah, that’s the one.”

Elliot recalled the email invite Anita had sent him. “The... ‘intimate gathering of close friends for dinner and drinks’?”

“Fuck that racket, man. I’m getting a *pacemaker* on Monday. We’re having one of those block parties fraternities have that turn into such glorious disasters that their universities revoke their charter.”

“Pacemaker? Maggie, slow down. You never even told me you were having trouble with your heart. What the hell is happening?”

Maggie laughed and clipped him on the shoulder with her fist. “No, no, my dude. The pacemaker is going in my ass.”

Elliot blinked. “Beg pardon?”

Maggie tugged the waistband of her jeans, excited. “Yeah! It’s so I can stop wearing these adult diapers.”

Maggie, truly, had no verbal filter. It was a fact that made her an outcast in the office, but it was also the reason Elliot appreciated her company; he never had to wonder what she was thinking. Everyone else was a mystery to him, but if Maggie had something on her mind, it was bound to tumble right out of her mouth.

Doing his best not to make eye contact with Maggie’s crotch, Elliot closed his eyes and shook his head.

“I, uh. I didn’t know you wore, uh...”

“Oh, yeah. Three years now. My pisser’s broken.”

Elliot had done acid only once in his life. It had been in college, and it had been something like this conversation.

“Y-your, what now?”

“My brain and my bladder haven’t been on speaking terms for a while now,” Maggie said. “But technology is great. They’ve got this pacemaker now, and they put it in your ass and hook it up to your nerves, and it tells you when to piss.”

Elliot had a feeling that she was either outright wrong about how the pacemaker worked, or that had been a vast oversimplification, but he no longer felt like Maggie was speaking a foreign language.

“Well, I don’t remember getting the invite,” he said. Truthfully, Elliot had an elaborate email filtering system set up that sent most of Maggie’s emails directly to his deleted items so he didn’t have to look at them. Maggie was the Picasso of getting inappropriate memes past the decency filters the company put on their laptops.

“The ‘que is on Sunday. I bought a *whole-goddamned-pig*. I’m gonna slow-roast that sunuvabitch for twenty-four hours in my homemade hog roaster.” She grabbed an invisible spit and mimed turning it slowly while she humped the air and smacked an imaginary ass with her other hand. “It’s gonna be the tits. It’s a luau, so wear a Hawaiian shirt and don’t forget to bring your smokin’ hot wife.”

Chapter Three

Maxon

Purple light flickered all around Maxon. It roared in whispers like the sound of cupping a shell to an ear. It stung his skin and tasted like metal on his lips. It wasn't like using magic that belonged to him. Using one's own magic was less aggressive. It was cooperative, like an agreement.

Using magic tethered to an inanimate object was like asking a favor from someone you didn't know and who didn't owe you anything. It would do the job, but it wouldn't be gentle about it. The flow of energy hurled Maxon forward toward a gash of light like a scar in the void. He hit it, but it didn't immediately give way. He was compressed, made to fit. It wasn't a physical toll, but felt in the spirit.

It had been like this the first time, he remembered.

Maxon braced himself. The delivery wouldn't be easy. He felt as though his soul were being passed through a fishing net, diced into tiny diamonds. Finally, he was through to the other side and with enough time to shift so he landed on his left side. He landed without trying to mitigate the impact by rolling. It was brutal, but it spared his right shoulder further injury and the fall had been short enough that he recovered well.

He was certainly in the Hollow World. What had Violet called it? Dirt?

Everything smelled stale in Dirt, like the windows to this world had all been irreversibly shut for hundreds of years. The air had a metallic quality that never went away. It was night, but there were only a handful of stars overhead, even fewer than he remembered if that were possible. He had only visited Dirt once before, and it hadn't been for long. Still, had some

terrifying force been blowing out the stars in this world? It had long lost its magic. When Steria lost its magic, would its stars also begin going out?

Maxon shivered. It was the chill in the air, he told himself. He had left Steria in summer, but it seemed to be late autumn in Dirt and his clothes were still wet from the river.

His clothes. He sighed. He hadn't considered his clothes. Unless much had changed since the last time he'd been to Dirt, his clothes would make him noticeable. He would have to find replacements.

Maxon looked around. He'd landed in a park with children's swings and several other, more mysterious apparatus for... what? Play? Exercise? Military training? The ground here was unnatural and bounced beneath his weight. Three brightly-painted, be-saddled ducks on massive, red springs baffled him. Was this what entertained the nonmagical children of Dirt? Maxon's childhood had been spent in a disciplinary academy to prepare him for service to the Immaculate, not bouncing about on iron avians.

Where was he? He shouldn't be far from where Violet would be; that was how the magic worked, but how would he *find* her?

Beyond the stone roads surrounding the park sat rows of dainty houses, each on a quarter-acre of short, brownish grass. Fences. Maxon didn't understand these fences. The ones in front of the houses were impotent, waist-high decorations meant to deter no one. The ones in back were indefensible against any determined adversary. Since it was socially unacceptable for people to mark their territory like dogs, these Dirtlings had chosen to mark it with flimsy planks and twisted wire.

But one of the houses was different from the rest. While the others were varying shades of stone and brick or neutral beiges and grey-washed primary colors, one house stood out even in the darkness, a beacon of dramatic hues and unnecessary knickknacks.

That every single plant in the small flower garden out front was hopelessly deceased was the confirmation he needed: this was Violet's house. Probably. He would have to wait and watch to be sure.

Maxon climbed into the interior of a wooden structure nearby—*So this park was for military training!*—and crouched in an archway from which a metal slide protruded. From there, he had a perfect view of the house and several of its neighbors and it wasn't likely he would be noticed by patrolmen in the shadow of the fort.

Maxon made himself as comfortable as possible and waited for the sun.

If time passed in Dirt the same way it passed in Steria, then Maxon passed six hours in the children's fort before the sun came up, and another two before he saw any movement in the house across the street. He was stiff from sitting in the same position most of that time, save for a brief period when he'd had to flatten himself against the deck of the fort when a large, slow-moving patrol car had driven past the park. It was shinier and sleeker than the one he'd encountered as a teenager; the need of Violet's people to innovate was insatiable. Or, perhaps it was their proclivity to make inferior devices that needed constant replacing rather than quality components that would last.

While Maxon mused about the unfathomable motivations of Dirlings, the morning bloomed into movement. Solid portcullises rose and more vehicles emerged from within caverns that had been filled with shelves and boxes in the same way the Immaculate's tower had been.

Fashion seemed to be as important in the shape and color of these vehicles as it was with regards to the clothes of the noble court in Steria.

Thinking about royal fashions only reminded Maxon of what he'd come to Dirt to do. A foul taste rose in his mouth when he pictured Rosleana's severed head tumbling from the dais to land in front of him. His fault.

He spat, shameful.

When the portcullis of the house with the dead plants opened, and a silver vehicle emerged—truly, the extravagance of *silver* for an appliance used to transport one's self between locations was a luxury that surpassed Maxon's understanding—Maxon used the slide to dismount the tiny garrison. He moved quickly to catch the vehicle before it could leave, but stopped short.

It wasn't Violet. The driver was a man, a tall man with glasses and too little muscle definition in his upper arms.

Damn.

He'd picked the wrong house, and now he had no idea where to find Violet. He couldn't be sure the portal had brought him to her. He could be anywhere in Dirt. She could be on the other side of the world! It was conceivable that he wasn't even *in* Dirt, wasn't it? He'd used unfamiliar magic with no backup plan or thought for caution.

Despair washed over Maxon. He had failed. He'd failed to protect Rosleana, had failed to prevent the destruction of the divine order of the Pristine, had failed to save his comrades-in-arms from capture and execution. Now, he had failed to find the only person he knew who could save Steria.

Maxon put a hand on a nearby tree and leaned into it. He let the grooves of the rough bark press into his palm. He focused his self-loathing into the contact. On a reflex, he reached for the point behind his navel from which he drew his magic and found it emptier than usual. Even in Steria, he'd had so little power remaining that he couldn't risk using the last of it to heal himself. Here, in Dirt, it didn't exist, like a severed limb except it didn't have the good grace to ache where it had been cut away from him.

The portcullis opened a second time, and a white vehicle reversed down the drive. Maxon instinctively ducked behind his support tree, but he saw her at the last instant before she drove away. Her face was fuller, her eyes ringed with dark circles, but it was her. So... the man in the silver vehicle was...

Ah. Of course, she had married. She'd been away from Steria for fifteen years, after all. It wasn't as though Maxon had expected her to be alone, but he hadn't expected her to be not alone. He hadn't considered the possibility, but it was obvious.

Maxon commanded his chest to stop aching. Their attachment was more than a decade decayed, and their parting had been... unsatisfactory. She hadn't said goodbye. She had simply gone.

Violet had disappeared around the corner before Maxon could react, but now he leapt into action. The binding of his right arm affected his balance and speed, and he only managed to roll himself halfway under the portcullis. He closed his eyes and prepared to be crushed to death, but instead of cutting him in half, the gate reversed and ascended once more. Maxon scrambled out of the way, further into the vehicle stable. His head swung left and right, but he was alone. No one manned the gate controls. In fact, they appeared to be automatic.

How Dirt had acclimated to the absence of magic, Maxon did not understand, but he was in awe of it. The portcullis had retracted itself, though it was apparently not smart enough to close itself once Maxon had gotten out of the way, and Maxon didn't know how to make it. He hoped it wouldn't be too suspicious to leave it open.

Maxon entered the house from the stable through an unlocked door into a kitchen. Violet's home smelled like vanilla and roasted chestnuts. It was clean, but cluttered, and warm air flowed into every room from raised, wall-length openings, some of which clicked when they turned on.

This wasn't a house. This was a home. This place had been lived in. Violet hadn't just moved on with her life. She'd done so long ago. Until two days ago, nothing in his life had changed since they were last together. Why would it? He was a soldier of the White Guard, a life-long servant to the Immaculate. He had been so focused on finding her that he hadn't anticipated what her life would look like once he had. Now, everything he'd planned to say to her sounded inadequate. How could he convince her to leave *this* behind?

She might even have children.

The thought strayed sideways into Maxon's mind, unbidden. How had these things never occurred to him? He had thought of little else but Violet in fifteen years, but in all that time he'd never imagined her as a wife or a mother. At least, not someone else's.

How foolish. How selfish.

Portraits lined every wall. If she had children, there was no evidence of them, but Maxon no longer had any doubt that the man in the silver vehicle was Violet's husband. The portraits were not like the stodgy, unsmiling caricatures produced by Steria's proud artists. They were

laughter and lightness and jubilation. They were like living memories, perfectly preserved beneath glass.

Maxon ached. He had no hope.

Chapter Four

Elliot

It wasn't unusual for Violet to forget to close the garage door when she left. It also wasn't unheard of for spiderwebs on the underside of the door to trigger the motion sensor before it could reach the bottom, sending it back up. Regardless, coming home in the dark to an empty house with the garage open—and the lockless door into the house exposed to the outside world—always put him on edge. It was like visiting any ordinary place after it had been closed up for the day and experiencing the eerie emptiness that made it seem alien. He smacked the button that would lower the garage door on his way inside and tried to shake the feeling that he was being watched.

Elliot kicked his shoes off at the door and walked to the other side of the kitchen to drop his keys on the table. On the weekdays, he came home with enough time to cook dinner before Violet got home. The tradeoff, ordinarily, was that Violet would get the groceries. It had been a difficult few weeks for her, though, so Elliot wasn't surprised when he opened the refrigerator to find four eggs, a gallon of milk with an inch or so remaining, and some rapidly-browning basil. He frowned and cast an eye around the kitchen.

One yellow onion, sprouting a vivid green tail. One wilt-y yellow bell pepper.

He closed the fridge and walked to a bookshelf that had been repurposed to hold canned food. He clicked his tongue against his teeth absently while he skimmed the labels, a tic that irritated his coworkers but that Violet said was adorable. Elliot hardly noticed he was doing it.

“Aha.”

Elliot triumphantly snatched two cans of diced tomatoes from the shelf that had been buried behind garbanzo beans and sweet corn. He carried them over to the stove, then retrieved

the sprouted onion, the wrinkled pepper, and the rest of the food from the fridge. Eggs poached in tomato sauce wasn't the food of the gods, but it was filling and would be done by the time Violet got home from another long day at the hospital.

Elliot reached forward to lift a skillet from a hook he'd drilled into the wall above the stove himself, and the hair on the back of his neck abruptly prickled. Elliot shivered and paused with his hands still raised. He glanced over his right shoulder. Did he expect to see someone to be standing there? The kitchen was empty.

He shook himself. His forehead scrunched, and he felt dumb for jumping at nothing. He took the skillet down and set it on the larger front burner, igniting it and turning it up to seven. While it heated, he diced the onion and pepper.

A creaking floorboard. He hadn't imagined *that*.

Elliot turned abruptly, but the kitchen was still empty. The living room was, too, from what he could tell where he was standing. He felt like a child jumping at the wind in the trees. He had the wild urge to call out into the nothingness that whoever was there should just leave. He imagined both burglars and ghosts, and that's where he drew a line with himself.

There's no one there. Elliot rolled his eyes. *This is ridiculous. I'm ridiculous.*

He turned back to the oven and started sautéing his vegetables in oil. He salted them and applied generous amounts of paprika and cumin which they were thankfully not out of, stirred them with a wooden spoon.

He was stirring in the canned tomatoes when he heard the front door open and close. He felt relief and a tremendous silliness at just how relieved he felt that Violet was home.

"Hey, Vi," he called. "Dinner in twenty, okay?"

No response.

Elliot felt a strange warmth near his navel, the same feeling he got whenever he saw police lights behind him or got a phone call from his mother after midnight. The flush of fear-induced adrenaline.

Elliot turned around again. The kitchen was still empty. He could see the front door from where he stood. The locking mechanism was vertical, which meant it was locked. But he had definitely heard the door open and close. What he hadn't heard was the sound of Violet's car pulling into the driveway, or the garage door opening.

"Vi!" Elliot called. He turned off the burner and held the wooden spoon in front of him less like a weapon and more like a dowsing rod, with both hands. "Violet!"

He heel-toed into the living room, making as little noise as possible... aside from the calling for his wife. Stupid, Elliot.

The living room was empty, too. To his right, the dark hallway to the bedroom and his home office mocked his wooden spoon. Elliot tried to force himself to move in that direction, but only managed a few inches before his knees and ankles locked up in terrified protest. He shifted his weight onto his leading foot, then onto the back foot again. He swayed forward and back, but made no more ground.

"Okay," he said out loud. "Facts. The front door is locked. *If* someone came in, that means they paused to lock the door on the way. Who does that? If I were robbing a house, I'd want an easier escape route, right? I'd want to leave the door unlocked so I could get out faster."

It made logical sense to Elliot, but it didn't make him feel any better. He was certain he hadn't imagined the sound of the door opening and closing, which meant that whoever had come in had locked the door, so it was either out of habit, or because they didn't want an easy escape route.

Elliot felt cold terror trickle down the back of his neck. Or they didn't want *Elliot* to have an easy escape route.

Something metallic clattered to a hard surface behind Elliot, followed by the thump of something heavy onto the floor. Elliot shrieked and spun around, brandishing his wooden spoon. Tomato sauce flew from spoon and splattered across Violet's scrubs in a mockery of a horror scene.

Violet gasped, hands raised to protect her face, but they hadn't made it all the way there. They stuck, frozen in midair while she processed her reaction. Elliot, just as stunned, didn't move from his kitchen ninja stance for several seconds.

Elliot's breath returned at about the same time Violet's eyes flicked open to look at him through bleary, angry eyelashes.

"What. The hell. Elliot."

"Ohmigod, Violet! I'm so sorry! I swear, I thought someone was in the house. I heard the front door, and I wiggled out."

Elliot stepped forward, lifting a hand towel he had thrown over one shoulder and started gingerly wiping tomato sauce from Violet's rigid features. Violet's arms dropped to her sides and she sighed. She let him dab her eyelids and at the new stains on her new scrubs. Tomato would be easier to get out than blood or vomit, at least, and it was only a matter of time before she was spattered in *something*. Tomato sauce was one of the least inoffensive she could think of.

"I didn't use the front door," Violet said after a minute. "I used the garage door."

"What?" Elliot paused. He looked around; nothing was out of place.

Bolstered by Violet's presence, Elliot walked over to flip on the hall light. Nothing. He quickly checked in the bedroom and office. Nothing.

He turned back to Violet and scratched his head. Tomato sauce leaked from the spoon into his hair.

"I swear, Vi. Either I'm hallucinating, or someone was in the house."

Violet nodded. "I believe you."

Elliot smiled. That was the thing about Violet. No matter how irrational Elliot was being, or how far into madness he felt he'd slipped, Violet was always on his side. She believed him, unerringly. She just got him.

Elliot blushed, shook his head, went back to the kitchen and turned the stove back on.

"The burner wasn't off too long," Elliot said. "Dinner'll still be done in about twenty minutes."

Violet walked up behind him and placed her hands on his hips. She kissed the back of his neck. He shivered, the good kind. She was tall enough that she could tuck her chin up over his shoulder.

"Thanks for cooking," she said into his ear. He could hear how tired she was. How sad.

He turned toward her just enough to kiss her cheek. "Everything okay? Is Alise...?"

Violet hummed against his jaw. It tickled. "Alise is a trooper. She'll be fine. We sent her home with her mom today. No, I just had a lot of things to think about today."

"Oh?"

She didn't say anything for a while, but Elliot could feel her jaw working against his shoulder and knew she was just trying to find the right words. He waited.

At last, she asked, “Have you ever thought about the past and wondered if your memories of it are reliable?”

“Reliable?”

“Yeah, like if you remember things better than they actually were. Rose-tinted memories. Sometimes I think about when I was a kid, and I think it was a pretty good life, but then I wonder if I just wanted so badly for it to be a good life that I made it up.”

Elliot didn’t know what to say. Violet never talked about her past. He knew that she’d been in the foster system, that it hadn’t been remarkable, and that she’d put herself through nursing school by working part-time jobs and couch surfing with friends. He hadn’t needed more than that, and she hadn’t offered.

Elliot gave the tomatoes a quick stir and left the spoon in the skillet. He turned to face Violet, wrapped his arms around her waist. He considered his own childhood before he answered.

“I think everyone feels that way sometimes,” he said. “There are memories I have of my father, of good times with him, that stand out in such contrast with all the bad times that they feel inflated. Exaggerated. A memory that shouldn’t have been anything special can feel extraordinary under those circumstances.”

Violet’s eyes softened, and she kissed him. “His loss. Jerk.”

Elliot laughed and leaned in to kiss her again.

A zealous pounding from the other room sent electricity through him. He flinched and clutched the hem of Violet’s scrub top. He felt the lean muscles of her abdomen tighten beneath his hand. They both turned to the front door.

Violet laughed first. “We’re wound a bit tight, aren’t we?” She sounded uncertain.

Elliot handed her the wooden spoon and motioned for her to stay where she was. She lifted both eyebrows at him but had the good grace not to verbally challenge his manhood. He walked over to the front door and peeked through the peephole. Nothing.

He unlocked the door and opened it slowly. No one.

Elliot looked at Violet. A chill breeze crept in through the open door, the smell of rain. Violet looked sick. She was pale, frozen, her eyes half-closed. Something about her stillness made Elliot shiver. He closed the door and locked it again.

“Vi?”

Violet’s eyes fluttered like she—the strongest person Elliot had ever known—might actually faint. Elliot rushed to her, but by the time he’d crossed the living room she had recovered. She cleared her throat.

“Oh, the shakshuka!” She turned with the wooden spoon to the stove where Elliot’s tomato sauce had started to boil. Bubbles of sauce had begun to explode across its surface and vomit shrapnel onto the stove and counter.

While Violet hopped around stirring the sauce and avoiding two-hundred-degree tomato debris, Elliot cracked the first of four eggs into a ramekin.

“Maybe we should get one of those security systems you can control with an app on your phone.”

Violet’s laughter was strained. “Maybe we should get a dog.”

Elliot rolled his eyes. It was a new, morbid twist on an old conversation. He appreciated the distraction. A familiar argument could help disperse the rigid tension that had been generated by the phantom door knock.

“No, no. You don’t want a dog. You want a *pony*.”

Violet took the ramekin and poured the egg into a divot she made in the sauce. “A mastiff is a beautiful breed! How can you not love those big droopy jowls and all those wrinkles? They have really expressive faces.”

Elliot cracked another egg for her, and she dumped it in next to the first.

“They don’t express anything except the fact that the eyeholes in their skin don’t line up with their eyeballs. It’s a size ten dog in a size twelve skin.”

Violet threw her head back and cackled. Elliot managed a grin of his own. It was a beautiful sound, Violet’s unconstrained laughter, and Elliot felt triumph any time he could trigger it. She snorted into the crux of her elbow.

“Well, shih tzus are just little fur mops.”

“That just makes them practical. We wouldn’t have to sweep as often. Besides, I’m not the one who thinks they can house-train a hundred-and-fifty-pound dog in the four square feet of grass we have in the back yard.”

Violet dumped a sixth egg into the tomato sauce and put a lid on the skillet to steam them. She set the wooden spoon on a clear section of stove where it stained the chrome surface red. She turned to face Elliot, and he was relieved to see that the color had returned to her face.

“Dinner in eight minutes.”

“You say that like you’re the one who cooked it.”

Violet put her arms on his shoulders in the style of every middle school dance and interlocked her fingers behind his neck.

“Well, I did rescue it,” she said.

Elliot felt a pocket of heat slide down his spine and settle behind his belly button at the look in her eyes. It chased away the chill.

You rescued me, he thought.

Chapter Five

Elliot

Within moments of arriving at Maggie's house, both Elliot and Violet had been lei'd. Without asking for them, they found themselves each with an umbrella'd cocktail in one hand and an entire grilled pineapple ring on skewers in the other.

"She works fast."

Violet meant Anita, Maggie's wife, who circulated around the room, pressing Hawaiian-themed *hors d'oeuvres* and alcoholic drinks into empty hands. She was ultra-thin and built like a cattail. Her torso moved a half second after her legs so that she seemed to sway around the partygoers rather than walking between them.

"I think she does this for a living," Elliot said. "Runs a catering company on a cruise ship or something like that."

Violet nodded appreciatively and sipped her mai tai. Elliot rotated to observe the crowd, half of which worked at their office. Of these, most were from tech support where Maggie worked; none were from business analytics except Elliot. He knew a few of the faces. Fewer names. Well, at least no one from work would see him wearing his luau attire.

Elliot had worn the ascribed Hawaiian shirt, which Violet had chosen for him, but without the khaki cargo shorts or canvas flip flops she had also bought. If he had to endure pink flamingos tumbling end over end amid cubist renderings of pineapples, he was going to do it in his comfy jeans and sneakers.

Violet, on the other hand, had repurposed a beach wrap she'd already owned which depicted a pink-and-yellow sunset. She'd thrown it over a pair of bicycle shorts. They were her

favorite pair because the genius who'd designed them had given them pockets. The wrap somehow hung loose on her frame and hugged it at the same time.

Violet was more at home in the crowd than Elliot was, and not because she was naturally more at ease at social functions than he was. Maggie had known Violet longer than Elliot had, and the other half of the party guests were mutual friends of theirs. It felt like the entire Indianapolis LGBT community had been jammed into Maggie's house, cutting a bold, colorful swatch through the drab office nerds Elliot worked with.

Elliot spotted a table with a bowl for discarded skewers and moved to drop his uneaten pineapple ring into it. He nearly stabbed a leather jacketed woman with a full face tattoo when she stumbled into his path, but diverted at the last second. He tripped and slammed his hip hard into the table before he could stop his forward momentum. He managed to keep from punching the skewers into his own jugular, but spilled half of his blue Hawaiian on his comfy jeans.

"Are you okay?" Violet asked. She had to raise her voice above the chorus of drag queens singing 'Let's do the time warp agaiiin!' along to the playlist blasting over Maggie's surround sound system.

Elliot dropped his pineapple into the skewer bowl, moving stiffly in favor of his right hip, and gestured for Violet to follow him to the backyard where it was quieter and the air smelled like smoked meat heaven.

"Are we late?" Elliot asked Violet once he could hear himself speak.

She shrugged. "Maybe a few minutes, but Maggie's invitation said six o'clock."

"Then how is everyone already drunk?"

Violet laughed. “Oh, the gays, we pre-game,” she said with a wink. “If you drink before you come out, you don’t spend as much money at the bar. Or, in this case, you don’t have to drink Maggie’s Natty Light.”

She made a face. To their right, near where Maggie was nursing a massive gas grill, stood a tower of beer cases. The bottom row had six cases. Elliot did the mental math without thinking. Twenty-one cases times twenty-four cans per case equaled five hundred and four. He thought there were fifty guests, sixty at most. That meant eight cans of sweat-sock musk masquerading as beer for every person present.

“At least Anita has good taste in booze.”

Violet laughed at him. “I’ll see if I can get you another since you’re wearing most of that one.”

He brought his vivacious cocktail glass up to eye level in a mock toast of thanks, and she disappeared back into the throng of bodies inside the house. Looking up, he could make out the cardboard letters that had been strung up against the wall of the house.

CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR CONTINENCE

Subtle.

“Hey, hey! Holy Helliott!”

Maggie had spotted him, and his shield had just walked back inside.

Elliot turned and pasted a smile onto his face. *Come on, Elliot. You like Maggie*, he told himself. *You don’t like her fifty screaming friends, but you like Maggie.*

He walked over to Maggie, and she grabbed him by the shoulder and shoved his face into the billowing smoke coming from the charcoal grill. She’d only cracked the lid, so the smoke had hit him all at once.

“Do you smell that, Hells Bells?”

Elliot Bellis. It was an inevitable nickname.

Elliot inhaled and tried not to cough onto the food when his lungs filled with acrid smoke. He inhaled and held it like a veteran smoker, and only let himself gasp for air once Maggie had released him.

His throat felt raw. He wheezed out a ‘yup.’

Maggie chuckled and smacked him on the back as though burping a baby. Elliot made a sound like a bullfrog and gagged. The rest of his drink sloshed onto the grass. Maggie whipped the tea towel from her shoulder and handed it to him.

“S’posed to drink ‘em, not wear ‘em,” she said.

Elliot set the empty cocktail glass on the nearby condiment table and dabbed at the initial spill on the crotch of his jeans. Maggie popped the tab on a Natty Light and handed it to him. He handed it back.

“I know you only buy that watered-down battery acid so you can have them all for yourself.”

Maggie took a swig. “Natty Light has no expiration date.”

“I’m not sure that’s true.”

Maggie shrugged. “Hey, Anita set up a room upstairs for you.”

Elliot looked at her. “A room?”

Maggie nodded. “Yeah, she soundproofed it so when you get anxious, you can go up there and chill out. Come back down when you’re ready to be around people again. There’s a sign on the door. ‘Recharge Room.’”

Elliot's smile straightened into something more genuine. That was the most thoughtful thing he thought anyone had done for him.

"We tested it out when the twins were home from college last week. Had the craziest, loudest sex of our lives. I'm talking hair-pulling, who's-your-daddy, circus sex. They didn't hear a thing."

And there it was. Still thoughtful, he supposed, but no longer as relaxing as they'd intended it to be.

"I'll keep that in mind," Elliot said.

Maggie raised an eyebrow.

"I meant the room. I'll keep the room in mind. Not the... circus sex."

