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Author

Holmes, Jason Edward

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The Fell World

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Jason Edward Holmes

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Thesis Committee:

Professor Nalo Hopkinson, Chairperson

Professor Michael Jayme

Professor Susan Straight

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The Thesis The Fell World by Jason Edward Holmes is approved by

Committee Chairperson

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For Anna

Prologue – California, Six Years Ago

Jordan fled and tripped through the undergrowth. His hands slammed into a thick tree trunk. He rounded it then put his back to it and held his breath. Everything was quiet and still in the frozen forest.

The garr in the woods behind him was unlike the other garr, with its black shimmering flesh, wings, wicked tail, and sinister cunning. It had hit his son, and he'd gone limp in a second. Jordan had to run, even though he knew this was it. He'd known it was coming, he just couldn't remember what it was. He wrote in his journal, moments after waking or before sleep, that his thoughts weren't safe, that something was going to kill him. Whenever he wrote the name, he always forgot later, and when he went back to check, it had been crossed out and drowned with ink. If he stored it somewhere without any ink nearby, he found it somewhere else, or with the page torn out and gone.

He glanced back around the tree trunk. Nothing. The gray sunlight peeked through the canopy of clawing branches. This creature, like a panther, had already taken his twelve-year-old son, and he wished he could fight it, but he wasn't armed. And something else was more important, above all else. He needed to lead it away, as far as he could. Give her some chance of surviving. But he made himself banish her from his thoughts. His thoughts weren't safe.

A twig snapped. He ran. He could hear his own feet crash through the forest, but if it was behind him, it stalked silently. Branches slapped his face and snagged his clothes, and he wished his wife had still been around, that he could have seen her one more time.

Blades raked his back, but it only hurt for a moment, before numbness spread through him. His legs failed. By the time he hit the forest floor he couldn't feel it.

His eyes were stuck open. They stayed open as the garr rolled him over, as it stood over him with glistening maw, and as it dug into his chest. He couldn't feel any of it, anything except horror. He tried to pull in his thoughts – not safe – resign himself to dying alone, but they ran away from him once the garr started to drag him away, and he became dizzy, and was glad he had led it away from his daughter.

Part One

Over Dark Hills

Chapter One

After six years without a family, Michelle still sometimes made herself see the good in things that were awful. Twenty years of the sun behind a shroud, for example, meant she and Mr. Keaton could be the lone occupants of a three-story office building. Mr. Keaton was a big reason she could look at anything positively.

Michelle lived in someone's old office, as in someone now definitely dead, but did her best to respect it. She never broke into the filing cabinet and had moved it to the hallway. A plaque for most Yellow Page sales hung on the wall, and a framed photograph of a smiling woman and two inattentive children, a boy and a girl, sat on the desk. She kept these as they were because she hoped that, if someone moved into her old house, they wouldn't throw out the books she read, or the ones she drew in, or the tools her father had made, or the toys her brother had played with, and especially a family photograph.

Tonight was Saturday, which meant she and Mr. Keaton were going to the market. She had to gather some things to trade, because even though they could survive on the crops that Mr. Keaton grew and the meager things the Arbiter gave them for reasons she couldn't understand, they traded what they could to other people in Logo City. Other people needed Mr. Keaton's crops, so he got things like the tweed jackets that he wore

every day. She did her best to contribute by quilting or sewing or repairing things she found in abandoned buildings.

She moved from her bed to her bookcases, to her rack of clothes. She picked out a leather jacket that she no longer wore since she found her heavy coat, and then she moved to her desk and looked through the drawers, which were mostly empty. From her little drawer of knickknack things, she pulled out the pair of diamond earrings she'd given up trying to trade a month ago. Maybe this time she would get lucky, and someone would be seduced by what these diamonds might have meant twenty years ago. At least she would try to get something for them. Maybe if she included the jacket.

In the corner she kept her most valuable possessions. In his youth, her dad had a thirst for learning, so he took classes in everything from pottery to fencing; when he found a sword at a bazaar when she was twelve, he traded for it and taught her how to use it. Next to it, her mom's broken flashlight. Her mom used to carry it with her all of the time because she said it protected her from demons even though it didn't work. It was the spirit of the thing that mattered. She gave it to Michelle when Michelle was eight years old and told her that she never needed to be afraid of the dark.

Every night before she slept, Michelle set these items on the small table beside her bed, and she picked them up each night before she went out. It would be like leaving home without her legs. It was the thought of going outside and being attacked and killed and eaten by garr without having what was most important to her, what really protected her whenever she was alone.

A journal on the table at all times. Her dad had taught her to always write, so she did. She had some of his journals, and it was her only way of connecting with him.

She slid her mom's flashlight into her coat's breast pocket, put her journal in a satchel over her shoulder, and slipped her dad's sword in its sheath through the loop she had made out of leather and sewn to her belt. She slung the leather jacket over her arm and piled a quilt she had just finished on top of it. Lastly, she put the diamond earrings in her pocket and went out her door. She used her foot to close the door then locked it.

Normally she would work on her board until they had to go, but the last time, Mr. Keaton complained, so she wanted to surprise him.

The hallway was stark. She slid around the filing cabinet and down the hall. The blue light of Mr. Keaton's agricultural lamps spilled into the hallway. She knocked and entered, wobbling around the door with the bulk of her items.

Mr. Keaton looked up and lifted his tinted goggles to the top of his head. "Michelle," he said, "you're quite prompt. Are you feeling well?"

He was sixty-five but always claimed to be a man of at least twenty years younger than that. Michelle thought maybe he liked to think that the Eclipse hadn't taken those years from him, that he was still forty-five and the sun still shined and there were no monsters.

"Just prompt today, that's all."

Troughs made of wood and filled with soil split the center of the long room, and a choke of cords with electricity borrowed from streetlights on nearby blocks wound across the floor to the agricultural lamps, which buzzed blue and hung above the sprouts and vines and small bushes.

"Those lights always hurt my head," she said.

“Then be good to yourself and avert your eyes.” He wore his pair of tweed jackets and a fine bowtie from his professorial days, and his face had that clean-shaven glow — he was ready to leave for the market. “Looks like you have plenty to trade.”

She turned away from the lamps. They had to run constantly to allow the crops photosynthesis. Mr. Keaton told her that otherwise they wouldn’t produce oxygen but would consume it instead. She appreciated the fresh air almost as much as the produce.

“Perhaps we can get some meat.” He met her by the door with a large burlap sack bulging at the bottom.

“Always on meat.”

He patted her arm. “A bit of meat could be good for you, don’t you think?”

“Too expensive.”

They took the stairs from the third floor and left home.

Michelle led with her coat pulled tight against the wind hitting her in the face. She turned her face down and to the side. Mr. Keaton followed just behind her, maybe trying to use her body to block his own from the wind. They walked down Washington until they took a right on Seventh, the same path they always took because those were two of the best lit streets in the city and were used by most of the few people who lived in Logo.

A man was just nailing up the last stall when they arrived. The stalls were set up in a circle, all facing out, and torches rounded the edge. Kept it warm, also kept the garr away. The market smelled like people who didn’t bathe, leather, wet wood, and liquor. The grass was crunchy and thick but dewy so that Michelle’s boots slid across the top of it.

Mr. Keaton split off to the right. "I'll meet you 'round the bend."

Around the side of the market circle, she spotted a pair of sturdy boots propped up on a wooden stool. Her current boots were too big; if those fit better, she would trade in hers and throw in the blanket and earrings for incentive.

"Excuse me," she said.

A glum man about fifty who clearly had once been fat looked out at her. "Not interested in a lady's jacket. Got no one to give it to."

"I can run about and swap it for something you might like more. I'm eyeing those boots."

"Yeah."

"Can I try them on?"

"Those are man's boots you're wearing now. Man's jacket, too." He motioned for her to come behind the counter. He must have seen her sword, because he took a step back and picked up a wrench. He pretended to pick a speck of mud off it.

"It's a coat. And they're warmer than women's," she said. She slid over the board that served as a counter and landed on the grass on the other side. After removing her boots and handing them over as collateral, she took the dusty brown ones. Her feet fit snugly in them, but not so snug that it would pinch her toes. They had working zippers going up the sides, a piece that someone might salvage to make something new. They were perfect, the glum shopkeeper knew it, and she figured she wouldn't get them for a fair price.

She tried to hide her satisfaction with them. "If you've got no use for a lady's jacket," she said, "these boots won't do you good, either. I'll take them off your hands."

He guffawed. "Those're worth more than a week of your body, miss, and that's something."

She glared at him. "You can't have that." Then softened, acting like she was giving in. Mr. Keaton had taught her how to work the market dealers, but they had been doing this every week for, likely, most of twenty years. "I'll give you my old boots, this quilt, and these earrings for them. More than fair. I might as well give you my left arm."

"And I'd take that, too," he said. "Let me see the rag."

She gave the quilt over. He inspected the stitching like he really knew what he was doing. "And the earrings?"

"Diamonds," she said, and showed him. "Scrub them off and they'll sparkle."

"I see." He frowned. "Enjoy the boots."

Farther around the market circle, Michelle found a woman pulling down the neck of her sweater for a cleaned-up young man. The woman was on the buyer's half of the market, but Michelle knew what she was selling. She stopped next to the woman, shoulder-to-shoulder. The woman smelled like soap, shampoo, and a couple dozen flowers. Michelle felt self-conscious of how clean she might have appeared to this young man, but she wasn't there to sell or offer him anything like that.

The woman straightened, stowing the view of her breasts. "You help me out on this, girl, and I'll owe you."

Michelle looked straight ahead, not giving any sign of emotion. "What're you selling?" she asked the young man. He was sweating, and his eyes darted from Michelle's face to the other woman's body.

"Insulated bedroll," he said shakily.

"Sleeping bag," the woman said. "For two."

Michelle leaned forward, still ignoring the harlot to her left. "Please do me a favor," she said sweetly to the man. He might have been younger than she was. "That's valuable. Don't give it up for something you won't be able use tomorrow."

"Hey," the woman said. She grabbed Michelle by the shoulder. "Don't screw this up for me, prude. Boy's gotta get what he needs."

Michelle smacked the hand and pulled back her coat to show her weapon. The woman stepped away, glaring. "I'm just giving advice. Free, even. He can do what he wants."

"Get lost, freak."

She left before someone got bloodied, and she caught up with Mr. Keaton entreating his favorite book trader. Few people would value a book more than a telephone, inkjet printer, or other such useless items.

"Please, what can I do to get it?" Mr. Keaton pled. Michelle took a spot next to him. "I read that book as a young lad at university. I would so love to be treated to it again."

"Gimme something worthwhile." The shop was run by a woman, scrawny and ragged with a raspy voice and a mottled ponytail, who made tea in an old iron kettle and always provided some for Michelle and Mr. Keaton. Michelle never liked it, but Mr. Keaton still missed teatime. "Maybe that axe you got hangin' in your buildin'? Something to mash in a garr's head?"

"An axe for a book, though I appreciate the sentiment, is entirely unfair."

"Just give him the book," Michelle said. "Let him borrow it."

"What am I gonna get outta that?"

Mr. Keaton sighed. He stared at the book, a pristine leather-bound collection of Edgar Allan Poe. Pain and longing in his eyes. "I can give you this jacket, but that means quite literally giving you the clothes off my back."

"I don't appreciate your joke." She smiled. "But I'll take it, and you can have another. Want some tea, Michelle?"

Michelle came to the counter. "No thank you, and you had better give him a few more extra books. It's a wonderful jacket, wool-lined."

Mr. Keaton shed it slowly, missing it already. Michelle didn't know if it was an act meant for haggling or honest sadness. Maybe it was both.

The shop owner rolled her eyes and tapped her toe. "A theater of tears, over here," she said. "Bring the book back next week and we can talk about a trade for something else." She handed it over.

Mr. Keaton was back in his jacket like he'd never started removing it, and he took the collection gingerly from the shop owner. He slid it into his inner pocket, careful of the pages, and fished in the bag of produce he brought. He pulled out a plump tomato and handed it to the shop owner.

"I told you they make me sick," she said.

"Perhaps trade it for something else," he said earnestly. "I won't leave without paying."

She nodded, took it and set it on her counter, then sat down, sipped tea, and propped open a book to read by the light of a candle.

Mr. Keaton turned to Michelle. "Have any luck?"

"It's no meat, but I got some decent boots."

"I see you're still carrying that jacket. Care to acquire some dinner?"

She sighed. "You didn't even look at the boots."

"They're splendid," he said, still without looking. "Don't be bothered, Michelle. I can see how they fit by your face. No need to look at the leather."

She handed him the jacket, inspecting its value while she did. "Maybe some poultry."

"Now we agree."

They traded the jacket for a freshly roasted chicken, a bag of potatoes, and two cans of oranges and considered it a victory.

Along the side of one of the streets, in a weed-filled ditch, she swore she saw something move. Mr. Keaton didn't appear to see or hear it. Then her heart picked up, and she saw the gray blur of a garr slide through the weeds. She clutched Mr. Keaton's arm and pushed him to walk farther from the ditch.

"Is something there?"

She nodded and put a finger to her lips. They were close to home. The evening at the market had gone uninterrupted. People laughed, ate, and traded, and there hadn't been a whiff of garr in the area. Her hand went to her sword.

Mr. Keaton kept his eyes fixed on the road in front of them. Michelle watched the ditch. The garr scurried, concealed, until the ditch veered away at an intersection. Just then the nearest streetlight flickered and went out. Michelle slid one arm in the crook of Mr. Keaton's elbow and drew her sword with the other. She squeezed her eyes shut and listened. The sky was too dark, the other streetlights too far away to light their path with her eyes still adjusted to brighter light. Not a sound.

She opened her eyes. Across the two lanes in front of her, a garr stood on its four legs and faced them. It froze like a perfect statue. The hairless skin of the garr looked like stone. This one was only a couple of feet tall and had the body of a lizard. Its head was almost human but with tusks. Still it didn't move.

She pointed her sword at it, but her arm was shaking. It was small, she told herself. She could kill it faster than it could kill her. She closed her eyes and steadied her hand. When she opened them again, the monster was gone. It wasn't up the street in either direction, so it must have gone back into the ditch.

"It's gone," she said.

Mr. Keaton, who'd kept his eyes forward, away from the monster, turned to look now. "Well done, then. You frightened it off, and now we can go home." He looked shaken up, his eyes uneven and his lips tight. "You've fought them before. Alone, I mean."

"Yes," she said.

"Have you killed any?"

She stared down at her new boots. "When they get wounded, they run. They regroup, and they come back. You have to kill them." They had hunted her when she was forced out of her home, when her family was entirely gone. If she hadn't had the sword, she would never have survived.

She had kept south, and by the time she huddled shivering in an old, musty building and this delightful old man sat down beside her and offered her bread, it had been three months since her brother had disappeared and her dad's body had been left on their porch.

Chapter Two

Four journals, one photograph, all of her memories, and now nightmares. These were her clues to piecing together why her dad had been killed and *why* he had been dropped on their porch, surely for her to find. One wall of her office was taken up by a huge pin board, and here she organized her clues. She scribbled quotes from her dad's journals and pinned them under *journals*. There was a special area toward the bottom for each time a name had been blotted out. Twelve occurrences she counted, and the entries were always fearful, always concerned with being heard, hunted, or hated. ---- *hates me, but it isn't my fault. ---- can always hear me. Had to move WEST, as far as possible from -* ---.

Under *memory* she pinned notes of anything she remembered with her family, even if it had nothing to do with her dad's death, couldn't by any stretch of imagination.

Danced with mom around the glass coffee table, don't remember song.

Her one photograph was of her parents in college, the sun shining above them. They sat on a lawn under a tree, a bottle in her mom's hand. Another couple was with them, a man with a buttoned shirt and glasses who sat next to her mom and laughed, and a woman lying in the grass, her eyes closed. It made her happy just to have it around, to be able to see her parents smiling.

And now a column *nightmares*.

*

This is a nightmare, she told herself. It may not have looked like it, but she knew it was coming before she fell asleep. The dread of someone standing over her shoulder, even when she was lying down. It interrupted her nodding off, like a sudden hiccup. Every time she felt this, a nightmare would follow.

She walks through a misty forest, the sky a pale blue swathed with yellow. It's like a painting, like what the day's sky might look like.

She fills her lungs with fresh, warm air, and exhales. There is a flash, and she sees her father's face, upturned, his deadeyes open. Then it disappears, and a dark ripple moves through the sky toward her, a momentary shadow sweeping over the forest. Frost forms on the dewy grass behind it. It washes over her, and she feels frozen. Casimir. The word shapes in the back of her mind.

Something tingles, a feeling that someone is just behind her, the same type of tingle that comes when you hold a finger out between your eyes when they are closed. A slow image of the wound in her father's chest, so deep that she can see shriveled organs, creeps up.

*

Michelle sat up, completely awake. She rolled out of bed, blankets pulled with her, and staggered to her pin board.

In the column *nightmares*, she had a tally of how many times she'd seen imagery of her dad dead. She marked off another tick, the fifteenth, and wrote "forest." Below "woke up with urge to visit abandoned hospital," she scribbled the word from the nightmare—"casimir?" She wrote, "second or third time—can't remember," then stepped back and frowned. It probably didn't mean anything, but she wrote everything

she could remember, and now with the nightmares, she wrote everything that happened each time she had one. The first few times, she wasn't sure what they were, and that had been when she first heard "casimir" jumbled together with dozens of other words – she wrote down all the ones she could remember.

The nightmares had begun two months ago, always with that dread beforehand. She could feel each one coming, and sometimes, when the dread terrified her too much to fall asleep, she got up and wrote about it in her journal, or she paced the halls, or she swung her sword.

She could hear Mr. Keaton stirring down the hall and knew that meant he'd be coming down soon. She dropped her blanket and, shivering, stripped her sleeping clothes away. New layers were piled on. Clean underwear, tights, a pair of pants, two shirts, a sweater, and her coat over that. She needed to bathe, but she would do that tomorrow. It was a Monday thing.

The forest had popped up a number of times already, but they had lived near one. It was in her head all the time. She had read stories about monsters living in forests. If she'd been someone else, she might have thought that her mom and brother disappeared into the forest, stolen by those monsters, but she knew that monsters lived everywhere.

She picked up one of her dad's journals and opened it again from the beginning.

*

Keaton straightened before the mirror. He brushed at his graying hair with a delicate hand before clasping his suspenders to the top of his trousers and slinging them over his shoulders. He owned five sets, and even though the cold was always too much for him

to shed his outer layers, a set of suspenders ought always to match one's shirt and tie. Deep blue that looked black to the inattentive eye contrasted the softer blue shirt, like the sky in the last bits of afternoon... like the sky *used* to be. And a matching plaid bowtie, crisp and medium thick around the collar. He donned his tweed jacket last, and then a thicker one atop it for lack of a more suitable overcoat. He left to gather Michelle.

He knocked on her door. "Are you decent?"

When she didn't respond, he opened the door and stepped in, his eyes closed. "Are you quite clothed?"

"I am."

Even before he opened his eyes he knew what he would see. She would be standing in front of her pin board, something or other in hand, pen or pencil held in her lips, her hip cocked to one side, and hair an utter, complete mess. This time it was a journal in hand, the black-bound one. "Would you brush your hair before we go to the library?"

"Why does that matter?"

"You think I wear a bowtie because it is enjoyable?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's beside the point. Appearances are not nothing. You'll feel better about yourself with your hair brushed. Now, I'm going to check our mailbox. I heard a truck last night."

She set down the journal and messed her hair up even more. He laughed heartily. "I'll be down in a minute," she said.

Each Sunday they went out, taking turns deciding on the location. A while back they had taken a few nights extra to go see a deserted airbase, all of its planes and helicopters

out of working order, and Keaton spent an entire night carefully inspecting them. On the long walk back, he had to tell Michelle that he would probably never see a machine in the sky again and, as fun as it had been to drift into the past, he would like to not return to the airbase. This Sunday, it was his turn, and he always chose the library.

He entered the mailroom hopeful, but when he opened their box, it was disappointment. A lump of meat wrapped in paper, an unmarked can, and a scratched-up water bottle. He held the gifts and waited on the stairs until Michelle came down.

“Is this all the Arbiter gave us?” she said.

“That’s everything in the box.”

“Let’s go.”

The air was still bitter from the black half of the night. “If only the library were closer,” he said. “Perhaps we could move into it.”

“You’d have to move your plants,” she said.

“I suppose I would.”

“They might not survive the trip.”

“But more plants can always be grown if I have my agricultural lamps.”

“You would miss out on all of our adventures,” she said. “Would you only stargaze through the skylight? A single window wouldn’t be enough for you.”

He sighed with a dreamer’s smile. “I used to try to convince myself that being able to stargaze continuously, never-ending, was a gift. Then I missed the sunlight and, as much as I adore the stars, wished for the sun.” He could see the silhouette of the sun on clear nights, trying its best to light and heat the Earth from behind its shroud.

Michelle gazed up. “I barely remember it.”

"You are lucky."

"How?" she snapped.

"Just old enough to remember it, not old enough to truly miss it." He patted her back. She looked weak and thin through the face. "Are you ill?" he said. "You look exhausted."

She shrugged. "I might be a little tired. What have you been reading?"

She changed the subject in only the most obvious fashions, but he decided to let her be. If she wanted to speak to him about something, she would. "I read up on helicopters," he said. "Fascinating devices. Thousands of pounds but able to fly and float like a leaf on the wind. They buffet everything in sight with their blades. We saw a few at that airbase. You know, I used to pilot them for a fire department in London. I was about your age."

"Let's find something good to read."

*

Michelle smelled something different on the wind as they got closer to home. It smelled like someone was cooking over a fire, only like they were preparing to eat plaster and wood instead of meat. She felt uneasy immediately, and then she saw the glow on the sky.

"Dear God," Mr. Keaton said. He started to run, and Michelle bolted after him and past him. Their building was on fire.

The front door, metal frame with glass, was smashed. Michelle started for it, and Mr. Keaton grabbed her.

"Michelle, do you want to die?"

"I can't lose everything." She struggled against his hands. "My journals, *my dad's* journals. He's all I have."

He took off his overcoat and helped her with hers. "Keep this over your mouth, keep your head down. Breathe through it. It will filter out some smoke. Stay as low to the ground as you can. Open as many windows as you can. Don't open any hot doors. Don't go anywhere the heat gets more intense."

He went past her.

"You're going in, too?"

"It isn't my first time, Michelle. I'll speed along and secure our exit. Don't waste any time."

"I won't."

"*One* minute," he said.

"One minute."

She took the stairs, looking up and ahead. The door to the third floor lay open, and specks of broken glass sparkled in the carpet under her torchlight. She peeked out into the hall that opened left and right. It appeared empty. Smoke was plentiful, but no fire was in the hallway. Mr. Keaton turned right. He held up one finger, his eyes locked with hers.

Her door was closed, still locked. She put her face against it. Not hot. With shaking hands she unlocked it and slid inside. Sweat layered her face.

She went to her board and tried to memorize everything on it. It would take too long to pull everything down from it, and she couldn't do anything with a bagful of scraps of paper. She took the photograph of her parents down.

Only one thing that could have done this. If any person was going to set fire to a building, they'd be sure to take everything of value out of it first or else they'd be stupid. But everything she owned was still here. So it wasn't a person, and she didn't believe in accidents. It had to be the Arbiter's burners.

She had to hurry.

The fire would consume all the furniture. She could only take small things. She said goodbye to the desks and the bed then grabbed her warmest clothes from the rack and stuffed them into a bag. She had only three bags. She packed her dad's journals and as many of her own as she could grab. Whichever memories they held, she would treasure.

She couldn't think of how she was supposed to, in a moment like this, in a single minute, select the things that were important to her life and survival and abandon everything else.

Batteries for Mr. Keaton's flashlight. Matches and lighters. Bottles of water. Preserved food. A thick blanket. Then she dug into the desk and pulled out the framed picture of the woman and the kids; someone needed to keep this memory alive, whosoever it was. She threw the bags over her shoulders.

Smoke seeped into her lungs, and she remembered to cover her face. She ran out the door.

*

Keaton grabbed a burlap sack and began uprooting – and apologizing to – his plants as he tossed them into the bag. While he grabbed them, he thought of what else to get. From the plant room, the only other things of value were the agricultural lamps, and oh, were they valuable. If he could just save one.

He cut the power, covered his face with one sleeve, and began working at the cords with his other hand. The last one in line would be the easiest to disconnect. He worked the cords free, but the wiring got caught on one of the plants. It fell into the trough. Bending down as far as he could, he used both hands to dig around in the soil. Something sharp, something metal, something small, but he couldn't feel it.

"Blast it." He coughed. His lungs felt tiny. Then his fingers grazed a strand of wire, and he pulled it up. The rest of the lamp disconnected easily enough, and he put it in his bag.

He looked back on his plant room. "I hope you survive the fire," he said. If someone could find it, use it, grow new crops, he would be delighted. It pained him to think of those efforts being lost forever.

Next he went to his own room. He had already spent half of the minute he gave to Michelle; she couldn't spend much more time in the building or the smoke might kill her.

They hadn't discussed what happened to the building—it would have been absurd to do so—but to Keaton this was no accident. This was burners, agents of the Arbiter who turned to ash whatever people did to give themselves independence. He just didn't know what, exactly they wanted to burn.

He'd never seen their handiwork before, but he'd heard that they were less than human, mutilated creatures created by the magic of the Arbiter—magic that was, of course, perfectly preposterous.

His room was composed of comfortable reading chairs and bookcases. A wall had been torn down between this office and another next to it, so the inner was his bedroom.

He needed nothing from there. He could always find more books elsewhere, he told himself.

The smoke was getting to him. He felt dizzy.

When he passed the collection of Poe on a comfortable red chair, he paused. It didn't belong to him, and it would die. He stuffed it into his jacket and ran out. Then he remembered talking to the woman who lent him the book, remembered what she wanted in exchange for it.

He went to the break-in-case-of-fire box in the hall, smashed the glass case, and took the emergency axe. He felt foolish that the idea of triggering the fire alarm hadn't come to him earlier, but didn't feel too badly because neither the sprinkler system nor the alarm triggered.

On his way out of the building, he slipped and skidded down the steps, twisting his ankle at the bottom. The bag of produce came tumbling down behind him, held shut by the drawstring, and hit him in the back. He rolled, clutching his stinging ankle. He wouldn't allow a simple twisted ankle to cause him to be burned alive.

He leapt through the broken frame of the front door, out into the street.

"Michelle? Michelle! Where are you?" No sign of her. "Damn."

Someone came around the corner with soft, sweeping steps. A thickly built man emerged and stopped. The man's hands were in tattered gardener's gloves, and a bandage covered his eyes, scars peeking out and spreading across his face. More scars overtook the man's forearms; amongst them was a deep, fresh cut that was gray. He turned to Keaton and smiled, black-toothed and ugly.

"You can see me," Keaton said.

"I know you're there." The voice was deep, and it dripped like an echo through a cave.

Keaton raised his grip on the axe. He would have to lead with his good foot, also his one with poor balance, if he were to strike well with his new weapon. He glanced back at the building, hoping and not hoping that Michelle would burst out of it at any moment.

"I am Anglis," the man said.

"You burned my home."

Anglis responded with a black, rotten grin. "I like to hear screams. Do you scream?"

Mr. Keaton swallowed and rocked back on his twisted ankle. It hurt but held him up. More than eight feet separated him and Anglis, too much to cover in one stride and one swing. He would need to take two steps. He tried not to panic or flee. He shuffled his feet, put his weight back on his good ankle.

"Scream."

Mr. Keaton did, as loudly as he could. He took a step onto his bad foot, caught his balance, and strode forward onto his good foot, transferring all of his weight and steadying himself. The axe came up over his shoulder and, from its apex, down in a curve, carefully aimed. Anglis tried to slide away from the blow, but he was late – the axe hacked at his side, and thick orange goo, glowing hot, ran from the wound instead of blood.

"Good heavens!" Keaton dropped the axe and leapt away. He landed on his twisted ankle and crumpled.

Anglis made no sound at the wound. He cupped his hand to his side, took a pool of the magma, and whipped it at Keaton. It splashed his back and shoulders. Fire leapt from it. Keaton scurried out of his outer jacket but hung onto the other and the overcoat he'd been using to cover his face. He could feel light burns all along his back from the residual heat of the magma.

Keaton was now face down in the dirt, ten feet from the street to his left, thirty from the building to his right. Around the corner, a tall black horse was tied to a tree. This man with magma for blood must have ridden it here. If he stole it, Keaton could get away – but not without Michelle. He could *release* it, and maybe Anglis would chase after it. It was certainly better than killing the brute with an axe.

He scampered on scratched-up hands and aching knees for the horse.

The scarred man – however it was that he sensed his surroundings – appeared confused by the rush of movement. He kept his hands on his wound to hold in the magma and struggled with his bearings.

Keaton hopped on one foot while he untied the horse. He looked back over his shoulder and saw Anglis stalking closer. Keaton turned to the horse. “I don’t much care for horses. You’re smelly and a little frightening and I know what we do with your leavings. But I need you to follow my lead.” He grabbed the reins and tugged on them. The horse walked forward, and together they approached Anglis.

“The horse will not be a shield to you,” Anglis said. He cupped magma in his hand and cocked his arm, ready to sling. “I feel no pain for death.”

“I was hoping for that,” Keaton said. He slowed his approach. He didn’t want the horse to come to any harm, but now the horse might be more inclined to fight on his

side. "The horse has done nothing wrong. It is no shield. I'm merely guiding it toward you. You've burned our home; your mission is a success. You can leave now."

"I gave my name, the Burner of the West. What is yours?"

"Keaton, former firefighter." He remained determined.

Anglis curled his lip. "She will be hunted."

Keaton stopped.

Then Anglis grinned, and he flung the magma. Keaton slapped the horse and dropped to the ground. The horse neighed and sprang forward, plowing into Anglis. It knocked him sprawling back, hooves crashing into his chest. The horse kept running, free now, and Keaton ran – hobbled hastily – past Anglis, around the corner back to the front of the building, where he picked up his axe. If Michelle hadn't come out yet, he would have to go in after her.

*

"Mister Keaton," Michelle shouted in the hallway. Coughing, she slid past the filing cabinet, down the hall, and peered into Mr. Keaton's rooms. The doors were open, the rooms filled with thick clouds of smoke. She didn't see him. He told her he would meet her outside, that he had done this before, but he was an old man who needed her.

He had a second room, in the back, so she left her things in the hall and went in to check it. She stumbled over her own feet, dizzy from the smoke. She became so dizzy that she dropped to her knees and shimmied along the floor. Keep close to the ground, he told her. The smoke collected at the ceiling.

She slid along the floor, exhausted by the effort, and threw her back against a desk in the middle of the room. She could see into his bedroom; it was empty. It didn't even

look like Mr. Keaton had stepped in recently. If he didn't have enough clothes, it would be Michelle's fault for not grabbing some now. Then she noticed that a drawer had popped open in the desk. She coughed, covered her face, and slid the drawer open. She felt pieces of paper, photographs, it seemed. Everything would be lost in the fire. If she could keep something for him, she would be happy with herself. A handful went into her jacket, and she had to leave. The smoke was too thick.

In the hall, she gathered everything she had. The stairs, which she had taken up and down so many times, wouldn't be taken again. No one would ever bother to go into a burnt building.

Through the frame of the front door she went, and then Mr. Keaton flung into view, and the silver and red blur of an axe blade stopped short of her face. She shrieked and ducked out of the way. Then she was seized by a fit of coughing.

"What the hell are you doing?" she said, gasping.

"I didn't hear you approach," Mr. Keaton said. "Are you unharmed?" He had two bags over his shoulders. "It must be burners. Undoubtedly." He shouldered the axe and began to lead her away from the building at a hurried pace.

She looked at the weapon in his hands. It seemed a little melted at the blade. "What are you doing with that thing?"

"Your father left you a sword," he said, straightening. "Without this, I have but my wits."

"But where did you get it?"

"The box in the hall said to break in case of an emergency. Come now, let's get somewhere safe, and then we can regroup."

They made their way uphill, east, away from their building. Mr. Keaton didn't stop until they were safe on a hill, in a gas station parking lot, and buildings and trees obstructed their view of their home.

"Are you all right?" he said.

"Besides the cough, I'm fine. You smell burnt."

"I may have been singed."

"It has to be burners, right?" She lay on her back and coughed, covered her eyes. Six years ago, the Arbiter came for her dad – she'd concluded that much – but she didn't know why. Her brother had disappeared the same day. Four years before that, her mom vanished, and her dad had refused to talk about why. Now, her home. "It's connected," she said. "I *know* it is."

"Connected? To what?"

"My dad. The board. Everything on it."

He shook his head. She knew he doubted her, though she was paranoid, whenever she tried to talk to him about it. He let her work on her board in solitude, and while he never told her it was nonsense or asked her to stop, he simply abided.

"I think you may be right," he said.

"What?"

"Outside our building, I encountered a burner."

She scrambled to her feet, shoved her face an inch from his nose, and honed in on his eyes. "Are you serious?"

"Good heavens. Yes, of course. He bled some sort of molten lava."

"But you got away?"

“Michelle. I need some time to piece this together. Can you give me some time?”

No, she couldn't. She didn't want to. The Arbiter knew where she lived – had known then and still knew. It targeted her for something her dad had been doing. What she had to do with its scheme to cover the world in darkness, she had no idea. But Mr. Keaton was her friend, her only family left. “If this is the same thing that killed my dad, I know where we have to go.”

He looked at her, uneasy. “I fear for my life when you say things like that. Then again, I am afraid for my life right now anyway.”

“In one of his notes, he wrote ‘had to move *west* as far as possible from... it’.”

“He wrote ‘it’? Didn't he know?”

“No. I mean, I think he did. But the name in the journal was blotted out. I can't tell what it is. But whatever ‘it’ is, it's *east*.”

“And why, in all of the world, would you want to move *toward* it?”

She shoved her face into his shoulder. Because moving in any other direction was no longer an option. “I can't talk to him anymore. I'll never be able to talk to him again.”

He patted her back, pulled her in and hugged her. “Michelle, you deal with danger in the most surprising ways.”

“I'm going east.” She sniffled and coughed. “If you don't want to come with me, then you don't have to.”

He put her at arm's length. “*Michelle*. I cringe to think of how you would fare without me.” His wholehearted, half successful attempt at a smile turned into a sorrowful frown. “I'm an old man. Your father's mystery may be all you have, but you're all I have. Here. Anymore. If you go, I'll follow.”

“Really?”

“Like I said, I’m an old man. I don’t often admit to it, and this is twice already tonight, so take that and cherish it, as I will claim to be a spry thirty-year-old for the next month.” He squeezed her shoulder. “You’re excellent company.”

For a while she didn’t know what to say. “Aren’t you angry?” She couldn’t tell by looking at him, and she figured she looked almost uncontrollably emotional. How he stayed so stoic – rather, stoic with optimism – she didn’t know. She tried it herself, but it never quite worked.

“We still have our lives,” he said. “However, I am furious.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “The Arbiter, it seems, thinks it has the right to burn someone else’s home. Normally I would think such behavior should be punished.”

“So you’ll fight back with me?”

“You’re implying I should be the one doing the punishing.” He adjusted the bags on his shoulders. “Not very gentlemanly.”

“I understand if you can’t find it in you to do it.” She followed him to the street. “I only meant –”

“Hold it there. I only said it wasn’t gentlemanly.” He stared far off. “We had better find someplace to sleep, though, so the cold doesn’t kill us.”

Her skin was too hot, the smoke in the air too thick. It couldn’t have just been their building, but even if their neighbors or even the whole block had caught fire, it shouldn’t have produced so much. She kept her head down and breathed through her coat sleeve. Mr. Keaton did the same. They were nearly to the highway when it started to thin, and she looked back. She expected to see a little fire and a billowing gray tower,

but instead, a canvas of smoke along the horizon glowed red, and below it, half of Logo City burned.

Chapter Three

“Michelle, we have to stop.”

“Can’t.”

“If we don’t, you’ll freeze to death, and I won’t bury you.”

She shoved him with her shoulder. “Then we’ll find some shelter and rest until we can move again. But that is it.”

The sun had disappeared under the horizon, and the night would soon become intolerably cold, the kind of cold that could be deadly if someone was caught out in it for too long, or unprepared. With Mr. Keaton’s tweed jacket, and her simple overcoat, they were unprepared, and they would likely be out too long as well.

Mr. Keaton pointed to a shopping mall just south of the highway. “There. It’s perfect.”

“It’s huge,” Michelle said. “If that burner is following us, it will be a huge target, a giant pyre. If he lights it on fire while we’re inside, we’ll never get out.”

He shuffled his feet and limped. It seemed a bit over exaggerated to her. “I gave that burner quite the wounding. I don’t think he’ll be coming after us – and why would he? Our home is already gone.”

“Don’t remind me.”

"I'm sorry. At least you still have the finest company a man or woman could hope for."

She grumbled, which drew a smile from him. "Then why the hell?"

"Warmth, mostly. I can see from here that the windows aren't broken."

He was right, and she couldn't argue that she wanted some warmth, too. They approached the unbroken glass doors. It seemed strange that these doors, vulnerable to the wind, the garr, and anybody passing by, would still be whole.

Mr. Keaton stalled for a moment at the entrance and drew his flashlight.

He pushed the door open and held the light forward. "Hello!" The echo came back to him. "Nice to meet you," he said, to himself, and chuckled.

"Come on, Mister Keaton." She wedged past him.

"If someone lives here, I want them to know we don't mean harm."

"And what if they do?"

"Then we'll best them in a contest of strength and wit," he said. "And become fast friends thereafter."

"Sure." If someone had come into their building looking for shelter, she wasn't sure how she would have reacted. She would have let someone stay, she was sure, and she wouldn't demand anything from them in return. Since the Eclipse, shelter was plentiful, unlike food and water.

They entered a wide corridor of scuffed and damaged floor. The stale air was at least a little warmer than the snapping winds outside. Empty storefronts gaped like hungry mouths. Each was built uniquely. One with faded wooden crossbeams was next to one with cracked mirrored glass around the door, and next to another that looked like a

scratched aluminum box. They didn't seem to indicate in any way what used to be sold inside. The windows were mostly broken, and inside, racks and displays and mannequins lay overturned. It was less cluttered than she was used to seeing stores. Here, everything useful had been taken, and half of everything not useful had been taken anyway.

"People went mad for televisions and computers," Mr. Keaton said. "I bet they were disappointed when they realized how useless those things were."

A store at the closest corner filled with tinted eyeglasses looked as though it had been entirely untouched for twenty years, and why not, thought Michelle. In one moment the world was dark, and no one needed to make the world look any darker.

Michelle turned around. Mr. Keaton had set his bags down beside a directory. He unfurled their blankets and looked around, probably for kindling.

"How did it look before?" Michelle asked.

He sighed. "Filled with people, energy, and light. Stale light, though, not a good variety. Teenagers everywhere, from what I can remember, even if they couldn't afford anything. Gossiping and enjoying their youth." He looked down. "Sorry."

"Oh, stop. It isn't your fault."

"Nevertheless, I know it isn't fair. You've never experienced that."

No, it wasn't fair, but for reasons Mr. Keaton didn't understand. She couldn't miss something if she never had it, so she didn't miss or wish she had days at the mall with teenage friends. She didn't miss buying clothes to impress someone, or whatever it was they did.

“The Arbiter never took any of that from me,” she said. “I never had it. I only miss what it *did* take.”

Mr. Keaton nodded. He shuffled off, limping slightly on his injured ankle. The Arbiter hadn’t taken him from her – she wouldn’t let that happen.

She was so tired, but she had been tired for a while, resisting sleep even when she knew she needed it. It was pathetic, but she missed her board. If she slept tonight, and the nightmares followed her, she would have to keep a record of it in her journal, and she would have to go by memory when trying to form any connections. It would have been easy to give up, all of her work gone, but she couldn’t. Not her dad.

“Michelle?”

She jerked forward, and her hand went clumsily to her sword. Mr. Keaton stood in front of her, looking worried. She hadn’t seen him come closer.

“How are you doing?” he asked. “With losing everything we had, I mean.”

“I’m okay,” she said. “Those were just things.” She could always do without things or find more things; no matter how many things she had or what kinds of things they were, the Arbiter was still in control, and her family was still dead. Losing everything only made it apparent. “We’re still alive.”

“It isn’t easy. I know I’ll miss our hall, and I’ll miss my plants.”

“I have everything I need.”

“Then something else is troubling you. What is it?”

She shook her head. He knew she had trouble with nightmares, but didn’t believe that they were caused by some outside force. Everyone had nightmares, he told her. “It’s nothing. Just tired.”

“Very well. Is this a decent place for us to spend the night?”

She looked around. The big directory split the aisle, which was otherwise open. If anyone – or anything – came to the doors, they would be able to see in. Plus, the cold seeped through the glass. “Let’s get on this side of the directory,” she said. “We’ll be less easy to spot from outside.”

“I think I can start a fire over here,” he said. “After we eat some and warm ourselves, you get to sleep. I’ll guard you.”

“I’ll be fine. I don’t need much sleep.”

“You look nearly ill. Please allow me.”

He shrugged. “I suppose if you believe that I *need* to rest to go on, I will. What would you like to eat?”

*

While Michelle tried to sleep, Keaton sat on a window display and looked out at the mall. It was quiet. But his thoughts lay on the highway. He hadn’t wanted to rest, even if they needed to recharge their stamina. Haste was all they had. He wanted to believe what he said, that their trail would be cold to the burner, but he had trouble. He returned to Anglis’s threat – “She will be hunted.”

He sat, then stood and did his best pacing, then returned to his perch and tried to think about anything besides what might be storming their way. From the glass doors, he could see the highway. It was empty. The stillness should have been peaceful, but it was foreboding. At any moment, it could be filled with evil. Trees with naked branches flailed in the harsh winds. Dust blew in gusts. On the horizon, a slight red glow. Their home still burned.

If they couldn't go and stay ahead of it, maybe they could hide and wait for it to pass them. Michelle would shoot down the idea.

He glanced at her, on the other side of the directory, sleeping.

She had been through some terrible things that someone her age, a precious girl like her, should never have been forced to go through. How many times she must have thought she was going to die... Keaton tried to recall what he thought of when he was twenty-two. It was so long ago, he couldn't even remember. Pitifully frivolous things, he was sure.

He settled by Michelle and read Poe by the firelight. Just in case, he had his axe nearby.

A shuffling sound. He heard it once without even being aware, but then he heard it again and, realizing where he was, whirled around and stood. A man with wide shoulders and a scar on his forearm rummaged through Michelle's bags.

"Hold it there," Keaton called. Then someone grabbed him, pinned his arms behind his back, and spun him. The brute shoved his face into the plastic directory then brought him to the ground. "Unhand me."

He couldn't see his attacker, but there was plenty of heft in his body. Keaton felt insignificant compared to this man's burl. With his face squashed against the floor, Keaton saw the axe. So close, but his arms were pinned, and he was helpless.

*

Michelle only drifted off for a few minutes before she jerked awake. At first she was afraid of a nightmare, but then she heard Mr. Keaton's voice. To her right, he was held

down by the arms of a huge, scruffy-looking man. He had at least three jackets on. She leapt to her feet. "Hey!"

She ran at him, her hands going for her sword. It caught in the sheath, and the sheath was stuck, too. He was half-kneeling when she reached him, but she had no weapon. She swung her elbow into his chest. When he fell back, she dropped her knee on his chest. He let out an *oomph* looked dazed.

"Did you hurt him?" she demanded.

He coughed and shook his head.

Mr. Keaton coughed. "Brilliant, but watch out for the other one."

"Other one?" She looked over her shoulder. A thick wooden club came at her. As fast as she could, she tried to roll away, but it clipped her shoulder and cheek. Her cheek burned, and she went with the swing, tumbling to her side. She remained motionless on the ground. Her roll probably made it look like she'd been badly hit, because the second attacker didn't pursue her.

She could find a way out of this situation if she just thought calmly. The sword was stuck. With her eyes closed, her face to the floor, she thought of what else she had on her, what else she could use to spring a surprise attack on them. She just hoped Mr. Keaton would stay down, and maybe they wouldn't hurt him any further.

"Damn, did you kill her?" It was a thick, heavy voice that seemed to fit the man who had Mr. Keaton pinned.

"No, idiot. Why would I do that? You see this girl? She's healthy." This one had an arrogant swagger to his voice.

"Shut it. Let's just take what she has and leave."

In the inner pocket of her coat, she had her mom's broken flashlight. In her mind, she practiced the motion of drawing it and swinging. It was metal, thick, heavy enough. She groaned and acted like she was in real pain.

"See? She's fine. For now."

"For now?"

She wished she could tell which was closer, but she would know the first one on sight. If she had a choice, she really wanted to hit the second one. With a great push, she jumped up, drew the flashlight, and whirled around. The new face was closer, a look of surprise. She gripped the end of the flashlight and cracked him over the head with it. He staggered. Blood dripped down his forehead.

With a whumph, the first guy tackled her from the side, and all of the air left her lungs. He pressed her face into the floor, and wrenched her right arm behind her back, pushing a fiery pain from her shoulder to her neck. For a second she couldn't see anything, and every sound was muffled. The world dipped and twirled around her. When it settled, sound came back with it. She wanted to tell him that she was on his side, that all of them were on the same side—no one had a reason to fight each other when the Arbiter made it so hard to live anyway. If she could beat them up, she would do it just for their stupidity.

She could barely suck in a breath with all of the weight on her back. It felt like her ribs might crack at any moment.

"What do we do with her?" said the guy sitting on top of her.

"Smother her," the other said with a groan. She wished she'd hurt him more.

She struggled, but she had no hope of budging the man on top of her. He hesitated. "Let's just leave her," he said.

"I'll do it if you can't."

"Hey," came a close shout, a new voice. "Do the smart thing."

Michelle craned her neck against her attacker's hand to see the owner of the new voice. He was clean-shaven with long dark hair. His skin was more colored than the typical ghostly pale of everyone else, including herself. He wore a long coat, and in one outstretched hand, he punctuated his words with a raised pistol. "Back away from her," he said.

She felt the weight leave her back, and she rolled over, free from the pressure on her chest and throat. The one who'd been on top of her backed away, and the new voice came closer.

"What do you care about her?" the bleeding thug said. The other ran from the man with the pistol. "You know her?"

"Just get out of here." The man with the gun kept walking after the thugs, pistol raised.

"She don't have anything worth anything, anyway," he said, sounding defeated, and ran off. She wished she'd been standing and could have gotten another hit in.

She rolled over and sat up, wincing, once the man with the gun wasn't standing over her. She teetered slightly and scooted closer to Mr. Keaton. He was shaken but looked otherwise okay. In better shape than she was.

"Did they hurt you?" he asked.

“Not badly,” she said. She took stock of her own injuries. The club would leave a mean bruise, but it hadn’t made a gash.

The man with the gun came back, his weapon holstered. “They shouldn’t bother you anymore tonight. Are you both okay?”

“Just fantastic,” Mr. Keaton said. “Have a seat. I owe you.”

The man nodded to Mr. Keaton, but he knelt beside Michelle. “I’m Arroyo,” he said. The way he looked at her – she’d never seen it before. Couldn’t attribute it to anything. Maybe if she’d had a youth with time spent at a mall. He looked only a little older than she was. She’d seen what it looked like when men wanted to get her alone and naked, and this wasn’t that. So then, at the least, she wouldn’t need to threaten to run him through.

“Um, yes,” she said.

“Are you hurt?”

She shook her head.

“Good to meet you, Arroyo. My name is Keaton.”

“You put yourselves in a lot of danger, coming here.”

“Seems we can’t avoid it,” Mr. Keaton said.

Michelle watched Arroyo. She wanted to catch his eyes again. It might have been concern rather than any sort of affection that she detected in his eyes. When he looked at her again, the look was gone. “What’s your name?”

He seemed earnest, but she couldn’t be certain, so she stayed at a distance. If two out of three men met in this mall wanted to steal from her – or worse – she couldn’t be sure this one wouldn’t also.

"You're welcome, by the way," he added. "I did save you."

"Michelle. And I would have done just fine." He gave her an incredulous look. "I got a little unlucky. They jumped me, and my sword wouldn't—"

"You have a sword?"

She pulled back her coat to show him.

"Take a seat already," Mr. Keaton said. "Or should I leave you two alone?"

"Would you? I won't hurt her."

Mr. Keaton looked at a loss for words. He obviously hadn't expected a yes, but now that he had offered, Michelle knew he'd have to oblige. "Just as long as you wouldn't mind doing the leaving. I'd like to sit for a moment and give my body a chance to stop aching so deeply."

Arroyo offered a hand to help Michelle up. She was apprehensive, but she took it. He helped her to her feet and led her a little ways from Mr. Keaton. The main aisle of the mall was illuminated in white by a skylight. The stars were bright.

"Can I see your sword?"

She drew it. This time it unsheathed cleanly, and she held the blade out—at first pointed at Arroyo and then to the side. "Good enough?"

He touched the flat of the blade.

She forced it back into its sheath. "And what about you, pointing a gun at people?"

"You keep forgetting how I saved you. It's odd." He drew the pistol from his pocket. It was black metal with a grip wrapped in leather. Its barrel was charred and worn. He paced while he talked, and Michelle followed him. It helped her get over her wooziness better than standing still, and the ache was starting to fade.

"What *were* you doing here, anyway?" she said. Looked straight at him. The light from Mr. Keaton's fire flickered in his dark eyes. The truth was deep beneath the surface. She couldn't get at it, but this was the first time she felt like she truly understood what he was feeling. Whatever he said next, she figured it would be a lie.

"Saving you."

She paced the opposite direction. It didn't matter what he said. He was just trying to impress her, and she wasn't going to have it. "All right, so you saved me—"

"Pardon me," Mr. Keaton called. "We do need to get our rest before moving on."

Arroyo headed back, and Michelle followed. She wanted to get on the other side, next to Mr. Keaton, but Arroyo stayed between them. "Where are you going?"

"Before we answer that, I need to ask you something," Mr. Keaton said. "To judge your trustworthiness, you see."

"A test. Sure."

"What would you have done if those thugs had called your bluff?"

"My bluff?"

"Your pistol is empty."

Michelle grabbed Arroyo by the shoulder and spun him. He looked stunned. "No bullets?" she said.

"No," he stammered. Then he laughed. "But it usually doesn't make a difference. How did you know?"

Mr. Keaton smiled. "I could see the butt of the weapon from the floor. There is no clip in it."

“Good thing I don’t often pull my gun on people on the floor.” He looked over his shoulder. “She was handling herself decently, anyway.”

“Decently?” she said. It was the sword’s fault. If she had been able to unsheathe it, those thugs would not have been a problem – and two fewer people would have survived the altercation. She’d only ever killed garr or animals for food. For a moment, she imagined if she had killed those thugs, and she was glad that Arroyo’s pistol was empty.

“You *were* on the ground, after all,” he said.

“Hey, I was outnumbered. And one of them snuck up on me.”

“And I could fire it if I had ammunition,” Arroyo said, turning back to Mr. Keaton. “I’m an excellent shot.”

“I’m sure, but without bullets, you’d be reduced to swinging it like a club.”

Arroyo reached behind his back, into his bag, and drew a crowbar. “Plan B. I wouldn’t leave two travelers to be mugged and killed by two men like that.”

Now he was defending both of them, not just her. It was stupid, but she felt less important then, and wished she could go back and prove to him that she didn’t need his help.

“Honestly,” Arroyo said. “Don’t underestimate a five pound iron bar.”

Mr. Keaton’s glare narrowed, then relaxed. “Good.”

“I wouldn’t stay here tonight,” Arroyo said. “In case they come back. I live nearby, if you can brave the cold for a few minutes.”

She felt the instinct to pull back from him. The offer was too kind, his assistance too coincidental. It seemed to be, however, their only option. She just wasn't sure she'd be able to sleep if he was nearby.

"We would be grateful," Mr. Keaton said. "Wouldn't we, Michelle?"

"What?"

"Ahem. He has made a considerably gracious offer."

Arroyo turned to her, smiling smugly. "If you'll accept."

She tried not to frown and probably didn't succeed, given the face on Mr. Keaton. He looked ready to scold her. "Thank you," she said. She wanted to believe him, just felt a nagging hesitation inside her that she had to listen to.

Arroyo waited in the main aisle while Michelle and Mr. Keaton packed their things and put out their little campfire. It didn't take long.

"So you're traveling," he said. "Where?"

"East," Michelle said. "Just east."

"No offense, but you don't seem like the nomadic type. Especially you, sir."

"I take that as quite the compliment, actually. Our journey is not by choice."

"Yes, it is," Michelle snapped. The last thing she wanted was Arroyo digging through their history. For one, if he knew how potentially dangerous it was, housing two targets of the Arbiter, he would kick them out as soon as he could. "We want to go east."

"I suppose, in a way, it is."

At the far end of the mall, they crossed a department store floor. Arroyo told them in that same straight voice that their exit was on the other side. Any tables that had been

there were gone, but the carpet still had grooves where they had once been. The clothes were all gone except some swimsuits and obnoxiously-shaped shoes. Footwear that might break her ankles was worthless.

Arroyo led, and he stopped at the glass doors when he reached them. He pointed across the dark parking lot. "There," he said.

Through the fog, Michelle could make out the silhouette of a building. "What is it?"

"It used to be a bookstore."

Mr. Keaton gasped. "A book lover?"

"When I get the chance."

"I knew you were trustworthy."

"That's hardly a reason to trust someone," Michelle said.

"Nonsense! It's an excellent display of sound moral fiber. Michelle, you don't need to be so guarded. This man had already shone his worth."

It still felt right to her to be hesitant. They had good reason not be forthcoming with all that had happened to them, with the real reason for their journey. She could not, with any certainty, say that he didn't have similar shadows hiding behind his generosity. If he held out a hand to her, she would take it, but she wouldn't pull herself in closer.

Thick fog had overtaken the parking lot, but Arroyo knew which way to go. Outside, in the black half of the night, the cold bit through Michelle in what felt like an instant. By the time she reached the bookstore on the other side and waited for Arroyo to find the key with his own numb fingers, she couldn't feel an inch of her body.

That changed once she was inside. It had a vaulted ceiling with pillars, and rows and rows of shelves, shorter and with aisles more open than those of a library. The shelves

were just short of barren, but gathered together the books might furnish a case or two. Mr. Keaton stood in the middle of the store and gazed around. She wished she could give him this kind of home.

Arroyo locked the door behind them, and the cold escaped, leaving a stale coolness that was welcome in comparison. He stood next to her, arms folded, and smiled – not at her, at the space before them.

It felt necessary that she fill this space with something. “You have a lovely home,” she said.

“It’s just where I live. I haven’t been able to have a home since the Arbiter’s been around.” He glanced sideways at her. “Were you alive for the Eclipse?”

“Just barely. I have a few hazy memories of sunlight.” She shifted her feet. The discomfort penetrated her, made her want to play with her hair or scratch her head, or move her feet around like an idiot. And she just wanted to catch up to Mr. Keaton and get some sleep, so that they could leave at sunrise.

It was still her turn to say something. She didn’t know what. “You must have a few more memories than I do.”

He tapped his foot, uncomfortable or irritated. “Six years in the sun, the rest of it in hell. Come on.”

He strode off ahead of her. It must have been something she said. Just as he started being nice, too. She let him go a bit ahead of her, while she pretended to look at books but kept him in sight, before she started to follow.

He led her to a cleared-off area with some beds, two of them low to the ground and one a bunk bed against the wall. Mr. Keaton had drifted over this way, and he sat on one

of the beds, undoing his bow tie. By his feet, a lump of meat they had gotten in their mailbox lay in a red pool on its paper. To the side was a pile of branches and processed wood. Mr. Keaton had taken some from that pile and filled a metal bucket in the middle of the area.

“Make yourselves comfortable,” Arroyo said.

“I believe we should eat this before too long,” Mr. Keaton said. “You are welcome to a portion, Arroyo, for your help.”

Arroyo knelt down beside the would-be fire and drew a matchbook. He struck the match, a spark of white red and yellow, and it danced as he lowered it to the wood. The fire crept along the wood. He touched the match to more spots, and little fires grew from those spots, flicking out, until they touched each other and connected.

Chapter Four

The three of them gathered around the fire as Mr. Keaton cooked the meat, which he said was beef. Whatever it was, it barely had any flavor. At least Michelle could tell it wasn't garr. She had tried eating it once – she'd never been so sick in her life.

They ate in silence at first, and then started telling stories. Arroyo shied away from sharing, but once Mr. Keaton and Michelle took turns, Arroyo got over his reluctance.

"After that," Arroyo was saying, "we finally cornered it, but once we shined our light, it was only Alex's little brother, and he started shrieking about how he hadn't meant to steal our dinner and, please-oh-please, he wanted us to not eat him instead."

Mr. Keaton laughed. "The poor boy." He cut a piece of the meat, which had cooked down significantly, and chewed it.

"He was laughing after about an hour, but for a while he was really convinced we were going to *eat* him for stealing our cans of food."

Soon after that story, Michelle dozed off on the bottom of the bunk while Arroyo and Mr. Keaton talked books. The last thing she remembered, they were deep in a conversation over a shared collection of fairy tales.

When she awoke, it felt like moments had passed. She let out a long relieved breath that she'd slept without nightmares. The subtle gray light of the sun shone through the

windows near the entrance. Mr. Keaton slept with a book across his chest his head propped up. Arroyo lay on his side, face hidden by a pillow, blankets drawn up over him.

She didn't want to disturb either of them, so she settled down cross-legged before the bucket and, with a lighter, restarted the fire. Once the fire started going, she had to back up from it. From her bag, she fished out a can of corn with a pop-off top.

Cooking pans were stacked under Mr. Keaton's bed, and she had to be careful pulling one out so that she didn't make a sound. The corn really only needed to be heated. Wouldn't take long.

Now that she had no time to mend clothes or scavenge and Mr. Keaton couldn't grow any more crops, they had nothing to trade, and nowhere to go for trade. She wouldn't let it stop her. They could find food. Somehow, they *would* find food. Maybe not all garr were poisonous.

As soon as the corn finished, Mr. Keaton woke up. "Did you sleep well, Michelle?"

"Yes, actually," she said. "It's been a while."

He sat down across the fire from her and began tying his bowtie. He already had on his suspenders, and somehow his shirt seemed wrinkle-free. "I may not be in my twenties anymore," he said, "but I sensed a bit of tension between you and our new friend. Is there something wrong?"

"Wrong? I don't think so."

He leaned in and peered at her closer.

"Fine," she said. "He can be a bit annoying. And I don't trust him. But I guess it's worth mentioning that the help is appreciated."

A wry smile crinkled his cheeks. "I see."

"What do you see?"

"Nothing. I think you'll grow to trust him."

"Well, I don't think I'll get the chance." She finished off her portion of the corn, and her stomach growled for more. "We're leaving, right?"

He nodded then glanced back. "Yes. But I suppose it wouldn't hurt —"

"What? To stay?" She hushed her voice. Arroyo still *looked* asleep, but he could have been faking to listen in on them. "You know as well as I do that we're putting him in danger every second we stay here."

He put a finger to his lips. "Things so unpleasant need not be mentioned in our host's home."

"It's not a home. It's just where he lives." Breakfast eaten already, the need to get up and do something else came upon her. She wasn't sure why. She pulled her bag over and started going through it. "He said that."

"Anyway," he said, the way he did when he wished to change a subject. "It seemed like there was something between the two of you, and that you might have something further to gain from talking to him some more. I meant no implication that we should belabor our stay."

Something between them? Mr. Keaton was up to something, but she figured it was just like before, how he told her how bad he felt that he got to enjoy his youth and now no one could. If that was the case, she was thankful, but she hoped he could understand that they were two different worlds, and she harbored no resentment on her half. She didn't want to bring it up. "You two were getting along," she said.

“Bah,” Mr. Keaton said, grinning. “He’s a romantic. He enjoys the fantasy, the invention, and the creativity of books.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Heavens, no,” he said. “Wonderful conversation. It only seems that an interest in science and plausible explanations of reality thrusts me into the minority.”

“You make me sound like I don’t have any interest in how things work.”

“No, you have some,” he said, gazing around. “Just minimal.”

“And do you care at all about the fantasy?”

“A long time ago, I did.” He spooned some corn into his mouth then reached out to touch her cheek. The bruise hurt on contact, and she pulled away. “It’s barely visible,” he said.

Arroyo groaned from his bed, and Michelle closed her mouth tight. Whether or not he’d been listening, she didn’t want to let on that they’d been talking about him. “Good morning.”

He sat up in bed, stretched, and then dragged a comb through his hair.

“You should ask to borrow that,” Mr. Keaton said.

“*What* is wrong with my hair?”

He shrunk back. “It has a certain... volume to it.”

Arroyo sat beside her and handed her the comb. She snatched it away and scowled at Mr. Keaton. “If you want to wash up a little, you can use the bathroom,” Arroyo said. “If you want.”

“Sure,” she said. To wash off everything that had happened would have been nice.

“I couldn’t help but notice that you smell a little —”

"Excuse me?" She stopped herself just short of shoving him.

"Like smoke," he finished. "Bad smoke. I'm not going to judge you, since you were meeting a new person for the first time, but do you want to add to your story?"

Mr. Keaton's eyes were wide. She hadn't noticed that they smelled like smoke. She must have gotten used to it after escaping the building. It could have been how the thugs from the mall found them, too. Her mouth was dry.

"Our home burned down last night," she said.

He grew silent. The embers in the bucket crackled. She fidgeted with her hands. "How far from here did you live?" he said.

"Logo City."

He drew in a quick breath and closed his eyes. "Why didn't you mention this earlier?"

"It was personal."

"So your home burns. Why leave town? There should have been plenty of places to live."

She folded her arms. It was too much of an interrogation for her liking. "It never would have been the same. Besides, I always wanted to travel, and, this sort of gave me the opportunity. It's the truth."

"That isn't all," Mr. Keaton said.

"Mister Keaton—"

"A burner was there. I escaped him, but—"

Arroyo leapt to his feet, hands slapped to his head, and kicked the frame of the bunk bed. "Why didn't you mention this earlier? Damn it." He paced and threw his arms

around. Michelle didn't know what to do, so she stayed seated and tried to disappear.

"Do you realize how much time you've given them?"

"Them?"

"Burners never function alone."

Her left leg was half asleep, so she wobbled to her feet and then caught him. "How do *you* know something like that?"

He brushed her away. "If we sit around another campfire, maybe I'll tell that story. You have to get out of here."

She beckoned Mr. Keaton with a wave of her hand. He got up, threw on his jackets, and started gathering their bags. It took him only a moment, and lastly he slid his axe into a loop, fashioned just like Michelle's for her sword.

"I knew it was strange that you had a sword," Arroyo said.

"You're just going to throw us out?"

He paused his frantic pacing and looked at her. His eyes were warm. "Of course not. You *need* to leave if you want to live. I know someone who lives nearby. He raises animals."

Mr. Keaton handed Michelle her bag. She slung it over her shoulder. "How might that help us, precisely?"

"He has horses. You could trade for a pair of them."

Michelle's jaw went slack.

"But what I need to know," he continued, "is why east? You were vague the rest of the way, and that stuck out to me. You insisted. So tell me, what is the truth?"

She backed up. "I was lying. You already pointed that out."

“Yes you were, and you are now, but you weren’t lying about that. You’re definitely going east. It’s intriguing.” He looked at her like she was cornered, and she felt it, even though they were in the middle of an open area.

“Shouldn’t we be leaving?” Mr. Keaton said.

“Why east, Michelle?”

She had had enough of this. If she told him the truth and he wanted nothing to do with them, at least they could find this man with horses and get on with it themselves. “I want to find the Arbiter.” Her tongue tingled. “My mom disappeared, my brother disappeared, my dad was killed, and our home was burned. I *know* they are all connected to the Arbiter. I want to find out how.”

He took her by the shoulders. Swallowed. “The Arbiter has plenty to answer for already. What if you find it, and what if it did all these things? What would you do?”

She shook her head and ducked away. He let her go. She walked away until she reached a bookshelf, and then she spun on the heel of her boot and came back. “I would kill it.”

Arroyo set his hand on his chin, scratching, his other hand deep in his pocket. Her stomach did nervous acrobatics. She waited for the response. “That’s good,” he said. “You don’t have to hide it.”

“Really?”

“I hate the Arbiter. What it has done to people, not just individuals but to all of us as a population, it’s sick. I’d be lying if I said I wouldn’t take the opportunity to put a gun to its head and kill it.” He looked off past Michelle and shook his head. His voice dropped low. “His name is... Howard. I’ll show you how to get to him.”

He ran past her, and she wanted to catch him, ask him to sit down with her and tell her everything he had been through. Nobody formed that kind of opinion about something without experience influencing it. But he was right. They had to go. If they stayed, he would be in danger. If they stayed, she might find out something about the Arbiter she didn't know, some piece that could link it to her dad.

She sighed.

Arroyo grabbed a bag, a folded-up camping tent, his gun with a belt holster, and a vest before coming back to meet her and Mr. Keaton at the information desk in the middle of the bookstore.

"A tent?" Mr. Keaton said.

"You can take it." He motioned them toward the door, but when he reached it, he opened it slowly, and stopped. Michelle caught up and looked out.

The mall was on fire, the flames growing from the inside. Where fog had been the night before, now smoke hung low over the ground. In the parking lot, garr ran amok, and a stocky figure stood at the department store door. A droplet of orange light glowed from it.

"Dear me," Mr. Keaton said. "That's the burner."

"This way," Arroyo said. "Follow me."

He hugged the wall of the bookstore and snuck away from the mall, around the corner. Michelle and Mr. Keaton followed, and he looked back out. "That man is the burner?"

"Yes, without a doubt. Anglis."

"He's headed this way, but I don't think he sees us."

"Arroyo," Michelle said. "I'm so sorry." Burners only did one thing.

"There's no time for that now. It's just a building."

He left them at the corner and went to the back of the store. A lawn sloped down to a street. He hurried down the street, around a corner, and between two buildings. One was a church. Michelle and Mr. Keaton followed, and she couldn't stifle the feeling of guilt. It wasn't just Arroyo and his home. Even those thugs in the mall hadn't deserved to be burned and hunted by garr. All of it pointed to her and Mr. Keaton.

Arroyo, always stopping, letting Michelle and Mr. Keaton pass, and looking behind them before catching up, finally brought them down an alleyway and to a tall chain link gate. It wasn't locked.

Beyond was a huge clearing, guarded on all of its sides by thick trees or buildings. Horses, dogs, cats, chickens, pigs, and turkeys roamed the field. Some of them grazed the crisp dry grass and the small gray shrubs.

"Howard," Arroyo called, off to Michelle's right.

The owner of the voice came forward. She'd been too busy noticing the animals to notice the man. He sat upon a small throne made of wood that slid on sled feet. A pair of huskies pulled the sled. A blanket was draped over his lap, but his legs ended at the knees.

"Stirring up some commotion here," Howard said.

"I need horses."

"Good, I've got that. Who're your friends?"

"My name is Keaton, sir. Those are some beautiful creatures." He bent at the waist to inspect the huskies.

"We don't have time for that. This is urgent."

"Working up another rebellion, Arroyo?" Howard said.

Michelle shoved herself between them. "Hold it. What does that mean? Arroyo, what does he mean?"

"I know how well that went last time," Howard said with a gravelly laugh.

"*Enough*, Howard." Each of Howard's dogs turned to Arroyo and growled. Tough negotiating would not be an effective approach. He swallowed, straightened, and looked at Michelle. "It's a story I'll tell another time."

She eyed him. "You had better."

"I need three horses," he said to Howard.

"Three?"

Arroyo turned back to her. His lips were pursed together, eyes downcast. "I don't have anywhere to go."

She squinted at him. "Right. But there should be plenty of places to live."

He squared his shoulders to her. "I suppose it's just sort of an opportunity. I don't want to miss it."

"Michelle, don't be silly," Mr. Keaton said. He came between them and pulled Michelle away, patting her shoulder. "We would be delighted to have him accompany us, if we could in fact get those horses."

It was what she had wanted earlier, but his eagerness – on top of the business with rebellion and knowing that burners never operate alone that he refused to explain – gave her pause. It was the same feeling she'd had when she first met him, that being cautiously skeptical was the best course of action to take.

“What happened to your abode?”

Arroyo turned and leaned in close to Howard. “Burners. They already made their way through the mall. They’re probably on their way here. Give us the horses, and we’ll draw them away.”

“Give? I don’t give anything.”

“Trade, then.”

“I think you overestimate how much I value my life.”

Mr. Keaton strode forward, drawing his bag from his shoulder and carefully unzipping it. He plunged in and pulled out his agricultural lamp. Michelle wanted to stop him, but it was the most valuable thing they had. If a horse ever came to the market in Logo, the owner could have his pick of whatever he wanted in exchange for it.

“I offer you this,” Mr. Keaton said.

“Don’t care about mood lighting.”

“It is an agricultural ultraviolet light. You can use it to grow produce.”

“Don’t do much farming.”

“Damn it,” Arroyo said, “you know how much one of these would be worth.”

Howard grimaced. “I just want you to know that I’m not happy about this. I’m half doing it just to get you outta here.”

He clapped and spoke to his huskies. “Saddles.” They ducked out of their riggings and bolted for the closest building. He sat straight up. “Can you all ride?”

“My father had a horse,” Michelle said. “It’s been a while, but it’ll come back to me. It’s Mister Keaton I’m worried —”

“I can handle a steed,” he said.

"But you hate horses."

"Yes," he said with a slight smile, "but I'm British. I took lessons long ago." He stopped, furrowed his brow, and smelled the air. Michelle picked it up, too. Smoke.

"Do you smell that?" Arroyo said. "That means we need to hurry."

Once the dogs came back with the saddles, Howard whistled, and four horses came through a gate that must have connected to another clearing. They were steady and calm in spite of the smoke and strangers. Arroyo strapped on the saddles while Mr. Keaton inched forward, a cautious hand outstretched.

"Have fun," Howard said. "Just know those burners *will* catch you."

"I'll be ready when they do," Michelle said. She pulled herself up onto her colt and leaned in. She stroked its neck, down its mane.

The air grew instantly hot, and, though she couldn't see the mall anymore past the buildings that barricaded Howard's clearing, a red glow emanated above them, the same red glow over the horizon the night before. It hadn't seemed like fire then, and it didn't now. Through it, a tower of smoke snaked across the sky, darker gray further covering the sun.

"Get out of here *now*," Howard snapped. "I've never seen any of you in my life." He made a series of clicks with his tongue, and the huskies dragged his sled away, the way the horses had come.

"Where are we going to go?" Mr. Keaton said. "Your long-term plan, Michelle, is to continue traveling east until we reach the Arbiter? I'm loath to say it, but I agree with Howard. If we continue at our current pace, Anglis will catch us."

"But we have these horses now," she said. "We can move faster than he can."

"It's not going to be fast enough," Arroyo said. "Follow me. We can talk later."

Chapter Five

The highway they took left the city, split the mountains, and unfolded into a flat desert as civilization fell away behind it. Scraggly trees jutted out of fields of sharp dry shrubs and cracked dirt. Owls screeched over the sound of the horse's pounding hooves.

Arroyo pushed them to keep going and, when they stopped at a stream to let the horses rest, said that they couldn't talk until sun-fall. He kept looking up, around at the air. Michelle had always thought people would judge *her* as being paranoid, but she would look ordinary beside him.

She'd heard about aeries, of course, myths and rumors about men who magically floated on the wind and listened to conversations a mile away; their job was to monitor the people and relay any signs of dissent back to the burners. Myth and rumor, but burners did actually bleed fire.

They made camp at sun-fall, away from the highway and beyond the crest of a hill, out of the wind. Arroyo unfolded his small tent, built for two but would squeeze three, Mr. Keaton cooked a rodent that had been left behind or dropped by an owl, and Michelle led the horses to some shrubs and tied them to a tree.

It was already growing frigid. Her breath blew back in her face. She stomped back to the tent, pulled down the zipper, and slid inside. The warmth was sudden, and she felt sorry for the horses.

"I have been unable to locate a straight razor," Mr. Keaton said. "Though I think I'd be lucky to remember how to use one."

"Mostly people will use it as a tool," Arroyo said. "Sometimes a weapon."

Mr. Keaton sat in the middle of the tent, Arroyo to his right. He patted the empty space to his left. He had probably positioned himself in the middle on purpose; it would be the least uncomfortable combination. She appreciated it, but the added distance would keep her from leaning on Arroyo — she was done with waiting.

"Out with it, Arroyo." She settled next to Mr. Keaton and, still a bit cold, drew her legs to her chest. "Where are we going?"

"Michelle," Mr. Keaton said, his voice low. "We were having a conversation."

"No, she's right. If you don't mind, we can pick up later from there."

"Of course not." Mr. Keaton leaned forward and raised his eyebrows at Michelle, a rehearsed and familiar look, indicating to her that, again, she had done something to upset the normal civil course of human interaction. It was usually her hair. Her mom, before she had disappeared, had done that for her.

"There's a city called Majestic. This highway goes right past it. We'll only need to go an hour or so north."

"You know the way?"

He nodded.

“And why do we want to go?” In the thick darkness, she could barely make out the shape of his head, the line of his jaw and the straight angle of his nose. Her skin tingled at being so close, even if Mr. Keaton were between them. It made her pull her legs closer.

“Doesn’t the name draw you in enough?” Mr. Keaton said.

“There’s a train,” Arroyo said.

She raised an eyebrow, but he probably couldn’t see it. “There are trains all over the place. That’s your big plan?”

“Just listen, for a moment. It runs east – across the entire continent.”

“That can’t be. Mister Keaton – have you ever heard of this?”

“Not in my years,” he said. “I’m afraid I have to doubt you, Arroyo.”

He shook his head. “No one knows about it. It was built secretly, after the Eclipse.”

She scoffed. “That’s even more ridiculous. No one would think to build something –”

“Can you keep quiet?” Arroyo snapped, whispering. “Just a little?”

“No one would build something like that,” she said, her voice lowered. She had gotten so caught up in thinking he was worried about aeries that she forgot that, if garr found them, their horses would be killed and eaten. “And after the Eclipse, they wouldn’t have been able to do it, even if they worked for all twenty years.” Unless –

“There is one who might have use for it.”

“You can’t seriously mean that the Arbiter built it,” Michelle said.

“For what purpose?” Mr. Keaton said.

“Moving supplies, the burners, I don’t know. But I know that it’s there, and it runs.”

“And what would *we* want with it?” Michelle snapped. “If it’s the Arbiter’s train, I don’t think it’s going to just let us on board. Are we going to walk up and try to trade three horses for three tickets to the Arbiter’s house? Come on—”

“No,” Arroyo said. “We steal it.”

She threw her hands up. “Okay, then. Simple as that.”

“Just listen.”

“It’s insane!”

He shushed her loudly. “Do you want *all* of the garr in the desert to know we’re here, helpless?”

She folded her arms. “It’s still crazy.”

“Think about it. You want to find the Arbiter, find the answers to your questions. If this train is linked to the Arbiter, and it heads all the way across the continent, all we have to do is follow the trail backward, and it will take us right to it.”

She opened her mouth, then let it hang open when she couldn’t find the right words. It sounded improbably, crazy, borderline suicidal – and she had to do it. Thinking about doing it made her chest buzz with anticipation. “Damn you.”

“You see?”

“All right,” she said. “I’ll play along.”

“Thank you.”

“But I still don’t trust you.”

“Keaton?”

Mr. Keaton hummed. “It has been a while since I’ve been aboard a train. The danger gives me pause. You’re sure it’s real?”

"Yes. I saw it, once."

"When was that?" Michelle said. It was going to be another

"That will have to be a story for another time," he said.

"Is everything going to always be a story for another time? Like your rebel history, and how you know that burners don't work alone? Is it ever going to be that time?"

"I don't know. We'll see how long it takes *me* to trust *you*."

Silence hung in the tent until Mr. Keaton cleared his throat. His lips unstuck, but then he said, "Hmm," and closed them again.

"Let's get some sleep, then," Michelle said. He had no reason yet to trust her, either. Maybe if she changed that, he would tell his real stories.

She was exhausted, but her mind kept racing, working ahead of her, imagining being attacked by garr in the night, or set fire by the burners on their heels, or killed in a dozen other ways before or after they reached this train. Finally, her mind fell silent. In the last moment she remembered before sleeping, she felt a looming presence over her shoulder.

*

Keaton waited until it seemed Michelle had fallen asleep. He jostled her gently, felt confident that she would not awaken, and cleared his throat. "Arroyo?"

"Hm?"

"Splendid, you're still awake. I want to ask you something."

"I'm not big on answering questions about myself. If you haven't noticed."

"No, not that. I believe a person has a right to secrets." It was often too painful to divulge them. He felt a pang of guilt. He could not, after so long, tell Michelle without

greatly upsetting her that he had a wife, and a daughter who would now be Michelle's age, in England, and he dreamed every day of seeing them again.

"That's good," Arroyo said. "So what's the question?"

"Perhaps not a question. I just want to be sure you know what you're doing, and that, if there is anything you're holding back relevant to the *danger* at hand, you please disclose it immediately."

"I will."

"Michelle is like a daughter to me. If anything should happen to her —"

"I'll take full responsibility for her safety."

"That wasn't what I meant." Keaton stared up at the darkness of the tent and imagined stars overhead through it. "I'm glad to hear it, but I was going to say, that it would devastate me."

Arroyo was silent.

"And, if you assure me, that's the last you'll hear me speak of it."

"You met the burner. You already know the level of danger."

"Well, if there's anything *additional*."

Arroyo laughed softly. "We might all be eaten or burner alive."

"Goodnight, then." And he rolled over, toward Michelle, watched her cringe and sweat, and wished he could fight the demons for her.

*

Michelle sits at the table, her dad's sword sheathed in front of her. She looked down at herself and realizes that she is fifteen. Her dad pulls up a chair next to her and picks up the sword. She

smiles, to see him again. Seth, eleven, sits across from her and sways back and forth. There is crackling, and a rock and roll album plays in the background. Kansas, the Point of Know Return.

“Feel the balance,” her dad says. His voice comes out dry, like his throat is made of paper, crinkling and scratching. “It’s an extension of you. Keep an enemy at least as far as your arm away from you.”

“Dad, your voice sounds funny,” Seth says. “Is there a chipmunk in it? Did an owl get you? Did you swallow an octopus? Can I have a badger?” He turned to Michelle. “My throat.”

Shadowy fingers wrap around Seth’s neck, but he doesn’t pay them any attention. Michelle tries to scream, but she can’t. Her dad unsheathes the sword and walks away from the table. He vanishes. The fingers around Seth’s neck are not tight. He isn’t strangled. Then the fingers become knives and work their blades into Seth’s neck. He doesn’t notice. Michelle falls back from her chair and hides under the table. She sees Seth’s legs. Nothing stands behind Seth. Then Seth falls. He looks at her, his neck completely threshed, and mouths, “How long to the point of know return?”

*

Michelle jerked awake, her stomach clenched. Sweat coated her face and chest. The tent was empty, and she was grateful for that.

The voices of Mr. Keaton and Arroyo reached her from outside in staccato bursts through the wind buffeting the tent. Normally she was so quick to wake up; how she’d slept through both of them getting up and out of the tent confused her. It might have had to do with the nightmare. She pushed through the lap of the tent and into the gray night. Wind whipped her hair into her face.

“Sleep well?” Mr. Keaton asked.

Her bag was slung on her horse's saddle. She went straight into it, pulled out a journal and a pen, and jotted down *nightmare caused deep uninterrupted sleep*.

"I suppose not," Mr. Keaton said. He peered at her.

He and Arroyo had the horses all ready with their gear, and Mr. Keaton had already heated another can of fruit for breakfast. She slurped it out of a pan. It sated her hunger and her thirst at once, but only for a little while. When she was finished, her stomach wanted more. Arroyo threw his bag over his horse's back then went to folding up the tent.

"I'm feeling fine," she said. "Thanks for getting everything ready to go."

"It was mostly Arroyo. I woke up not too long ago and found that he had already saddled up the horses and prepared our breakfast."

"Oh."

He continued to fold the tent until it fit back into his bag, oblivious or pretending to be oblivious to the other two. She felt bad; she'd expected to trust him and questioned his intentions, when he had just as much reason to question her but didn't. Instead, he brought them in on his plan and trusted them to do it with him. She wouldn't trust him entirely, not yet, but she felt she owed him something.

"Listen," she said. "Arroyo. I'm sorry."

"No, you're right." He stood with his bag over his shoulder. A blur of gray streaked across the crest of the hill and barreled into Arroyo's back, hurtling down into a ditch with him.

The horses reared and snorted, wide-eyed and spitting panic. Michelle took a half step toward the ditch then grabbed the reins of her horse. "Easy, boy – Mister Keaton, are you okay?"

He had the reins of one horse wrapped around his arm as he hobbled after the third, which had backed away toward the hill. He grunted and said, "Oh yes, I can manage the beasts."

"Good." She handed him the reins to her horse. "I need to help Arroyo."

She bolted for the ditch. A garr the size of a human on hands and knees pinned Arroyo to the bottom of the ditch and tried to bore into his chest with its muzzle. He had his hands around its head, struggling to hold it back. Michelle dropped into the ditch, drew her sword, and slid it through the garr's side. It snorted and squealed. She drew the sword back and thrust again, pushing it to the hilt and then some so that it didn't collapse dead on top of Arroyo and crush his chest. Blackish blood spat out of the wound as the garr went down.

"Are you okay?"

He grimaced and pulled his coat around him, buttoned it and tied it off. "I'll manage. We have to go now. That was a scout."

"A scout?" The garr were cunning as hunters, ruthless, but not nearly intelligent enough to use any sort of tactic. "Do you know anything about the garr?"

"Yes."

"Oh really?"

"They can be controlled. I've seen it."

"And I'll hear about that, when? Another time?"

“Yes. Keaton – are the horses ready?”

Mr. Keaton pulled the horses closer, struggling to keep them all in line. “I believe.” One jerked him left, and another pulled him forward, into its face. “They may be winning.”

They stamped out their camp, covered their tracks, and were back on the highway in minutes. Arroyo favored his left side, and twice Michelle caught him peeking under his coat.

*

Arroyo led them north at a juncture, onto an almost imperceptible road. The terrain grew rocky and a shadow of orange. Huge cliffs jutted from the earth, and canyons just as often dropped down into it. The air was warmer, but from what she understood about the desert, it should have been freezing. Now and then Michelle looked back, and always the red glow hung over the road behind them, seeming neither closer nor farther behind them.

A small collection of buildings, and one that stuck above the rest with a burnt-out sign that read *The Majestic Palazzo*, grew ahead on the horizon, but before they reached that, Mr. Keaton gasped and pointed off the road to the other side.

Michelle couldn't understand what she saw for a moment. The ground dropped away, not abruptly like the sheer face of a canyon, but at a curve, forming a bowl in the earth, a cracked chasm at the bottom. It was a crater, bigger across than most of Logo City.

“That’s amazing,” she said, though she knew over the sound of the horses’ hooves pounding through dirt and dust, neither of her companions could hear her.

Majestic seemed barely a city. They came up alongside it on their small road before turning to head straight into it. Once they drew even with it, Michelle saw straight down its center – the whole city was centered on one wide street, a bright white light at the end of it. In the periphery of the city were long, wide, squat buildings with rolling doors like garages. The sign on the Palazzo flickered. Not a person walked the streets.

Michelle wanted to slow her horse at the entrance of the city, but Arroyo kept on like he was focused on that light at the end of the street and wouldn't rest until he was standing close enough for his horse to lick it.

The buildings were plain, and everything was quiet. If any people lived here, they would have had no problem hearing the sound of their horses over the otherwise buzzing silence. She just as soon expected ghosts to soar out of the buildings than actual people. She hoped the train existed, so that they didn't have to stay here for even a moment, but it was nowhere in sight.

The bright white belonged to a single lamppost on a raised platform in the center of the empty street and, as she looked around, the center of the entire city. The platform was made of smooth, round stones, had brick steps and iron handrails whose paint had chipped away except for scattered flakes of white. Beside the platform, steel railroad tracks stretched away into the desert.

They dismounted, and Arroyo walked slowly up to the platform.

Michelle kept her distance with Mr. Keaton. It was still warm. She supposed before that it could have been the horses, because their bodies were hot after running, but now that she was standing, it felt like it came from the ground. "Do you feel warmer here?" she asked Mr. Keaton.

"I noticed it as well. There seems to be something hot about the ground."

"So there is a train here."

"No, no there isn't," Arroyo said.

"I mean, look at the tracks...."

She let her voice fall when he half-turned toward her, and she saw his face, dragged down in anger. "Everything's gone now. I left it all behind to come here. Now it's just... it isn't even here. There's no train!" he shouted at the sky. He turned to Michelle, the anger dripping from him slowly, and he froze staring past her. She followed his gaze.

On the street behind them, a shuffling crowd gathered. Each man and woman held their hands up to guard their eyes from the glare of the white lamppost.

"Mister Keaton," Michelle hissed. He scampered to her side before he even looked to see what was behind him. Michelle drew her sword. "Stay back," she warned.

"Is that really your first attempt at greeting them?" Mr. Keaton said. "At the end of your blade?"

"They aren't our enemies," Arroyo said. Still, he drew his pistol. Intimidation, he had mentioned before. Even though he'd shown her that the ammunition chamber was empty, she didn't like having the weapon behind her back.

"Hunter's coming," one of the men in front said. The crowd continued to advance, with more people gravitating in and sticking to the back and sides of the crowd like specks of dust to a smooth surface.

"Who is Hunter?" Mr. Keaton said. Then, to Arroyo, "Do you know?"

Arroyo said nothing, merely looked ahead, eyes unreadable, with his knuckles white around the grip of his pistol. Mr. Keaton and Michelle backed up until they joined him on the platform. If she had to use the sword, she did not mind having the higher ground.

A trio of men broke through the crowd and gathered up the horses, pulled them away to the side, and then all of them turned at once toward the Majestic Palazzo. A man stepped through the doors. He was a healthy weight, strongly-built, and dressed in a long leather coat. A gangly man with hair in greasy tangles down to his shoulders ambled behind him. The crowd began to part then come back together, forming a bubble around the first man as he drew to the front of the crowd and walked up the steps of the platform. He stopped a sword's length from Michelle.

"I'm Hunter," he said. "Welcome to Majestic." In a flash he pulled back his jacket and drew a pistol in a gloved hand, pointed over Michelle's shoulder. To her it looked the same as Arroyo's, but she had no doubt that this one was loaded.

"Dear heavens!"

When she glanced back, following the aim of Hunter's gun, Arroyo was unarmed. She wondered if he stowed his pistol before Hunter reached the front of the crowd. She hoped he had.

"Put your sword away and hand it over." Now Hunter's pistol was trained on her, and she couldn't move.

"No," she said before she could bite her tongue. Then she locked up. He grabbed her hands around the hilt, the pistol still in her face. In one move, he wrenched the sword from her hands, and in another he thrust it back at her. Mr. Keaton gasped, and Michelle clenched her eyes and gritted her teeth, waiting to feel it pierce her and the blood to spill

out and drip onto the stones, waiting for the dizziness and death, but heard only a metallic slide. Her hips jerked back, the sword firmly back in its sheath.

"I'll miss next time." Hunter's hand went to the rim of her pants. She would have done something if the gun weren't still in her face. He unclasped her belt and took her sheath. Then he slung the sheath through one of his belt loops, and all she could do was watch it go. The last thing left of her father, and she was too afraid to stop it from being stolen.

Hunter stepped over to Mr. Keaton, who looked equally frozen. "People come to Majestic for one of three reasons," he said. His voice was oratorical, clearly addressing the three of them. "One is they love the Arbiter and want to do his work for love. Second is they need food and shelter and do his work as exchange. Third is to die."

Arroyo stepped up, between Mr. Keaton and Michelle, and brushed her aside with his shoulder. She stepped behind him. Hunter turned his attention away from Mr. Keaton. Arroyo's face was focused, but he seemed to be thinking about something elsewhere. Michelle hoped he knew what to do.

"You love the Arbiter?" Hunter said.

"No."

"You hungry and looking to work?"

"No."

"Thought so," Hunter said. He didn't move his eyes from Arroyo. "Come with me." He pointed to the tower from which he'd come.

None of them moved.

"We aren't going to die," Michelle said. "You aren't going to kill me."

“Are you sure? You said no when I asked for your sword, but I have it, don’t I?”

She scowled. “Not forever.”

“You came here to sneak a ride onto the train. I heard.” He pointed to the sky.

“Don’t be stupid enough to think your words are only yours. Now, step down from this platform.” He pointed the pistol at Mr. Keaton. She wanted to tell him to go, to walk, but she couldn’t even make her own knees bend.

Mr. Keaton slowly moved his planted feet and took the stairs down from the train platform. The lanky man waited, and he took Mr. Keaton’s bags. The crowd of people sneered.

Hunter turned toward Michelle. “Follow him.”

Michelle looked at Mr. Keaton, who begged her with his eyes to follow, to come down and be with him, and she was going to go, but then a hand clasped hers. She tensed her arm, but the fingers wound around hers and squeezed. Arroyo.

Hunter snarled, impatient, and turned back on Arroyo. “Move *now* or you die.”

Arroyo stayed. She squeezed back. Her hand shook, but his steadied her.

“Looking to die early?” Hunter said to him.

“Not looking to bow to anyone.”

“I won’t make it quick. I’ll shoot off one of your kneecaps, and you’ll hobble around for hours before you bleed out and die shivering.” His ferocious stare didn’t break.

“And I’ll enjoy it, won’t I?”

He whirled on Michelle, the gun back at her. She couldn’t swallow. He turned back to Arroyo. “Move now, or *she* dies,” he said.

“I’ll kill you if you hurt her.”

Hunter grinned. "Oh?"

Chapter Six

Hunter took Michelle by the arm and yanked her away. He shoved her off the platform. Her stomach did flips and her feet lost touch with the ground. Hands from below caught her, the onlookers, and brought her to the ground with prodding fingers on her hips and her neck, stroking her hair, feeling her breasts. She shrieked and kicked, threw her elbow into an eye, and punched a man in the nose. Blood splattered onto her knuckles.

She wrapped her arms around her body, breathing fast. Had to cover it, protect it. Her back pressed against the train platform's rail.

"She's feisty," someone in the crowd said. She couldn't place whom, or she might have broken another nose. Two women came to the fore of the crowd and ushered the rest back.

"Hunter's got her," one of them said. "Let her through."

Sounds of a struggle came from behind her, and she turned. Arroyo grappled with Hunter, but Hunter was the stronger man, and he pried Arroyo off of him and tossed him back.

"Arroyo," Hunter said, "that was not smart." He straightened his pistol in its holster; it had been partially pulled out. Michelle wanted to tell Arroyo that he didn't need to fight for her. Hopefully it wouldn't get him killed.

"Good lord, are you all right?" Mr. Keaton said.

"Take them inside," Hunter ordered the group of men. "I have some questions for this one." He hopped from the platform and landed beside Michelle. Not much taller than her, he sported significant bulk, and only so much of it could have been from his thick coat.

If he were anyone else, she would have fought him, but after seeing how easily he handled Arroyo and shook off those blows, she lost all her strength. She just stared at her sword on his waist, shoved crudely through a belt loop. "Fine," she said. "Let's go."

"Michelle," Mr. Keaton called. He was being detained by Hunter's thugs. She spotted one with a bloody lip and chin. "Be strong. We can do this."

She wanted to believe him.

Hunter took her shoulder, but she shoved his hand away. "I'll come peacefully," she said.

He made another grab at her, took her wrist, and she couldn't shake it. "I know you will." As he led her toward the dizzying structure the Palazzo, he didn't even let her turn her head to look back at Mr. Keaton, at Arroyo, to say thank you or I'm sorry. She didn't know what she needed to say, what she wanted to say, but she knew it wouldn't be enough.

The dark, flickering lobby of the Palazzo dripped with rot and reeked of rats. He led her through it, his grip still tight around her wrist. She was on his right; her sword was

on his left. If it had been the other way around, she would have thought about going for it, trying to cut him while she drew it back to her, maybe cut his hands or strip him of his pistol.

He took her to a set of elevators. Her eyes widened a little when they opened, impressed for a moment at the working technology. But when the doors slid closed behind her, and she was trapped in the tiny metal box with Hunter, and her breath went short and she felt like she was drinking thick sludge instead of drawing in air, she tapped her foot and fidgeted and only wanted out.

“Cut that out,” he snapped. “It’s only an elevator.”

The machine bumped and clanked. She closed her eyes and felt sweat on her forehead. This was new, the panic of being trapped and not being able to breathe. She’d hidden inside closets and cabinets, smaller compartments than this, but maybe she was spared the panic then because she was still in control of when she left. A bulb glowed in the ceiling, but it felt like being surrounded in darkness without a way out.

The doors opened after a ding, and she launched herself out of the box, dragging Hunter with her. Once she stopped, he yanked her arm, pulled her back, and slapped her. Her vision of the gold and gray hallway turned into tiny boxes, black and flashing, as the pain went from one side of her face, through her throbbing eyes, and then back to the aching cheek. Her eyes were hot and wet. She’d have kicked if it wouldn’t have gotten her another slap, or worse.

“This way.” He pulled her and shoved her through an open door.

Finally free of his grasp, she cradled her wrist. It would bruise, but wasn’t broken or sprained. In the middle of the room, she turned and took it in. Near the wall to her right

was a wide desk that looked regularly cleaned but never used. A painting of a river in splotchy strokes hung behind it to one side; to the other was a portrait of a woman with bulging breasts painted as though the light were fuzzy. She stopped after that, though, when her eyes came to a glass case with heavy lock and, behind that glass, an arsenal of rifles. Some looked antique, some metal and plastic, all with ammunition laid out beneath them.

“Impressed?”

She turned. “What do you want from me?”

He gestured to a plush chair she hadn’t gotten around to observing. “Sit there.”

Even though the rifles were behind thick glass, she did what he told her to do because of them. The chair was cold, its fibers stiff.

“When did the burners destroy your home?” He rounded his desk and stood behind it, stared down at her, as if the floor were higher. She felt small and weak, swallowed by the chair.

“*That’s* what you want to know about? Why do you care?”

“Answer.”

She swallowed. His eyes were fierce, animal eyes, like he might pounce on her and tear out her throat if she answered incorrectly. “Two nights ago. We’ve been coming this way ever since.”

“Did you have any weapons?”

“Just that.” She pointed at his waist.

“Did you do any work for the Arbiter?”

“Of course not.”

He was trying to figure out why the burners had come to attack her, just as she had been. It hadn't taken her long to figure it out, though—her research, her investigation into her dad's mysteries. She was so careful to never admit it publicly, to never speak of it out loud, though, except to Mr. Keaton. As clear as the why was to her, *how* the burners had known she was up to something still eluded her. And she wouldn't tell Hunter.

He came to the middle of the room, drew his pistol, stepped closer, and put the cold metal barrel of the gun to her forehead. She yelped then went silent.

"Tell me everything you know," he said. "Start talking, and I'll stop you when I think you're done."

Just as she was about to speak, she glanced up at the pistol. It was identical to Arroyo's. Down to the empty clip in the butt, the one Mr. Keaton had seen and pointed out in the mall. Hunter should have noticed the change in weight, but he must have been too flustered to notice. The image of Hunter sliding it back into its holster replayed in her mind. He hadn't been settling his pistol back in, he had been completing the placement of Arroyo's. She didn't know how he managed to switch the weapons in the brief tussle, but she wanted to hug Arroyo for it.

She sank back into the chair for a moment, pulled her leg back, then swung it up into Hunter's groin. The muzzle scratched away from her forehead. He cried, drew back, aimed the pistol and pulled the trigger. Click. Click.

The door was straight to her right, but her sword was right in front of her. Half-bent over, pistol in his hand, he would have easily been able to stop her if she went for it. Later, she promised herself. She stood up in the chair and leapt for the door, ran from

the office, slammed the door behind her as she heard shouted curses and the jingle of keys.

*

Keaton watched Michelle be taken away to the Palazzo, and then he and Arroyo were led to the same building by a dozen unpleasant men. They took their bags and Keaton's axe. He didn't notice if Arroyo handed over his pistol. As though it mattered.

Via the lifts in the lobby, they were brought to the twelfth floor of the hotel. Half of the dozen men had to take the second lift. The directory indicated twelve floors and then 'R', equipped with 'H access', though 'R' was not accessible by the lift. Keaton puzzled it over – roof and helipad, for wealthy visitors, though he could scarcely imagine anyone wealthy wishing to visit *this* place.

They were brought down a hall, around a corner, and put into a bare room that had windows that faced the desert to the south. The men locked the door and left them alone.

"That man is truly atrocious," he said, turning back to Arroyo. Keaton had picked up on it, but he didn't think that Michelle had – Hunter used Arroyo's name when Arroyo had never introduced himself. "How do you know Hunter?"

Arroyo shook his head. "From a long time ago."

"Who, sir, are you? You are no ordinary man."

He drew his pistol from under his coat and looked at the door. When the coat flap opened, Keaton spotted a smear of blood on Arroyo's shirt, just below his collarbone.

"I'm no one," Arroyo said.

"You are, however, injured."

"I'll be fine."

Keaton moved in front of Arroyo, blocking his view of the door. "Did you know that Hunter would be here?"

He closed his eyes and turned away. "I had an idea."

"I asked you, if you were aware of any other danger, to tell me, and you withheld that. Maybe Michelle has been right not to trust you."

"That's not – I had to keep it from you, because I didn't know for sure. Could you move?"

Keaton stepped aside, and Arroyo put his ear to the door.

"What are you doing?"

"The ones who put us here are gone." He pulled his ear away from the door, stood back, and aimed the pistol at the deadbolt. "You'll want to be a bit farther back."

Keaton rolled his eyes. "Stop fiddling with that thing! It isn't loaded. Don't be delusional –"

He fired off a shot that exploded through the small hotel room and shook the windows. Keaton ducked and covered his ears. The deadbolt crunched and shattered the wood around the frame. Arroyo pulled the door free and swung it open.

"How did you...?"

He held up the pistol. "Hunter and I have the same model. When I attacked him, I switched our guns."

Keaton followed Arroyo into the hallway. If his heart weren't slamming into his chest like a squirrel trapped in a box, he would have let out a sigh of relief.

"We have to go now if we're going to find her. Is your ankle doing okay?"

It still stung when he stepped on it. “Better than ever,” he said. “If you switched your empty weapon with Hunter’s, shouldn’t he be unarmed? Less dangerous?”

“For now.”

“For now?”

“He’ll have more weapons.”

Arroyo pressed the lift buttons, but nothing happened. He started to dig his fingers between the lift doors and tried to pry them open, as though that would help.

“Is that a story for another time? How you know Hunter?” Keaton tried to help with the door, but he couldn’t get to it at a proper angle, so he stayed back and watched.

“Well it’s not for now.”

“Then, however you know him, do you know if he would be the type of man to do harm to Michelle?”

The doors opened a crack, and Arroyo peered in. Keaton watched over his shoulder. Inside the blackness was an empty shaft. No lift. “I think he would,” Arroyo said, “if there was a point to it. If he thought there was a point to it. But I haven’t seen him in... a while.”

Arroyo kicked the metal door and moved on to the lift next to it. Keaton knew not to pry further. Divulging that much information alone had clearly flustered Arroyo. Instead, he drifted back to the hotel room/prison cell they had occupied and looked out the window again. It had a superb view of the desert – only, he saw something on the road toward them that made his skin grow cold.

A mechanical chariot with smokestacks and a red glow rolled toward Majestic. In front of it, the ground seemed to ripple – but Keaton watched, horrified, and saw heads

and wings and arms. It was garr, hundreds of them moving like a gray wave. And on top of the chariot was a figure, a man with his arms shoved elbow-deep into a black metal mechanism. Anglis. On each side of him stood another. The burners.

"The elevator is here," Arroyo called.

"*Arroyo*. Dear me, you must come see this."

He jogged into the room then stumbled and stopped.

"What in heaven *is* that?" Keaton asked him.

"I've seen it once before. And it's nothing good."

Keaton put his arm around Arroyo's shoulder. It was a comfort not to be alone, when hundreds of hungry demons poured their way. It didn't matter to him that Arroyo seemed full of surprises, just that they were on the same side. "We must find Michelle."

*

Her feet slipped and skidded down the stairs. In the dark, it was the best she could do to not fall over. With both hands she held loosely onto the rail. As she went, she kept her ears focused on any sound that came from above her, but so far she heard nothing.

Then her right foot hit frigid water, and she yanked it back before the water soaked through the boot. "Damn it," she said. With one hand still on the rail, she reached back and felt around for the wall. After a couple of steps, her fingertips felt the grimy cracks of the wall, and then the smoothness of the door. She left the handrail and opened it.

A bit of light came in. The sign that said "2nd Floor" appeared just to the right of the door, and she could see that the entire stairwell below her had been flooded. This would have to do.

If Hunter wasn't following, she didn't know where he'd gone. But she did know why he hadn't burst out of the office immediately after her, and the thought of it made her want to keep running, to never stop running. That jingle, just as she had slammed the door, had been keys, keys she was sure opened the cabinet of rifles. Somewhere, he looked through the scope of one of those cruel weapons, trying to find her.

In the hall, she found that the lights were all off, but a white glare came from some windows, at a slant, up into the distorted darkness, the bright lamppost at the train platform. She looked. Where the tracks should have kept going into the rocky desert, a wispy gray cloud hung over a faint red glow, moving on the tracks, closer. The train.

*

"Arroyo," Keaton said. "I would like you to be honest with me."

The lift bucked and descended slowly. Arroyo had pried open the doors only so much so that they could squeeze into the lift, and the doors stayed stuck like that.

"Maybe."

"Is it possible? Can we possibly find Michelle and escape Majestic without being killed by Hunter or devoured by garr? Or burned alive?"

"Yes."

Now that their situation seemed the direst, Arroyo swung to optimistic. Maybe it was actually the peril of the situation that caused him to feel so strongly about it—or maybe it was the substantial danger in which Michelle currently found herself. The notion was sweet if it was true, but Keaton had to be practical. He asked, "How might it be possible?"

"I have nine bullets left. I'll make them count."

“Well, then.” Whatever caused Arroyo’s new confidence, Keaton found it easier to trust him now that it seemed he trusted himself.

The lift hit the bottom with a jolting thunk. Arroyo pushed the doors open slightly and peered through. Keaton flattened himself against the door in an attempt to remain invisible. “What do you see?” he asked.

“It isn’t Hunter,” Arroyo said. “I think it’s the one who stood behind Hunter outside.”

Ah, the lanky man. But his placement here, waiting for them, when they had been escorted earlier by a group eleven stronger, surely indicated a trap. However, he didn’t believe they had enough time to worry about traps. “Ah, good evening,” Keaton said.

Arroyo pulled back. “What are you doing?”

“Testing the waters.”

“Hello?” the lanky man called out.

“Is he still alone?” Keaton said.

Arroyo looked. “Seems like it.”

“Hello?”

Keaton sucked in his chest and squeezed through the doors despite Arroyo’s objections and attempts to pull him back. “Would you mind telling me something?”

A long pause. The man’s face was scrunched, his mouth agape as if he was deep in thought. “Good,” he finally said.

“I suppose that means you do not mind. Do you know where Hunter has taken Michelle? She was the young lady at the train platform.”

Again, a pause as the lanky man processed the information.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," Arroyo said. "He can't even figure out what you mean."

"The lady," the lanky man said. "Hunter took her to office. Upstairs."

Arroyo turned back to the lift, but Keaton said, "Wait. Are they still there?"

The lanky man shook his head. "Hunter came back. Left."

Still turning toward the lift, Arroyo, spun back and grabbed the lanky man. "Where has he gone?"

"Where we found you," he said.

"The train," Arroyo said. He pulled the lanky man by his shirt, but the man remained perfectly compliant. "Is the train here?" The lanky man blinked. "Did Hunter really go to the train platform?"

The lanky man nodded.

"Is it a trap? Is he waiting there to kill us?"

The lanky man narrowed his eyebrows like he didn't understand. Keaton tried to help, pulled Arroyo back a little. "He is not at fault here," Keaton said.

"I know, but...."

"A trap, yes."

"But why did he leave Michelle?" Keaton said. He spoke aside to Arroyo. "She must have escaped him, or else he wouldn't have left alone."

Arroyo looked about to say it, but Keaton was glad he didn't. He didn't want to think it. *He could have already killed her.* It was a possibility he refused to acknowledge.

"Then where would she be?"

"Possibly hiding. Or, if we used the lift, she might have taken the stairs."

“Did Michelle come through here?” Arroyo asked the lanky man.

The lanky man shook his head.

“We can’t search the whole building for her,” Arroyo said. “Those garr aren’t going to give us enough time, and if the train really is here, we need to get to it.”

“Garr everywhere, burners, a gun-wielding madman—how can we survive this?”

“We get lucky,” Arroyo said. He turned back to the lanky man. He no longer held him by the collar, but he still spoke with the same urgency and intimidation, which didn’t actually seem to affect the lanky man. Keaton figured he was used to dealing with Hunter. “Where did you take our things?”

The lanky man scratched his head then pointed both toward and away from them. “Both sides. Outside. Some here, some there.”

“Arroyo, I can’t leave Michelle.”

He nodded, and it was clear to Keaton that he didn’t want to leave her either. So, deceit aside, he did care. That was good. “Then we get our things and come back. We’ll wait as long as we can. Those garr were close.”

Keaton took the lanky man by the shoulders. “If Michelle *does* come through, can you ask her to wait here?” He seemed to understand.

“Then we’ll split off and try to retrieve all of our things,” Arroyo said.

It was the only plan they had, so it didn’t matter if Keaton didn’t like it. If a trap was going to be sprung on them getting onto the train, maybe it would be sprung as they got their supplies. Hunter was probably sitting somewhere, armed, waiting.

They met at the front door. The chariot hadn’t entered Majestic yet, but Keaton could hear the rumble of that many garr coming toward them to the south. To the east, the

train sat at the station. Arroyo took a long look at it, closed his eyes, and ran to the right, along the wall toward the train.

If Hunter were going to fire on him, Keaton would make it as difficult as he could. He ducked low, ran out the door, and took a hard left, away from the train. He wasn't shot, so he didn't stop running, no matter how much it hurt his ankle.

Directly ahead of him, making the turn from the lone road into town onto the main street of Majestic, was the chariot. The garr swarmed ahead of it, beginning to fill the street, closer than he had feared. If he didn't find the storage area with their things, the garr would be on him. He figured he had two minutes, maybe less.

He dove through coarse foliage and ran across cracked. It was concealed well, but he saw an open door in the side of the Palazzo, and he ran for it, taking half steps on his injured ankle. He pulled out and flipped on his flashlight. It would be his best garr deterrent as well, but he couldn't shine it in all of their eyes at once if he were surrounded, so he had to hurry. Inside the door were piles of bags. He recognized Arroyo's sitting on top but none of the others. He grabbed it and slung it over his shoulder along with another. He had hoped for his own bag – with an axe, perhaps, he would feel a little more secure. The only weapon Arroyo carried had been that blasted empty pistol.

With the added weight and awkward position of the bags, he moved slower, but he hustled back toward the Palazzo's main door. It was as if he had on blinders – he didn't want to see the garr, so he didn't. He only saw what was directly in front of him: the entrance to the Palazzo. It was close. His chest rose.

His legs came out from under him. He tumbled straight down, and the bags slid away from him. His shins throbbed as he rolled, flashlight kept tucked to his chest. As his eyes focused, the daze from the tumble cleared, and he saw the garr that had tripped him, a small beast with a long serpentine tail. It came closer, joined by two others. Of course, they hadn't needed to take the road. They had come straight across the desert from the south.

Keaton clicked on the flashlight as the one with the tail lunged in to bite – he shone the beam straight in the demon's eyes, and it shrieked and collapsed, apparently experiencing a seizure. Just as Keaton swung the flashlight to the next garr, it brought down a bearlike paw and swatted it out of his hand. It hit the pavement, cracked, and cut out.

"Well damn," Keaton said.

He turned and ran for the bags, but a stinging pain made his ankle falter, and he stumbled, down on his knees near the bags. Something thick and metal poked out of Arroyo's bag. The crowbar. How could he have forgotten? He drew it and whirled around on his knees. The encroaching garr leapt back, narrowly avoiding having their noses nipped.

Keaton grabbed the bags, got to his feet, and sprinted for the entrance. The adrenaline of a young man pumped through him. The beasts were too slow. The door was so close! He flew into the lobby.

"Run," he shouted to the lanky man.

The lanky man simply stood, and the garr ignored him. Keaton made it to the lift and pressed the buttons to close the doors. The lobby was as empty as it had been when

he left it. He hoped Arroyo and Michelle would make it. The garr bounded for his closing doors, but he knew they wouldn't make it. Just before the lift doors closed with a gentle sound, Anglis stepped into the Palazzo lobby.

*

Hunter steadied his rifle.

Chapter Seven

Michelle raced and slipped down the stairs. The train was here, and they had to get on it. She pulled the door to the first floor open, back to the lobby, slow and quiet. The lobby light swam around her. The air was musty and dull, less cold than the stairwell or the higher floors. The smell of rats was again strong. The lanky man from outside stood motionless in the middle of the lobby.

"You," she shouted and ran toward him. Running was easier than walking, because at least she got to her destination faster. She worried that, if she stopped running for too long, her legs would cramp up and she wouldn't be able to move.

"Good," the lanky man said. "He said wait."

"Who?"

The lanky man stared. "Other man. Grab and shake my shoulders."

"Hunter?"

"No." He furrowed his brow. "Older man with him."

Arroyo. "Where did that man go?"

He pointed toward the door then hooked his finger to the right. Out the door and to the right. She thanked him and took off. He tried to tell her something else, but she didn't hear him. Fear and desperation pushed her now. She had no time to wait.

*

Arroyo had Keaton's and Michelle's bags in tow from the small room around the corner, and he headed back, taking longing looks at the train. At any moment it could depart, and he would never see it again. He itched to go to it, but he had to go back. He wasn't here alone.

Before he reached the doors of the Palazzo, Michelle came through them, running like mad, and she turned his way and ran straight into his arms.

"You brilliant asshole," she said. "Thank you."

He was a little stunned. "For...?"

"Switching the pistols. It saved my life." She was bouncing, unable to stand still. She was probably running on adrenaline alone at this point. When this was finished, she might pass out.

"We aren't through this yet," he said. "Didn't the man tell you to wait?"

"That was for me? I thought he was talking about himself."

Arroyo shook his head. Then, behind Michelle, he saw Keaton run faster than he'd thought possible. Garr chased him – and two burners. Arroyo brought up his pistol, and Michelle yelped and ducked out of the way. Two burners and too many garr – he had enough time for only one shot. He calculated and took it. *Blam!*

A molten hot spurt of ooze erupted from the second burner's head. It crumpled, and the garr went around the body. The first burner went inside without noticing, steadfast.

"What happened?" Michelle shouted, probably louder than she meant to after being so near the gunshot. She jumped back up and looked around. "Warn me next time."

"It was Keaton. He went back inside."

“Mister Keaton.” She started for the Palazzo, but Arroyo grabbed her. “Let go of me!”

“If you go back for him, you’ll be trapped inside.”

“I’m not going to abandon him.”

“We won’t make the train if we go back for him.”

“I don’t *care* about your train.”

He couldn’t explain it logically. He needed to appeal to her emotions. He touched her hand. “If they catch him, wouldn’t he want you to get away?”

She scowled. “I can save him.”

“No, you can’t—” The burner he’d shot began to move, actually began to stand. The burning blood dripped all over him, consuming his clothes and the ground around him in fire as he rose to his feet, a small chunk of his head missing.

“Get down,” Arroyo ordered. He fired again and took out more of the head. The burner stumbled back, collapsed on a fire hydrant, and his flesh began to pop and burn.

Michelle turned to look, but Arroyo grabbed her and pulled her closer. “We have to get to the train,” he whispered to her. “Or we will all die.”

*

The lift rattled as it ascended. Keaton wiped sweat off his forehead. He tied the bags diagonally across his chest and gripped the crowbar in both hands. He rode the lift to the twelfth floor and hoped that the roof did indeed have ‘H access’. A helipad was his only shot at escape.

He took a dark, dry hallway and found a stairwell. Inside was a sign that read, “Roof Access.” Maybe, if nothing else, he could keep Anglis distracted long enough for

Michelle and Arroyo to escape. He followed the stairs up and pushed at the door. It didn't budge.

"Heed! Obey!" He jammed the crowbar into the crack by the door and threw his body into it. The doors here were all shoddy from time. It gave. When he shoved it open, he was met by starlight and freezing, whipping winds.

"Keaton, former firefighter," came the voice from behind him.

Keaton spun around and nearly lost his balance. In the doorway stood Anglis.

"Oh dear," Keaton said.

Anglis grinned, black-toothed. "You will scream when you are on fire."

Something else caught his eye, and he didn't bother trying to hide that he was looking at it – Anglis could possibly *see*, after all, and therefore wouldn't be able to follow his gaze. There *was* a helipad on the other side of the roof, and a shining helicopter on it. If it was operational, he hoped the mechanics hadn't changed too much since he piloted them as a young man.

He held the crowbar as if to attack, though he was uninterested in that – he just needed to distract Anglis long enough to get around him and to the helicopter. He didn't want to get too close, and he wanted to avoid actually wounding Anglis. The blunt crowbar would be better for that than his axe.

Anglis stepped forward. He reached into his rags and drew a scalpel, and he held out one arm. The blade dug into his skin, the molten orange blood dripped along the arm and down, and he advanced.

"Can you see me?" he asked Anglis.

"I know where you are." Anglis didn't slow.

Keaton backed up until he was near the lip of the roof. The wind threatened to overturn him, but he resisted. At least he couldn't feel the pain in his ankle anymore. He squeezed the crowbar and swallowed and did not look behind him. He waved the weapon in the air, but it didn't stop Anglis's steady pace. "How does it work?"

Anglis was five feet away now. Four. He lunged at Keaton with an arm dripping with magma. Keaton ducked and felt the fire on his back. He threw his shoulder into Anglis and bit his lip to not scream. His jacket burned on his back.

He leapt back, and his leg hit the lip of the roof. Losing balance, he tipped over. With one arm, he snagged the edge as he fell hip first. His fingertips slipped, but he hung on. All of his strength went to keeping himself from going over. The vertigo made him sick, even though he didn't look down. He shimmied forward and went down on his knees back to the flat ground.

Anglis came at him from behind and tried to pin Keaton's arms to his sides in a sort of fiery embrace. Keaton kicked at his shins but couldn't connect. He threw his head back and connected with the scarred and bandaged face of his attacker, causing Anglis to unlatch. Dizzy, Keaton staggered forward, balanced on his good foot, and swung the crowbar in a circle. He hit Anglis in the head, but the bar slipped out of his hands and went spinning over the side of the building. In his head, he apologized to Arroyo and hoped he wouldn't need it again.

He patted down the burning spots on his jacket – his last jacket – and ran for the helicopter. Behind him, Anglis got to his knees. The blow had knocked the bandage free from Anglis's eyes, only patches of scarred skin covered where the eyes should have been, and Keaton looked away, focused on the helicopter.

He reached it and climbed inside.

The controls were a jumbled mess of buttons and knobs and levels, but the big stick in the middle was familiar. He shut the door and mashed on the controls, the stick in one hand. The buttons lit up, and he smiled. It began to come back to him, but it was all just slightly off, familiar enough that he figured he should know how to operate it, but foreign enough to thwart him.

Anglis was dazed but staggering in the correct direction, straight for the helicopter.

“Come now,” Keaton said, pleading with the helicopter as well as his memory. “The blades spin, and then we fly. Could it please be easy?”

Five buttons later, the blades began to spin, and Anglis stopped. Keaton wished that Anglis were not so oppressive, sadomasochistic, and generally evil – he would have loved to sit down for some tea and discuss how his “vision” worked. The helicopter took to the air, uneasy, and Keaton tilted away from the Palazzo. He took off. It was possibly his most magnificent experience since the Eclipse, and he was happy he had fought long enough to live it.

*

Michelle took Arroyo’s hand. In the streets, the inhabitants of Majestic fought a losing battle against the garr. It couldn’t have been all because she was here. These people, and Mr. Keaton, were going to die just because she was here, because Anglis and the other burners wanted to kill her, because the Arbiter wanted her dead. But she could do nothing about it, only run, keep herself alive.

It was a short distance to the train platform. Red light emanated from the undercarriage of the train, a background to the white glare of the lamppost on the platform. Arroyo ran, pulled her along.

A gunshot exploded through the street, and a blinding burning pain zipped across her back, the skin over her shoulder blade. Just grazed. She fell. The bullet ripped through her bag. Paper pulp from her journals and her dad's littered the street.

Arroyo stepped over her, between her and the train, drew his pistol and fired two shots toward the train. "Get up," he shouted. "You're lucky he missed so badly."

"*Lucky?*" The pain made it nearly impossible to move her shoulder. Even her clothes rubbing against the torn burnt skin was excruciating. She had been lucky a week ago, or years ago when she met Mr. Keaton. Not now. Everything was being burned and destroyed and stolen from her. No luck. "Arroyo, I have never —"

A screech of metal from the train as the wheels slowly turned.

Arroyo helped her up and handed her Mr. Keaton's axe. "Come on." He looked behind her and started to run.