"I'm just messing with you," Maggie said. She opened the grill all the way. "Burger?"

"I thought you were roasting a whole pig."

Maggie jabbed a thumb over her shoulder at the other end of the yard. An imposing, black tank on metal stilts emitted steam and smoke from an iron tube on its roof. It was as tall as Elliot, and at least seven feet wide. The shell had obviously been a single piece at one point, but a huge section had been cut away from it, then reset on hinges so that it opened in front like the grill. The iron smokestack had been an aftermarket addition, too. Thick, ropy seams of welded iron stood out where it had been customized to perform its duty as a hog roaster.

It was a DIY Frankenstein.

Elliot squinted. "Is that an oil tank?"

"Used to be. Now, it's living its best life, making the best whole-roasted pig you'll ever cram in your cramhole."

Maggie vacated the burgers from the grill and flipped a few bratwursts that were nearly done. She closed it and dragged Elliot over to the roaster.

“Here, help me with this.”

Two handles, even spaced, had been welded onto the shell so the entire top front half of the roaster could be lifted. Maggie took one and Elliot grabbed the other with both hands. They lifted together, and Maggie quickly secured it with a hook connected to a thick chain affixed to the top.

The hook held, but Elliot had terrible premonitions of it giving out and slamming shut on his head. When Maggie gestured for him to come closer, he put up his hands.

“I’m okay here,” he said.

“Well, just smell that.”

Elliot cautiously sniffed the air and found he didn’t have to get any closer. The fatty, meaty, slightly gamey smell of the pork hit him a moment later.

“Oh,” he said. Despite himself, he took another step forward and inhaled more deeply.

“Oh, Mags. Yes.”

“Hah! I told ya!”

“You did. I concede defeat. It smells like how Christmas is supposed to smell.”

“Smells like the best pussy you ever ate.”

Maggie had delivered the sentiment without irony or humor, and Elliot struggled between the need for clarification and the rational fear of it. He cocked his head to one side, though much better about it, and let the question die before it left his mouth.

He helped hold the lid up while Maggie unhooked the lid and let it fall closed with an ear-shattering *bang*. Elliot thought for a moment he'd gone deaf, but it was just that the partiers inside had heard the crash and paused the music to peer out the windows.

Elliot stood awkwardly for a moment, then waved. A moment later, the faces staring at him disappeared and the music continued.

“Hey, grill masters!”

Violet stepped out of the house with two fresh cocktails and walked across the lawn. She looked the same as when they'd arrived, but there was something off about the way she moved. Her steps were shallower and her arms were flat against her sides, guarded. When she got closer, he could see that her eyes were rimmed pink. Had she been crying?

Whatever the matter was, she was trying to cover it up.

Elliot took the glass from her, and gave her the ‘You okay?’ eyebrow scrouch.

Violet gave him a half-smile and kissed him on one cheek.

“You guys are too cute,” Maggie said. Her voice was still warm when she added, “Just makes me want to puke.”

Violet laughed, and her stance loosened. “You have no one to blame but yourself for introducing us.”

Elliot hugged her from the side. Her whole body clinched at his touch, and she hissed in pain. Maggie leaned in and lifted Violet's right sleeve before Elliot had the chance to. Maggie whistled.

“Damn, Vi. Did one of the drag kings grab you? Anita said they were pretty sloppy when they showed up.”

Violet tugged her sleeve from Maggie's grip and pulled it down, but not before Elliot saw the reddening marks on her upper arm.

"Violet." His voice was as gentle as his touch when he lifted the sleeve back up. The fingerprints on the back of her arm and the wide thumbprint on her shoulder were going to bruise.

Violet took his hand and pulled it away from her sleeve. "It's fine," she said. "It was an accident."

"An accident? Violet, that's not an accident. That's assault."

She waved her hand and made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a gasp. "You're overreacting. Everyone inside is sloppy drunk. Someone fell, they grabbed me for balance. Complete accident."

Elliot sighed.

"Come on. Come with me."

He put his hand on her lower back and guided her back toward the house. "Mags, we're going to pop into the Recharge Room for a sec."

Maggie looked confused, and red-faced, bull angry.

"Take your time," she said. "I'm going to head inside for a bit, myself."

Chapter Six

Violet

Maggie's party felt like a hug from a favorite—admittedly-boozy—aunt. Violet had felt the bass from the surround sound pulling strings in her chest from the end of Maggie's driveway. The muscles in her neck worked back and forth to the beat and her legs threatened to throw her into the pulsing tangle of familiar bodies. The energy trapped within Maggie's tri-level made Violet feel drunk without having had a drop of alcohol. Even a few of the straight-laced techies from Maggie's work had fallen victim to the magnetic throb of the subwoofer.

Elliot hated it. He hadn't said so, but she could see his knuckles whitening on the skinny stem of his mai tai glass. Plus, he'd nearly given himself an emergency tracheotomy with a wooden skewer. His inability to go with the flow was one of his most charming features. He was the trunk to her branches.

She followed him to the backyard. The sliding glass doors dimmed the sound of the music and an emptiness spread through her gut. A tether made of glitter, EDM, and audacity connected her to the party inside. The pieces of her that hadn't worked eighteen hour shifts since she passed her boards ached to go back inside.

And as soon as she could, she did.

Violet made "find Anita" a loose goal as she slipped back into the party and rode the waves of remixed showtunes around the room. She scream-sang along with a mashup of Beyoncé's *Partition* and *Alexander Hamilton*. She did a body shot—okay, *two* body shots—from the magnificent cleavage of a bearded queen. She applauded the physics-defying twerking of a scrawny redhead with very little ass and allowed herself to be coaxed into a twerk-off, which she graciously lost. Her throw-it-back was somewhat rusty.

Violet caught a glimpse of Anita's bob cut floating through a crowd of wallflowers who looked like they weren't sure what they were allowed to participate in. Straight guys mostly, who had fallen down a very gay rabbit hole. Anita's tray had been filled with a little 'Drink me' to loosen them up.

"A-niiii-ta!"

The tequila had begun to settle under Violet's tongue.

Anita turned, tray of brightly colored drinks balanced on a steady palm. She grinned.

"Vi!"

Anita planted her free hand on Violet's waste and swooped in to plant a pack on her cheek.

"I haven't had a second to myself to mingle yet. How have you been?" She had to shout to be heard.

Violet returned the kiss.

"Mingle? I'd lay money that you haven't stopped to sit down or take a drink of water, either. Do I need to force you to take care of yourself?"

"I could ask you the same, Miss Double-Shift," Anita said, but premature lines crinkled around the corners of her sparkling eyes. "This is the first house party you've come to in, what, four years?"

Violet made a face. "Ugh, really? I guess you're right. You must be. We should do this more often."

Violet had spent the last two years working as much overtime as she could get her hands on. It was in part out of love for her job and her patients, but it was also in part due to the seventy thousand dollars in students loans it had taken to get her through nursing school. The last time

she'd been to a party, it had been to celebrate her completion of nursing school. There had been the occasional dinner out, but she hadn't had an opportunity to let herself have this much fun in years.

"Yeah, right. You're as married to your job as I am to mine."

Violet grinned. "Well, okay. Maybe I'm too old to party like it's two-thousand-ten again, but we should get together more. I miss you guys."

"We miss you, too."

Anita planted another kiss on Violet's cheek. "Look, I'm going to get some refreshers and make another round. Can you babysit the norms, please? See if you can lure a few away from the walls?"

Violet's eyes twinkled. "Oh, because you don't speak hetero and I'm... bilingual?"

Anita drifted away, but her barking laughter could be heard over the music all the way to the kitchen.

Violet turned to the techies. They looked like lost, terrified sheep.

She clapped her hands together and prepared to drag one or two of them into the dance space with her. She made eye contact with her first target, a heavysset, bearded man with square glasses. He paled when she walked over.

Violet put on her nurse face—a half-smile with relaxed eyebrows—and lifted a hand to place it on his shoulder.

The hair on the back of her neck prickled, and goosebumps tickled up her arm. Alarm burned through her oncoming buzz. The muscles in her neck contracted, snapping her shoulders back, and her eyes searched the room.

Nothing. But she knew someone was watching her.

Movement caught her attention from the other side of the group of wallflowers. A memory stood in Maggie's front yard on the other side of a window next to the door. The tilt of his hips, the angle of his chin. He looked at her with an intensity that made her feel fourteen again.

"Maxon."

Violet glanced behind her to make sure that Elliot was still outside with Maggie. She could see him through the tall, ribbon blinds. Heart racing, she stepped outside and closed the heavy front door. Before she turned to face him, she steeled herself with a deep breath.

Maxon hadn't changed much in fifteen years. He still had cheekbones you could sharpen a knife on. He was still broad-shouldered. He was thicker around the middle than he'd been when they were kids, but he still looked like he was made of muscle. His hair had been cropped shorter than she'd ever seen it, just a fine dusting across his scalp.

And he was wearing jeans. She'd never seen him in jeans before.

Neither spoke. Neither made a move toward the other.

Violet felt she would have to be the first to break the silence. It was her life on which Maxon had come treading. What would he do, she wondered, if she just turned and walked away? She'd seen him—acknowledged his presence. Would he leave her alone if she went back inside?

She couldn't bring herself to dismiss him so easily, she decided. What happened hadn't been Maxon's fault, though it was easy to blame him for his inaction.

"What are you doing here, Maxon?"

Maxon didn't say anything. He stood at the foot of the lawn in silence and stared at her with lamp-like eyes, like a stubborn cat. Violet stepped into the yard.

“You don’t have anything to say to me?”

A rainbow of lights from the living room window played on his face. She could see his jaw working, but he still said nothing.

Emboldened, Violet took two more steps toward him, halving the distance between Maxon and the front door.

“No, you couldn’t *possibly* have anything to say to me.” She spit the words at his feet. His eyes closed for a heartbeat. “Not after fifteen years of banishment. Nothing could be so important that you would deign to track me down after fifteen years of silence.”

“We weren’t given a choice, Violet.”

Violet felt her face go hot. “Bullshit!”

She stopped herself and glanced around to make sure no one had heard her scream at him, then repeated herself in a more reticent tone. “Bullshit, you ‘had no choice.’ Those are some fine first words to greet me with. We haven’t seen or spoken to each other since we were teenagers, and the first words out of your mouth are an excuse.”

“Violet—”

“I don’t care, Maxon. Whatever it is you came for, I don’t have it. You can go to hell, and you can tell Rosleana she can go to hell, too.”

Violet turned to walk back to the house but stopped cold when Maxon spoke.

“Rosleana is dead.”

Violet felt a rivulet of ice run down the back of her neck. She turned and saw, for the first time, the look of pain on Maxon’s face. She knew without asking that Rosleana hadn’t gone peacefully in her sleep.

“Why are you here, Maxon?” she asked, though she feared she knew the answer.

“I came for you.”

Violet laughed, but there was no humor in it. “You came for me. For what, exactly? To bring me back? I have a *life* now, Maxon, and it doesn’t involve you!”

Maxon flinched. “I would have stayed with you forever.”

“That’s an awfully bold statement. Too bad your undying affection wasn’t enough to come find me fifteen years ago.”

“I swore to Rosleana!”

“You swore to *me!*” Violet’s voice cracked. “Goddammit, Maxon, you swore to *me*. I did everything you ever asked, didn’t I? I did everything Rosleana asked. I was never good enough for her, but *you* were supposed to have my back. Always!”

“You’re the one who left!”

Violet threw her hands up. “You can’t tell me you believed that horseshit.”

Maxon shook his head. “There’s no one else, Violet. I don’t have anywhere else to go. No one else I trust.”

Violet bit back another curse; he looked so broken.

“I can’t help you with that,” she said after a moment. “Even if I wanted to, I’m not the same girl anymore.”

Violet turned and started walking back up to the house. She wanted to get Elliot and go home. She suddenly didn’t feel like partying anymore.

“Wait, please!”

Maxon seized her by the arm and turned her around. He gripped her arm with one massive hand so hard that she screamed. Muscle memory took over, and she stepped backward

into him, slamming her elbow into his free shoulder. Maxon made a sound like a wounded rabbit and crumpled to the ground at her feet.

Violet knew she hadn't hit him hard enough to seriously injure him, which meant that someone else already had. *Shit*. She forced herself to shake her nurse's instinct to tend to him. It wasn't hard. She would have a bruise where he'd grabbed her first.

“Go home, Maxon. You're going to have to find someone else to save you this time.”

Chapter Seven

Violet

This was not a conversation Violet wanted to have with Elliot. She didn't want to have it, because it was going to be a lie. Whatever came out of her mouth, it had to be a lie because the truth was insane. She hated lying to Elliot.

Elliot's hand at Violet's elbow was exceptionally gentle as he led her up the stairs. Halfway down the upstairs, the party music had been shut off and Maggie could be heard bellowing above the complaints for people to listen up.

The sounds of the party were cut off when Elliot closed the door of the Recharge Room behind them. Violet assembled her face into a mask of amusement and don't-you-think-you're-overreacting? before turning around to face him.

Elliot frowned at her. "You can raise your eyebrows at me all you like, but your eyes are bloodshot around the edges, and you have toothmarks in your lipstick. Incidentally—" he added, snatching a tissue from a box on a nearby desk— "you have lipstick on your teeth."

He held the tissue out to her, and she took it. She made her movements sluggish, using the extra time to figure out the best approach.

"Well, of course. I'm not saying it didn't hurt," she said. "But it was an *accident*. People have been drinking. Someone grabbed me harder than they intended, and you know how easily I bruise. That's the end of the story."

It did hurt. Truth.

It was an accident. Truth.

People have been drinking. Truth.

Someone grabbed me harder than they intended. Truth.

I bruise easily. Truth.

That's the end of the story. Lie.

Five truths and a lie was a decent average. Violet was an excellent liar, due in part to how highly she valued—and the expertise with which she wielded—the truth.

Elliot said nothing to this. Instead, he lifted the drapery sleeve of her thin top to look at her arm.

“Vi, these bruises are no joke. You weren't out of my sight long enough for them to be turning yellow already, but look at this.”

He stood in front of her and hovered his hands in the air surrounding her arm. His hand hooked into a claw, but he didn't touch her.

“This is not a mistake. You don't grab someone in this position hard enough to leave finger marks by accident.”

Elliot utilized facts the same way Violet used truths. He targeted her single lie with empirical evidence and logical thinking, but he waited for her to answer before pulling the trigger.

“Come on, Vi. Last week, you came home from work and spent two hours recounting the delicate minutiae of removing a golf driver from a man's anus with vivid imagery, but tonight you can't muster the details of someone physically hurting you? You're being deliberately vague, and I don't understand why.”

Damn. All facts.

Violet sighed. “Fine, but this really isn't the place to have this conversation.”

Elliot chewed on the inside of his cheek, a tic Violet had come to associate with his wanting to say something but not sure if he should. He licked his lips.

“So, something did happen.”

“Yes.

“And you *are* going to tell me what happened?”

“Yes.”

“But you won’t tell me here?”

Violet looked around. The dark walls of the Recharge Room were an oppressive blue. There was a gray sofa in the corner, and a desk beneath a window overlooking the backyard below. The carpet was lush and inviting. She wanted to sink into it and forget this whole night ever happened.

“You’re going to think I’m crazy.”

“When did I ever give you the impression that I had a problem with you being crazy?”

Violet laughed, and it felt great. She felt like an overinflated balloon, but the laugh had released some of that pressure.

“Never.”

“Okay, so let’s just sit on this couch, which—I have to warn you—Maggie and Anita have probably done unspeakable things on, and talk. It’s soundproof. It’s safe. It’s not thirty minutes away like our house is.”

Violet took a deep breath and held it for a moment. Her eyes flickered to the door. Finally, she nodded.

“Okay.”

Elliot smiled. His smile was her favorite thing about his face. He was so serious all the time, and his face naturally frowned, but his smile changed everything. It lifted the corners of his

eyes and created two beautiful wrinkles at each of his temples. There was a shadow of a dimple in his left cheek.

He gestured her over to the sofa, and they sat with their knees touching in the middle. He folded his hands neatly over his knees, almost touching hers, but she held hers balled together in her lap.

Violet took a deep breath and spoke all in one breath.

“It was just this guy I dated in high school.”

Elliot blinked, then turned pink. “I thought you met Maggie in college.”

“I did.”

“So, it’s not someone Maggie invited.”

It wasn’t a question, but Violet shook her head in response.

“So, someone you know in high school showed up at a party he wasn’t invited to and assaulted you.”

“Not assaulted! It was an accident.”

Elliot waved his hand. “Violet, how did he even know you were here? Is this guy stalking you? We need to call the police!”

“No!”

She hadn’t meant to yell at him, but she had, and he looked at her like she’d smacked him.

“No,” she said more quietly but with no less urgency. “There’s more to the story than just that we used to date.”

Elliot didn’t say anything, but he didn’t put his hands back on his knees either.

Violet leaned forward and covered her eyes with both hands. She groaned with frustration and fifteen years of insecurities. How was she even supposed to start?

She felt Elliot's gentle hand on the back of her head. He stroked her hair. "Listen, if you really don't want to talk about it—"

"No, I do," Violet said to her knees. "I just... Ugh, it's so complicated and weird and-and-and *completely insane*."

Elliot waited.

Finally, Violet leaned up and slapped her hands onto her thighs.

"Steria is real."

Violet locked her eyes onto Elliot's, but the emotions there played too quickly for her to determine the breadth of what was taking place in his head. She thought she recognized confusion, then maybe something like incredulity, then confusion again. His eyes darted left-to-right like the two hemispheres of his brain were having a tennis match and he was only a spectator in his own body.

After several seconds of listening only to the whirr of the air conditioner, Violet had started to sweat.

"Steria," Elliot said.

Violet nodded.

"Steria from your book."

"Yes."

"Good. Okay. Just checking."

He sounded manic, or maybe Violet had just imagined the edge in his tone.

“Steria is real,” Violet repeated, “and the book isn’t as *fictional* as I may have implied. Actually, it’s more... autobiographical.”

Elliot’s entire bottom lip disappeared between his teeth. He nodded with his entire upper body. “Mmhmm, okay.”

Violet had to shut up the nurse part of her brain that was reminding her the first stage of grief was denial. Elliot definitely looked like he was in the process of rejecting her confession. His eyes were wide. His breathing was shallow. A tiny vein had risen against the skin of his forehead.

“El?”

“Yeah?”

“Will you say something?”

Elliot opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He licked his lips and tried again.

“I’m sorry, Violet, I’m just trying to reconcile the impossibility of what you’re saying with the certainty that you wouldn’t say something like that just to throw me off the trail of an old boyfriend.”

“Well, he wasn’t really a *boyfriend*.”

Elliot’s eyes flashed at her.

“Right. Not the point. So, how’s that reconciliation going?”

Elliot rubbed his chin hard. “I don’t know. I mean, you’re not a liar. I trust you implicitly.”

He flared the fingers of both hands in the air around his face like he might be able to grab all his free-floating thoughts and gather them together manually.

“I can’t claim to always understand your sense of humor, but you seem to be serious, and I’m confident you wouldn’t try to diffuse such a serious discussion with a practical joke, particularly one that’s in such poor taste under the circumstances. You appear to be lucid, maybe a little buzzed, but certainly not enough to be delusional or impaired. You didn’t take anything, did you?”

Violet was hurt. “Take anything? Elliot, I haven’t touched anything since my undergraduate. How could you think that?”

“I have a conflicting information here, Violet. It was a shot in the dark. You’re telling me that the fictional world from your YA fantasy novel is a real place and that place has something to do with your ex-boyfriend. Which is impossible, last time I checked.”

“*Not* a boyfriend. A fling, maybe. Probably not even that much. A crush? Mostly just a mistake.”

Now, she was the one who sounded manic.

Elliot pinched the bridge of his nose. “Violet.”

Violet reached forward and rubbed his temples gently with both hands until she saw his shoulders relax and his head drop.

“Okay. Given all the data I have at hand, I have to conclude that you’re either telling me the truth or you’ve had some sort of stress-related hallucination.”

“The first one.”

He looked up and she stopped rubbing his temples.

“And this has what to do with your ex... whatever?”

“He’s from there.”

“But he’s here.”

“No!” Violet shouted it, and Elliot flinched. “He *was* here. Now, he’s gone. I sent him home.”

“Violet, that sounds more like wishful thinking than the truth.” He had assumed his robot-analysis voice. “If, theoretically, a man were to travel from one world to another just to find a woman, it doesn’t stand to reason that he would take the first ‘no’ he got as a final answer, would it?”

“Theoretically? I thought you believed me.”

“I do!”

Elliot vaulted from the sofa as he said it, grabbing his hand and pacing in a slow circle. “Mostly.”

It took a hell of a lot for Elliot to lose his composure, and Violet realized she’d pushed him past that point. How could a person believe something so incredible with so little evidence or adjustment time? Some part of her was comforted that he’d given her the benefit of the doubt and not immediately assumed she was crazy. Stress wasn’t an outrageous conclusion, logically speaking.

In her own defense, she’d thought the Steria chapters of her life would be confined to the pages of her manuscript. It shouldn’t have been something she would *need* to tell him the truth about. If she pushed him any further, though, it might break him.

At that moment, as Violet was considering taking it all back and trying to pass it off as a drug-induced delusion and a handsy dragon queen, the door opened and Anita peeked her bob into the room.

“Hey, sorry to interrupt you guys, but I’m going to need Violet to clear a few things up downstairs. Maggie’s trying to interrogate a houseful of our friends, and I think her tactics meet the legal definition of ‘kidnapping.’”

Violet glanced at Elliot, who still had one hand tangled up in his hair.

“Yeah, okay,” he said. “We should save Maggie from herself.”

He held his hand out to Violet. She took it, and they followed Anita downstairs.

Chapter Eight

Elliot

Extracting Maggie from her crusade to find out who had put hands on Violet had been much easier once Violet was able to reassure her that the culprit hadn't been anyone who had been invited. Their mutual friends took the extended interrogation sessions with surprising grace, but Maggie had probably burned a few work bridges if the blustering faces and ruffled shirt collars were any indication. The techies had left. The rest were still looking forward to sexy smoked pig.

Extracting themselves from Maggie and Anita after the party had resumed, however, had been an ordeal. Anita had bribed them with the good scotch. Maggie had offered to clear the party out and make it a truly awkward double-date-sleepover. When that didn't work, she tried guilt, but Elliot had gone to an all-boy's Catholic school. He'd developed a thick skin for guilt, and even Maggie wasn't creative enough to compete with the righteous passive aggression of nuns.

Once they were in their car, by some unspoken agreement, they didn't speak. The silence was thick and calming, a buffer between the two halves of the conversation that would be continued eventually. Violet chewed on the fingernails of her right hand and gazed out the passenger's window while Elliot held her left hand in the space between them. He thumbed circles over the back.

The first half of the drive Elliot spent pent up in his own head. Facts that should have been mutually exclusive competed for dominance in his head. His wife had just confessed to being the heroine of the YA fiction novel she'd been in the process of writing since before he'd known her.

A novel that began with the protagonist being dragged to an alternate world in the first act.

This was an impossible thing.

On the other hand, she wasn't drunk enough to make it up, she wasn't high, and she just wasn't the sort of person to lie so obviously and under such serious circumstances.

There were still things that bothered him, though. Ten minutes from home, he broke the silence.

"Why don't you start at the beginning?"

Violet looked over at him. Her eyes took a minute to focus on him. She looked bone-weary.

She sighed. "What do you want to know?"

Elliot turned back to the road. "You were, what, fourteen?"

Violet nodded.

"You were fourteen, and he came here to take you to Steria. Why?"

"Does it matter why?"

"It matters if he came back for you fifteen years later."

Violet sighed. "It's been so long since it happened, that it feels ridiculous to talk about it. Ten more years and I might have believed I'd made the whole thing up."

Elliot waited.

"Steria," she said. "They called it the land of dying magic, but it was more complicated than that. It was more like each person born in Steria had a finite amount of magic they were born with."

Magic. Elliot winced, but said nothing.

“You have it when you’re a kid, but once you’ve used it, it’s gone. And it’s hard to teach children to regulate themselves. Children are all about instant gratification, so by the time most people reach adulthood, they’ve used it up. It’s gone.”

Elliot remembered some of this from the drafts he’d read, but Violet was protective of her drafts and he’d only been allowed to read the first few chapters.

“Most people.”

Violet nodded. “Most people. There were a few who were trained never to use their magic who still had reserves of it. Mostly soldiers and diplomats.”

“Gavin.”

It was the name Violet used in her novel for the boy who whisks the protagonist away to Steria. If Elliot remembered correctly, the character had been a soldier in training.

“His name is Maxon,” Violet said. “He came here to find me.”

“Why?”

Violet shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t think I was anything special. I was just the first girl he found who matched some vague description he was given. It was a very romantic notion when I was fourteen, but the older I get, the more I think it was random. He could have taken anyone back to Steria—anyone who grew up here and had a full tank of unused potential like I did.”

“And now he’s come back to find you again.”

“No! I don’t know what he’s here for, but he’s not here for me. He can’t be. He knows better. There are rules.”

Elliot gestured out of the windshield. “No, I mean he’s actually come to find you again.”

As their home presented itself from out of the darkness, a figure stood at the door, looking out to the road.

Violet leaned forward in her seat and swore under her breath.

“Ells, I’m sorry. I don’t know why he’s here. I didn’t give him any impression that he was welcome.”

Elliot pulled into the driveway, letting go of her hand to make the turn.

“I know,” he said. He turned off the engine and unclipped his seatbelt. “He clearly wants something, though.”

Elliot squinted through the windshield at Maxon.

“Are those my jeans? And my shirt?”

Violet cleared her throat and became sheepish. “Could be? If he came from Steria, he was probably wearing something a little more sixteenth-century when he got here.”

“He was in the house.” Elliot gripped the steering wheel hard. “I knew I wasn’t crazy. He was in the house when I got home. That’s why the garage door was open.”

“Elliot, I’m so sorry.”

Elliot looked at her, lips right, and got out of the car. He paused with the door still open. Maxon turned toward him, but the outdoor light above the door blocked out his face. Maxon’s build in Elliot’s clothes gave Maxon the appearance of a tough guy. The shirt fit Elliot correctly, but stretched over Maxon’s chest like latex. Elliot mentally played out all the ways in which he could manage to get his ass kicked.

“Elliot?” Violet asked from inside the car. She sounded worried.

A fighter Elliot wasn’t, but every muscle in his body *longed* to transform into Jason Statham, walk across the driveway, and break Maxon’s nose. Logically, Elliot knew it wouldn’t

happen that way. On the three occasions on which Elliot had ever been moved to throw a punch at someone, he had been astonished by three things.

The first, was how difficult it was to actually land a punch on someone. There must be some innate danger sense most people possessed, some recognition of the facial expressions or body language of the aggressor that alerted them and allowed them to avoid the punch.

Second, Elliot was always surprised by how much energy it took to swing an effective punch. He didn't understand the physiology of Bruce Li's one-inch punches. How could a person generate so much energy with so little range of movement where Elliot himself couldn't even manage it with the momentum of a full swing?

Third, and Elliot had only experienced this once, was how much it hurt to hit someone with a closed fist.

In college, Elliot had broken two of his fingers on the cheekbone of a fraternity brother. It had been an accident, a telegraphed punch and a forgotten duck as part of a choreographed maneuver that had been practiced a hundred times without incident until showtime when it had gone wrong.