She didn't look back, couldn't dare, but knew the garr were close. She'd never heard so many all at once, a mash of throaty roars and whiny screeches. The smell was like sewage spilt on grainy cement.

Arroyo hopped the steps up to the platform. She was close behind.

He pulled her up the steps, but she tripped on the bricks and fell on her knee. The pain fired up her body and bent her back. Mr. Keaton's axe skipped away but she caught it and gripped the haft in two hands. She wouldn't let this one get away from her.

Something growled. She tilted forward, rolled onto her back, and swung instinctively, though she didn't hit anything. The garr smothered the street, but the light from the station was dazzling. The closer they grew to it, the slower they moved. One dropped to the ground and convulsed. The one she'd heard growl was closing in, a few feet away.

She got up, swung the axe at the same time. It was so much clumsier than her sword. It wouldn't have been a problem if she'd had her sword. On her feet, she took a step forward and swung down at the nearest garr. The axe caught its shoulder and knocked it to the ground. It withdrew. With blood drawn, each of the approaching garr sped up. She wished she hadn't struck it. She needed to run, and the faster the garr the more difficult that would be.

The train chugged and spewed steam. She glanced over her shoulder. Arroyo clung to the door of the first train car, yanking and banging on it, inching it open. She swung back around.

Garr clambered up the stairs. They were white and pallid in such clear light, skin cracking like dry stone. She leapt forward and hacked at one's head. It recoiled and fell from the stairs with blood spurting from its skull.

The train accelerated. She had only seconds. The door screeched and was open wide enough to stick a head through, but Arroyo was still on the wrong side of it.

One garr sprang up from her right. She tried to ready the axe against it like she would a sword, but it didn't work. It ignored the axe blade and tackled her into the side of the train, and she smacked her head hard backward. Her vision became spasmodic. The garr bore down on top of her, dragged her down, buckled her legs. She felt the heat

of the train's wheels. In the red light, the garr's horrific, twisted face reached for her, snapped its jaws. The axe blade carved deeper into its chest, the blood dripping over her hands. *Snap, snap, snap*— and it stopped, slumped. She let go of the axe and put her palms on the ground, struggled to push up.

The train's wheel snagged her coat and yanked her down.

"Arroyo!" He got the door open enough to wedge himself into it, and he looked back. His eyes were wide. She wouldn't blame him for leaving her. The end of the platform came at her fast.

Her coat ripped as the wheel turned. The garr was lifted off of her. A mammoth garr, as big as a truck, picked it up in its massive tusked maw and dropped it aside. Michelle screamed and squirmed to get out of her coat. It ripped, and it tugged at her and pinned her as the wheel slowly churned it.

The mammoth garr lunged for her. She felt the heat of its breath, its roar. Its head kicked away after a bang, and a chunky plume erupted from the new exit wound in the other side of its skull. But that didn't stop it from flying at her. She rolled to her right, fought out of her coat, and the mammoth slammed into the train a foot behind her, its tusk sliding to a stop grazing her neck.

Arroyo, leaning his entire body out of the door and holstering his pistol, held out his hand. She had to get to his hand. The train picked up speed. She ran with it. Ten, then five feet of platform left. She pushed off with her last bit of adrenaline and caught his hand. The rail at the end of the platform slashed her leg and ripped her boot before Arroyo yanked her onto the train. They left the platform swarming with garr, all of Majestic, and Mr. Keaton behind.

Part Two

Storms of Fire

Chapter Eight

Anglis returned from the Palazzo and went to the burner chariot. The legless man Howard and the lanky man were with Lauzas, though the lanky man made little noise. The garr stirred.

"I did everything the Arbiter ever asked of me," Howard said. "This is unacceptable. Don't you creatures understand a deal?" His uproar had surprising volume for a man so brutally handicapped. It was a pity he had no legs. He wouldn't do.

Both Anglis and Lauzas ignored Howard. Anglis grabbed the arm of the lanky man, who did not appear to have a name, and prodded him with his bared fingertips. He had bulging veins with healthy circulation, in spite of the scarcity of meat on his body. Regardless, they had to perform the rite and continue their pursuit. The rest of the inhabitants had been too injured in the struggle. The garr were fed well.

"Did you save Gaisras's blood?" Anglis asked.

"Yes. Did you catch the old man?"

"He escaped by air."

"On top of everything else, I gave you access to Arroyo's possessions! That's what you asked of me. I delivered my end of the deal, and now I demand that you return me to my dogs." Howard's noise was bothersome.

"The other one," Anglis said.

Lauzas grabbed the lanky man. "You are lucky," he said. His voice crackled like a slow-burning log.

"I only wanted to help," the lanky man said. "Good?"

Lauzas administered the blood of Gaisras, and the lanky man screamed for some time. The volume rose above and drowned out every other sound in Majestic. Howard shook the chariot's floor with his horror, but Anglis could hear nothing but the scream of the lanky man, peaking at the moment of the greatest pain and then fading away as that life left him. Anglis stretched upward at the scream's height, letting it fill him, and let out his breath as the scream died.

"Y-you can't do that to me," Howard said once he could be heard again. He repeated it several times. "Please don't feed that to me."

"You won't suffer the rite," Lauzas said. "There can only be one Gaisras."

"There can... what?"

The lanky body stirred. The scars over the eyes would take time to cool, but the blood had been delivered, and Gaisras would become alive again. He coughed and tested out the vocal chords of his new body with some basic sounds. "Me, my, ma, la, pa, da, de, die. It's good. I will burn the one who shot me."

"Oh my God. What *are* you things? I—please save me!" Howard tried to scramble away, but it was useless. He was only a contingency; they no longer needed him. The restless garr advanced.

*

Michelle slammed into Arroyo and rolled across the train car. When she stopped, she felt like she couldn't move. Her muscles cramped, her breath was weak and slow, and her eyes didn't want to focus.

She heard the door skid closed, shutting them out from the wind and the gray light. The car looked exactly like she thought it would, a plain metal box, except slits or small windows were cut into the floor, and that same light that came from below the train spilled into the car, lighting it dark red. She didn't need a backdrop of blood to replay the images she'd just seen, the number of garr clambering toward her that had almost eaten her. She shut her eyes, but that didn't help. The garr were there, too, clawing for her.

Yet she was happy to be alive. And sick for being happy right now, after leaving Mr. Keaton like that. It didn't matter anymore that he'd kept things from her. If she could see him again, she would forgive him. If only she could.

There was a thump next to her. She didn't open her eyes. From the sound, Arroyo had just sat down. "You all right?" he said.

"I'm alive." She tried to shut out the images of the garr. They crawled more slowly, and she thought about looking back at them from the back of the train, watching them fade away into the distance. In her mind they chased and tried to jump onto the train, but she thought about her sword, how real it felt in her hand, and slashed at them. In her mind, they collapsed in heaps and mounds, and disintegrated and mixed with the dirt and dust in the breeze. They didn't appear when she closed her eyes anymore.

"You hurt your leg."

“Yes,” she said. She knew she needed to thank Arroyo. If the roles had been reversed... she would have helped him, too. But the point was, he hadn’t needed to pull her onto the train. She was no help to him right now, but for some reason, she was worth it to him. “Thanks,” she added.

“Oh, of course,” he said. She heard a series of clicks and snapping sounds. “I used six bullets. I have four left.”

“Hm.” Her muscles cramped again, and she groaned. She could tell that she had a gash in her leg, but that didn’t hurt right now. Neither did her back, which surprised her. Only her muscles ached. She rolled over, away from Arroyo, but into the wall, and she rolled back. Her hand slapped against his knee, and she grunted an apology. She sat up, kept her eyes closed, and tried to stretch.

“I...wish I had my first aid kit,” Arroyo said.

“Yeah,” she said. Arroyo had tried to help, but he’d also told her to leave Mr. Keaton. It had been the right decision – they would not be here if she had gone back for him – and she didn’t blame him for it. Didn’t blame him. The words didn’t seem to go together. It was strange *not* to blame Arroyo for something. She still knew nothing about him, and he still kept things from her, but he had saved her. She wanted to ask him so many questions, but all she could do was groan and breathe and keep her eyes shut, and he stayed silent while she did not ask him the questions. He had held her when she cried, and after that she didn’t feel like she could talk to him. Still, she felt the need to say something, so she went for her hopes. “Is there any chance...?” She hoped he would fill in the blank.

“Of what?”

“Mister Keaton.”

“Yeah, some.” It sounded like a lie. His lies didn’t sound like lies when she was looking at him, but with her eyes closed it was easy to pick up. Or maybe he was tired. On the other hand, if looking at him distracted her into not picking up his lies, she would feel ridiculous.

So he didn’t think Mr. Keaton would survive, but he didn’t want to tell her that. She didn’t want to call him out, because then he would tell her what he really thought. Somehow hearing that could be hope, even if he didn’t believe it, made it tangible enough for Michelle to cling to.

“Look, Michelle....”

“What?”

“I really wish... that first-aid kit.”

She opened her eyes and looked up at him. He was looking away from her, but he was sweating. It looked like he was in pain. “Are you okay?”

“No, but that’s not it. I haven’t been honest with you –”

“Okay.” She got ready to bite back the urge to be furious with him, but the urge didn’t come. The feeling of being wrapped in his arms, his hand gentle on the back her head, his shoulder against her cheek, was still fresh. Different from how her dad had held her. She wanted to be able to save him.

“When the garr tackled me on the road? I think it might have done more damage than we thought.” He fell back and hit the floor with a car-shaking thud.

“*Arroyo*.” She leapt to her knees and scampered to his side. His face was pale and slack. She held his hand and touched his cheek. “Are you there?”

He groaned, and his eyes moved.

His wounds. She took the quilt from her destroyed bag, or what was left of the quilt, balled it up, and stuffed it under his head. And then opened his shirt. "Why didn't you tell me about this?"

He tried to shrug and winced. "We were in a hurry."

The gash in his chest was deep and red. She tore a scrap of the quilt and wiped at it. It didn't seem to be bleeding freshly anymore. "Drink some water," she said. She handed him their only water bottle. "I'm going to be mad at you once you're on your feet."

It was possible that his wound was infected. "You need to rest."

"I'll be fine. What about you?"

"What about me? Shut up and lie down."

"You're hurt, too."

She bit her lip. The last thing she needed right now was for him to care about her. She'd have to restrain him. If he did, she might fall apart. On top of that, she didn't want him reminding her that she was in pain and bleeding. As much as she didn't want to be, she was aware. She'd deal with that later. "Look," she said, "we can't take care of each other if you can't move."

"You want to take care of me," he said, sounding surprised.

She was afraid to answer him. Not being able to trust him or believe what he said made it difficult, but yes. "Stop talking."

He swallowed hard. She stared at where the garr had gored him, and her stomach wished it had something to expel. She pulled his shirt closed and pushed everything

they had in their bags against his legs. "Stay warm," she said. "I'm going to look for supplies." When she stood, her muscles protested, clenched and released. The gash in her leg throbbed.

"Where?"

"The rest of the train." The door at the long end of the car might have led to a connecting car. She'd never been on a train. Or seen one. But it made sense to have ways to get from one car to the next.

"But Hunter," Arroyo said.

"What about him?" Her abdomen clenched. A nervous swell got caught in her throat. She felt like retching. "I can handle it."

"He's armed now. You know that."

"Yes." She reached down into Arroyo's belt and pulled out his pistol. "So am I."

"You don't know how to use that." He tried to sit, but she eased him back down.

It was foreign in her hands. Heavier than it looked, but a weapon, and she needed a weapon. "Show me."

"No. You're hurt."

She sighed. "I'm not going to go looking for him. I just need to be prepared if I find him."

"You don't need to save my life."

She shrugged and looked away. "I owe you."

"You owe me?"

"Because I never thanked you for saving me."

"And how many times did I do that?"

She wanted to kick him. “Why don’t you count while I’m gone.” Though as she stared at the door, she didn’t think she could do it. Through that door, Hunter might be waiting. He was experienced, and she couldn’t move as fast as she could in the Palazzo anymore.

“We only have four bullets,” Arroyo said. “If you have to fire it, make sure you keep count of how many you fire.” He took a breath. “I’ll show you how to use it.”

She knelt down, and he showed her how to disengage the safety, how to aim, how to position her elbows and her shoulders, and how to pull the trigger. The safety stayed on while he showed her, and then she clicked it off.

“Be careful,” he said.

She stood again and took a step toward the door. If she was going to leave at all, she needed to do it in one burst, before she second-guessed herself and decided not to go. When she opened the door, the roar and rush of the wind came back, and she closed it behind her. A small walkway connected her car and the next, lit by the red light from below the train. The door on the other side opened easily, and she went through.

Once she started moving, the pain in her legs was easier to ignore, but if she ever stopped, her calf throbbed, and the muscles in her thighs cramped.

The next car was identical to the first. She hoped they weren’t all like this, but realized that Hunter couldn’t sneak up on her in one of these. As long as she had the doors in her sights.

From her jacket, she pulled out her mom’s old flashlight. She’d lost count of the number of times she hoped it still worked. She kissed it. “Please protect me.”

The next car was the same, but in the car after that, a light bulb hung from the ceiling and came on when she entered. Stacked wooden crates filled the car. They must have been supplies. The wooden lids were nailed shut.

If she hadn't dropped Mr. Keaton's axe on the train platform – or if they had Arroyo's bag with his crowbar – this wouldn't have been a problem. Even her sword would have worked. But all she had was a pistol. She had lighters in her bag, but setting fire to the crates didn't seem like a good idea.

She didn't want to move forward any further than she had to – Hunter was there somewhere. If she could stay back and not see him, that's what she wanted to do. Then her foot hit something, and a metal sound bounced along the train car. A metal pipe, about a foot long, with a jagged edge.

With the jagged end of the pipe, she tried to pry open one of the crate lids. The pipe mostly cut and scraped at the wood until it whined, metal sliding through wood, and budged. It was just a budge, but it was something. She pushed harder, put her body into it. With each ounce of effort she put into the crate, she thought of Arroyo. Not the things he had done for her, but all of those stories for another time, everything he would have to tell her if she was ever going to trust him. It all had to come out.

The lid opened a few inches now. She wiped sweat off her face. It was progress, but she didn't know how many times she could repeat the process. It took a lot of effort to block out the fact that her leg was coated with blood.

The nails groaned and loosened, and it stayed open enough for her to squeeze her arm through the gap. She groped around and felt smooth plastic, cool to the touch. She'd felt these hundreds of times before – the bottles of water delivered by the Arbiter.

She grabbed one and pulled it out then went back for another. She got three bottles before it was too much not to drink.

It was cool, smooth, and crisp. She gulped down too much and felt sick.

The crate was *filled* with hundreds of them. She carried four of them under one arm, the pistol in her other hand, and headed back to Arroyo. "Look what I found."

His eyes barely opened.

"Oh, God." She knelt beside him, opened a bottle, and stroked his face. "Hold your breath." His lips were red. She put the bottle up to them and tilted it just enough for water to trickle through. He gulped it down. She held the bottle until he drank half of it.

"Thank you," he rasped.

"Not yet. I'm going back for more. Keep drinking, if you can." She felt she should do something, some physical representation of "Goodbye, but I'll be back soon." Her dad had always kissed her goodbye. Thinking of doing that made her dizzy. She took his hand and squeezed it.

The second crate was a little easier than the first. It was filled with gray sweaters. It smelled like wool but without dust, a gentler scent than she was used to associating with clothes. Sweat poured down her skin and turned icy in the cold air. Her fingers ached.

She opened a third one and felt ready to collapse. This one had cans of beans and gravy. It would be cold, but the food was pre-cooked. Her stomach wrenched and grumbled.

When she brought the cans to him, she dropped to her knees, then to her hands, and scooted close to him. "I found food," she said. "But I can't even open it right now."

He nodded.

“Just need to rest. Then, we’ll eat, and I’ll find medicine.”

“Don’t push yourself.”

She gently butted him with her head, because that’s all the energy she had. She left her forehead resting against his shoulder. When she woke up, she hoped she could save them both.

*

Keaton wanted tailing the train to be simple. His helicopter had taken off in the wrong direction from the Palazzo, but he righted it and again found the train platform. What he saw then destroyed utterly the chance of anything being simple.

The burners rode their chariot along the tracks. A red halo coming from the chariot lit the undulating swarm of garr, which looked like dark red maggots. Steadfast as always, Anglis would eventually catch the train, and unless Keaton decided to jettison Arroyo’s belongings in the hope that he could aim something precisely enough to strike Anglis where he stood on the chariot, Keaton could do nothing to deter the blind monster’s relentless gains.

He spoke aloud to himself to help stay awake as adrenaline began to wear off and the desire to sleep began to catch up to him like a panther waiting for its prey to tire. He decided to fly on ahead and stop somewhere along the tracks, rest, and hopefully catch the train before it passed.

So he pushed the helicopter and was surprised by its speed. His impulse was to slow down, to be safe, but he had to override it. Only at the utmost velocity would he gain a lead significant enough to allow him to sleep and eat and wait for Michelle to catch up with him.

Small dots of light littered the emptiness. So little life out here. He shuddered to think of the people, independent homes or even small communities, already struggling to survive, who would be in so much danger simply by being near the train's path—Anglis would follow the tracks, and the garr would follow Anglis, and they would stray and hunt and desecrate anything hiding in the dark.

The terrain was a dark smear, all the same. The hills were repetitive. The small valleys and desiccated farmland provided a little grim variety to the otherwise monotonous landscape. He ate what Arroyo happened to have in his bag, which was precisely one package of jerky, and drank from the one bottle of water. He would make it last.

As his eyelids drooped, he thought of the difficulty he had growing potatoes. They were simple tubers, and no one else seemed to have trouble with them, but they refused to cooperate with them. He didn't even like them, really. He remembered the Logo City library and made a map in his head.

Then he considered the helicopter. If this belonged to the Arbiter, there had to be fuel for it, somewhere. Finding where this craft refueled seemed a brilliant idea.

And he allowed himself one simple, fleeting hope. That he might return to England. If the Arbiter had a helicopter at its disposal, it could have others. A jet airplane or a ship that could return him to London. He had survived for twenty years; so could his family. Rachel had never been one to give up easily.

Ellice would be so old now. She wouldn't remember him. But every night since the Eclipse he had whispered to the empty room around him and told no-one-in-particular

that he loved his daughter and wanted her to still be alive. As long as he whispered that, he hoped that she would outlive him, because she deserved to. Twenty-two years old.

The idea of reaching the Atlantic alone had seemed impossible. The field of empty aircraft he visited were unfair – they mocked him and flaunted the impossibility. But if he could get that far, actually get to the Pond, maybe reaching England wouldn't be impossible, and maybe seeing Rachel and Ellice wouldn't be impossible, either.

After some hours, he didn't know how many miles he'd crossed. He saw towns and cities along the horizon, but nothing close to the tracks.

Then a huge expanse of nothing. The sky was gray, and he could barely make out the horizon. Like swimming through a black ocean. Then something arose. Light, enough light for color. Green and brown and gray – forest and dirt and buildings. Small squat buildings in rows, and movement. People hurried, and cars with headlights rolled through, like a military base. In the center was a huge dome, like a sports arena with a retractable roof, but more immense. The lights were low on the ground, and the top of the dome was black. Whatever the compound was, it wasn't meant to be seen from a distance. And the train rolled directly through it.

"This is it," he said to himself. "This is where I have to land."

Chapter Nine

They would notice him if he got too close. He took the helicopter in slowly.

The people workers here were employed by the Arbiter, which made them the enemy. Still, Keaton didn't see any garr. When he thought of the Arbiter, the image in his head was of a toothy maw and gray pallid skin lurking through shadows.

He concocted a lie he hoped was clever – Hunter sent him from Majestic to check on something. He would figure out the something later. Right now he focused on landing.

The dome intrigued him, though he struggled to think of why the Arbiter would need a building of that shape and size. Perhaps it was a sports arena, and the Arbiter's followers played and enjoyed some sort of twisted sport, like gladiators but with garr. He shook his head. Finding a place to land, that's what he was doing.

A series of flares went off leading to a flat platform nestled into the back of the facility. The lights of the rest of the facility had made it invisible in the shadows, but now small bulbs lit and shone on a circle of paint circumscribing an H. He had been spotted, but they were willing to accept him.

As he took the helicopter closer, a young woman walked onto the platform and waved him down. Keaton held his breath. He hadn't thought about trying to land.

"Splendid," he told himself, "just ease it in." She stood just a few feet from the circle, more confident in Keaton's landing ability than she had any reason to be. He swallowed and wiped sweat away from his palms, one hand and then the other so that he kept a grip on the control stick, and he just hoped that he didn't accidentally decapitate the poor girl or cause the helicopter to explode. With a thunk the helicopter skids hit the helipad at an angle. They scraped the surface. Keaton compensated backward and brought the tail down, leveled out, and landed. Finally let out his breath and sucked in more.

The young woman was still exactly as she'd been before his terrible landing. She smiled and waved.

Behind her, three men wearing thick gray vests carried long pikes. Their stern faces were not as welcoming as the young lady's.

He exited the helicopter, woozily landing on his feet. He coughed and pulled his jacket around him. It wasn't as windy here as it had been in Majestic, but it was colder.

"Hi, have you visited before?"

Keaton stumbled over his words for a moment. He couldn't take his eyes off the gleaming spearpoints of the men behind this girl. She noticed, and turned to them.

"Could you check the helicopter?" she told one of them. "I don't think he's going to hurt me."

"Of course." The man strode past Keaton, loosed his spear, and rested it against the helicopter. He entered. The other spearholders stayed put.

"Is this your first visit to the compound?"

Keaton nodded. "I've never been east of Majestic."

“Ha! How horrible.” It seemed like a joke for her, and the two spearholders chuckled, but Keaton didn’t get it, though he felt like he was supposed to. She cleared her throat, maybe because she realized he wasn’t laughing. “It will be my job to show you around, then. We’re receptive to all visitors, even if they come by air. I’m Sophia.”

“Keaton.” She shook his hand. The two spearholders ignored him.

“They’ll take care of your things. Come downstairs with me.”

The building below them seemed some sort of recordkeeping headquarters. It was filled with filing cabinets and empty desks, and Sophia said nothing about any of it as she led him through. Back outside, it was warmer. Keaton looked up at the helicopter. He had no idea why it felt at least ten degrees cooler twelve feet in the air. Maybe the wind. Sophia relaxed at the warmer temperature.

“Sorry,” she said. “I get a little stiff when I get cold.”

She was small but not underfed like Michelle, a common look. Her hair was blond, but light, like a candle at the end of its wax, and she tied it back in a single braid that reached her shoulder blades. She had full cheeks, sharp eyes, and thin pink lips. “How old are you?”

“Old enough.”

“I mean no offense by it. You’re clearly capable. I’m simply curious.”

“Seventeen, but it doesn’t matter.”

“I believe you,” Keaton said.

“How old are you?”

“I do not divulge my age, because most people wouldn’t believe it if I told them.” If he looked old he would be treated as old, as someone who was closer to death than

birth. He wasn't incapable. He had grown his own crops and even fought a burner — twice. “Young enough,” he said.

“That’s good,” Sophia said. “I started working here when I was fourteen but I’ve lived here my whole life.”

She showed him a building three stories tall, with vertically oriented windows every ten feet or so. She told him it was the dormitory where all of the workers slept, provided by the Arbiter.

“Actually, that’s just the first one. Our staff has grown, so we built another one ourselves, over there.” She pointed.

Provided by the Arbiter. He heard it again, from someone walking by trucking a dolly, and then he started overhearing it everywhere. Gifts from the Arbiter. Kindness for the work done to help the people of the world. The people here — all those since the spearholders — were ordinary, hard workers. They were better, kinder people than most Keaton had seen since he’d left England.

Sophia pointed out the dome, the most obvious structure in the compound. “That’s the farm, obviously,” she said.

“Excuse me?”

“Our big purpose is to make food and ship it as far as we can to as many people as we can.” She gestured to the dome with a nod. “That’s where it happens.”

She led him to the distribution center at the north end of the compound, a long, flat building part warehouse and part parking lot. A hundred trucks parked inside, and Sophia told him even more were out on deliveries. At any time, forty trucks were out delivering food.

“So, why have you come here?” she said. “I’ll still show you around, of course. I’m just curious.”

Sophia seemed like someone who could think for herself, but her loyalties wouldn’t do well if he told her that his friends would kill the Arbiter if they could.

Still, he didn’t much care for lying, and perhaps he could still deceive her into thinking there was nothing strange about him with the truth. “I’m meeting a friend.”

“Oh? Does anyone here know that you’re coming?”

“No. I’m sorry, should I have sent notice ahead of time?”

She nodded. “That’s usually how it goes. I’ll ask Miss Agnes what she’d like to do about it. For now, do you want to see the dome?”

He did. The dome loomed even larger when he was right in front of it. It had an antechamber just past the front door that began dim then slowly brightened.

“We have to adjust on the way in and the way out,” Sophia explained.

Keaton knew they grew crops here but the building was so massive that he had a hard time imagining how it worked. It was easily ten times the size of the dormitory. Keaton imagined stacks and rows of troughs like the ones from his agricultural ventures, thousands of them, so no wonder they needed so many workers living here. It had been difficult enough for him to manage one trough on his own.

The antechamber brightened so slowly that it didn't hurt his eyes as they adjusted. He wondered why he needed to ruin his dark vision just to see crops. Michelle had often complained of the hum and glow of his agricultural lamps. It grew brighter than the office building burning, stronger than the lamppost at the Majestic train station.

He blinked and observed the sharp clarity of color in the room: the smooth grainy silver of the door, the striped beige and brown of his tweed jacket.

Sophia raised herself up on her toes as the doors leading into the dome opened. "Just through here," she said.

The smell of live crops hit him before he saw anything. It was wheat, corn, soil, and leaves, and then what felt like a real breeze swept through and dusted him with the smells of pollen. He stepped through the doors and couldn't feel his body. Fields of corn stalks and wheat stretched in huge squares with workers filtering in and out of the rows. Vegetable gardens sprawled across the floor of the dome to his right, and he could smell the faintest citrus from the fruit orchards at the far side.

But his eyes soon left the massive fields. Above him was a blue sky. A brilliant yellow ball of light. He never thought he would see it again. For a brief juvenile moment he thought that the Arbiter stole the sun and dumped it here, but it was clear to him that this, as marvelous as it was, was artificial, somehow created on the dome's ceiling, a near to perfect imitation of the reality that used to be.

Sophia grinned and practically bounced in joy. When her teeth showed like that, she actually looked her age, or younger. Her hands were balled up in front of her. Her shoulders lifted.

"How...?" he said.

"The Arbiter knew the eclipse was coming," she said, "and he had this facility built so that it could maintain the Earth's population."

"You weren't alive before the Eclipse."

“No. It's just what my mom used to tell me. How is it? I always imagine what the sun might have been like, but this is all I get. Is it close?”

“Too close. The air is even warm.”

“It follows the path of the real sun and sets at the end of the day and everything.”

She hopped next to him. “I wish I could work in here.”

“What do you do when you aren't escorting strangers around the compound?”

“Normally I work with the loading crews and the packagers. I'm just strong enough for it. They don't think I can handle the mechanical work, but I came here all the time when my mom was still alive.”

He couldn't imagine how anyone with some humanity in this world could deny a young person like this work that made her happy. Until he came here, it had been hard to think of anyone as being happy. Regardless of whether the people here were being deceived or not, maybe this compound was a good thing after all.

He inhaled the smell of soil and water and sunlight then closed his eyes. It might be artificial, but he had never expected to see the sun again. Now that he had, just this once, he might never return.

She led him back out. For the exit, the antechamber slowly darkened until it was completely black, and the doors opened to the cold windy night.

“Do you know Hunter?” Keaton asked, once they were back on real earth.

“Hunter? Oh, the man from Majestic. He doesn't usually come here. I've never gotten to speak to him. When he is here he usually talks to Miss Agnes or someone else alone in the authority building.”

“Which one is that?”

She pointed past Keaton to a small edifice with a barbed wire fence around it. Guards roamed around the gate, this time armed with rifles. Keaton shuddered and wondered how he hadn't noticed them before. "What else goes on in that building?"

Sophia shrugged. She flipped her braid back over her shoulder. "I don't know. You would have to ask Miss Agnes."

"So she is in charge here?" As much as he wanted to solve all of the mysteries of this compound, he couldn't shake from his thoughts the fact that Michelle and Arroyo and Hunter sped closer. Behind them came Anglis and the garr, and that onslaught would threaten the entire compound in a way that it didn't seem ready to face.

"Are you okay?" Sophia peered at him. "You look nervous."

"Dear heavens, no. I am just tired."

Her eyebrows crinkled in what looked like worry. "If you're sure. Do you have any other questions?"

"Hmm. What about the garr?"

"What about them?"

"They didn't exist before the Eclipse. It seems possible to draw a logical conclusion based on that fact, don't you think?"

"No. I've heard that before, but I wasn't around then. My mom told me that the Arbiter tried to fix what it could, and it's going to guide us through the Eclipse. The garr came along because of the Eclipse, not because of the Arbiter."

He wanted to pry in, but he had to be careful. They walked past a guard carrying a twelve-foot pike, and Keaton swallowed. "It sounds from that statement that the eclipse has a definitive endpoint."

"Yes. Well, maybe not definitive. It used to be. But a few years ago the Arbiter told us that it had underestimated his opponent, and the Eclipse might remain longer."

It sounded like simple propaganda, but he needed to hear her out if he was going to continue talking to her. "Its opponent?"

"Those were his words. And please, the arbiter is not an it. He's a man."

Keaton had never discounted the Arbiter somehow being human, but with its control of the garr and its summoning of the Eclipse, it never seemed likely. If he played devil's advocate and assumed her notions regarding the control of the garr and the nature of the Eclipse were correct, the Arbiter could perhaps be human. But he didn't buy into it. "Of course," he said. "My mistake."

"You mentioned a friend before," she said. "How is she going to get here? Like you did?"

"No, I'm afraid not. She will be coming by train."

"The train? It isn't coming back. Not yet, at least."

"Oh. It seems that Hunter decided to instigate a hasty return."

"What? I have to tell Miss Agnes." She started to go.

"Wait." He needed something, some way to maybe ensure that Hunter didn't simply kill Michelle when the train arrived. It would be up to her to make it through the trip.

"If, hypothetically, Hunter were to open fire on a guest of the compound, say me, for example. What would happen?"

Sophia's jaw went slack. "Are you serious?"

"Hypothetically."

“You would die. And then our guards would grab Hunter and report his crimes to the Arbiter. Honestly does stuff like this happen?”

“Unfortunately.” He hoped he could gain some sympathy with the hypothetical, but that question did exactly what he wanted it to. If Michelle made it to the compound and Keaton alerted enough people that it would be making a swift return, she would be safe under the protection of a crowded compound. Until the garr caught up with them and they all died. But one step at a time.

“If I can give you my honest opinion, no person’s got an excuse to not be civil.”

Keaton smiled. “I could not agree more.” This girl had never known a world with society and sunlight and modern conveniences, but living at the arbiter's compound had taught her to be a decent person in spite of the fell world.

Sophia smiled, too, but then it appeared she remembered what she had to do. “It was nice taking to you, Mister Keaton. I have to tell Miss Agnes.” She started off then turned around and trotted backward. She waved toward Keaton's right. “Two buildings that way, past the trucks, tell them I sent you.”

“Thank you, Sophia.” He looked forward to being able to rest, but he doubted he could as easily appeal to this Miss Agnes and navigate the same tricky waters of deception. It was exhausting to lie.

He went to the building Sophia had described, told the man at the door she had sent him, and was pointed to a cot where he could sleep. The room had four of them, but the rest were empty, so he shut the door and rested his body.

*

Like the beat of a drum, the name Casimir vibrates through her. This, first in the absolute darkness of sleep. Then, an image appears.

The silhouette of a hospital looms ahead of Michelle. She needs to go to it. A voice calls out from it to her, a wave moving through the air, but she can't hear what it says. With a careful foot, she steps onto the wet dirt between her and the hospital.

Hands break through the dirt and seize her ankles. She fights but falls to her face. Fingers work through the soil and snag her clothes. The fingers scratch her skin, and then, once a sea of coiling dirty bleeding fingers form a bed under her, they lift her and begin carrying her to the hospital.

She feels sleep coming, heavier than it ever felt before, like she is being put to bed with a blanket of lead on her chest. As she gives in to the sleep, the fingers begin to pull her under the earth.

An image appears on the silhouette of the hospital, a skeletal face with cracking gray skin, like a garr's but decayed and stretched across a human skull. It faces right. As she drew closer, it turns toward her. She tries to scramble away or even turn her head, but the touch of the fingers immobilizes her. The face will not let her. Then its eyes, white and hollow, like a dead man's but definitely alive, focus on her.

*

"Excuse me! Your name's Keaton?"

Keaton sprang up, jostling his cot and sending him to his knees. He regained his composure, startled as he was from his thick sleep, straightened his glasses, and looked up. The source of the noise was a spindly woman with a mess of black hair. She was probably forty-five and a couple inches over five feet tall.

Behind the only partially obscured doorway stood a slim man with a small face, long neck, and flat hair. He was dressed in blacks and grays. His gloves were armored. He regarded Keaton with wide eyes, though after a moment Keaton realized that's just how his eyes always were. Beyond that man, Sophia stared at her feet.

"Yes, my name is Keaton," he said.

"I'm Agnes," the short woman said. "Sophia gave me a report of her talk with you. A full report. That's why I let you sleep so long." She shot a look over her shoulder. Sophia cringed even with her eyes still stuck to the floor.

"I'm head of security. Jeffery," the man said. He had an effeminate voice, but Keaton guessed, simply by the formidability of his gloves, that that might have been a guise.

"Wonderful." He did need to talk to Agnes, but he'd wanted to do it privately, at least without Sophia present. And he'd have appreciated time to prepare. He hoped lies were not required of him. "How can I help?"

"Why is the train coming back?"

"Well—"

"And I don't want lies." She jabbed a finger in his direction. "You tell me the truth."

Keaton swallowed. He looked from Agnes, to Jeffery, to Sophia. She glanced up and nodded, urging him to tell the truth. Well, he supposed they wouldn't take kindly to lies.

"Do you mind if Sophia steps outside?" Keaton asked.

"I'd like to stay," Sophia said. She regarded him with a stern look, as if to let him know that it would be in his best interest that she stayed, that maybe she would be on his side. He wanted to thank her for it, though it didn't seem the moment.

“Sophia, stay,” Agnes said, though Sophia had made no motion to leave. It didn’t seem to Keaton that Agnes cared if Sophia stayed. Maybe she did it because it made Keaton more uncomfortable.

He told them about the burners and the garr, how Hunter and two others had to use the train to escape with their lives, and left out everything about Hunter taking them as prisoners. He didn’t mention anything that happened before Majestic, and didn’t name Michelle or Arroyo, just in case.

Agnes and Jeffery didn’t react while Keaton talked. If he hadn’t been speaking the words, he wouldn’t have guessed they were hearing about a threat that could potentially destroy them. They must have immediately gone into preparation mode.

Sophia, however, looked horrified. It was what Keaton had hoped to avoid when telling Agnes about the garr. If at all possible, he had wanted to spare her the worry and fear. But she was a strong girl, he knew.

When he finished, everyone was silent. Even some people from the hallway had halted to listen. “It won’t be long until they arrive,” Keaton said. “The train first, then the burners.”

“You know anything else about this you aren’t telling me?”

Anglis’s voice played in his head: “She will be hunted.” For some reason, everything was following Michelle. This, however, he couldn’t tell Agnes, and he hoped to prove a better liar than he had known himself to be. He didn’t know Agnes yet, but she struck him as a shrewd person – if sacrificing Michelle could save the rest of the compound, he was sure she would capture Michelle straight off the train and attempt to perform some kind of trade with the burners. “No,” he said. “That’s everything that happened.”

“Three burners,” Jeffery said aside to Agnes. “And how many garr?”

“Hundreds,” Keaton said.

Agnes looked back, and Jeffery shook his head. “I’m gonna have Hunter’s head on a stick for leading those things here.” She stomped around Keaton’s small sleeping room. “Throw the train in reverse – run ‘em over. Shoot ‘em yourself with your fancy guns! I can’t believe that man.”

“Anglis is a steadfast opponent –”

She stopped. “Did you say Anglis?”

Yes he had.

“How do you know the burner’s name?”

He swallowed. “Well.”

“You said there’s nothing else you didn’t tell me.”

“It slipped my mind,” he said. “He told me his name. I fought him on the rooftop of the Palazzo and escaped with the helicopter.”

She glared at him. “I smell a liar. Grab him, Jeffery.”

Before Keaton could finish saying, “My goodness,” Jeffery appeared behind him – he moved as if a blur – and pinned his arms to his back. He used just enough force so that Keaton couldn’t fight, but not so much that it might hurt him. Keaton didn’t resist. “This compound is in danger.”

“I believe you on that account, unfortunate as it is. You let me deal with protecting my people. But you. You better start telling me the truth. Sometimes protecting the people in the jail slips my mind.”

Sophia gasped. Agnes spun and slammed the door. "I don't want anyone to be hurt."

He thought he had escaped all this trouble, but the comfort of speaking with Sophia had dropped his guard. Now he was at their mercy.

A thick-necked gentleman opened the just-slammed door. "Excuse me," he said. "The train just crossed the checkpoint, coming back from Majestic."

Agnes grunted. "I thought we'd have some more time." She nodded to Jeffery, and he released Keaton. "If I'm going to be dealing with Hunter, I have to go right now and gather my *patience*. If we all live through this I'm gonna give him such a limp."

She stormed out of the building, and Keaton followed.

"Mister Keaton," Sophia called, racing after him. "What should I do?"

He glanced back at her. The air was chilly and still, and it smelled like the crops inside the dome. The backdrop of hills beyond the compound was black. Sophia was lit by the moon and modern lights set to a dim setting. She looked scared. "Stay close," he told her. "Things may get a tad dangerous."

Chapter Ten

Michelle woke up screaming, but when Arroyo tried to help her, she wouldn't let him. She said it was nothing, just images of Majestic replaying in her mind, but Arroyo feared it was something else. Arroyo wanted to tell Michelle everything, but he couldn't tell her that he had known she was coming because a monster in his nightmares had ordered him to kill her.

She eased back down next to him, and her whole body tensed. She groaned.

"You've done enough," he said.

"No. Not yet. I can get more crates open, just wait."

He'd seen these types of things before. "They should be labeled. There should be something on each crate that tells the shippers what's in it."

"It was too dim for me to see it. Or maybe I just couldn't pay attention."

He rested his head against hers. Then he noticed that she clutched a flashlight. "You could use that."

Her head tilted in confusion. She followed his eyes and looked down at her hands. It was as if she hadn't noticed it. "Oh, this." She stuffed it in her jacket pocket. "It's nothing."

"No, it's useful—"

"It doesn't work."

She had it for a reason, but if she didn't want to tell him, he wouldn't press her. "Are you okay to get up?"

"Not yet." She grunted. "Give me a minute."

It would take more than a minute. If he didn't have a motivation, he'd have stayed lying on the floor of the train car next to her all night. Maybe she wanted to move more than he did. "I'll tell you a story," he said.

Her body tensed, briefly. "I thought all your stories were for another time. Is it finally time?"

"Yeah. What do you want to know?" He couldn't tell her how he'd come to know where to find her. He just couldn't. Any other story he could tell her.

"I want to know about you."

"Me?"

"Something wrong with that?"

"You want to know about me. Not what I know about the garr, or the Arbiter, or burners, or rebellions. Just about me?"

"I'll make sure you get to all the rest later, even if I have to sit on you. But you only told me a little when I first met you, and I don't really know anything beyond that." She shifted. "So, tell me a story. Whatever you want, as long as it's about you."

He didn't know where to start. Not a bit of his life was happy, but he suspected she wasn't interested in hearing about how much he loved his mother. Her family had been ruined, her home destroyed multiple times – she wanted to know his tragedy. Losing his

parents had been terrible, but that event's place so far in the past had allowed him to adjust to it. To him, one story was more tragic than any other.

"My parents died together," he began. "My mother was sick, and my father caught the same illness from her. They found a vaccine in town, but only one dose. They snuck into my room and gave it to me while I was asleep to make sure I could live." He paused. "But that was the worst of my childhood. I was alive for six years before the Eclipse, and it was indefinably more difficult afterward, but I was still happy with my parents. Before they died, my life wasn't terrible.

"I was fourteen, and I started living with another kid my age, my only friend in the world. His name was Jake. I had a slingshot, a really strong one, and I practiced my aim with it every night. That would help later when I first held a gun.

"Jake was an orphan, too. We shared a room above a downtown restaurant, or what used to be a restaurant. The only way into it was up a narrow flight of stairs, so it would be easy to defend if we needed to. That was the idea. He had a collection of guns that his parents left him, and he set them on display at the top of the stairs just to scare anybody we might have had over. That's where I learned the trick of the unloaded gun."

He expected that Michelle might not trust him enough to consider him her friend – it was more like she needed him and didn't have any say in the matter – but he wished for her to be his friend. He hadn't had one since Jake, and that had been a long time ago.

"Jake and I sometimes went around an old military base that wasn't too far from our place. We didn't find much, but when we did, it was good. The army used quality stuff. Anyway, we could never get into this one locked gate, that no one we'd ever met could get into, but Jake tried to pick the lock every time we went anyway, and one day he got

it open. This was when I was nineteen. We went inside, and I remember the feeling, the excitement of a whole storeroom filled with things that hadn't been touched for almost fifteen years.

"We start going through these boxes, and we find electric equipment, and tools, and rations, and Jake pops open a box filled with pistols and ammunition, and he just stares at it for ten minutes. I finally come see what it is, and I can't believe it, either."

"That's really valuable," Michelle said.

"If we knew the right people to trade it to, and we were smart enough about it to not get all of it stolen, we could eat forever. Jake couldn't speak, but I could see on his face that he wasn't thinking about food. He saw something else in the guns."

Arroyo thought for a moment about how crazy he and Jake must have been – to trade food and survival for ideals. If he found those pistols now, he would trade them.

"What happened?"

"We packed everything up and carried as much home as we could. It took us three times as long, dragging these boxes, but I was so thrilled about everything we'd found. Jake was pretty quiet. He hid the box of pistols under his bed, and sometimes he would drag it out and just look at them. After a while, I asked him if we could take them out and try shooting them. We went to an open field and shot at a hillside. The transition from slingshot to pistol was easy for me. It was deadlier, faster, and more accurate. I only fired a few times because I wanted to conserve the ammunition, but Jake unloaded a whole clip before I'd taken my second shot. I had to tell him to stop."

Michelle started to say something then stopped. He knew what she was going to ask, and just the same he knew she decided to wait and see how the story ended before she asked.

“The First Rebellion just sort of *started* around us.”

“You called it The First Rebellion?”

“Yeah. I don’t remember why.”

“Sorry, go on.”

“It’s all right.” Back then, he had thought The First Rebellion was big enough for people to have heard of it, but he’d never met anyone who had. It was stupid to think he’d accomplished anything yet – he knew that now. “We had these weapons, and people around town were interested. Jake intimidated them into thinking he was in charge. All he had to do was show them his weapons and talk tough. He was good at both. He didn’t fire the pistols again. He didn’t want people to know that I was better with them. But he started trying to modify the bullets, and he talked with people about trading for ammunition. I don’t know if he mutated pistol rounds or if he traded some of them, but once he got his hands on some rifle rounds, he was dangerous.

“Everyone followed him.

“Some garr attacked us, but we were ready. Jake was ruthless. He started killing them, and the rest actually retreated. I’d never seen anything like it, but that didn’t scare me. Something else did.” Arroyo paused. It had been a long time since he considered his friend like this. He’d thought he was dead for so long. “Jake got on his horse and chased the garr, and he killed them. All of the ones that attacked us. After that, he started going by a different name.”

“Hunter.”

“We started expanding, Jake kept recruiting people, and he kept hunting garr. I wanted him to stop. I should have made him stop. You see, there’s never an end to the garr, and there was definitely an end to our supply of ammunition.

“I thought we were doing all right, but that we could do even better. I started to organize a strike against the Arbiter. I got about half of the people in The Rebellion behind me, but Jake was content just expanding his territory and killing garr. He said it was impossible to kill the Arbiter, and he told me I couldn’t stand up to it by myself. He... wanted an army.”

Michelle was silent. Arroyo wished she would interrupt him so that he didn’t have to finish the story. She stayed silent.

“Jake went out hunting, and I followed him. We’d been doing this for almost two years. I wanted to try again to convince him that eventually he would stop being able to amass power. We had three towns or so in The Rebellion, and it was tough enough to keep everything working. Where was I?”

“He went out hunting. You followed him.”

“I caught up to him in a field. He just stood there, his rifle at his feet, his arms spread out, face turned toward the moon. There was a contented look on his face, like he’d accomplished something. I tried to talk to him, but he wouldn’t listen to me. He told me that a messenger came to him on the wind. He said something to me....”

Arroyo held onto that pause. Michelle nudged him. “What?”

“He said, ‘I know something you don’t know,’ and he didn’t sound like himself anymore. He sounded like Hunter. I don’t know what he meant, because he took off

back toward town. I turned around to go after him, and I saw it, too. The horizon was on fire.

“No one was left. Garr ran through the streets, but they ignored me. They were clearly bothered by the brightness and intensity of the fire, but that didn’t stop them from running. I couldn’t tell if they were retreating, or if they were heading to a target, but I just started shooting them. And they ignored me as they died.

“Jake—Hunter grabbed me and told me to follow them. I wasn’t thinking clearly enough to make sense out of the situation. So we followed the garr through our burning home.”

They amassed around a black chariot. Atop it was a burner, and inside... was the creature of Arroyo’s nightmares. He couldn’t tell her about this. He hadn’t actually been keeping up with his own story; it had gotten away from him, and now he had to scramble to come up with something, a clever lie, to fill that void at the end. He could make it believable, he just had to leave out Casimir.

“Where did they go?” Michelle said. “It’s okay.” She laced her fingers around his.

“The burner’s chariot, just like in Majestic.” He looked down at her hand. She deserved to know everything, but he would ruin all of the trust he had built up if he told her what Casimir wanted from him. What it told him to do. “After that, it’s kind of blurry. I ran and hid, and I lost track of Hunter. Later I heard rumors about a man, a devil with a rifle who worked for the Arbiter, and I knew it had to be him. Eventually I found out exactly where he was, but I couldn’t go.”

“So... when we went to Majestic, you knew he’d be there?”

“I had hoped we could avoid him and just steal the train.” Saying it now, his plan seemed so impossible. He tried to imagine what state of mind he’d been in when he thought it could be anything like that. “I’m sorry for not telling you.”

“I’m glad you told me now.” She sat up, though it sounded painful. “I’m sorry that happened to you, and your friend.”

Her fingers were still around his. “It... felt good to tell someone.”

“Let me get you that medicine, and then you can tell me the rest.”

She didn’t have much left in her, with those wounds. “Let me help you —”

“No, you’ve done enough. Stay right there.” She smiled, or tried to. She sort of bit her lip, curled down one eyebrow, and lifted the corners of her mouth. It made him laugh a little, and her face blossomed into a real smile. Her eyes, lips, cheeks, and teeth worked in unison, and she was beautiful.

She left the car —

Michelle’s arms are pulled behind her back, bound by black ropes. Shadows cover her naked body, and a blade tickles her throat. Arroyo wants to scream and jump to protect her, but he isn’t there. He is only watching. Casimir’s gaunt gray face appears beside hers, and the knife carves a thin red line across Michelle’s pale neck.

He jumped awake then cried out, but from the pain of moving, not from the fear of the sudden nightmare. His wounds burned when he was still, and every movement was like taking the wound in his hands and just slightly pulling it open. He eased down, panting.

It was a message from Casimir. Another one, telling him to kill her, or not to tell her about it. Or both. He wouldn’t hurt her, and he couldn’t tell her.

Casimir was frequent in his nightmares, so much so that sometimes it blurred for him whether he was really there or if Arroyo was conjuring it himself. It used to be that, before each nightmare, he would feel something like a clawed hand tickling the back of his neck, and a short gust of breath in his ear. Just to show him that he wasn't alone.

He had seen Casimir only that one time. Stepping down from the chariot, shadows stretching out from him like light from a torch. Green fire sprang from his hands. He had killed people Arroyo knew, and then he dove into Arroyo's mind. He devoured his fear and his hate of the Arbiter.

The name tried to obliterate itself from his memory, but he wrote it down, uttered it to himself every time he felt the control was being yanked away from him, just so that he could hold onto it. He needed to remember that these nightmares and these thoughts weren't his own. They were forced on him.

"His name is Casimir," he said. "I won't kill her. I'll kill you, or the Arbiter, but not her."

Shortly, Michelle came back. She looked incredibly weary, like she'd pushed herself too hard opening up crates, but she wore a triumphant smile. She'd found a crate with first-aid kits, and she collapsed to a seat next to him, dropping a couple of them on her way. They split some painkillers, ate some canned beans, and she began to treat his wounds. If she hadn't been so exhausted herself, she would have noticed how shaken he was, and she would have asked him about it. He was glad she didn't.

She was a bit awkward with the tools, but not in a way that told Arroyo she didn't know how to use them. He thought about it for a second, how she had to pause before

wiping the wounds clean, before sterilization, before suturing, and he realized she acted that way because she'd never done this to anyone but herself.

"What about yours?" he said. He gritted his teeth as she applied antiseptic to his chest.

"You just wait. I'll get to me."

The pain made him feel hot. Sweat coated his face and arms. Then it started to subside. The painkillers took over, and he cooled. The pain turned from a rip to a slash to a cut, and the burn settled into a numb tingle. Whatever they were, the painkillers worked amazingly. Or he was dying and his body wanted to give him an easy transition.

"We'd better take those first-aid kits with us," he said. "They're really good."

"There's not much to stop these from being infected. Well, nothing to stop them quickly." She lay down next to him, facing him, her face close. "You're all done."

She looked about ready to pass out. Now she needed him, though he knew she was tired of admitting it. He needed to offer his help, immediately and before she thought she might have shown weakness. He smiled, mostly on the inside, because he realized he was starting to understand her pretty well. "Your turn," he said.

Chapter Eleven

Michelle had cringed and bit down on whatever she could find with her teeth while Arroyo did what he needed to do to her wounds. Back when she used to treat all of her own wounds, she'd at least had the task at hand to focus on; it must have made her oblivious to the pain. Or else Arroyo was really terrible at it. She'd tried to convince him that she could do it just fine herself, but he'd insisted, and she just held on and hoped it would be over soon.

After that, they could only kill time. She opened up more crates, which housed more cans and packages of food; blankets and other clothes, all in the same drab gray; and water. Just essentials. Whatever was in the first-aid kits was as effective as Arroyo had said earlier; they each began to feel better not long after taking the medicine. Best of all, Arroyo became better company. She needed the diversion, otherwise she would think about the face from her nightmare, or Mr. Keaton, and she didn't want to think about anything that might make her scream or cry. Arroyo excelled at taking her mind off of things. Interacting with him was unusual in a way that she'd never experienced while interacting with someone else. He made her feel warm, and sometimes she looked away from him without knowing why. With fewer secrets between them, she smiled more easily.

Then the train stopped.

First it slowed so subtly that neither of them noticed, until it became more substantial, and then it came to a screeching halt. Michelle held her breath. She didn't move or speak.

"We have to go see," Arroyo said. His eyes were on the door.

Michelle shook her head. She thought of Hunter outside, waiting for them. It didn't matter to her if Arroyo had a complicated relationship with him. He was an intolerable danger to her, and she had absolutely zero affection for him.

"Inaction gives us no advantage," he said. "If we move, we can try to position ourselves better. The closer to him we get, the safer we'll be—"

"But he can still kill us." She wished she had her sword. They only had the one pistol, and it was infinitely more useful in Arroyo's trained hands than hers. As much as she wished she could be as capable, she wasn't. She needed her own advantage, and she didn't have it. Hunter did, or worse, it was back in Majestic.

She looked at the pistol in Arroyo's hand. "After what you told me about him... are you going to be able to kill him?"

"I hope I don't have to."

"There won't be time to wait and see, Arroyo. You're going to have to act faster than he does—"

"I know that! I know. And I don't want to think about it." He stepped to the door. "This is going to make a lot of noise when I—" He cut himself short and put his ear to the door. When he drew away, he looked bewildered. "There are people out there," he said.

Michelle's mouth hung open then snapped shut as a knock clanged against the metal door. Arroyo jumped back and leveled the pistol.

Michelle jumped forward and put a hand on his rigid arms, lowering them. "Maybe a peaceful introduction would be better."

"You *just* said –"

"Hunter would be a little more subtle, wouldn't he?"

Arroyo holstered the gun. "Yeah, I think he would." He pulled open the screeching side door. The last time it had been open, Michelle had nearly been eaten by a garr twenty times her weight. Her legs went rigid, because for a moment she was terrified that the garr would still be there, as irrational as she knew it was. Instead, a trio of men held long spears at ease. "Who... who are you?" the lead man spoke.

"You find someone?" The voice was a man's, but it wasn't deep. It sounded urgent and hurrying this way.

Michelle tried to peek past the men. The red light of the train crawled across the black landscape. Between their heads, all she could see were glaring lights. Or at least they were glaring to her sensitive eyes. In the midst of everything else she didn't understand, she realized something she should have figured out earlier: the red light from the train had seemed so sinister, but it was simply practical – red light wouldn't diminish her dark vision.

"Michelle."

She hadn't been paying attention to anything around her until she heard that shout. The words being exchanged between Arroyo and a thin-bodied but somehow imposing

man, were blank murmurs. When she heard that voice, though, her stomach flipped, and her knees creaked back and forth weakly.

Mr. Keaton.

She rushed past Arroyo and ducked under an outstretched arm, slipped between two spear-wielding men, and then, spotting her favorite gentleman treading through thick grass, burst into a sprint and nearly bowled him over.

She kissed the side of his face and squeezed him. He hugged her. “Brilliant to see you, Michelle,” he said. “I was hoping you’d made it onto the train.”

“Of course I did, but how did you...?”

“I used my devilish wit and impeccable cunning to devise an escape, flawless and unharmed. The beasts couldn’t keep me in their clutches long.”

He smiled, unaffected by the peril, as he always did. And all *she* could do was hold his face in her hands and cry. Normally she’d try to hide it, but she didn’t care right now. She knew what it felt like to think that she’d seen him the last time in her life. “I didn’t want to leave you in Majestic. I thought I left you to die. I’m so sorry.”

“Hush, Michelle. It worked out for the best. If it makes you feel better, I don’t believe you made the wrong decision.” He studied her and brushed at her hair. “You look better than you did. Oh – is Arroyo with you as well?”

“Yes, but Hunter is –” She looked past him, at the lights, to buildings behind a wall topped with barbed wire. Along the tracks ahead and behind, nothing but sparse wilderness. “Where are we?” She glanced back toward the front of the train. A crowd of people gathered; at least a dozen spear tips waved in the air. She heard shouting, but it was a female’s voice, not Hunter’s.

"A bit difficult to explain," Mr. Keaton said, "especially depending on who you ask. I'll see if we can have some privacy to catch up." He patted her shoulder.

She stood dazed for a moment then shook it off. "Just tell me one thing. Are we in danger?"

Mr. Keaton's face turned grim. "As always, certainly. But it might not be the type that you expect."

It was unlike him to be so cryptic, and she could see that, while he sometimes took pleasure in joking about adventures, he was serious here.

"I will return here. Meet me," he said. "I think we can go back inside."

He walked off toward the front of the train; Michelle didn't want him to go. The last time she'd been separated from him, she had thought he died. She went back to Arroyo, and hurried when she heard heated voices.

"You *aren't* taking my weapon," Arroyo said.

"I can take it by force."

Michelle heard Arroyo's voice and the thin man's, but she couldn't see what was going on in the train car beyond the spear-holding goons. She tried to peer around and went to one side, but they didn't notice her, and she couldn't squeeze between their square shoulders. She summoned up the loudest, highest pitch shriek she could. "Come *on!*"

They jumped, and she slipped past. Just inside the train car, the thin man readied a combat pose with one hand outstretched. His feet twitched when Michelle made her entrance. Arroyo, backed against the wall, aimed his pistol.

"Keep her back," the thin man said.

"No way." The spear-holders tried to grab her, but she ducked beneath their thick arms. She shuffled forward and hopped onto the train car. The thin man swept his leg back and kicked her foot. Her feet slid in opposite directions, stretching her groin, and she fell forward.

"Michelle!" Arroyo let down his guard before Michelle touched the ground, and the thin man sprang in. He disarmed Arroyo then backed off to a neutral corner of the train car; he disengaged the bullet clip from the gun and tossed the clip to Arroyo. He slipped the empty shell into his belt.

"The gun," he said, "was all I wanted."

"Who *is* this guy," Michelle said, "and what's he doing?" Arroyo lent her a hand and helped her up. Her groin muscles burned. "I'm fine," she told him, before he asked.

"My name is Jeffery, head of security at the Arbiter's compound. We talked to your friend Keaton." He offered a handshake to Arroyo. "I'm sorry. I just needed your gun."

"And I didn't want to give it to you."

Jeffery yanked his hand back and stretched his shoulders. The words *Arbiter's compound* lingered in Michelle's mind. "As head of security, safety against invasion is my part of my duties. That's why I need to talk to you. Both. Come with me."

He exited the train. Arroyo looked as confused and Michelle felt. About a half dozen things Jeffery had just that didn't make any sense to her. One thing especially didn't make sense, but only because it had gone unmentioned. "What about Hunter?"

Jeffery stopped and turned. "He will be ordered to assist in the defense. His expertise will be invaluable." He squinted. "Do you have a problem?"

Michelle's eyes had gone wide, but she stopped herself before her jaw dropped. Arroyo held his reaction in feigned calmness. He had to be as bewildered as she was. And somehow Mr. Keaton had been talking to these people and became involved. She tried to think of how long they could have been on the train and realized she had no idea.

"No," Arroyo said. Yes, they did have a problem, but he must have had a plan. He had to. Michelle yanked on his sleeve and pulled him aside. Meanwhile, Jeffery continued walking away, and the spearmen followed him.

"What's going on?" she said.

"Not a clue. But they don't think Hunter's dangerous, and I'm unarmed. I don't like it."

"We'll get your gun back. And my sword."

"I'm not letting *Jeffery* out of my sight until I do."

*

Sophia leaned back against the wall. Her toe and heel were sore from kicking it, but she still wanted to do it some more. Maybe the other foot. It wasn't fair that she couldn't leave the compound while everyone else could. Even a visitor! Just because of potentially dangerous —

She groaned in frustration and kicked the wall again. The pain sizzled through her toe. She hopped back and cursed, then looked up and swung her head to the right and left to make sure no one was around. People were either outside investigating the train, or going about business as usual far from the gate.