Elliot balled his hands into fists and tried to remember not only how much the fractured had hurt when being reset, but how horrible the next eight weeks of recovery had been.

So, on virtue of not being able to take eight weeks off work to mend a broken hand, Elliot decided not to punch Maxon in the face. He shut the car door without answer Violet's please and worried looks and crossed the driveway.

Violet shouted his name, but her voice was muffled by the door. He could hear her door open behind him.

"Elliot! Wait!"

He didn't. He stepped up to Maxon, further into his personal space than Elliot liked to have people. Maxon was wider and more muscular, but Elliot was taller by an inch and it lent him some courage.

"Get. The fuck. Away. From my house."

Maxon hadn't reacted, not to Elliot's proximity or his anger. Not to his words. His eyes were glued to Violet, approaching from behind.

Violet's hands clamped around one of Elliot's arms. "Elliot, that's enough. Maxon, you have to leave."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"The hell you aren't!"

Maxon finally looked at Elliot at this. "I'm not leaving without Violet."

Elliot grabbed a fistful of Maxon's shirt with his free hand. Anger, fear, surprise, and some protective instinct rattled around his chest, all mixed together. "You're not touching my wife."

Violet wrenched on his other arm. "Enough of this macho bullshit!"

Elliot didn't let go of Maxon's shirt, and Maxon hadn't made a move to get free despite the fact that one of his arms—Elliot now noticed—was in a makeshift sling. Surprisingly, Elliot had no sympathy for his injury.

"You were here earlier, weren't you? You were inside the house this afternoon. You were *in my goddamn house!*"

Violet let go of Elliot and threw her hands down. Her voice took on a harsh, half-scream. "Stop it, the two of you, before the neighbors call the cops!"

She shoved them toward the front door with all her body weight. Elliot swayed, but Maxon looked as though he didn't feel her at all. He looked down at her, and Elliot thought he saw surprise and maybe disappointment on his face. Good. Let him be disappointed; he'd leave sooner.

Maxon looked at Elliot, rolled his eyes, and moved toward the door. Elliot had to stop in front of him to unlock it. He could feel heat rising up the back of his neck, but he held the door open for Violet. She hugged herself and stepped inside. Elliot followed and left the door open for Maxon.

Maxon closed the door behind himself and stood in the middle of the living room. He looked everywhere except at Violet and Elliot as though he hadn't already been in the house before. He sneered at the furniture and the bookshelves with distaste. He ran his hand across a panel of reclaimed wood that hung on the wall. It said 'An' it harm none, do what ye will.' This seemed to disgust him more.

"What is this?" Maxon turned to face them.

Elliot wanted to smack him.

"This is my life, Maxon," Violet said. "It doesn't involve you, and you're not allowed to pass judgment on it. You have no right."

Maxon took a deep breath. "I deserve that."

Violet bristled. "Well, *thank you* for giving me permission to be mad at you. Now, why are you still here?"

"Because we need you."

Elliot didn't like the sound of that. "We? Who's 'we'?"

Maxon only flicked his eyes in Elliot's direction for a second before he looked back at Violet. "This doesn't involve you."

Elliot rolled his eyes. "That's the stupidest thing you've said since you got here. Are you pulling these lines out of the action-movie book of clichés? Of course this involves me. If it involves Violet, it involves me." He turned to Violet. "Who the hell does this guy think he is, Nicolas Cage?"

"Oh, god, he really does talk like that doesn't he?"

"Like what? What do I talk like?" Maxon looked suspicious and a little worried. "Who is Nicolas Cage?"

"*You* are, Drive Angry."

Maxon took a step toward Elliot. "I am not Nicolas Cage!"

"Uh, yeah. You are. You're so Nicolas Cage, you probably want Violet's help stealing the Declaration of Independence."

"I do not!"

"Switch faces with John Travolta lately?"

"No!"

"Oh my god, you're both ridiculous! Stop it!"

Elliot and Maxon, who were now standing inches from other another and breathing heavily, looked at her. They both had the good sense to look embarrassed.

Elliot stepped back and crossed his arms over his chest. Maxon shifted his weight to his back hip and tried to mirror Elliot's posture, but it looked awkward with the sling. Elliot thought he saw the hint of a pout, and he couldn't help but smirk. Strangely, he felt much less threatened by Maxon than he had before. Maxon's tough-guy act was just that, an act. Elliot had lured him

into exposing his soft underbelly. He had, admittedly, lured him with childish baiting, but the jig was up. Maxon was as insecure as Elliot was... probably.

Violet had somehow become the person in the room with the greatest amount of composure.

“I know it’s a foreign concept for you, Maxon, but I need you to be as transparent as possible. Tell me, in small words—without riddles or games or evasions—what you want and why you think you need it from me.”

Maxon’s eyes slid from Elliot to Violet and back again. “It’s not for him to know.”

Violet snapped. “Then it’s not for me to know, and you can leave.”

She walked to the door and opened it, waving him through with a broad sweep of her arm. There was a moment of silence in which no one made a move before Violet slammed the door shut again.

“That’s what I thought. Now, spit it out.”

Maxon hesitated, but seemed to realize that Violet wasn’t negotiating.

“It’s Greeg.”

The room filled with a silence that Elliot didn’t understand. Maxon was waiting, but Violet had frozen in time. She had a hand on her hip and was bent forward at the waist like a doll that was only semi-articulated. Elliot wasn’t sure she was breathing. Despite not know what who or what a ‘greeg’ was, Elliot felt a chill run up the back of his neck.

“No.”

Violet’s voice was quiet. She shook her head. She shook her whole body. Her arms waved in arcs in front of her chest like she was warding off hornets. Her hair whipped around her cheeks.

“Not possible. Greeg is dead. I *saw* him die. I *saw* it.”

Elliot stepped in front of Violet and slid his hands over her forearms but didn't close them. He had never seen her panic like this. Of the two of them, Violet was the one with her shit together. Elliot was prone to anxiety attacks, self-doubt, and fits of denial, but Violet was level-headed. She was the sane one, and Elliot didn't know what to do for her. She was shivering under his touch. She wouldn't look at him.

“Breathe, Vi. Breathe.”

It was what she always said to him when he felt like he was falling to pieces. It was surprisingly easy to forget.

“You've ruined her.”

Elliot didn't turn to look at Maxon, but it was a close thing. His concern for Violet outweighed his outrage at Maxon.

“She's not ruined.” Elliot ran a hand along the side of her face, tucking her hair behind her ear. “She's everything.”

He said it more to her than to Maxon. He was rewarded when Violet looked up into his eyes. She rolled hers, but gave him a small smile.

“There you are,” Elliot said. “What was that? Who's Greeg?”

Violet went pale. “King Greeg. He was...” She struggled for a moment to find the right words, but couldn't. In the end, she just said, “He was my Saruman.”

That, at least, made sense to Elliot.

“Not *King* Greeg,” Maxon said.

Violet squinted and looked over Elliot's shoulder to Maxon. Elliot dropped his hands to his sides and looked, too.

“*Queen*. Queen Mashriella Greeg.”

“What happened to Mashriella?”

Maxon rolled his eyes. “Nothing happened *to* her. *She* happened to *us*.”

Elliot was beginning to develop a headache. This felt like every conversation about office gossip that Maggie tried to drag him into but he didn’t care to follow because he didn’t know the people involved. He wished now that he had been less content to know the bare minimum about Violet’s background, because the difficulty he was having with following the conversation was compounded by the fact that none of it seemed real yet. He wouldn’t have believed her if she’d told him when they’d met, of course, but at least he’d have had a few extra years to dwell on it. Come to terms with it.

Elliot pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers. “Stop. Just stop.”

“There’s no time to stop,” Maxon said. “There’s no time for this idiotic conversation. My home hangs in the balance. Steria needs Violet!”

“STERIA DOESN’T WANT ME!”

Violet had shrieked the words. She had folded her body nearly in half to build the energy she needed to hurl them at Maxon. Elliot’s left ear had been closer, though. It took the brunt of the sound. He hissed and turned his head, too late.

“Stop! Everyone, stop! *Jeezus*.” Elliot rubbed his face with both hands. “Look, I’m calling a time out. Ten minutes. To your corners.”

He guided Violet to an overlarge, springy chair in one corner, and gestured at the far end of the sofa on Maxon’s side of the room. “Sit.”

Thankfully, Maxon did as he was told. He was staring at Violet, apparently stunned to silence.

“Now, I’m going to make some coffee.”

Maxon started to protest, but Elliot waved him down. “The coffee is nonnegotiable. Drink it or don’t, but no one talks until it’s done. Just... Just take a second to cool off and remember that we’re all grown-ass adults capable of having reasonable conversations and making informed decisions without tearing one another limb from limb.”

He glanced over at Violet’s arm as he said the words ‘limb from limb.’ He could see the bruises peeking out from under her sleeves. His cheeks went hot again, but he had to be able to take his own medicine.

“Hang on,” he said, and left the room.

He came back a moment later with a sandwich bag full of ice wrapped in a tea towel. He put it in her hand and guided it to the bruise on her opposite arm. He threw a dirty look at Maxon as he did.

Maxon looked away, but didn’t apologize. Instead, he said, “This place makes you weak.”

“Violet’s the strongest person I know,” Elliot told him. “Now, shut up until the coffee’s ready.”

Chapter Nine

Elliot

It was good coffee. Violet required nothing more than a little rocket fuel in the morning, but Elliot was an addict and a self-admitted snob. Just opening the bag, he felt a calm wash over him. He shoved his face up close and took a deep breath of the beans before refilling the grinder reservoir. While the ceramic cone blades whirred, he put his face back in the bag and inhaled like an anxiety-ridden airplane passenger rebreathing into a paper sack.

He wanted to scream. He had screamed. At Violet. In Violet's direction.

The grinder stopped, and he dumped enough grounds into the porta-filter for everyone, tamping it tightly with a stainless steel tamper shaped like the world's tiniest free weight. The tamper felt ridiculous in his hand when he considered that, in the next room, he would soon be discussing magic with his wife and her ex-boyfriend.

His *life* felt ridiculous in that context. Making coffee, shopping for groceries, building spreadsheets of data, having goddamn barbeques. It was the same, sudden self-awareness he felt watching videos of people living in impoverished countries. It was an uncomfortable twisting of the intestines—absurdity, disbelief, and no small amount of shame.

Elliot operated the espresso machine on autopilot because he was a straight, white man from an economically-adequate country who had never had to fight for his own freedoms or learn magic to save a parallel universe.

His hands shook as he carried the three cups back into the living room and set them on the coffee table. The cups rattled against one another. He took the one in the middle and leaned against a bookshelf on the wall opposite where Violet and Maxon sat.

Elliot sipped his coffee. "It's probably a waste of time to start at the very beginning just for my benefit, so why don't we try starting somewhere in the middle." He gestured to Maxon. "Something's wrong, or you wouldn't have come."

Maxon rolled his eyes. "This is a waste of time."

"No, a waste of time is you not accepting the fact that neither Violet nor I are inclined to help you until you talk. If you had explained yourself the first time we asked, we'd be past this by now."

Maxon looked like he'd drunk vinegar. Elliot nodded to the coffee cup on the table between them. Maxon took it but didn't drink. He sighed and put it back down.

"Mashriella killed Rosleana."

Two names Elliot didn't recognize. He looked at Violet, who was holding her own coffee cup in both hands and hovering over it like it was the only thing keeping her warm. She shook her head.

"She would never."

"She would. She did."

"No. Masha wasn't like her father. I wouldn't have spoken for her if I'd thought she were capable of the same violence."

Elliot decided not to interrupt them unless he needed context, but it hadn't escaped his notice that Violet had just used a pet name to refer to a queen.

"She deceived you, Violet. She deceived us all. She executed Rosleana in public. There is no question."

Violet took a long time to find her words. "I don't understand. *Why?*"

“We don’t know what her end goal is, but she killed Rosleana and enucleated the rest of the seers.”

Violet flinched.

“Enucleated?” Elliot asked.

Violet covered her face with one hand. “Removed their eyes.”

Elliot had to take a moment to consider that. His coffee didn’t seem as appetizing anymore.

Violet spoke again. “That doesn’t make sense. Removing their eyes shouldn’t stop them from getting visions.”

Maxon shrugged. “Except that it has. They see nothing, and they *See* nothing, spiritually. We suspect magic was involved, but no one has ever heard of magic that could suppress the Sight.”

“It still doesn’t explain why.”

“Because she is the same as her father! She should never have been allowed to rule. We should have deposed the monarchy like Rosleana wanted.”

“It wasn’t up to Rosleana.”

“It wasn’t up to *you!*”

Violet’s eyes narrowed. “I didn’t choose. The Pristine chose to leave Masha in power.”

“Only because you convinced them it was safe!”

“I only have *your* word that it wasn’t!”

Elliot cupped his hands and clapped them together twice to get their attention before they fell to pointless arguing again.

“I’m only following about eighty percent of this conversation, but I can tell we’re getting off topic. It doesn’t matter whose fault this was. Why did you come *here*?”

Maxon stretched his shoulders in an obvious attempt to calm himself.

“Rosleana’s final vision. As the executioner’s axe came down, she spoke with the voice of the Immaculate. One word before she died. ‘Violet.’”

Violet rolled her eyes.

“Oh, one word? She said a *single word*, and it was my name? That means absolutely nothing to me, Maxon. It means less than nothing. In fact, you probably misheard her. Rosleana was pretty adamant about exiling me from Steria. She was probably saying, ‘*By letting me die, the gods are finally bringing a little justice to the world,*’ or, ‘*I’ve let all of you down by being a deceitful, ungrateful, domineering BITCH!*’”

At ‘domineering bitch,’ Violet had stood up. She was leering over Maxon, who held her gaze. She was panting. Elliot crossed the room to stand next to her. He put an arm around her and felt her shoulders relax under his arm.

“Okay, Elliot’s missing some pieces,” Elliot said. “Can we slow down for a second and cover some history?”

Maxon, still looking at Violet, opened his mouth, but Elliot interrupted him.

“I know. There’s no time. Why are we still on this? Make time, or this ends right here.”

Maxon drew reluctant eyes away from Violet and onto Elliot. “I’ve come to take Violet to Steria. This conversation is a courtesy.”

“Feels real courteous.”

“I have instructions to take her back by any means necessary.”

“And I promise you that I will make *every* means necessary. How much time you got, because I can be pretty counterproductive.”

Maxon glared and chewed on his tongue.

“Great. Now, who is Rosleana?”

“Rosleana was one of the Pristine.”

“And the Pristine are?”

Violet answered this one. “It’s not quite like anything we have here. The Pristine are like religious leaders. They serve the Immaculate, who is their leader. Supposedly, the Immaculate can channel the soul of the very first Pristine. It’s a little involved to explain, but think about the phrase, ‘cleanliness is next to godliness,’ and make it an entire religion. Except there isn’t really a *god* in their religion.”

Elliot’s eyebrows came together amid hills of confused forehead wrinkles.

“And these *aren’t* the bad guys?”

Violet huffed. “That’s debatable.”

Maxon bristled. “The Pristine *guide* us. They saved us from plague, and they have always acted in the interest of Steria.”

Violet’s tone took on a venom Elliot had never heard before.

“Spoken like a pawn.”

She spat the words, but rather than look ashamed or angry, Maxon only looked confused.

“How did you grow to hate them so?”

“Rosleana didn’t tell you? I thought you were her right hand. I thought you were her golden boy. After all, it was *you* who saved Steria, right? All by yourself, without any help from me.”

Elliot saw a transformation take place in Maxon. His eyes shifted to the floor, then the wall, then the floor again. He shifted her arm in its sling. His fingers wove together between his knees. He was ashamed, and it was written on his whole body.

When he finally spoke, his voice was cracked around the edges. The machismo from before was gone.

“I never said that.”

“You never corrected it, either.”

“Rosleana said it was—”

Violet threw her coffee at him, cup and all. He raised his good hand in time to stop the cup from shattering in his face, but the coffee splattered everywhere. The cup rebounded on the floor. Miraculously, only the handle snapped off. The coffee had apparently cooled because Maxon appeared more wet and annoyed than harmed.

“You’re not an idiot, Maxon, so why are you still playing the role of Rosleana’s trained dog? You were just a kid back then, but we’re both adults now. Don’t sit in my house, in my world, and tell me you still believe her. Rosleana didn’t send me back because of any bullshit prophecy. She got rid me because she was afraid of me.”

“You chose to leave!”

“Oh, I know you don’t believe that.”

“Why would she lie?”

“She sent me back to *nothing*, Maxon. No family. No home. No resources. I saved your world, and my reward was abandonment. I sacrificed everything for Steria, and you didn’t have the balls to come after me. I drained myself *dry* for you.”

Elliot wiped at the tears that had begun falling down Violet’s face.

Elliot didn't understand everything they were talking about, but he made an educated guess. "You used it all up, didn't you?"

Violet looked at him. Her bottom lip trembled, and she sucked it into her mouth to disguise a sob. She nodded and buried her face in his neck. Elliot wrapped his hand around the back of her head and held her close.

"What?"

Elliot looked over Violet's shoulder at Maxon, whose eyes had widened.

"Her magic," Elliot said.

Elliot was sure he'd said the word 'magic' before. He'd been to magic shows. He and Violet had played Dungeons & Dragons with Maggie and Anita. He'd used the word 'magic' to ironically describe mundane things like the taste of Thai Town's panang curry or how it felt to pull off a perfect parallel park. But it felt like a foreign language in this context. Talking about magic as though it were a real thing gave him a feeling like cottonmouth. It made him feel stupid.

"That's the thing about... *magic* in Steria, right? Use it and lose it."

"But Rosleana never said—"

"Look, you're going to have to cut it out with the 'Rosleana said' crap. You clearly can't trust anything she's ever told you."

"But, if you have no magic, then why would she send me here?"

Elliot felt a tingle down his shoulder as Violet sighed into his neck and drew herself away from him. He shivered and hoped it was just the central air cooling the tear tracks she had left on his neck and some latent spidey danger-sense

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, Maxon. You don’t want me. I can’t help you. I have nothing left for you to take. Whatever Rosleana said before she died couldn’t have been about me, because I am *useless to you*. Do you get it now?”

Maxon shook his head. “If you don’t have any magic, then why would she be so afraid of you that she would make you leave against your will, like you said?”

Violet rolled her eyes. “She wasn’t afraid of my magic. She was afraid of my *influence*. She saw how the rest of the Pristine listened to me. I was only fifteen, but my opinion held so much weight with them that it swayed their decision to reinstate Masha as queen. Rosleana was afraid of losing her power over Steria.”

Maxon stood, angry, and Elliot instinctively placed himself between Maxon and Violet. He wasn’t sure what he could do against him, but he was prepared to take a cheap shot at his injured shoulder if he had to.

“Then maybe she had good reason to banish you!”

Violet side-stepped Elliot and slapped Maxon across the face. The clap sounded destructive, but Maxon only took a step back. Violet gasped and clutched her hand to her stomach, doubling over it protectively.

“Jeezus.”

Elliot put his arms around Violet’s back. This whole evening had been a exhibition of things of which he had never suspected his wife capable, but this was the most out of character. He had never seen her violent. No matter how angry she’d ever been, he’d never seen her strike someone.

“You bastard.”

Violet was openly weeping now, and Maxon had been stunned into sitting down again. Violet hadn't done any apparent physical damage, but he raised a hand to where she'd hit him, speechless.

Elliot could feel her whole body jittering, but he couldn't tell if it was with emotion or adrenaline.

"I have something here," she said. "I took the *nothing* Rosleana left me with and built it into a life I could be proud of. I'm safe here. I make a difference. I help people, and they don't punish me for it. I'm *happy*. How dare you come here and spit on my life and tell me I deserve nothing?"

"Vi, I didn't mean—"

"Get out."

She had whispered it, but it had cut him off as effectively as though she had screamed it.

"Get out of my house."

Maxon stood. Elliot straightened and readied himself for trouble, but Maxon walked around him toward the front door. He left the front door open, and Elliot watched him dissolve into the darkness.

Chapter Ten

Violet

Violet didn't feel good about turning Maxon out. She should have, but there was an itch behind her temples that wouldn't go away. She'd spent her first year back in the real world planning what she would say to him when he came back for her.

But then he never did.

The year she'd turned eighteen had been rough. She hadn't prepared for higher education the way other teenagers had, so she was left on her own, which was something she'd never been before. She'd been *lonely* most of her life, but there had always been guardian to make sure she was fed at least.

Until then, she'd always had the hope in the back of her heart that Maxon would rescue her from the joylessness of the real world and she wouldn't have to think about things like college or careers or debt collectors. She'd put her life on hold while wishing for a follow-up fairytale.

She'd wanted her epilogue, dammit. Didn't she deserve one?

She used her last foster home address to get a part-time job working in a drugstore as a cashier that summer, and lived out of a white-and-rust-colored Chevy Nova she'd scraped the cash to buy the year before. It was there, as she was scrubbing human waste off the bathroom mirror of the men's room—what monster had done this??—that she realized she was going to have to make her own happily ever after.

Violet had worked so damn hard to slice out a piece of this world for herself, and Maxon had expected her to walk away from it without a fight. He hadn't even considered the possibility

that she would refuse. He'd been confident that whatever she had accomplished in those fifteen years would pale in comparison to the promise of returning to Steria. With him.

She was so mad she could chew glass.

But she was also nauseated.

Whatever she'd said in the heat of the moment, Maxon wasn't a liar. On the few occasions he'd had a reason to lie, he'd been terrible at it. Fifteen years was a long time to improve a skill, but even if he were an expert now he had no reason to lie about Rosleana's execution or the enucleation of the seers.

He had no reason to lie about Mashriella's involvement, either, but she couldn't bring herself to believe it. Mashriella had been a sweet girl, a captive in her father's castle. She had been easily manipulated, perhaps, but she hadn't been a murderer. If Maxon hadn't claimed to have seen it with his own eyes, Violet would have dismissed it out of hand.

Violet sat silently on the living room sofa while her mind turned in circles. A few feet away, Elliot was wiping espresso off a vinyl cushion with a microfiber cloth. It was so normal. Violet felt herself starting to return to her equilibrium.

"Sorry."

Elliot turned to look at her, his eyebrows a question mark. She waved at the cushion.

"Sorry about the coffee."

Elliot smiled. It squeezed her heart, like a hug.

"At least you don't take sugar."

She gave a short laugh, but there were tears behind it.

"So, how freaked out are you?"

Elliot had turned back to the chair and was wiping it down. He took a deep breath and then shrugged. “Hard to gauge.”

“Well, what’s going on in that big brain of yours?”

Elliot finished wiping the last of the coffee before turning to face her.

“I’m still processing a lot. It’s hard taking a lot of this on faith, you know. I have about a million questions, but I’m not even sure how to ask them. I’m not sure I have the vocabulary. Hell, I’m not sure I have the capacity. I might be at my suspension-of-disbelief limit for the year.”

Violet nodded. “Any of those questions in English yet?”

“Maybe a couple. Mostly things like, ‘How could you have dated such a tool?’ and ‘Why do you look like you’re going to hurl right now?’”

“Maxon was always such a tool. I mean, maybe he was, but it was less important to me back then. He’s someone who doesn’t see past his own backyard. Everything in his little bubble is all that matters, and everything else is incidental. When I was fourteen, that translated to undying loyalty and this sort of edgy intensity that I craved. Now, it just reads as willful ignorance.”

Elliot stood up to take the microfiber cloth to the laundry room. He called out from the other room.

“And what about Steria?”

The question seemed odd to Violet. She looked at Elliot as he walked back into the living room.

“What do you mean?”

Elliot sat on the sofa next to her. She leaned into him and he put his arm around her and drew her in closer.

“I mean, how do you feel about Steria? It was this incredible place where you spent one of the most formative years of your life, right? I don’t know anything about it other than its arbitrary magic burn-out rule and the fact that its primary religion is a cult obsessed with cleanliness, which honestly sounds like *the* most thinly-veiled cover for a villainous cult I’ve ever heard of. But you loved it once, didn’t you? I’ve only read the first few chapters of your draft, but I know you love it.”

Violet thought about that. Steria was so much more than the parts Elliot had gleaned over the last couple of hours or from pages she’d let him read. Losing Steria had been losing the only place she’d ever considered her home.

She drew her knees up to chest.

“I miss it. But I’m scared.”

“Of what?”

“I’m scared that it’s not like I remember.”

“I’m sure it’s changed over time.”

“No, I mean, I’m terrified that it was never the amazing place I thought it was in the first place. I didn’t have a *bad* childhood, exactly, but wasn’t starshine and roses. Steria was like this shining beacon and I had finally reached land after years at sea. I was enamored, but I had no frame of reference. Maybe it was only amazing by comparison. Maybe it was just as ordinary as this world.”

Elliot raised an eyebrow at her. “You know, except with magic.”

Violet blushed even though she knew Elliot was only teasing her.

“I guess. Maybe I’m overthinking it.”

“No, I get it. You’re afraid that it won’t live up to your memories of it. When we’re kids, we idealize people and romanticize places. You want to keep Steria shiny. It’s like finding out that all diet sodas contain aspartame.”

Violet laughed. “What?”

She felt his chin against the top of her head as he nodded. “You think you have this great beverage that doesn’t contain any sugar or calories, and then you’re faced with the reality that—while delicious—it’s toxic.”

Violet started giggling. “It’s not like that at all, and you have to drink like fifteen cans before it’s toxic.”

“I know, but your cheeks are looking less green, so I win.”

She rested her head on his shoulder and a peace fell over the room. The ventilation in their small house wasn’t great, so everything still smelled like coffee, but it wasn’t an unpleasant smell. It was late, though, and sleep was starting to tug at the corners of Violet’s eyes. She snuggled deeper into Elliot’s shoulder.

“What’s going on in *your* brain right now?” Elliot asked after several minutes of exquisite silence.

Violet closed her eyes. Elliot gave her a little, playful shake of the shoulders.

“Come on. Don’t give up on me now.”

Violet pretended to grumble a serious of nonsense words under her breath. She punched his shoulder and repositioned her head on it.

“Pillows aren’t supposed to talk.”

She could feel Elliot's laughter in his chest. "I know you're tired, but it feels weird to leave it like this. Talk to me."

He reached over and yanked her bent knees across his lap. She shrieked and landed on her back along the length of the sofa. He dug his thumbs into the muscle of her thigh where she carried most of her tension. It tickled, but it also helped her feel less wound up. She oscillated between uncontrollable giggling and appreciative sighs.

"I don't know," she said at last. "I know it was a ton to process for you, but it wasn't easy for me either."

"Start anywhere."

"King Greeg was this monster tyrant. The Pristine were the leaders of the religious sect, and they were powerful in their own right, but they had no authority over him. He had an army, and most of the people who still had magic were in his army. They had this thing they would do to stop you using magic when you were a kid. They would inject this foul, gray stuff into what I now know is the radial artery in both your wrists. The needles were huge, though, and it wasn't always successful. It was *never* pleasant."

"So, the Pristine brought you over to fight fire with fire."

"Basically."

"And then you fell in love with a princess."

Violet nodded. "She was my first girlfriend."

"And now?"

And now? Violet didn't know what now. Of the two of them, Maxon had betrayed her and Mashriella never had. If what Maxon had done could be considered betrayal, she supposed.

She didn't know the truth anymore. It wasn't difficult to believe that Rosleana had lied to him, but the fact that he hadn't come looking for her until now still hurt.

"I just can't believe that Masha turned out like her father. She was too... *soft*. And she loved Steria. I mean, she hadn't been allowed to go out in it since she was little, but they were *her* people. I wouldn't have thrown my weight behind her if I'd thought she were capable the kind of animosity he was."

Violet raised herself up on her elbows and looked at Elliot, who was mindlessly kneading at the muscles in her calves, staring at some middle distance.

"Do you think I'm idealizing her, too?"

"It's possible. Like with my dad. I thought everything was great when I was a kid. All my friends had two Christmases, but I had the parents that were still together. And then they split and my dad sort of Scooby-Doo-like revealed himself to be a pretty atrocious human being."

He sighed and leaned back against the couch. "But, I don't know. By the time you met Mashriella, you had fourteen years of foster homes under your belt. You had a lot more experience reading people than I did at that age."

Violet considered that. If she thought about all the people in her life who had let her down, how many had she been really surprised by? Rosleana had betrayed her, but there had always been something off about Rosleana. Maxon had abandoned her, but he'd always been the 'taking orders' type. There had been a series of foster fams both before and after her year in Steria, but she hadn't ever felt surprised when nothing solid came of them.

"No, I guess people don't surprise me often."

"*I* surprised you."

Elliot said it with a rogue's smile that sent her back to the night they started dating. He'd been every inch the gawky, awkward analyst he still was, but he had been bold that night. While she remembered, he took advantage of her silence by giving the inside of her thigh a pinch where she was most ticklish. She shrieked and sat up to defend herself, but he didn't go in for a second attack.

Violet leaned in and kissed him. "Yeah. You surprised me."

"What I feel like the romantic lead is supposed to do in this situation is to lift you up bridal-style and carry you to the bedroom, but I have the knees of an octogenarian, so what do you say we get up and go to bed together?"

Violet grinned. "Yeah, okay. We'll talk in the morning."

Chapter Eleven

Violet

Sleep came easier than Violet thought it would, but it was filled with nightmare versions of Sterian landmarks. The Flying Forest on fire. The Immacularium torn to the ground, rubble at her feet. Mashriella, unrecognizable as a figure of shadow and iron, stood atop the ruins and laughed at her. She sent an army of spellcasters and undead soldiers after Violet while the severed head of Rosleana laughed at her from where it lay at Mashriella's feet. Maxon ran to rescue her, but he slipped in a river of blood that streamed from a pile of Sterian corpses and Mashriella's army overtook him.

She woke to Elliot gently shaking her by the elbow.

“Vi, you're kicking in your sleep. Violet. Violet, wake up.”

The journey back to the waking world felt like the journey from Steria back to the real world. Back then, the journey had been disorienting, a twisting, jolting swirl of physics-defying colors and sensations.

She resisted waking, convinced at first that Elliot was part of the dream. He was an owl flying ahead of her, showing her the way through the trees, cutting a path through the darkness. She would follow him anywhere.

“Violet, wake up.”

Elliot gave her another, stronger shake, and she dripped from her dream like honey from a spoon. Her head felt like it was full of lead.

She groaned, a wordless signal to Elliot that he could stop shaking her.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “You were kicking.”

“Running.”

Violet grimaced. Her words tasted like rotten lettuce. She regretted not brushing her teeth before bed.

“I was running.”

“What from?”

Violet leaned over the side of the bed and grabbed a bottle of water from her night stand. She took a swig, swirled it around in her mouth a few times, and spit it into a nearby trash can. She drained the rest of the bottle.

“My life.”

From the other side of the blackout drapes, Violet could hear signs of daylight. Birds were hosting choral practice from the gutters and a pair of squirrels—Elliot referred to them as June and Ward—were cursing at each one in one of the apple trees out back. They were always arguing about something.

“What time is it?”

She felt Elliot shift in the dark to look at his smart watch.

“Ten-fifteen.”

Violet groaned again and buried her head on her pillow even though curtains already kept the room pitch dark.

He wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed her shoulder blade.

“I’ll go make coffee.”

The bed shifted, the door hinges screamed, and Violet rolled onto her back. She rubbed her eyes and smooshed all the muscles in her face together in an effort to crush some alertness into it. Then, she swung her legs over the edge of the mattress and fished around in the darkness for her cell phone. On her way to the door, she tripped over a pile of laundry, and the effort to

catch herself before she faceplanted in the hardwood did more to wake her than her face-squishing had.

Zombie-like, she trudged out of the bedroom and down the hall to the kitchen. She yawned with her whole upper body and scratched churlishly between and under her boobs where she had sweat through her pajama tank and a sticky film had formed. She felt slimy, but wasn't convinced she'd be able to stand upright in the shower without falling over until she'd poured some sweet, jittery poison down her throat.

She pulled out a stool tucked under the overhang of the kitchen island and watched as Elliot buzzed around the kitchen with espresso and whole milk.

She hadn't broken him. That was good. It had been her fear, that he wouldn't be able to handle her truth.

To be honest, she'd had pretty concrete plans to never tell him the truth. What point would there have been? Steria was a chapter of her life that had been closed, cut, and relegated to the slush pile. Well, insofar as she was trying to pass it off as fiction and market it as a young adult novel.

Now, the chapter had been reopened, Elliot had been exposed to the madness, and he hadn't dissolved or evaporated or whatever else she'd feared would happen. He was whistling and making her coffee and eggs.

“Hey.”

Elliot froze mid egg-crack. He punctuated the tune he'd been whistling with a questioning up-pitch.

“I love you.”

Elliot's pouted lips turned into a smile. "I love you, too. Do you want hash browns with your eggs?"

"I'll get them."

Violet went to the freezer for the pre-processed hash brown bricks and popped a couple in the microwave.

The doorbell rang, and all noise fell to the background as Violet and Elliot locked eyes.

"He wouldn't ring the doorbell, would he?"

Before Violet could answer, there were a series of obnoxious, rhythmically-challenge knocks, and then a bellowing voice from the other side of the door.

"Little pig! Little pig! Let me in!"

It was Maggie.

Color flooded back into Elliot's face; Violet went to answer the door.

"Maggie! Anita! It's... so early."

Maggie, who was carrying an enormous serving tray wrapped in aluminum foil, pushed her way into the house and rushed to set the heavy haul down on the kitchen table. Anita dipped her head respectfully to Violet and scoot inside with somewhat more dignity.

"Your enthusiasm overwhelms," Maggie said, "but we just came to check on you. We wanted to make sure everything's already. You didn't have any more trouble from that creep last night, did you?"

Elliot started chuckling. It didn't seem voluntary.

"Woah." Maggie lowered herself onto bent knees and place her hands in front of her in a semblance of a karate stance. "Do we have a stalker situation? Do I need to set up a sting

operation across the street? You know, Anita was a Junior Explorer. She can booby-trap your whole house, Home Alone style.”

“No I can’t,” Anita said, but Maggie ignored her.

“No, we took care of it last night after we came home.”

“He came to your house?!”

This conversation was snowballing and Violet wasn’t sure whether continuing it would help or just pour more gas on the flames.

“Well, yes, but he’s gone now.”

“Not likely,” Elliot said, scraping scrambled eggs onto a plate. His tone was conversational. “I lay even money that he comes back. Couldn’t say when, but I’m guessing it’s not easy for him to... *travel*.”

Violet picked up the meaning. She wasn’t sure what it had taken for Maxon to get to this world. Both times Violet had traveled between worlds, it had been the Pristine who had facilitated the creation of a doorway. But if the Pristine were dead, Violet didn’t know how he’d managed it. Elliot could be right. Violet had been too eager to accept last night’s victory as the final battle.

“Well, then there’s no question,” Anita said. She was using her manager’s voice. “We’re staying.”

“No, come on, you guys. That’s not necessary.”

“I disagree,” Elliot said. “I’d pay an entry fee to see Maggie stomp Maxon into the ground.”

Maggie laughed. “*Maxon*? What kind of a name is *Maxon*?”

Elliot grinned and Violet got the impression that he was enjoying this a little too much.

“You know, I wondered the same thing.”

“All right, this is just getting childish.”

“Violet, I’m not sure you’re taking this as seriously as you should,” Anita said. “You’re a nurse. I don’t think I have to remind you how many assault cases occur against women at the hands of ex-boyfriends.”

Violet rolled her eyes. She was being back into a corner, and Elliot was helping Maggie and Anita push. She raised her hand.

“Now, listen, this is a much more complicated situation than you guys realize. Elliot is unfairly egging you on, but he knows the truth and he *should know better*.”

She directed the last part through her teeth at Elliot, who had nonchalantly cracked more eggs, she assumed for Maggie and Anita.

“No, I only know part of the truth, and that’s as much as you know.”

Violet was getting tired of being ganged up on. She could feel her face turning pink with heat.

“Elliot! I will not stand here and let you misrepresent the situation. You *know* he didn’t mean to hurt me, and you *know* that I’m not going anywhere with him, but you’re behaving like a jealous movie-boyfriend.”

“He wants you to *go* somewhere with him?” Maggie asked. She performed a partial sumo squat and slapped both her thighs with meaty palms. “Oh, I *hope* he comes. I’m going to make it so he has to sit in chairs backwards for the rest of his life.”

“You will not! Maggie, you have surgery in five hours. You can’t stay here and protect me from someone I don’t need protection from.” She turned on Elliot. “And you are I are officially in a fight, in case you were wondering.”

“I’m not going anywhere. This is way more important than sticking some more junk in my trunk.”

“Maggie, no. You will not miss your surgery because of this.”

Violet threw a nasty glare at Elliot, who threw up his hands in defeat.

“Fine. Maggie, Violet’s right. We have this under control. There’s no reason for you to miss your surgery. You’ve been fighting to get the insurance to pay for it for too long to cancel it now.”

“*Thank you.*”

“Hey, Violet?”

Violet turned to Anita, who was staring at something in the distance. Violet turned to follow her line of sight, but didn’t see anything.

“Yeah?”

“Is your ex a big guy? About Elliot’s height, buzzed hair, black jacket?”

Violet felt the warmth in her cheeks drain away.

“Yes.”

“Well, he’s, uh, he’s in your backyard.”

“WHAT?!”

Violet moved in front of Anita to get a view outside the kitchen window where Maxon was knelt down, fiddling with something on the ground in the far corner with his one good hand.

She saw him stand and quickly cross to the other side of the yard, out of view of the window.

Violet saw a flash of something metal in the corner he'd left. She felt suddenly cold.

“No, no, no, no, no.”

Violet leapt across the kitchen to the door that led to the garage, then out into the backyard. Maggie, shocking fast for her size, was on her six. By the time Violet was halfway across the lawn, she could hear Elliot and Anita behind them.

Violet waved her arms in big, warning windmills.

“Maxon, NO!”

Maxon turned from where he knelt at the other end of the yard. His eyes flashed to Maggie, Elliot, and Anita in turn. He looked scared for a second, then obstinate again—that soldier's façade she'd once been weak for.

“I'm sorry,” he said.

He took something from his pocket and fixed it to a metal spike he'd hammered into the ground.

Violet froze as though her veins had been laced with electricity. A rectangle of jagged green energy encompassed the entire backyard. Violet felt like her molecules were vibrating so far she would fly apart into an uncountable number of pieces. She felt herself trying to scream, but her muscles wouldn't obey.

In front of her Maxon was likewise frozen in place. From the corner of her eye, she could see Maggie, mid-charge, face arranged into a perpetual battle cry. She couldn't decide whether she hoped Elliot and Anita were inside the gate or not. Both, maybe.

At the point when she thought she might die of suffocation or collapse in on herself like a dying star, there was a flash of white hot light and the feeling of being pulled inside out from the base of her spine.

For a moment, she floated in a negative gray space. Her atoms spilled apart, pooling like so much liquid mercury. Then, everything abruptly snapped back together and she was slammed into the ground on her back.

The fall knocked the air out of her lungs. She cobbled together a wheezy breath that tasted of salt and fish and sat up. Tears came to her eyes, but she wasn't sure if they were joyful or bitter.

“Steria.”

Chapter Twelve

Elliot

From where he'd stood—the last one out of the house—Elliot had a perfect view of everything that happened. He'd delayed only long enough to turn off the burner on the stove, then flew out into the yard behind Anita just as green lightning gripped him and threw him to the ground.

In the moment before the flash, he could see Anita, Maggie, and Violet—mid-stride—shimmering like hot pavement. He had an unchecked thought that this was how the Wicked Witch of the East must have felt when Dorothy had splashed her with water. It was like being so cold you looped back around to your melting point.

It made no scientific sense, of course, but Elliot pretty certain that the laws of physics had just been tossed right out the window. This wasn't science. This was magic, and it hadn't had the civility to ease him into it.

He couldn't be sure, but there might have a moment after the flash in which he lost consciousness. It could have been a second or it could have been a year, but when it was over, he wasn't in Indiana anymore.

He really needed to stop making *Wizard of Oz* references.

As soon as his elastic bones would support his weight, he flipped himself over onto his stomach and threw up. Without breakfast, and skipping everything but the cocktails from dinner last night, there wasn't much aside from stomach acid and spit, but his abdominal muscles clenched at uneven intervals anyway.

Elliot had never had a hangover, but he had to imagine it was something like this.

Violet's familiar hands started rubbing circles between his shoulder blades. His ruined innards began to calm.

"Elliot, I'm sorry."

Elliot nodded at the ground and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He wiped his hand on his... pajama shorts.

Jeezus.

Elliot sat back on his heels.

"Tell me honestly. Is my head on backwards? Did my eyeballs explode?"

Violet held his face in her cool hands, and he gradually started to feel like he might have been reassembled correctly after all.

Nearby retching nearly sent Elliot's stomach back over the edge, but he managed to hold himself together.

"Christ," Violet said. "Anita and Maggie."

Stiff-limbed and dizzy, Elliot crawled on his knees to the nearest person to him. It was Anita.

Unlike himself, Anita had apparently had breakfast, the remnants of which Elliot put his hand into blindly.

"Oh, no. Oh, *no*. Oh, jeez."

Part of his mind tried to refocus him on comforting Anita, but the alarm bells of an obsessive-compulsive forebrain had overtaken all other thoughts. He couldn't shut up the inquisitive side that was trying to identify what Anita's breakfast had been without looking at it. At the same time, he was weighing the pros and cons of wiping his hand on his shorts again or

taking his chances with a nearby leafy plant which could have, for all he knew, been poison sumac.

With all of this going on at once, he was just as frozen as he had been when Maxon had beamed them up from the back yard. His breathing grew shallow and desperate. Panic had begun to set in. Ordinarily, it would have taken a little more than vomit to set him down this rabbit hole, but the past twenty-four hours had primed him for a short circuit and the puke his been the blown fuse.

“Elliot, honey. Elliot, *breathe.*”

Elliot wasn't sure whether it was Anita or Violet speaking to him because whoever it was sounded like they were talking from the other end of a tunnel. He couldn't hear properly over the rush of blood in his own ears.

He flinched when someone took his left hand and almost jerked it back, but someone had started wiping it down with a cloth. Elliot stretched the muscles in his neck left and right. He dug the heel of his right hand into the center of his chest where his lungs felt like they would burst. Pushing against them like that probably wasn't helping, but it made him feel like he had come amount of control over the panic attack.

He forced himself to slow his breathing, counting beats between inhaling and exhaling. It was like being submerged underwater while trying to survive by breathing through a plastic straw.

“That's good. You're doing great.”

It was Violet. He was certain now. She held his only-slightly crusty hand in both of hers.

“Slow breaths. Deep breaths.”

“What's the matter with him?” Maxon asked.

“The matter with him is that you kidnapped us, you prick!”

“It was just supposed to be you, but then everyone was in the yard before I could finish. I had no choice.”

“You were the *only* person who had a choice! That’s the problem.”

“Stop. Everybody, stop it,” Elliot said, holding his head.

He had somehow managed to regulate his breathing enough to sense Anita shifting on the ground beside him.

Anita moaned. “Maggie?”

As the black spots in his vision started to recede, Elliot looked over to see Anita crawling over to Maggie, who lay facedown on the ground. Elliot gave Violet’s hand a reassuring squeeze, then lurched over into his hands and knees to push himself back to his feet.

“Mags?”

Anita tried to shove Maggie over onto her back, but only raised her left side a few inches off the ground. Elliot bent down to help. Together, they were able to roll her over. Violet, who didn’t seem to have been as heavily impacted by the trip between worlds, was next to them in seconds.

Violet felt at Maggie’s neck. “Pulse is strong. Here.”

She reached over Maggie and yanked a fistful of leaves from a nearby plant. She crushed them between her fingers and they released a heady spearmint scent into the air. She held the crushed leaves under Maggie’s nose.

Maggie sneezed and farted. Her eyes flew open, and she performed the most incredible roll into a fighting stance that Elliot had ever seen for a recently unconscious person.

Unfortunately, her sudden spryness didn't last long. She folded over and barfed into the spearmint. Elliot tried not to think about his disgusting encounter with the contents of Anita's stomach.

"Give me that," he said to Violet, who handed him the remnants of the leaves. He smeared them onto his upper lip and took a deep, soothing breath that smelled almost like the aftershave he used.

It was cathartic.

While Anita and Violet comforted Maggie, Elliot took his first real look at their surroundings. They were standing on a dirt road that had seen a lot of use. It reminded him of rural Indiana, the forested areas where his mother's second husband had misguidedly tried to bond with Elliot through the ritualistic shooting of woodland animals.

They were at the point where a wooded area met the top of a hilled prairie. In the distance, the horizon half-lidded the sun, and when he shaded his eyes he could see a tiny village against the backdrop of a vast body of water down the road.

He had to look away. Looking downhill at the village made him feel like he would fall over. He pictured himself taking a Princess Bride tumble and breaking all of his ribs.

"I've pissed myself."

Maggie had pulled her head out of the spearmint and was lying on her back in the dirt. Anita held her hand. Violet leaned forward to check her pupils.

"How are you feeling, otherwise?" Violet asked. "You were unconscious for a minute there."

“There’s timpani playing in my brain pan, and my mouth tastes like burnt toast wrapped in chlamydia. Where’s that mother fucker with the green glow sticks? I’m gonna pull his teeth out through his ass with my multitool.”

“Feeling better, then.”

“Yeah. Help me up.”

Elliot walked over to help the other two bring Maggie to her feet and make sure she was steady enough to stand on her own. Anita tucked herself under Maggie’s arm to help support her weight, but Elliot suspect that Maggie wasn’t putting much on her. Either that or Anita was sturdier than she appeared.

Maxon stood at the other side of the road. He gingerly tucked his arm back into its sling. He watched them fumble around with what Elliot interpreted to be contempt on his face. He wasn’t helping. He wasn’t making sure his tagalongs weren’t injured. He was just standing there with a face like a chiseled douche, probably wondering how he could ditch Maggie, Anita, and Elliot at his earliest opportunity.

“You must be pretty pleased with yourself, huh?”

Maxon’s eyes focused on Elliot.

“You got what you wanted.” Elliot gestured to Violet, then clapped his hands in mock congratulations.

“This isn’t what I wanted.”

“No? You mean you *didn’t* want to kidnap my wife?”

Maxon’s jaw clenched. A vein in his neck visibly throbbed. Elliot didn’t realize veins could do that in real life, but he was beyond the ability to censor himself now.

“What’s the plan now, Tall, Dark, and Dipshit? I hope it’s a good one, because now you have four people to keep alive in this Tolkienian hellhole instead of just the one! And I bet you were too self-assured and *stupid* not to bring any extra metal spikes with you in case you *fucked everything up!*”

Maxon dropped his arm to his side. His eyes narrowed. He walked toward Elliot with intention, but Elliot was too angry to make the smart play and back down. Maxon telegraphed his punch, pulling way back to build power and giving Elliot more than enough time to duck under it.

With his head still down, Elliot delivered a fair imitation of a boxer’s body blow to Maxon’s solar plexus.

For an instant, Elliot felt like his whole arm had been wrapped in feathers. His skin tingled and sent shivers up his neck into his jaw. His fist connected with Maxon’s chest, and Maxon was thrown back six feet into a tree trunk.

Maxon’s legs gave out and he slid down the length of the trunk. He was still conscious, but he couldn’t draw enough breath to make sound yet.

Elliot opened his fist and stared at the palm of his own hand, then looked at Violet, eyes wide. She looked equally shocked.

“What the hell just happened?”

Violet shook her head but didn’t speak. Maggie did, instead.

“Holy, shitting shar peis, Elliot.”

Elliot didn’t know how to comprehend what had just happened. He *knew* he hadn’t hit Maxon with enough strength to knock him back that far. Elliot was pretty certain he didn’t possess enough strength, even if that had been his intention.

“I knew it.”

Violet sounded defeated, deflated, and half amused. Elliot turned to look at her. She had one hand at her forehead and the other on her hip. She shook her head and lowered herself into a half-squat.

“It could have been anyone.”

“Violet?”

“He could have picked any girl off the street.”

Magic. She’s talking about magic.

Elliot looked down at his hands again. Well, it hadn’t been because Elliot ate his spinach when his parents fed it to him. He’d just sent two-hundred and twenty pounds of human hurtling across the road.

Anita cleared her throat. “Ah, Nurse Violet? Are we not concerned about the unconscious guy?”

Violet waved her hand. “He’s fine. He’s always fine.”

As she said it, Maxon groaned and dragged himself to his feet. He looked like someone who’d had a few too many Jägermeister’s the night before—decidedly not like a man who had just had his bell rung. He shook his head, then his torso, then his hips like a wet dog.

Elliot’s first instinct was to dig his heel into the dirt road and ready himself for a charge, but when Maxon didn’t run at him, he relaxed his shoulders. Punching Maxon had relieved the pent up rage that had accumulated since the night before, and he felt less like a badass and more like a garden variety ass.

“So, exactly how impossible is it to get back home?”

Maxon had the good sense to look ashamed. “Rosleana was the only one who knew how travel between worlds worked. Those portal spikes were... relics.”

Elliot felt new fury feed into his muscles. “So, there’s no way back.”

It wasn’t a question. It was a dizzying truth.

Maxon shook his head.

“So, we’re stuck here.”

Maxon nodded. Elliot could feel his heartbeat in his teeth.

“So, your original plan was to bring Violet here—alone—with no way to get back when she executed whatever cocked-up plan you had.”

“There would be time to worry about that later.”

Elliot didn’t like himself very much in that moment. He didn’t like the man he became whenever Maxon spoke. He turned into a man who used his fists to alleviate his own scorched emotions instead of a mediator who disassembled his problems with logic and conversation. He clenched both his fists, closed his eyes, and gnashed his teeth so hard it gave him vertigo in an attempt to keep himself restrained.

He tore his gaze from Maxon and set it behind him on Violet, who had begun to rock back and forth. Anita knelt on the ground next to her, shoulders in her hands. It was this that brought Elliot back to the land of the rational thinker. Violet needed him to be Bruce Banner, not the Hulk.

“Do you even know where we are?”

Maxon looked around and scratched the back of his neck. “Uh.”

Elliot pinched the bridge of his nose.

“We’re in Kelton. Or near it,” Violet said. She sounded withered. She pointed down at the fishing village in the distance. “I was here once, during the war.”

“Hold on and got-damned minute,” Maggie said. “Can someone explain where we are, you know, in a *broader* sense of the word? Like how in the nine hells are we not in your backyard anymore?”

Elliot squinted at the ever-lowering sun.

“Let’s walk and talk. I don’t want to be exposed at night in the middle of nowhere.”

Chapter Thirteen

Maggie

Maggie had spent a disproportionate amount of the last three years covered in her own piss. Now, having missed the surgery that would install an electrode near her pissing nerve that would send pissing signals to the pissing lobe of her brain, there was no doubt the foreseeable future contained a great deal more misplaced piss.

Her thighs were rubbed raw through her jean shorts, and they were only halfway to town. She walked with an overstated twerk in her gait, trying to find new ways of avoiding the friction, but her hips were no match for the damp denim. It sandpapered at her skin with every shimmy.

Despite the fact that Elliot had promised conversation while they made their way to town, they had been walking in silence. Maggie didn't handle silence well; it reminded her of Sunday dinners when her parents would host the ward bishop after sacrament when she was a kid. Silence made Maggie itch, and she was already uncomfortable.

“Okay. Okay, fucking stop.”

She felt everyone look her direction, but Maggie had stopped to examine a shrub with leaves as wide as her palm and long as her torso. There were hundreds of them growing on the hillsides.

“What at these. Are they poisonous?”

“I wouldn't eat that,” Violet said. “Not unless you want explosive diarrhea.”

“I'm not going to eat it. It's for my belfry.”

“Your...”

“Belfry.” She indicated her crotch with a sweeping gesture of her hand. “My lady cave. My groinal area. I can't keep walking while I'm this wet. It wouldn't be the first time I've worn

a grass skirt commando, but I'd rather have medium rare thighs than poison oak diaper rash, you know?"

Violet choked. "Uh, well, no, I don't think it's poisonous."

"Good enough for me."

Maggie unhooked her belt and ripped it out of its loops in one motion like a goddamn pro. She had her shorts and underwear down her ankles a second later. She stepped out of them, no trace of sheepishness.

A breeze struck her bare, red thighs.

"Hoo-ee! That stings."

Elliot turned to face away. A beat later, so did a startled Maxon. Violet didn't bother, and Anita let out an exasperated, "Babe!" which Maggie ignored.

Maggie cinched her belt as tight as it would go and started stripping the shrub of its bigger leaves and tucking them into between herself and the vinyl. The leaves had to be layered on top of one another so they would stay in the belt, and what resulted was a horticultural tutu that flared at her waist and barely covered her ass. By the time she was finished, her cooch had airdried, but she tucked an extra tongue of foliage between her thighs to keep them from rubbing together until she could get some proper pants. She took a few steps to test it out; it wasn't perfect, but it would get the job done.

"All right, you fucking gentlemen. The groundhog saw her shadow. Let's git."

Anita was bright pink and appeared to be holding her breath. She was biting one of her thumbs, one hand on her stomach as though to physically restrain a laugh. She had started to wheeze by the time Maggie had finished.

"What?"

Anita's laughter burst out of her. She tipped and almost fell onto her knees.

"You look like redneck Thumbelina."

This pulled a giggle from Violet and made Elliot and Maxon turn around. Elliot grinned, but Maxon just looked at her with that same constipated expression he'd had on ever since she'd met him.

Maggie looked down at herself. She was wearing a pink camo jacket and green tactical boots with her grass skirt. There was an ten-inch knife strapped to one of her ankles. She shrugged.

"I'd fuck me."

Anita hooked an arm around her waist. "No doubt, babe."

Maxon had already turned back and started walking again, but Maggie wasn't having the silent treatment any long.

"Hey! Bargain-brand Dwayne Johnson!"

She picked up her jeans from the ground and threw them at his back. They smacked into his shoulder blades and hung from his shoulder by one pant leg. Maxon froze. The jeans slowly slid down his back and puddled at his feet.

"I'm not taking one more step until someone starts talking. We got shot by purple lightning, Elliot's throwing people through trees, and I'm standing here in a goddamn *vegan diaper*. You all seem to be not-so-surprised about what's happening, but Anita and I need to be filled the fuck in. Right now."

Maxon didn't move, but Maggie could see how stiff his neck had gotten and how his one free hand was flexing and unflexing. That was a man on the edge, and if Maggie pushed him a little harder, he might snap.

That, she decided, was just what she would do.