Then the gate opened, and Sophia leapt to attention. "Welcome back...."

She expected the first through the gate to be Agnes, but a strongly-built man with a wild anger about him stormed through and right up to her. He stopped just inches from her. She flinched. He smiled like he wanted to devour her, but just as quickly as he'd come, his face contorted into fury, and he huffed as he stomped around her.

She'd never actually gotten this close to Hunter before. She realized that she was shaking.

Jeffery was right behind him. "Go back to work, Sophia. This is over your head."

He was gone before she could turn around and swat the back of his head – though she knew people who did that got broken wrists. That nice Mr. Keaton would have paid her some attention and listened to her. As she spun back, Agnes came through the gate ahead of a hodgepodge of guards and workers, none of whom made eye contact with her. Agnes stopped in front of Sophia.

"Welcome back, Miss Agnes."

"Shush. I can't talk."

She started away, but Sophia was through with it. "Enough!"

Agnes froze. With a tilt of her leg, she turned on her heel. She cocked her head. "You got something to say?"

Sophia opened her mouth, but she found the words caught somewhere way deep down inside her in a twisted up bundle. Yes, Agnes, she had plenty to say. She wanted to be in a position that would test her; she wanted to grow, improve, and figure things out about herself; she wanted to move up from a position that was the same everyday. No, she wasn't sick of helping people; it's actually all she'd ever wanted to do. She was so thankful she lived at the compound. But yes, Miss Agnes, she was *capable*, damn it,

and she wanted to show it. Jeffery might be able to disarm her, but those incompetent guards – she could snap one of those spears in half before one of them even knew what to *do with it*, and she just wanted a chance to prove it. She wasn't crippled by her mother's death. She didn't need to be coddled. If she didn't live inside the compound, she could survive on her own, and that was more than she could say about *just about everyone else including you, Miss Agnes, so it would be ever so delightful if you would just shut the hell up with your orders and your "you got something to say" and slamming doors in her face*, because Sophia Williams had had enough.

So much to say. "No ma'am. I'm sorry. Is there something I can do?"

Agnes shook her head. "If you figure out you can work miracles, you come find me. Real soon, when the alarm goes off, you sit your ass somewhere safe. Lock the doors. Grab a bucket of water. And stay there. Understood?"

So, so much to say. "Yes ma'am."

*

Outside the train, Mr. Keaton waited, but everyone else was gone. They were efficient, whoever these people were. The whole thing made Michelle feel uneasy, like this was a world where she didn't belong and wasn't wanted; it was so strange to think that so different a world could exist so close to the one she knew. As soon as they caught up to Mr. Keaton, he started toward the walls of the compound. "Hurry," Mr. Keaton said. "There isn't much time."

"Time for what?" Michelle turned to Arroyo for some advice, but he looked too serious; she didn't want to ask him a question right now. Jeffery had mentioned an invasion. She shivered. "What's going on?"

"It would be a bit of a longwinded, one-sided conversation for me to explain everything about this place," Mr. Keaton said. "What you need to know first is, well, the garr... and the burners from Majestic. They followed the train."

Michelle gasped. She stumbled and nearly fell.

"You can see why that would be a danger to these people."

With the size of that force coming along the train tracks, and the compound nearly sitting on top of them, the garr could do serious damage just by passing through. She had never asked to be chased. If only the train could turn or head in another direction. Even if they started moving again, the garr would still come.

"But Jeffery said this is the Arbiter's compound," Arroyo said. "The burners and the garr won't harm this place."

"They don't seem to think so," Mr. Keaton said. "I think it has something to do with Anglis. He won't give up."

"Who is that?"

"I'm sorry. The burner I battled, and the one centrally atop the chariot. That's his name. You know, I think his blood somehow *powers* the machine—"

"You... *battled* him?" The thought of Mr. Keaton doing battle with the forces of evil... she'd logged that in the realm of the impossible, alongside bringing her dad back to life and her settling down and living with a husband and having children. She didn't know what to say. In any other situation she might have laughed. This was her gentle neighbor Mr. Keaton.

"Naturally," he said.

It took her a moment to find words. "With what?"

"My axe, of course," he said. "Why do you think I procured it?"

An axe. He had been a firefighter, she remembered, but as she understood they never used an axe on anything more imposing than a stubborn door. She tried to get her mind around it. "How...?"

"Sometimes people do unexpected things," Arroyo said.

"Of course they do. Michelle once ate an entire —"

"Okay, okay," she said. She didn't know what he was going to say, but it was not going to be anything pretty.

"But that isn't what is important," Mr. Keaton went on. "Listen, please. You mustn't — utterly mustn't — let on to anyone within the compound that the garr and Anglis are after you, Michelle. You can't."

"Why...?" Other people figuring that out had been pretty far down her list of things that concerned her.

"They'll deliver you," Arroyo said. He put his hand on her back. "A trade: what Anglis wants for the safety of the compound. I don't know if Anglis is the type to uphold something like that, but your life won't mean anything to these people."

"Heartless! Have a little faith in me."

"I'm afraid it's too probably to ignore, Michelle," Mr. Keaton said. "That's why you have to feign ignorance in that regard. Us being here at the same time as the burners is a coincidence."

They reached the gate of the compound, which lay open. She knew they were right; even if she pleaded with these people and tried to convince them of her importance, that it would be bad if Anglis handed her over to be killed by the Arbiter, that her dad had

been involved in something that was more important than she was, it wouldn't matter to the people who lived here. They didn't care about her. If her life could be traded for their safety, it only made sense for them to make that trade. And she didn't blame them. She only wished the circumstances were a little different. "A terrible coincidence," she agreed.

*

Keaton explained what the compound was about. Now that they were inside, he obtusely hinted at the peculiar notion of the Arbiter's benevolence that the people here shared. Michelle and Arroyo acknowledged that they understood.

Jeffery found them and escorted them to the authority building and promptly separated them. Keaton's heart swelled curiously when he noticed Michelle clutching Arroyo's hand the moment before they were pulled apart. Maybe she could be happy.

He was put in a simple square room with three chairs, and he expected Arroyo and Michelle were each deposited similarly. The floor was made of linoleum that was scratched and smeared with dirt. The light bulbs in the recessed ceiling were dim, but Keaton had so far adjusted to such light.

Thinking of light, he realized he hadn't had the time to tell Michelle about the dome. Maybe it was a blessing; he wasn't sure how she would react to the particular heartbreak of seeing the sun for the first time all the while knowing that it wasn't real. It hadn't been wholly enjoyable to him, even if it was fascinating.

Keaton waited for a few minutes until Agnes rejoined him.

She didn't sit. "Don't suppose you were kidding about the garr, were you?"

"Afraid not."

“Nah, didn’t figure.” She stormed in circles. It made Keaton dizzy. “Hunter’s story backs you up. Let me tell you, I almost gave that man such a beating he’d wake up in two weeks – ‘cept we need him before then.” She stared at a wall. “I don’t figure we have much time.”

“What are you doing to prepare?” He wanted to ask her why he was being held and questioned, but presumed that might net a negative response. So he held it in check.

“Everything we can.”

Her voice slipped, and Keaton suspected that “everything they could” wouldn’t be sufficient. Maybe they had never prepared for such an eventuality as being overrun by garr.

“You sure the burner’s name is Anglis?”

“Yes. Does that matter?”

“Not a bit, no.”

Keaton waited for her to say something, but that spot on the wall seemed to captivate her. More likely she was anxious. “What can I do?”

“Tell me why they’re coming. I know you know.”

Keaton said nothing. He tried to make it so that his body did not betray him; his mind raced and flew to try and discover a way out of this without putting Michelle in danger. Unless he could get her away from this line of questioning, it seemed impossible.

“You said Anglis,” Agnes continued, “and I know Anglis. He won’t give up if he’s after something. He won’t let anything get in his way – he’d also never be after anything without a reason. So what is it?”

"I don't know."

"Yes you do, Mister Keaton, and I know it. You got a first name?"

"It is officially none of your business."

"Uh huh. But this business with Anglis is my business, so you don't have no excuse to not tell me about that."

He waded through her sentence and tried to invent a brilliant lie, or figure out some other way to stall. "Does it really matter what he is after? If he is coming this way, the garr will attack regardless of what he wants."

"If he gets what he wants, he's not gonna burn anything else."

"The garr will not bend to his determination."

"Yes they will. They'll be under his fire bleeding thumb."

Keaton thought about that. If the garr had been under Anglis's control, it made sense that they moved in a wave around the chariot. But it didn't matter if it made sense; it was impossible. "How?"

Agnes shook her head. "Dirty fiery bastard."

He wanted to know how Anglis might control the garr, but he didn't want to push it and cause the line of questioning to cycle back to undesirable topics, so he decided to simply agree with her. "Believe me, I understand your sentiments."

She whirled around and kicked one of the chairs. Keaton flinched but stayed put. "He either wants you, someone on the train, or the train. I don't have any problem giving him any of those, you just got to tell me which, and tell me now. Or I'll give him all of it."

This was it. He didn't believe he could convince her that Anglis was after *him*, because he had borrowed the helicopter, and Anglis had begun following the train before even knowing where Keaton was going. Of the people on the train, Hunter was the only one for which Keaton did not care, though he hated the idea of potentially condemning a man to save someone else. That left only one lie for him to tell. "It's the train," he said.

"Bullshit."

"His arrival in Majestic perfectly coincided with the arrival of the train. The others, however, did not know this, and they boarded the train." He almost had it. The facts came at him and rolled over, exposing other sides, sides he could use. "Anglis cannot see. He would never have known that they climbed aboard the train to escape him, yet he followed it still. How many other solutions could that lead one to deduce?"

"Why would Anglis want the train?"

Keaton shrugged. "I am not wholly familiar with him. You tell me."

She grumbled something then went to the door. "You gonna be useful if the garr attack us?"

"I will do my best." He kept his reaction reserved. He wasn't sure if he was clear of her suspicions just yet, and any betrayal might condemn him.

She nodded toward the far wall. "That helicopter still fly? Never mind. Don't bother answering." Her teeth showed between her lips as she scowled. "I been thinking about everything I can do to save us. You know I can't leave the compound. Anglis would burn the whole thing."

Keaton wanted to ask why but didn't.

"I can't save myself and let everyone else die, either. We could fight, and maybe we could win, but it wouldn't really be like winning. Half our people die so we can kill a hundred garr, and those things never stop coming." She closed her eyes.

"What will you do?"

"I got a plan. Don't worry 'bout that."

*

"You work for the Arbiter?" Arroyo said. He was in a small room with three chairs. When he was put in it, he sat in one of the chairs and dragged another one to serve as a footrest. Then Jeffery came in to interrogate him; Arroyo pretended to be as relaxed as he could.

"Yes." Jeffery seemed to prefer terseness.

What they believed about the Arbiter, according to what Keaton had said, Arroyo thought to be impossible. The Arbiter was the farthest thing from benevolent, and the garr were proof enough. "Why isn't the Arbiter protecting you?"

Jeffery twitched his neck. Arroyo darted his eyes to the man's belt, but his pistol was gone. "Maybe if we'd heard about a little earlier."

"I mean the garr. If you work for the Arbiter, why doesn't it just stop the garr?"

Jeffery stared at him like he was crazy. "The garr can't be stopped. The Arbiter has tried for twenty years."

It seemed as if everyone, even the head of security, believed the lie. He wanted so badly to call it a lie and be done with it, but the facts didn't line up for Arroyo. If the Arbiter did control the garr, then this compound likely had nothing to fear. Anglis would come and kill Michelle, Arroyo, and Keaton, and then he would leave. However,

if that were the case, he didn't understand why the Arbiter would lie to the people who worked for it and tell them that it had no control over the monsters of their nightmares. It was a lie that didn't make sense. Therefore, it was only logical to presume that it wasn't one; the Arbiter then *did not* actually control the garr, and the compound was in danger. This presumption lined up with his understanding of the facts, but his experience contradicted it. He had seen the garr succumb to the control of a single creature, and that creature was a general of the Arbiter. "Regardless," he said. "You have to get ready to defend your compound, don't you?"

"That's why I am here. What do you know about why the garr are following you?"

He needed a lie. "I thought they were following Hunter."

"Could be. Why?"

"I don't know."

"How well do you know him?"

Arroyo swallowed. He never should have mentioned Hunter, but his only other option was to condemn Michelle, and he wasn't about to do that. He decided to give half the truth in the hope that it distracted from the lie. "I knew Hunter before he worked for the Arbiter. His name is Jake."

Jeffery stretched his shoulders again. He always seemed to be stretching, keeping himself limber. "Is the burner hunting you?"

"I just said I think he's following Hunter."

"That was the garr. Is the burner the same?"

"As far as I know."

"Is he hunting your friend Michelle?"

Arroyo's gut tightened. He shook his head, but he had waited a beat, and he could tell Jeffery saw through it. "No, it's after Hunter."

"Damn it," he said, clarity in his face. "Let me be honest with you. I believe that it doesn't matter who the burner is after. Agnes thinks differently."

"She wants to give the burner what it wants."

"Yes, so that he will go away. I don't think it will work." His voice grew soft, as though he were cautious of someone overhearing. "Tell me something. How significant is Michelle to you?"

"Very."

"Would you defend her?"

"Yes."

Jeffery nodded. "How well do you use that pistol?"

"Very well."

He dropped down and looked into Arroyo's eyes. He was focused and determined. Everything Jeffery's unassuming appearance and voice didn't say about his toughness was broadcast in his face. "I'm going to give that back to you and trust that you'll defend Michelle with it."

Arroyo expected that, if this Agnes woman had interrogated him instead, he'd have to fight her instead of the burners. He considered himself lucky. "Agnes. Is she in charge?"

"More or less."

"What will you tell her?"

Jeffery backed away from Arroyo, stretched and touched his toes, then went to the door. He opened it and left. After just a second, he came back, knelt down, and set something black and metal down inside the room. "You think the burner is after Hunter. That's what you told me."

Chapter Twelve

A short woman with a visible temper kicked open Michelle's door and took half a step inside. "Come on," she said.

"Who are you?" She mentally readied herself to pick up a chair and attack this woman if she needed to, but then she remembered the woman Agnes – Mr. Keaton had described her, and this seething woman fit the description. So Michelle set aside the idea of grabbing a chair and instead said, "Never mind. You must be Agnes. Mr. Keaton told me about you."

Agnes shot her a look and snapped, "All shimmering remarks, I'm sure," but she said it like she didn't care. She clicked her tongue and jerked her head toward the door. "Well anyway, your escort never showed up, so I had to come all the way down here to find you and tell you that we're serving tea to your friends. You should join them."

Michelle said nothing.

Agnes snorted and said, "You're welcome."

She turned to leave, but Michelle said, "Who was supposed to be my escort?" They were probably being served tea only to get them out of the way, but Mr. Keaton would be happy about it regardless. Thrilled, probably.

Agnes's face was stretched downward at its sides in a whole-face frown, and she had this look in her eye like she was thinking about something that gave her a headache. "I was dumb enough to think I could tell Hunter to do it."

Hunter. After a moment, Michelle had to remind herself to keep on breathing. Agnes went on, saying, "Honestly, I can't depend on him to do anything but run off and make a heaping pile of shit out of everything. Just wish I never had to deal with him. Enjoy the tea."

But Michelle was frozen until after Agnes stepped out. If these people lost track of Hunter, he would probably go after her again. If only he had showed up and escorted her. She had to find him anyway because she let him borrow her dad's sword for entirely long enough, and it was well past time that she got it back, so she left the room.

In the hall outside, a man with a round face and a flat expression waited for her. She could tell by how wide his eyelids were open that he was scared and trying to hide it. He showed her outside, led her a few hundred yards to a different building, then inside and down an identical white and gray hallway to a tearoom. Around the tearoom were windows with black drapes pulled tight. On the far wall was a single door painted black; a sign nailed to it read, "No EXIT." Arroyo and Mr. Keaton were seated on couches around a small table with a tea set centered on it. It was the most whole arrangement of seating she could remember seeing.

Mr. Keaton waved her over once he noticed her first. Arroyo sighed and smiled when he saw her. That made her feel good, except the first thing he said was, "Did you give us up?"

She sat down and rolled her eyes. "Of course not. No one even came to speak to me."

“Oh.”

“So were you two interrogated?”

“Agnes is a less than pleasant woman,” Mr. Keaton said.

“I’m glad I spoke to Jeffery,” Arroyo said.

“Why is that?” Michelle said. Last she recalled Arroyo had not been happy with Jeffery. Something about taking his gun.

“Well, it was easier.” Michelle got the sense he was hiding something. She took a moment to be proud of herself, because she remembered how impossible it had seemed to read him when she first met him. Now she was getting much better.

“Easier how?”

“He was level-headed and patient.” He made an overt motion with his head and glanced down at his belt – where his gun had been returned. “But if you weren’t interrogated, then why did they let you out?”

Mr. Keaton sipped his tea and looked delighted.

“I think I was supposed to be interrogated... by Hunter,” Michelle answered. “But instead Agnes came to retrieve me, and she just sent me along.”

“I wonder why Hunter refused to interrogate you,” Arroyo said. “He was so eager to do that in Majestic, and he didn’t even have any questions to ask.”

Michelle shuddered. “Don’t remind me. Instead, he’s disappeared, and Agnes doesn’t seem like she cares that he did.”

Mr. Keaton picked up his head. “There must be something more important to Hunter.”

“More important is not good for us,” Arroyo said. “He still wants us dead for what we want to do.” Kill the Arbiter, she knew, but he wouldn’t say that out loud here.

“But he won’t do that here, because Agnes actually has some kind of authority over him.” The room grew quiet. Arroyo wrung his hands and stretched his neck. She’d never noticed him being nervous before, but she could see it now. Maybe it was for her. Mr. Keaton continued to do what he did best: drink tea and pretend things were less dangerous than they actually were. Really, this quiet moment might be one of the last she ever experienced with her friends. The thought gave her pause. She’d never had a friend before, and now she had two. She contemplated her only two friends. Still, even after growing close to him, she didn’t know what to make of her relationship with Arroyo. He *had* been honest and open with her, so she knew now that she could trust him at least. Beyond that, she didn’t know. When he held her, she experienced a strange lifting sensation, even though her feet always still touched the ground. And taking care of him when he was hurt—she’d never felt that motivated to help anyone before. When she helped him, she felt her heart in it, not just her hands and brain. It was about more than just making sure he didn’t suffer an infection. But she didn’t know what.

She contemplated Mr. Keaton and immediately felt guilty. It was her fault that his life had been upset. For too long she’d held onto that thought and let it fester without ever saying a thing about it. She needed to tell him. If this was the last chance she had to sit down with him, she needed to tell him. “Mister Keaton,” she said. “You’d still have a quiet life if you’d never met me. If I wasn’t trying to figure things out...” She didn’t want to say what. Figuring out why her dad was killed and what connections he had

with the Arbiter weren't words she wanted overheard – not at the compound or anywhere.

He said, with an unusual somber voice, "If only recently had been the first time my life had been upset. You don't know the half of it."

It was Arroyo who stole the words right from Michelle's open mouth. "Would you tell the story?"

"It is mostly uninteresting and features no swashbuckling adventures, no daring escapes, and only the world's smallest magical creature." His voice trailed off, and his forehead wrinkled for just a moment. Then he forced a smile, and the stress on his face cleared. "Yet now does not seem the time for such weary tales."

It couldn't be more wearying than their home being burned. Everything therein was gone. Anything that was his life had been burned away. He'd gotten his agricultural lamp and some food. Not much else. She'd been too slow to get her research board on her father... but she had saved a handful of photographs from Mr. Keaton's drawers. She checked her pocket and felt an edge of paper that was crumpled and glossy. Michelle handed them across the table to Mr. Keaton. "I grabbed these from home, and we haven't had a proper time to stop for me to give them back to you." She looked at the floor. "I forgot about them. I'm sorry –"

Arroyo said, "Michelle," and she looked up. Mr. Keaton was crying.

"Mr. Keaton?"

"It's terribly ungentlemanly of me," he said. "It's been too long since I looked at these." He sniffed. "Because this happens every time I do."

Arroyo was silent, and he looked away from Mr. Keaton as if this was only a situation between the two of them, but Michelle needed Arroyo to help her wade through it. He could be her life raft, or her buffer, or something. She'd never seen Mr. Keaton like this, and she didn't know what to do. She kept her eyes down. "I'm sorry," she said.

"No," Mr. Keaton said. "Don't say that. Sometimes it can be good to cry. We're still alive, after all." He paused and slid the photographs back to her. "I want you to see them."

She didn't move. "I can't."

Mr. Keaton didn't say anything, just smiled at her. She nodded. Once it was smoothed out, the light in the tearoom showed all of the color and vibrancy of a world from more than twenty years ago. In the first photograph, a man about forty had his arm around a beautiful blonde woman. Behind them was a building with stone steps leading up to a door that had a red bow tied around it. The man was handsome and youthful for his age. He was dressed in a tweed jacket and wore a bowtie, and he was undoubtedly Mr. Keaton. The woman was pregnant. Michelle flipped it over, but nothing was written on the back.

Arroyo glanced at the photographs.

The next photograph featured the woman lying in a hospital bed. Dark circles hung beneath her eyes, but her face glowed. She held a pale pink baby in her arms. *May the 23rd 2013 Ellice*. Michelle carefully smoothed it. The final photograph featured the same Mr. Keaton, visibly a little older, in a field of grass, an astounding blue sky behind him. The girl Ellice was a toddler with a cascade of yellow blonde hair. Mr. Keaton balanced

her on his knee. She had her arms straight out from her sides like she had been wobbling; he had his eyes on her, one arm behind her, ready in case she slipped before the picture was snapped.

“I never spoke of my family. Maybe it was wrong.”

“This is your daughter.” May the twenty-third in 2013. Michelle had just been born herself, and she knew what happened two years later even though she couldn’t remember it. In 2013 Mr. Keaton was in England, and in 2015 he was in the United States, from which he would never leave. He never spoke of her or his wife. Michelle’s family had died, but Mr. Keaton didn’t know what happened to his. He had to live every day knowing that he couldn’t get back to them. Michelle started to cry. He’d spend two years with his daughter, and then twenty without her. It would have been enough to tear Michelle apart, but Mr. Keaton was still Mr. Keaton.

“Oh, Michelle.” He scooted from his seat and put his arms around her. “You needed... I’m not sure. It had been too long since I could be a dad, so... well. You know the rest. The point is, don’t feel sad for me.”

She couldn’t imagine what he’d gone through, especially for the years before he’d met her. It was clear why he was so happy now. It was relative.

“So now you see,” he said, “waiting for danger with you is better than being alone anywhere else – even in the biggest library.” He wiped away the last tears, and his face looked as if they had never been there.

Outside, a man screamed. Arroyo jumped from his seat.

“Dear heavens.”

“Is it happening already?” Michelle said. They should have had more time. “It can’t be.”

Silence settled. “I’m going to see what it is,” Arroyo said. “We don’t belong here anyway.”

She hugged Mr. Keaton and slid the photographs into the pocket of his tweed jacket. He would need those. “Keep her close,” she told him. His chin wrinkled; he straightened his bowtie and stood at attention.

“She’s never far.”

Maybe he had just needed company, and that was the reason he had attached himself to Michelle; or maybe she had reminded him of his daughter, and he was filling that void in his life by pretending that she was; but really it didn’t matter. She loved Mr. Keaton, and he loved her. It was her turn to look after him.

If the garr were coming, she couldn’t wait any longer. “I need to get my sword back,” she said, to Mr. Keaton then also to Arroyo. “I’m going to be useless when this place is swarming with garr if I don’t have it.”

Arroyo held her shoulders. He seemed to lose focus on the scream from outside. His hands slid down her arms and fell onto her wrists. Her mouth went dry and for no reason she could figure out, her tongue started to tingle. “Michelle.” He lifted one hand to the back of her neck and . He leaned in and kissed the side of her head. “Don’t go looking for Hunter unless you need to. Get your sword and get back here. Please. Please.”

“I will.” Finding Hunter was the last thing she wanted, even if she had to head straight for him. Though Anglis and the garr were just behind Hunter on the list. Things

did not look good. If this was their last moment.... "Thank you," she said. "Thank you for finding me." She put her face against his chest and kissed the base of his neck.

"Michelle, I didn't...."

"Let it be," Mr. Keaton said. "We should go."

"Where are you going to go?" Michelle asked. Arroyo released her, and she lifted her head from his chest.

"I'm going to inspect the helicopter. If it can still fly, it would be a good thing to have just in case. Then I'll look for a girl."

"Mister *Keaton*," Michelle said, appalled.

"I don't mean it like that. It's just—"

"When we get through this, we can meet her, and you can explain it," Arroyo said. He patted Mr. Keaton's shoulder. The elderly man took Arroyo's hand and shook it. "It's been good."

"It has been excellent."

They sounded like they were ready to die, but Michelle wasn't. She wouldn't be, never would be. If her dad had been ready to die the night he never came home, she'd never know. Maybe he had always been ready to die, but she never learned that. It was the opposite. For her, she refused to die, to let herself be okay with that. It was the only way she survived on her own. She never gave and she would never give up her life. They would survive this. She wanted to tell them, but they were on their way out already.

The door that wasn't an exit did lead them outside, but to the outer wall, beyond which was a line of trees. No sounds of people screaming or of garr viciously tearing

into them, only a buzz in the air as tense voices formed a murmur spreading from the center of the compound. Michelle wouldn't find out what the voices talked about — exiting the back of the building was perfect. She gave a confident nod to her friends and slipped away.

*

Michelle snuck toward the front of the compound, Keaton to the back, and Arroyo went for the middle. The scream had not been good, but no garr were in sight. Guards hustled around like they didn't know what to do or where to go, and Arroyo only wished he had some words of confidence for them like a great war general. He had none.

She had her own things to do, but he wished he could have gone with Michelle. He wished he could have told her everything, and he wished he could have kissed her properly. They would just have to survive; then he would have plenty of time to do those things. Right now, he had to divert his attention from her and focus.

He followed the sense of panic and hurrying people and came to a trio of women wearing white coats hovering over a wounded man. So that had been it.

As short as she was, Agnes lorded over the group. She hissed orders, but the women seemed like they ignored her.

"What happened?" Arroyo said.

Agnes started to talk, but one of the women in white coats unknowingly cut her off. "The garr sprinted through, hit and ran. Got George here in the neck."

"We think it was headed toward the dormitories," another said.

“Thank you,” Agnes snapped. “Take him away.” The women loaded the man onto a stretcher and carried him off. “Just a wanderer.”

“Who was?” Arroyo watched the man. He looked like he lived here, so she couldn’t have meant that he was the wanderer. He wore the same fine-quality gray clothes. Color was an unnecessary expense. Agnes wore red and purple.

“The garr,” Agnes clarified.

“Did you kill it?”

“You kidding? Of course. Down that way.” She pointed.

He looked but didn’t see anything. The lights were too bright, and that was the problem with Agnes’s view of the facts. “It was just the one?”

“I thought it was starting already.” An alarm howled across the compound, four quick bursts then a break and four more. “No matter,” she said. “We’ll be ready now.”

“So will they. That’s a scout.”

She scoffed. “Garr aren’t smart enough for that.”

“Right. They aren’t. I wish you hadn’t killed it.”

“Make sense!”

He’d seen unusual garr behavior before. He’d seen them controlled and guided like they were being pulled along the end of a rope. “He’s controlling them.” He would let her believe he meant Anglis. Truly, he wasn’t sure, but he *hoped* it was Anglis and not the phantom from his nightmares. “They send out a scout to see how far ahead the enemy is.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Even if it’s true, we killed it. Why’d they send it running into our base?” She sounded skeptical – but worried.

"It takes too long to wait for the scout to come back, and besides, the garr aren't intelligent enough to give a report." He wasn't sure why aeries weren't used. But it wasn't the time for that sort of speculation.

"So they aren't scouts."

"Look how many of these lights it ran past. You know an ordinary garr wouldn't do that."

She frowned.

"There's a link with the garr," he said. "A mental link. When the garr dies and the link is broken, they know how far to go until they get to whatever killed the garr."

She looked at him like he was crazy.

"They have plenty of garr to spare. It took you by surprise and took out one of your men." He looked west. "If only you could have let it keep running." Only the one who sent the garr would know how much time they had. "You need to prepare for the absolute worst."

"We got our lights," Agnes said. She gestured with a bony shaking hand. "They cover every square foot of this compound. They kept us safe from garr this long."

"That won't work," Arroyo said.

"What do you know?"

"The light will still hurt them but they won't feel it—"

"How does that make any sense? You're just stupid."

He swallowed the urge to hit her. "Stop interrupting and listen. Have you ever seen a garr act as a scout before?" Agnes frowned, and he knew he didn't need an answer. "I

just proved that to you. These garr that Anglis is coming with are compelled. They will go against their normal behavior even if it hurts or kills them.”

A crowd of people bustled toward Agnes from Arroyo’s left; the group halted in front of her and a large man with a spear bumped Arroyo’s shoulder. A blonde girl, just a teenager with a determined face, pushed her way through the crowd despite how intent it seemed on keeping her back.

“Barricade the dormitories,” Agnes said to the group. “They aren’t getting to us.”

“It won’t help.”

“Let me do what I do. Go be negative somewhere else, son. You just be glad I’m letting you walk around right now because I’ve got things that are actually important to deal with.” She smirked. “Where’d your girlfriend go?”

“Hunter is missing.” He knew the “girlfriend” was meant to aggravate him – either meant to elicit protest or need to protect – but he ignored it without a flinch. “She went to find him because you won’t.”

“I don’t care what you did – that crazy ass isn’t going to remember you exist while he has a shot at the burner.”

Arroyo knew why. The burners changed everything for him and for Hunter. He decided to feign confusion and said, “What?”

“It’s his vendetta.”

“So you let him disappear?”

“Not much I could do to keep him.” She turn to the crowd, which hadn’t yet moved. “Go!”

They hurried away, only tripping a little at the sudden orders, and the blonde girl was left where the crowd had been. She drew in a breath and puffed up her chest and said, "Miss Agnes —"

"Sophia! What did I tell you to do?"

She opened her mouth and hesitated, her breath still held. "Find somewhere safe and stay there."

"That's right, now go. This is important."

Sophia grew red. "I would like to contribute my services."

"I don't need vegetables packed in a box. I need people safe, and I need somebody who can rip a garr's throat out. Now go be safe."

Agnes wasn't paying enough attention, but Arroyo could see the anger play on Sophia's eyes, and he could have believed she'd rip out a garr's throat if it told her what she couldn't do.

"But I —"

"If you disobey this order," Agnes said, apparently done trying to hold down her anger, "I will banish you." Sophia's jaw was slack, and the breath left her as a whimper. Agnes turned a waving finger on Arroyo. "And *you*. If you want to fight, go fight. Be a hero. I don't care. Just get out of my face with your expert advice. This is *my* compound."

With that, she left. Arroyo hadn't expected her to listen. He still figured Jeffery to be the more sensible of the two. He would better his chances of being heard if he could find Jeffery. Now, Sophia... he looked at her. He expected teary-eyed compliance, but he saw barely contained fury.

“Are you going to go and be safe?” he asked her.

She clenched her teeth and balled her fists. “Hell no.” And she stormed off. Arroyo followed.

“But she said she would banish you.” He dodged a troop of running guards. They looked panicked; they’d likely never dealt with something like this in their lives and just as likely, given how safe the compound normally appeared, never though they would.

“I don’t care,” Sophia said.

“So where are you going?”

“To find Jeffery.” She weaved past a guard and swiped his spear from his back – he didn’t notice. “And if he won’t listen to me, I’ll... do something drastic!”

“Like what?”

She stopped. “I don’t know. But it won’t be pretty.”

He liked her tenacity, even if she believed the Arbiter was a human-loving envoy of goodness. Plus, she had a much better chance of finding Jeffery in the chaos than he did.

“I’m Arroyo,” he said.

She began moving, a little slower this time, perhaps more comfortable with him following. “From the train,” she said. “I heard what you were saying about the garr.”

“She’s underestimating them.”

“I believe you. So light can still hurt them?” She ducked between two buildings, and he bumped a trashcan. It rattled and overturned. It had been a while since he’d seen anyone besides actually use a trashcan. She turned back. “Hush!” Then, slowly regaining her composure, “I guess you heard my name is Sophia.”

“I did.”

“Light will still hurt the garr, even if it won’t stop them?”

“It should. Do you have an idea?”

“I do.” She kept moving. “But it’s risky, and those burners will ruin it.”

“How’s that?”

They emerged on the other side of the pair of buildings, and Jeffery stood beside a dead garr – surely the scout. He hadn’t done it in, as three spears jutted from it. Rather, he was examining the kill.

“It took three of them to take it down,” he said. His voice had a hardness that sounded unusual compared to it even when he’d had Arroyo’s pistol in his face. The words appeared to be intended for them, even though he didn’t face them. “That is worse than I thought.”

“A heavy club will do better,” Arroyo said. “I use a crowbar myself.”

“I’ll remember that. What can I do for you, Sophia?”

She went red again and strode forward. He still didn’t look up. The garr held his fascination. “I want to offer my services.” She held the spear in front of her, but he didn’t notice.

“Good. Go get heavy equipment from the factory. Anything big, metal, swingable.” Now he looked up and eyed her. “I hope you return that to the back from which you’ve plucked it.”

“I might.”

“Get somebody to help you carry them.”

“Carry what?”

“Our heavy clubs.”

She stifled what probably would have been a growl, or something to the effect. To Arroyo it sounded almost like a chirp. "Yes, sir," she said.

"That's it?" Arroyo said.

She snapped around at him. "It's better than nothing!"

"At least if you're banished you can do what you want." He stepped up before she could retort. He was getting the sense that she didn't like him much, but maybe she was just angry. "Sophia has a cunning theory for surviving the attack." He was putting a lot on the idea he hadn't heard, but he was starting to doubt that anyone would listen to him alone anyway. "Her only problem is with the burners."

Jeffery nodded curtly. "They will be the sturdiest targets."

"No," she said. She jumped forward. "If we can take out the burners, I can completely neutralize the garr."

Jeffery raised an eyebrow. Arroyo was just as intrigued. "You can? How?"

"The antechamber of the dome—"

"We already considered that. The adjustment period—"

"I can counterbalance the adjustment period and turn the light into an instantaneous burst." She breathed nervously. "If you'll let me."

He nodded as if he were mulling it over. Arroyo was already impressed. "Go get some heavy things and hand them out," Jeffery said. "Then hide."

"What?"

"Agnes's first line of defense is the trucks. They drive through and try to scatter or kill as many garr as possible." He eyed Arroyo as if contemplating his trustworthiness.

"I'll be on one of them, and I'll try to get close to the burners. You said you use the pistol well?"

"Very well."

"Come with me. Got it, Sophia?"

"It will take some time to make the alterations to the antechamber. If I'm hiding until the garr are already here —"

"You can't make them from the inside, either. It would put you in too much danger." He turned away. "We wouldn't be able to get everyone inside the dome, and Agnes would never approve."

"I'll cover her," Arroyo said. "If it's dangerous, I'll cover her. And if everyone can hide from the trucks, they can hide inside the dome." He had seen the dome but didn't care to witness what was inside of it; he'd told himself a long time ago that he would see the sun again when the Arbiter was dead.

"I like the idea, Sophia. I don't want everyone trapped in the dome if it doesn't work." He started to leave. "Please do what I ask of you."

"I'll stay with her," Arroyo said.

"Do your part in the fight. If you have talents, use them." He spoke to Arroyo, but Arroyo glanced at Sophia. A mischievous grin formed on her lips then hid.

When he was gone, Arroyo turned to Sophia. "Now what?"

"Time to do something drastic."

*

She needed to get close to Hunter, but it was the last thing she wanted to do. She needed her sword. The familiar darkness swept around her, and she sunk into it like a

bog. She worried that the garr would attack before she retrieved her sword, and the darkness terrified her even though it was familiar, even though it was something she had experienced so many times. It didn't matter how many times she experienced it, she would still want the comfort of that gentle orange flicker or the critical edges on a cone of light from her hand. The darkness on the way back to the train was especially thick, likely from the white lights used at the compound. Her wounded boot flopped and slowed her so that she trudged and plodded when she wanted to slink and speed toward the locomotive.

The red of the train started like the weakest last embers of a wood fire cast on the trees around it, but soon as she grew closer and used to the red and black darkness it lit everything, but clarity was elusive. When she looked right at something, everything around it became sharp to her even as the object of her focus blurred and blurred. Then, if she moved her eyes, it all smeared together until she stopped and focused again. Still, she wanted to focus on something around her instead of the danger right in front of her, so she looked right at it, and everything else came into focus as it blurred away. She noticed the tall grass and the clean edges of the train's engineering. The step up to the ladder blurred. The ladder led to the locomotive hatch; it too blurred. It was just at the front of the car. She was sure the space behind it was where they had the engines. It was all a normal enough train if she could get herself to forget about the light and the fact that the train was made of black steel, but she couldn't. It was the Arbiter's, and it was Hunter's.

She opened the hatch and peered inside. The light was a deep orange, just kind enough to her eyes to keep her dark vision intact but bright enough to light the room so

that she didn't have to look just to the left of something for it to become clear to her. She scanned the small space for her sword. Nowhere. Things were piled in the corners, blankets, boxes, shoes, and garbage, but, as she rifled through the piles, her sword was not among them. She turned back and expected Hunter to have his rifle trained on her. Her pulse pounded in her neck and her wrists. Nothing.

"Damn you," she said aloud. Then she swallowed, because she knew the sword was still with Hunter, and he wasn't here, so she would have to find him. She didn't want to. But she *had* to get her dad's sword back no matter what, or she had no hope of surviving, let alone killing the Arbiter. She needed her dad with her.

But she couldn't do it, not now, because the garr were going to attack, and she was in no position to defend herself if she got caught outside the compound when they showed. She'd been listening to the sounds outside the door, but nothing reached her ears. She decided to head back, defeated for now. She climbed out of the locomotive and dropped to the ground. Her boots sunk into the loose dirt.

They had been so silent. Garr poured toward the compound wall. They didn't see her yet, but only clear empty ground stretched between them and her. She had to back up, get across the tracks, to the other side of the train. It pained her, but she had to hide. She refused to be okay with dying.

Ka-BLAM! The concussion of Hunter's rifle, close behind her.

*

The burner's chest caved violent orange from the shot, and Hunter followed it with his scope. It crumpled to its knees but did not fall, not that it mattered. Hunter ejected the shell from the first bullet, locked the next in place, and lowered his eye back to his

scope, the burner, tall and broad-shouldered with a thin waist, still in clear view. He settled his finger onto the trigger and centered on its heart – what should have been its heart – just a few inches to its left from the oozing entrance wound of the first shot, compensated for the wind, and fired. Less than a single moment later, that immediate satisfaction that Hunter so loved, the gushing wound tripled, and the burner folded and collapsed onto the floor of the chariot. The chariot stopped. No other burners were in sight –

Whumph! Hunter was struck dizzy, and the rifle was thrown from his hands. The thick burner grabbed Hunter's throat, and he grinned with black teeth.

Chapter Thirteen

Sophia brought Arroyo to the dome and dropped the spear she'd swiped from an inattentive guard at its base. She got to the left of the doors and started to scale it using the disguised foot- and handholds for the maintenance people. Her mom had told her all about – her dad had been one of the engineers who worked on the dome. He had been an older man, much older than her mom, but he'd loved her even if he died when Sophia was little.

Until she made it ten or fifteen feet off the ground, Arroyo stayed directly beneath her like she might fall, like the handholds that she could see but apparently he couldn't would just up and stop existing at any moment. Then he backed away a bit and turned his attention toward the front of the compound. He called up to her, "Are you all right?"

"Oh yeah," she said, and took the next hold. The control panel was twenty-five feet up. She was almost there. "I do this all the time."

"It really seems like you don't."

"Hey, shut it," she shouted back. He was at the same time refreshing, because he actually listened to her and believed that she could do what she told people to do – how shocking they always seemed to think that was! – but she soon saw that his honesty could be absolutely infuriating, too. She didn't know why he was here, really, any more

than she knew why Mr. Keaton was here, but as long as he helped protect her home the best she could, then Arroyo was at least a decent guy and better recently than anyone she could find otherwise. Or at least he was on her side.

The rungs were dry because it had been a while since it had rained. At her current height, she could really smell the trees. The compound was so completely surrounded by nature, yet somehow after being inside for twenty minutes she forgot about the natural world outside of it. In spite of the danger, she allowed herself to feel refreshed right now.

She reached the control panel and balanced her butt on the delicate perch concealed there. To Arroyo, it must have looked like she was just floating. A hatch protected the controls, but it wasn't locked, because they never had a reason to be worried or afraid someone might tamper with their technology. No, the only reason they had to be afraid was the garr surely getting closer to the compound. Not much time now.

"Are you stuck?" Arroyo called.

"No," she said. "This is it. I'm where I need to be." She calmed herself and cracked her knuckles. She had been lying just slightly when she'd described her plan to Jeffery. She had never done or seen done what she planned to do, but in actuality she did have a pretty good idea of how to do it. The only problem was time, because if she had enough of that, she could test all night and have it working perfectly. But she didn't have enough. She needed to figure out how to do it first, and then hope that she could do it right, and *then* hope she had time enough left to get everyone inside the dome. No problem.

The alarm howled again, and her heart stopped. She managed to hang onto the perch when she jumped from surprise. One two three four. Pause. One two three four. And her heart kept going again.

“Is it time?”

“No, it’s a warning, the same as before. It will go in a series of pairs when we’re really screwed.”

“How kind of it. Pairs?”

“One-two, one-two.” She turned her focus back to the control panel and went to work. It had been a long time since she’d last been up here messing around with this thing, a year or more. That had actually been her first time, too, but no one needed to know that. They were better off thinking she was an expert and not treating her like a child, because her dad had given her all of the instruction manuals they had produced for running the technology of the dome, and she had memorized each one. But no, Agnes required *experience* for the job. Expertise was apparently irrelevant. Being a man or someone old enough to remember – just barely – what it was like when the dome was built was somehow more valuable – but she needed to focus.

She kicked those thoughts out of her mind. It went just as she had rehearsed it in her head when she came up with the idea. She’d been running calculations and going through the command interface in her head the whole time. Just as she’d thought, the lights in the antechamber were durable enough so that they could push out considerably more lumens than was claimed to be their maximum output. If she gave them sufficient auxiliary power and then cut the eye adjustment period, which normally made the light grow gradually brighter so that eyes could adjust, down to nothing, anything with its

eyes open in the antechamber when her light flashed would be blinded, possibly permanently. So it would be important that everyone cover their eyes and that the garr keep theirs open wide.

Only now did she realize that Arroyo had been talking to her and trying to get her attention. "How is it going?" he asked. By his inflection, it hadn't been the first time he repeated it.

"You ask that a lot."

"I'm getting anxious down here guarding you from all the nothing – how's the progress, little electrician?"

"Call me little again and I'll end you." She looked at her work. "I'm kicking ass," she said. "I need to run a test, but if it works it might blind you. So be careful."

"Me? Why I am I your test?"

"Because I'm not my test," she said, "and I don't want to climb down then all the way back up, so just close your eyes please?"

The alarm shrieked, and again Sophia only just caught herself from tumbling off the side of the perch. It howled once twice, once twice, once twice, and Sophia's fingertips tingled.

"I can see them. They're coming over the gate."

"No," she said. If she couldn't test it, people might die.

"There's no time for adjustments," he said. "Stay there or come down, there's only one thing to do now."

A gunshot was fired from somewhere near the gate. Sophia didn't look. She didn't want to look, didn't want to see the garr. She shouted, "We have to get everyone inside. They'll be safest there."

"I have only five shots," Arroyo said. "I'll use them if you're about to die, but not otherwise." He had a pipe in his hand. She had no idea where he got it.

More shots were fired from toward the back of the compound – the riflemen who guarded the authority building – followed by wet crunching sounds far off. Sophia was no longer aware of the gunshots after that. She started to climb down.

"Sophia, there's a truck coming this way."

She forewent the rest of the rungs and instead slid down the curved face of the dome. She hit the ground hard, but the dirt was soft, and her ankles only stung a little from the bracing impact. She picked up her spear at the dome's base where she'd dropped it. "I'm going to help –"

The truck swerved and screeched to a halt in front of Arroyo. Sophia went to his side. Jeffery was the only one inside the truck. "Did you do it?" he asked.

"I think I did," she said. When he seemed unhappy, with her response, she said, "I'm not going to lie about it or apologize, because I think that what I did is much smarter than what Miss Agnes had planned. I'm going to do whatever I can to save my home – just don't tell her I said that about her." She paused. "I think it will work."

Jeffery nodded and said, "Good, I was hoping I could count on you. The trucks aren't ready, so I already started giving orders to fall back to the dome."

She had no idea what to say. This had been the same guy who'd told her to best make herself useful by grabbing things that were heavy. Maybe he'd truly fooled her.

“You said you need the burners distracted? I think the first shot was Hunter’s, but even if he killed one of them, there will be, according to your reports, two others remaining –” he turned to Arroyo “ – will you come with me to the front?”

Arroyo looked at Sophia. She held her spear at the ready. “I’ll be fine without you,” she said.

“I meant you too, Sophia,” Jeffery said. “Unless you need to make sure this is going to work.”

“No,” she said. He didn’t want her with him on the front lines, but maybe he felt bad for earlier, or maybe he thought she’d be easier to protect up there. Regardless, she would do him the favor and refuse. “I’m going to help people get inside.” She lifted a wrench from her belt and gestured it to Arroyo. “Blunt weapons?”

“Only if they get close enough. Keep them at a distance with your spear.”

“I know,” she said. “Jeffery taught me everything he knows.”

“I did?” he said.

“Well, unintentionally,” she said. “Now get going.” She shoved Arroyo toward the truck, and he climbed in. It drove toward the gate. She had to look now. So many of the dry gray monsters tore, mobbed, and rushed through the small streets of the compound. The guards held the line, but beyond that line, anyone too slow or stupid enough to want to fight was pulled down by the garr. They would dig in with their claws or horns, or mangle with their teeth, and then once enough flesh was torn so that their victims wouldn’t fight back, they moved on as a collective and dragged down the next one. Bodies littered the roads, the dirt damp and dark from the blood, the grass glistening

around anyone who had fallen. The pungent smell of fresh flowing blood filled the whole compound.

People hurried toward her. They needed her.

“Get inside!” she shouted. “But clamp your hands over your eyes – *tight* – and don’t let go. You’ll know when it’s safe to look again and the doors open. Now *hurry!*”

*

The truck bumped and bucked through the compound. The line of garr split to one side or the other but few so much as brushed it as they evaded the truck. Arroyo gripped the door handle in one hand and his pistol in the other and waited with held breath as they drove deeper into the horde. Hundreds of them.

“This isn’t working,” Arroyo said. And it wouldn’t work even if they tried to run the garr over. It was clear Jeffery wasn’t trying to hit them like Agnes had planned. He stayed focused on driving straight. It seemed Sophia’s plan really was his objective. The compound gate was just ahead.

It was closed. If they were going to get through it, they would have to stop and get out of the truck, and they would die if they did that. So they couldn’t stop. They had to keep driving moving, Jeffery had to keep driving, but he didn’t turn or slow. They headed straight for the gate, bumping and weaving closer. Then, a few feet from it, he spun the wheel, and the truck skidded. The right-hand side slammed into the gate and couldn’t budge it, but everything in the truck wanted to keep moving. Arroyo braced with the hit but struck the door with his arm and the window with his shoulder. The window shattered. The truck stuttered and stalled.

Garr clambered over the gate and onto the roof of the truck. Claws started to squeeze down and grope for the shattered window. Arroyo leaned away. "Anytime now!"

Jeffery stomped on the gas, and the truck came back alive. The garr tumbled off and rolled under their tires.

"Where are we going now?" Arroyo said.

"The burner is still on the other side. If Sophia's plan is going to work, we'll need to get to them. Are you ready?"

Arroyo didn't know what to expect on the other side of that gate, but he knew, rather hoped, that Michelle had gotten that far and he would find her on the other side. So he said, "Absolutely," and they circled back then spun, still failing at running down any garr in their path, and Jeffery steered the truck onto the road with the straightest shot to the gate. He pushed the truck as fast as it would go and slammed his fist into the horn and the pedal to the floor.

Arroyo held on. It hit the gate and crumpled, metal bending and folding like cloth. It splintered the wooden doors. One of them burst from its hinge and boomeranged to the right toward the tracks. It landed soundlessly and floated along the grass, spinning with a pocket of air under it. He lost track of it, stopped keeping track of it, because the burner's chariot lay past it just peeking from between the hills. It wasn't moving. A single object burned on it. No burners in sight.

"That's their chariot," he told Jeffery. "But no one's on it."

The truck wasn't going to move anymore. Jeffery tried the key and tried the gas, but it was dead. Their luck shone, however, in that they had cleared the line of garr. Now that they weren't in the garr's path to the compound, they paid no attention to the truck.

Arroyo even got out of it and stood just a few feet from the cusp of the rushing garr, and they ignored him entirely. To them, he didn't exist. He frowned. They were being compelled again. It wasn't just to ignore the lights. They were given a singular goal as a collective, and they were following it with no exception. But what was it?

"Where else might the burners be?" Jeffery said.

"Inside already? The chariot could be a decoy. Although...." He turned to the train. It looked unbothered, although the door to the locomotive at the front was open. If the burners were looking for Michelle, they could have followed her. He decided instead to assume that she had made it to Hunter's end of the train and gotten back safely with her sword.

"Let's investigate it," Jeffery said. Arroyo turned. He'd followed his gaze to the locomotive. It was the only clue, and they couldn't afford to spend any time deliberating. Somehow it was easy to forget that an army of garr were ignoring him just twenty feet back, but for Jeffery it would have been impossible. He wanted to defend the compound, and he believed that destroying the burners would accomplish that. If Arroyo could find Michelle along the way, he would help Jeffery. Otherwise, he didn't care about the compound.

*

She dropped into the fray of burnt blood, snarls, and death cries, and she readied her spear but not as a weapon for thrusting. She held it in two hands across her body, each end becoming a shield to block attacks. She feigned and ducked back and caught their irrational rushes. Without thinking about attacking, she could focus on controlling them. She was more interested in staying alive than for as long as possible than seeing how

many garr she could kill before they brought her down. She became a one piece wall to open a path behind her leading the fleeing people to the entrance to the dome. Eventually more would show up and join in her line – she hoped. Even fighting as defensively as possible, she couldn't hold the line long.

Once twenty people were inside the antechamber, she shouted, "Defend yourselves!" and she backed down and ran for the antechamber herself. It was farther than she thought. Hopefully she could make it; if she died, oh well, but if she didn't make it, and all the rest of the people died because her plan didn't work, then there wouldn't be much conjecture regarding whose fault that was.

"Sophia! There you are." To her left, Mr. Keaton rounded the dome and headed for a point of interception.

"Mister Keaton, what are you doing here?" She was surprised to see him, but everyone was the same here, just trying to save or be saved. "Get to the dome!"

He altered his course and hugged the wall. It would be easy for him to reach the door. She, however, didn't want to look back. She could hear the garr snapping at her heels. If she looked back, they would trip her, pin her down, and wound her enough so that she didn't get back up. They weren't killing anyone. She'd noticed that. But they were inflicting wounds that ensured their targets stayed down. If they lost the compound, all of those people would die. But if her plan worked, and they made it through, most of the victims could be saved. She clenched her fists and ran harder.

The antechamber was filled with frightened faces, wide eyes in pale faces. Mr. Keaton made it inside. They all looked just behind her. She grabbed at the controls and hung on, catching herself even as her momentum tried to carry her on, and she slammed

her fist into the *CLOSE DOOR* command. The doors snapped shut, and claws ripped into her. She felt the sting and smelled her blood but she staggered into the antechamber the garr around her

Their force crashed upon the unmoving bodies in the antechamber and rocked it and tore through it. She hit the control to seal the door. Above the sound of flesh rending and snarls and screams, she screamed the loudest. "Cover your eyes, whatever you do!" She cupped her hands over hers, and the garr clawed her and bit her legs and ankles and tried to get to her throat. She wanted to cry, but she made herself count. One, two, three. Her hip and leg were wet with blood. Maybe hers. That should have been it. The lights should have come on. But there was nothing, and as the garr drove her to the ground and tried to claw through her pulled-together elbows to get to her chest, she kept her hands clamped over her eyes and shrieked, "Keep them covered! Keep them covered!"

It came without sound. A white so bright it burned her eyes through the cracks between her fingers, and in that instant, the garr just stopped moving. The one attacking her fell aside. She had imagined unholy wails in the face of divine light, but instead it was just an absence of sound. The snapping jaws and slashing claws just ceased, leaving whimpers and cries behind. It dimmed, though the light was still bright. The doors to the empty dome opened, and the first wave of survivors were ready. Sophia blinked away the pain but still couldn't see much of anything for the brightness. She heard the gasps of others before she heard her own as her vision came back to her, because the garr all lay dead on the floor. Their faces, whether avian, reptilian, canine, or demonic, were devoid of eyes. The eyes had just been erased like it had been sanded away from a stone surface, with scorch marks left behind.

“Get inside,” she ordered, and swallowed heavily as some people had to be dragged inside. But again, everyone was alive. Mr. Keaton hobbled up to her. “I’m glad you made it inside,” she said. “Stay safe.”

“And you will not?”

She shook her head and looked back toward the black door that brought them here. “I have to fix that delay. I can’t injure all of the survivors.”

“Must you go back out there?”

“Of course. I have to.” But in no way did she want to. She could barely move her right leg for all of the wounds, and her hands shook. Feeling that creature bear down on her, trying to get to her chest and throat, but not being able to see any of it happen was worse than any nightmare she’d had about the garr. And she’d had plenty. “I’m going back.” It helped to say it again out loud to herself.

“I’m going with you,” he said. He had his back to the interior of the dome, like he didn’t want to see the false sun again—of course, it was the only sun to her, but it was far more to him. She realized how it might have been a bad idea to have brought him to see this earlier. She had been so convinced that he would like it. She felt like a dumbass. “I don’t want to be stuck in here,” he said. “My friends and I have an important journey to undertake.”

“Come on then,” she said. As the doors closed on the interior of the dome, and the light of the fake sun was shut out, Sophia felt a well of sadness, and she said goodbye to it. Despite her wounds, she did not think that she would die, and she did not know why else she might never see this building again, but she still said goodbye to it.

*

The air was warmer as they got closer to the locomotive. That should have told Arroyo everything he needed to know, but he didn't think fast enough. Jeffery went ahead of him and was knocked off the ladder by a heavy boot slipped onto a thin leg. The kick tossed him over Arroyo, who ducked. Arroyo ran back from the locomotive and was ready to shoot whatever came out of there, but he paused.

At first he didn't believe it. It was the lanky man from the Palazzo lobby. The idiot. Except his eyes were covered by scars, and his veins were thick and red. Jeffery set a hand on Arroyo's arm. "Don't shoot unless you're going to kill it." If he had a shot he would take it, no matter what this head of security said or thought he could do by himself.

"The man with the gun," the burner said. This was clearly no longer the lanky man. The voice had changed completely. It had been simple and slow, but now it was concise and villainous. "I am Gaisras. You killed me with your fire, but I live again because of mine."

Jeffery apparently had no patience for monologues. He took quick steps to close the distance and struck at Gaisras's throat and stunned it. He blocked the wild reprisal then disarmed the burner of the blade it was trying to draw behind its back.

Arroyo stopped looking for his shot. It made sense now. Their fire was under their skin, so Jeffery could defeat it, or at least combat it and hopefully incapacitate it, with bludgeoning blows if he never let it draw blood. Only, the burner seemed exceptionally strong. Jeffery delivered blows to the burner's joints – its knees, shoulders, elbows – areas that would slow its movement but not break the skin or blood vessels, and he ducked each time a feral strike would come through. Arroyo wasn't sure he'd get up

again if one of those blows connected. Without much else to do he took aim in the event that blow did fall. Four bullets. Plenty.

Jeffery didn't seem to be making progress despite how many times he hit the lanky enemy. Then he caught Gaisras's wrist, bent it around, and moved behind it where he delivered a snapping blow to the burner's shoulder and elbow then dropped the knees from behind it and caught the burner's uninjured arm and pulled it up around the burner's throat. But the burner used the improbable strength of that arm and yanked Jeffery over its shoulder, flung him to the ground. He landed on his back, the wind knocked out of him.

Arroyo was ready, but he hesitated still. Jeffery had delivered many hits and, from the sound of it, had broken at least a couple of the lanky body's bones. He didn't want to fire yet if that meant he would have to engage Gaisras alone. "Freeze!"

Gaisras rose on its injured knees, oblivious to the pain it must have been feeling, and said, "Burn." It drew another scalpel from its pocket, but Arroyo couldn't let it. If it was going to burn, it was going to burn because he made it bleed. He fired. It was intended for the burner's head, but Gaisras apparently hadn't been standing fully upright, because it stretched upward and twisted and took the shot in its already injured shoulder. Magma burst out the other side and trickled down its arm. It took the scalpel and dug it into the wound and flung magma. Jeffery crawled away, and Arroyo leapt back. His next shot hit Gaisras in the chest, and then it was on him. It moved far faster than it should have, and it slammed its good arm down on his pistol and knocked it to the ground.

It shoved him with its burning shoulder, and Arroyo's shirt and jacket caught fire. He dove to the ground and rolled and extinguished the flames, but he had to roll away from Gaisras and, therefore, away from his pistol. Then Gaisras's head snapped forward, and its knees gave out again. Jeffery was behind it. He tossed Arroyo the pistol and kicked Gaisras so that it hit the ground face- and chest-first.

Arroyo stepped over it and placed the pistol to the back of its head. He didn't know how it had happened, but the burner Gaisras had killed this innocent man and taken his body. It wasn't Arroyo who killed him, no matter how much it looked like that was the case. He refused to close his eyes, and he fired.

He stepped back to see if it would die. When he had killed Gaisras the first time, the fire that was always contained inside it had burned it from the inside out when it died. Gaisras did not do that now. So when Jeffery said, "Good work," Arroyo shook his head and said, "It isn't dead yet. It's pretending. Playing, hoping we leave it alone."

He only had the two bullets left. One more went in Gaisras's head, and it started to pop and burn. This time he hoped it would stay dead.

"How many are there?" Jeffery said.

"I'm not sure," Arroyo said. "Didn't you say three?"

"That's what I heard. I thought you might know better. That thing burning on the chariot must have been one of them, probably taken down by Hunter's rifle shots, and now this is the second. But where is the third?"

*

Sophia climbed the ladder with slippery palms, blistering aching cuts and punctures in her legs, arms, and stomach. She needed to quicken the flash. In the time it took to get

the first load of survivors inside, guards had shown up to defend the antechamber door. It seemed like the garr were concentrating here, targeting the dome. She had no idea why.

While the guards swung tire irons and metal beams around to keep back the garr, Mr. Keaton directed as many survivors into the antechamber as he could. The guards with rifles had stupidly wasted all of their ammunition on the garr, so now they had to join the melee. It meant that, if they needed firearms to take down the burners, they wouldn't be able to. Somehow they would have to figure out an alternative. Some of the guards were overrun and left groaning on the ground.

Sophia climbed the hidden ladder faster this time and did what she needed to do. This time she knew she had it. The light would trigger immediately. It would cripple the garr, and hopefully no one would be injured. "Go! Go! Go!" she shouted. "Let them in."

Mr. Keaton fled to the side, and the garr ignored him. The guards let the beasts slip between them, blocking and corralling instead of attacking. The garr wanted to get to the dome. Sophia felt the surface of the dome, and she could feel the doors sliding and then thudding shut and clicking locked. She put her cheek to the cold metal. Her breath made steam on the surface. With the doors closed and the garr inside, the people screamed, the garr growled, and then it all fell silent, and the interior doors opened. She exhaled, felt all the pain of her body rush back to her now that her adrenaline started to drain, and she smiled.

*

Michelle went toward the sound of the Hunter's rifle. It was deeper into the line of trees than she'd thought given how loud it had been. The last time she'd heard the

sound, the shot had grazed her and might have killed her had the wind picked up or died down just a little at that second, so it was not a sound she wanted to head toward normally, or even now. Rather, she headed toward it because heading in any other direction was far worse.

Then she saw them. She raced and leapt over rocks and past trees despite her maimed boot, and the fat burner – Anglis – walked a steady pace of steps toward Hunter, who scampered away on all fours. She saw the glint of his rifle in the grass, and she saw the rigid line of her sword at his waist. Anglis kicked him, fiercely but idly, not as an attempt at preventing him from reaching the rifle, just as what needed to be done. It was like it made no difference, like everything was inevitable to this creature.

She got closer. But she wouldn't get there fast enough.

Hunter reached the rifle and seized it. Anglis stomped on his back, flattening him to the grass and rocks. Hunter cried out, "*Oomph!*" as the breath escaped him, but he held onto the rifle. He lifted it over his head, flipped it backward, and tilted it up slightly. Then he awkwardly hit the trigger. The gunshot was more like an explosion. Michelle yelped and slapped her hands over her ears. Hunter did the same. The rifle kicked out of his hands and into a patch of thick, thigh-high grass.

The bullet cleared a hole through Anglis's thigh, but the burner barely noticed. Magma spewed out the exit wound onto Hunter's own legs. The shot had done what Hunter needed it to. He wriggled out from under Anglis's boot, didn't first bother extinguishing the fire on his backside, and scrambled for the tall grass. He recovered the rifle while Anglis teetered.

She couldn't tell where his hands went as he ejected the shell, cocked the next into place, and aimed the rifle – all while getting to his feet. "I've got you now."

"Hunter," Michelle said.

He glanced her way but kept the rifle steady.

"Surrender the girl," Anglis said.

So he was after her. But she couldn't think of why. Another piece to her dad's puzzle? It would explain why the garr had always taken a fervent interest in trying to kill her, but it didn't give her any answers about her dad. If Anglis really only wanted her to surrender, then maybe the garr wouldn't have killed her, back then.

"You want *her*? And here I thought this was between you and me."

Michelle was afraid to move any closer, even as much as she wanted her sword. Hunter's rifle could easily be turned on her; or she could be an unwanted diversion, and Anglis could strike while Hunter was distracted. For having Anglis locked in his sights at point-blank range, Hunter didn't even seem as confident as usual, and that scared her.

"Besides," Hunter said, "you can have her. She wants to kill the Arbiter, so I figured *you* and your folk wouldn't have any problem with that."

"His folk?" she said. The burners *wouldn't* have any problem with her killing the Arbiter. If the burners weren't a function of the Arbiter, then what were they...?

"So yeah, Anglis, you can have her, but that's not going to save you from me."

Hunter smiled.

"Think."

"There isn't anything to think about! You're an enemy of the Arbiter." An enemy. Just like her. "That's all that matters."

The smile disappeared, and he fired. At the disappearance of the smile, before Hunter's finger even brushed the trigger, Anglis made his move, but, even with the impossible reflexes, its move was not to avoid. Anglis ran straight into Hunter's shot, and in mid-step its head burst open in a sideways eruption. The blindfold fell limp over the hanging half nose, the grinning half mouth of burnt teeth. But he didn't stop—he finished that step and only accelerated, magma pouring from his head and down his shoulder. Hunter frantically ejected the empty shell.

Then the rifle was struck from his hands. It hit a tree with a snap and landed near Michelle. After all of his slow, deliberate movement, Anglis attacked with the energy of a released coil, like a viper's strike. Sprung even as he melted and fell to pieces.

Disarmed, Hunter fell back and tried to draw Michelle's sword. Anglis grabbed the blade in both hands, cutting through his shaggy gardening gloves and into the flesh. The magma dripped and poured over the blade and turned it yellow with heat.

Only now did Michelle remember to move. She'd been so dumbstruck by the fight, but she'd been knocked out of her daze by the rifle landing nearby. She looked up at the sword—if only she had that instead. It didn't belong in Hunter's hands. She took up the rifle and repeated the motion Hunter used to load the next shell into the barrel.

The grass and trees started to go up from the fire spewing from Anglis. She could barely breathe. It was like the fire was on her skin not around her. She could feel her face burning, the skin growing dry and cracked just from being so close to all of the fire. Her knuckles were bleeding. She wanted to fire the rifle, but her arms felt too weak, and she felt so uncertain of herself, so sure she would miss.

"Michelle!" She heard Arroyo. Please let him be close.

Hunter let go of the sword and withdrew. Anglis broke the melted blade in two pieces like it was made of soggy cardboard, and it tossed the molten pieces at Hunter. Michelle's mouth went numb. It would be impossible to put back together, to have her dad again.

Hunter flung his arms up and knocked the blade down, but Anglis lashed out and seized one of his arms by the wrist and lifted him off the ground. With his other hot, dripping hand, he cupped the back of Hunter's head. Hunter kicked and fought, but Anglis didn't budge. He drew Hunter toward his molten face as if for a kiss.

Michelle stopped. She'd never heard a sound with more anguish. Anglis tilted his head, and the magma poured from his head over Hunter's face. "Oh my God," Michelle whispered. Hunter's face disappeared behind the hot glow. His arms convulsed. His legs jerked around, feet off the ground as Anglis held him up by his wrist. His scream was like someone's underwater. Everything was covered in fire.

Arroyo grabbed her and pulled her away, but once they were clear of the flames, she wanted to look back.

From the heat, Michelle's eyes filled with tears. Zero affection. That's what she'd told herself she'd had for Hunter, but... no one deserved to be in so much pain. Not even Hunter. The tears weren't from the heat. It was the unnecessary suffering.

Next to her, Arroyo dropped to his knees. They couldn't reach Hunter, couldn't if they wanted to stop anything that was happening.

Hunter flailed and struck Anglis, but the burner was unmovable. The fire ate through Hunter's skin. His suit ignited. Anglis wouldn't let go of the wrist, even holding it up as Hunter collapsed. Like a doll held up by its raggedy arm, Hunter swayed and

flopped in the thick heat and smoke. Anglis held onto him until the fire consumed him. Even without his head, Anglis wouldn't give up.

"It just wants me," she mumbled. Arroyo didn't hear her, and that was just fine. He wouldn't agree with what she wanted to do. Hunter could have given her up and gotten away with his life, but he didn't want to. He really, seriously wanted to kill enemies of the Arbiter. She wanted to cry, but she held it back. "We have to do something."

Arroyo clamped his jaw shut, so much hurt and anger in his eyes.

"Please."

"What can we do?" he snapped. "He's dead."

"We can kill Anglis!"

"And will that do anything? Is that even worth the bullets? Is that thing's life worth anything?"

"Arroyo."

"No, get out of here. I'm not going to let you go after that thing."

Anglis held onto Hunter until he barely looked like a person anymore. Then he dropped him, knelt on burnt grass, bent low, and touched what remained of his head to the body. Anglis looked like he was feeding.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

As much as she would have liked to honor his request – if he'd requested, which he hadn't – she knew she couldn't. Anglis was an enemy of the Arbiter, and so was she, but he pursued her and marched with the garr, burned so many things and killed so many people trying to get to her. She needed to stop it. She needed to know why.

The rifle was still in her hands. Maybe if she was close she could use it.

Arroyo didn't want her to fight, probably because he cared for her and a little because he had cared for Hunter, but she didn't belong to him. She cared about him, too, and didn't want him to die because Anglis wanted her. She turned and started to go with him, then she whirled and sprinted back.

"Michelle, no!"

She jumped and cleared the first row of burning bushes. The air turned forty degrees hotter. The path to Anglis and Hunter was clear, though the air was filled with smoke. She gripped the rifle the same way Hunter had, aimed down at the kneeling body in front of her, and rested a trembling finger on the trigger.

"Anglis!" She panted. "Why are you hunting me?"

"Michelle." Arroyo stood at the edge of the fire, his pistol drawn and aimed at her. Not at her. Near her. "Come back."

If Anglis really was feeding on the fire, she had no idea what would happen if she let him finish. She couldn't. "No," she shouted back. "Not yet."

It wasn't the same as Arroyo's pistol, but it should have worked the same way. Finger against the trigger. Her breaths were quick and shallow, fetching more smoke than air.

"Anglis!" She had to stop him from feeding on the fire, whatever he was doing. "Stop now. Stop all of this."

She stifled a fit of coughs and clamped down on the trigger. That same explosion ripped from the barrel of the rifle. The bullet tore a trough across Anglis's back, through his spine. The rifle shocked back. Electric pain jolted through her shoulder, down her arm and back, and it numbed immediately. Michelle bit her lip and dropped the gun.

Anglis didn't move. He didn't look alive – head submerged in fire and a chunk of his back missing – but somehow she knew he was.

"Stop," Arroyo said.

Anglis stood and lifted its head her way. *His head.*

"Oh my God." He hadn't had a head a few moments ago.

"There's no winning, Michelle! Run!"

Not yet, not yet, she repeated in her head. Without the blindfold, Anglis's eye-shaped scars were awful. His face had the shape of eyes and depth of eye sockets except there was nothing but marred skin.

"I never asked for this," she yelled. Arroyo shouted for her, but she ignored him. Hunter's body was burning strong. The smell was horrid. "I am not worth this many lives. Whatever you want with me, you can have me."

"Michelle, no!"

"He will *never* give up," she shouted back, "and everything will burn." If he wanted to kill her, it would. She would fight, but she was too weak to win. It didn't matter. She wouldn't run anymore. "Anglis. What do you want with me?"

The burner seemed speechless. Maybe he had never expected her to go willingly.

"I will take you to Casimir."

Her legs froze. That name. Fear rumbled in her stomach. It was the one from her nightmares. She'd forgotten how many times she had heard it and discarded it. It had been a struggle just to convince herself to write it down. But she *knew* that name had something to do with her dad. She... if she could reach Casimir, then maybe she would finally find answers.

"Michelle, don't," Arroyo pleaded.

"Yes," she said. She didn't want to look at Arroyo. It would be too difficult to say goodbye with just her eyes. Instead she glared at Anglis. "Take me to Casimir."

Chapter Fourteen

Forty-three had died from their wounds. One hundred sixteen had made it into the dome. Seventy-nine were injured, some inside and some outside. And then the garr began to behave even more strangely. They hated light, yes; it was painful to them, but they had been ignoring it. That had only been marginally strange. Now, Sophia stood beside Mr. Keaton with more than a dozen of the remaining survivors, including three guards – one of whom continued to insist on using his spear – and watched as the garr now ignored them. All they did was run, about a hundred of them, hugging the wall of the dome. They ran lap after lap and ignored everything else. She couldn't get to the dome control panel, or the door to the antechamber, and none of the survivors-turned-prisoners could get out of the dome.

It wouldn't be a problem, not for the people on the inside, but it was awful for everyone else, and Sophia figured she was the only person standing in that group that realized it. They talked amongst themselves, the guards exchanging strategies on how best to sneak up on the garr, the rest lamenting the people who had died. Mr. Keaton was quiet and kept making wayward glances toward the compound gate.

But Sophia knew. The people in the dome could survive indefinitely. The geothermal reactor powered all of the dome's functions. They would have food for all time. But no

one else would. As long as the garr remained outside the dome, there would be no more deliveries, no more helping the desperate and alone, and everyone in the nation would starve eventually. Sure, the distribution centers had reserves, but they were cut off indefinitely from the supply, and those stores would not last long.

“This is horrible,” she muttered.

“The people are safe in the dome,” Mr. Keaton said, bringing his attention back to her after one more glance toward the gate. She wondered where Arroyo and Jeffery were, too. “You saw what the light did to those garr.”

Before she had a chance to respond, the guards raised a clamor. The one with a spear puffed out his chest, patted another guard on his shoulder, and edged closer to the garr. “What is he doing?” Sophia said. None answered her. They probably didn’t even hear her.

He slowed five yards from the garr. Then inched forward to five feet. He took incredibly hesitant steps, pausing after each one, until he couldn’t be more than two feet away from the edge of their running. The garr didn’t acknowledge him. He readied his spear, timed it, and let it fly.

Sophia just realized what he was doing. She tried to get to him, but she couldn’t cover that ground, and once she knew that, she stopped.

The spear broke through the garr’s body and it fell, trampled. The rest of the circling garr swelled and broke against him like a wave on a sandy shore, coursing over him and reducing him to nothing in moments. He didn’t have a chance to make a sound. When it was done they fell back in line without a pause.

“So they’ll defend themselves,” Jeffery said grimly.

“Jeffery.”

She wasn’t sure when he’d come back, but he was now just behind her. “Who thought it was a good idea to do that?” he shouted.

The guards looked at each other then at the ground. “No one, sir. He was boasting.”

“And no one tried to stop him?” Two women among the survivors clicked their tongues, shook their heads, and let out sighs. A waste, they were probably thinking. “This is all we have. We are it. I don’t know if those garr will ever let us back into the dome.”

“They can’t run forever,” one guard said.

“Can’t they? We don’t know. I don’t want anyone doing anything else wasteful or stupid or desperate. We have enough to survive here, for a while, but we have to put our heads together and think of a way to get through these garr.” He turned to Mr. Keaton. “Your friends are alive.”

“Thank goodness.”

Jeffery didn’t seem to share the old man’s enthusiasm over that, and it worried her. “Sophia, can you take him to the train? You’ll find Arroyo there.”

“I want to help.”

“This is helping. You’re more sensible than the rest of these—” He cut himself short. “Where is Agnes?”

Sophia shrugged. “I haven’t seen her. We went around and counted the dead, moved the rest of the wounded, and I couldn’t find her.”

“I must have spoken to her last, when I told her that her plan wasn’t going to work.”

“Where was she?”

“Her office. The authority building. You don’t think... do you think that she stayed there?”

Before it even became a topic of conversation, Sophia wanted oh so badly to be the one to find Agnes. She wanted to scream so many delightful things at the small, sad woman. Then her stomach tied itself in knots at the thought. Miss Agnes was still in charge, still her boss, still rife with threats and power. She couldn’t do it. She wanted to do it.

Jeffery started, “I’ll try to find her – ”

“No I’ll do it,” Sophia blurted. Yet inside she leaned away and wished she could take it back. She didn’t want to face Agnes, hiding under a desk or something, and find herself unable to say what needed to be said because she was afraid.

“Are you sure?”

Sophia nodded.

“Take this key. When you find her, let her know that I’ve put myself in charge of the compound. If she wants to contest it, she’s welcome to talk to me.”

Her mouth hung open. She looked around. Only Mr. Keaton appeared to be listening in on their conversation.

“I can see where you would come to that decision,” Mr. Keaton said with a sharp nod. “Good luck. However, if Sophia is undertaking this errand, shall I seek out Arroyo on my own?”

“Is that all right? I don’t think any garr will attack you.”

“No, I’m not concerned that they will. Your cryptic tone regarding my friends, however, has me bouncing with nervousness. I’d like to go.”

“Go, then.”

“Wait,” Sophia started. “If you decide to leave, please come back before you go. I’d like to say goodbye.” She wasn’t sure what she wanted to say, but she wanted to have words with the visitors before they left. No one else seemed eager to blame them for the attack, but she wanted to know what they were really up to before she decided to pass that same judgment. And she would, admittedly, miss Mr. Keaton.

“Of course,” he said, and he left.

“There’s going to be a lot of work to be done,” Jeffery said.

“I won’t be useless.”

“No, I know that much.”

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Keaton pleaded with who-knows-which-God all the way to the gate that Michelle still be all right – and Arroyo, too, out of fairness. The fire smoke filling the air from that direction did nothing but cause his bubbling anxiety to boil. He moved faster. When he stepped past the crippled gate and saw Arroyo sitting alone in the middle of the clearing, he stopped pleading, for he knew it wouldn’t be heard.

Arroyo didn’t see him coming. On the other side of the train, some trees still burned, though it appeared that much of the fire had chewed through the foliage and exhausted itself. The burner’s chariot was nowhere Keaton could see, though one body near the locomotive had been thoroughly burned.

“Arroyo, did she...?”

“Keaton,” Arroyo said. He sounded relieved. “My mind is going faster than I thought it ever could, but I can’t get my body to move. It’s like it numbed my body and

took all of that inertia and threw it into my brain, and I keep telling myself that if I sit here long enough and think hard enough, something will happen.”

“Slow, please,” Keaton said. He noticed the pistol in his lap. “Tell me what happened.”

“Hunter killed the first burner at a distance with his rifle.” He took a deep breath to calm himself. His eyes concealed immense pain. As much of a chasm had grown between him and Hunter, it was clear to Keaton that Arroyo had held onto some lingering hope that he might be able to return to the old. Sadly, though, Keaton knew that returning to the old was rarely possible.

“Go on,” he said.

“The second burner, Gaisras, attacked Jeffery and me. We killed it. The third one, Anglis, attacked Hunter. I didn’t see all of what happened.”

Keaton could barely find the words to speak, but he needed to hear what happened to Michelle. “Please go on.”

“Hunter shot off part of Anglis’s head, but it didn’t stop. It killed Hunter and regenerated somehow. Michelle couldn’t... she couldn’t kill it.”

“No,” Keaton gasped.

Arroyo shook his head. “It didn’t want to kill her. She surrendered and went with it.”

“Surrendered? Why in heaven’s name would she do that?”

A shrug. “Tired of being chased. Maybe. But she doesn’t know Casimir.”

“Neither do I. What is it?”

“A nightmare. Anglis will take her to Casimir. I don’t know what he wants with her, but I can’t let her go.”

Keaton brightened. “You’re going after her, then?”

“They left in the direction of the train tracks. I know they can go off the tracks, but maybe we can still find her.”

“It’s unlikely.”

“It’s worth trying.”

Just what he hoped Arroyo would say. A dashing man! They would rescue Michelle yet, he knew. “Then we ride immediately. Except, without the riding. No more beastly horses, thank goodness.”

“Does the helicopter still work?”

Keaton shook his head. Before he met Sophia at the dome, he’d tried the helicopter, but the garr had spilled in from that direction, too, and they’d tossed it from the top of the building where it had been resting. Its blades were crippled.

“The train it is, then.”

Keaton helped Arroyo, who looked like he needed considerable hours of rest and recuperation, to his feet. He regarded him before they began walking. “I want you to answer something for me, though. What you know and I do not about relevant events is considerable, I’m sure. But I want to question your motives. Why will you rescue Michelle?”

Arroyo looked like he wanted to duck out of his own skin to avoid the question.

“She is important to me now. More important than any ideals or missions for the greater

good. It's been too long since someone was important to me." His eyes trailed back to the train.

"We have something in common, then, besides an affection for books."

Arroyo allowed a slight smile. "Shall we go?"

Keaton started toward the compound. "This way, first. Briefly." Like he agreed, he would bring Arroyo and himself back to Sophia before they departed.

*

Sophia had never been in the authority building before. She wasn't sure what she should have expected, but it hadn't been something that looked, in every possible way, exactly like every other building at the compound. They were built for economy, for purpose, with none of the art of buildings she'd seen in books or on films they recovered. It was utterly normal.

Offices, halls, all empty. She felt shocked by the sadness of it all. People worked in these offices, cataloguing the detailed and tedious process of growing, packing, shipping, and supplying food to most of the country. It took a serious amount of logistics. Some of these people were dead now. Others were injured; others were holed up in the dome. She had no idea how Jeffery planned to keep this process going with so many fewer people and with so much lost time, but she knew that, by now, he did more of the work and oversaw more of the actual details of the operation than Agnes. Everyone would be better off with him running things.

With her thoughts back on Agnes, Sophia set about looking for her. It would have helped if Jeffery had given her a hint regarding where Agnes's office was, but she had a guess, and it was a good one. On the third floor of the authority building was an ornate

door, clearly recovered from somewhere else and then brought here and installed, because the frame had to be expanded and evidence of the construction work was obvious. Sophia tried her key.

“No, go away,” a voice said once Sophia had opened the door.

“Miss Agnes?” She inched into the office. A bed, a dresser, a wooden room divider, a desk, a filing cabinet, a dining table, and a kitchenette – it was an entire living space. Sophia stared, and she barely noticed that Agnes was on the floor in the middle of the room.

“Everything’s gone wrong.”

Sophia held down her anxiety. If she waited to say what needed to be said, the anxiety might stop her, so she said it now. “Jeffery says he has taken over command of the compound.”

Agnes croaked something. Sophia couldn’t tell for sure, but it sounded like a swear word.

“He said if you want to argue it, you can come find him.”

“Yeah? He can have it.”

That wasn’t what she expected to happen. Agnes was all ire. What was this creature, then, blithering and weak? Not her leader. “Get up.”

“Hmm?”

She didn’t want to bolster Agnes’s confidence. No, Sophia didn’t care if she moped, or if she wallowed in her failure. She had been so single-minded that she refused to listen to the ideas of others, and it was selfish to mourn anything other than the people who had died defending their compound. “Get up,” she said again. But she *did* want to

be mad at Agnes, and if hearing what she had coming to her somehow snapped Agnes out of her stupor, then so be it.

Agnes shuffled to her feet. She held onto a pillow in an old brown pillowcase.

"You have an obligation to the people who, for some reason, trusted you to be their leader." Agnes winced. "If you want to wallow, do it somewhere else. People died. If you're going to be here, then you have to own up to what happened."

"What happened," Agnes repeated.

"What *did* happen? Why were you hiding in here?"

"I had a plan, and I wanted it to work, but I couldn't face him."

She must have meant Jeffery. "He still respects you. Not everyone else will, if they hear about this."

"Quiet, girl. I'm not talking about Jeffery."

Sophia wanted to snap back at her but didn't out of intrigue. "Then who?"

She shook her head. "It's been too long. I couldn't do it."

"Do *what*?"

Agnes looked hurt. "You can't tell anyone."

"I won't." Maybe she would.

"Sophia, you may think that you have all the world experience that you need, but a lie is a lie and I see it all over you. I can close my eyes and hear it. I can cover up my ears and smell it, and I'll feel it in the air, too."

"All right, enough."

"Don't tell nobody."

"Okay, I won't."

"You know how many burners there are?"

"No."

"Neither do I, but I've heard names of ten at least, and I heard other people say there were fifty or three hundred or a hundred thousand. Some of them were crazy, but the point is I'm not sure how many there are. What I *am* sure about is that Anglis is the worst of all the bastards. It has a soul burnt so black that it refuses to die."

"Refuses to die?" That was the longest string of words Sophia had heard Angles string together without scolding her or yelling at her, so it must have been something important. She listened.

"I saw it get shot and beat and stabbed, and it was burning so badly you couldn't even see the shape of the body. Didn't die."

"But how...?"

"Don't ask me. I don't want to know. After it did that... it grabbed my husband, Hank." Agnes looked about to cry. "He was a gardener. Worked in the dome, always wore gardening gloves whenever he went out."

She didn't want to ask about Agnes's husband. She didn't know Agnes had ever cared about anyone before. So instead of approaching that subject, she asked a different question. "The compound has been attacked before this?"

"No. We were out on a delivery. Sort of a vacation for us." Agnes dropped the look of sorrow and curled her mouth and scrunched her eyebrows in anger. It was a more familiar face, and it helped Sophia relax. "It grabbed Hank and poured its blood, its magma... over his face. And down his throat."

"Oh my God."

“And, when it was done and my Hank stopped screaming, then it died. But it didn’t really die. More like it fell apart. It dropped Hank, but he got back up. His eyes were gone. And that was it.”

That was no end to a story. “And that was *what?*”

“Hank was Anglis now. Anglis killed Hank and jumped to his body. I ran away, took the truck.” She let out one tearless sob. “I put all I had in this place ‘cause I didn’t have anywhere else to put it. I never thought I’d be a good leader, but I did it anyway. And that’s why I hid here. I couldn’t see Hank.”

“Oh.”

“If I find out you told *anybody* about this, I will kill you, Sophia.”

“I won’t tell anyone.”

Agnes nodded. “Thank you.”

“Then, for everyone who asks, what were you doing up here?”

“Just tell ‘em I’m a coward. That’s good enough for me.”

“Really?”

“I’d rather people think that than know I’m hurtin’. Better that way for me.” Agnes grumbled. “So what’s gonna happen to those folks who brought all that here?”

“Jeffery said they can go.”

“They can go? No, not a chance. They gotta come clean and answer to some of this, too.” She dropped the pillow in the old brown pillowcase, stomped toward Sophia, grabbed a coat from the rack by the door, and stormed out of the room. “Close that door behind you, and come on. I’ve got one last thing to do.”

And Sophia closed the door and followed, even though she hadn't yet gotten to yell at Agnes about everything she wanted to.

*

The garr ran and ran. They didn't slow, or stop, or waver. It was exactly the same lap as the one before, and watching it, Arroyo felt like he was trapped in some loop of time, reliving the same thirty seconds over and over. It made everything else happening feel like it was set to the same loop, like everything around it was chopped into thirty second segments, too. He tried to shake the feeling.

In the light, the garr were almost white, like ghosts. They were of all sizes, some on two legs, others on four, occasionally some on more than that. "What are we waiting for?"

"You asked that three times already," Keaton said.

Arroyo supposed he had. It felt like the appropriate time to ask again. Michelle was slipping farther away. Each time the garr completed one lap, how far had she moved? One. Two. Three.

"There!" Keaton shouted. "Sophia, we're leaving. Please come quick."

The rest of the people of the compound had cleared out, taking orders from Jeffery and getting right to whatever task he had for them. Now the blond girl Sophia and Agnes crossed the clearing. Agnes was careful and gaped at the garr as she took a wide circle around them. Sophia said nothing. She looked upset, but also vaguely like she enjoyed seeing Agnes afraid.

"No you are not," Agnes snapped. "You are not going anywhere until I ask you a few questions."

There were no guards. They had no reason to listen to her request. But he did owe it to her. The garr had come to the compound because of Michelle, who was there because of him. If he had killed her like he'd been ordered to, or if he had ignored her coming to him, then maybe they wouldn't be here, and there wouldn't be casualties to collect.

"Fine," Arroyo said.

"Where are you going?"

It was a simple question, and he could give it a simple answer, but it wouldn't be a complete answer. "Anglis took Michelle east. I'm going to get her back."

Agnes nodded. "You'll need someone who can operate the train."

Yes they did. He had been hoping that he and Keaton could figure it out, but having someone who understood it already would be far more beneficial.

"Go ahead," Agnes said, "take Hunter."

"We... can't," Keaton said.

"Why? Why does he hate you?"

"No, that isn't quite it," Keaton said. "He's dead."

Agnes scowled. She closed her eyes and cursed under her breath. "And I was going to break his arm, too. Damn it."

"Is there anyone else?"

She lifted her head. "Me. I'm it."

It wasn't likely that they were the only ones in the whole compound who knew how to operate the train – it didn't seem logical – but only Sophia was here to protest her view of the facts, and she said nothing. More than that, Agnes had offered herself up. It

had to be that she no longer wanted to be here. She was looking for a way to leave. "Will you come with us?"

"What?" Sophia said. "That's absurd."

"Yeah, I will."

"*What?* You don't trust these people," Sophia said. "No offense, Mister Keaton."

"A strange gentleman lands a helicopter in your midst? I wouldn't trust me, either."

"Nah, I don't trust them. That's why he's gonna earn it. Arroyo."

He met her eyes. Her face was angry, but her eyes weren't. She was sad, and maybe confused. He decided not to call her on the duplicity; if she offered her desire to go with them, he would comment on it, but it seemed likely to him that if he called her on it then she would retreat to aggression, and he wouldn't be able to get anywhere.

"Why did the burners come here?" she started. "They were here because of you. It has to be you." Agnes crossed her arms. Keaton hummed nervously.

"Isn't that obvious? They wanted Michelle, and they took her."

"And why'd Hunter hate you?"

"Me? I'll never know. I've wondered often."

"Nah, not *you* you. The three of you. Came to Majestic and he wasn't happy 'bout it, but he didn't tell me why. Now you should tell me."

"He doesn't like us, I guess."

"And what do you have to say about it?"

"Me?" Keaton said. Arroyo filled with dread. "I have nothing to add. As far as I will concern myself, my reason for being right now is to find Michelle."

"Yes. And we have to go now –"

“But you ain’t gonna catch her without that train, and you ain’t gonna move that train without me. That’s not the only thing I can do for you, either, but you got to win me over. So you’re gonna answer my question with none of this runaround, and then I’ll go with you.”

“Agnes, no—” Sophia started.

“Just let him answer. You’ll see.”

She’d backed him into a corner. Telling her the truth would lead her to back out—or worse. Lying might not convince her, and she wasn’t going to react well if she caught him in a lie. Refusing would cause a stalemate. However, she was proud, proud enough to hide her real desire, and he could use that. “What if I tell you and you don’t think the answer’s good enough? You’ll back out.”

“Will I now?”

“Anybody would. I would.”

“I ain’t you.”

“Then what can I do?”

“I’ll guarantee it. Hit me with the truth—every bit of it—and I’ll go with you no more questions asked.”

“Will you swear to that?”

“Yeah, I’ll swear. Shit. There you go.”

“Good enough for me.” He smiled inwardly. “For different reasons, we’re tracking down the Arbiter to kill it.”

"Him," Sophia corrected. It was a natural, reflexive correction, Arroyo wagered, and she'd uttered it without actually listening to what he had to say. "No," she said, now stunned. "How could you want to kill the Arbiter?"

"That the truth?" Anges said.

"The simple truth, yes. There's plenty more I can tell you about what we've been through, including the story about why I can't figure out why Hunter hated me. But we will have a whole train ride for stories."

"Miss Agnes, they need to leave."

"And you, sir?" Agnes ignored Sophia and turned to Keaton. "This true?"

"It is."

"All right. I swore. I'll go with you."

"Agnes, *no*." Sophia got in front of the short woman. She grabbed Agnes and pulled her aside. "We need to talk a bit over here," she said.

*

"They don't believe anything that we know is true," Sophia said. "Why can't we take them to see the Teller so he can tell them?"

"He'll only talk to people who want to talk to him, and these folks don't want to listen to any other truth than their own." For a second, it sounded like Agnes was talking about the two of them, unwilling to listen to a truth other than their own, but that couldn't be it, because what Sophia believed *was* the actual truth. She knew that they were right.

Then Sophia stomped. "But he could tell them so easily that the Arbiter is good, and then they wouldn't be trying to kill him. The Arbiter, I mean. I know some people are entitled to think certain things but—"

"Sophia, have you ever met the Arbiter?"

"No."

"Seen him or heard him speak, ever?"

"No. Where are you going with this?"

"The Teller is a liar. Always has been."

"No," Sophia said.

"Don't tell me *no* when I know what I'm talking about."

"You believe it. I've heard you."

"I know I do. But I still know that the Teller's a liar. He's good at it. He lies to get people to join our side. He makes it up."

"How can you believe it but still say that he's making it up?"

"Cause as much as I believe it, I know he doesn't. We live the way we do because we're lucky. I don't know if the Arbiter is good, but I never ask, 'cause I get to live the way that we do, and life is a hell of a lot kinder to me than it is to most. I know that."

"But I know —"

"You think you do, but you don't. Like me, you just believe. Wouldn't you rather know it for real?"

"What do you mean? I thought you just said...."

"If you're as sure as you say you are, then you can prove it to them. Give 'em a big *I told you so*. Come with me, and with them, and you can show them how good of a person the Arbiter is."

"Wait. Why would you want me to come with you? You think I'm useless." She shook her head. That wasn't the point now, and she didn't want to back herself into a corner where she confirmed Agnes's asinine assumptions of her. "No, forget that – how is going with them a good idea for me?"

"Just listen. They want to kill the Arbiter. Okay. If he doesn't exist, then there's no harm done, and if he's evil the way they say, then all the better. But if he's real, and he's good, they won't kill him. *We* won't let them. And we can finally know for real if we've been living for anything. I know that would make me feel better."

"So you're just going to go along with it?"

"And they need someone to move the train."

"You're serious."

"I won't pretend to hide nothing with them."

And then there was her husband. Sophia knew that Agnes acknowledged the fact that he was dead and that he was only a burner now, but she also knew Agnes fairly well. She would want to overcome that cowardice and face her past. While Sophia didn't want to travel with Miss Agnes the leader of the Arbiter's compound, maybe she could tolerate traveling with Agnes the woman looking for her own truth.

Going along with people who wanted to kill the most benevolent person on the planet. The thought made Sophia cringe, but Agnes had brought up a good point.

"You'd stop them from killing the Arbiter, when it turns out they're wrong?"

“Without a doubt.”

Then if they *didn't* go with Arroyo and Mr. Keaton, they might kill the Arbiter just to unleash their unhappiness on a target. Her skin started to turn hot just thinking about it.

“I might not like it,” she started. She summoned her guts, because she knew the only way Agnes would have any power here would be if Sophia let her have power, and she had to remind herself of this as she spoke. “But there’s something I need from you first.”

Agnes waited.

Here it was. She braced herself. “Okay. I need you to apologize to me.”

“What for?” Agnes snapped, and Sophia did not recoil.

“For treating me like a child when you had no right to—”

“I had right enough, girl. I was your leader.”

Sophia picked up Agnes’s indignation and arced the momentum right back at her.

“You’re right, you were – but you aren’t anymore.”

“I’m not going to apologize for leading you the way I thought was best.”

“Yes you are, damn it. Or I am not going to budge.”

“You won’t stay here.”

“I’ll help Jeffery.”

Agnes scowled like she was going to say something, probably about how Sophia wouldn’t be any help to Jeffery and would just wind up being a nuisance, but clearly the shattered chain of command made her sour, and she turned silent at the mention of Jeffery. Maybe it did hurt, not having anyone to boss around, but Sophia wasn’t going to sympathize with her for that.

“I ain’t sorry.”

“Then promise that you’ll never do it again.” Never have undo authority again. “We are equals.”

“I’m still your elder.”

“I don’t give a damn! Equals or see you later.”

Agnes went quiet. Her shoulders slouched, and her chin dipped. She’d never seemed so small. “Then I apologize. I used to be your leader, but you’re right. I’m not that anymore.”

Sophia spun. “Mister Keaton! Arroyo, wait.” They had moved closer to the gate. “We’re coming with you.”

“I’m the only one who can work the train, anyhow,” Agnes grumbled, “now that Hunter’s gone, may he get more peace restin’ than he ever had walkin’.” Sophia listened to those last, oddly tender words ricochet around her head as they trekked to the train.

*

Keaton watched the aerie float on the breeze and then disappear as a blur heading due east, as if he had been shot out of a silent cannon. Agnes had summoned the man—whose spindly legs, true to tales, ended in nubs at his shins—with the blow of a quiet horn. Observing the flying man had briefly raised his spirits because of the marvel, and then *greatly* raised his spirits when he heard what Agnes had planned for the aerie.

“Fly east, along the tracks,” Agnes had said. “We’re going to follow in the train. Tell us if and when the burner leaves the tracks.”

“What do I get?”

“You don’t get snapped in two, you half-pound ass! Get!”

“Fine, fine.”

Now, Keaton climbed the ladder into the locomotive after Arroyo, Sophia, and Agnes. "So that man will spy on the chariot for us, and come tell us if it deviates from the tracks of the train?"

"You bet," Agnes said. "Let's get this going. I'm not looking forward to what's on the other end."

Keaton was looking forward to that more than the train ride itself, which, given the icy disposition Sophia had taken on and the general unfriendliness of Agnes, didn't promise to be a fun trip. Still, his time alone with Michelle had done something for Arroyo's spirits, for he was not nearly the pessimist Keaton remembered from Majestic. It made him overall better company.

Chapter Fifteen

Anglis was a burner. The compound opposed the burners. That could only be possible in so many ways. The Arbiter's followers might have split into two sects, and now they fought. It was hard to think of Hunter as part of that team, but before he died, she saw a new side to him. Something that might have been the friend Arroyo made those years ago.

But where, then, in this scheme, did Casimir belong?

*

She swims through darkness. Her consciousness feels murky, but the murkiness doesn't come from her. Her thoughts are clear, only moving through them feels like wading through curtains of filth.

The name Casimir appeared in her forest nightmare. It appeared again in her hospital nightmare. She remembers these, only forgot the previous ones because she had, at the time, disregarded it.

She swims and passes under and over swampy curtains of muck. Her fingers go to brush them aside then stop. Words are carved into the curtain, glowing, as though written by a pen with light for ink.

“---- hates me, but it isn’t my fault. ---- can always hear me. Had to move WEST, as far as possible from ----.” *She recognizes these as lines from her dad’s journal, ones she copied down to her pin board. They reform, change shape.* “C--- hates me, but it isn’t my fault. Ca-- can always hear me. Had to move WEST, as far as possible from Cas--.”
“Sometimes I think of the state of the world, and I feel an incredible amount of guilt, but I force myself to remember that Casimir is not the man I knew, and his envy is not my fault.”

She has never seen these words before, and they shock her into numbness. Envy. A man he knew. What could have been his fault?

Alarms go off in her head, and panic wells up from her toes. The curtains begin to shred. The words vanish into darkness. Deep blue smoke seeps toward her. It chokes her. The world around her spins. She falls and tries to scream. The blue smoke comes forward through the blur and begins to form an oval, which turns into an elongated skull, which turns into a wispy, dripping visage that shrieks, and from its mouth tendrils squirm toward her like a fistful of worms. Still falling, she can’t swim away. Anxiety spreads through her like fire with each touch of a tendril as they worm beneath her clothes, across her flesh, and she screams, “Wake me up! Wake me up! Wake – me – up!”

*

It wasn’t her only nightmare during her time on Anglis’s chariot, but it was the first, the worst, and the only one that gave her any information. She did her best not to scream each time she awoke, but Anglis didn’t seem perturbed when she did. She didn’t look at him, because she didn’t want to see if he enjoyed it.

She hadn't expected there to be food on the burner's chariot, or somewhere for her to sleep, and she was surprised when Anglis offered her both. A ladder led to a small cabin under the chariot's black steel surface, a space with a bed and an empty chest. It smelled like sweat and old meat, but she stomached it. The pain in her shoulder from firing Hunter's rifle had grown excruciating, and she could barely move without igniting it. It stretched over her back and down her hips, sometimes aching even if she wiggled her toes. Much of her time in the first few nights was spent sleeping, though the nightmares came to her with increasing regularity, and she was forced to sleep in short spurts, her restless thoughts her only companion otherwise.

The food was bland but filling. It was stored in sealed boxes behind a hatch that Anglis showed her in the cabin. She didn't want to try to identify the food; instead, she just ate and then rested her shoulder. After two nights of travel and rest, she had to start moving.

She found herself thinking of Arroyo often, to the point where she thought he might appear in her dreams. Her feelings about him confused her, and she tried to focus away from attempting to figure them out. Unsuccessfully, on both counts.

Talking to Anglis was a possibility, and she had plenty she wanted to learn from him, but she hoped the burner would initiate conversation, and then she could draw out the responses that suited her. He seemed content without moving and without speaking a word. Never was it clearer that Anglis was inhuman.

She talked to herself to stay sane.

Once her shoulder felt better, she started climbing up and down the ladder that led from the deck to the cabin. She walked circles around the deck of the chariot, and she

did sit-ups and push-ups in the cabin. When her muscles were sore, she stretched.

Anglis never moved, and she never bothered him.

Anglis stood at some kind of control pedestal for every moment of the journey. Presumably, if the other burners were still alive, they could take shifts. But, with only the one remaining, he placed his arms upon the pedestal and stayed there. A black steel panel swung over the tops of his arms, and somehow that allowed him to steer the chariot.

One night, she was sitting on deck, watching the trees and rivers as they passed, and she noticed a hatch, entirely smooth, along the pillar in the center of the chariot. It had looked like a smokestack, so she hadn't paid much attention to it.

She opened it. The hatch swung open, and a gray-black boney creature slipped out and thudded to the floor at her feet. Its head crunched then rolled away from its shoulders. Its eyes were closed, its face slack, but the skin snapped and peeled away. It was almost like ash; the harsh wind rubbed away the crumbling surface of what used to be flesh.

The scream caught on her tongue, and she swallowed it. "What the hell *is* that?"

"You have seen it before."

She stared at it, not even acknowledging that Anglis had broken his fifty-hour silence. She stared at the face from her nightmares. It was *similar*, but it wasn't the same. If that face was Casimir, this was not it. It had the gray decay, elongation of the face, the rotting skin, just wasn't quite the same. She stared at the disembodied head. The ashy skin swirled in the air and flowed away.

"This isn't Casimir, is it?"

“No,” Anglis said. “It is a nightmare. It controlled the garr before it died.”

“A nightmare.” The word tasted like its ashy skin on her tongue.

Controlled the garr. That was the Arbiter’s power, or so she’d thought. But here was an enemy of the Arbiter with the ability to control them. Her theory of a divided force continued to look better.

It felt strange to talk to Anglis, but now that he had spoken to her, she didn’t want him to stop before she took the conversation as far as she could. “What happens to the garr now that it’s dead?”

Anglis paused. Maybe he didn’t want to answer her questions. Of course, he had no reason to answer her. He had been so comfortable with silence that he clearly did not need to, but then he spoke. “They run,” it said. “It will wear off eventually.”

Perhaps the garr truly were mindless, more so than even Arroyo had thought, and they could only perform tasks more complicated than eating when compelled by one of these nightmares. “But Casimir is one of these, isn’t it?”

Anglis said nothing. She watched him, but he made no gesture that indicated he was still interested in talking to her. The wind – thankfully blowing away from her – had nearly swept away the dusty remains.

“What does Casimir want with me?”

“Casimir wants what the Arbiter made him want.”

“That’s too vague. Why are you obeying his commands if you can’t understand them?”

“I can understand,” Anglis said. “Casimir wants what the Arbiter made him want.”

"Yes, you said that." But she had to be able to get more from Anglis. She wouldn't give up. The Arbiter made Casimir want something. The implications of that were foggy at best, but at least she had a sentence linking the two. Along with envy, and a man her dad knew, she could try to figure things out.

Anglis didn't say anything else, and Michelle went back to bed.

*

"You could have just told me that the train runs on its own," Arroyo said. He was less irritated than he now pretended to be, but Agnes *had* been pretending to man the train for the last three nights and had even slowed it down when she slept. He wasn't upset that she had used her ability to power the train as an excuse to come with them. No, he'd seen through that. It was just the principle he wanted to argue.

"Then what? Then you'd steal my train. No, sir. I know that you stole this train once already from Hunter."

"Actually," Keaton added, "I believe Hunter boarded the train first, and Arroyo and Michelle snuck onto it."

"But you wanted to steal it," she shot back.

She had him there. "True, but only as means of transportation. We weren't interested in the supplies beyond what we needed."

"So what?"

"So we would have given it back. Sophia."

"What?" The blond lifted her head. The train travel was making her restless, and she clearly did not do well with restlessness. She was used to being busy, having something to do or trying to have someone give her something to do at all times, and she'd been

reduced to walking the entire length of the train several times a night. Sometimes Keaton went with her. A couple of times she even allowed Arroyo as company.

“Did Agnes tell you anything about not wanting us to steal the train?”

Sophia put on a fake smile and shook her head. “Not at all.”

The discord between the two of them had been obvious from his first encounter with them, but now that Agnes’s power had been subverted, Sophia often looked for reasons to side against her, and Arroyo enjoyed using that.

“It don’t matter.”

“Did we have to slow down each night?”

“Yes, but only to save on fuel. The train should’ve been restocked at Majestic, and when it came back to the compound, but shit was a little busy. So we gotta stop at this emergency station, and I needed to make sure we had enough to get there, so we had to coast while I was asleep. That good enough for you?”

Arroyo frowned. “Anything else you’re holding back?”

“No. Oh yeah, I like to watch you when you sleep,” she mocked. “Nah, that’s it.”

He wasn’t sure he’d come to trust either of them, and now that he could presumably ride the train all the way east without them, he wondered why they were still here. If the opportunity arose to leave them at this refueling station, he’d consider it. Neither seemed eager to be here.

Sophia coughed.

“Are you feeling well?” Keaton asked.

“Yeah, sorry,” she said, shifting her shoulders. “Just an itch in my throat.”

“If you’re feeling sick at all, there’s medicine on the train,” Arroyo said.

"I know. I helped load it." Sophia shot him a look.

He then felt awful, and Agnes's eyes were a friendlier alternative to Sophia's. Definitely not his ideal company. "So we have to stop at this emergency reserve station. Will it take long?"

"Maybe an hour. I'll have to do it all myself, so maybe longer."

"Does no one live there?" asked Keaton.

"Why would they? We barely use it. Guess I can tell Sophia how to do some stuff and she can help out."

"Don't sound too excited about it," Sophia said, "or you might smile."

"Sophia, why don't we go on a walk and check out that medicine?" Arroyo said. Agnes looked ready to launch into one of her tirades, and Arroyo for one had had quite enough of those. The woman seemed most comfortable when she had something to scold. He often suspected the equipment worked perfectly but she yelled at it just because it made her feel better.

"Sure," Sophia said without excitement. "A walk sounds lovely."

That left Keaton to listen to Agnes's rant, and Arroyo offered an apologetic nod. Keaton took it graciously, and wished them safety.

*

After the first night, Sophia started to regret coming along. Agnes didn't give her orders or assume any authority, but the old woman had instead made it a point to bitch at almost everything and yell at everything else. Sophia wasn't sure which Agnes she preferred.

Then there was this guy. Arroyo was clearly infatuated with Michelle, and he wanted to rescue her. Sophia admitted it sounded like Michelle had put herself in a situation which direly required some rescuing, so she wouldn't get on him about how just because Michelle was a girl he liked didn't mean she needed to be saved, but at the same time she tried to fathom how he could be positive enough to find love yet jaded enough to not believe what she had to say about the Arbiter. And that made her want to hit things.

"Arroyo," she said. "First, thanks for getting me away from Agnes."

"I was doing it for myself, honestly."

"Well, thanks anyway. Can you tell me something?"

"It depends on what it is."

They paused while they walked between cars. The chugging wheels and the whipping wind made it impossible to hear anything unless the doors were closed. "Why do you want to kill the Arbiter?"

"It seems the right thing to do."

"Why, exactly?"

"To set right the world. Look, there's no point asking *me* why *I* want to kill the Arbiter, no more than there's a point in me asking you why you glorify it—"

"*Him*, damn it."

"Because it's the same. I believe what I believe, and you believe what you believe. One of us will be right."

She squelched her frustration. When she calmed herself enough to look at his point from both sides, it was valid. He wouldn't have been able to sway her from her viewpoint, either. "Fine then. Why does Mr. Keaton? He seems so harmless."

"He doesn't really. But if there's a way to restore the world, he wants to find it. He has family in England."

"Where's England?"

Arroyo gave a condescending laugh. "Too far away to reach."

This time only, she suffered his condescension because it seemed like something she ought to have known. She hoped Mr. Keaton's family was still alive. If it was too far away to reach, then it was too far away for the Arbiter to help. Probably. She knew he would help people as long as he could reach them, but she didn't know how far that was. "And what about Michelle?"

They went through to the next car. "Michelle."

"Yeah," Sophia said. "Why does she want to kill the Arbiter? Did you talk her into it?"

"No. She blurted it out when she first met me. We bonded over it, and I went along with her."

"So *she* started this little quest."

"It goes deeper than that for her, though. She's trying to figure out why her family was destroyed. The Arbiter and, apparently, some other individuals, are part of that. I'm not fully aware of her plans."

They paused, and the wind between the next cars was especially violent. There must have been a fierce crosswind. She spent the next few steps untangling and straightening

out her hair. Arroyo allowed her. "Then it's a mystery she wants to solve," she said finally. They were at the next door already, but Sophia set a hand on it and stopped.

"Basically."

"Not just to kill the Arbiter."

"No, not just that."

"Well, that's more respectable. Then I want to help you rescue her."

Arroyo faced her. "Why would you do that?"

"Because I," she started, setting her hand on the door's handle, "am interested in doing good things for other people." She sneered, he laughed genuinely for the first time she'd noticed since they boarded the train, and she pushed through the next door.

*

Talking with Sophia, Arroyo realized how little *he* knew about Michelle's quest; she'd been so concerned with knowing more about him. If he knew the clues, the hints, the leads she had already followed, maybe he could help her figure it out. He would, if he ever saw her again.

*

"So," Keaton said. "Do you know what Casimir is?"

Agnes leaned back against the train controls. There was a chair that glided along a rail the width of the locomotive cabin, but she ignored that mostly, so Keaton sat in it. Absentmindedly, she gazed out the window. "That's a goat, right?"

"No, I believe you're thinking of cashmere."

"A sweater, then."

"Still cashmere."

“Then find a dictionary.”

Keaton shook his head. “Arroyo mentioned the name Casimir. That burner is taking Michelle to Casimir, and Arroyo behaves as though he knows what Casimir is, but he refuses to speak of it, as if broaching the subject alone would be traumatic. Do you know anything?”

“I’ll help you corner him if you want. Otherwise I got nothing.” She paused. “Traveling’s a slow business,” she mumbled.

“Preferably I would like to get the information from him without cornering him. I appreciate the offer, however.” He got up and walked to the back of the cabin. “Are you at all interested in liberating Michelle?”

“Burners are bad.”

He waited, because it sounded like more was intended to follow that. “Is that all you have to say?”

“For right now? Yes.”

*

Anglis kept a canvas bag of scalpels hooked to his belt. Michelle noticed them after two more nights, and she wondered what they did. She had tried to talk to him again, but he refused to say anything beyond simple answers or the same rote enigma about Casimir that she wasn’t any closer to understanding. It didn’t take long for her to figure out what the scalpels were used for – Anglis could only do its burning if its skin was broken.

It took her a while longer to think that, if she stole the scalpels from the immobile Anglis, then maybe he would talk to her again. She wouldn’t cut him with them, and she

couldn't threaten to turn them on herself, because Anglis would probably call her bluff. But she could try to do *something*.

Stealing them was just as easy as she had expected. Anglis's arms were pinned down. She simply lifted the pouch from its belt and backed away.

"Return those," Anglis said. He sounded surprised.

"I'd be willing to bargain them back to you –" The chariot wheels screeched, and the vehicle stopped. She lurched forward and fell to one knee. The metal panel over Anglis's arms lifted, and the burner turned on her. "Okay, maybe not," she said.

"Immediately."

"You won't kill me."

"Pain won't kill you."

"Why? Why do I need to be alive?"

"Casimir commanded it to be so. Alive, to be savored." Anglis had started to step closer, but now he stopped. He must have been aware that she just played him into giving her that bit of information, though again she wasn't sure what to do with it.

"Return my blades."

She wanted to mention how he had broken her sword in half, but she didn't think he would care much. So she tossed the pouch back to him. "Here, take it. I only wanted to talk."

"Talk to the wind, or yourself," he said. He fastened the pouch back to his belt, put his arms back on the rests, and the chariot began to move again.

She checked her pocket to make sure that the scalpel she swiped from the pouch didn't puncture the fabric. Then she returned to her cabin. It hadn't been much, but a

scalpel and a few hasty words were more than she'd gotten from four nights on the chariot.

To be savored, it had said. Specific commands from Casimir. Now all she had to do was figure out what Casimir was, what connection it had to her dad, and why Casimir wanted to savor her.

Chapter Sixteen

While Arroyo had been walking with Sophia, apparently their aerie scout had checked in. The chariot was covering more ground than he had expected, and it left the train tracks immediately, heading in a straight line northeast. As Agnes recounted this to Arroyo, he felt like he was there, and a knot closed around his throat when he thought about Anglis getting away with Michelle. They *had* to catch up to her. Agnes had told the aerie to figure out about how far north Anglis was heading and to meet them at the emergency fueling station.

Arroyo had expected the fueling station to be something of a miniature compound, but it was just a line of four identical box buildings parallel to the train. Sophia and Agnes filled the train's diesel engine, and Arroyo and Keaton went on lookout duty in case of thieves. Arroyo hadn't even considered that possibility – he had, after all, wanted to steal the train only for its ability to be a train and hadn't given a second thought to its cargo.

Arroyo walked alongside the idle train and checked his pistol, his one bullet. He had been used to an empty clip in his gun, but now he remembered the comfort of being able to intimidate without the bluff, and he missed having a fully loaded weapon. The compound had a limited supply of firearms – it seemed Hunter had commandeered

them all – and the riflemen had used every last bullet futilely fighting off the garr, so Arroyo was stuck with his one bullet.

Keaton had apparently grown comfortable wielding an axe, so he had asked for a new one from the compound. With his fingers tight around the base, loose near the top, Keaton looked comfortable wielding the weapon; it was a quick transformation from elderly and gentle to grizzled and ready for war.

But there were no thieves. They refueled without a hitch, the aerie returned, and Agnes spoke privately with him.

When they were moving again, Arroyo brought it up. “What did the aerie say?”

“Anglis is still moving,” Agnes said.

“Agnes. I need to know if it has anything to do with Michelle.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve been meaning to ask you something about that.” It was an unskilled evasion of his prodding. But he would bite.

“If I answer your question, you answer mine. Deal?”

She curled her lip. “Fine.”

“Then what is it?”

“I just been thinking, now that Sophia and I are in all sorts of danger. You know, garr and burners and thieves.”

“There were no thieves.”

“Don’t matter. I just want to know. You sure you’re still gonna do what you set out to do, even with this rescuing your girlfriend kick?” Agnes said.

“Finding Michelle *is* what I set out to do –”

“No, I’m not talking about last week, I mean from the beginning. You’re out to find the Arbiter. You still going to do that?”

“Kill the Arbiter?”

“Find him,” Agnes corrected. “We’ll see what happens then. But I wanted to ask, ‘cause if you’re not so much interested in that anymore ‘cause you got a girl now, Sophia and I will drop you off and head back to the compound.”

He knew she wouldn’t go back. He’d read her clearly enough to know that she left in shame and would be too prideful to ignore it, but the fact that she didn’t realize he’d picked up on that meant he was doing something right. He still didn’t trust them, no matter that their point of view had been marginally substantiated by a few facts, so the possibility remained that, if he kept them along, they would turn on him. He had been mulling it over.

Perhaps the simple possibility that they might turn against him was enough of a danger to outweigh any benefits of having them along, and so now he considered letting them return to the compound. More than considered it. He was too close to give up now. He would find Michelle, and with her would continue onward to the Arbiter, but they didn’t need to know that. In fact, it would be better for them – safer for them and better for everyone – if they returned to the compound. So he said, “No.”

“No?”

He shook his head. “Michelle is all that matters to me right now, and I want to keep it that way.” He stopped Agnes with a raised hand before she could start, and then he continued, “Not that I believe what you say about the Arbiter. I still don’t. But I don’t want to do anything that would put Michelle in danger. I want to keep her safe.” Keaton

beamed and Sophia sighed, relieved and perhaps a little content, but by Agnes's face, she wasn't yet convinced.

"I love her," Arroyo said.

Agnes stepped close to him and rose to her toes – though she still didn't come up to his eyes – and she said, "You had better not be lying about that, 'cause if you are that makes you the worst kind of son of a bitch."

"I wouldn't."

The locomotive jolted and dipped to the right. Agnes caught her balance on Arroyo's arm. Then the jolt turned to a quake, and Arroyo, Agnes still holding on, dropped to his hands and knees to keep from falling. He guided Agnes down with him. The whole chamber continued to tilt right, and now he could see that the train was drifting, away from its tracks and into a line of dead trees. The trees hit the train like twigs, but then the car's right-hand wall hit the ground and flipped fully onto its side. The screech of metal grinding against earth swallowed all sound.

They fell against the right-hand wall, now its floor. The window frames buckled but the thick glass did not break. And they kept coasting. The only sound that came up over the screech were booming crashes from the other cars slamming into the earth behind them. There was so much power and speed – momentum – gravity was going to be dragged behind them if it wanted to stop them. Arroyo held on to whatever he could and just hoped it did stop them before they hit anything disastrous like a cliff or a river.

Agnes held onto him with both hands, her eyes clenched closed. Sophia held onto Keaton with one arm and onto the bolted-to-the-floor chair on its sliding rail with the

other – she’d let it guide her to the new floor, but it might have pulled her arm out of its socket with the jolt if she’d been less lucky.

It was the middle of an unending earthquake. Any movement beyond holding on tight was out of the question. The train, now completely derailed, drifted down a subtle slope away from the tracks and always forward. Who knew how long it would go. Then an iron thud above their heads and a crumbling crack, and the train shuddered and lost its momentum. It bounced now as it slowed and couldn’t pave over the bigger uneven parts of the ground. After one last lurch, everything froze.

“Is that it?” Sophia said meekly.

“What the flaming hell *was* that?” Agnes dropped Arroyo’s arm and looked to the ceiling where the exit now was. “How do we get out to look?”

“Human ladder,” Arroyo grumbled, getting up.

“What’d you say?”

“Nothing at all. Has anything like this happened before?”

“Ever? No, but it makes sense. We never push the train to go so fast.” She clapped her hands to her sides and scowled at Arroyo. It wasn’t much of a change. “That’s gotta be what it was – you made me push the train and now you broke it.”

Arroyo rolled his eyes. While their speed may have caused more damage than otherwise, he seriously doubted that that derail had happened naturally. He said, “There’s no way to fix this,” as it hit him. Their progress was utterly, frustratingly, halted.

“No shit. Now we don’t have any way to keep going –”

“Wait –”

“And now we’re gonna die and it’s your damn fault.”

“Agnes, shut up!” Sophia snapped. “Quiet.” She leaned her head against the window at the front of the locomotive. “I can hear something. Voices.”