Maggie walked away from Anita's arm and planted herself in front of Maxon. She set her feet shoulder-length apart and bent her knees, ready to dodge or absorb a punch if he swung on her. She hoped he did.

"Come on, V-neck. Tell me what's up."

Maxon's eyes were closed, but his lips pressed together and his head turned to the side. Maggie poked him in the sternum with two fingers.

"You're the man with the plan, aren't you? I'm not totally clear on the how, but you at least owe us a why, right? How 'bout a where? How 'bout a what-now?"

"You're not even supposed to be here!"

Maxon didn't swing at Maggie, but he stepped forward into her combat zone. He must have been expecting her to back down, out of bluster, because he ran chest-first into her crossed arms. She gave a short, sharp leap forward, and he bounced backward a step. His eyes rolled into the back of his head and he put his left hand against his right shoulder to stabilize it.

"Tough titties! We're all here, and someone's gotta take responsibility for that. My vote's for the asshat with the magic sparklers."

Anita stepped between Maxon and Maggie.

"You're both acting like children." She turned to face Maggie. "I'm scared, too, but smacking each other around isn't going to get us home."

She turned to face Maxon. "I don't know you, honey-bun, and I don't much like you, but you're stuck with us for now."

She looked at Violet, who had been sullen and withdrawn since they'd started walking, and Elliot, who hadn't said much since he'd knocked Maxon into next week. "And you two have

to let people into your exclusive little lovey-dovey-club. Like, it's adorable when we're playing Dungeons and Dragons and you write your characters' backstories together, but this isn't cute. This is pants-shittingly terrifying, and you need to snap out of it."

She looked around at everyone. "Someone start talking." She emphasized every syllable with a clap of her hands. "How did we get here?"

Elliot looked at Violet. Violet looked at Anita and Maggie. Maxon looked at the ground.

"It's probably best if you field the questions," Elliot to Violet.

Violet offered Anita and Maggie an uncertain smile. Her voice was tiny. "Magic?"

"Obviously," Maggie and Anita said at the same time.

"Where are we?" Maggie asked.

"This is Steria. Steria is... Earth adjacent."

"We're on another planet?!"

"Another universe, probably? I'm not too clear on the quantum mechanics."

"And we got here by magic," Anita said.

Violet nodded.

"And Elliot used magic to backhand Prince Charmless into a tree."

Violet nodded.

"And *you* have magic, too?"

"Uh, well, I did. The first time I was here. When I was a teenager."

Anita snapped her fingers, and pointed first at Violet, then at Maggie.

"I got it. Steria's the name of that place in her book. Remember, I read a few of the draft pages to you."

Maggie wasn't sure if she remembered much about the pages Anita had read to her. She was pretty sure they'd been in the bathtub together at the time. She also remembered what had happened afterward...

"Anita and Maggie have read your book?" Elliot asked.

"Are we going to talk about *that* right now?"

Elliot shrugged. "Well, it just seems like everyone's read it but me."

"I thought you were okay with that?"

"I was! But now that I'm *living it*, I feel like it would have been educational."

"Hey!" Everyone looked at Maggie. "You two are rock solid, so stop acting like you're even mad about petty stuff. Can we please get back to the conversation at hand?"

Violet folded her arms. "Sorry."

Elliot scratched the back of his head. "Sorry."

"Look," Violet said, "I can give you the short version right now. The long version is going to take some digestion, and we're already going to lose the daylight before we get to Kelton."

Maggie considered this. On the one hand, she was pretty sure that whatever explanation Violet had to give her wasn't going to be enough to overcome the real Mickey-Mouse-bullshit that was going on. On the other hand, she wanted to limit their nighttime walking as much as possible.

"Fine. Walk. Talk."

Maggie started walking, but when there were no sounds of movement behind her, she turned to look at the rest of their reluctant caravan.

"Well?"

Maxon blew an exasperated gasp between his teeth like a teenaged girl and stomped ahead.

“Oh, gods,” Anita said.

“What?”

“That just reminded me. What’s going to happen to the twins if we can’t get back?”

Maggie grimaced. “No one’s saying we can’t get back.”

“Well, Maxon—”

“No one we *trust* is saying we can’t get back.”

Maggie threw a glare at Maxon’s back. He hadn’t stopped and didn’t show any signs of slowing down to wait for them.

“Anyway, the girls will be fine. Whatever happens, they’re smart and can take care of themselves. I’m worried about our mortgage, to be honest. Violet.”

“Hm?”

“Is this like *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, or like *John Carter of Mars*?”

Violet blinked. “I don’t understand the question.”

“Is this like Narnia, where we can be here for years, but when we get home, no time as passed? Or are we going to go home and find out we’ve been missing, presumed dead? Please tell me this is like Narnia.”

Violet didn’t say it was like Narnia. She did go pale and put her hands over her face, and that was enough answer for Maggie.

“I’m gonna kill him.”

Anita reached for her. “Babe.”

“Nope, I’m gonna rearrange his entrails. I’m gonna strangle him to death. With these!”

Maggie picked up her foul-smelling jeans and started off after Maxon like a hound with a scent. This time, she could hear everyone else scramble to follow her.

The odds of her actually strangling Maxon with her pee pants was low, but with her pulse throbbing in her ears—and the real possibility of losing her job, her house, her children chasing circles in her brain—they weren't zero.

She felt Anita slip a tiny arm through her thicker one. She felt Violet's hand on her shoulder with gentle pressure, but she was picking up momentum despite their attempts at injecting her with reason.

"Mags, I can't tell you it's not going to feel amazing to punch that douche right in his duck face—"

Violet hissed. "Not helping, Elliot."

"—but we all have whatever the interdimensional version of jetlag is, so maybe we should focus on getting to town and finding somewhere to sit down and rest."

"Easy for you to say. You already got your licks in. I want mine."

"Yeah, I punched him. And I felt like an asshole after. Especially since I could have really hurt him without meaning to."

Maggie gave Elliot a side glare. He was speedwalking alongside her on the other side of Violet. He shrugged at her.

"I mean, hit him if you need to."

"Elliot!"

Violet smacked him on the shoulder, but the words had carried their intended weight with Maggie. 'If you need to,' he'd said. Hit him if you *need* to. Maggie and Elliot had only become

friends through their mutual relationship with Violet, but sometimes it seemed he knew her better than Violet, whom she'd known longer.

'If you need to,' Elliot had said. 'Hit him if you *need* to.'

When Maggie was eighteen and newly liberated from the Church of the Latter Day Subjugates, there was a time when she had felt the *need* to hit someone—anyone who wanted to put her in a tailor-cut, curated box with all her labels on it. She'd left Idaho on a junkyard Frankenstein motorcycle with a shoulder full of chips and a high tolerance for pain. Elliot knew as much about her, and damn his ability to pick apart her childhood insecurities in six words. Did he get a degree from Dr. Phil's University of Efficient Psycho-Babble?

She gathered up all her fear and frustration into the center of her chest and puffed it out in a sharp exhale. She kept walking, but she was no longer a runaway train.

"All right, Violet. The tea. Spill it."

Chapter Fourteen

Maxon

Maxon was not a strategist. He was a soldier. He didn't come up with the plans. He was given the plans. He followed the plans. He had always followed orders.

Since Rosleana died, there had been no orders. The Immaculacy had been dismantled. The monarchy had fallen to evil and corruption. Violet was married.

Violet was married?

He still couldn't process everything that had changed with her while they had been separated. He'd always thought they would meet again, that fate would find a way around Rosleana's edict that Violet must return to the Hollow World.

The day Violet left Steria was supposed to be a day of celebration. Violet was to be recognized for her valor and made a member of the White Guard. There was no one in the Hollow World to miss her. She had chosen to stay in Steria, with him.

That morning, however, Rosleana had revealed that a vision had come to her in the night. Violet's presence in Steria was sapping the already scarce magic from the land. If she stayed, Steria would be just as hollow as Violet's home. In order to preserve Steria, Violet had chosen to go home at Rosleana's request.

It had happened quickly. At the Induction Ceremony, Rosleana had announced that he, Maxon, had been the Pristine's instrument in unraveling the monarchy that had enslaved its citizens, and that Violet—prophecy fulfilled—would be returned to her home. Steria would sing its songs about her, honor her in her absence, remember her for her bravery, but she would never be able to return.

She was gone after that with little fanfare in a private ritual conducted by Rosleana. There had been no goodbyes.

He had searched for a way to follow her. It's how he found Rosleana's portal spikes. It was the sneakiest thing he had ever done in his life. Violet had taught him a phrase about asking for forgiveness instead of permission. It had seemed like the perfect loophole. Rosleana's vision had told her that Violet must return home, but it had said nothing about Maxon going with her. His magic was waning, anyway. He could live without magic in the Hollow World if it meant he could be with Violet.

But Maxon wasn't good at being crafty. He was a terrible liar, and impatient. Rosleana had figured him out and forbidden him from going to the Hollow World. After that, he'd had no choice. Rosleana wasn't a woman to change her mind, and Maxon was a White Guard. He was hers to command.

When she'd died, when Maxon had failed to save her, he'd hadn't known what to do. It was his greatest shame. Captured and bound, he had been made to watch as she was beheaded. He'd felt it as keenly as though it had been his own neck.

At the end, Rosleana had looked him in the eyes as he'd knelt before the dais. Her irises were washed white, her pupils, pinpricks. It was the look she always had just before providing prophecy.

But Maxon had lied to Violet. Before Rosleana had been able to utter a single word of prophecy, she had died.

And then there had been blood, thick and hot. He'd been anointed in it, but for what? He wasn't a soldier anymore. He wasn't even a free man. He was a captive, and soon he would be either dead or indentured.

He wasn't sure which he preferred.

It was fate or luck that saw the royal army make camp near Moia River. Maxon had jumped in, hands and feet still bound, and prayed for death or salvation though he deserved neither. He'd woken up on a low shore where the river narrowed an indeterminate amount of time later.

In retrospect, going to the Hollow World to find Violet had been a terrible idea. At the time, though, half-drowned and agonizing over the loss of his leader and his purpose, it seemed the only natural course of action. After all, hadn't Violet had saved Steria before. Couldn't she do it again? Wasn't it reasonable to conclude that, given enough time to speak, Rosleana *would* have said Violet's name in her dying moment?

Of course, now Maxon knew that Violet had no magic left, he wasn't sure anymore. Now that he knew Violet hadn't chosen to leave Steria, his faith in Rosleana had been shaken, as well. He'd always trusted Rosleana implicitly. She'd practically raised him. He'd been groomed from childhood to be the personal defendant of the Pristine. The things Violet had accused her of couldn't be true.

As Maxon marched toward Kelton, this internal conflict consumed him. Violet was so different from the girl he had brought to Steria with him fifteen years ago. She'd been happy in Dirt.

Had Maxon also changed since then? Had he ever been happy like Violet had been?

Two facts warred against one another in his heart: he should never have brought her back, and he could not have done anything else.

Violet and her friends caught up to Maxon just as he reached the border of Kelton. It was a small village and had apparently not yet been visited by Queen Mashriella. There was no town

gate, but there were local guards standing at the entrance to the main road where two stone towers seven feet high had been erected. There was a torch slotted into an iron ring on each of the pillars.

The guards were probably fishermen's sons who'd drawn their lots poorly that week. They smelled of fish and sour tea, which was not tea at all, but a type of pickled pepper wine popular along the seaside. It smelled like sailors who had been at sea for weeks without proper baths.

"Who is it?" asked one of the men, stepping forward.

The other guard leaned against one pillar. By the strength of his stench, Maxon guessed he was leaning because he couldn't stand upright on his own.

"Maxon Rithia, White Guard of the Immaculate."

The leaning guard let go of a giggle, punctuated by a hiccough.

"White Guard? Ain't no White Guard no more. Ain't no Immaculate no more. Ain't no *Pristine* no more."

Maxon ground his teeth together.

"We're passing through. Just staying the night, then on our way in the morning."

"Bad timing, friend," the first, sober, guard said. "So long as Kelton holds neutral, Queen Greeg doesn't burn us to the ground. That means no helping rebels or refugees."

Maxon heard one of Violet's friends say something about 'renaissance' and 'medieval' and 'jousting,' and Violet hushed her.

Violet stepped up from behind Maxon and into the torchlight.

"Please. We haven't come to cause any trouble. We just need somewhere safe to sleep and to buy a few provisions for the road."

The leaning guard stepped behind the stone pillar, dropped to his knees, and threw up animatedly. The first guard rolled his eyes. He stepped forward, in front of Violet, and lowered his voice.

“Look, that idiot is the pier master’s son, and I’m only telling you this because he’s not going to remember this tomorrow.” He jabbed his thumb at the other guard. “If you go ‘round to the south side and enter up by the shore, you can blend in with the traders coming in from Port Serry. Half o’ them are wanted men and they won’t call constable on you if they notice. Just *don’t tell no one else you’re White Guard.*”

He looked Maxon up and down, then sniff. “Besides, you ain’t a White Guard. No such thing anymore.”

His fault. Maxon bit his lip.

“Thanks,” Violet said. “What’s your name, guardsman?”

The man waved his hand. “I’m Deezal, and I’m a local deck hand, normally. I’m only a guardsman when I can’t get out of it. Now, go on. Get moving before he pulls his head out of his sick.”

Violet walked between Deezal and Maxon, hand on Maxon’s uninjured shoulder. She steered him away toward the south, and he followed after a moment of resistance. He felt rather than heard the other three follow.

Full dark had set in by now, so there was no one around to witness their trek around the perimeter of the town. They were outlaws, Maxon realized. Of course, he’d been an outlaw ever since he had resisted when Mashriella had taken the Immacularium, but until that moment, the weight of that knowledge hadn’t settled on his head.

Maxon Rithia, pride of Tyr, White Guard to the Pristine was a fugitive. He was a fugitive of a corrupt system to be sure, but a criminal nonetheless. A foul wing washed over him, and pain congealed in the pit of his stomach. All he had ever been was a servant to the people and an upholder of the law, and now that meant nothing.

Maxon was vaguely aware of Violet's hand still on his shoulder, turning him if he strayed too far in the wrong direction. Cloistered in his own head, he needed her direction often. He wondered if her husband was aware of her constant touch. If he was, he made no comment, and that was the final nail in that coffin. A man who was so confident in his woman's loyalty that he showed no jealousy in the face of the division of her attention and her physical contact with another man was a man who *had* nothing to fear.

Maxon should never have given himself hope that Violet would still want to be with him in the first place. They were so young when she'd left, and she'd been so angry the last time he'd seen her. He'd been surprised, too, when Rosleana had attributed their victory to him instead of to Violet, but there hadn't been time to correct it. Violet was gone, and the Rosleana explained it was necessary.

"Idiot."

Violet's hand popped off his shoulder.

"Excuse me?"

Maxon shook his head but didn't look over at her.

"Not you. Me."

"Oh."

She said nothing else, but he could sense that she was listening. It was a comfortable feeling, like falling into the rhythm of a sword stance. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed that.

"This isn't what I wanted."

"I believe that much. The problem is, it's what you've got now. So, what are we going to do about it?"

Maxon sighed. "I don't know," he said, but he felt comforted that she had said 'we' and not 'you.'

"Well, we'd better figure it out. This isn't the same as bringing home a fourteen-year-old girl with no family or attachments. Maggie and Anita have children who have just left home for the first time. We all have jobs and houses. We have friends. People are going to notice that we're gone, and they're going to waste their time looking for us. People are getting hurt this time, Maxon."

"I need your help, Violet. Steria needs your help. I can't do this without you."

"Can't do this without someone telling you what needs to be done, you mean."

Her voice was bitter. How long before she was no longer angry with him? Would she hate him forever?

"I was never good at the planning."

"You never tried, Maxon. The entire time I knew you, you let other people do the thinking for you. If it wasn't Rosleana, it was one of the other Pristine. If it wasn't a Pristine, it was me. You're not good at planning because you have always been content to follow and never question whether something is the right thing to do."

Like he had with her. She hadn't said it, but the bite in her tone had been as fierce as the night before in her living room.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

Her voice was still sharp. It wasn't a you-don't-have-anything-to-apologize-for 'for what.' It was a which-thing-are-you-apologizing-for 'for what.' Was there too much to apologize for? She had asked the question, so maybe that meant she would accept it if he gave the right answer.

"For everything."

Violet snorted. It was an ugly, derisive sound and it didn't sit at home with his memories of the girl she had been once.

"Maxon, that weak-ass blanket apology just isn't good enough. You're going to have to try a lot harder than that if you want me to trust you again. And you're going to have to get used to the fact that there are three other people here who need you to stop feeling sorry for yourself and be a leader."

Chapter Fifteen

Violet

Inconspicuous, they were not. They found a dark alley near the docks where they could easily enter the city without being seen, but Violet wasn't sure what they would do once they were inside. They were all dressed in clothes from back home, not to mention Maggie's shrub skirt. There was no way anyone would mistake them for sailors making port. To Sterians, they would look like lunatics.

Violet leaned her head around the corner to check for signs of life. The sun had completely set, but it was still early enough that there were people in the stone streets. Lamps were still on in windows; people could be heard having dinner inside.

Violet's stomach whined. Her internal clock only considered it afternoon, but she hadn't had the chance to eat her breakfast before being yanked back to Steria.

She ducked back into the alley and looked at everyone.

"So, how do we feel about a little petty theft?"

"Not great," Elliot said.

"What're we stealing?" asked Maggie.

Anita didn't say anything, but she frowned. Violet didn't need to ask her. Anita was a stickler for the rules, particularly when it came to theft. She knew that from their days working at the pharmacy together.

"What if we stole something and left some money behind?"

"Do we have any money?" Elliot asked. He was looking at Maxon.

Maxon shuffled his feet. “I traveled to your world from Rosleana’s forest home. I left my belongings there. I... I assumed we would reappear there when we came back. I don’t know why we ended up here.”

“Of course not.”

Violet put a hand on Elliot’s arm and his attitude subsided.

“Okay, well, if we’re not stealing anything and we can’t pay for it...”

She looked each one of them up and down. Elliot wore baby blue flannel pajama pants with abominable snowmen and the phrase “yeti for bed” on them. Maxon wore a pair of Elliot’s jeans and a leather jacket with bright, aluminum zippers that he had apparently stolen from someone else because Violet didn’t recognize it. Maggie was... Maggie. Anita wore a brown peasant top and a tie-die boho skirt over a pair of bike shorts. The skirt was tied in a knot at her hip.

Violet looked down at herself. She was wearing an old, oversized hockey jersey and leggings.

“Okay, Anita, I need your clothes.”

Anita didn’t even blink. She pulled her top over her head and handed it to Violet. The sight of her lacy, pink bralette made Maxon turn a swift about-face. Elliot was more accustomed to this sort of behavior. He blushed appropriately, but only averted his eyes.

Violet snickered at both of them and took off her jersey. She swapped it for Anita’s top.

“Skirt, too?” Anita asked

“Please.”

Anita threw on the jersey and slipped out of the skirt. It had an elastic band, but the peasant top was long enough to hide it. Tie-die wasn’t exactly the fashion in Steria, but Violet

thought she could answer questions about her unusual clothing pattern if she were pressed. Her only concern was whether someone might mistake her for a silly, rich merchant out for a nighttime stroll without any bodyguards.

She sighed and looked at Maxon's turned back. "You don't even have your sword, do you?"

He turned to look at her. "It was taken from me when I fought the royal army and was captured."

Violet felt a little ashamed of her exasperated tone. "Captured?"

Maxon crossed his good arm over his chest.

"There is much you do not know."

Yeah, not ashamed anymore.

"Whose fault is that?"

Maxon looked chastised but said nothing.

"All right. Maggie, I need your knife."

Maggie unstrapped the knife from her ankle and handed it over.

"She's like one of my children. Take care of her."

Anita smacked Maggie on the shoulder. Violet reverently accepted the knife.

"Well, the idea is that she'll protect me, but I hope not to need that."

"Vi, is this the best idea we have?" Elliot asked.

Violet shrugged. "It's the only idea we have."

She stepped up on her toes to give him a quick kiss.

"Okay, everyone stay here. I'll be back."

Violet slipped into the main street. She felt like a wine stain on a white carpet. She walked between houses stacked two- and three-high, dove in and out of alleys, and avoided torchlight wherever she could. She could pass for a local in the shadows, but someone only had to get a good look at the brightly-colored skirt or her short sleeves and low-cut neckline to get suspicious.

She didn't know where she was going yet, but she knew what to look for to lead the way. Kelton had expanded its borders since the last time she'd been there, but once she was past the outer neighborhoods, muscle memory kicked in. The homes in the inner neighborhoods hadn't changed at all. They were perhaps decaying in places. Seaside villages were locked in a constant battle against the corrosive strength of the salty air and ocean spray that battered them day and night.

The smell of fish grew stronger as she approached the town square. Memories of her stay in Kelton drifted back to her.

She hadn't intended on passing through Kelton the first time she'd been in Steria. She had been on her way to Tyr, to the King's castle, on a ship with a trite name. *The Maiden's Knickers* or *The Jolly Rogerer* or something like that. The crew had been loud, unruly, and not happy about having a teenaged girl on board, particularly since it took her so long to find something useful to do on board.

They had been at sea for over a month, aimed for Port Serry, but a week before their approximate landing date, a storm had thrown them into the path of the devastating rocks to Kelton's southern shore. *The Blushing Bottom* or whatever it was called hadn't stood a chance. It was smashed by the vengeful waves.

Violet had made it to the port along with two dinghies full of survivors and the little cargo they could fit in among the crew. Violet had railed against the captain's orders to leave without searching for Maxon, who hadn't been recovered in the initial search. With age and distance, she realized now that the captain had been right not to stay. The storm, while easing back, could have capsized their tiny longboats, and they could have lost more. At the time, though, Maxon was all she trusted in Steria, which wasn't a kind world for a misplaced fourteen-year-old out of her depth.

Maxon wasn't recovered the next day, either, when the captain had ordered search parties for both the missing seamen and any remaining cargo that had washed ashore. There were plenty of bodies, but none of them breathing. They weren't film-beautified corpses, either. They were bloated and distorted.

Violet had been sick when the first body had been turned over. The optimist in her had been quelled by years in the foster system, never finding a family that wanted her, and she found that she didn't have enough hope in her heart to believe that Maxon had survived the shipwreck. Her resolve had left her.

Violet had stayed in Kelton under the pretense of hope—the pretense of searching for Maxon—but the truth was that she didn't have the strength to go on without him. Funny, she thought now, that she was back in Kelton with him and that she felt so differently about their relationship.

The crew of *The Salty Whore* had sailed on without Violet, and she had abandoned her cause. She had been shamed. She'd lost faith in herself as the so-called instrument of fate Rosleana had claimed her to be. Even then, Violet somehow knew that all Rosleana's talk of destiny and prophecy had been complete horse shit.

She knew better now. They hadn't discussed it since it had happened, but Elliot had used magic. There was no other explanation for how he had done what he'd done.

And if Elliot could do magic, then so could Maggie and Anita.

That was a conversation Violet wasn't looking forward to having. In part, it was because she still wasn't sure how she would approach the subject of her past with her friends, but mostly it was because Violet was the only one who couldn't use magic. She was an empty vessel. Useless.

She could teach them, she supposed, to use their magic. It would be depressing, but it might be all she was good for. For now, though, there were bigger concerns. For now, they needed a roof, a meal, and a friend.

Violet hoped she still had one.

Finally, she reached the town square. There were still people milling around there, and even a few merchants were braving the dark. They were the ones who didn't fear thievery—blacksmiths selling heavy iron wares and grooms selling saddles and horse.

Violet hovered just outside the ring of torchlight, searching the eaves of the nearby buildings.

She smiled. On the other side of the square from her, she saw it. One of the only four-story structures in Kelton was a pub with a sign above the door. The wooden sign had been shaped into an armored knight with his head lying on top of a rock.

The Dented Helm took its name from the town's origin story, which was just a dumb and far-fetched as the Indiana story about the origin of the word 'Hoosier.' The story was that a retired royal knight had been traveling along the coast. His horse had thrown him, and he'd hit

his head on a rock and lost his memory. Not sure where else to go, he had decided to just stay where he was, and so founded Kelton.

There were so many holes in that story that Violet felt that it couldn't possibly be true. How had he married? How had he had children and grown the village? How had he established the fishing trade routes along the coast between Port Serry and Alfala?

It didn't matter. The pub was an institution, and Violet knew it would still be there. She only hoped ownership hadn't changed hands.

Violet backed away from the courtyard and circled around through alleys until she was behind the pub. On this side of the square, there was no foot traffic. When drunks and gamblers had overstayed their welcome, they were tossed from the pub into this back street, and upstanding citizens didn't want to be caught up with one in the dark.

Violet didn't want to be caught up, either, but this was where she knew she could get inside without being noticed.

Violet approached the back door of the pub. She could hear shouting coming from the window nearby, and the grating sound of stoneware cups and plates from the kitchen just beyond. It wasn't alarm-shouting. It was revelry-shouting, and it hopefully meant that no one would be watching the back door. So long as the card players and winos stayed happy, she should be able to go undetected.

Violet tried the door. It was latched on the other side, but it opened enough for her to get Maggie's knife between the door and the jamb and lifted the flat, metal latch. The latch turned too quickly on its peg and swung full-circle to *clink* against the knife blade.

Violet froze, but when several moments passed without someone noticing, she opened the door and slipped inside.

Inside the pub, the sounds were magnified. They echoed in her ears and brought back old, blocked-out memories of herself the first time she'd come here. It had been under similar circumstances.

She'd been in Kelton too long, had drawn too much attention to herself. King Greeg's elite guard had been seen to capture or kill her. She'd entered the pub through the same back alley, although without something thin to unlatch the door, she'd had to climb through the window.

To the left of the backdoor was the discrete staircase that led to the upper floors where rooms were the family who owned the pub lived. Violet climbed the stairs as stealthily as possible, pausing every time a floorboard creaked under her weight or a sound from downstairs made her think someone might be coming up behind her.

This is taking forever.

Elliot and the others had been waiting for her in that alley for over half an hour already, but Violet tried not to think about that as she took her time to remain unheard.

When she reached the second floor, a door down the hall opened, and she froze on the landing. She held her breath as a tiny someone walked from an unlit room to open a door across the hall.

The child—Violet thought it was a girl—carried a lantern. She rubbed her eyes, hooded in the low, warm light.

The light from the lantern was directed forward by a shiny ring of metal, so Violet was still hidden in the shadows, but her weight shifted on a weak board. The board may as well have screamed that there was an intruder.

“Mama?”

The little girl swung her lantern in Violet's direction, and Violet was cast in stark firelight.

"Who are you?"

At least she hadn't screamed.

"You're not supposed to be up here. Patrons aren't allowed."

Violet gave a weak laugh. "Sorry about that. I'm, uh... I'm actually not a patron. I'm an old friend of the owner. I was looking for his room."

The girl took several steps toward Violet and looked her up and down. Violet had flashbacks of Alise and her tough little face.

"My mama's the owner, and I don't think she's your friend. I would know."

Terrible news, then.

"You're right. I don't know your mama. The last time I was here, the pub was owned by a man, not a woman."

"What's your friend's name?"

Thank all the gods for children who grow up in rough neighborhoods and fear nothing.

"Kitt? Do you know him?"

The girl looked very serious. "Kitt's not the owner. Kitt died."

Of all the news Violet had been expecting to receive, this had not been on the list. The announcement felt like a slap in the face.