“Someone to rescue us, perhaps?” Keaton said. He sounded less shaken up by the crash than he looked. He hadn’t moved since they stopped and had a hand on his neck, rubbing it.

“Don’t hold your breath,” Agnes said.

“Well why not?” Sophia said.

“Listen, girl, no one saves anybody in this world without something in return.”

“Well I would.”

“Something in return like a train full of cargo?” Arroyo said.

Agnes’s face scrunched down. “Well shit.”

“You don’t think anyone would actually *do* that.” Sophia’s jaw had dropped just a bit.

“Didn’t you hear me talking ‘bout thieves before?”

But Sophia just balled her fists. “This is destroying our train and stealing *free food*. Free food! From the whole country – come on, Arroyo, help me up.” She readied herself over the rail chair.

“What?”

“Help me get to the door so I can go out there and kill them.”

“Sophia now is not the time for jokes,” Keaton said. Arroyo had to agree. If Sophia acted irrationally, she would be killed. Maybe that truth of the world had been kept

from her during her charmed life in the compound, but outside of it that was purely a fact. Arroyo had been lost in his quest for long enough to almost forget that.

“These are the worst kind of people – the food is free!” She fumed and swung her arms around like she needed to his something. “Come on.” She grabbed Arroyo and tugged him along. “It’s not that high up. Just keep me steady.”

He didn’t try to pull away when she grabbed him – it might somehow have hurt her – but he wasn’t going to help her go out there all by herself. Then, his help or not, she stepped onto the arm of the chair on its rail, and the chair swiveled and she slipped, but she tumbled forward right into Arroyo. He caught her leg, purely to save himself from a broken nose, and steadied her. She swung her other leg up onto it and did a bit of balancing. Arroyo kept the chair even.

“Come now, let me help,” Keaton said. “It’s good that you care so much, Sophia – and brilliant on your feet thinking, by the way, with the chair – but you may find yourself outmatched by a team of thieves crafty enough to derail this impressive locomotive.”

“If that’s even how it happened,” Agnes chimed.

“Oh, so it isn’t thieves now?” Sophia said. She wrestled with the door overhead. “Is it Arroyo’s fault again? You’re unbelievable.”

Agnes grunted.

“Damn,” Sophia said. “This thing is too heavy for me to slide from this angle.”

“Agnes,” Arroyo said, “take over for me.”

“No way. I’ll get up there. You’re too big.”

“You can’t reach it.”

“Well I’m not gonna let you get your body right up against Sophia’s. It ain’t right.”

He stared at her. “You’re seriously –”

“Agnes, cut it out,” Sophia said. “It’s fine. Remember? He’s in *love*.” With that she pulled Arroyo up onto the chair with her. Their chests touched, and her whole body swayed into his as the chair spun then jolted to a stop. Sophia held onto Arroyo with an arm around his back and kept herself steady by gripping the door above her. “I just saved you from smacking your head on the floor,” she said.

“How about that.” In the last half hour, since he revoked his fervor over killing the Arbiter and declared, perhaps falsely, his undying love for Michelle, Sophia had become his great friend. It wouldn’t end prettily.

Together they slid the door aside. The crisp air welcomed Arroyo’s face, and the black and gray world above was once again refreshing versus the orange or red lights that had wearied his eyes.

“I’ll give you a boost,” Arroyo said. “Crawl out, then get something to help the rest of us out, and come back.”

“And don’t kill anybody ‘less they try to kill you first,” Agnes said.

Arroyo took hold of one foot and raised her up so that her torso was out of the locomotive and, careful not to be kicked in the face, helped her the rest of the way.

*

Sophia lifted herself out of the car and sat on the side of the locomotive. If she stayed perfectly still, she would probably be invisible to the thieves. They didn’t seem concerned with anything besides their quarry. She watched them, probably twenty or thirty of them, climb up onto the overturned cars, scramble around them, carry small

bags in empty and return with them full. They swore a lot, which she found strange, given the fact that they had enough stolen supplies to now live comfortably forever; but apparently the difficulty of having to steal off a train on its *side* negated that and made it a situation worth complaints. Not even appreciative of their stolen fortune. She still felt like chasing them down and wailing on them.

“Sophia,” Arroyo called. “Get moving.”

She shushed him. “They might hear you. There are... a bunch of them. How about, instead of me sneaking around and trying to grab a rope or something, Arroyo and I just help lift you guys out?”

She looked down and reached her arms down through the open door. They were plenty long enough to grab onto Arroyo, but she wouldn’t have enough arm strength to lift him. He must have thought that, too, because he put a foot on the back of the chair and asked Agnes and Mr. Keaton to hold it steady. Then he lunged and caught one edge of the doorframe. Sophia snagged his other arm with hers. Mr. Keaton and Agnes pushed up his feet, and Sophia hoisted him out.

He panted a little then sat up. “All we have to do is repeat that, then.”

“Wonderful.”

It took longer to get Agnes out – she had to be next because Mr. Keaton needed to give her feet a boost so that she could reach the door – and then the longest to get Mr. Keaton out. With no one left to steady the chair, he first tried jumping, then balancing on his own. After he nearly broke his neck, Sophia dropped back into the locomotive, steadied the chair, and helped him through.

With the highest jump and longest stretch she had in her, she grabbed Arroyo's arms, and he, with help from Mr. Keaton and none from Agnes, helped her up. The others stepped aside for her to stand up from all fours, but her hands slipped, and she tumbled forward. There was just enough slope to carry her. She fought for Arroyo's hand, spun herself around so that her legs pointed down, but he couldn't drop down fast enough. Her legs kicked up over nothing, her stomach grated on metal edges, and she fell the ten feet to the ground below.

Pain jolted up her shins and into her knees. Her feet hit small rocks like gravel and slipped, but this time she caught herself on the underside of the train. The rocks clattered down a short slope.

Sophia gasped, her stomach jerking back, and she covered her mouth. In the absolute quiet of the darkness, someone had to have heard it. She ducked low to try to disappear into the shadow of the train, which was stupid, because that's where the red light came out. Maybe they would lose her in the light and wouldn't see her. Nervously she looked down the train and spied on the thieves.

None turned toward her or stopped what they were doing. If any of them saw her, they disregarded her or pretended to, anyway. She inched away from them, toward the front of the locomotive, to get around it and behind some cover.

"Are you okay?" came from above. She wanted to respond but her voice was caught by a cork stopper; she didn't want any to spill. So she said nothing. Maybe once she got behind cover she could speak, so she stepped over the rocks, careful so that no more of them dislodged, and around the locomotive. A hand grabbed her arm and clamped down, like the fingers curled under the pressure of a depressed piston. The pain was in

her bone. The hand yanked her forward, and another fastened onto her throat. Just for an instant during that moment before the hand flattened her voice, she pulled the stopper and poured her scream out.

“Sophia!” It sounded like three voices at once. She wanted to say, Yes, please come save me. Come save me now.

Now please. She wanted to fight, to hit this man whose face she couldn’t see. So dark, hidden, red-outlined. She wanted to crush his testicles with her knee or her boot and push his face into the ground or swing it against the train, the cow catcher, and maybe he would bleed. That wouldn’t be the worst thing. Her vision went fuzzy. She realized she wasn’t breathing anymore and thought that was odd.

The pain in the bone of her arm went away, and she thought maybe she’d lost the arm or lost feeling in it, because she was certainly losing feeling in her face. Then, in a rush and with pressure under her skin on her cheeks and in her ears, her vision gushed back. Her neck ached, but the hand was gone. She could feel her feet again. Without thinking, she started to sob and staggered back.

There were voices – shouts – and she wondered how long she’d been gone. The man whose face she hadn’t seen clearly, the one with the piston hands, was on his knees holding his arm but not holding in the rush of blood.

Gentle hands helped her up. Mr. Keaton’s face appeared in front of her, and her feet moved as he urged her forward. She put her face against his shoulder. Agnes and Arroyo followed them, urgent also. Agnes had Mr. Keaton’s fire axe – the one he’d taken from the compound – in her hand. It was bloodied. Others crowded around the wounded man and shouted threats, other thieves and marauders, rapists and

murderers. She wished she could go back and fight him. Make it fair. Don't sneak up on her. She could take him.

Instead, they ran away and didn't look back. Her throat hurt throbbed ached and pounded with each sob. "You're safe. You're safe," Mr. Keaton repeated to her. She could only cry, though she wasn't sure why that was.

*

"You've got a lot to answer to," Agnes barked. They didn't have the luxury of stopping, so she yelled at Arroyo as they walked.

He waited for her to continue. Gracing her with a response would yield him nothing.

She huffed. "First you convince us you're heading off to kill the Arbiter and so we gotta come with you so we can stop you from doing something so damn stupid, and then you up and change your mind. Now we don't have to go with you 'cause you're in love with some girl, and we're here for no reason."

Again he waited. He was aware of the situation, but knew she needed to lay it out for her own benefit. Still, he had to fight back a wince with each word. It hadn't gone like he'd hoped.

"Now our train gets derailed and we're dead! Nowhere to go, no reason to go anywhere. We'll die if we try to go back now."

"We're going to die?" Sophia said.

Arroyo turned. He hadn't expected her to say anything. He hadn't even thought she'd been listening. She'd done nothing but sob since Agnes jumped down onto the man who attacked her. If she hadn't slipped – Arroyo had seen it but didn't think

Keaton had – she would have split the man’s head with the axe. Agnes didn’t say anything about it, and he wouldn’t mention it.

“No,” Keaton said. “We’ll only die if we resign ourselves to it. Refuse to give up, and we can carry on.”

“Are you sure?”

“Don’t tell anyone, but I’m actually an old man,” Keaton said. “That’s my secret.”

At another time, if she weren’t shaking from the cold and from the shock of being assaulted, Arroyo thought Sophia might have brightened at Keaton’s comment. But now the appreciation was silent. She leaned into him.

“Arroyo,” Agnes said. “I don’t have any reason to go along with you except to stay alive, and I’d gladly do that on my own, Sophia and me on our own. Got something to say about this?”

He didn’t have much. They needed to stay together and continue after Michelle. Agnes was sticking to the story that the only reason she went along was to stop him from killing the Arbiter. While that certainly was part of it, and he didn’t know the whole story, it was clear to him that Agnes *wanted* to go with him. But that want had gone away when he backed out of killing the Arbiter, and he wasn’t about to turn the conversation around on her and call her out on it – that would turn her too aggressive, defensive. She must have wanted to see the Arbiter herself, perhaps a sort of reaffirmation of her beliefs, or some other purpose. He could get behind that, but he had backed himself into a terrible spot, and only one option was mutually nondestructive. But it would be painful.

“I lied,” he said.

"What? Lied about what?"

"I needed you to help us with the train, but after that I didn't want you messing up my plans. So I took the opportunity you gave me and said I no longer wanted to kill the Arbiter."

"So you're still going to try to do it?" Sophia said.

"Yes."

"And you don't love Michelle?" Her voice turned weak, like she might cry again.

Arroyo swallowed and looked down. None of them could see his eyes. "No, I don't."

Agnes clicked her tongue. "Worst kind of son of a bitch."

"But... you're still going to save her, right?" Sophia said. "You have to."

He nodded. "Of course." Speaking was difficult. His throat felt swollen with his lies. "We have to leave the tracks and head north. Eventually we'll run across Anglis's tracks, and we can follow him to wherever he took Michelle."

"You can do that? Follow his tracks?"

"Across natural ground, it should be easy. If he hits city streets or the highway, it would be more difficult." For the former, he was confident of his ability, but he knew he couldn't do the latter. More difficult meant impossible. But it would be something.

"Suppose we just kill you now," Agnes said, quiet. "Then you'll never get your chance at the Arbiter."

"Agnes, no," Sophia said. She straightened, shifted away from Keaton, and stepped between the two of them. "I want to trust him."

"Still? You're swayed by a handsome face, girl."

"I don't care about his face. That's not what this is about."

"Then what's it about?" Agnes said. Arroyo backed away, happy to have Sophia between Agnes and himself, though he wasn't sure how the conversation was going to go. In the end they could both turn on him, and Keaton didn't look too happy, either. "We've got no reason to trust him, no reason to like him. So tell me."

Sophia dropped her head and turned toward Arroyo. "He can deny that he loves her, but I know he cares about her."

"Michelle. What's she matter to us?"

"Agnes, what do we do at the compound?"

Agnes grunted. "You know I know. I know you know. Go on."

"We help people. It's what I like to do. Right now, Michelle needs our help, his help, and he wants to give it." He was getting close to wanting to hug her.

"He'll lie again, and you'll just get burned. Believe me." Agnes glared. Arroyo tried to find the horizon.

"Maybe he will. I don't care. I won't let you hurt him, and I won't let you abandon him."

"And anyway," Keaton interrupted, "I could use some assistance, you know, as chief bodyguard of this quest. Combating the dangers this lad seems intent on sinking neck-high into is an exhausting effort."

"Well ain't this just peachy shit," Agnes said. "Fine. We'll stick around, rescue your girlfriend, and stop you from ruining the world."

He didn't have the strength to argue, and, by the desperate look Sophia gave him, neither did anyone else. The assault she'd suffered was just beginning to settle under her skin. They could help her deal with it. And, he realized, he was saving her from

traveling alone with Agnes. He slid over to her and whispered, "That's twice I've saved you from Agnes."

"You want some candy?"

It wasn't a time for humor, but there was something to be said for the effort. The horizon was dark, the shrouded sun fading soon for the night. It didn't matter who was going which way and with whom – if they didn't find shelter soon, the cold would kill them. Arroyo used the tracks as an East-West axis on an imaginary compass, gauged the position of the stars so he could figure out where they were headed once he no longer had the tracks, and led them north, into the fell wilderness on foot.

Part Three

The Casimir War

Chapter Seventeen

The hills and countryside were spotted with the occasional grazing animal, but they were too fleet to be caught, and besides, Keaton wouldn't have been able to stomach killing a poor creature struggling to survive just so that he could. If someone else killed it, or if it was perhaps struck by an inconsiderate lightning bolt, he would still eat its delicious meats, but he didn't believe that made him a hypocrite. Before the cold really set in, he realized he was preoccupied with food. After the cold, he couldn't think of much at all.

Then they saw the road and the first buildings. It was past sun-fall, and his body was so cold he couldn't feel it. At least it was past that point where absolutely every muscle shook and teeth clacked together. No words were spoken, no vote taken. When they got to the first building, they went inside, gathered whatever they could find, huddled together, and tried to sleep. It was difficult to return to a comfortable temperature, but eventually Keaton slept, Sophia's head on his shoulder.

With sunrise, a bit of warmth returned, but they still hadn't anything to eat, so Keaton's stomach clawed at him from the inside as if a small rodent were trapped there.

Sophia groaned. "I don't want to get up."

"Come on," Agnes said. "You don't get up and we'll leave you."

"She isn't used to it being so cold," Keaton said. Since the other three woke up, Sophia had burrowed beneath the papers, cardboard, and linens they had found in what had turned out to be a roadside diner. With empty cupboards, refrigerators, and even waste bins.

"Why is that?" Arroyo said. He had gone to the back of the diner but returned empty-handed.

"I'm not quite sure myself," Keaton said. "I just recall that, when we first met, she mentioned she gets stiff in the cold."

"It's the reactors," Agnes said. "We've gotten pretty far from the compound's, so it's just gonna get colder 'til the next one."

Keaton and Arroyo traded confused looks then something like realization lit Arroyo's face. "There are reactors underground, and they make the earth warmer." To Keaton, he said, "Remember how the ground was warmer near Majestic?"

"Brilliant. How do they function?"

"They're geothermal," Sophia said, shivering. "That's all I know about them. The Arbiter had them built so that the world wouldn't freeze over. And I could really use one right now. Maybe just a portable one? Something."

"Quit your whining."

"Oh shut up!" Sophia sat up, pulling her bundle with her. "You've done nothing but bitch since Jeffery took the compound away from you. Boo hoo, no more power over everyone else. I'm already stranded, starving, and lost. I don't want to freeze to death, too."

“Now, Sophia,” Keaton said. She and Agnes being so agitated did nothing for their morale.

Agnes made fists and started for Sophia – but Arroyo caught her. “Let’s all calm down.”

“Yes,” Keaton said. “We’ve found civilization again. Before long, we can find a way to catch up with Michelle.”

“It’s a deserted city,” Arroyo said. “Hardly civilization.” He led Agnes outside.

Keaton pulled his carefully folded bowtie from his pocket and looped it behind his neck. He crossed the ends, pulled the short one under, folded the wide end in half, crossed the fold in the middle by pulling up the other end, tucked the folds over the straight middle, clasped the folded end and pinched the other, and slid it through the tiny gap produced by the knot. A perfect bowtie. He didn’t need to watch himself do it.

But Sophia watched. “That doesn’t make any sense.” She tied her coat around her tiny waist. Keaton wished he could fill her belly. It wasn’t that she looked emaciated – she was a fit young lady – but he could see the hunger in her cheeks.

“The mechanics are simple, really, and it becomes second nature once you do it a couple of times. Not many ladies wear them, though.”

“No, not that. I get the knot. Why do you wear it?”

“It’s what a gentleman wears. Even in a world such as this, I need to remember that my appearance, the way I hold myself, matters.” He straightened the tie.

“Uh huh.” She nodded as if she understood. “And why do you take it off each night?”

“To stave off wrinkles, of course. And I’d hate to inadvertently strangle myself. It would be most unseemly, and supremely embarrassing.”

Sophia finally smiled. “Do I still have to go outside?” Her eyes fell, eyebrows furrowed, mouth frowned.

He was at her side without pause and offered a hug. She accepted it, wordless. “Sophia, I know it’s frightening that you were attacked. You don’t have to bear it alone.”

At that she started to sob. He heard Agnes going on about something outside – she sounded impatient – and he hoped Arroyo would forestall her. Not that he thought she would chastise Sophia for being affected. He merely wanted to spare Sophia’s embarrassment and comfort her in private.

“It’s okay, my dear. You’re safe now.”

“I can still feel his fingers. My neck is bruised, five little dots. They hurt.”

He noticed her scarf, but didn’t look beneath it. It was enough to believe her. “I know you can protect yourself,” he said. “But if you need us, we’ll be there for you.”

“Even Arroyo?”

“Of course. He is nothing if not chivalrous.”

“He doesn’t like me, though.”

“It isn’t that,” Keaton said. He wanted to wrap her up in a padded coat and pat her shoulder. Such a sweet girl. “Your point of view merely frustrates him. Give him time, and he’ll understand.”

“And will you believe me?”

“I said he’ll grow to understand. I don’t know if he will ever believe you.”

“But what about you?”

"I believe in your faith, and I believe in defending your home. Don't yield."

"Okay. Thanks." She straightened up. "Don't mention this, please."

"Never." He patted her shoulder. "Shall we?"

*

Arroyo stretched and looked up the boulevard. A baby walker rolled back and forth, one front wheel snapped off and the other left to the whims of the breeze. "You saved her, but you haven't mentioned it to her," he said to Agnes.

"Yeah 'cause I don't think it's nothing worth mentioning. If I hadn't done it one of you – probably you – would've."

"I guess I might have." He didn't want her thoughts focused back on Sophia, but if he could get Agnes to think on her kindly and actually act like the more mature of the two, they'd be less of a problem to have along.

"You got a thing for saving girls, don't you?"

"What?"

"Michelle, Sophia, I'm sure they ain't the first – no, listen, it's fine. Everybody's got their thing."

"It is not like that," Arroyo said. He didn't blame Sophia for always getting irritated with Agnes. It was difficult not to.

"What's it like, then? You wanna nuzzle her milky –"

"Stop that."

"You already said you lied about saying you loved her." She kicked a rock and it clacked and bounced away from them. "Far as I'm concerned I'm just gonna tolerate having you around."

"You tolerate me." He couldn't find his words. It was like having his tongue stuck to flypaper, if the flypaper were an infuriating woman bent on twisting his every move and word. "What I said – it doesn't mean I don't care about her. I do."

"Then you afraid?"

He wasn't sure what might make him afraid and he wasn't sure how he felt. It was certainly more than her milky anythings. If he had had any previous concept of love maybe he could comfortably label it, but as it was, he did not understand his need for her. Need to save her, yes, and to protect her, yes, but it went beyond that. How else, why else, would he think the perfect evening one in which he could just sit with her close, not yet touching, close his eyes, and just listen to her speak, even if she was yelling at him, and hear the breaths between what she was saying, and the pauses after she had inhaled – ?

"We are prepared to go," Keaton said. Arroyo spun around. Sophia sheepishly hung back, behind Keaton, bundled spectacularly. She just nodded to Arroyo. Her eyes were red.

"I'll be waiting for that answer later," Agnes said.

"Let us keep on north, shall we?"

And at Keaton's suggestion, Arroyo led them north, and he counted his own breaths, fog under his nose, hoping Michelle took one for each of his.

*

Keaton walked alongside Sophia. He supposed she would be okay now – she was a strong girl – but it was in his nature to worry.

They reached an intersection nearer to the center of the city. A fake marble wall crumbled to dust. Cars lined the sides of the street, their shells dismantled, seats stripped or removed. Sometimes they could function as competent shelters from frost and wind, but they were mostly left alone because, unless there was gasoline still in the tank, they didn't make such good shelters when a hungry garr lurked outside and smashed in the windows.

"Hold it right there," boomed a voice from above. It came from everywhere, from above and every direction. Arroyo ducked back and pulled Keaton and Sophia with him, but, save the automobiles, they had little to use for cover.

"My goodness," Keaton declared.

"I have a gun," the voice continued. "Turn around and go back."

Keaton brushed Arroyo off of him. "This is preposterous." The voice from the echoes had a waver that was masked by amplification. By the slight whine, Keaton guessed a powerful megaphone. "Come down and speak to us, if you'd like us to leave," Keaton called. Otherwise the city was silent, so he didn't think the shouting man would be unable to hear him.

"What are you doing?" Arroyo said.

"I am being sensible," he said, hoping to be loud enough to be heard. "It is about time that more people followed the example." Then, quieter, "He has already decided to speak to us. And if he has a gun, he has not fired it. I doubt he is uncivilized."

"You're nuts," Agnes said.

“An educated risk. Sophia, would you care to stand beside me?” He held out a hand, and she nodded, knees shaking, still shivering, and locked arms with him. Together they moved to the center of the intersection, though Sophia was hesitant.

“I will wait until you come down and agree to speak with me,” Keaton continued to the megaphone man. He waited. As much as he believed what he said, he couldn’t help but feel the itch of a gun trained on his forehead from somewhere far above them. He’d had enough of unsettling people and unfortunate surprises.

“Just hold on a moment. It’s difficult to hear you. But don’t move.”

Arroyo stood next to Keaton.

“He told you not to move.”

“He also told you to turn around and go back,” Arroyo said. “How did you know he doesn’t have a gun?”

He didn’t. “What matters is that he’s listening now. I’ll listen to what he says so long as he’s courteous. And reasonable.”

“You’re still nuts,” Agnes said. “I’m staying back.”

“You there, in the snappy bowtie – where are you from?” The voice was closer now, louder. The fuzz and screech of a megaphone were now clearer. And it definitely came from the building on the northernmost corner, a hotel with plenty of dilapidated balconies, several shrouded by hanging sheets.

“Originally? From London.” He scanned the balconies, trying to find the megaphone. Alas, his eyesight wasn’t what it was once. Then he spotted a black sliver poking out from beneath a sheet. It was either the barrel of a gun or disguised to look like the barrel of a gun. Either way, he felt that tingle on his forehead again.

“And after that.”

“I came from a long way west.”

“How did you hear about us?”

That was surprising. “Hear about you? I haven’t the slightest idea who you are. Care to divulge the details, say, on flat ground? Perhaps with some tea and bread?”

A pause. “Keep your weapons where I can see them. I’m coming down.”

“Splendid,” Keaton said.

“That was... pretty impressive,” Arroyo said.

“Good job,” Sophia said. She eyed Arroyo. “You shouldn’t doubt the goodness of *everyone*. It’s unhealthy for you.”

“Notice that we aren’t safe yet.”

“He’s coming down to talk to us. That’s something.”

“He still claimed to want to shoot us.”

“Ugh! Fine. Whatever.” She turned to Keaton. “Thank you for sticking up for us like that, Mister Keaton.”

Arroyo stretched his shoulders. “Sophia, I didn’t mean to—”

“Don’t move.” The voice was unamplified, and now it belonged to a man walking through the doors to the hotel. In the dimness, the rifle he carried looked like a folded up umbrella stuck in a metal can with a telescope mounted to it. Keaton didn’t understand the anatomy of firearms, but this weapon was massive, and it was aimed at them. Perhaps it launched exploding canisters, or maybe just bricks, because all that size would have been wasted on bullets.

“Well, he’s got a gun,” Agnes said, surrender in her voice.

But Keaton determined to not be intimidated by this man. He put on the coolest attitude he had, and he said, "Thank you for coming down. It was dreadfully awkward speaking to you like that."

"And now I can hear you just fine." The megaphone man wobbled a step closer, the weight of the gun causing him to sway. "So how did you find us?"

He wasn't threatening in stature, not like the thieves who ransacked the train. His shirt was clean, his coat was long and without patches or rips, and his pants were intended for an occasion. Anything would have done for being a lookout, but this man carried on an appearance. Keaton had been right — this was a secretly civilized man, and he was intent on getting to that person so that he didn't have to speak any more than he had to with a gun pointed at him.

"Do you know of a train that crosses the country?" Keaton said.

"This place isn't in our network," Agnes said.

"I don't even know if we deliver here," Sophia added.

"No," the megaphone man said. "But I know what you're talking about. We can hear the train." He paused, and then held onto the pause and Keaton realized he was waiting.

"Did you hear it crash, then?" Arroyo said. "Recently. It was loud."

The megaphone man nodded. He was young, probably between thirty and thirty-five. Clean people always seemed younger. "Was that you?"

"Why don't you get deliveries from the compound?" Sophia said.

"Wait a second — where are we?" Agnes stepped up. The megaphone man didn't react. "You call it the Oasis, yeah? I know now. You all refused our help."

"What?" Sophia said. "Why?"

The megaphone man lowered the mammoth gun a little, but only because his arms had started to shake from the effort of holding it up any longer. "We take care of ourselves just fine. That food should go to other people who really need it." He lowered the weapon entirely. "I'm sorry for scaring you."

Sophia smiled, spun on her heel to face Arroyo, and stuck out her tongue at him. "See? People helping people."

"My word," Keaton said. Now that the megaphone man had lowered the weapon, his neck was visible, as was the crisp thin bowtie, green, tied there. "That's a splendid bowtie you're wearing."

"Yours is quite nice, too."

"Now why are *you* wearing that?" Sophia asked. "It doesn't make any sense."

"The secret service wore suits, the CIA wore suits, the FBI wore suits. If I dress for work, it makes it feel that much more important. Personally I think the plain black is a boring option."

Sophia shrugged and crossed her arms. "It still seems silly to me. You don't see me with bows in my hair."

"You know, you're lucky you came through this way," the megaphone man said. "It's dangerous to walk around with your weapons hanging out like that. One of the other lookouts might have killed you."

"Good *heavens!* That behemoth is loaded?" Keaton recoiled from the hulky weapon.

The megaphone man patted it. "This one? No. This is Ballista. I just use it to scare folks away if I can. We operate as a group. I can signal the other lookouts, and we can set up an ambush while I keep the intruders – er, visitors – distracted."

"I see."

"But I'm not doing that here. Clearly. I'm sorry again."

"You should be," Agnes snapped. "Waving guns around gets somebody killed. Arroyo here could've shot and killed you if you pushed him the wrong way."

"Don't mind her," Arroyo said.

"Well, I'm still sorry. I'd like to welcome you to our Oasis. I'm Lee."

*

Lee brought them to the Oasis, which was at the center or near the center of the city, and called Oasis because it was near the lake, where they got all their water. It was temperature controlled, so that they could fish, Lee explained, and there was a waterpower plant on the river that left the lake. It was all highly impressive, but Arroyo's time and ability to enjoy such impressive things had faded and was gone now.

Something needed to be done, someone's life besides his own depended on him, and he did his best not to let his impatience show on the tour that seemed absolutely essential on their way through the Oasis.

He tolerated it because Lee was taking them to the mayor, someone Arroyo hoped could help them catch up to Michelle.

"I *told* you the world isn't so bad, Arroyo," Sophia said. "There are some nice people."

"I didn't lose confidence in the people," he said. "I just never had any in the one sitting on top of the people."

"It is *not* like that – never mind!" She looked about to scream. "There are people here, being kind –"

“Sorry to interrupt,” Lee said, “but some of the other lookouts might have killed you. Just saying. Not that I want to get in the middle of... whatever is going on here.”

“But only because *somebody* was waving a gun around, right?”

“Tell me,” Arroyo said to Lee, before he could answer Sophia, “What is the opinion around here of the Arbiter?” He needed to ask, not to prove Sophia wrong, just to see what kind of camp he was headed to.

“Is that safe, Arroyo?” Keaton said.

“At this point? I can’t imagine things could get less safe for us.”

“We’ve heard of too many settlements destroyed because they tried to do too much, so we keep it simple, keep to ourselves. Not sure how many of those stories are true, but even if it’s just rumors being spread around, they go around for a reason, don’t they? Anyway, I wouldn’t call it neutral. Not exactly. No, I’ll go with non-confrontational. I guess you could call it that.”

“The Arbiter would *never* destroy anything – that’s the burners and the garr. Help me out here, Agnes.”

“Never? Not even people who resisted him?” Arroyo didn’t want to agitate Sophia anymore, so he carefully used “him” instead of “it.”

She glared. “No.”

Non-confrontational was better than Arbiter-controlled or Arbiter sympathetic, but not as good as it might have been if this had been a resistance group. He would have explained everything to Lee, and no one else did – Agnes and Keaton shot him some questioning looks, as if they waited for his cue to move, which he supposed was good –

but he didn't know yet if he trusted Lee. There was no way to be sure they weren't headed for a trap. It was at least a good sign that Lee hadn't killed them.

"We don't have time to stay here," Arroyo said. "We have to keep moving."

"What if they can help?" Sophia said, and she shivered as a gust blew through the streets.

"I agree, Arroyo," Keaton said. "There is a certain advantage to seeing what they have to offer." Before Arroyo could rebut, he added, "I want to help Michelle as much as you do, but our luck is incredible to find these kind and sharply dressed individuals when we were barely able to move across the countryside and not sure if we would survive any longer. When life presents opportunities, we would all be wise not to waste them."

There wasn't much to be said following that. Keaton seemed to impress Sophia, Agnes, and Lee alike, so Arroyo didn't say anything, just let Lee lead the way to the mayor.

*

The mayor had a thin frame, strong knobby shoulders, and clean dark brown skin. He worked in a humble office, papers and boxes atop a grand desk. "Nice to meet you all. Lee didn't have a chance to tell me anything yet."

Keaton stepped forward. "I would like to request, if you could —"

"No need to ask. You can stay for as long as you want. We're short on people, not space, and we can replenish our food."

He didn't speak like a leader, or not what Arroyo imagined one would speak like. There was no condescension, just generosity, and it made Arroyo nervous. He didn't

think this man had been a politician, a leader, in the world before the Eclipse, probably something more personal, but he didn't know what. His knowledge of Earth's modern culture was too limited.

"What kind of food do you replenish? Do you grow it?" Keaton sounded hopeful, almost like the prospect of having plants to care for made him forget what they were doing, where they had to go.

Arroyo watched the door. He couldn't wait around.

"The most plentiful thing, unfortunately, in this world."

"You can't eat cynicism," Sophia said, but Arroyo didn't look to see what kind of expression she wore. Surely she looked at him, but he stayed focused on the door. Polished wood, worn around the doorframe, by the handle, from repeated uses and repairs. If he could get food to take with him, and he started walking now, how far could he get by the time they finished speaking to the mayor? By the time Keaton finished looking at plants?

"Garr."

Arroyo turned. "You *eat* the garr?"

"Nonsense," Keaton said. "It's a trick, or a joke. Garr are poisonous."

"At first," the mayor said, drawing Keaton in. "It's a delicate process. Get past killing the thing and dealing with the smell and cutting the meat off its body. You have to fry the meet in oil that's hot enough, and then you have to soak it in water and salt. Then, if you roast it, the poison drips out. The meat's dry, but it's food."

"Astounding."

After some talk, Arroyo guessed it would no longer be suspicious to get right to his point. "Have you ever heard of something called Casimir?" he said.

The mayor cocked his head. "Strange question. Yes I have, and by your asking, I take it the rumors lose a little as they spread, or maybe they don't spread far at all."

"Rumors?"

"Not going to ask how you heard about it. If you take the freeway directly east of here northeast, they say there's a palace built in the middle of a city, and it's surrounded by the ruins of buildings, like it came out of the sky and crashed down, and everything around it crumbled. Supposedly there is a monster that lives there called the Casimir that sneaks up on you at night and eats your mind." He lifted his head. All eyes followed him. "After that, you never wake up. You're stuck in a nightmare forever."

"I've heard similar fables before," Keaton interjected, possibly to break the mood. "It's funny. After the garr, I didn't think there was any remaining need to continue telling campfire stories about monsters and ghouls. All too real, now."

"It's just a story." He yawned. "Come down to dinner by the fire, and Lee can show you where you can stay."

The mayor led them out of his office, and one by one Sophia, Keaton, Lee, Agnes, and Arroyo followed. Arroyo would follow, eat, and be shone a generous room, but that was all he could take. They wouldn't delay his journey any longer.

*

That night, Arroyo sat down onto the bed and laid his hands on his thighs. It was so odd to think this bed, this room, as provisionally and temporarily his. Space to spare, not people, the mayor had said. Second floor, lift access only – no garr would sneak in

here, because they couldn't scale walls like spiders, not the ones he'd ever seen, at least. Nearby, Keaton had his own space, Sophia had hers, and even Agnes had her own.

They all must have been used to it, but he wasn't sure how to feel, didn't know what to do with this gift space, rewarded for nothing. Surely Keaton knew what it meant to make a place his own, but Arroyo had never, since his parents died, had anything like this just offered to him. It felt wrong to turn down such kindness, but the mayor had to know he wouldn't be staying long. It would just be much shorter than anyone had thought.

It would be suicide to sneak out now, because the frost would kill him before he could find his own shelter, but he would have to leave before the rest of them woke up at sunrise so that they couldn't stop him.

When the mayor had mentioned the "myth" of Casimir, Arroyo had made up his mind.

Keaton would let his tea go cold for a while and mope, maybe read something poignant, but Arroyo could return *with* Michelle, and then Keaton would invite them for hot tea, could invite them for tea all the time.

It really was for their sakes that he wanted to go alone. Anglis was taking Michelle to Casimir, and to go after her now was to walk back to his nightmares, to bring them right up to his face and let the spiders crawl over his eyelids, let the worms wriggle into his hair, and let the leeches nip and dangle from his arms. He started to pace, careful to avoid creaky areas of the floor. He pulled shut the curtains and welcomed the new blackness.

The white curtains glowed from the lights outside through the frosted window. It was clever to light their rooms from the outside so that, if anyone ever attacked or invaded, the lit-up buildings would be decoys. On top of that, no building was entirely filled with people, just a few here and there, so that it would be more difficult to be found and easier to escape. All these things he hadn't thought of that the First Rebellion hadn't had – and if they had been led by someone who wasn't a young overconfident overly idealistic unrealistic now-cynical wayward young idiot, then maybe it could have avoided being burned to the ground.

He was a danger to them all. Casimir, and therefore the Arbiter, could locate him easily.

The frost on the window melted under his fingertips, leaving little pools that trickled drops down to the sill, like they were crying. He still had time to kill, but he didn't want to spend it stuck inside this false unearned gift of a room. He made for the door and twisted the handle, careful to not let the cold metal screech, and gently nudged the door until it swung open on its own.

"You sure are quiet," grunted Agnes.

Arroyo caught his hand on its way to his pistol, breathed out as he eased it back to his side. There were two chairs in the hall, at the end by the window, one empty, one with Agnes. "But not quiet enough. You doin' so much pacing, probably didn't even notice I came out here for the sound of all that bouncing around."

"How did you...?"

“Keaton told me something ‘bout Casimir, and we thought it was kind of odd that you asked the mayor about it. Don’t know what it is, but I do know it’s got you flustered, so we kept watch, thinking you’d take off like a damn fool. Or a hero.”

“I just wanted to take a walk. I was pacing because I was restless. Because I want to keep moving.”

“Bull shit. So what’s your deal with this Casimir?” She watched something out the window. “We all got a right to know, seeing how you got us all in some shit.”

He wasn’t sure where to draw the line, where to stop so that she understood but still didn’t fully know. “He’s monster, and Anglis is taking Michelle to him.”

“Worse than Anglis?”

“I don’t know. More terrifying.”

“How do you know that much, but you had to ask somebody else about how to find him?”

He eased into the other chair. Maybe it was for Keaton, or maybe she really did know he would do this. “Have you ever heard of people getting terrible recurring nightmares?”

“Who hasn’t, these days?” It sounded, just for a moment, with the openness at the end of that statement, that she wanted to share something, but she kept her lips tight together and eyed him, waiting for him to reply.

“Something different, like the nightmares were being put there from the outside. Heard of that?”

“No. I’d say it sounds crazy, but I’ve seen burners bleed, so nothing seems too crazy. Okay, so say that’s true, what then?”

“Casimir gives those nightmares. Michelle has them, and so do I.”

“And you know it’s this Casimir?”

“He can reach my mind.” Arroyo felt his voice fall soft, just breathing the words. “I write it down and tell it to myself so that I remember, because he tries to make me forget, forget that he comes. Like cleaning up after breaking into someone’s house.”

Agnes just nodded. “You can’t handle that on your own.”

“Is that what you think?”

“It’s what Keaton thinks, and I agree with him – plus, Sophia overheard us talking, and she won’t let you go alone either.” She glared back at the hallway. “Her watch was gonna be next.”

“But I do have to go. I can’t stop thinking about it, counting every step I should be taking toward Michelle while I sit here walking in circles, wasting them all.”

“Don’t forget that you can’t keep taking steps if you don’t sleep. And we ain’t letting you go by yourself. We trust you, for reasons I’ll let you know when I figure them out. But we know you want to help that girl – and when *you* figure out why you gotta do that, you tell me. I mean us. Shit – tell *her*.” She stared at him now, her eyes serious and deep in the pale light.

He nodded. It was as much a concession as she was going to get, and by the way her glare let up, she seemed pleased with it. “We have to go again at sunrise.”

“Get Sophia some blankets, Keaton some tea, and we’re good. And let’s try to find a car.”

She couldn't be serious, but then again she had spent at least most of her time since the Eclipse in the compound where driving around was normal. "You don't understand how dangerous that is outside."

"You don't want to do it?"

"If we can get one working, it's nearly impossible to see, it might attract garr, leave an easy trail to follow, who knows when it might break down or catch fire —"

"And you got no idea how to drive one."

"That isn't the point." He hushed his voice after growing a bit too loud. "It's risky."

"I know all the risks," she said. "I just don't know why that's stopping you." He started to say something, but everything he thought of just fell apart, like cardboard in the rain. She patted his hand. "Go on, get some sleep. We leave at sunrise, just like you want."

Chapter Eighteen

The chariot rolled onto a freeway and, sometime while Michelle was asleep, it rolled into a city. A hospital caught Michelle's eye, and she tried to hide her reaction to it. That was it, the hospital from her nightmare. But there was something different about it. She held down the fear, because she told herself it was only on the inside. Nothing here was crawling decaying or shrieking. That was only in her nightmares. As much as her stomach clenched in anticipation, afraid that it might start clawing and shrieking at any moment, it didn't. It slept.

The chariot, going much slower now on a paved street, just kept going. She couldn't understand it. They passed the hospital and continued deeper into the city.

This was where Casimir would be, or at least that's what she'd thought based on her nightmares. It seemed like that was what they showed her. She couldn't ask Anglis. She didn't want to let on that she knew anything. He had said he was taking her to a palace, but at the time she'd thought this hospital was what he meant.

There couldn't *really* be a palace.

And then she ate her words. The chariot turned the corner of a street and she looked down the avenue, North. The wreckage of imploded buildings spread around it in a ring, a protective field of rubble, and within that ring grew a monumental structure, a true to life castle. She'd learned enough, from Mr. Keaton and her own study, to know that this shouldn't have been there. It couldn't be, it never had been, and yet it was. Buttresses, spires, stained glass windows, immense stones, archways, vaults, towers. There were rings within the main wall, circular series of buildings and pathways, drawing in closer and growing taller toward the center, where a number of towers swirled into a single form.

Beyond the scope of the palace, it was visually stunning. The stones shone with a perfect polish and were an unnatural blue-black. Every window was stained glass, red and green and yellow. They didn't show images, as far as she could tell from the distance, only geometric patterns, but they glowed as if lit from inside by fire.

"Who *is* Casimir?" she said to herself, her voice low. He could be a direct servant of the Arbiter's, a sort of chosen favorite. That might grant him this elaborate luxury – or else, following her theory of the divide of the Arbiter's followers, he might be the leader of the deviant sect. She wanted to weep. For everything she uncovered about her dad's involvement with the Arbiter, the confusion doubled.

"Shortly, you will see," Anglis said. She hadn't expected him to hear but didn't much care that he had. "We will have to walk through here to reach the Palace. Come with me."

The chariot stopped abruptly at the edge of the rubble. From a distance it had looked like small pieces of walls and ceilings from demolished buildings, but there were huge segments of wall, cement and metal and glass, that on their sides were more than twice as tall as Michelle.

Anglis separated himself from the chariot and pushed Michelle to the edge. She recalled something her dad had told her about what to do if she were ever forced anywhere: "Try to get away as soon as you can, because wherever they take you is going to be worse for you and better for them." But Anglis wasn't taking her anywhere she didn't want to go, she just had to convince her body, which wanted to react with *flight*, that they needed to go and meet Casimir. Nothing would happen if she didn't; certainly getting away in such a foreign place would do her no good. Perhaps she should have followed her dad's advice back at the compound. But it was too late to second-guess herself now.

She and Anglis left the chariot and began navigating the maze of rubble. Porcelain sinks and toilets cropped up amidst the dust and glass. Desks, beds, some clothes. How long had these been here, unreached? Whose stories fell to unconsciousness when these buildings were demolished, and would they ever be recovered again? A quaking sense of foreboding came over her as she looked up to the palace, its grand scale ever larger the closer she got. This was not where she wanted to be.

She needed a diversion, something to get her mind thinking about something besides the doom that awaited her. "What will you do after you deliver me?" she asked Anglis. "Go on burning things?"

"I will do whatever Lord Casimir wishes. If he wishes for fire, there shall be fire."

Never to be deterred, she commented internally. At the same time she wondered what Anglis might do if his Lord Casimir didn't give him another task. Go fetch Michelle and that's it, go live your own life. Anglis wouldn't have any idea how to live without having a task, she imagined. If she thought of that, and looked away from the burner, she could almost – but not quite – come close to feeling sorry for him.

"You don't expect me to run, do you?" She looked around. "I could probably hide forever in this rubble."

"You would hide until you died of starvation. You will not attempt escape."

He was right, but she wanted to see what he thought. She remembered what Anglis said to her whenever she tried to learn something about Casimir. *Casimir wants what the Arbiter made him want.* Maybe Anglis, then, only wanted what Casimir told him to want. She wanted to know what that meant.

The field of rubble was deeper than she'd thought. Something about the flatness of the city that held the palace threw off her depth perception and dwarfed the true scale of everything. The palace walls were twenty feet tall. "How was this built?"

Anglis said nothing. Maybe she'd rattled him with her questions. He led her to the gate and stood aside. The gate had no door. "Go inside," he said. "You will find your path."

"You're staying outside?"

He was silent. One arm was raised, gloved finger pointing, to the gate.

"Goodbye then," she said to Anglis. She contemplated her hidden scalpel. She could lunge for Anglis and drive the blade into his face, into his skull. He deserved it for destroying her home, all of those people, Arroyo's home those years ago. But attacking

him, trying to meet violence with violent revenge, was far too risky. She had seen Anglis wounded far worse than she'd be able to do with a scalpel and still live. So she said goodbye.

Anglis didn't make any movement that registered her goodbye.

She wished that Arroyo and Mr. Keaton were here with her, but knew that they were better off. There was no need for them to be dragged into her problems. She would find her answers in Casimir, and Arroyo would find his with the Arbiter. It was where their journeys split. Then, accompanied by a wave of grief, she realized that it was likely they would both die on these journeys and never see each other again. That goodbye look she hadn't wanted to give Arroyo, because it would have been too painful, was all she longed for now.

With one foot steadily in front of the other, she crossed the threshold of the gate and passed under the outer wall, into a small courtyard. The doors and gates leaving it were all closed except for the one ahead of her, which led toward the center of the palace and into a hall. Ancient tapestries, fifteen feet long, draped the walls between tall windows. More doors lay closed. She tried them, and they refused to swing. One, to her left, lay open.

This must have been the path Anglis had meant. Each time she entered a new hall, dining room, sitting room, art gallery, or closet, one door and one door only lay open for her. She lost count of the chandeliers, statues, tables, rugs, chairs, paintings, even full suits of armor, but only ever one open door at a time. She tried to double back, but when she retreated, the way she came was closed. So she moved forward. As far as her placement in the scheme of the palace, she had not even a guess. East, west, north,

south, she could have been in the center or just to the left of her entrance and she wouldn't have known.

She started shouting in the halls. "Casimir. I'm finally here! What do you want with me?"

Then she passed through a door just like all the others, but on the other side this time she heard music, and she had to stop. Her mom had always listened to it, but the name eluded her. When her mom disappeared, so did the music. Her dad had destroyed it because it reminded him too much of her.

"Hello?" she called.

"Oh!"

She hadn't expected a voice to respond, and she jumped in surprise. It was a hall like a cathedral, with a wide main aisle and smaller side aisles separated by colonnades. From behind one of the columns, a woman danced into view in a poofy silver dress. Her skin was smooth, her body healthily full.

Michelle's knees gave up on her, and she fell to the stone floor, down a few steps and into a heap at the bottom. She caught herself with her hands and straightened up. The woman came closer; Michelle wanted to push the realization away.

"Michelle, sweetie, are you okay? That's quite a fall."

"Mom."

The woman did a twirl. "I knew I'd get to see you again. He promised."

Her mind was a whirlpool that caught anything she tried to think of, sucked it down into green waters, and suffocated it. "What?"

"Casimir promised."

"What?"

"Michelle, you seem shocked. Please, come here. You look so weary." Her mother held out a hand to help Michelle to her feet. Michelle would not take it. "Let me help you up."

"Why are you here?" She stood by herself.

"Because it's terrible outside."

Michelle's mouth hung open. She tried to think of something to say, but the whirlpool caught her thoughts. She walked a half circle around her mother and continued down the main aisle. To the left, she saw the record player from her house. Their music, her mother's music.

"The acoustics are wonderful," her mother said, and she barely heard it.

At the end of the aisle she would run out of room to walk, and she'd have to think of something to do after that. Ten years ago her mother had disappeared. Her dad told her she was dead, but Michelle had always hesitated to believe it. There was no burial, not even a pretend one for her benefit. But when she'd searched for any mention of her in his journals, it had been sparse at best. Pages had been torn out—maybe she was on those. He couldn't have *possibly* known that she was here all that time... she hoped.

"How did you get here?"

"To this hall? I walked here—"

"*Twelve* years ago." Michelle spun, and her mother yelped. "You disappeared twelve years ago. Now you're here."

"And so are you."

"And I doubt you got here the same way I did. Mom. What's going on?"

She shrugged and twirled in time to the music. "Casimir is beautiful."

Michelle shuddered and withdrew. Her back hit an altar at the front of the main aisle. She glanced at it, afraid to see some kind of pagan statue of a decaying gray-skinned monster, but thankfully it was empty. Casimir. Beautiful.

"Have you *seen* him?"

"Oh, you have to get past the tiny oddities," her mother said. "But he's strong, and so very beautiful." Twirl.

She had to get out of there. Another second and she would be sick. Frantically, she looked around. On each side there were a few steps that descended to a door; on the left it was open. She made for the door.

"Michelle, don't go yet. Have a dance. You do remember this song, don't you? Do you remember how we used to dance together, my little girl?"

Michelle yanked the flashlight out of her pocket. She almost went for the scalpel, but she didn't want to hurt her mother, just find out if she was in there somewhere. "Do you remember *this*?"

Her mother tilted her head at it quizzically. Her mother was too beautiful, too youthful. She'd never looked this young and full of life, even when Michelle had been a baby, even in the photographs of before the Eclipse, even more balanced in face and feature than in her college pictures.

"You gave this to me when I was eight. Do you remember? You told me that it would protect me from demons even though it didn't work. Do you remember that? And you told me you wanted me to never be afraid of the dark again. *Do you remember?*"

Her mother squinted. "You never have to be afraid of the dark here."

It almost fell from her shaking hands, but she caught it and shoved it back into her jacket. No, she didn't remember. "But you remember me, right?"

"Of course. He promised I would see you again. And now I'm so happy."

She wanted equal parts to scream and to never speak again, and neither would be sufficient. "Do you remember Seth?"

"Our son? Of course. I see him everyday, sweetie."

Her mouth dried. "He's... here?"

A wide grin. "It's a beautiful reunion! I'm sure he has missed you."

Michelle turned and ran for the opening.

"Oh, don't go yet. Stay for a dance."

She disappeared into the open door, and this one she slammed herself. If she had stayed for a moment longer, she would have started screaming and crying and may have done or said things she would regret. She set her head against the door. There was no sound from the other side. No more words or calls to come back.

Her mother was too absorbed in her music, her dancing to chase after Michelle. But... she should have still been able to hear the music. It had been too loud to be shut out by just a wooden door.

It was locked, and she couldn't find a mechanism on the door to unlock it.

She put her back to it, shaking and confused, and realized that the door had not brought her to a place beneath the church's aisles. It was a guestroom with a bed made up with silk sheets and pillows; on a desk beside the bed, a single notecard lay.

Welcome to my Palace.

-Casimir

She tore it in half and dropped it to the floor. There was a bathroom to one side and sitting room and kitchen to the other, but there were no windows, and the door was locked. The room was stocked with furniture but devoid of other objects. A single metal cup sat in the kitchen, but not a plate, dish, fork or knife otherwise. The sitting room had a bookcase, but it was empty. Lavish or not, this was a prison cell.

On the bed, she tried to sort it out. Twelve years ago her mother had disappeared, but she hadn't died. She had come *here*. Michelle wasn't sure how, why, or under what circumstances, but somehow her mother had become content to leave her husband, daughter, and son behind and... she didn't know what. Was she married to Casimir? The thought made her want to vomit.

Again she wanted company. It had been so long since she'd been alone, she'd forgotten how devastating it felt. She could scream and cry or even hurt herself and no one could comfort her, no one could tell her that she meant something to them. She wished for someone, Mr. Keaton or Arroyo, but she got nothing.

Chapter Nineteen

The floor is a blue granite slab. There are no walls, no ceiling either, just a close blackness. Arroyo stands on it alone, shaking from the cold. Michelle appears slowly, given light like a match struck. She kneels, naked and covering herself with her arms, her face downcast, her eyes on the floor, and a collar around her neck. A chain from it winds around her knees and rises into a black skeletal hand. The knuckles crack and make a grinding sound as the hand tightens. A black skeletal creature grins in its naked skull atop its spine. Red points of light as eyes. Arroyo can't move, can't let out the air in his lungs or swallow the dryness in his mouth. His desiccated tongue is limp on the floor of his mouth.

Casimir the skeleton just stares. The slab of floor slips away, slides under Arroyo's feet, but he doesn't move with it or trip backward until the slab is entirely out from under him. All he can see is Michelle's pale naked body and the red points of light – then he is falling, and he hits the ground in a cavern with orange lanterns overhead.

The cavern floor vibrates, sending pebbles bouncing and rumbling. The wall to his left is warm. He touches it – the image of Casimir and Michelle already fading – and finds his pistol in his hand, the one bullet remaining in the clip, and he knows who it will be for, who inevitably awaits him at the end of this tunnel.

If the Arbiter dies, Casimir will crumble. He will release Michelle, and Arroyo can protect her. He starts down the tunnel, sloping deeper, then stops. "No," he tries to say, but his words are silent. "I have more than this. This isn't all there is to me." He knows the words even though nothing comes. "I'm not here to kill. I can do more than that."

He tries to throw the pistol away, but his fingers won't release it.

"I can love her."

The cavern shakes, and a voice slithers into his mind: "Single-minded, predictable Arroyo. She wants her revenge, her absolution, and you want your noble kill – love was convenience, two quests put on the same path for a brief time. Abandon her as she has abandoned you."

Arroyo bolted awake, grabbing at his blankets and pulling them close, shivering and repeating, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no."

*

Keaton walked to the window, looked out at the gray sky, and imagined it a little blue and a little yellow as he sipped his tea. Lee had gathered a remarkable collection of teas. Even Sophia found one she liked. He joined them, not working tonight, in the lounge at the bottom of their hotel, and Sophia was explaining what she did at the compound, what they all did there, when Arroyo came downstairs, weary-eyed.

"Good morning – have some tea. I figure you for a mint sort of man."

Arroyo nodded, looking around as though this weren't where he'd gone to sleep last night. "Sounds fine. Where is Agnes?"

"She left looking for something she saw on her way here," Lee said.

"I couldn't figure out what she meant," Keaton said, "and she wouldn't tell me."

"How long ago?"

"Perhaps forty minutes."

"So, you're leaving, then?" Lee said. He fished in his pocket and tapped his finger against his palm. "That's what you want to do?"

"Yes," Arroyo said. "Is that a problem?"

Lee stammered. "Uh, well, not to me, no. It's just...."

"Just what?" Keaton said.

"Oh, just that I was hoping you could stay longer, but I guess you have to do what is most important." He picked up his tea and met Keaton by the window. Even in his time off, Lee still wore a vest, loose slacks, and a pale yellow bowtie. "Keaton, if you want to leave, you have to do so soon, and you have to follow my directions." He spoke clandestinely, like a spy.

"What is going on?" Keaton whispered.

"The mayor doesn't precisely want you to leave. But *I* know that you have to." He pulled out the green tie from the night before. "Here."

Keaton took it, wrinkle-free and folded in Lee's palm. The tie was soft, clean cotton, or maybe a synthetic blend. Now that he could see it closer, close enough to admire the stitch work, he saw the depth of the color, the places where there were darker greens shaped like leaves and lighter green in smooth waves like vines. He undid his bowtie and dropped it into Lee's hand before Lee could pull it back. "I hope you'll take the trade, though mine has seen plenty," Keaton said. "One is all I need."

"How are your injuries?" Arroyo was asking Sophia.

"Healing okay," she said. "That's the only good thing about how cold it is, helps me forget about them."

“And you won’t bleed as much if your blood is slush.”

She giggled a little. “Did you just make a joke? Look at you. I really should give you that piece of candy.”

Lee took Keaton’s hand and shook it.

“What do we need to do, then, to make our escape?”

“You’ll have to be fast.”

A series of honks made Keaton jump and clutch at his chest. Lee tensed up and ducked. It came from outside. Agnes sat at the wheel of a silver car relatively undamaged aside from a crumpled front bumper – and it was running. “How in the world...?”

“It seems... like that won’t be a problem,” Lee said.

Sophia tailed behind Arroyo to come see. “I’m not getting in that,” she said.

“Then we’ll leave you with Lee,” Arroyo said. “I know Agnes won’t mind.”

“You wouldn’t *dare*.”

“Besides, you wanted to help, right? We need this car.”

“I know that. It’s just... Miss Agnes’s driving. She’s very... what’s the word?”

“Tempestuous? Irritable?”

“Bitchy. And she drives like that.”

“Come on – we’ll be fine.” She started for the door. “I hope it’s warm in there.”

Keaton tapped Arroyo’s shoulder as he started after Sophia and asked again, “How in the world has she managed that?”

Arroyo simply shrugged with a stupefied smile. "I guess she's more impressive than I thought." Agnes honked again and waved them over, scowling and doing an overly exaggerated shrug.

Keaton met Lee by the window. "Thank you for the kindness," he said. "I sorely missed it."

Lee stopped staring at the car. "Do you think she would mind if I asked her how she did that?"

"I doubt she would. Come on out."

The air outside was still but frosty. The others were already inside the vehicle. Keaton led Lee to the driver's window and then took his seat in the back, in luxurious cushioned leather seats. It had been so long since he'd been in a car. These American machines were still foreign to him. He'd been in one a few times, though this one was German-made.

Lee asked his question, and Agnes said, "I saw one on the way in, right after you threatened to shoot us."

"Sorry about that, again."

"But one I saw was busted, so I went up the hill to the rich folks' houses."

"How is it still running, though? All of the ones we've seen have empty fuel tanks and dead batteries."

She patted the pristine dashboard. "We use these at the compound – electric car with lithium-air batteries."

"Electric."

"The would have been too expensive, but I figured some of the rich folks would have 'em." She paused to sneer at Arroyo beside her. "I had to sneak in and then drive it through a gate and the garage door. Hence the dents."

"Astounding—and you know where you're going?"

Arroyo leaned over. Agnes slapped his arm, but he didn't bother drawing back. "Casimir's castle," he said. Lee laughed at what, to him, was obviously a joke then slowly stopped and showed worry when he must have realized that, to them, there was no joke about it.

"I thought you said that was a myth," Sophia said. "I don't want to get dragged around looking for something that doesn't exist."

"But that's where Michelle is. If she's anywhere she's there. And Casimir would make anyone who had seen it believe that it's a myth."

She cocked her head, and her confusion matched that on Lee's face. "Wait, the Casimir is real, too? Can you explain all this to me? I'm lost somewhere."

"You're serious," Lee said. "Then good luck to you—and don't let me keep you."

"Is someone going to explain this to me?"

"Lee," Keaton said, "I hope we live long enough to come back. I'll pick up my bowtie, and we can drink tea more peacefully together." Lee nodded, Sophia complained that she was being left in the dark, Agnes rolled up the window, and she drove off at Arroyo's directions.

*

Michelle was actually glad about what her mother had told her. Seth was alive, too, and he was here. She felt bad, because it became obvious that she'd let her obsession

with her dad's death overshadow the loss of her brother. She'd always assumed Seth had died too because he had been with their dad, but *his* body hadn't been dropped on their porch. It hadn't occurred to her that there could have been any more complex possibilities.

She pulled out the broken flashlight. "Haven't you always protected me from demons?" she asked it. While she knew that it didn't protect her, at the same time she still always thought that it did. "I'm still afraid of the dark, but I don't blame you. Here." She set it on the table next to the guestroom bed. "You've worked a long time. Take a break."

She wished the door hadn't locked behind her. She wished that she hadn't taken that door at all, because she didn't want to be through with her mother. The experience had been altogether too much. Now she realized that she'd panicked and fled, because that woman had been nothing like her mother.