"He died? When did he die?"

"It was forever ago. I was in my mama's tummy. How come you didn't know your friend was dead?"

"Oh, well... I've been away for a really long time."

“Away where?”

Violet thought this was the sort of conversation that very young children continue perpetually by asking subject-changing questions. She wasn't sure how much she could reveal, but she didn't want the girl to sound the alarm, either.

“It's hard to explain.”

“That's what grown-ups always say.”

Violet cleared her throat. “Ah, well... did you ever hear a story about a girl who came from another world?”

Violet blushed. Writing about her experience under the guise of a fiction novel had been embarrassing enough. Now, referring to herself as someone about whom stories might have been told felt ridiculous.

“Violet, from the Hollow World, you mean?”

“Yeah. That's... I mean, I'm Violet.”

The little girl stomped her foot and put one hand on her hip.

“Don't lie! Violet went back to the Hollow World.”

“Shh!” Violet put her finger to her lips. “Please, I'm not lying. I went away for a really long time, but I came back. I promise, I'm Violet.”

The little girl leaned back and looked up at Violet. She looked her up and down, then shook her head.

“I don't believe you!”

Working in the children's wing of the oncology ward, Violet saw all the signs of a scream come on before the girl had the chance to make a sound. She inhaled so deeply that her

shoulders drew up. She puckered her mouth as she inhaled, and the air whistled through her lips. Her eyes went wide and wild.

Violet moved forward quickly. She dropped to her knees and put one hand over the girl's mouth, wrapping her other arm around her back, cradling her as gently as possible while still holding the scream back.

Violet's voice became a hissed whisper.

"Please! Please, I'm begging you. I'm back from the Hollow World, and me and my friends just need some help."

The girl's eyes were still wide and she took short, shallow breaths behind Violet's hand, but she'd stopped trying to scream. She was clearly, and with good reason, terrified, but she seemed to be listening.

"My friend Maxon went back to the Hollow World to get me because he thought I could help since things with the Queen have gone bad. He brought me back, and he brought my husband and my two friends, and I came here because I thought I would find Kitt. Kitt helped me when I was stuck here after a shipwreck. He was my only friend here, and I couldn't have defeated King Greeg without his help."

The girl's breathing had leveled off, and she was starting to relax.

"I'm really sorry I grabbed you. I'm going to let you go now. If you want me to leave, I'll leave, but please don't scream, okay?"

The girl didn't move at first, but after a few minutes, she nodded, slowly.

Violet let out an abrupt exchange of air. "Okay."

She let go of the girl and helped her to steady herself on her feet. The girl crossed her arms over her chest and she puffed out her little cheeks.

“I didn’t like that.”

“I know. I’m very sorry.”

The girl turned to the side and gave Violet an adorable-if-it-weren’t-genuinely-scary side-eye.

“You’re Violet of the Hollow World.”

“Yes.”

After a beat: “Prove it.”

Violet sat back on her heels. “How?”

“Do your magic. I want to see it.”

Violet’s stomach sank to her ankles. She looked down at her hands.

“I can’t.”

“Because you’re a big faker!”

“No!”

Violet raised both her hands and shook them back and forth in an urgent plea for the girl to keep her voice down. “No, because I ran out of magic when I fought the king. I don’t have any left.”

The girl tapped her foot on the wood floor, but it was muffled by the softness of the old wood and her cotton slippers.

“That seems very convenient.”

“Yeah, it does sound pretty convenient, doesn’t it? But, look, I think I can prove it another way. Will you give me a chance?”

She held her hand out for the girl to shake.

This was another tactic from Violet's nursing arsenal: sometimes children needed to feel as though they were the ones in control. Tell a child they had to do something and it would make them not want to do it. *Ask* a child in the right way if they were *willing* to do something, and then they were the one making the decision.

It worked with college boys, too. And Elliot, come to think of it.

The girl reached out and shook Violet's hand. Then, she let go quickly and held up a finger in front of Violet's face for emphasis.

"But you only get one chance, okay?"

Violet nodded. "I understand. If I don't convince you, you're allowed to go and rat me out."

"I'm not a tattletale. If I don't like what you show me, you have to leave. This is *my* house."

This actually pulled a grin out of Violet.

"Okay, deal. Is there anyone else upstairs?"

The girl shook her head.

"Okay, follow me."

Violet turned and headed up the second flight of stairs. She was less cautious about making noise this time, hopefully optimistic that she could trust the word of a six-year-old that they were alone together.

On the third floor, she walked to the end of the hall and opened the last door on the left. She stopped when a hand grabbed her skirt.

"Mama says we're not allowed to go in there." Caught up in the conspiracy, the girl had lowered her voice to a whisper.

“But this is where my proof is. Do you want proof or not?”

The girl considered this. She put her hand to her chin in a gesture she had cleared copied from someone older and probably bearded.

She nodded. “Okay.”

Violet smile and stepped into the room. The girl and her lantern followed. The light swing wildly around the room until the girl stilled it with her free hand. Violet didn't see everything, but she got a good enough look to know that the bedroom was covered in a fine film of dust.

No one had been in this room in a very long time.

Not only had Kitt died, then, but someone was avoiding his memory, because the room was laid out exactly as Violet remembered, to the point of it being bizarre.

There was a small, round table under the south window, and two child-sized chairs. Violet could remember having snacks with Kitt there. They'd been too tall for the chairs, but it had made her nostalgic for her younger years when she wasn't expected to be the savior of the world.

One of the chairs had been knocked over and never picked up. It felt like a fallen soldier, obscene and sad.

There was a four-poster bed against the east wall, still adorned with a mattress and sheets, although they were moth-eaten and rotted through. What was the purpose of wasting perfectly good bedsheets? Not using the room was understandable. Violet knew several social workers who visited bereaved families who kept children's bedrooms just as they were, sorrowful shrines of young lives lost.

But those bedrooms were maintained; someone cleaned them and some even rearranged things to make it look as though a child was still using them. This... This room had been completely abandoned.

Violet shook herself and tried to rid herself of the feeling of being watched by the ghosts of her past. Or real ghosts, she supposed. She'd never seen a ghost in Steria, but she had seen walking skeletons, so she didn't think it would be entirely outside the realm of possibility.

Violet walked over to the west wall, which was made of brick where the other three were wood. There was a wood-burning stove set against the wall, a circular ring of stones beneath it to protect the floor from embers. Violet couldn't help but think that even with all the precautions taken, this was a serious firehazard. It hadn't seemed all that dangerous when she was a teenager, but in comparison to what she'd been facing at the time, dying in a housefire had never occurred to her.

Violet knelt next to the stove and took out Maggie's knife, picking at the mortar around one of the bricks. She wiggled the knife to shave away the mortar until she could get her fingertips around the brick.

"What are you doing?" the little girl asked. She'd remembered to keep her voice low, but she was apparently distressed by the proper destruction.

With a low grunt, Violet pulled the brick from its place in the wall.

"Getting you proof."

She handed the brick to the little girl, who set down her lantern to turn the brick over in her hands. She knelt down so the brick was in the firelight. After a moment of flipping and squinting, she gasped.

The paint had faded over time, but the brick wall had protected it from the air and elements. On the backside of the brick, in burgundy paint made from mulberries and linseed oil, were two letters.

K and V

“Do you know your letters, yet?”

“Course.”

Violet smiled. “‘K’ for Kitt. ‘V’ for Violet.”

The little girl rolled her eyes. “*Obviously.*”

Violet laughed under her breath. “Believe me now?”

“I don’t know...”

“How would I know that was there unless I put it there, huh? Look, Kitt mixed the paint, and we put it in the wall together.”

“But, why? That’s stupid.”

Violet sat on the floor cross-legged.

“How much about my story do you know?”

“I know that Maxon the White Guard brought you here from the Hollow World to fight the evil king. I know that you were captured in Port Serry and that you were a prisoner and *everyone* thought you were dead, but then the king said you were alive and that he was going to execute you, so the whole White Guard attacked the castle and rescued you and killed the king, and then the king’s daughter was put in charge. I also know that she’s *crazy* now, and that she killed the Pristine.”

Rescued her? So, the White Guard had *rescued* her, had they? Violet could feel heat rising in her face. She was going to have a serious conversation with Maxon about the blatant lies that had been told while she'd been gone.

“Well, some of that isn't really how it happened, but what I bet the stories don't say is that, on the way to the castle, I was shipwrecked in Kelton, on the rocks by the bay. Our ship went down, and I thought Maxon was dead. I stayed here for almost a month. Kitt was my only friend, and he made me believe in myself again after I lost Maxon.”

Violet took the brick in her hands and flipped it over to look at the initials. “Kitt and I made then when I knew I would have to leave again. He gave me the strength I needed to keep going, to defeat King Greeg. We thought that if we painted our initials on this brick and put it in the wall, that it meant we would be friends forever.”

Violet bit her lip. “I always meant to come back and thank him, but Rosleana sent me back home before I could see him again.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. She coughed to hide her emotions and tucked the brick back into its place.

“Kit wasn't really the owner back then. His father, Jallow, was.”

“You knew my pappaw Jallow?”

Violet's heart leapt. “Jallow is your grandfather?”

The little girl nodded with enthusiasm. “My pappaw Jallow went to Tyr with the queen last week.”

Violet's emotions were a roller coaster.

“He went with the queen?”

“She came here last week. There were a lot of soldiers, and they took my bedroom. I had to sleep downstairs with Mama. They took everyone’s bedroom, all over Kelton. The queen came to talk to my pappaw and to the pier master. She was here for three days, and when she left, my papaw went with her.”

“He went with her. She didn’t take him?”

The girl shrugged. “What’s the difference? He’s gone, and he didn’t say goodbye, and now Mama has to run the pub by herself.”

Violet put her head in her hands. What the hell was going on here? What was Mashriella doing? Killing Rosleana and blinding the seers was something Violet could almost see as plausible. The immaculacy was loved by most of the people, but Violet had always found them to be creepy. But kidnapping an old man, a pub owner?

The little girl patted Violet’s shoulder gently.

“Don’t be sad. I believe you.”

Violet chuckled softly and sniffed. She put her hand on top of the girl’s.

“Thanks. Hey, what’s your name anyway?”

The girl grinned; she was missing two of her front teeth. “I’m Violet, too.”

Violet was taken aback. “What?”

“There are three Violets at my school, and two Maxons. There’s also a Rosleana, but she’s mean. She likes to pull girls’ hair.”

“Yeah, sounds like the real Rosleana. She wasn’t very nice, either.”

“All the Violets have nicknames so it’s not confusing in class. There’s Vio and Viola, and they call me Vivi, so you can call me that so you don’t get confused.”

Violet smiled. “Okay, Vivi. Now, do you think you can do something for me?”

Vivi nodded. She was no longer the cheeky suspicious rascal she had been when she thought Violet was a trespasser. Now, she was a partner in crime, and ready to participate in whatever sneaky plan Violet had in mind.

“Okay, here’s what I need you to do.”

Chapter Sixteen

Elliot

“She’s been gone for over an hour.”

No one answered him. The first time he’s said it, there had been some minor conversation, but this was the twentieth or so time he’d said it.

Elliot had been pacing for the better part of that hour. He run his fingers anxiously through his hair until it felt greasy to the touch. The house slippers he’d been wearing when he run out of the house that morning were not holding up to the constant walking he’d put them through since coming to Steria.

He’d started tallying up all the things they needed if they were to get along in Steria long enough to find a way home.

They would need clothes, a minimum of one change each, but ideally two changes so they weren’t always wearing the same filthy clothes. They would all need shoes that could handle walking because this was definitely not the sort of place that had cars and he had *no idea* how to ride a horse or drive a cart. Anyway, horses and carts would be way more expensive than good shoes.

Maybe. He didn’t know what shoes cost in Steria. Leather shoes with sturdy soles back home cost an arm and a leg, but cheaper options made of cloth and rubber were widely available. Would leather shoes be expensive if they were the only option and everyone needed them? How did supply and demand translate to Steria?

Besides that, they were going to need food. And they would need traveling food, so that would be dried meats, cheeses, and hard breads. Bread and cheese were probably pretty

affordable, but dried meat took a lot of time and effort to prepare. Beef jerky was one of his favorite treats, but it was also ungodly expensive compared to other non-meat snacks.

Plus, they would probably run out of food while they were traveling; it was bound to happen. That meant that they would need to find ways of collecting food while they were on the move. Hunting and gathering. Elliot had been hunting several times, but not since he was a kid, only with a rifle, and he'd never personally killed anything in his life that was larger than a cockroach.

He could gather, he supposed, but it would be his luck that he'd wind up in a poison oak patch or eating the Hunger Games berries that Katniss threatened to kill herself with. Or, you know, since they were in a mystical realm with unknown dangers, in the web of a giant, talking spider who lured its prey by calling out in the voice of a distressed woman and then talked its victims into a coma by reciting Kilmer-esque poetry before eating them, eyeballs first.

Just an example off the top of his head.

For all he knew, Violet had fallen into the clutches of just such a magical creature and was at that moment saying her final words while she drifted off into a contrived, double-couplet slumber.

Elliot paused in his pacing and lowered himself into a squat—a trick he'd learned in marching band to give his knees a rest from all the standing and... marching. He didn't think it was helping. He didn't think it had ever helped anyone.

He rubbed his hands over the back of his neck where mosquitoes were making mincemeat of his skin. They'd had the astronomical luck of invading a small fishing village in the middle of summer on a night that somehow miraculous had little to no breeze come off the

water. He was sweating in his pajamas, his wife was still not back, and he was trapped in a dark, muggy alley with Maggie's soiled jeans.

"You're gonna need to take a pill, friend. Violet's a big girl. She can take care of herself."

Elliot rubbed his face. "I appreciate that you mean well, Mags, but what pill do you suggest I take? All *pills* have been left behind in another world, and we're stuck here *pill-less* until we find a way home."

"Hey, I know you're freaking out, but if you snap at me again, I'm going to full-on hysteria-slap you in the face."

Elliot looked up at her from the ground.

"Hysteria's not a real thing."

"No, it's just not a medical condition. It *is* however, the state of voiceless panic in which you find yourself, and I will knock you out of it if I have to."

Elliot stood up. "Exactly how long are we supposed to stand here and waiting for Violet to get back? She didn't tell us how long she'd be. She could be in trouble. You heard the guard at the entrance; this Mashriella person is looking to quash rebellions, and this town isn't trying to stop her."

"You only know Violet the nurse," Maxon said. "I know Violet the warrior. Even if she *did* get captured, it wouldn't be the first time. She always finds her way back to... She always finds her way back."

Elliot knew what had been about to come out of Maxon's mouth, and as much as he wanted to pursue that with a series of pointed questions (and pointed punches), he let it go.

Starting a squabble with his wife's ex wouldn't accomplish anything besides getting them noticed and pissing off Violet once she came back.

"No, Elliot had a point."

Elliot's champion was Anita, who had been standing guard by the entrance of the alley since Violet had left. She'd turned around the address them.

"Maybe Violet is capable of being out there on her, but how long *are* we supposed to wait? It's quiet now, even quieter than when we first got here, but we can't stay in this alley forever."

Elliot nodded. "That's what I mean. I'm not saying, 'let's dive headfirst into a mysterious town working with the crown.' I'm just saying that someone is eventually going to notice four unknown figures in a shady part of town."

No one had an answer for this question. They all stood or sat in silence while waiting for the answer to somehow present itself to them.

"Haven't you ever been here before?" Elliot asked Maxon.

Maxon, who was leaned against the side of a house with one ankle tucked behind the other, shook his head. With his sling, however, the posture didn't look half as cool as it did awkward.

"I thought you and Violet stormed the castle or whatever together."

"No," Anita said, "If this is the part of the book I'm thinking it is, then they were shipwrecked south of here. They got separated."

Maxon's eyebrows lifted in surprised, and he looked down at the ground. Was that... shame?

“I thought she’d died. I thought I’d failed. I searched the wreckage, but found only the dead. I went back to Rosleana to report my failure. We didn’t know Violet was alive until the king announced an execution date.”

“AN EX—*An execution date?*”

Elliot contained his outburst a second too late. “He was going to execute her? And you brought her back here to fight his homicidal, eye-plucking daughter?”

“Woah, eye-plucking? Just a goddamn second. Who’s plucking eyes?”

Elliot looked at Maggie, and then at Maxon.

“All right, Girlfriend Jeans. Since we’re stuck here for now, how about you do a little storytelling?”

Maxon bristled, but Maggie puffed out her chest, and he settled back against the wall, wisely

“Fine. We have nothing but time now, anyway.”

Elliot threw his hands up in the air. “Now, we have time, he says. I swear, the fact that I’ve only punched you once is a goddamn testament to me restraint.”

Maxon took a step forward. “Any time you’d like to settle this without a sucker punch, you let me know.”

“Please, I’m not going to fight someone who literally has one arm tied behind his back, especially when I don’t know how the magic thing works yet. Do you have some kind of death wish? I could kill you.”

“You could try.”

Elliot planted a hand in Maxon's chest and pushed him away. "I *wouldn't* try. That's the point. I could kill you on accident. Are you really that much of a machismo that you would fight someone who doesn't know how to control themselves?"

Maxon looked Elliot in the eyes, and Elliot realized it was the first time since they'd met that Maxon had done that. He'd only ever looked at Violet, or looked away, or somewhere in the vicinity of Elliot's mouth.

They locked eyes, and silence fell on the alley while they took the time to size one another up. Elliot didn't know what he looked like to Maxon—probably a man who couldn't live up to some antiquated lizard-brain masculinity that demanded he have an overdeveloped upper body musculature and 'protect his woman' through acts of violence. Admittedly, he had succumbed to the violence portion of that description, but he was already ashamed that he had sunk to that level. Especially now that he knew he possessed some sort of latent magic awakened by being in Steria.

Whatever Maxon saw in Elliot's eyes, it made him step back. The tough exterior lowered some, and Elliot could see an edge of vulnerability on his face.

"Look, just tell us what's going on, start to finish."

And Maxon did exactly that.

Maxon started with summarizing parts of what had happened when King Greeg had announced Violet's execution.

"He announced it two months in advance. He wanted people from all over the kingdom to be able to come and watch as he beheaded the last hope of the people, and he *wanted* us to form a plan to try and stop him."

"Why?" Anita asked.

“He mounted a counterattack against our invasion. Ultimately, his goal was to use Violet as bait to capture or kill the White Guard and the Pristine.”

Maxon took a moment there to explain to Anita and Maggie who the Pristine were, and how King Greeg’s daughter had removed their eyes to stop them from making any more prophecies.

“That’s dumb,” Anita said, crossing her arms over her chest. “It doesn’t make any logical sense.”

“That’s what Violet said, but apparently it’s worked so far,” Elliot said. “What doesn’t make sense to me is why it matters whether or not there are prophecies.”

“If a prophecy shits in the woods and there’s no one around to see it, does it happen anyway?” Maggie asked rhetorically.

“Exactly.”

Maxon shrugged. “Be that as it may, she blinded the Pristine and killed Rosleana, their leader, and captured all of the White Guard who weren’t killed in the struggle. She captured me, too, but I escaped.”

“So, you decided to do was go and find the girl who had saved your world the first time,” Anita said.

“Apparently, just before Rosleana was beheaded, she said Violet’s name,” Elliot said.

Maggie snorted. “So?”

Elliot made spirit fingers at her. “She said it in her prophecy voice.”

“So, with her dying breath, she said that Violet could save the world. That’s suspiciously convenient.”

“No, no,” Elliot said. “Rosleana said one word. She didn’t say Violet would save Steria. She just said ‘Violet,’ which could have meant anything.”

He turned to Maxon, then. “She could have meant that you should just leave Steria and not come back. She could have seen Violet living her perfectly normal life in our world, with me. She didn’t say anything about kidnapping us and bringing us into the middle of a war that has nothing to do with us.”

“Besides, I bet Violet didn’t even believe you,” Anita said.

Elliot smiled. “She didn’t.”

Anita snorted. “No, of course not.”

“What does that mean?” Maxon asked.

Anita threw eyes at Maggie. Maggie looked confused at first, but when she cracked a smile. “Ahh, right. *Queen* Mahsriella. Formerly *Princess* Mashriella. I don’t remember much about those chapters you read to me, but I remember the princess. Ells?”

“Yeah, I know. She told me this morning.”

“Told you what? What does everyone know that I don’t know?” Maxon asked.

“Should we tell him?” Anita asked.

“I don’t know. It *is* Violet’s private business,” Maggie said.

Elliot shrugged. “She was writing a book about it. It’s not *so* private.”

“Yeah, but she didn’t expect anyone who read it to be able to read between the lines,” Anita said.

“What?! What is it?” Maxon was starting to lose it, which Elliot had to admit was satisfying.

Anita, Maggie, and Elliot all looked at one another.

“I’m not sure he could handle it,” Anita said.

“I’m not sure I care,” Elliot said.

“Someone tell me something!”

“I’ll tell you something.”

This new voice from the end of the alley wasn’t a cheery one. It was made of ice and gravel, and it belonged to a hulk of a shadow. Two other figures—these ones visible due to the torches they each bore—stood behind him.

Elliot knew instantly that they were boned.

“Fuck.”

Chapter Seventeen

Violet

“You look like someone drug you through the hills by your hair.”

Violet laughed a little at that. Vivi had gone to fetch her mother from downstairs. Violet had waited in the girl’s room for her mother to come up and, to Violet’s surprise and delight, they knew each other. Hellie had been a friend of Kitt’s when Violet had known him, and she and Hellie had spent some time together when she’d stayed in Kelton. Hellie, it turned out, had married Kitt, and Vivi was their daughter.

When Violet had asked Vivi why she hadn’t said so in the first place, Vivi had only smiled and said, “You didn’t ask.”

She wasn’t sure how she felt about Kitt having named his daughter after her, but after some awkward blushing, she decided it was the most flattering thing anyone had ever done in her honor.

Violet reached up to pull a knot out of her hair.

“Yeah, I can’t imagine I look very presentable. And I’m sorry to bust in on you like this. I had no idea Kit had died.”

“No, of course not. How could you? You went back to the Hollow World so soon after the liberation. Kitt was always disappointed you never came back.”

Violet looked at her feet. “That wasn’t my choice,” she said. “I would have come back, but I wasn’t given the option to stay.”

“Kitt always said that was the only reason you would have left without a goodbye. He had faith in the person you were.”

That hit Violet in the guts and grabbed them.

“That’s... Well, I don’t even have words to say how grateful I am to know that. Thank you.”

“I can’t say that I always had the faith he had, but I’m glad he was right.”

“Oh, no.” Violet dismissed this with a wave. “You have every reason to believe that I left without paying my respects to the people who saved me along the way. I’m told that was the story going around. Rosleana is... *was* a very influential person.”

Hellie set down the hammer she had carried upstairs with her. From the urgency with which she’d entered the room, Violet felt sure that Hellie had intended on using that hammer on whatever home invader Vivi had befriended., and Violet had nearly caught a neat blow to her temple.

It had been the shock of seeing Violet’s face more than Hellie’s reflexes that had saved her. Hellie had almost smacked herself in the face with the flat end when she redirected the blow into a face-covering gasp.

“Listen, Hellie, I don’t mean to step on your hospitality, but Maxon sort of screwed up when he brought me here. He meant to just bring me, but my husband and our two friends got caught up in the portal, and we’re all wearing clothes that could get us decapitated, if you know what I mean.”

Hellie smiled. “Oh, of course. I have some extras of mine, and some of Kitt’s old clothes in our bedroom downstairs. I never could make myself get rid of them.”

“Can I ask you what the deal is with the abandoned room upstairs?”

Hellie did look a little confused at that. “Well, Kitt always said no one was allowed to touch it. I never knew why, but he was pretty adamant about it. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It just seemed odd to me.”

“Well, if you ask me, I think it had something to do with you. That was where he met you, and where you spent so much time together.”

Hellie blushed. “To be honest, I think he was in love with you. Sometimes I wondered if I was a consolation prize.”

“Oh, Hellie, I’m sure that’s not true,” Violet said. “I believe we all end up with the right person in the end.”

Hellie gestured for Violet to follow her down the hall. As she opened the door, she asked, “Did you?”

“End up with the right person?” Violet looked down at the floor.

There was a moment of silence as she stepped into another bedroom. It was dusty and comfortable. “Yeah, I did.”

Hellie handed Violet a pair of boots that looked too small but would have to do.

Violet kicked off her house slippers and knelt to pull on the soft leather boots.

“Then why did you look so sad when I asked?”

Violet looked up at her, letting the laces fall to the floor. “Elliot saved my life. I don’t know what I’d have done without him. He loves me without condition.”

She sighed, and went back to warring with the laces. “And I paid him back by lying to him about my whole life.”

She tightened the laces more than necessary and looked back up at Hellie. “I didn’t think it would matter. I didn’t think I’d ever come back here. I never *wanted* to come back here, Hellie.”

Hellie nodded. “When you’re a kid, you’re still figuring yourself out. You did all your figuring somewhere else.”

Violet tied her laces in a lazy bow and stood up. “How bad is it here, really?”

Hellie shrugged. “You hear about things going on in other cities—things you don’t want to say out loud in case saying it makes it true—but whatever’s happening in the world hasn’t had much impact on Kelton. There’s a rumor going around that the pier master made some neutrality agreement with the queen, but nothing official has been declared. Aside from a few days where the military quartered its soldiers in every available room in Kelton and my father-in-law’s departure with the queen, things have been quiet here.”

“I meant to ask you. Did he go with her willingly, or was he taken?”

Hellie tilted her head one way, then the other before answering. “Both? Neither? If the question is, ‘Did he want to go?’ then the answer is ‘no.’ He *chose* to go, but he wasn’t happy about it, and I got the sense that it wasn’t so much a choice as it was an order. What I can say is that, after his meeting, he came home, he packed a few clothes and keepsakes, and he walked out of town on his own two feet.”

“He came home? Vivi said he didn’t say goodbye.”

“Well, no. She was asleep. It was the middle of the night when he got in. They were sequestered in the pier master’s house for some eighteen hours. He didn’t want to wake her.”

“And he didn’t tell you why?”

Hellie shook her head. “Wouldn’t say. Said it was better for me not to know. I’ve never seen him look so serious.”

Jallow, from Violet’s memory, had always been a loud, jovial man with a brazenly off-key singing voice and hands like cymbals that crashed against the beat of whatever pub song had broken out in the tavern downstairs.

Violet allowed herself a small smile at the thought, but then frowned.

“I’m sorry, Hellie. When I put my voice behind Mashriella, I really believed that she would be good for the kingdom.”

“She was.”

Violet looked startled. “She was what?”

“Good. For the kingdom.”

Violet stared at her. It was the first time she’d heard anyone say anything good about Mashriella—anything that confirmed what Violet had always believed.

Violet sat down at a humble vanity.

“Was she? Was she, really?”

“There was a time when she could have been called great. She unwound her father’s caste system. She lowered the percentage of agriculture and livestock farmers were required to pay to the crown. She was meticulous and transparent with her bookkeeping. She stopped the Immaculacy’s induction of child magic users.”

“She *what?*”

Hellie actually smiled at that. “That was a feat, let me tell you. With fewer and fewer magic users born now than ever, and even those possessing less and less power, she put an end to mandatory matriculation. It didn’t stop recruitment entirely, but it put the choice back in the parents’ hands.”

“Oh, I’d give anything to see the look on Rosleana’s face when Masha—”

Violet stopped before she could finish the thought. Rosleana was dead, she reminded herself, and Mashriella had killed her. Still, it was becoming apparent to her that Maxon hadn’t been forthcoming with all of the details. Or maybe Rosleana hadn’t provided him with them.

Maxon and the rest of the White Guard would only have the word of the Immaculacy if the monarchy were behaving badly.

“How long ago did it start going bad?” Violet asked.

“It came on fast from what I hear. One week she was here with her entire military force, and the next week she was in Abalett, rounding up the Pristine and the White Guard for... well, you know for what.”

“Wait, she came to Kelton first?” This whole time, Violet had assumed this had started with Rosleana’s execution and everything had come after, but this didn’t make any sense. “Why’d she come here with a full regiment of soldiers before making her move for power against the Pristine?”

Hellie shook her head. “I couldn’t say, and no one else is talking. If you wanted answers, and you were desperate or foolhardy enough—or both—I’d say you need to speak to the pier master.”

Violet chewed on her bottom lip. The pier master *was* the best lead they had. He was the last person she knew of who’d spoken to Mashriella before everything had gone straight to hell. He would at least have more information than Violet had now. The question was whether or not he’d be willing to share it.

“Has he been strange lately, the pier master? Acting differently since Mashriella came to see him?”

Hellie sat down on the edge of her bed and crossed one leg over the other. She leaned back on the heels of her hands.

“Well, not that I speak often with him, but he has made fewer public appearances since then. He’s always struck me as harmless enough. Vain, perhaps. A bit haughty. I wouldn’t describe him as ambitious or malevolent, though.”

Violet mumbled under her breath. “Someone people hide it better than others.”

“What was that?”

Violet waved her hand. “Nothing. I shouldn’t even be getting involved. What we need is to find a way back home.”

“You’re leaving?”

The sudden squeak in Hellie’s voice took Violet by surprised. Their conversation until that point had been congenial, but Violet could now hear the edge of fear. She looked at Hellie, who now had her hands on her knees and her back bent forward.

“I’m not supposed to be here, Hellie. Elliot and I have lives and jobs back home. Our friends have children who depend on them. We *have* to go. We can’t just leave everything behind.”

Hellie smiled, but the muscles in her neck strained. “No, you’re right. Of course, you are. I just thought, since you were here, you’d help us. Like last time.”

Violet sighed. “Last time... I was alone last time. My being here didn’t matter to anyone.”

“It mattered to Kitt.”

Violet felt like she’d been slapped. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know, and I know what you went through the first time. You weren’t much older than I was, and everyone expected you to solve their problems for them. I know the time you spent in

Kelton was pretty dark, doubting yourself and your mission, but you pulled yourself up and you marched on, and you fought for us anyway.”

“It’s different now, Hellie. I had magic on my side back then. I’m all used up.”

“I don’t believe that. Magic wasn’t what made you special.”

Violet rolled her eyes. “I know that *now*. Maxon could have brought anyone back with him and they’d have had a full tank of magic when they got here.”

Hellie snorted. She got up from her bed, crossed to a closet on the far wall, and began tossing various pieces of clothing onto her bed.

“That’s *not* what I meant.”

Violet walked to the bed. She dragged her feet and played with her fingernails.

“You had magic, sure, but I remember you had this vitality. Even when you were recovering from the shipwreck, it was like something inside you glowed. Everyone could see it.”

She paused and held a man’s shirt in front of her. Her eyes went soft.

“It’s what Kitt loved about you.”

Violet said nothing as Hellie’s attention drifted. After a moment, Hellie lovingly folded the shirt and held it out to Violet. Violet took it carefully, like it might blow away.

“It’s what made *me* believe in you.”

“Oh, come on.”

“I’m serious. Do you think I’d let Kitt name our daughter after you if I didn’t think you were worth remembering?”

Violet looked up sharply, but Hellie was grinning. Violet exhaled her laughter and began rolling all the clothes together in a single bundle.

Hellie turned somber and her voice deepened. “I think just knowing that you’ve come back would be enough to give people hope.”

Violet wrapped her arms around the borrowed clothes and hugged them to her chest. Was it selfish of her to want to get back to the real world and leave Steria to fend for itself? Well, of course it was selfish, but did that make it wrong to walk away? She had practically been kidnapped. She wasn’t supposed to be here in the first place, but could she leave after all her history?

Even if she were inclined to stay, she couldn’t commit Elliot to stay, too. He’d never leave without her, of course, but Maggie and Anita had family back home. They needed to get back as soon as a way back could be found.

Violet buried her face in the bundle of clothes and fought back tears. She sniffled unheroically.

“I’m sorry,” Hellie said.

Violet shook her head, but kept her face down.

“I don’t want to unfairly place our burdens on your shoulders. I don’t even know if you being here would help, but it would feel disloyal if I didn’t make an argument for the sake of my home.”

“I get it,” Violet said into the clothes. She looked up at Hellie through a halos of tears. “I guess I’m just a sucker for a national tragedy.”

She tried to laugh, but it came out as a strangled sob. Hellie walked over and put her arms around Violet’s shoulders.

Before Hellie could say anything to either reassure Violet or fiddle with her feeling of guilty any further, a congregation of torchlight caught Violet's attention from the window that overlooked the town square.

Violet stiffened and extracted herself from Hellie's embrace. She crossed to the window and opened it a few inches to let in a night breeze and the voices it carried across the cobblestones.

There were five soldiers—poorly-outfitted ones—marching through the square. Between them, hands tied behind their backs, were Elliot, Maggie, Anita, and Maxon.

“Shit.”

Chapter Eighteen

Maggie

“If my hands weren’t tied together, I’d nut-stomp the both of you.”

Maggie, walking next to Anita, hissed the insult from behind Elliot and Maxon. Maxon had additionally been gagged since he had made a hell of a racket when his injured shoulder had been wrenched backward so his wrists could be tied behind his back.

“In fact, as soon as they put us in our cell, I’m *going* to. Shouting at one another in a residential alley when we’re supposed to be keeping a low profile? I’m going to garotte you with your own tongues, I swear.”

Something hard was jammed into Maggie’s ribs from behind. The sharp jab knocked the wind out of her, but only for a second. She stopped abruptly and backstepped with the full force of her weight and the heavily-textured soles of her tactical boot onto the foot of the soldier who hadn’t learned to use his big boy words.

The soldier screamed and fell backward. His buddy drew a sword as long as his forearm and held it in front of himself with both arms. She could see the whites of his eyes in the torchlight. He was scared of her.

Good.

“*Come at me* with that toothpick, bro!” Maggie lunged at him with both shoulders. He flinched, but Maggie came up short. “You think I’m resisting, right now? I’m not, but I fucking can. You want to see me resist?”

The tip of the short sword quivered, and the soldier—who looked more like a scared momma’s boy—tried to squeeze a syllable through his paralyzed vocal chords. It might have been a “Stop!” or a “Stay!” but it instead came out as a “Skuh!”

“What the hell is the hold-up back there?!”

From in front of Elliot and Maxon, and the two soldiers in front of them, came the irritated grumble of the head cheese of this operation. His armor was less broken-in than that of the younger men, and he had better posture. His armor also looked like it was part of the same set, unlike the other men who looked like the kids from the poor high school who had to patch their football gear together from mismatched remnants of the previous decade’s sports budget.

He was clearly more important, or at the very least *self*-important, and Maggie had a feeling that she would have hated him even if he hadn’t ordered her to be tied up and marched through town. He seemed like the kind of entitled asshole who would plant his dick in the butter tray and expect you to tell him how much it improved the taste.

Maggie did something for which she had perfected the skill but rarely performed on account of how thoroughly disgusting it was. She inhaled deep into her chest, snorting through her nose slowly and dramatically, then forced air back up her snot-blocked throat and hawked the nastiest of loogies onto Big Cheese’s polished boots.

Then, she gagged. Her stomach convulsed painfully, but she managed not to throw up. It really was fucking gross.

“Your military discipline is for shit,” Maggie said once she regained control over her dry heaves.

The man gasped, losing all his stern composure, and lifted one foot then the other into the air. Maggie’s gift left a slug’s trail as it dripped to the ground.

“Absolute savagery. I’d expect nothing less of a culture that dresses its women in leaves and numbers them like cattle.”

Maggie looked over at Anita. The jersey Violet had given her had the number “12” and the name “DURMOT” on the back in blue, outlined in thick, white stitching. Anita looked down at herself and blushed.

“What’s savage?” Elliot asked. He always had Maggie’s back. “Turning away travelers to fend for themselves in the dark, or arresting them when they were only trying to find a bed for the night?”

“Travelers, are you?” Big Cheese asked, chest puffed out. “Not in those clothes. Not with a White Guard!”

He grabbed a fistful of Maxon’s hair and yanked his head forward to show the tattoo that wrapped around the back of his neck.

“I’m not a fool. I may not know who you are, but I know where you come from, and I know someone who will be very interested that you’ve come.”

“Now wouldn’t be the worst time for some of that loss of control you were talking about earlier,” Maggie said to Elliot through clenched teeth.

Elliot looked distressed. “I can’t, Mags. Not until I know how it works.”

Big Cheese gave Maxon’s head a good shake, and he grunted around his gag.

“No conspiring. No talking. No *breathing* loudly.”

He tore a length of rope that had been tied to his belt and took a moment to tie it between Elliot’s teeth to match Maxon’s.

Maggie grunted and rolled her eyes. “Be more of a cliché. I dare you.”

This seemed to ruffle him.

“I’m not a *cliché*!”

Maggie could be sure, but there was something about his awkward inflection that made her think he didn't know what a cliché even was.

Without letting go of Maxon, he grabbed Maggie's arm with his free hand and tried to move her in front to trade places, but Maggie wasn't inclined to be moved and his first attempt failed. Maggie swayed with the force of his pull, but her feet didn't budge. Maxon, however, back into her and rebounded.

"Care to try again, Kahuna?" she asked.

Letting out a strangled mewl of frustration, he released Maxon's hair and grabbed onto Maggie's upper arm with both hands. He planted his feet and threw his whole body into pulling her to one side.

He found zero resistance.

Maggie went completely stiff and leaned into him, toppling like a tree. At the last moment, she tucked her shoulder in like a vertical tackle and hammered him into the cobblestones.

Maggie had underestimated how tough quarter-inch thick leather was. Her shoulder felt like it had slammed into concrete, and she'd knocked the air out of her own lungs in an abbreviated grunt. She earned a high-pitched shriek that ended in an abrupt gurgle for her trouble, though. Her shoulder had made a home in Big Cheese's lower abdomen. If her guess was correct, she'd clocked both his digestive tract and his womb broom with the same well-aimed freefall.

One of the other soldiers from the front came around to help him, but Maggie rolled onto her back and kicked up and into his crotch. He crumpled noiselessly, and Maggie used the momentum to roll onto her stomach and get her knees underneath herself. As she was attempting

to stand, however, something struck the back of her head at the base of her neck and sent her consciousness momentarily into the stratosphere. For an instant, she knew the meaning of life, and the locations of Elvis and Jimmy Hoffa.

Then, her brain trickled back into her cranial cavity with such clumsiness that she couldn't remember any of it. She puked once, then fell onto her face. The last thing she remembered thinking was that the torchlight looked like camera lens flares.

Chapter Nineteen

Anita

Anita screamed and tried to go to Maggie when she hit the ground, but she tripped over the first guard whose foot Maggie had likely broken, and found herself sprawled on the stones next to the city watchman in charge. Her knees bled, and she'd twisted one of her ankles beneath herself, but she still rolled to one side and tried to crawl to Maggie despite her injuries and her hands tied behind her back.

The guard who had knocked Maggie out with the hilt of his sword now turned it on Anita. Behind him, Anita could see the other guards with their own swords drawn against Maxon and Elliot, who were both trying to shout at their captors through their rope gags. Elliot looked particularly distressed, and Anita wondered how close he was to breaking his no-magic-until-I-can-control-it stance.

“Don't move, now. This doesn't have to go bloody.”

Anita frowned.

“You don't know what bloody looks like. You're still a child. How much blood have you seen in your whole life?”

She cast a glance over her shoulder at the city watchman, who was curled away from her, cradling his injured junk. She rolled back far enough to swipe her ropes against the edge of the dagger attached to his belt. Hands now free, she took the dagger and faced the shivering infant in armor.

“How much training did you get before they gave you that sword?” Anita asked. “Did they just teach you which end to hold, or did they teach you to actually fight? There is a very important distinction.”

Anita tossed the knife from her left hand to her right hand. It wasn't a flashy toss, and it had been many years since her very rudimentary combat training, so she made the calculated gamble that she might fumble the knife, but she managed to catch it cleanly and to not appear surprised about it.

Anita pointed the tip of the knife at him. "See, you're basically a babysitter with a leather bib, but I was a real soldier."

When he looked good and nervous—lips parted in indecision, eyes bouncing back and forth to his captain—Anita slowly grabbed the blade of the dagger with her left hand and held it out to one side before dropping it on the road. The guard's nervousness turned to confusion, but Anita didn't bother explaining herself. She raised both of her hands in front of her, then stepped forward and knelt next to Maggie in one motion.

"Lucky for you, I don't do that anymore," she said.

Anita rolled Maggie onto her back with more strength than it looked like she should have. Maggie's shirt and mouth were covered in vomit, her nose was bloodied, and it looked like she might have cracked a tooth when she'd fallen.

Behind Anita, the city watchman had regained control of his limbs. As he got to his feet, Anita put her hand on Maggie's chin and gave her a tiny, tender shake.

Maggie's eyes writhed beneath her eyelids for a moment. She groaned and grimaced, then growled a string of curse words.

Anita smiled as Maggie's eyes opened. Her pupils had dilated, but they constricted the instant she opened them, probably from exposure to the torchlight.

Anita ran a cool hand over Maggie's forehead.

“I’m not Violet, but I’d bet Sunny and Shady’s tuition that you have a concussion, you wild woman.”

She helped lift Maggie into a sitting position, then looked up at the guard who still had his weapon drawn on her.

“Are you going to help me or not?”

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and cast a glance at the city watchman, who Anita caught trying to discretely rearrange the lay of his trousers to be less restrictive over what was likely a quite swollen scrotum.

“Well, do you want to sacrifice one guard to help her walk to jail, or all four of them to carry her?”

The watchman paused for a moment before gesturing to the nearest guard to help Maggie to her feet. Anita tucked herself under one of Maggie’s arms, and the guard, looking relieved, sheathed his sword and did the same on the other side.

Once Maggie was standing—hanging between them like drying laundry—the guard turned to look at Anita. He was even younger than she’d initially thought. His skin was a patchwork of acne and stubble.

“What are you?” Anita asked. “Is this some kind of child army? You can’t be more than sixteen.”

He opened his mouth to answer, but the watchman snapped at them.

“That’s enough talking! You’re our prisoners. You’re under arrest. You can’t seriously be calling our competency into question!”

“Tell that to your ball sac, sweetheart,” Anita said.

She tapped his groin lightly with the back of her free hand, and he doubled over with a hiss.

Between his teeth, he said, “Just follow behind, or you won’t make it as far as the jail.”

Anita rolled her eyes. “What are you going to do? Have one of these toddlers stab me? Not likely.”

He didn’t reply to this. He walked away to lead the group once more. His gait had become somewhat pigeon-toed as he attempted to accommodate his sensitive injury.

“Who the hell *are* you people?”

The question had come from the young guard on Maggie’s other side. He leaned forward to look at Anita around Maggie’s drooping head.

Anita looked at the young man. “We’re just people who wanted a night’s sleep before going home. I don’t even understand what we’ve done so wrong. Disturbing the peace, maybe, but we’re no danger to anyone.”

The guard lowered his voice some and said, “It’s not about you, really. Things have been weird here for weeks. The queen took most of the city guard with her, and everyone’s been on high alert since.”

He looked down and Anita couldn’t see his whole face, but she got the impression that he was blushing.

“I’m Wexel,” he said after a moment. “And I’m not sixteen. I’m eighteen, but everyone tells me I look like I’m still a boy.”

Anita snorted. “You *are* still a boy.”

“Ssh! Shut up!”

The kid whose foot Maggie had stomped limped on Anita's other side, but he was looking at Wexel.

"If Rank catches you talking to prisoners again, he's going to have you cleaning latrines with a straw brush and *no soap*."

Anita made a face. "That's nasty."

Wexel's eyebrows lifted and he nodded.

As they walked, Maggie gained a little more control over her own legs, but not enough for either Anita or Wexel to leave her side. Anita was almost grateful. With her hands unbound, Maggie would be fighting with all her strength, and when Maggie got worked up, bodily injury was the only thing to stop her.

It had already happened once.

"Hey."

Anita looked over at Wexel, who had spoken, his voice still hushed.

"What?"

"Why are you wearing the... you know?"

He plucked at the shirt under his own armor, and Anita looked down at the borrowed hockey jersey. She remembered Rank's comment about the number, but wasn't sure how to explain. Sports weren't really her thing.

"Well, no one owns me or anything. It's not like that."

"Oh."

"Uh, where I'm from there are these... gladiators. Every year, they form teams and engage one another in combat on a frozen lake. They wear different numbers and colors so you can tell who they are from a safe distance."

He looked at her with lips parted and eyes wide.

“And *you* are one of these gladiators?”

The question surprised Anita. She looked down at herself. She could understand his incredulity. She'd always been thin, and she'd lost much of the muscle mass she'd put on when she was an MP. The jersey swallowed her entire upper body in bright green polyester. She didn't look just thin; she looked emaciated.

“I'm fast,” she said, finally, “and you'd be surprised at how little pressure you have to put on the blade of a properly-sharpened knife to pierce skin. Plus, there's this vein in your groin that's super easy to access if you have small hands like mine.”

She showed him her hand with its slender fingers.

“You just *boop!*” She flicked her wrist in what she imagined was a slick, threatening motion. “Cut it. Really easy. Dead real quick, depending on how much you weigh. Most people, maybe five minutes. You? More like three.”

He must have believed her, because his eyes snapped ahead of him and stayed there. Anita tried not to look too pleased with herself. She hadn't used a knife for anything more than slicing lime wedges in almost ten years.

“You know,” Anita said, aware that she was gilding an already bloomed lily just a bit, “people think that bleeding out is painless and that you just drift off. Not true. It's *really* painful when your blood is all gone because you're still breathing but you're basically going insane because you can't move, but you're awake even though you're basically dead. Woof. I'd rather die *any* other way.”

“Boop!” Maggie said, then giggled. Then gasped and dry heaved once.

Anita grinned at how pale Wexel had gone. Even the shorter guard on her other side avoided making eye contact with her. She felt a *little* bad about terrorizing a couple of teenagers, but not so bad that she had any plans to tell them she was joking.

In front of her, Elliot caught her eye over his shoulder and she nearly broke into girlish snickers, but she maintained her sociopathic façade of nonchalance.

After a few more blocks of silence, with Maggie's weight starting to put a kink in Anita's spine (she couldn't imagine how Wexel was holding up), they stopped at a building that didn't strike her as looking much like a jail. All the jails she had seen were stone or brick structures with bars on all the visible windows, but this looked like every other clay structure they had passed on the way.

Yeah, it wasn't going to take much effort to break out of this place once the guards had left them all alone. Elliot was the strong man of the group, even if the city watch didn't know it, but since he wasn't willing to fight anyone, Anita had been concerned that escaping from some underground dungeon or fenced-in prison without getting into a fight with actual people was going to be impossible.

This place, though, looked like if they waited long enough, it would fall down around them. Even if they were separated, Anita felt comfortable that she could get herself out with an old spoon and the corrosivity of her own saliva. All they had to do was be placed in a cell the shared the outer wall and Elliot could punch them to freedom.

Where they planned to go *after* escaping from prison was another story.

Chapter Twenty

Violet

Had Hellie not stopped her, Violet would have rushed out of the *Dented Helm* and into the town square still in her tie-die skirt and only one boot. As it was, she had to put herself between Violet and the door and smack her soundly across the face in order to appeal to her better senses.

By the time Violet had finished changing into Hellie's less conspicuous clothing and vaulting the stairs to the ground floor, the commotion outside had caught the attention of the bar patrons. Every blurry-eyed, big-bellied binger in the joint was jostling for a clear view from the doorway and every street-facing window available. Violet had to leave through the kitchen, into the back alley the way she'd come in to get to the square.

When she saw Maggie on the ground, she prepared to leap into the ring of torchlight to defend her friends, but she'd completely neglected her immediate surroundings. An arm snaked out of the darkness from behind her and wrapped around her throat. It yanked her backward further from the light.

Violet would have yelled, but the arm prevented any sound from escaping—and any air from reaching her lungs. She clawed at the arm desperately.

“*Stop it. Get hold of yourself.*”

It was Hellie.

Violet relaxed, but still couldn't breathe. She patted Hellie's arm urgently, and Hellie released her.

“Sorry. You're not as... sturdy as I remember you being.”

Violet inhaled, and her vision darkened at the edges for a moment. She held back a cough that might have given away her position and forced herself to breathe slowly until her dizziness passed. She glared over her shoulder at Hellie and moved toward the square again, but Hellie grabbed her by the wrist.

Violet drew Maggie's knife from her belt and turned on Hellie, fire in her eyes.

"What is your problem?"

"Your friend is handling it. Look."

Hellie pointed, and Violet turned to see Anita and one of the young guards helping Maggie stand up. Had *Anita* defused the situation?

Of course she had. Deescalating a confrontation was exactly the sort of thing Anita excelled at. She'd been good at it when she'd been the manager of the pharmacy she and Violet had worked at in college, and it was one of the skills that made her the most requested wedding planner in Indianapolis.

Even under arrest, it seemed that Anita could put out metaphorical fires and get everyone seeing sense again.

"You're no good to them if you go and get yourself arrested, too."

Violet looked back at Hellie. She felt heavy from the adrenaline leaving her body and from the weight of her concern.

"They're my responsibility," Violet said. "They're my family. I have to protect them."

"You can't protect anyone with your hands bound behind your back. You have to be smarter than that. They'll be moving slow with your friend who was hurt. Follow me. I'll take you to the jail."

With Hellie's help, Violet reached the jail several minutes before the guards arrived. When they did, Violet sent Hellie back to the tavern.

"There's no need for you to get involved any more than you are. I appreciate everything you've done."

Hellie smirked and handed over a backpack that had been stuffed with the borrowed clothes and shoes.

"There's a pouch of coins in there, too. It's everything I can spare, which isn't a lot, but should be enough to feed you and your friends for a few days if you're smart."

Hellie fidgeted with her fingers, then jumped at Violet and put her arms around her shoulders.

When she let go, she said, "Kitt would have wanted to do that himself."

Violet gave Hellie's shoulder a squeeze. "I'm sorry, Hellie."

"What for?"

Violet shook her head. She felt so ashamed. How could she explain that she couldn't stay without it sounding like she was abandoning Steria?

"Oh," Hellie said.

She didn't sound surprised. She didn't even sound disappointed.

"Well, I see it as you made it possible for Steria to have some of its best years. You may not have been able to enjoy them with us, but *we* did. You don't owe us any more than what you already gave us."

Violet didn't know how to accept Hellie's... *acceptance*. How could she be so calm about this? How could she abide Violet's selfishness with such grace when it was tearing Violet

up from the inside? Maybe she was a genius, and this was reverse psychology to make Violet feel so guilty that she changed her mind?

Torches and soft voices drifted down the road toward the jail, and Violet urged Hellie to leave before the watchman was in full view of the building. Hellie disappeared into an alley and was swallowed by the night. Violet, with her head on straight this time, tucked herself behind the stone wall of what appeared to be a warehouse and watched from the shadows. She couldn't hear the conversation yet, but she held her ground, plagued by her own thoughts.

Whether or not Hellie was a devious mastermind purposely manipulating her into wanting to stay, she had managed to tear down one major belief that Violet hadn't even been aware she'd held on to.

When fourteen-going-on-fifteen Violet had found herself back in the real world—without magic and without a friend—she had built a resentment. She resented Rosleana, of course, and she'd resented Maxon for letting her ejection happen.

As her bitterness had grown, however, she'd come to resent Steria itself. Steria hadn't turned its back on her exactly, but it was out there, existing just out of reach. Its *people* hadn't abandoned her, but it sure as shit had felt like they had, and Violet had stored a venom in her gut that had been released the moment Maxon had come back into her life. She had spewed that poison all over Maxon (and Elliot had caught some by proximity), but it had tainted her own memories, as well.

Steria was a dreamland. At one time, it had been Violet's home. She'd had every intention of never going back to her world.

What had Vivi called it? The Hollow World.

It was apt. Being back had felt that way after her year in Steria. *She* had been hollow, an empty container that had once been filled with magic, but was now as marvelous as an empty milk carton.

Steria didn't deserve the hatred she had stored for it over the years.

Was that enough, though? Was Steria's innocence in her rejection enough of a reason for her to stay and fight a war she may or may not have inadvertently caused?

Violet was sick with indecision.

"One battle at a time."

The words had passed over her lips like a muscle memory. She couldn't place them at first, but then she remember.

Kitt. Kitt had used those words.

Violet smiled. She had been conflicted then, too. She'd searched for Maxon in the shipwreck for two weeks, had finally given into to her self-doubt and loathing, and had been determined to let herself waste away.

Violet could almost see Kitt's face form in the shadows next to her.

"Steria is a kingdom with a long history of war and peace. We're at war now, but we can reach peace again, one battle at a time."

The "battle" he'd been referring at the time had been her internal struggle. She couldn't even think about becoming the hero Steria needed until she had conquered the monsters of her own mind.

Now, the battle at hand was rescuing Elliot and their friends. Everything else—including her staggering guilt—would have to wait.

Chapter Twenty-One

Elliot

It was a good thing that Elliot had been gagged. He had been approaching his boiling point with the city watchman and his baby guards, and chewing on the rope was better for his teeth than the gnashing he *would be* doing otherwise. It gave him something to focus on. It was, surprisingly, helping him maintain a center. In the weirdest way, it was the thin line between rational, pacifist Elliot, and snap-your-spine-like-a-pencil Elliot.

Elliot clenched his teeth around the rope and took slow, calming breaths through his nose.

He had been placed in a cell by himself, as had Maxon. Maggie and Anita had been placed together, a little further down the hallway.

He couldn't see anyone else, but he could hear them. Like himself, Maxon had been placed in his cell still gagged with his hands behind his back. The guards hadn't bothered to tie up or gag Anita or Maggie, though.

From down the hall, he could hear Anita's voice.

"Hey, Elliot."

She didn't bother lowering her voice. They'd been left alone as far as they could tell.

Something about her resolve soothed him. Elliot grunted something that could have passed as, "What?"

"I know you're new to the whole magic thing, but now seems like an opportune time to start practicing."

Elliot sighed. "Yuh, okuh."

He tried to say, "I'll try," but it came out as "Ah gah."

“No pressure.”

“Uh huh.”

No pressure. Sure.

Elliot walked to the middle of his cell and closed his eyes because it seemed appropriate.

Violet was pagan, but Elliot subscribed to the church of skepticism. He tried to remember all the times he watched her meditate at her alter in the living room and every conversation they’d ever had about how she focused her energy.

It was weird. Just thinking about that perfectly normal interaction, he couldn’t help but wonder if it was influence by her time in Steria. Steria didn’t have gods that he knew of, but did she “focus her energy” the same way she focused her magic when she was here? It was a thought that shocked him.