The bed was thick, soft, and the look of its comfort seduced her. The sheets were silky beneath her fingers, the softest thing she could remember feeling, and she struggled against the desire to shed her clothes and crawl into it to feel it on all the skin of her body.

She wasn't safe. She couldn't let herself sleep. But at the same time, there was nothing else to do in the room, and, if she was going to survive, she needed to sleep.

She paced the room, from bathtub to empty refrigerator, tried to stretch every muscle she could think of, then turned on the faucet at the sink to wash her face. The water was warm. If she'd had a razor instead of a scalpel, she might have tried to shave.

Finally she had been aggravated enough that she threw back the bed sheets, removed her boots and coat, and slunk into the bed. Immediately, she grew nervous, felt vulnerable. If Casimir wanted to prey on her, he would do it now. She just knew it.

The pillow swelled around her and cradled her head. Her eyes were tired, felt heavy. They fought against the vulnerability that tingled in her stomach and on her forehead. Then she felt a presence –

She snapped awake, scrambled to the foot of the bed, and looked back. A plain wall. With a hand nervously running through her hair, she breathed out. Something had been there. It had never felt so strong before any nightmare. She grabbed the pillow away from the head of the bed and curled up at the foot, facing the wall.

Casimir could have been sending this haunt to keep her from resting – she felt paranoid. She didn't understand Casimir or know anything about him. Still, it felt right.

Her eyes closed.

*

Her arms are above her head, tied to a huge pendulum. It swings, and swings her with it. Below, her mother taps her toe, fingers gingerly lifting a record player's needle from a spinning record. She drops the needle, and music begins. "La la la," her mother sings as she begins to dance.

Michelle tries to call out to her mother. "Hey! Let me down!" Her hands are numb, and her shoulders hurt. The swaying has made her so dizzy she feels sick.

Her mother curtsies, lifts her arms, and ascends. She levitates up to Michelle's height, scoots closer, and taps her on the nose. The pendulum stops swinging. "Silly, dear, you should just dance with me."

"No!"

Her mother pirouettes in midair. "If you resist... I'm sure something happens, but I don't quite remember. Funny, isn't it?"

*

There was a click at the door. Such a subtle sound, yet in the quiet it caused her to jump awake. Her hand went for the first thing she could touch, and it was her mother's flashlight. Scarcely five inches long, it was no impressive club, but at least it was metal.

The door swung open. No more sound.

She relaxed, just a little, and held up the flashlight. "Sorry. I need you." Back into her pocket, and she relaxed her hands, her shoulders stopped being clenched, and the pain in her neck went away.

If logic reigned, the door should have led back to the church, to her mother's music and dancing, yet she doubted it would do that.

Her muscles were tired, and she had to stretch once she stood up. She must have slept through the night. She put her boots and coat back on and stepped out of the guest room into an empty hall. She swore she'd seen the painting of water lilies in one of the halls she took when she first got to the palace, but she couldn't be sure. All she was sure of was that the cathedral aisles and her mother were nowhere around – yet she came to this guestroom through this door from the cathedral.

With it open, she could come back to it. Hopefully. But now she couldn't waste time trying to figure out how the door worked. She needed to find Casimir. As happy as the thought of Seth still being alive made her, she thought of her mother, a face familiar

enough and a voice she could hear whenever she closed her eyes, but not in any way that same person, and didn't want Seth to be like that, too.

Left down the hall, she watched the archways, the way that the columns came up to the ceiling and curved together and met at the peaks of the vaults and stuck out like ribs, like she could see the palace's skeleton. And if she detonated the right stones, she could probably bring down the whole hall.

Torches slotted high into the walls lit her walkway. Somehow, light came in from the outside, too, through the red and green and mostly blue of the stained glass windows at the gap of each arch.

Something shuffled ahead. If she had been breathing in at the moment, she wouldn't have heard it.

She slid to the side and flattened herself behind a column. Held her breath. If whatever made such a small sound had ears as decent as hers, it would hear her much easier than she'd heard it. The sound did not repeat

Instead, a black figure slinked across the aisle intersecting her hall. Four sinewy legs, hunching shoulders, a flat-snouted black maw that glistened wet. It was a garr, only not white-gray like every other. Black-purple rather than colorless. A panther, almost, with the same stealth in each step, only it had crisply folded wings along its back, and a long barbed tail that could take her legs out with one sweep.

It passed her. Then stopped in the center of the intersection. Its tail twitched.

Michelle's legs begged her to run, but she had to tell them, no, it's faster than I am — if I run, it will catch me, and she clenched them to hold them fast.

The panther slid one paw – with knuckled claws, almost like a hand – and turned her way.

Her legs won out. She bolted past it – there were no escapes the way she'd already come. It could have whipped its tail out and hit her, and she was willing to risk that, but she must have surprised it.

Beneath her own frantic breathing and falling footsteps, she couldn't hear any sign of it following her, and she didn't want to look back, as much as her body tried to get her to do it – just look, maybe it wasn't there – then the clack of claws on the stone floor.

It was close, but it should have been able to overtake her, unless it wasn't as fast as it looked – she ran past a door to her right – if she stopped to go back, let alone if she had to fumble with the handle or found it locked, the panther would be able to take its time eviscerating her. All she had to fight it was a scalpel. No, she needed to find an open door, but that wasn't likely. Maybe a door she saw coming would be enough to risk it.

Another passed that she didn't see, and she looked back at it. In the corner of her eye the panther glided along, not running its fastest, probably waiting for her to tire or slip or turn and attack it, but it watched her with white eyes.

When the hall ended she skidded and swept to the right. Tall wooden double doors with images of trees carved into them and ornate iron handles like branches. She had to slow a bit. Every muscle from her ankle to her lower back burned. Then she pulled in whatever she had left and sprinted the last ten feet.

She grabbed the handle and caught it – her body tried to rocket past it, but she held on. Her injured shoulder flared and shot pain down through her fingernails.

The panther skidded past her.

She yanked on the handles, and the doors gave. But barely. They were too heavy. She glanced back. The panther had steadied itself and raised its spired barbed tail. She ducked away as the tail swung around and down and crashed against the floor. It would have hit her if it had made a straight attack and pinned her to the door, but it stayed hesitant.

She took one door handle in both hands and pulled.

The panther brought its tail back.

The door slid a little easier. The panther lashed again, striking just short, and Michelle evaded by staying close to the door. She gave it one more yank, ducked her head, and slid through, pulling it closed behind her.

Then the silence was broken by music, just like in the cathedral, only not the classical dance – another set of music she remembered from her childhood, but she couldn't quite remember it.

She stepped out from a narrow atrium and into the room. It rivaled the cathedral in height, and the whole space glowed by chandelier and torchlight, but this space wasn't decorated with frivolous ornamentation. Three tiers of walkways were open to the floor – Michelle was on the second – all decked in full bookshelves, marble stone blended with polished wood. Not an inch was dusty, not a smear of grime.

Holding onto the stone banister, she looked down. A young man sat at a marble table. The music came from above, echoed through the space, and she remembered now. Point of Know Return, Kansas, another record of her dad's that played at home almost every night.

Seth. It was Seth, was supposed to be or once had been him – but it didn't seem like anything lived here besides shadows and her stolen family. Sweat slipped between her palms and the banister.

She breathed hard to catch her breath – not loud enough for Seth to hear over the music, probably. Somehow the grandiosity of the library had made her forget about the panther. She watched the doors, static in the shadow of the atrium. No movement, no sound. They were both closed, though she didn't remember pulling the second one behind her.

Stairs circled down to the center floor to her right. She held onto the banister for her shaky legs and steadied herself down the long flight.

His nose was in a book, but his eyes were closed. He opened them, read, then closed them, enjoying equal parts escape through music and literature. At home, he always used to do the same thing. Except he opened his eyes again immediately and lifted his head slowly, as if unsure that Michelle was really there.

“Michelle?”

She swallowed. It sounded like him.

“You're all grown up. You look... terrible.” When he smiled, it was the same. It was Seth. “Come sit here with me.” He was older, definitely, though not as much a full-grown eighteen year-old as she might have thought. Broader in the face and body. But he was definitely her brother. His skin lacked all color, just a tinge of blue, like he had been too cold.

She joined him on the marble bench. It made her bottom cold, but she ignored it. “How did you get here?” she said.

"I've been here a while," he said. "I'm sure you know about how long. How did *you* get here?"

"That is a very long story."

At first she thought it was a quirk of the lighting that made his skin like ash, until she glanced down at her own hands folded on the table. They were paper white with just a hint of pink from eating, and he was still tinted blue.

Her face must have given her away, because he said, "I don't know why it never came up at home. Maybe we just didn't want to notice the freak."

"What happened?" He was her brother with the same smart, thought-through snap to what he said – even when he'd been twelve – but she couldn't get past his skin. And the fact that he was here, alive; but at least he was still clearly himself. She shuddered.

"How did it happen?"

"My soul decayed," he said. "My skin forgot to be happy."

He was joking. "I'm serious," she said.

"I can tell."

"Can you tell me how this happened?"

"Michelle, I was born like this, with a little seed of evil in me."

Okay, he was still joking, and it was irritating. "Tell me."

"I just did. They didn't come out and say it, but I figured it out." He paused, maybe expecting her to ask what he figured out, but she didn't want to give him a chance to let loose another dry joke. She just wanted to know. "I'm *his* son."

He swallowed. His eyebrows bunched together toward the middle. He wasn't evil, now or at birth, and she would not accept that. But he was her dad's son. Whose did he think he was? "What are you talking about?"

"I'm one of them. Part, at least. I made a garr turn in circles once just by looking at it and thinking about those bagels Mr. Ham baked every weekend."

She gasped and almost stumbled back off of the bench. One of them. *His* son.

"You used to be so much smarter than me, Michelle. What happened?"

"You mean you're... Casimir's son? Is that what this is about?" Her mind raced, trying to piece together the pieces. None of it matched up. Her brother wasn't even mentioned anywhere near those entries. No, there was more to this.

"I just know he didn't kill me. What are you trying to figure out?"

"Dad wrote about him. He wrote about Casimir, just a few times, in his journals."

"You took Dad's journals?"

"So he's still your dad?"

"Don't be an idiot," Seth said, seriousness taking an edge to his voice. "I don't care where I came from. When I think of 'Dad,' you know who's in my head. So, did he write anything about me?"

"Sometimes he wrote about both of us." She wasn't sure how true that was, because she skimmed those parts. It had hurt too much at the time to think of her dad as her father, her brother's father; it was easier to think of him as the man who died, the man with a mystery to unravel. That way she could think about him, keep him alive to her, but not think about all the pain of not having him around. All of the pain that rushed back to her now, looking at her brother, grayish blue.

Not her brother, not completely. Not even completely human. One of those. She imagined Casimir from her nightmare forcing himself onto her mother – she blinked away the thought and shook her head so hard it almost slammed into the table.

“I think you need some help.”

“Shut up. I just want to know why.”

“Me, too. I ask, but they won’t tell me.”

She imagined her brother, her hollow mother, and Casimir sitting at a dinner table, chatting. It was too much to stomach, even though she knew the truth wasn’t like that. “How many of these have you read?” She stared out at the bookshelves.

“You know, sometimes I have no idea if I’ve read something until I start it, and then, once I figure out whether I’ve read it already, I flip a coin – ”

“How can you live like this?” she blurted. “You and *her*.” Mom was too painful, too untrue to say, so she would use the word mother, or *her*, and she would spit it as vehemently as she could. She didn’t care if it was unfair. “How can you live with yourselves?”

“I didn’t have much choice of leaving. You should talk to her about her choice.”

She logged that away for later. Now she had more to say to him. “It has to be unbearable living with him.”

“It’s life, Michelle. It’s better than being dead.”

“That’s not the point – ”

“It’s better than being afraid every night and it’s better than starving.”

“I’m not so sure,” she said.

"I am," he said. "I'm still alive. So what if I have a heart made of burning sulfur, and evil is a shadow stretching across me, threatening to drag me to Hell with its steely claws?"

She slugged him. "How can you joke?"

"Because it's life. And ow." He rubbed at his upper arm.

"But how can you just laugh at this?"

"You're right. I could be all mopey and serious like you are, but then, would I still have time to laugh?"

She got up and paced. As much as humor might have been his savior from being miserable, she was not in the mood for it. It was nothing but infuriating to her.

"You used to be funny," he said.

She spun on him. "That was before I lost my brother and dad. Before I had to spend every moment wondering if I would be eaten while I tried to sleep. So I'm sorry, but not much has been funny since that."

He was quiet while she stomped around. She clung to the anger, because she would start crying if she let it go. "It was easier for you," she said. "You're right. Maybe making jokes is better than being afraid, but I've been afraid my whole life, so I don't know what it's like anymore to not be afraid."

"It wasn't easier. Well, yes, it probably was." He paused, probably to see if she would laugh. Then he went on, "But the thought of you out there by yourself... I thought you'd be dead for sure." He invited her to sit next to him again. She took his hand; it was soft. "But then I remembered who my sister was, and I knew I'd see you again someday. I don't know. Now that you're here, it feels kind of special." He stared

at the stone table and picked at its tiny crevices. She wanted to hug him but didn't. "But you're so damn depressing, it's a little bit painful to be around you, to tell you the truth, and I'm one half the embodiment of pure sin."

He returned her punch to the arm, and she laughed.

It was a laugh with a smile. It bubbled up from her chest and felt foreign. The impulse to bottle it down came, but she tossed it away and took another shot at it, letting the laugh come up and flow out. Her cheeks hurt, and she put her arm around her brother. She wasn't sure she'd really laughed in six years.

She did love her brother. So he figured it out, pieced it together that he was a product of Casimir and their mother, and it didn't seem to bother him. He joked. It could have been a defense, but his laughs felt real. If he could get along with a little bit of happiness, like this, with no one – as far as she could tell – except Casimir and what was left of their mother, then she could, too.

Just thinking about her mother sneaking around and having an affair – with a monster, not even a human man – while the rest of them struggled to eat made her want to go find her again and strangle her just a little – no, a lot – but there was no telling which door might lead to where she wanted to go.

"I'm glad you're here, Michelle."

"I..." She wanted to say that she wasn't, not even a bit glad to be here, that she didn't want to be here, that she didn't think her family being turned into a puppet show was worth being glad, but then she reconsidered. He was alive. That was better than what she'd thought, and her mother was alive, too, as pitiful as she was. "I'm glad, too."

There were, as resistant as she was to admitting, worse places to be, and she needed to find Casimir. Find her answers. That could only be done here.

“Where is he?” she asked.

“Who, Dad?”

She stared at him. He had said their dad was the only ‘Dad’ to him, so he didn’t mean Casimir. Her tongue tingled and felt fat in her mouth, like anything out of her mouth would be unintelligible gibberish. She swallowed and said, “What are you talking about?”

*

Lee removed his handkerchief from his breast pocket, folded away the third that was already damp from his sweat, and mopped his brow and sideburns. His hike through the Oasis – out of the Oasis and into the desolate once-city around it – had been long, circuitous, and fruitless. He was, for the first time since Harriett’s death, comforted by the fact that she was in a better place. If he still had a wife, he wouldn’t have been able to do what he was trying to do. Able, yes actually, but he wouldn’t have been willing to.

A tear joined his sweat. At first he didn’t know why. Then he realized – if Harriett were still with him, she would have joined him, been his lookout or made excuses for him to the mayor. As such, he needed to do this before the mayor knew that their guests were gone. More specifically, before he found out that Lee had helped them go before they could be convinced to, or if necessary coerced to – stay in the Oasis. The mayor had dreams of expansion, and females were especially of value.

Lee climbed a hill to the next driveway. His gun made a decent walking stick if he used it carefully, but the trek still tolled him.

For a while he had counted the cars, garages, the houses he checked. Haunts, all of them. But he stopped after it started to make him feel increasingly hopeless. He peered through a window in a garage door. Nothing. He had thought that, given how Agnes had happened upon one of those cars, he would find one, too, if he looked hard enough. At least he knew he wouldn't be killed for his disobedience. The population count needed him.

Gravel sounded from the driveway.

He spun and turned his walking stick back to its intended purpose. But no one was there. From a crouch he inched out and looked down the hill. *Screech!* Claws hit him as the garr swept down from the sky, gripping his shoulders and slamming him back to the wall, then the ground. Lee threw up his arms to guard his face. The gray jaws closed around it. The teeth slid into his arm and crunched against his bone. The pain jolted through him, so hot in his arm that his nerves were overwhelmed, and he felt it in his teeth and behind his eyes.

The garr pulled its face back, bloody teeth bared, and he slid from under it, picked up his gun. His right hand didn't obey his commands. The arm hung limp.

Lee staggered away from the house as the monster leapt into the air, to circle and make the final strike.

Chapter Twenty

“Dad,” Seth repeated. “Did you not hear me?” He looked around conspiratorially.

“Casimir doesn’t want me to know, but Dad is here.”

“Here.”

“Well, not exactly here. Did you see the really creep hospital on your way here?”

“Seth, Dad is *dead*.”

“You’re no good at the humor thing, Michelle, though the effort is nice, I swear. I don’t mean that I wish he had killed Dad – I just can’t really figure it out.”

How would he have known? Their dad had been dropped off on their porch, alone, and only she had been home, so of course Seth wouldn’t know. When she had first sat down with him at the library, she’d been so focused on what he knew that she didn’t, at the secrets he could fill her in on, she hadn’t thought that he would have had a different perspective on events, that things she had gone through and seen... well, he would have no idea any of it existed, especially this.

“What is it?” He stared.

“What?” She didn’t want to meet his eyes.

“You stopped pacing and got this really freaky look. What’s going on?”

She swallowed and puckered her lips like something hot and sour and gotten down her throat. “Casimir killed Dad – I’m pretty sure. I don’t know who else it would have been.”

“No, that can’t be true. I’ve overheard them talking about him. Both of them. And they didn’t know I was listening, so don’t even go there.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“But he’s at that hospital.” His voice was sharp, defensive. She wanted to believe him.

“Seth, I was at home the night you disappeared. I was there, and then there was a sound on the porch.” She swallowed some air before going on. “I was scared because you and Dad weren’t home yet when you were supposed to be home, so I ran to the door and waited for you to come through. I was so happy you were home that I was going to forget about yelling at him for being late and letting me be so scared. But it didn’t open.”

She couldn’t urge her legs to go keeping pacing.

“And there were no more sounds on the porch. I didn’t want to look, but I had to. I had locked all the doors and windows and said I wouldn’t open anything again until you were back, but I needed to look. So I did.” She refused to cry, as difficult as it was to tell. Her eyes were dry. “He was there, lying there. I only looked for a second, but I can’t forget it. Every detail is like fire when I close my eyes. His body was dry, especially in

his lips and eyelids, and there were footsteps leading up to the porch, and then away from it, lighter as they were heading away –”

“Michelle –”

“And his ankle was twisted around so that his foot faced the wrong way.”

“Please.”

“It was his left foot.”

“Please stop this.”

“And his *eyes* were still open, looking right at the door, just to my left, but the color was gone from them.”

“Stop it! I know he’s alive.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Because if you aren’t sure or if you could be wrong, get that out right now, because I’m not getting my hopes up.” She couldn’t keep her eyes dry anymore. Tears came somehow. Seth shambled to her side and held her hand.

“He really meant a lot to you.”

“I’ve been trying to figure out that night ever since. Trying to figure out where Mom went and what Dad wrote about, but it’s all been about that night. I know it. And if I can figure that out, get that out of Casimir, then maybe....” She didn’t know what came at the end of that thought. Blankness. Nothing. Either she would fill it with whatever she wanted, or she would be dead. That was all that came at the end of this.

“Come here, big sis.”

“I just want to know why.”

She let her arms dangle as he tried to embrace her, with his arms over her shoulders.

“Don’t be a crybaby anymore. It makes me sad. We’ll figure out why.”

“But he’s there?”

“Yes.”

“If you’re wrong....”

“Let’s go find him.”

She followed him back to the landing that overlooked the library floor. For a moment she was focused on her dad, thinking what she would say to him if he were still alive. *I never gave up* came to mind.

Then she noticed the ridiculous thing billowing behind Seth as he walked; maybe she had been too shocked at his appearance to notice that he’d been wearing a cape.

“What in the world are you wearing, Seth?”

“Oh come on. Do you have to ask questions about everything?”

“No, what is with this? Where are the practical clothes? You look like a doll.”

“I don’t fit into what I came in anymore – and if you haven’t figured it out, I really don’t get to do anything practical.” He opened the huge library doors, which had been so heavy for her.

“How’d you do that?”

“You’re just weak.”

She punched his shoulder. “Seriously.”

“I am. And I’m also serious about the questions.” He waved her along. “Okay, up here, we turn left.”

“So, that’s all Casimir provides for clothes? You can’t find anything yourself?”

"Nothing that gets tolerated. It's a little sacrifice. Up ahead, a left. Are you listening?"

"Of course I am." It was the same hall she'd gone through when running from the panther, but would have bet that, if she had opened those doors, she would have found herself somewhere else entirely. "When you open the doors, they all take you where they're supposed to. Why is that when I try to open them, they...?"

He turned and looked at her as if over the tops of glasses resting on his nose, even though he didn't wear any.

"Right," she said. "Fine. No more questions. Lead the way."

He led them out of the central palace. They cut across the courtyard, through a hidden door and a secret alley, and came to the front gate, now closed. She had no idea how they had gotten there, because as far as she could tell they had just gone in a giant circle. None of this made any sense, but she decided to stop trying to figure *that* out.

Seth walked up to the gate. "Wait here. I'll go over and let you in."

"Over?" The gate was twenty feet tall. Easily. "If you say so."

"It'll be easy. Just wait." He approached the gate.

"You seem to have your escape plan memorized pretty well. Why haven't you gotten out?"

"Oh I have. It's not my first time slipping out."

"But if you come back, why not just ask Casimir if you can go somewhere? He would let you go, wouldn't he?"

"Not as fun." He started to scale the wall to the left of the gate. She couldn't tell how he did it—it looked pretty sheer to her—but he made it to the top without much

difficulty. Then he waved, turned, and jumped down the other side. A few seconds later, the gate came up, and as it did, Michelle realized something she should have realized earlier.

The gate was locked and opened from the *outside*. She and Anglis had cut a pretty clean line through the field of rubble surrounding the palace, even though he said she would get lost in it if she tried to go back. This palace wasn't designed to defend its inhabitants. It was designed to keep them there. Seth had probably figured that out a long time ago while her mother went on, oblivious. She wanted to slap one of them and hug the other, and she went back and forth trying to figure out which was which.

Seth trotted up to meet her. "Voila."

"Have you ever gone to the hospital before?"

"Questions, again?"

"Come on."

"I'll answer as long as you know how much it pains me." He watched her, maybe to see if she withdrew the question, but she wouldn't. He could put up his little fake fits as much as he wanted. He was cooperative, and she needed as many answers as she could get. "Fine. I tried, a few times, but I got picked up by garr."

"The black one?"

"Once. I got as far as the glass doors."

He was never supposed to leave, and their dad was kept at the hospital, close but still far enough so that Seth could be caught if he ever got out. Casimir stole her family and held them here as prisoners, a forced family, and she had no idea why.

*

She hesitated to put a foot down on the walkway, the path of mottled dirt and mud that stretched from the driveway to the hospital's glass doors. Maybe it had been paved cement once. Her last memory of being here—her only memory of being here, and not really a memory at all—had her being pulled by reaching fingers toward the crumbling skeletal face, and the sense of sleep. Great, deep sleep that would take her.

"So that's it," Seth said. "I got to the doors once."

"You mentioned."

"But I'm not afraid now. Not at all."

Their dad was in there somewhere—like the fingers and the crumbling face had become infused with this image of the hospital, the image in her head of her dad, as it had been for six years, was him dead on the porch, and it was a struggle to drag out another image of him and bring it to her mind, but she always tried. This time it came easily. His tired-eyed smile, the only she'd ever seen on him, as he settled into the maroon plush armchair and read *The Phantom Tollbooth* to her. In that world, all of the creatures and the monsters could be explained. He held out his hand to pull her up with him, that same reassuring smile, telling her that all of the monsters would be explained away, and that she could conquer them.

The image flashed away, the hospital returned, and she pulled back her outstretched hand to instead finger the comforting steel of the scalpel. "Come on, we're wasting time," she said. Having just been reaching out at nothing, she didn't want Seth to have a chance to question her.

She put one boot in front of the other. They sunk into the mud, and she stifled a gasp, held down that breath. Nothing would pop out of the soil and grab her. Nothing. So

she looked up, and instead stared at the black windows and cracked façade, at each grain in the bricks, each tangle of the naked ivy, until she and Seth stepped up to the glass doors.

Something squished through the mud behind them.

She whipped around and grabbed Seth. Garr – a half dozen of them – stalked up the mud path toward them.

“Let’s get inside,” Seth said.

“You think that will stop them? We have to fight.”

“They won’t hurt us. Trust me, they’ll just take us back. If we can find Dad first –”

“That was before I got here, Seth. I’m not going to take that chance.”

“We could at least try to get away!”

“Fine, go.” She shoved him toward the door and held the scalpel out like a tiny, insignificant sword. The first garr lunged and all she could do was try to catch it so that she could push the scalpel into its eyes, but she knew it was all wrong. She was slow. Claws reached out for her. Then the garr tripped over its feet at the start of its leap and curled inward to the right. She had to look twice to make sure she saw it right. “What in the world?”

The others behind it turned, too, and they began to run in circles. She grabbed Seth. “The bagels, really?”

“It’s all I know how to do! You want something better?” He grinned. “Look at them run.”

Watching them, she had to laugh.

“Hey, look at you,” he said.

“How long do they do that?”

“Until another nightmare tells them to do something else. I think.”

“Really? Good work, kid.”

He pushed open the glass door and took her hand.

*

Lee ducked, dropped to the ground, propped up by his left arm, and the garr reached but missed and glided past him. He ran and hopped over the short retaining wall and back to the street. The garr would regroup, and the downhill slant only aided its glide. But he had to run back, downhill. Robinson would be on patrol for this side of the Oasis. He could help.

Lee glanced back but didn't see the garr. There couldn't have been that much distance between them. It must have been airborne already, and Lee left a trickling trail of blood. He would be easy to follow regardless.

Already prematurely feeling those stone strong jaws close on him again, Lee knew he needed to be evasive. He made a sharp right and ran beneath a line of trees planted along the walk. No one would be around. He would have to flee for easily a mile before he would even be in sight of Robinson's patrol. The blood loss alone would bring him down before he reached that perimeter.

The garr shrieked at his change of direction. He heard it sail past the line of trees.

If he was going to get away, he needed to do it on his own. He crouched below the cover of the trees and went through his bag with his good arm. As part of the standard perimeter guard pack, he carried first-aid supplies, in case someone came along who needed attention, or in case someone fought back. The pills were bitter and stuck to his

dry tongue, and he wrapped his arm with all of the gauze and bandages that he had. It was a slow, vulnerable process with only one hand to do the wrapping.

His eyes darted and scanned the line just below the trees. The garr was nowhere.

He taped off the bandage and shoved everything back into his bag. Something rustled above him, and he ran without looking up or really even standing. Tree branches snapped, and something crashed down just behind him as he made for the street, for his hill, to go back up it. He could hear it clawing the pavement at his heels. He whipped his gun around and tossed it backward. Not enough behind the throw to be more than a mild nuisance, but he hoped to trip it up.

His best chance, as he striated getting used to the idea of saying hello to Harriett because *this* was his best, was to keep doing what he was doing before the garr had attacked. He would check these upscale homes for one of those green-marked electric cars, and maybe he would come upon some weapon he could use to fight back, exhausted and left-handed.

The first two on the hill he had already checked.

His thighs burned and begged him to stop, but he couldn't. He would find this car, he would follow Keaton and Arroyo, he would help them, and he would make a difference. As much as he loved Harriett, he wasn't ready to see her again just yet.

*

Michelle pressed her nose to the window and squinted to see inside. There were four hospital beds with people lying on them, asleep. Skin sagging pallid, just drooping, lying there. She stared down the hall at all of the windows just like this one and saw

faintly the outlines of more beds with a head at one end and feet at the other. She opened the door and went inside.

“I don’t know if you should do that,” Seth said.

Michelle gingerly approached the first bed. It was difficult to tell, but this man’s chest did move, just barely. She stood over him. His face contorted, and his mouth was open, his dry tongue arched in a silent scream. When she nudged him, he made no movement.

“Michelle, what are you – ?”

“Stop being so scared and come here. They aren’t going to get up.” The concrete room smelled as if the patients – the prisoners – were already dead, but as Michelle looked from one to the next, they were each moving their faces, each struggling to scream and escape. “Oh my god,” she said. “Nightmares.”

“Every person in the hospital?” He peered at the bedridden prisoners from the corner of the room.

“All night, every night, hundreds of victims. Thousands?” It was a huge hospital, and there could easily have been more than four crammed into each room. “What does he get out of it?”

“He doesn’t eat or sleep. Well, he doesn’t *need* to.”

She looked up at him. For so long she’d been used to just wondering things and not being met with answers. “Okay. So what?”

“He takes energy from the nightmares.”

“Oh, God.”

“No wonder he’s so powerful... and this is just one building. There could be even more.”

She whirled and grabbed him. “And Dad is one of them.”

“He must be.”

“But.” She turned to the first patient. He was crying, but his face was too dry for tears. “Why am I not one of them?”

“Don’t jinx it – let’s find Dad.”

She watched the silent suffering. This couldn’t be what happened to all of Casimir’s victims, because she wasn’t like this. Their bodies were so weak – if Casimir released them, would they even live? Their bodies were so frail. If they had any muscle left, it was little. “We can set them free,” she said.

Seth grabbed her arm. “No. No we can’t. Not here or now.”

“If I kill them, they won’t be in pain anymore.”

“But they’d never wake up.”

She imagined herself shriveled like these people – she would probably look eighty years old, too. “I would want someone to do that for me.”

He pulled her in and hugged her. “We’ll find another answer.” He pulled her out into the hallway. Something stabbed her shoulder.

The pain was momentary, replaced by a hot numbness that spread.

“Michelle!”

She pulled back, and the panther tail curled into view, still for a moment just before it plunged down and struck Seth, but it pulled up, just as it had to avoid hitting the door to the library, so that it was more a tap on Seth’s shoulder. He went limp and fell.

The numbness crawled across her chest and took her other arm and her stomach, then her face and her hips, thighs, and she collapsed but couldn't feel the impact. She didn't lose consciousness. She couldn't speak or close her eyes.

The hospital tilted and shifted around her. Then she realized she was being dragged. Not killed. No, that might have been preferable, depending on what the panther planned to do with her, or rather what Casimir had in mind following up their short-lived escape. She watched as Seth was left behind until another garr, like the panther but white and without the tail spikes, lifted Seth and dragged him with his cloak in its jaws.

The hall retreated from her until she was outside again, and then – completely without sensation – the ground fell away from her, and she was airborne. She couldn't even feel her clothes tug on her as they were held onto, though she could just barely feel the blood rushing to her face. Without being able to feel anything, the experience was oddly serene. She felt strange that she wasn't frightened. Maybe the panther had numbed her ability to feel that as well. The way that they had walked to the hospital passed below her, and she was inevitably brought back to the palace.

The ground came at her, and she had a flurry of vertigo, if only she could close her eyes, and she felt like she would vomit, only her throat and mouth didn't cooperate. When she stopped descending, and the dragging started again, luckily that nausea went away. She was taken through doors, up steps – by the bumpiness she could see, there would probably be bruises later – and then deposited on the floor of the guest room, and the door was closed.

Chapter Twenty-One

Feeling came back to her body almost all at once, as if the panther had a valve, paralyzed or not paralyzed, and just twisted it open or shut. But when feeling came back, she could feel her skin again, and she realized that she was filthy along with sore from being dragged. The back of her neck was covered in thick goo that burned. She swatted and wiped at it with her hands, but it only spread and burned some more, this time on her hands, too. She rubbed the pillow from the bed on it and got most of it off her hands, but it still burned on her neck.

She yanked the pillow out of the pillowcase and took the pillowcase to the bathroom sink. The running water rinsed off her hands, but she couldn't get the back of her neck to it, and she couldn't even get it all off after she drenched the pillowcase and scrubbed her neck with it.

The heat was getting to her eyes, making them water, and it felt like each hair on her neck was lit by a match, and the flame burrowed into the roots. She dropped to her knees from the sink and slid over to the bathtub. She turned on the faucet and waited until the water stopped being icy.

And she thought about Seth. Poor Seth, wouldn't have gotten into any trouble if she hadn't come along. But it had been his idea, and surely he wanted to see their dad

almost as much as she did. He probably felt just as bad about her getting caught. No, that was just her attempt to skip out on the guilt. It had definitely been her fault. He'd put himself on the line knowingly to help her, and she owed him. Something. If she ever got to see him again, the least she could do was thank him.

The thoughts didn't help distract from the burning. All of the scrubbing and spread the goo around, and now it dripped down her back and carved rivulets of fire. She had to get it off.

Steam rose from the hot water in sheets.

She threw a look back at the door. It was locked for now, sure, but anyone could burst it at any time. As long as that was a possibility, she didn't want to shed any of her clothes, no matter how much her skin burned.

From the sitting room, she pulled over one of the chairs and wedged it against the door. Tears smeared on her face. From the nape of her neck down the right side of her butt, the fiery drool dripped and sizzled. She kicked the chair a couple of times then raced to the bathtub, stripping as she went.

She flung her coat onto the counter and it hit the mirror with a loud clack that gave her pause. Her flashlight. She took it out of the inner pocket as she wiggled out of her pants, out of the tights beneath them, and set the flashlight by the floor by the tub. Having it near eased her mind.

As she bunched up her pants, the scalpel stabbed through her pocket and cut the stitching. She removed it and set it on the edge of the counter nearest the tub, just beside the towel rack. Now she *had* to get in. The burning dripped down the back of her naked thigh, around her calf.

She slid in, and water sloshed out of it, all onto the floor, and she felt stupid for not thinking to turn off the faucet. But that was in the background because the moment she touched the water the burning started to dissolve.

At first, it felt like the water would scald her. All that skin that was usually covered – most of her body, but especially her breasts and everything around her butt and hips – burned, but only for a moment. Like dry dirt being watered, her skin, so used to the cold, soaked up the heat and became acclimated.

The pool of hot water steamed, and she breathed it, felt the thick air glide into her lungs and warm them, and she let out a breath that she watched curl in the steam.

The muscles in her neck and shoulders loosened at the warmth of the water, like an intricate lacework being unwound by the pull of a single strand. She let her eyes close, her head tilt back, though when she looked out across the room, she saw the tile floor and thought of how cold it would be on the bottoms of her feet. Even if the air would give her goosebumps and make her hair stand up and her breasts hurt, for now, the warmth was worth it.

The dirt faded from her skin, her fingers, and under her fingernails. The water swept around her and made her flesh feel bigger, more mobile. Maybe she would stay until the water turned cold, and then when she got out it wouldn't be so bad. She closed her eyes again and sunk – just a little, because she wasn't up for getting her hair wet and catching something terrible – and she let herself drift.

Michelle.

She sat up, the cold stabbed its needles into her chest and prickled her skin, but she didn't care. The voice had been in her head, but also in the room with her. She looked,

but there was no one, though she couldn't tell for sure; there was plenty of the bedroom that she couldn't see through the open door.

From the nearby towel rack, she pulled the plush towel and stood up from the bath. After she stepped out, it wrapped nearly twice around her chest, and the bottom edge brushed her feet. She picked up a soap dish from the countertop and put her back to the wall next to the door.

The way to the door to who-knew-where-next was clear, just the flicker of her candle. But she couldn't yet see the bed. Soap dish held high, she crossed the threshold, turned, and let the soap dish fly at a billowing figure in front of her bed. She held down a scream. The soap dish swept past the figure, a miss. Then she caught up to her heartbeat and told herself to calm down. A little.

From a wire pulled down from the ceiling hung an extravagant poofing dress just like *hers* had flowed out as she twirled. Michelle scoffed at it. Then noticed a new note card on the table.

Enjoy the dress. Leave the room when you are ready.

-Casimir

"Don't count on it." As she touched the paper, her fingers felt rough and spongy. She wondered how long she had lingered. It felt like she'd been asleep, like her mouth was full of cotton, but she didn't count out that she could have been forced asleep. If she'd just been napping, she would have woken up if anyone came into the room.

Regardless, she wouldn't wear the dress, that damn ridiculous piece of clothing. There was lace all over the thing, little white stones that sparkled embedded in the tent-like skirt, sleeves that puffed out at the tops but hung off the shoulder. The whole thing

was blue, though it wasn't a bad color. She quite liked it. Just a few shades darker than Seth's skin. There were gloves that looked nice, light blue, but there was scratchy lace trim all around the opening.

Her feet were starting to get too cold – that too cold where they hurt and she would stop being able to feel them soon – so she went back to the bathroom to get dressed, only, when she got there, her clothes were gone. Boots, underwear, coat, everything. She checked all over the floor, inside the still-empty dresser, and the closet, under the bed. Her scalpel was still where she left it, her flashlight, too, but not a shred of clothing.

Even though she wouldn't be getting back into it, she left the water in the tub, because at least the room would be a little warmer, and sat naked, covered by the towel, on the bed. The door was still blocked by the chair, yet somehow this dress had been delivered and all of her clothes had been taken.

Something that she *supposed* was underwear came with the dress – an all-in-one piece that fit from her crotch to her chest and looked incredibly uncomfortable. She pulled the dress from the wire, and it dragged her arms to the floor with its weight. She heaved it to the bed.

"How can she *dance* in something like this?" It was heavier than anything she'd ever worn, and she'd worn three overcoats when she was younger and thinner. In keeping with its ridiculousness, there was an absurd amount of fabric in the skirt alone; if she had the time, a needle and thread, and some clothes to wear while making the alterations, she could have taken the raw materials and made a blouse and some pants out of it.

Staying in the towel seemed an option easier to stomach at this point, despite how close to the world, how vulnerable she felt. She made sure the towel was tucked securely around her chest, high at her armpits or else she would step on it, and went to the ever-unpredictable door, removed the chair, and took hold of the handle. If Casimir wanted to corral her, really wanted to speak to her finally, he would have to deal with however she would let herself be corralled. As hesitant as her feet were and as much as her arms wanted to cover her nakedness, the defiant girl inside her told her anxiety that, naked and defenseless, this would be her best rebellion.

Legs shivering, she stopped. There was no guarantee on her safety, especially after her escape to the hospital with Seth. They'd been caught. She'd broken a rule, she supposed, and if Casimir did really want to see her now, there was every chance that he would choose now to finally finish her off.

She drew away, back to the bed and the dress. If she needed to defend herself, the towel would come flying off, and she couldn't have that disadvantage. Even as difficult as it would be to maneuver in the dress, it would at least protect her skin.

She leafed through the fabric like pages of a book. If she cut away at it, made it lighter and more mobile, then it might work. With her scalpel, she inspected it.

There were hoops in the skirt, under the top and a second layer but on top of the inner lining, and they were layered in this coarse scratchy fabric. Clearly this scratchy nonsense helped give the skirt its volume. She cut it away except for a bit at the seam, which would take too long to completely remove. Then she looked to the hoops themselves, because they would still hold the dress out around her, even with the stuffing removed. The hoops were metal and sewn into tube-shaped pockets, stitched all

the way around. She sighed. Three hoops. They had to go, or there would be no way she could wear the thing.

She stabbed the scalpel into the tube pocket. Her blade clinked against the hoop, and she dragged it, breaking stitching, and split the sewn pocket, rotated the dress and ripped it all the way around until the hoop was free. She yanked it out and tossed it across the room where it landed with a clang and a bounce, and she repeated her process, ripping the hoops out until the skirt had less than half the volume. But it was still heavy.

If she were going to wear any of it, she would need to deal with the undergarment and put that on first. Besides, as engrossing as her work on the dress was, and as much as tearing into Casimir's gift to her helped with her anger, she was just about done wearing a towel.

She saw how it would go around her bottom, like normal underwear, just with a strange top part attached, and it was clear where her breasts were supposed to go, so it was obvious which way went forward. She tried putting it around herself. It laced up the front like a shoe, a chest shoe, but there were metal wires in this, too, that made it tight around her chest—too constricting, too much smashed down; how was she supposed to breathe or even walk in this? She started to believe that the delivery of the dress and not just the theft of her clothes was torment by design.

She thought of Seth and his cape, and wondered how he could tolerate it. Then she thought of Casimir impatiently gliding around a grand throne room like a wraith, smashing clocks and wondering what was taking her so long. She smiled at that, and picked up her scalpel.

Once properly maimed, the undergarment slipped around her comfortably, nothing pinched or smashed. She stretched to each side and down and twisted, and it moved with her.

She would have to fit the top on next. There were clasps that matched hooks in the skirt; so the two pieces were actually separate. There was a lace piece all around the neckline that she cut out stitch by stitch so that nothing would scratch her chest – and she was enjoying her mental image of Casimir, growing only more furious with each second that ticked away.

If she ripped off the sleeves altogether, there was nothing she could see that would hold the rest of the dress up, and it would flap away from her chest, so she sheared the sleeves off as close as she could.

Next she took those coveted gloves, fine leather. They would have been worth so much back in Logo, more than this dress. Their only fault was the lace around the wrists, which she trimmed away.

She managed to slip the whole thing over her body. Zippers in the back sealed it up. It dragged on her and was especially heavy around her legs. She stared at the mound of cut off fabric and metal pieces, and couldn't figure out how it could still be so heavy.

The shoes that came with it were stupid, with heels, though the heels were short, and wobbling was better than frostbitten toes. She would just try not to break her ankles.

Now she was ready. She would go see Casimir.

On her way to the door, she caught her reflection in the side mirror. The dress was nothing of what it had been, now nearly straight from her hips to her feet, the sleeves nothing but scraggly nubs after having been sheared off, and there was less shape

around the middle, probably since she didn't lace it tight enough and had cut out all the wiring—but her skin was clean and glowed in the candlelight. Her hair was straight and almost without tangles. The skirt flowed about her. For the first time she could remember, she really took stock of how she looked, and she liked it. For a moment, she let herself wonder if Arroyo would like it.

But now she had to face the monster, the gray face and split skin, the empty eyes and the blackened teeth and the reaching fingers. She faced the door, and it seemed to grow in front of her. Scalpel in hand, her skirt swished about her knees, and she went through the door.

*

Arroyo navigated from the passenger seat and watched Agnes steer, brake, apply the gas, start the car and slow it around curves so that, in the future, he could drive if he needed to. And Agnes was much better than the impression he'd gotten from Sophia. For the drive, Keaton and Sophia alternated napping and chatting in the backseat. The car was roomy and warm, though despite Sophia's complaints Agnes maintained that the car stay cool so that the cold outside wouldn't be a shock. The vote was taken that, getting out and stretching aside, they would sleep in the car or continue moving, and while Agnes slept Keaton took a turn driving, even though he claimed to be clumsy and out of practice.

After a night and a half, they crested a freeway overpass and saw in the center of the city sprawl a castle, amidst a field of huge rubble.

"It's just like they said," Sophia said, her nose pressed to the glass. "That place looks amazing." She leaned forward and said to Arroyo, "And Michelle is there?"

She abandoned you. The voice lit up in Arroyo's memory. She hadn't gone voluntarily as abandonment—it was sacrifice so that no one else would be hurt. Arroyo knew it, and he told himself, but in spite of that the nightmare voice nagged him, and dragged him down. He felt like falling through his seat. "Yeah, she is," he said.

*

This time her door opened to a small square chamber, a closet with empty racks and a wooden bench. Maybe a changing room. The small steps down from her door were a challenge in the wobbly heels. Well, maybe she was the wobbly part, but she liked having a target of blame.

A dark hallway led away to a throne room lit with golden light.

The form in front of her was lithe, his skin a deep blue, nearly black but smooth, with elegant flowing black hair, long past his shoulders. He was immensely tall and seemed to be stretched out in the same way that the horrid face from her nightmares had been, but the elongation here wasn't frightening. His cheekbones were prominent, his jaw long and crisply square; his forehead was tall but not wide. And his eyes. The arched eyebrows gave plenty of space for eyes that drew her in with shimmering depth; they weren't large or strangely shaped, just dark like obsidian. The lashes around them were thick and feminine. His arms and legs were long and densely muscular, his hands and feet not disproportionate. His chest was wide to compensate for his height. But more than anything else about his appearance, something intangible about the face pulled her closer. Where Casimir the Nightmare was a dusty crawling festering creature, Casimir the Lord was beautiful.

He wore a ruffled white shirt, something tied around his neck that wasn't quite a bow tie, and laced gloves. What made Seth look ridiculous, what made her feel foolish, Casimir wore so proudly that she couldn't imagine him wearing anything else. He, unlike them, was spectacular enough for these garish clothes. And he smiled. She caught herself staring, shook her head and turned her eyes on the rest of the room.

Her mother clicked into view. Somehow she stayed balanced in those glittery heels. "Here she is. Dear, what took so—" She gasped and covered her mouth to try to hold in a shriek. Michelle covered her shoulders. "What did you *do* to my dress?" Casimir's hand came to her waist; she grabbed his wrist. "She ruined it!"

"Did she?" Casimir said. A harmonic voice, operating seemingly on every pitch. After just two words Michelle felt pulled toward it, wanting to hear more. "I hadn't noticed."

She blocked out the woman so obsessed with beauty that she couldn't possibly in any way be her mother, and she forced herself to be calm, she made herself lower her arms and bare her shoulders, even though in doing so she felt fully naked. The nervous twitch in her stomach rebelled. She needed answers. She reminded herself of the snaking corridors, the door to wherever, the bath, the dress and the evisceration of it. This was Casimir's game, and she played. If she wanted her questions answered, it would have to come out of the game. And she realized that way of thinking wasn't necessarily hers—looked like she had learned something from Arroyo.

"I... decided to make it more comfortable," she said.

"And did you?" Casimir said.

"A little."

He didn't seem as irked by waiting as her mother did. No, he seemed to even enjoy that. If any wrath was going to rain upon her for her adventure with Seth, it made no appearance yet.

"You're going to let her get away with that?" her mother said.

For all the finery of the palace, Casimir did not appear to care about her defacing the dress. An act. Otherwise, he would have to concede that she affected him. She recalled the panther's hesitation to damage the library door.

"Are you hungry?"

Yes, her stomach wanted to scream. But she didn't know whether to lie or not—she needed Arroyo to think it through, because she was neither shrewd enough to figure it out nor careful enough to care. "Yes," she said, because at least then there was a chance she would get food to eat.

"Then come this way, my dear." She almost halted and recoiled at "my dear" but followed him through the hesitation. He took long strides, but they were slow enough so that Michelle and her mother could keep up. Her mother still acted hurt or offended and pouted rather than get the point across—she was such a child—and Michelle didn't care, wouldn't apologize for what she did to the dress, not after the display her mother had given so far. She owed her mother nothing.

"I think you'll appreciate the dining hall," Casimir said. "Have you enjoyed the stained glass?"

So they were really just going to pretend that his panther hadn't attacked her. Twice. Or that he'd stolen her clothes or that he imprisoned her dad. No, he imprisoned all of them. She pondered stabbing him in the back with the scalpel, but if she wanted the last

thing she did alive to be incredibly stupid, there were better things to do than that. "The windows," she said. "I think they are... where does the light come from?"

"Does it matter?"

"I think so."

"Well, I think that it *doesn't*." Her feet slipped, but she caught herself. Her mother *tisked*. She didn't want to be there. She wasn't nearly good enough to talk information out of Casimir, especially if he played by his rules and could just disregard her question if he felt like it.

The scent of the food came to her before they reached the dining room. It was so strong, thick, and delicious that she couldn't identify any one food in the aroma. Platters of food topped a white marble table. Not just food, though, juice-dripping meats, freshly baked birds. She didn't care what kind. Normally she wasn't hungry for meat, but now she was hungry for everything.

"Won't Seth be coming along?"

"Not tonight, no – a *private* banquet. Please sit down."

"I wanted to ask a question."

"Michelle, that isn't polite."

"It's impolite to *ask questions*?" She had to synch her anger. She would have no chance of getting her answers if all she did was scream at her mother. "What if it's about Seth, or you?"

"I will listen to your questions, Michelle," Casimir said. She felt the pull toward him again and was happy he was at the opposite head of the table. "However, those topics are obsolete."

If the mere mention of her family was deemed obsolete topics of conversation, then the burners or garr or the Arbiter were likely blasphemous, and if that was true, then there wasn't much else Michelle gave a damn to talk about. "Then what isn't obsolete?" It wouldn't stop her from trying to get what she wanted.

"The food, for example. Why haven't you touched it?" He and her mother had not started eating yet. Perhaps that was the polite thing to do, or perhaps the food was poisoned. If she wanted to keep this going, she had to eat.

"I'm sorry." She took a warm loaf of bread, divided it with her hands, and brought it to her face. The steamy aroma made her stomach leap like a hungry animal with food waved in front of its nose. She took a bite, chewed, swallowed, and took two more bites, and by the time she came up for breath, she had finished one of the half loaves. "I'm sorry," she said again.

"No, don't be," he said. "I should have entertained your hunger earlier. I wouldn't have thought you would so ruthlessly kill the meal."

She swallowed and stared and held her food in clenched hands.

"Matters needed to be dealt with that I couldn't ignore."

"Casimir is so beautiful," her mother chimed, though she wasn't looking at anyone, or even up from her plate of food, not even an attempt to join the conversation. Michelle stopped herself from running screaming from the hall.

"Eat all you like," Casimir said.

"How do you make it? I mean, who cooks it?" An admonishment was coming—her mother opened her mouth, but Michelle cut her off preemptively. "What? He said it's fine to ask questions about the food. That's all I'm doing."

"I don't think that's far," her mother said.

"I'm not doing anything that I've been told not to do." She didn't care about the answer but was interested in how he might give it.

"I have a chef, and the food is paid for."

"Really?"

"Were you expecting more? I didn't rip out anyone's throat for it."

She flinched. "No. I didn't think you would." It had more than crossed her mind, but if the Arbiter could have a farm that created and distributed food, she supposed Casimir could, too. That he jumped immediately to it made her uneasy.

"And how do you like the room? The comfort level is greater than you're used to, isn't it?"

"I suppose."

"Of course it is," her mother said. "What have you had before now?"

Michelle stared at her plate. A steak lay untouched. "You don't want to know."

"No, I suppose I don't. I just wish you had come along sooner. It would have been lovely."

"Really, would it? And you think I just came along?"

"Yes, of course. Well, maybe not. I won't ask that you go into that now. I'm just glad you're here." Now she seemed to have forgotten about Michelle's dress. Maybe because most of it was out of view, hidden below the table. Michelle covered one of her shoulders with an arm. "You turned into such a beautiful woman after these years. Hasn't she?"

“Yes.” Casimir smiled and Michelle averted her eyes. She stared at a drop of juice rolling down a bird. Maybe a turkey? She pressed her toes into the floor to keep from tapping her feet, and she didn’t know how long she could sit and tolerate this. She was afraid to speak up about how she really felt, what was really affecting her – she couldn’t predict Casimir’s reaction, and given how the panther had attacked her earlier, Casimir’s concern over her safety, if there was any apparent, was false.

Casimir pushed his chair back and stood. She’d forgotten how tall he was. “We have another guest,” he said.

“What?” her mother said. “You didn’t mention that you were expecting anyone else.”

“I wasn’t expecting.” He looked at Michelle, though she didn’t know why – she didn’t care if there was another guest. Did he want her to leave? “He will find his way here, soon.”

He didn’t return to his seat. Michelle didn’t know whether to stop eating and stand, like he did, or continue with the banquet, like her mother did, and pick at fresh bread like it was a half-mold-covered hunk of cheese.

“How do you know it’s a he? Your guest, I mean.”

“My palace speaks to me. I know what goes on in it – always.”

She wanted to recede, but she held her chin high. Yes, he knew she snuck out. Of course he did. And she didn’t feel bad about it. But if he knew from the beginning, that meant he also let them go and allowed them to get as far as they did before bringing them back, and at that moment she became more worried about what had happened to Seth since she last saw him, paralyzed by the panther.

"Welcome," Casimir said.

Michelle, seated with her back to the door, turned around, and there was Arroyo, shaking in the doorway, his knees locked, pistol clenched in his hands. "Oh my god, Arroyo."

"You know this raggedy thug? Casimir, sweetie, he is *armed*."

"Don't worry. He is harmless."

"He isn't a thug." Michelle stood, and Arroyo snapped to attention, shock all over his face like he was just startled awake from a dream.

"Michelle, what *is*...?"

She smiled and felt her cheeks blush as she awkwardly covered her shoulders. And felt silly for it, but if she didn't do that, she just felt cold and naked and nervous.

"Michelle is staying in my Palace." Casimir rounded the table and settled to the side of the room. Arroyo locked up and started to shake again.

"Are you going to introduce me?" her mother said.

"No, I don't think so," Michelle said.

"Ugh! I did not raise a girl to behave like this."

She ignored her mother and went to Arroyo in the doorway. The way he shook, she worried – he stopped and focused on her. He squinted and his lips twitched. "Why are you dressed like that?" he said.

"Michelle is staying here, as I said," Casimir said.

"No," she said. "Well." She caught herself, but not soon enough. She couldn't see Casimir, but she felt heat on her back. "I am, just for now, but that isn't why I'm dressed this way."

“Only for now?” her mother said. “Why would you not want to stay?”

Michelle didn’t turn around. “I have my own life,” she snapped. “But you aren’t interested in me.”

“Well then!” Her mother paused. “Invite him to put that weapon away and come to the table.”

Michelle took Arroyo’s hands. They were so tight over the pistol grip, and felt like cold metal. “Don’t do this,” she said. “It won’t work.”

“I came...” he started, his voice wavering.

“I know. I didn’t think you would. I didn’t want you to... but I’m glad.”

“Oh my goodness,” her mother said. “Are you involved with this man? You could have mentioned, really.”

Michelle bit her tongue.

“It certainly is *unexpected*,” Casimir said. He stepped closer.

Arroyo’s arms quivered. Michelle held them still.

“How attached she has become,” he continued. “You should have just destroyed her heart before wringing it of all its beating blood.”

Michelle turned. Casimir was close – so tall – darkness spread from him and obscured the banquet table so that only the outline and the sparkle of her mother’s dress shone through. It couldn’t always be like this, to be close to him. Had to be an illusion. She wanted to grab the scalpel. He had no idea what he was talking about.

“I had no idea the depths of your malice, Arroyo,” Casimir said.

“You don’t know him – don’t try to play with me.” She released Arroyo’s hands. Almost went for the scalpel, but couldn’t will herself to. If she distracted Casimir, maybe Arroyo could kill him.

“I know more than you do, Michelle – daughter of Sarah and Jordan – I have always known more.”

Her hands started to shake, her jaw chattered, and a chill went through her chest.

“You have been on a quest that started six years ago,” he said. “Many deaths along the way have been your fault, but you resist the guilt. Arroyo’s pistol has one bullet in it, and I know whom he wants to receive it, yet it will reach another.” Casimir seemed to grow. The room around them was entirely gone. Her head was filled with the sound of her teeth clacking together. “Turn around,” he whispered. “And face him.”

She did. Arroyo’s hands clutched the pistol, but it was aimed at her. Right at her chest. “Arroyo. What are you doing?”

“What he always does. Lie as he might, the truth always comes out.”

The truth? Yes, he had lied, but he told her. He told her about his history with Hunter, about his parents. So many experiences, and no way to know which was the lie. His face was pained, his eyes lowered to Michelle’s chest.

“He knew that you were coming.”

She shook her head. “He told me that.”

“He knew that you were coming because I told him. Arroyo has been my toy soldier abroad for some time. I told him to *kill* you.”

“No.”

“To *wound* you.”

"Arroyo... saved me." She wanted to see his eyes. He wouldn't turn them up. If a gun weren't between them, she would grab his face and pull it to his just to see his eyes. Tears fell down his cheeks.

"He never intended to do anything else. He has lied to you, and he has lied to others, claiming to *love you* only to use them to get closer, to get here. All for this last bullet. Doesn't this hurt so much more? Doesn't it kill you?"

"It's wrong. You're wrong."

"He didn't care about you."

"Arroyo. How could you?" She wanted to say it couldn't be true, but here he was with a gun pointed at her instead of Casimir. With that, she couldn't deny it. "Please tell me it isn't true. I..."

He made no sound, and didn't move his head.

"To wound you, to *kill you*," Casimir repeated. "But now that you're here, I see something different in you, something that deserves to survive and be rewarded for its resilience. And so pained, I have two options for you, Michelle."

"I don't want it."

Arroyo was in pain pointing that gun at her. He couldn't want it... but he had held that from her. Why else would he have kept it secret? I was told to kill you, but I won't because I think you're great. Telling her that wouldn't have been so awful. She wouldn't have been foolish enough to hate him for that dishonesty. She trusted. If he had kept that from her, it could be true. He could have meant to kill her.

"Two options to stop this pain," Casimir said. "You can let him fire that bullet. Or, I will banish him. You decide, my dear."

She wanted to scream or sob but her throat was dry and her voice was gone. "Please banish him." At least he would be away from Casimir, hopefully away from danger. "Please."

A rush of wind swept her hair. She opened her eyes without knowing that they had been shut. Arroyo walked away, down the hall. She reached for him, but the door slammed in front of her. She heard her mother's knife cut through a piece of meat, tap her plate, and gently scrape it.

"I want you to live, Michelle," said Casimir. His voice had returned to the captivating harmony, and no more shadows spread from him. His hand touched Michelle's shoulder. He was warm, but she knew at what cost he bought that warmth. She thought of all the people in the hospital, and she wanted to run away from that touch, but she couldn't. She stared at a closed door and wanted to ask Arroyo – was it a lie? Do you love me? – but there was only a door.

"Casimir is so beautiful," her mother said at the table.

*

Arroyo finally stopped walking in a courtyard, somewhere. His breathing was hard like he had been running, and his legs were tired to the same effect. His hands, arms, and neck were sore. The events that had just happened were blurry.

He saw Michelle in a gown, covering her bare shoulders. Her mouth moved, and the memory of words floated through his head, her voice. "Arroyo – what are you doing? – you don't know – he told me – no – it's wrong – it isn't true – I don't – love you – Arroyo – no – please banish him – please – Arroyo – I am – staying here."

He sunk to his knees and pounded the ground. It couldn't be true. It was the same as the rest of the nightmares. He had to bite down on his own tongue and fight it, know that the pain in his mouth was real, and the pain in his head and heart wasn't. "Casimir," he said. "His name is Casimir. Casimir is the one in my head, and in my nightmares. His name is Casimir." And he would continue to remember, as painful as it would be for now. He didn't want to move.