He realized he was doing a poor job of clearing his mind.

The more he tried to empty his mind, though, the more clutter there was to fill it. His head flooded with things he wanted to say to Violet when he saw her again and memories from his childhood and snippets of nineties power ballads he hadn’t sung in literal decades and didn’t know he even knew all the words to.

While he was humming the notes to Bryan Adams’ “(Everything I Do) I Do It For You,” Maggie recovered enough to register her complaints.

“Christ, that’s an awful song. Has the torture started? Is this the torture? I surrender. The troops are camping over the hill. They plan to attack at dawn. The soldiers are in the wooden horse. The nukes are in Elder Shaw’s silo, but not like a nuke silo. Like a regular corn one. Just make it stop.”

“Ha ha ha,” Elliot said, but only because he couldn’t say, “I hate it, too, but my mom was a professional wedding singer, so I heard it so many times from nineteen ninety-one to nineteen ninety-five that it’s been etched into my soul.”

From the cell next door, Elliot could hear Maxon start to laugh, but it wasn’t isn’t-Maggie-hilarious laughter. It was definitely more like how-did-Violet-end-up-with-a-total-loser-like-Elliot laughter. The laughter itself bothered Elliot less than the fact that he felt he knew Maxon well enough to recognize the derision in his voice.

Elliot soccer-kicked the bars of his cell with the inside sole of his slipper. It made a dull thud, but rather than stop, Maxon’s laughter doubled.

“Heh!” he shouted but couldn’t work out an insult that could convey the unadulterated strength of his hatred but which also consisted only of consonants he could pronounce with rope between his teeth.

“Hng?” Maxon made a mock-innocent questioning sound, then snickered again.

“Hey, Mommy Issues,” Maggie said. She was feeling better, apparently. “How about you cool it with the antagonistic bullshit for a few minutes, huh? We get it. You planted your flag on Violet’s moon before Elliot did, but Elliot colonized it, okay? I swear to god, straight men are so insecure.”

But Maxon didn’t stop laughing, and Elliot was starting to get really pissed. It was awful, being angry *and* gagged. He had all these *words* he wanted to hurl at Maxon, but no ability to articulate them. His whole life, Elliot had trained himself to take his emotions and channel them into witty, well-crafted insults and vicious rhetoric, but a powerful rage had been building inside him with no outlet.

Elliot threw himself at the bars, chest first, and put his face between them, but he still couldn't see Maxon. He could see Maggie and Anita, though; they were in a cell at the end of the hall, facing him.

"You're not helping, Maxon," Anita said. "That's enough, now, okay? We're in this together."

Maxon snorted, and his laughter turned nasty.

"Yuh gotta buh kiddig muh."

There was no mistaking his meaning.

Elliot tried to say something—anything—that was synonymous with a command to leave Anita alone, but the best he could manage was, "Huck you."

"You ah weak." Maxon took great care to enunciate with as much precision as was possible under the circumstances. "Gib up."

Something deep inside Elliot split open. Every fight he'd backed down from, every final word he'd let someone else have, every time the customer had been right, every argument he'd had with his stepfather about how the oboe was a perfectly acceptable instrument for a boy to play bubbled to the surface.

Elliot strained against the ropes binding his hands and bellowed through his gag.

And then, he was free.

He had grabbed the bars of his cell with both hands before realizing that the rope had snapped in the middle. He'd bitten clean through the one in his mouth. He spit a chunk of the coarse, fraying material into the hallway and shoved with his hands, but also with a new strength that came from that fractured place in the back of his mind. The bars groaned in protest, but then

the weaker hinges buckled and snapped. The entire wall came away, stone crumbling where it held the metal in place. It tipped forward and fell onto the opposing wall.

“Oh, shit.”

“Fuck, yeah!” Maggie pumped a fist in the air.

Elliot looked down the hall at them, then stepped into the hall between the bars and looked at Maxon who had an infuriatingly smug look on his face.

This son of a bitch had done all that on purpose just to piss him off. And, goddammit, it had worked.

“Yeah, all right, whatever. Let’s see if we can do it on purpose this time.”

Elliot wrapped his hands around the bars on the door of Maxon’s cell and tried to recreate the feelings of helplessness-induced rage he’d felt before. He braced one foot on the dividing wall between the cells and pulled with every ounce of strength he could conjure, but it didn’t budge.

He felt silly again, and he wasn’t sure how to combat that. He now had empirical evidence that magic was real and that he could wield it, but part of his brain still told him that was ridiculous.

“I hear footsteps!” Anita said. “From this door down here. Someone’s coming!”

“Okay, okay.”

Elliot let go of the bar, gave himself a full-body shake, and slapped himself in the face for good measure. This time, he wrapped his whole arm around the bar tried to yank it in a sort of headlock position. His leverage was better, but the magic wasn’t coming.

“Oh, come on, you useless piece of shit,” Elliot said. Even he didn’t know if he meant the bar or himself.

The sound of a door slamming open around the corner made Elliot pull harder, but the only thing he was in danger of displacing was his shoulder from its socket.

The footsteps were closer, and Elliot could hear the sound of heavy breathing. He let go of the bar and faced where the sounds were coming from. He planted his feet and raised his fists, ready to fight or bluff his way out of a beating.

He wracked his brain for something witty to say, but when Violet came around the corner, all the wind went out of Elliot.

Violet glanced around the hallway, saw the dismantled wall of bars and, after a brief beat of surprise, lifted up a ring of iron keys.

“I thought this might make things easier.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Maggie

Maggie hadn't had her bell rung like that since she'd crashed her motorcycle into an I-15 road sign in her twenties. The difference between a twenty-two-year-old concussion and a forty-six-year-old concussion was goddamn spectacular. She felt like someone had taken the worst hangover she'd ever had and cranked that shit up to eleven. Dim light hurt her eyes, sudden movements made her physically ill, and sharp sounds were like chisels trying to pry open the top of her skull.

Elliot's special effects with the bars had been fucking epic, but Maggie couldn't see straight right after.

Anita helped her stand when they heard the door at the end of their hall open, and Maggie pressed herself against the bars, ready to snatch any guard who came too close. She was prepared to Hannibal-Lector someone to escape.

But it was Violet, on a rescue mission, and she had the keys with her.

Maggie reached for Violet. "Someone come get this woman before I kiss her on the mouth."

Violet laughed and unlocked the cell door, then picked her way through the wreckage in the hallway to Elliot. She grabbed the collar of his shirt and kissed him hard, then went to unlock Maxon's cell.

"I say we leave his ass behind," Maggie said.

She opened the door and she and Anita stepped out of their cell.

Violet grinned and let Maxon out.

"Oh, you think I'm joking." Maggie turned to Anita. "She thinks I'm joking."

“You *are* joking,” Anita said. She ran a soothing hand down Maggie’s shoulder.

“Yeah, but only a little.”

“How did you get down here?” Elliot asked Violet while she used Maggie’s knife to cut Maxon’s ropes, then untied his gag.

“Well, let’s just say that peace makes soldiers lazy.”

Maxon fell forward and leaned against the wall as his right arm dropped to his side. He brought it up in front of himself and ran his left hand over his shoulder. His breathing was shallow, and Maggie tried to feel more sorry for him than she did.

It was difficult.

“Peace?” Maggie asked, “I thought there was a war.”

Violet glared at Maxon. “Apparently, that’s not the case. It’s a long story, and for now, we just need to get to the pier master’s house without getting arrested. Or... *re*-arrested in your case.”

“I think whoever you stole those keys from is coming to get them back,” Anita said.

Maggie could hear angry shouting and more footsteps coming from the same door Violet had come through.

“Is there another way out, around that corner?” Maggie asked.

Maxon did the first useful thing he’d done since Maggie had met him and went to look.

When he came back, he said, “Well, there is another door. Whether it leads to outside, I can’t be sure, but the floor here is dirt, so I doubt there’s a basement, and it looked like all one story from the outside.

“Good enough for me.”

Maggie bent down and picked up one of the loose bars that had come free from Elliot's cell, and lifted it up over one shoulder. It was iron, and heavy, but it wasn't any heavier than carrying both twins on her shoulders when they were kids. The bending over and back up again, however, caused a lot more blood to rush to her head than her head was prepared to handle and she almost passed out.

She was going to feel the strain later. For now, she planted one end of the bar against the point where the wall met the floor just in front of the door. The other end, she leaned against the opposite wall.

"Look smart, Elliot," she said, and waved him over.

She had him stand under the bar and grab it with both hands while she stood behind him and did the same.

"On the count of three, jump and let all your weight hang from the bar."

Elliot must have caught the gist of her idea because he didn't question her.

"Ready," he said.

"One. Two. Three!"

Together, they jumped and bent their knees so that their combined weight came down on the bar. The bar wedged itself in the heavy clay wall and stuck fast.

A second later, the door opened and smacked into the bar. Maggie and Elliot reeled backward, but the bar held and what sounded like several walking sacks of meat piled into one another on the other side.

"All right, fine," Anita said. "Very clever. Now, can we go?"

Maggie gave Elliot's shoulder a quick punch and followed him around the corner. Maxon held the door open until everyone was through and closed it behind him.

This hall was filled with more cells, all of them empty. It really didn't appear as though this building was used for much. Did this town not have any crime, or did they keep their criminals somewhere else?

Maggie hope this wasn't an omen that foreshadowing some gruesome Sweeney-Todd style of corporal punishment. She would mow down the entire guard before she let them turn her into soylent green.

She had just begun to feel hopeful about this escape plan when the hallway ended in a dead end. They turned a final corner to see the last few cells to the left and right, and another clay wall directly in front.

“Ugh, what the *fuuuuck*?” Maggie pounded the wall with the meaty side of her fist. “This layout doesn't make the least bit of sense. What kind of prison doesn't have a circular floorplan?”

“Sorry, everyone,” Violet said.

“For what?” Elliot asked. He put an arm around her shoulders. “You didn't know this would be a dead end, and you got us this far.”

Elliot let go of Violet and stood in front of the wall. “Let see if I can get us the rest of the way.”

Elliot placed both his hands on the wall and closed his eyes.

“*Ahem.*”

Everyone, wound as their nerves were, jumped at the small voice that interrupted Elliot's rushed meditation. Maggie looked around until she saw the tip of someone's nose peaking out one of the cells in this short stretch of hallway.

A small hand appeared through the bars and waved at them.

“Hi.”

Violet patted Elliot on the back. “Keep trying, babe.”

Maggie walked down to the cell and looked inside. The prisoner was a teenaged girl in filthy clothes. Her skin was dark where soot had been smeared on her cheeks, and her hair looked like it had been sawn off in patches with a dull blade.

“Y’all, I think I found Cinderella,” Maggie said.

“Maggie, this is a real place. We’re not in a Disney movie,” Violet told her.

“Whatever,” Maggie said. She pointed at the girl in the cell, “I’m telling you, though, I found Cinderella.”

She squinted. Her vision was blurry. “There’s only one of you in there, right?”

“Just me,” the girl said. “My name is Summer, not Cinderella, but I can help you get out of here if you open my door.”

Maggie wagged her finger at Summer.

“Ah, no. I’ve seen too many horror movies and played too much Dungeons and Dragons to fall for that one.”

“You... have a strange way of speaking,” Summer said.

“Yes, well, you’re not the first person to say so, and as far as insults go, that doesn’t even tilt my needle, kid. I know how this works. We let you out, and you follow us out of here, then turn into a cannibal nightmare and eat us. Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Fine, then have fun finding the secret passage without me.”

“Secret passage?” Elliot asked.

“Hey,” Maggie said. She pointed at him. “Mind your business, Mr. Gorbachev, and tear down that wall.”

Maggie turned to the girl. “Why are you in jail? You look like you’re twelve.”

“I’m sixteen,” said Summer, “and how about why are *you* in jail?”

Maggie put on a high-pitched mocking tone. “*How about why are you in jail?* Listen, brat, we’re not in jail.”

Summer raised an eyebrow at her.

“Well, what I mean is that we’re not *supposed* to be in jail.”

“And you think I am?”

Maggie thought about that for a moment. She had no rebuttal.

“Good point. Vi, keys!”

Violet turned from Elliot to toss the keys with what Maggie thought was a slight eyeroll.

Maggie reached out for the keys, but missed them completely. Anita picked them up and handed them to her.

“Depth perception’s a little wonky,” Maggie said, then she unlocked the cell.

Summer stepped out and Maggie noticed she was barefoot.

“Where are your shoes?”

“Where are *your* pants?”

“Fair enough. Where’s this secret passage?”

“Gimme the keys.”

Maggie hesitated, but handed them over. Summer sprinted in the direction of Violet and Elliot, and opened the cell at the end of the hall on the right. Maggie followed.

The cell was empty and didn’t even have the wooden stool and bucket the other ones had. Maggie was suddenly glad she hadn’t been in the jail long enough to need to use theirs.

There was a pile of hay in one corner, which Summer brushed to one side and revealed a trap door in the floor.

Summer opened the trapdoor, and Maggie leaned over it to see where it led. It was too dark, but Maggie knew *exactly* where it led. The stench of an open sewer drain drifted into the prison, and Maggie nearly wretched for the second time since her concussion.

“You didn’t think to mention that by ‘secret passage’ you really meant ‘sewer maintenance tunnel?’” she asked.

Summer shrugged. “An exit’s an exit.”

Maggie examined the hole. She wasn’t convinced she’d fit. She had what her mother had once called ‘birthing hips.’

“Hey, how does everyone feel about taking the shit route?”

Everyone looked at Maggie, then at Elliot who was still in the assume-the-position stance against the wall.

“Yeah, okay,” Elliot said.

“Good. Everyone else through first. You’re gonna have to pull my ass through from underneath.”

From the sound of it, someone had managed to get the door in the next room open. Maggie had a lovely mental image of the four younger soldiers using the captain’s head as a battering ram.

Once everyone else was down in the sewer—not without Maxon tweaking his shoulder painfully—Maggie lowered herself, feet first, into the trap door. Her hips, it turned out, weren’t much of an issue. They would be bruised later, but her shoulders didn’t want to cooperate.

Okay, not her shoulders. It was her bust.

“Goddamn underwire bra! Perks you right up, but the *second* you need to squeeze into a sewer.”

“Hold still, Mags,” Anita said from below.

Maggie felt Anita reach up with both hands and squash her boobs against her chest and maneuver them under the lip of the trap door.

“This is just like prom,” Maggie said.

From down the hall, Maggie could hear the door slam against the wall.

“Shit, company’s coming.”

Anita wrapped both her arms around Maggie’s waist, and someone else grabbed her by the knees.

“On three,” Anita said.

“Three!” Violet shouted.

Maggie cried out in pain, but it didn’t feel like it was anything more than superficial scraping.

Unfortunately, she was covered in shit. She landed ass-first in a steadily-trickling stream of water and human bile. It was too much for her concussed ass to take. She bent over and dry heaved. She’d left everything she’d eaten that day in a spearmint plant earlier, but her stomach insisted there was more.

“Are you okay?”

Maggie’s eyes were closed in pain, and she might have bitten through her bottom lip, but she was pretty sure Violet had asked the question.

“Fine-fine,” she said quickly. “Get me up.”

Two pairs of hands—one of them Anita’s familiar hands—helped her to her feet.

“You guys are wasting valuable escape time, you know.”

Maggie opened her eyes and focused on Summer, who had evidently stayed to lead them out of the sewer like she’d promised.

“I still haven’t ruled you out as a cannibal, kid,” Maggie said.

Summer didn’t seem bothered. “Even if I were, who wants to eat someone covered in human feces. Not this cannibal.”

Maggie grinned and looked at Anita. Anita smiled, and Maggie knew they were thinking the same thing.

Summer reminded them of the twins.

Which reminded them that they were trapped in the world with no way of reaching their children.

Anita’s smile faded. Her bottom lips trembled.

“Come on,” Maggie said.

She put her uninjured arm over Anita’s shoulders.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Maxon

Maxon stayed behind to follow up in the rear, to be the first line of defense between the guards upstairs and the group ahead of him, but the trapdoor didn't open up after them. Either they hadn't thought to follow them, or they decided that it wasn't worth the effort of crawling around in the stink and the dark. As long as no one had sent word to Mashriella that the missing White Guard had been found, no one would need to know that any prisoners had been captured in the first place.

Cowards.

Maxon didn't understand how *this* had been the place Violet had regained her strength. It would full of weak-minded men and aspiring bureaucrats with brown noses.

Although, who had the brown nose, now? They were crawling through excrement to save their own lives.

Time was when Maxon would have rather died fighting unbeatable odds than lower himself into filth and turn tail. Those were the days of knowing that your mission was righteous and your orders came from the divine.

How did ordinary people handle doubt?

Maxon had broken bones. He had been cut by sword and dagger. He had been tortured. He had felt every form of physical pain that had been invented to be visited upon a man. He had felt sorrow and guilt and longing, but this wretched *doubt* was the meanest of all his afflictions. How did someone go on living without being able to trust that his actions were just?

How could Violet look at him without disgust?

Maxon made one decision as they trudged: he was going to teach Elliot to use his magic. They were going to need it if they were going to evade the queen forces. So far, no one knew that Violet had returned, but word would get out that strangers who dressed in clothing not of this world had arrived and been wandering around Kelton. Captain Rank's soldiers were undisciplined and immature, and Maxon knew that the combination of the two led to loose tongues.

You could threaten a soldier within an inch of his life to keep confidential information to himself, but you couldn't teach an adolescent not to rumor mill with his friends where they could be overheard.

"Where does this tunnel lead?"

Maxon could hear Violet's voice from up ahead. She was near the front, furthest from him aside from their little guide.

Summer's voice was small and barely met his ears.

"Where do you think? The ocean."

So they were traveling north. That was good to know. It meant they wouldn't be walking the length of the city. They were closer to the shore than they were to the nearest source of freshwater, at least that he could see from their approach that morning.

It struck him that it had only been a day since they arrived back in Steria. He could hardly believe it; so much had happened in so short an amount of time. They already been in the sewer for long enough that the smell hardly bothered him anymore, which meant they ought to be close.

Maxon rubbed his poor, bruised shoulder, which had been consistently abused since he had injured it. Being flung into a tree had not been an enjoyable experience. Maxon *was* sturdier than most, but Elliot hadn't been wrong that he could have killed someone less so.

Maxon would never admit it out loud, of course. Something about Elliot still rubbed him raw, but he still had to respect the fact that he wouldn't hit someone without knowing whether was in complete control of himself.

Soon, the stench in the sewer changed. It didn't lessen by any stretch, but the scent of humanity began to mingle with the smells of salt and fish. Light began to filter into the pitch blackness of the tunnel. It was still dark out, but the moon had begun to penetrate the shadows. Stone gave way to sand, and someone ahead of him gasped in relief.

Maggie, who had been directly in front of Maxon, didn't stop when they reached the end of the tunnel. She marched straight into the ocean, arms out to her sides, and let the waves knock her under. Anita and Violet ran over to drag her out, but the surf spit her back onto the sand and she got back up to go in again. Her leafy skirt hadn't survived the first series of waves, so she re-entered the sea bare-assed.

Everyone else approached the edge of the water and kicked their shoes off. When Elliot started rinsing his out, Violet called over to them.

“Don't bother with those!”

She held up a backpack that had mercifully survived the trip through the sewer without a drop of... *stuff* on it.

Elliot shrugged and chucked his shoes—which looked like they were made out of cotton fluff that had just absorbed everything they'd been walking through—into the water.

After Violet and Anita managed to get Maggie out of the water and onto the beach, Violet opened the backpack and sorted several sets of clothing and boots into piles for each of them.

“Sorry, Summer. I wasn’t expecting a fifth.”

Summer shrugged. She stood ankle-deep in the water. “I didn’t get it all over me, like her.”

Maggie grumbled something under her breath and tugged on a pair of men’s trousers.

“People are going to give you funny looks for being a woman in pants,” Violet told Maggie, “but none of Hellie’s skirts were going to fit you.”

“She could make a skirt out of seaweed,” Summer suggested.

Maggie threw a handful of sand at Summer, but she hadn’t thrown it with much intent to land her mark.

“I figured you’d run off as soon as we were out,” Maggie said.

Summer laughed. “You guys are by far the most interesting thing that’s every happened to me. Where am I gonna go?”

“Home,” Maxon said. “You’ll only find trouble if you hang around us.”

Summer snorted. “I sweet up metal shavings for the blacksmith when he’s sober enough to work, and try to avoid catching the back of his hand when he isn’t.”

“No, Maxon’s right, kiddo,” Violet said. “We’re talking about big trouble.”

“Oh, you mean like *royal* trouble?”

Violet’s eyes widened. “What do you know about royal trouble?”

“I know that *you’re* Violet of the Hollow World, and he—” she tilted her head at Maxon— “is a White Guard. Also, you just told me his name, so I know he’s the *same* White Guard who rescued you from King Greeg.”

Violet’s hands went to her waist, but she turned her anger on Maxon rather than Summer.

“You know, I’m really sick of hearing about how I got captured by King Greeg and *you* had to come rescue me. I can almost understand how Rosleana could convince you that my going back to my world was better for Steria, but how did you justify *lying* about what really happened at the castle?”

Maxon didn’t have an answer for her. Rosleana told him she’d had a vision that Violet had to go home for Steria to learn to stand on its own, but he knew that wasn’t the answer she wanted. As for the rest, the re-writing of events as they were told to the people, he had no answer. He’d never felt that it was honorable exactly, but he’d always assumed that Rosleana had had her reasons.

She’d always had reasons.

“I always thought the story was weird,” Summer said. “Why would he go all the way to the Hollow World to bring you here if the Pristine were just going to save everyone, anyway. Unless you were supposed to just be a distraction or something, but that makes a much less interesting story.”

“Yes, thank you,” Violet said, darkly.

“This is the first time since breakfast that my hoo-ha has been covered, and I have to say that I feel a lot more secure with a bonnet on my bunny.”

Summer dissolved into giggles; she crouched in the sand and clutched her stomach. Maxon was stunned into silence. How did people learn to talk like that in Violet's world? How did they live without being shunned by polite society?

Violet just shook her head at Maxon. She took off her boots and began to rinse them out.

"Everyone, just get dressed before we get spotted by a curious sailor. Summer, close your eyes, okay?"

"Absolutely not."

"Child, you will close your eyes while the adults are changing clothes," Anita said.

Anita was another one Maxon did not understand. She'd said she was a soldier, but she refused to fight the guards when she'd escaped earlier. She'd thrown away her only weapon without being ordered to. She'd stared down a sword, barehanded, and hadn't blinked.

Now, she glowered at Summer with the same intensity, and indomitable Summer had placed her hands over her eyes without any further argument (although with a sigh of impetuosity).

Maxon picked up the stack of clothes meant for himself and held them as far from himself as possible to keep them pristine. He walked some distance away, to the other side of a jagged rock, and stripped.

Maxon left his soiled clothes on the beach to wade in the water and scrub unmentionable substances from his skin and under his fingernails. The salt water stung his eyes and a series of scrapes on his back from the tree, but it was a good sting. It was sharp and brightening.

When he was... well, not *satisfied*, but willing to accept that he could get any cleaner from green water than he was, he stepped out of the ocean.

He flinched when he heard a nearby giggle and then the distant, scolding voice of Anita say, “Summer!”

Maxon looked down at himself, standing with his legs crossed and his hands shielding himself below the waist. He looked absurd.

Not like a soldier. Not like the Pristine’s esteemed personal guard.

Maxon tossed his soiled clothes into the ocean and got dressed as quickly as his shoulder would allow. It was going to be a long walk to the pier master’s house.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Violet

“Why are we going to the pier master’s house?”

Violet didn’t know how to answer Elliot’s question. The truth was that she didn’t know why she felt compelled to go to the pier master’s house. She only new that it felt like the right thing to do. Her instincts rarely failed her in the past, although that had been part of Steria’s gift to her—and unerring sense of what needed to be done.

It hadn’t served her as well in her world as it had in Steria, however.

Violet stood in front of Elliot, Maggie, and Anita. Maxon was off to one side, up against a rock. He was absorbing but not participating, and Summer was playing some sort of single-player version of leap-frog with the incoming waves.

“Look, the truth of it is that I don’t know how to get us back home. My best guess would be to find one of Rosleana’s safe houses. She kept them all over, but I’ve only been to one of them, the first time I was here. She used them as way stations for when she went on her bullshit pilgrimages or whatever. She kept supplies in them in case she ever needed them. Maxon must have found the portal spikes at another one.”

“And we don’t know where these way stations are, I’m guessing,” Elliot said.

“No, unfortunately not.”

“I don’t suppose her boyfriend over here knows where they are either?” Maggie threw a nasty look at Maxon as she asked this.

Violet looked at Maxon for the answer.

He cleared his throat and said, “Just the one. Rosleana took her pilgrimages alone, without White Guard protection. The one I found... I found it by accident.”

“That’s code for, ‘She hoarded magic items and supplies and squirreled them all over the country so no one could use them but her,’” Maggie said.

Maxon popped forward off the rock he’d been leaning on and pointed at Maggie. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Rosleana *loved* Steria.”

“I’m sure she loved her *control* over Steria,” Maggie said.

Violet clapped her hands to get their attention. Maggie winced.

“We’re not fighting. This isn’t happening. No one likes this situation, so we’re going to have to suck it up like adults.”

Maggie crossed her arms over her chest and Maxon leaned back against the rock, but neither broke eye contact with the other. It was going to have to be sufficient.

“The short version of the plan, since you play-babies don’t have the attention span to listen to the details, is that Rosleana had to travel by boat for some of those journeys, and I’m hoping the pier master will have records of those trips so maybe we can reverse-engineer a roadmap.”

It was half the truth. The true part was that it genuinely was the best and most direct way she could think of to get them home. The part she’d left out was that she was keenly curious about why Mahsriella had come to Kelton before attacking the Pristine.

“The bad news,” Violet said, “is that the pier master might be in cahoots with Mashriella.”

“That’s not just bad news,” Elliot said. “That’s catastrophic news. If we go and meet him, he could just have us put right back in jail.”

Maggie laughed. “Not *that* jail. Not after you wrecked the place, King Kong.”

Elliot blushed. “I didn’t know I was even capable of something like that. I was... angry.”

He looked at Maxon, but Violet didn't have time to figure out what *that* was about.

"I'm hoping we can avoid the pier master," Violet said.

She glanced toward the horizon where a glimmer of light had begun to breach the perfect line of the sea.

"In theory, the pier master has to be out on the docks first thing in the morning to see off today's ships. If we go now, there's the chance that we can get into his house, get the manifests we're looking for, and get back out again without getting caught."

"I don't know Violet," Anita said. "I don't like the idea of breaking into someone house to steal anything, even if it's going to get us home. We're not criminals. I mean, I guess we're technically outlaws *here*, but we don't know how to break into a house. You're a nurse! Elliot's a pharmacist! Maxon is a *literal* white knight."

"I can get you in."

Violet hadn't noticed Summer joining the conversation, but she stood between Maggie and Anita.

Violet frowned. "Is that what you were in jail for, breaking and entering?"

"No. I was in jail because I refused to marry the pier master's son."

Violet blinked. "You what?"

"Well, that's the real reason. The pier master's son told the guard I was stealing from my employer."

Summer grinned. "That's not the point, though. The point is I know how to get *in*."

Violet looked at everyone else. No one looked like they liked this idea, but no one said anything.

Violet sighed. "Okay, punk. Let's go."