In a little while, he would leave. If she wanted to stay there, stay behind, she could go ahead. There was more to him than that. He did have one bullet.

The road snaked through his mind in precise detail. He saw himself driving on it, and he felt the heat of the cavern from his dream, the gun in his hand; the sun broke over the ocean on the horizon. The Arbiter was... close. He got off his knees.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Michelle wanted to pick up the bread-filled stone platter and smack some sense into her mother then bash Casimir's beautiful face, but she was too exhausted, and not exhausted enough to be so stupid. She wanted to curl up and cry. But she couldn't do even something as simple as that. The game was still on, and Casimir was without a doubt winning. Arroyo would survive, if he didn't do anything too stupid. She, on the other hand, somehow needed to pull herself together or she would die long before figuring out anything. "I think I've eaten enough," she said.

"Enough?" her mother said. "You've barely touched your food. Eat more, eat until you've filled out a bit. But not too much." She laughed like nothing had just happened, and Michelle wasn't so sure that her mother *was* aware that anything had.

"I know that it pains you," Casimir said. "Your sorrow seeps into me. What you're feeling, perhaps you can't describe –"

"Please. Enough."

Casimir's restraint at being interrupted was impressive, but she didn't care. Yes, he knew, but that statement had none of the compassion it would have had if it were coming from Mr. Keaton. Yes, Casimir felt her sorrow seep into him, but he was nearly euphoric for it. His eyes were dilated, wide.

"I don't want to think about it," she said.

"If you are finished eating, then," Casimir said, "we can return to the throne hall. Your mother loves to dance."

"Yes," Michelle said. "Please," she added, pulling it from somewhere.

"Would you like your food to be brought to your room, for you to have later?"

Casimir glided toward the table and took her mother's hand, lifted her from her seat. "I do feel awful that you've been deprived since coming here."

Awful, she estimated, was something Casimir did not know how to feel. "Thank you."

Her mother twirled around Casimir and the two moved as a unit to the door. Michelle wasn't sure how they could move so uniform, hands held together, without tripping each other up, with that skirt, and a cape, and all those legs. She followed, watching how her own skirt moved out of time with her steps, how it lay flat and dull.

Ahead, the panther crossed their path, and Michelle froze. It locked eyes on her, whisked its tail back and forth, slightly unfurled its wings and pulled them back, as if a challenge. Then it kept on, and neither Casimir nor her mother made any hesitation or showed that they had noticed it. As they moved into the intersection, Michelle watched it down the hall. It turned right and went into an alcove, where there must have been a door or a set of stairs, because it didn't come back out. There was some level of intelligence behind it that was missing from the rest of the garr – not just that it was smarter, but when it stared at her, she could see in its gray-white eyes that it wanted to kill her. It couldn't be hungry. Garr killed to eat, unless they were told to do otherwise. When it watched her, she swore that it hated her.

"Michelle, join me, please." Music started, and Michelle caught up to them in the throne hall. Her mother danced and twirled in the center of the room, alone. Casimir stood back, to the right, where a record player spun a disc on a thin-legged table. His arms were folded in front of him, and his forehead was wrinkled like he was scheming. She didn't believe that he'd worry about anything.

Her mother came forward, took her hand, and pulled her in. "Have you ever danced?"

"Um. Just with you, when I was little."

"Hold my hand here." It was warm, nice, gentle. "Put your hand here on my shoulder. I'll lead you, if you don't mind, sweetie."

"I don't want to—"

"Oh, my. You're crying."

She stopped with her mouth open. Before Arroyo left, she'd been too confused to cry. Had she been crying since? She didn't realize, and she would have checked her cheek with her hand if her mother weren't holding them. "I'm fine now, thanks."

"Come on, now, it's just a waltz. Hand here. Mine goes here. Listen to the way the music goes. We count in threes, are you ready? Loosen your knees."

"I don't—"

"One, two, three." And her mother started moving her, in seamless steps, around the throne hall. When her hand pushed or pulled, Michelle moved her feet in that direction. "You're doing great." They moved in circles in time to the music. Her shoulders felt lighter. She looked past her mother and caught a glimpse of Casimir, and he had those same wide eyes that drank in her sadness.

"I don't believe she is enjoying herself," he said.

Actually, she was. It surprised her, but she felt relieved. She almost regretted defacing her dress, and she could almost feel her mom, her actual mom, in this woman. There was care in the way she held Michelle's hand.

"She is troubled, Casimir, sweetie. Can you do something to make her feel better?"

"No, please, I don't want anything."

Her feet halted, and the dance fell apart.

"Yes, let me do something for you."

He hadn't done anything for her since she got there, likely not since he'd been alive. She knew it would be cruel, twisted, like calling in Arroyo, but she was too numb to object. Nothing he could do now could bring her any lower.

"I thought it would be nice," he went on. "You've waited long enough to see him."

Him.

"I've brought him here." He gestured with a sweep of his arm to a door in front of her, and he took the steps up to the palace's throne. Maybe the door had been there. Michelle wasn't sure. Her tongue tingled. The door opened, and a decrepit gray creature, all dust and bones, crawled out.

*

Arroyo kept walking. He wasn't sure where he was going, but it had to be the right way. If he came to a turn, his body compelled him one way, and he pushed forward. Eventually he came to the outer wall, and a crack in it big enough for him to fit through. It didn't occur to him to ask why they hadn't noticed it beforehand. He slipped through, and stepped away from the palace's outer wall.

He heard Keaton and Agnes. And he knew where the car would be. Once he got it in his sights, between a pair of crumbled edifices with foundation walls still standing, he glanced toward the gate. Keaton sat on a chair that he must have pulled from the wreckage, Agnes stood, and Sophia sat with her back to the wall. She was the only one who faced him. He still bet he could get to the car before any of them noticed.

It would be better that way. No need for them to be hurt anymore. They could stay with Michelle, and he would kill the Arbiter. He wondered why he had bothered trying to do something else. Why had Michelle mattered to him –

“Casimir,” he snapped at himself. “His name is Casimir. The one in your head is Casimir.”

I think not.

“Oh my god, it’s Arroyo,” Sophia said. He ran. “Arroyo, we’re over here.”

“Arroyo, please wait!”

“The hell do you think you’re doing?” Agnes pursued, but she wouldn’t catch him.

He opened the door, closed it, started the car, and held his pistol out the window. “I have one bullet left, and it’s going into the Arbiter.”

*

It looked like her dad in the basic features of his face, and only if she could ignore his horrifying skin, except his face was long and gaunt; his head seemed twice as tall as it should have been. All of his features were stretched. Now he was too tall, as tall as he’d seemed to her when she was a little girl. But it was him. The eyes were still his, and she knew that love and sorrow stirred beneath them. “Daddy,” she croaked.

The world in front of her blanked, and she felt like she was flying backward, wind rushing around her, and she fell into a nightmare. But it wasn't a nightmare, though there was a feeling of dread like bricks in her stomach, weighing her down and making her want to retreat into a corner. She was nowhere, and then images flashed in front of her. They were gone in a second, but she saw each one, full detail, and recalled them.

The picture of her parents from her pin board, smiling and laughing on a lawn under a tree, but now the man with them is outlined and pulled forward. The picture moves, they laugh, and the man looks uneasy. This picture dematerializes, but this man remains, repositions, stands under an arched walkway, his back to a metal railing, speaking to her mom. Her mom's face lights up. She laughs and touches the man's arm. Michelle feels flooded with warmth. It turns icy, fast. Her mom remains, and the rest of the picture melts away. She ages, slightly, and embraces Michelle's dad as a field of flowers pull in behind them, filling the picture. A white dress cascades down her mom, and people appear around them in seats, and the man appears just behind Michelle's dad, smiling and clapping, though the smile isn't the same as it had been in the image before. Michelle had seen this picture, too, in her childhood. Their wedding. All of it turns to black, and a white-hot ball appears in the middle of the blackness. It grows small, to a pinpoint, and then vanishes. A rocky red-orange desert rises and fills the empty space, bright sky overhead, and the ball streaks down, a slight arc, and hits the earth, sends up dust and dirt as it carves out a deep crater. People, trucks, vans, cars materialize around the crater, a rope that blocks it off, the man from the photograph among it all. Michelle's dad is with him, holding a camera, taking pictures. Her mom is not. Her dad distracts a watchman, takes his picture, while the man slips under a rope and skids down the slope of the crater, dust under his feet. The image flashes, blue. The man reaches the bottom of the crater, the authorities clambering about the rim, not going in.

The man crouches at the bottom, looks at a foot-wide black sphere, smooth, shimmering, colors flowing on its surface. He touches it. Blue. The image scrambles, blurs, and a sterile hospital hall appears, glass on the walls looking into rooms. It is then a picture of a hospital room, a hospital bed, her mom, swollen belly, in it. Her dad there, the man not. Her dad holds her mom's hand, kisses her sweat-streaked forehead. A slow burn, and the picture fades into another. The clock shows that many hours have passed. The swollen belly is gone from her mom, and now there is a baby in her arms. The man from the photograph enters the room, unsmiling. He is different now, his face plain, his shirt buttoned with a tie passed under the collar. Behind him, or within him, hovers the image of that black sphere. It is above the picture, displayed only for Michelle. Her dad scowls, and her mom hugs the baby to her chest, bends her head over the child, and kisses her. The man stays as the image melts to black. The black becomes a dark room, people in suits walking past as he stares out a window at a sky that goes from blue to gray. The man walks away, and the room changes around him, becomes his destination, a lavish bedroom. He collapses on the bed. Cries. Again, the clock on the wall tells of time passing, and the man crouches on the floor for hours. A shadow spreads from him, across the room, and relief grows slowly on his face. The shadow continues to grow, tall, shapely, dimensional, amorphous, until it has arms, legs, and a head, stretched. Skin stretches over it, gray, pasty. The man draws a gun, aims it at the head of the shadow. The shadow flashes forward, hits the man back, and leaps through the window. It disappears into the night.

Like a stroke of lightning, Michelle came back to her body, to the throne hall. Not a second had passed. Her dad was there, reaching for her. "What—? What was that? Did you just—? Did he—?" She scrambled for some sensible words to string together.

Her dad opened his dry mouth. "I'm sorry—"

Casimir flew down, cloak billowing, in a whirlwind of green fire. He struck her dad on the side of the head with a packed fist. Dust kicked up. The green fire swept behind Casimir and spun up and around her dad. His mouth moved, but there was no sound. His body crumbled, and a pile of dust and bones and skin like ancient cracking parchment was left behind.

Her hands and arms shook. Her mouth hung open. She stared through the space he had just occupied, where Casimir now stood over his dusty body, and she wanted to scream, but nothing came, not even a whimper.

Casimir filled his lungs. A clean-toothed smile spread across the face.

Her dad was dead. She'd always thought he was dead, but he'd been reaching out to her, talking to her the only way he could, pulling her, bringing her here. He wanted to bring her here just to see him, only to see her one more time. Or that's what she thought—now things clicked. As much as he wanted to see her, he needed her. To save him. By doing this. He knew. He knew this would happen when she came here. Maybe he had wanted her to kill Casimir, too, the way she had wished she could have a unicorn every year until she was ten. Whether Casimir died or not, she found her dad, and she saved him.

"You hate me, I know," Casimir said.

But that wasn't what she was going to say. "Thank you, Lord Casimir," she said, the *lord* intoned like a twisting knife. "He only wanted to die."

"You—" He swirled away. "That is—" He circled back, breathing heavily, seething. "It is gracious of you, to see the *favor* I have done him in finally ending his wretched life." He drew his hand back and punched her. She recoiled and hit the ground, a shock

that buzzed through her head, and bounced and rolled away. Her cheekbone felt broken, and blood dripped down her face. Her eyes saw black, but then the room came back in, upside-down and in a hazy black tunnel. It flipped around, and Casimir was gone. She set her head against the cold stone and forgot what happened after that.

*

Seth stood some books up together at one end of his room then took a thick, but not too big square just thick, volume, crouched down at the other end of his room, and slid the one in hand across the slick floor at his stacked target. The books toppled, but that wasn't the true test. The one he hurled broke through, skidded, but didn't stop, and it smacked the wall.

"Damn it."

He'd put too much behind it. Before stacking them again for the twenty-seventh time, he checked his door. The black garr he called Satan growled, but didn't otherwise move. Twenty-seven out of twenty-seven times it still guarded his door. Perfect.

Back to book bowling. He worried about Michelle, what torment Casimir might be inventing for her while Satan kept Seth where he didn't want to be. He spent so little time in his room that he was more comfortable in the bathroom.

On his next hurl, he didn't put enough force into it, and he only took down one book, albeit a dictionary.

"What *are* you doing?"

Twenty-eight was the final count, then, before something happened. His mother, her hair slightly unwound, crossed her arms in the doorway.

"Book bowling. What are you doing?"

"Your dad –"

"Casimir. Come on."

"No, I mean *your dad*. Jordan."

He dropped the books. "What happened?" He had too many, more direct questions, but he knew his mother would do better if she could just tell the story on her own terms. He felt twitchy, uncomfortable standing still, as he waited for her to speak.

"Casimir brought him to see Michelle."

"So he *was* at the hospital, then?"

"Please." She looked upset. She hadn't looked upset since he'd been here. "When Michelle came, I thought it was finally time to be together again."

"Except without Dad."

"But she is so stubborn! I tried to make it better for her, but she wouldn't have it. Your little escape... it cost your dad his life."

"What... do you mean?"

She started to pace and kicked books out of her way. He was inclined to join her, but his whole body was still like a metal rod had been shot down his spine, and his legs felt like a pedestal that the rest of his body sat on; he couldn't even move them enough to turn around.

"Casimir made your dad into a... what he is. What you are. Half."

"He made dad into a nightmare? Why now?"

"No. Ten years ago. It was to save his life."

"And then he made him a prisoner after saving his life. Really considerate of him."

Satan was still in the hall, at attention. Seth looked away from it and focused on his mother.

“No, the hospital is the only place he could survive. Until now.”

“What?”

“Casimir would keep him alive, but only at the hospital. It’s what he said. And he promised me that Michelle would come here someday, too, and then she would see him—”

“Mom!” He grabbed her shoulders. Satan let out a grunt, or maybe a whimper. She had a confused smile on her face, tilted. “Mother. Are you delusional? Wait. That’s a stupid question. Let me try this again.” He stared into her eyes, and they stared past him. “You are delusional. None of that is true.”

“But it doesn’t matter anymore.” Her face slid into a grimace, and she looked like she might fall apart. “Casimir killed him. Right in front of my daughter.”

Seth wanted to push her away, but he held on. More delusions. Had to be. “Did you... were you there?”

She nodded, now clearly holding back tears. “She told him *thank you*. Thank you. I thought she had lost it—and then Casimir hit her, and he stormed out.”

“Is she okay?” He had seen Casimir break things, ornamental lions, urns, rip books in half, a bookcase, all with his hands.

“She’s... I think so.”

“Mom.” He never called her that anymore, except by impulse. Now he said it intentionally, trying to get through. “If you’re there, listen to me. Casimir does not want Michelle here. If he did, he would have brought her here ten years ago.”

“He couldn’t find her. She needed to make her own way here. She said she didn’t want to.”

“Damn it.” She’d probably been fed so many lies about that, that now they were blending together, and she spouted three of them, unconnected. He took her hand. “Think. He got me, and I was living with her.”

She shook her head, but it didn’t seem to clear the cobwebs. “I have to go ask Casimir. Stay here.” She hurried out.

Whether she believed it or not, he knew they were all in danger. He needed to get out. Satan flicked its tail back and forth. “What are you looking at?”

*

Each clack of her heels fortified her resolve. Seth was right that it didn’t make sense – how couldn’t she have seen it? Well, she still didn’t really see it. Michelle *could* have been brought earlier, and Casimir didn’t do it for some reason. Some reason. Some reason.

Back to the throne hall, she pushed the door open. It slid slowly, not obeying her touch. Casimir must have been upset to forget to do that. By the time she got it open, she had to take a moment to breathe.

She gasped. Michelle lay on the floor against the far right wall, sticky black-red stuff smeared on her forehead. She thought Michelle would have been moved already and treated. Greatly upsetting.

Sarah turned her eye to the dust pile in the center, the crumbling bones on the aisle rug. “Oh, dear.” She knelt and poked it. “I loved you both. I loved you both.” She shivered as the room darkened.

Casimir crossed to the aisle from the back corner, his shoulders heaving. She hoped to suck those words back and almost kicked the pile. She smoothed her skirt. It was a trying day, and she felt the tension in her shoulders. "Casimir, sweetie, are you okay?"

"She has been a *curse* on us since she came." He started for Michelle.

"Wait. What do you mean? I thought you wanted her to be here. I thought... she would rejoin the family." He whirled on her, and she crouched and ducked her head. "Please."

"If that was ever a chance, she has ruined it. Did you see what she has done?"

"She... thanked you?"

"Thanked me? Yes, she did that." His voice calmed. Sarah stopped covering her head. "Sarah, our life will go on as we knew it, and you will forget all of these things. Can you hear me?"

She kept her head down and stared at nothing, at pillars. "Yes, I hear you."

"Your memory of this young woman and this pile of dust and bones will disappear."

And they did, and she felt them leave her, and she forgot why she knelt, but knew that she needed to continue. "What did you say, Casimir, sweetie?" When she lifted her eyes, there was a woman across the stone floor, and Sarah recognized her. "Michelle?" Blood. From her knees she launched toward her daughter. "Oh my goodness, my sweet girl."

"No." Casimir set an iron grip on her neck and pinned her to her knees.

"No? You're hurting me."

He wrenched her around by the neck to face him, away from Michelle. But she wouldn't forget her daughter. Sarah stared past his legs at the back wall as it vanished in shadows. The windows were smothered by it.

"She is no daughter of ours."

"Please let go of me." No, but she was Sarah's daughter.

He tightened his vice. "I will kill her. But first you will forget her. She has never existed."

"No!" Sarah struggled. The shadows closed. She couldn't even see Casimir's legs or the tip of her nose. "I am her mother, and she is *not* afraid of the dark because *I* told her she would never need to be—"

*

Seth sat down. If Casimir had killed his dad, he didn't know how much longer Michelle would be safe here. Safe. He had to laugh. She'd never been safe, but he doubted she would be allowed to live much longer, and he couldn't sit, especially with strangers at the gate. That sense near the back of his head still tingled, the one that told him whenever someone was around the palace walls. But Satan prowled outside his open door.

He closed his eyes, surrounded himself in the shadow of quiet thought, and Satan appeared in his head as a wispy purple light, like a flashlight in thick fog. Just purple. As he considered the light, it brightened and swayed left to right as he swayed left to right. He stopped swaying but continued to *think* about swaying, and the light continued to sway. This must have been what happened when he thought about bagels at the regular garr.

But Satan was intelligent. If he told it to run in circles, it would claw off his face. Still, he felt a thread taut between their minds, and where Seth moved his end, the other end moved in response. It would need to be something believable, something that Satan could understand as being more important – or more exciting – than guarding Seth. *You should do something better worth your time.*

The thread tingled, like electricity passed between them, for just a second. It agreed. Next, he needed something better to recommend, but he had no idea what Satan did all night long. *It would be a good idea to do something else.* Another tingle.

Casimir talked about a private office sometimes, but Seth had no idea where it was. As far as he knew – because the palace layout was as clear as a blueprint floor plan in his mind – the office didn't exist. It was somewhere secret. *This boy isn't going anywhere.* If it was hidden, Satan would know where it was. *You should go check on the master's office.* A strong tingle, and the thread stretched. The wispy light turned blue and receded. Seth opened his eyes, and Satan was gone. He grabbed his cape, put it around his shoulders, and snuck out.

*

"The hell do we do now?" Agnes said. She kicked a piece of drywall, and it split, coughing dust around her ankle.

Sophia huddled in a ball, her hair standing out, yellow in the glow coming from the palace walls, the only color in a gray, gray, gray night. Keaton looked at the walls and liked to think that they weren't too tall, and with his ankle recovering he could likely scale them... if he had a rocket or catapult of some kind. Then a figure appeared atop the wall. "Good heavens. What is that?"

Agnes came over and squinted. "It's a kid."

"That's what I thought."

"He ain't gonna jump, is he – ? Oh shit."

The boy leapt from the wall and hit the ground rolling. Keaton cried out and hustled over, but the boy sprang up unharmed, as if he had done it a hundred times. "Hi there," he said. "This is weird for me."

"You seemed to handle yourself well enough on that landing," Keaton said. The boy was gangly, and there was something odd about the hue of his skin that Keaton couldn't quite pinpoint.

"No, not that. This part. Talking to people. Anyway. I'm Michelle's brother, Seth."

"How did you jump off that thing?" Agnes said.

"Michelle has a... brother?" Sophia stirred from her chilled ball and came to see the newcomer. "Oh," she said, a hint of a smile appearing then disappearing from her lips. "I'm Sophia."

"Seth." His lips were slightly agape, his eyes relaxed the way one gets when staring at something that makes one forget about everything else. Keaton wanted to say, Ahem.

"You said that."

"I guess I did." He looked down at her. She was still shivering. "Are you cold?"

"Well, it's a little better here, but it's warmer where I'm from."

"Here." He unfastened the clasp around his neck and drew his cape forward. Gingerly he slung it around her shoulders, wrapped it around her body, and then backed away. "Better?"

"Yeah, thanks. This is a lot better."

“Cut that out,” Agnes growled. “It’s disgusting – why’d you go all acrobatic and come down here? Not just to fumble your words, I hope.”

“Right.” He brought his attention to Agnes, who, by what it did to his face, appeared to make him much less comfortable. “I’ll explain what’s going on, but we need to get inside, or Michelle is going to die.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

The room wobbled in Michelle's vision, and her pumping blood beat in her head like the fall of a hammer, throbbing through her cheek. A blurry shape manifested in front of her. A pillar. Others, behind it. And she tried to remember what happened – her memories flew backward at a speed that hurt. She had fallen asleep, and before that Casimir had hit her. He had destroyed her dad – a nightmare, like the dusty form at the center of the burner's chariot – in a whirl of green fire. Her dad's story, through the images. The black sphere, and the man who was friends with her dad, seemed to love her mom, and who was, somehow, also Casimir. She remembered that.

When she tried to move, her vision blanked at the pain in her face and skull. She set her forehead to the cold floor, but being upside-down hurt even more. Before her vision came back fully, she had to keep her head upright and still. A crumpled form in a pluming dress came into focus. It was a fight to keep from running to her. "Mom." She inched forward, and felt that her head didn't hurt so bad, that she could probably move.

She closed her eyes and slid across the floor – she couldn't get up – until she held her mother's shoulders and cradled her head. Her face was angry, defiant, still warm. The vertebrae in her neck were broken. Michelle's hand jerked back from touching the

displaced bone pressing the skin like it wanted to escape. It sent shudders through her body, but she didn't want to let go.

No one else was around. It had to have been Casimir, but she couldn't understand why. The man from the photograph, from the story in her head, had loved her mother. When had that stopped?

She looked around the empty hall. And where was he now? One of the large doors from the throne hall lay open. "Seth!" She held the shout until the echoes came back. "Casimir!"

After sliding from under her mother, she lay her down, tilted her head to the side so that it wasn't apparently disturbing, and folded her hands over her stomach. The body settled just next to the pile that was her dad. She wanted to lie down there and spend some time with them, if only she could. She was sure Casimir would kill her if he saw her again. Besides, her dad had given her half the story, but she needed to fill in the rest.

She smelled blood, but there was no blood on the ground here, no wounds on her mother. She touched her own hot face and drew back sticky red fingers. Her head tilted, and she nearly lost balance. Gingerly, wincing through the pain, she wiped it with her sleeve. It hadn't registered before, and she'd have to keep ignoring it.

She staggered for the open door, as dizzy from the blow to the head as from everything that had happened. Regardless of how much she'd meant it when she'd thanked Casimir for killing her dad, for ending his misery, she wouldn't forgive him for doing that to her mother. At least she'd been happy living here, brainwashed, with Casimir, and had done nothing to deserve that. Happy. Unlike Seth – if he was still alive, she had to get to him before Casimir did.

She went back to the intersection where the panther had crossed them and ignored her. There had been, as far as she could tell, only four people in the palace. If she followed where the panther had gone, she was convinced she would either be killed by it or she would find Seth.

*

The alcove the panther had gone into held a narrow staircase devoid of all the majesty and grand decoration of the rest of the palace. The stones were rough, drab gray, and it was so dark she could barely see the gaps in the stones under her feet. At the top, a small window cast a square of gray light onto the floor. Plain wooden doors lined the walls of the cramped hall. It smelled like blood, stronger than that coming from her cheek.

She leaned against the wall and inched down the hall. The light didn't reach the end, but she didn't plan on going that far, didn't want to walk into darkness. The whole hall was probably useless – the palace doors were always locked unless Casimir wanted her to find them. But the first door opened.

Before looking inside, she went to the next door and tried it. If Casimir was still deciding which doors she went into, she didn't want to walk into a trap, or back into the guest room where she would be locked inside. There was no way she could wait now. Even knowing that she would have to keep wearing the remnants of this dress, she needed to get Seth and get *out*. For good.

The second door opened. Thinking about it, Michelle doubted that Seth lived behind one of these. This hall was not meant to be seen. Given the way Seth was dressed,

Casimir wanted him displayed whenever possible. But still, she had seen the panther come this way, so there was something here.

She touched the scalpel and held it back in her palm. No, it wouldn't do much to the panther, she knew, but it put her a bit at ease to hold it, and being at ease also helped her head hurt less. If she moved her face, even twitched, the pain seared through her cheek. The shock from earlier must have made her unaware of the pain; it hadn't hurt when she was shouting in the throne hall.

Behind the first door, she couldn't see anything. If there were no windows, she doubted it was Seth's room. She braced for the pain and whispered, "Seth," though once the pain kicked in, it came out more of a hiss. Nothing.

She went to the next door. It was silent except for her breathing and the sound of her own pulse in her ears. This second room had a sliver of light from a crack running up the far wall, wide enough at the top to give dimness to the room. A square table in the middle of the room – papers and splinted of wood all around it in addition to a pair of stools – had papers spread across it, including a map almost as wide as she was tall. She inched up to the desk.

The light cut jagged across the map. Toward the center of it there was a circle with an X through it marked *Compound*. A pen lay next to it. A straight line cut across from *Majestic*, also marked with an X, through the compound, after which it trailed away without an endpoint. *Logo City*, far to the west, was written and marked with an X. She scanned the east coast, from the south on up and pointed out Casimir's palace, marked ambiguously with a triangle. Straight east, not far from the triangle, was another circle, devoid of an X, that caught her breath in her throat. *Arbiter*.

It made sense now. This was a war map. She grabbed other papers with numbers, locations, dates – Casimir’s ranks on any given day. A strictly upward trend. It hadn’t been about her and Arroyo at all. Casimir wanted to get Arroyo out of there and back on his way to the Arbiter. Whatever would happen there, it would be wrong.

*

Seth led Michelle’s friends into the palace. “Don’t touch anything. Don’t open any doors, go under any archways, or turn down any halls. Stay close.”

As Sophia walked, her arm brushed his. “What will happen if we do that?”

“They might take you away from here. Casimir can control where portals lead inside the palace. Arches, doors, windows. But if I go first, they should all work normally.”

“If I may ask, what is the mechanism behind that phenomenon?”

“I have no idea. I just know that’s what happens.” If Michelle survived her dinner, she would have been sent back to her room. He doubted that was where she would be, though. It just didn’t feel right. Ballroom, dining room, any hallway, the throne hall. She could have been anywhere, and there was no speedy way to check them all. She could even be locked in a hidden room or a never-used closet, and he would never find her.

Seth led them around a corner and stopped. He caught Sophia and held her back.

Casimir staggered down the hall. He held his arms close to his body, hands up near his face, fingers spread out tightly clenched and angled at each knuckle.

“Oh dear.”

“Casimir,” Seth said.

Casimir’s back was hunched, curled in toward his hands. A gravelly whimper escaped his lips, and he squatted then dropped his hands to the floor, crouched like

Satan. He uncurled his back. Spine popping. His hair hung over his shoulders in satin curtains. He tilted his face up, his eyes wild.

“Oh my God,” Sophia said. She jerked back, but Seth held onto her.

“This thing is Casimir?”

“Seth. Our son, Seth.”

“*Son?* Shit.”

“Did I forget to mention?”

“You’re still here,” Casimir said. “Still here. He loved her, you know. Of course you know.”

He wanted to run, and he was glad no one did. The way Casimir was crouched, coiled, was animalistic. At the slightest movement he could pounce, and whoever he landed on would then stop living.

“Who loved her? Do you mean Michelle?”

“Does he mean Arroyo?”

“No!” And then Casimir cackled. Seth had heard him laugh before, and it had always been forced to fit the situation, never real, never when something was actually funny. This was, by comparison, real, and sick. “No, we don’t mean him or her. *He* loved *her*. After a while, before we were made, he became the Arbiter more than he was himself, but he still loved her.”

“Casimir, I don’t understand —”

“He loved her!” He stretched his neck and threw open his mouth, and his fingers clawed the stone floor. “He always loved her, and if we are one part me and one part him, why do we only *hate her?*” he shrieked.

Seth held onto Sophia's trembling hand, leaning away from Casimir. Something had happened to make him snap like this. If the women he talked about wasn't Michelle...

"What happened to my mother?"

"Seth's mother. Yes. That is her. We hate her husband. We hate her daughter. They will die, because we hate them. But we didn't mean to hate *her*, too."

Seth jerked forward, but Sophia caught him. Casimir flinched back, coiled to pounce, unblinking eyes focused on Seth.

"Did you kill my mother?"

Casimir blinked. "We did not want to hate her, but she loves her husband and her daughter, so we hate her so much."

"Did you kill here?"

"Snap goes her neck."

"I'll snap *your* neck – that's my mom!" Sophia gripped his arms and pinned her to him.

Casimir stared. "We didn't mean to hate. We don't hate Seth."

"You bastard – *I* hate *you*. I've always hated you."

Blinked once more. "We could hate Seth."

"Did you kill Michelle, too?"

Casimir cackled and uncoiled. "Not yet. She got away." With more popping joints, he raised himself back upright, still curled in on himself like he had been to start.

Seth felt his whole body shake with a desire to launch himself at Casimir and end it now, live or die and just be done with it, but he knew that would be selfish. Michelle

couldn't go on without her only family. Only the fact that she was alive kept him back. And that Sophia held onto him.

Casimir finally straightened and masked the mania that had been all over his face, though his eyes were still wild. He looked down at Seth like he was an spider trying to swim out of a puddle, and a manic grin spread across his face.

*

Something scratched the stone outside in the hall. Michelle looked back and sunk beneath the table. Held her breath, didn't move. Black-clawed paws slinked into view in the doorway, one claw just dragging on the floor. The panther's head dropped into view, low to the floor, sniffing. It faced left, swept right, stepped forward. Close now. In her palm, she inched the scalpel blade to her fingertips and gripped the shaft. The panther turned its white eyes on her and bared its teeth. She lashed out and cut its eye. It drew its head back, and she drove the blade into its neck. She had never heard the panther make a sound before, but now it let out a gurgling screech that made her skin want to peel away and hide.

Scrambling from under the table, she grabbed the map and tore out of the room. The window drew her down the hall. She skidded down the steps away from the panther's cries and turned right.

Casimir had to have known that Arroyo would never give up – he had *needed* Michelle to reject Arroyo, and now he needed him to kill the Arbiter.

*

A rippling screech, utterly inhuman, split the hall like a shattering mirror.

"What in heaven is that?"

Seth turned to the direction of the screech, closed his eyes, and pulled up his mental map of the palace. It was so loud that it wasn't too far away. Ahead, left, right, left.

"Where did he go?" Sophia said.

When Seth looked, Casimir was gone. He breathed a bit of relief, but if Casimir had gone anywhere, it would have been toward that noise. "Damn. That sound is his favorite garr."

"It sounded like it was in pain."

"There's only one person still here who would hurt it."

"Michelle!" Keaton said. "Young man, please take us there."

"I can't. Do you remember the way back? You and Agnes should go back and wait for us outside, somewhere safe."

"Hell no. Why's Sophia gotta stay but I gotta go?"

"She has young legs." She still held his hand. "Plus, I don't think she's going to let go. Hurry." He couldn't wait for another complaint. He ran and pulled Sophia with him and closed his eyes. The thread between him and Satan was gone, and he could no longer see that wisp, blue or purple. But he was sure that it would be ahead, left, right, and then left.

*

"You're not gonna just let them go like that, are you?"

"I would object, but I feel fairly out of use at present, and I admire his intent to keep us safe —"

"Bull shit! I'm going after them. Give me that axe." She reached for it and then her eyes went wide looking past him. "You're not gonna want to go that way."

He relinquished the axe and turned around. Garr stalked ran and galloped down the hall toward them. Ten at least, hungrily snarling with open mouths. "Is there no end to this?"

"Not an ending that has all your insides still inside you. Now come on!"

*

"What's your plan?"

"Save Michelle. Get out."

"Really specific. I love it."

He pulled her left, and then right. The halls were empty, and too quiet, as if Casimir blocked the sound. Their footsteps didn't echo back to them, and they should have. Still, he was pretty sure of the location based on where Satan liked to prowl and the direction of the cry.

"Then we'll celebrate somehow – got anything better?"

"There she is," Sophia shouted.

Michelle ran their way, her face bloody, wearing a dress that had apparently fought and defeated some kind of vicious badger. She faltered, exhausted. Behind her, Satan sprinted. It usually never moved full speed, but it was angry, wounded – Seth spotted the shiny glint under its neck where something protruded. "Seth, run!"

"Any ideas on how we fight *that*?" Sophia said. She assumed some kind of martial arts stances, arms up in front of her and legs loose, aimed at Satan.

"Working on it."

"What? How, exactly?"

“Well, for starters, we become meat shields.” Its strength was its tail; if it hit them, they were done. He had one idea. “Give me my cape and watch out for its tail.”

“You’re nuts.” But she still gave him the cape, without breaking her stance.

He rolled it in both hands, the band of thick cloth stretched between his arms. “See the damage to its face? Go after that. Just avoid the tail.”

“Oh, that’ll be no problem. Any other sage wisdom?” He was pretty sure he was crazy about this girl. She stepped a few feet away from him, to their left, so that Michelle could run past them and they could at least, he hoped, stall Satan until Michelle got away a bit.

Michelle passed and dropped to her knees, panting and raggedly crying out in pain. Satan was second behind her, but it slowed at the new obstacle to its prey and raised its tail. Seth stepped closer, to draw the tail so that he could catch it in the cape.

Sophia leapt forward, dropped low, and arced a kick up under its throat. Her foot struck the piece of metal jutting from its neck and drove it deep so that only a nub stuck out from the flesh. Satan made a sound like a hiccup. Blood almost purple pooled under it. It whirled its tail, but Sophia ducked. She got closer, pushed its muzzle down and jabbed the cut on its eye with straight fingers.

It couldn’t properly shriek the way it had earlier, probably had something to do with the metal device through its neck, but it tried. It clawed at Sophia and snatched one of her legs, pulling her down.

Seth jumped in, but Satan pulled down a wing and buffeted him back. He teetered and hit the wall behind him.

Sophia ducked another swipe and broke free of the claw, sliding. She got to her feet. Then Satan brought its tail around and raked her leg. She balanced on the other, cried out at the dozen spikes ripping her thigh, then fell, limp.

“Hey, come on, over here,” Seth called out to Satan. It left Sophia alone, smart enough to know that once it hit something with its tail, it wasn’t going to do anything else against it. “Michelle, drag her away. Sophia, I know you can hear me. You’ll be okay.”

Satan was woozy, but that only made its tail more dangerous. It whipped and lashed unpredictably. Seth tried to position himself to catch it as it swept by. He stepped in front of Sophia, glanced back as Michelle pulled her away. The tail came at him, and he lifted his arms, cape spanning the gap between them, and snagged the spikes. They tore into the thick folds of the cape but not through it. He was careful to keep his arms back—a pinprick from one of those spikes might put him out. With a roll of his cloth shield, he doubled up the tail. Now he just needed someone to attack it while he had its defenses down, and of course he had no one.

“Keep up, old man, I’m not gonna leave you behind.”

“Seth,” Michelle said. “More garr coming this way. Do your bagel thing.”

“I’ll do you one better,” he said. If it worked. Around the corner behind him, Agnes, Keaton, and a dozen garr came running. He slammed his eyes shut and forgot about everything going on around him, cleared his mind of it. Only in shadows did he see the garr, each a pulse of purple light. All else was dark. Satan appeared as itself, a snarling black monster in thick shadow.

I am the master of your shadows, and this creature threatens me. He opened his eyes and tied off the cape around the tail. A wing knocked him forward.

The garr hadn't responded. They circled Agnes and Keaton, at bay only because of a swinging axe.

He had to try again. Darkness, eyes clenched. This should work. *This is Satan, please kill it.* He felt teeth go after his throat, burning hot, ripping his skin. From the teeth dripped a sizzling hot liquid. *Kill it – kill it now!*

The teeth pulled away. He opened his eyes weakly, had to squint from the pain. The garr leapt onto Satan, clawing and biting, pinning down its legs. It lashed with its tail and dropped two garr, limp, but the rest crawled onto it, sinking their teeth and talons into it. Seth touched his own neck, but the hot liquid only spread to his fingers, mixed with blood. He sweated. The liquid seeped into his veins. He started to shake.

"Seth, my boy." Keaton knelt before him. "Look at me. You will be okay. You will be just fine."

His head lolled to the side, and he saw Sophia, motionless. She looked right into his eyes but didn't cry. Her face was limp, but he saw the victory in her eyes. "Time to celebrate," he said with a cough.

"No, no," Keaton said. "Don't speak. Rest your throat. Let me get something for that." He pulled something out of a bag and held it to Seth's neck.

The garr stood around and top of Satan, half of them, anyway. The rest were numbed, and Satan's head hung by a strip of flesh from the jaws of on that looked almost triumphant, its shoulders thrust back. Seth felt his vision fading. "Keaton, right?"

"Yes, young man. What do you need?"

"If I survive —"

"Hush now, of course you will survive."

"But if I do, can you tell Sophia —"

"Tell the young lady yourself, and don't stress yourself with speech."

"Can you tell her I would like to give her a kiss for being so... what's a good word?"

"Ravishing, exceptional, beautiful? Surprising?"

"For being so cool."

"The young will always be young," Keaton said. "When she can move, and when you're feeling better, I'll tell her."

"Wait." The strange sense in the back of his head tingled, the one that had told him Sophia and the others had been outside the gate. "Someone is here. Southwest gate." He couldn't keep his head up anymore and felt his cheeks go numb.

"Seth, Seth —!"

*

When the burner chariot was idle for too long, Anglis could no longer feel the heat of it. He wanted to give it his blood and fuel it, roll into a crowd of gathering people and listen to the fear in their breath. He could distinguish each one and would make their breath stop.

Now, though, he dipped into the tepid waters of patience. It cooled him. Lord Casimir would have new tasks, new battle plans. The war ebbed beneath their pressing hand, he the demolisher and Lord Casimir the architect of the new world, a world of ash and fire, fear and dread, darkness and death. Until new orders came, Anglis waited.

He had cleaned out the dusty remains of his most recent passenger so that Lord Casimir might join him, and he had cleaned out the cabin as well, in case the young lord joined them as well.

Uneven breath came from the steps down from the palace. It was unfamiliar, but the steps he knew, and he could picture Lord Casimir descend at a quickened pace. There was something not right. "Lord Casimir—"

"We go east, now. We can't lose distance. Arroyo is fighting us better than we thought, and we *must* be there, be close enough and strong enough, when he buries the bullet through the Arbiter's skull." Casimir bounded up to the chariot and landed beside Anglis. "NOW."

Anglis went to the helm. "This is it, then, my Lord?"

"Tonight we win the war. Now go."

*

The cold was fierce and penetrating. Keaton shambled to the southeast gate, once he located it, and stepped outside. Headlights were like droplets of the sun in the black night, the silvery landscape lit by the stars and dim moon interrupted by the garish brightness. He held a hand out to shield his eyes and tried to identify the car. Arroyo couldn't have come back already; this automobile was larger, one of those American sport-utility-things, and the man at the wheel wore a bowtie.

"Lee! How in the world?"

"Keaton." He exited the vehicle, careful not to use his right arm. "I followed you— if you've got the time I can explain... what is *that*?" With his left hand he pointed away from the palace to the east.

Keaton turned. The burner's chariot, with its red glow, rumbled away. "Nothing pleasant," Keaton said. But it was *leaving*, and that could be a boon. "Does your vehicle have medicinal supplies?"

"Of course. I always come equipped."

"Come with me."

*

Arroyo slowed the car to a full stop at a door in a tall square wall, broken at the top and tilting to the left, as if it had been shifted by an earthquake. He drew his coat close and exited the car, but was surprised by the air outside. It was warmer here.

He crouched. Definitely coming up through the ground.

The thing that troubled him, though, as he looked over his shoulder, was that he didn't remember driving up to this building. The whole drive felt like a trance of which he was now relieved. Ruined streets strewn with bodies, human and garr, unfolded behind him, and apparently he had driven through it.

No matter. The push from inside his chest told him that the Arbiter was inside this building, and obeying that push and focusing on the bullet in the chamber of his pistol helped him to not think of Michelle.

It would be over soon.

*

"How is Seth?" Michelle lay flat on her back, willing her cheek to heal. The hall's arches joined at the peak of the ceiling, but it hid in shadows.

"Still bleeding, still out cold," Agnes said. "Sophia's conscious, but she's not moving."

"That will last a while."

"I'm sorry, you know, about your family."

"Don't mention it." It took all the effort she wasn't using to move to keep herself together.

"Michelle!" Mr. Keaton trotted down the hall. "Agnes, Sophia, Seth, and all of those garr making me nervous, I have our reinforcements." With him, he brought a small-eyed man with a bowtie and a leather backpack. She couldn't figure out his age.

She sat up. "They won't move unless you attack them or they get new orders. Who is this?"

"That's Lee," Agnes said. "How the hell did you get here?"

Lee eyed the garr and shuffled away from them, toward Seth and Sophia. "I found another car, just the way you described. It's outside." He sat next to Agnes and peered in on Seth. He loosed the backpack from his shoulders and drew a white box. With the box rested on his thighs, he started to dab at Seth's neck, gashed by the panther, which Michelle still couldn't look at.

Mr. Keaton ambled to Michelle's side. "More importantly," he said, "I believe Casimir is gone. Lee and I saw the burner's chariot leaving to the east."

"East?" She felt her expression fall, which hurt. She unfurled the map and spread it out.

"That's... not good? I had supposed that meant we were safe."

"It doesn't look good for this young man," Lee said.

Mr. Keaton turned. "Please do what you can. Michelle, what is going on?"

Casimir was following Arroyo to the Arbiter. He meant to somehow be reunited with his former self, and despite all her attempts to interfere, the pieces to allow that to happen were falling into place. "We have to follow him. But I can't drive."

"I can," Agnes said. She approached and reached out a hand to Michelle. "I'm coming with you."

"You might not—"

"Look, I'm not gonna hide anything. I got a particular bone to pick with that burner." Her expression was steel. "I'm in, or I'll go without you."

Michelle took Agnes's hand and pulled herself up by it. Agnes caught her when she leaned forward and held onto her until the dizziness subsided. "I'm okay."

"You sure?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Lee," Mr. Keaton said, "would you stay with Seth and Sophia?"

"Sophia will be able to move again soon," Michelle said.

Lee dug into his pocket and tossed his keys to Agnes. "Bring it back in one piece, if you would. This castle is highly unsettling." He glanced at the garr. "And they really won't attack me?"

"Keep Seth alive, and he can tell them to do whatever he wants."

Lee nodded, but his face lacked confidence, his eyes strayed from hers, and she wished she could stay with her brother. If she lost *him*, too, that would be it. She'd lose herself.

“Michelle,” Mr. Keaton said. “In our encounter with Casimir the hallway, he was all but entirely unhinged. That type of individual is the most dangerous. I want you to be sure—”

“We’re going,” she said.

“I’ll have a look at that cheek in the car.” He took up his axe.

“Mister Keaton—”

“Ah, ah,” he said. “In Arroyo’s absence, you need someone to fill the role of the strapping man, the excellent physical specimen, to fight the monsters. I volunteer.”

There was nothing she could do to stop him. The map crumpled a bit when she picked it up. “By the map, it isn’t too far. We need to hurry.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Arroyo put his hand to the cavern wall and felt the warmth, the vibration behind it. It was the machinery he'd passed on his way down, generators like Sophia had described that used the core of the Earth as a generator for heat. It had to be close.

*

Mr. Keaton clutched a stretched seatbelt and stood over Michelle while he patched up her cheek. It hurt, but she stayed calm. When she closed her eyes, she saw her dad in the throne hall reaching out for her, or her mother's neck with the bulging bone, or Seth with his throat torn open, so she kept her eyes open. World at stake or not, she needed to catch Casimir.

"I hope this doesn't hurt too badly," Mr. Keaton said. "The bumps and such."

Every time he jabbed her cheek, it did feel like a drill boring through her face. "I'm fine, Mister Keaton. Thank you."

"I'm sorry, Michelle." He finished wiping and applied an adhesive bandage. "If I knew this would happen when we left—"

"Please stop. I don't want you to be sorry. I need you to stay focused."

"Girl's right," Agnes said from the driver's seat. "Did this thing always go so fast?"

"The car?"

“No, that burner mobile. It’s stayin’ ahead of us no matter how fast I go.”

“Just keep on it,” Michelle said.

*

The cavern gave way to a metal-paneled tunnel, and at the end of the tunnel was a metal door. His fingers itched. He fastened them around the pistol grip, carefully away from the trigger. He needed that bullet. The door was unlocked and opened easily.

Arroyo led with his gun and crossed the threshold. The room had a solid wood floor, an aisle between two long rows of tables that led to a single high-backed leather chair with wheels. There were two side doors in the back. Screens flanked the room, all powered-down and dusty, and there was one at the far end, too, behind the chair. In the chair sat a man, probably fifty. He looked asleep, but he spun the chair.

“Our operations have moved, but I still spend my time here,” the man said. “In case you were going to ask where everyone is. I take care of the generators, and I keep track of my directors from here.”

“Who are you?”

The man spun the chair again to face him and smiled. “Who did you come here to find?”

Arroyo shook his head. It certainly wasn’t this man.

“Come closer, so we can talk.”

*

“Shit – the hell happened here?” The car slowed, and Agnes began to take more turns. Michelle hadn’t been paying attention to the road, but now she leaned forward and looked. The street was littered with rubble in huge patches all pointing away from a

building on the corner that was missing most of two walls. Out of a patch of rubble stuck a gray arm, bent the wrong way at the elbow and missing two fingers. More bodies lay piled on the sidewalk. Nearby, a garr corpse, at least the upper half of one, hung over a windowsill.

“Did Casimir do this?” Michelle said.

“Not recent,” Agnes said. “This is all old work, and these tread marks... he just rolled through, over all this.”

“It looks like...” Keaton said.

“A war,” Michelle said. “It is. Casimir versus the Arbiter.”

“All the garr he could ever want, up against... well, us,” Agnes said. “And not much else.”

“Can you still see him?” Ahead, I mean.”

“Not right now, but these tread marks are easy enough to follow. You think all these people were defending the Arbiter?”

“Has to be. Why else make a stand like this?” As they rode deeper into the city, there were more bodies, garr and human. Sometimes they were so mangled or covered in dust from the destruction that she couldn’t tell which.

*

“Others have come here and tried to kill me,” the main in the chair said. Arroyo had come a little closer but kept his distance. “Some have succeeded. But if you will listen, and allow me to speak, I believe I can convince you not to.”

Arroyo’s hands trembled. He struggled to steady them. “Who are you? You can’t be....”

The man smiled the way a parent would smile watching a child build a tower of blocks. "The Arbiter? I certainly am."

*

"There it is." Agnes pointed. Ahead, in front of a battered building, stood Anglis's chariot. The doors to the building lay open. "I don't see anybody. I'm gonna park it here."

"And look! Our old car."

Arroyo was here, too. Michelle unbuckled her seatbelt. "I hope we aren't too late."

"Whoa, there." Agnes stopped the car on the closer side of the street and shifted it to park. The engine hummed. "What do you think you're gonna do? You don't have any weapons, nothing for defending yourself."

"I'll come up with something."

"My ass. You'll get yourself killed—" Glass shattered as a gloved hand punched through the driver side window and grabbed Agnes by her hair. It pulled her through the window.

Michelle flung open her door and slid out.

A few steps from the vehicle, Anglis lurched back and, lifting Agnes, tossed her behind him like a removed coat. She hit the pavement in the middle of the street with a thud and rolled to the curb. She raised herself onto her elbows. Michelle stayed still, shivering from the cold, and watched the burner. Steam rose from his skin, especially around where his eyes would have been. He turned slowly to face her.

"I can hear you breathe. I can hear your heartbeat."

“Michelle,” Agnes called out. “Just run. Get your ass inside and find Arroyo.” She got to her feet. “You know, he tried to convince me once that he doesn’t love you. He’s a pretty good liar.”

Michelle shook her head. “I can’t just –”

“Take that, you fiend!” Mr. Keaton rushed past her, dragging his feet on the loose gravel over the pavement, and raised his axe high. Anglis flinched for far too long. The axe blade sliced his neck and, before Michelle could blink and before a drip of orange magma oozed from the gash, Anglis shot out with one hand and knocked Mr. Keaton straight back. Michelle jumped out of the way. He hit the driver’s side door hard enough to put a dent into it, and slunk to the ground, gasping and coughing.

“Just go, Michelle. Go now.”

She had to. For every moment spent out here, she had no idea what was happening to Arroyo. “Don’t let anything happen to either of you.” She passed Mr. Keaton, bolted across the street, and through the open doors into the building.

*

“You can’t really be the Arbiter.”

“I can. I am, but I am also not.” He rose from the chair, knees popping. “Let me show you.”

He rolled in a crate through one of the side doors and then stood in front of his chair.

“This is me. This is really the Arbiter.”

“Inside there?” His finger tickled the trigger.

“It is, as a body, incapable of anything, but quite indestructible.”

“I don’t care about your box – why are you here? Why do all this, hurt all these people?”

“I can feel your pain, your confusion. I won’t dispute that I have hurt countless people, but I did not intend to. Sit down for a moment, and I’ll tell you how I have failed.”

*

The aftermath of the gruesome battle across the rest of the city had even made it into the building, except the bodies were, thank God, gone. Michelle guessed it was some kind of government office. Blood stained the carpet black, holes had been smashed into the walls, and chairs and desks had been propped up like barricades. But there was no sign of which way Casimir or Arroyo had gone.

She went as deep as she could through the darkness, mostly feeling her way along and fingering the flashlight at her hip. She followed halls and cut through offices until she met a dead end and had to turn back. She slammed her fist into a cubicle wall. Agnes and Mr. Keaton outside, Arroyo somewhere inside – she couldn’t afford to get lost. She had taken every turn she could and it only brought her back to the lobby, just a shattered glass help desk, an elevator, and the biggest bloodstain in the building.

She turned slowly. The elevator.

Rushing, she hit the call button. With a metallic whine, the door opened, a light on inside. Hunter had just pushed one of the buttons for the level he wanted. But she frowned at the options. If this building had had more than two levels, it didn’t anymore, so she disregarded those. B. For bottom? Basement? She hit it.

The doors closed, except for a slight gap, and the elevator dropped. She watched earth pass through the gap and estimated how much depth was covered. Thirty, forty feet. Fifty. The light dimmed, and the doors reopened to unveil a rocky cavern lit by steel-framed glass lanterns strung on a thick cord held into the rock ceiling by thick bolts. The one nearest her looked loose. There was a slight vibration to the whole tunnel.

As much as her legs shook, she knew she had to hurry, so she ran down the tunnel, careful in her heels. It was cut straight for a few hundred feet, gliding downward at a slight slope, then made a sharp, curving right turn, and she stopped. She hadn't noticed the vibration growing or the hum in the air until now. Ahead, the cavern opened wide, and four huge half-buried machines lined an aisle, computer consoles facing inward and lighting the chamber in blue.

The air was so hot she wished she could take off the dress, hotter than she'd ever felt. She sweated and had to squint. The machines chugged and hummed like engines. The computer consoles displayed power output figures as she walked by. At the far end of the aisle, the cavern shrunk back to a tunnel, and another string of lights led onward.

*

"I came here twenty-four years ago. Like this." The man in the chair touched the crate. "I knew that the Shroud would cover your Sun, and I came to attempt to help humanity survive the fifteen years it would remain."

"Fifteen? It's been longer than that."

"Yes, it has, and I will get to that. I require the assistance of a physical host to do what I need to do. Many humans came to look when I landed. You would have been a

child at that time. Many came, but they were fearful. One man made contact, and I asked for his help. He offered to share his physical body, and I too eagerly accepted the offer.”

Coming to the planet, physical hosts – it was easier to believe the garr, or Casimir, when there was no attempt at logic behind it. He didn’t want to believe any of it.

“Humans have far more feeling and turmoil than I had ever encountered. Especially this man. To share his body was to share his mind, and it exhausted me. His envy was all consuming... I had to extract it. It pained me, but I had to cut this man off from himself and extract the negative energy. I gave it a form, and I planned to slay it. I was too desperate. The Shroud had already come, and I was failing.”

“So what happened?”

“The envy lashed out at me. I couldn’t kill it, and it escaped. It created more like it, created creatures with fire for blood, created monsters, fed on humans, and built a palace for its glory. It named itself Casimir.”

*

“Keaton, damn it, what did you go and do?” Agnes barked. He only groaned. Anglis pulled the axe from his neck, and lava poured down his chest and back like thick soup. “Anglis, c’mon, leave him alone. You remember me, don’t you?” Hopefully he couldn’t see her shaking.

He tilted his head at her. Hank had never done something so stupid, doglike, when that body had been his. “Yes. You fought me, my body before this.” Axe lowered and blade glowing hot, he started toward her. Just like she wanted. Sort of. Keaton had to get out of the way if she was going to make it to the car.

“Remember how we fought you?”

"Your burning is inevitable."

"Oh, I don't care if you kill me. So just play along before you do it. I know you don't give up."

A slight pause. Behind Anglis, Keaton stood. "When you drew my blood, the house burned, and everyone with it. You ran outside."

"Some memory you've got." She sidestepped to put the building to her back. "Keaton, go after Michelle. She needs somebody to keep her brain where it belongs."

"I would never forgive myself if I let you face this alone. He has burned quite enough."

"All will burn," Anglis said. Magma dripped from him and hit the ground in popping smoky pools.

"I have a plan," Keaton said. He pulled open the door to the car, but the metal grinded together, and the door jammed half open. Anglis whirled at the sound.

"No!" Agnes picked up a stray brick and charged before Anglis could act, shuffling her feet just like Keaton did. She smashed the brick into his head with a crunch. Dust and pieces of brick clattered around. A piece of flesh flopped loose on top of his head, steaming.

He lurched forward and froze. Then spun and swung the axe into Agnes's chest. The fire burned so hot she really didn't feel the blade cut through her flesh and her bones, making a neat divide. She pulled it out and stared at it. Her breath was wet. She couldn't fill her lungs. Her arms drooped, but her hands held the half of the axe.

A car horn blared. Anglis cried out and covered his ears, but the sound was muted to Agnes. Hank had sounded like that before lava was forced down his throat. She staggered back.

Their car, horn still blasting, struck Anglis and tossed him spinning sideways her direction. His legs were on backward, and still he crawled and scooped his blood. Never giving up. He turned sort of gray in her vision. Agnes dropped to her knees next to him, axe to her shoulder.

"Agnes," a voice shouted, so far away.

The burner still smiled with rotten black teeth. "Everything will burn, whether I am there or not," he said.

"I don't care. About anything else right now." She coughed blood onto Anglis, and some of it came from the gape in her chest. She was thankful she couldn't feel anything behind the burn. "I shouldn't have let you get this far," she said. "This is for Hank."

*

"Casimir." Arroyo struggled to say the word.

"It has fought bitterly to cause pain, to destroy me. It knows only hate and envy, and it wants what I have. It wishes to hurt, deprive, freeze, and starve. The Shroud remains because Casimir wills it to remain, though I don't know how." He looked so sad. "So you see, I have perpetually failed."

"What happens if someone hears your story and still wants to kill you?"

"I can see that you remain skeptical. In that event, they have usually killed me. In the death of my host, I assume a new host, the murderer. It is not ideal, but it is a defense

mechanism that keeps me alive, and I must remain alive until Casimir can be defeated.

As much as I have failed, I will not resign to defeat." He straightened.

To kill the Arbiter was to become the Arbiter. It was impossible to rid the world of it. His arms shook.

"Do you understand?"

Arroyo struggled to keep his arm still. It rose, and he fought to lower it, pulled it down, but the pistol aimed at the Arbiter's head.

"It will only end badly for you," the Arbiter said. "I will ask again – do you understand?"

"His name is Casimir," Arroyo said. "The one in my nightmares is Casimir."

"What did you say?"

"Just run! His name... is Casimir. He exists." Arroyo felt a shadow swell over his mind. He lost all feeling in his body, though still saw out of his eyes. The voice from his mouth had two layers harmonized together. "We have won, Arbiter. I have won."

*

The tunnel gave way to a metal door in a metal wall. Michelle hurried to the door and, as quietly as she could, nudged it open. It was silent. She peered through. Everything else blurred when she saw Arroyo, seated, his head in his hands. "Arroyo!" She pushed inside and rushed past tables and powered-down computer screens.

"Oh my God." On the floor, next to a crate, a man lay in a still expanding pool of fresh blood, a neat hole in his head. Arroyo's pistol lay at his feet. "What did you do?"

He lifted his head, eyes wide in fright, his whole face struck with panic. Just looking at him, she felt it gnaw at her, too. "I didn't. It was... him. I can't remember his name,

but it was him. Yes." His face blanked. He looked up at her, his face slack. "I would never—I didn't—I wouldn't—it wasn't—"

"Arroyo." She grabbed his shoulders, dropped to her knees, and took his hands. "Tell me what happened. Was it Casimir?"

He gasped and drew away, tensed up and cringed as if he was about to be hit, then he closed his eyes and let his head hang. "She shouldn't have said that."

The voice came twice, once from Arroyo, and another time behind her. Casimir. He slid from the corner and stood in front of the door, a head above its frame. He looked composed, but she saw that breaking in his eyes, frantic and frenzied.

"What did you do to him?"

"He did it all to himself," Casimir and Arroyo said. "A bullet through the brain of the Arbiter comes at a steep price."

She looked at the dead man. No, he was not the man from her dad's past. If *this man* had been the Arbiter, she didn't know what to make of the images from her dad. "That isn't the Arbiter."

"He was."

"No, you were the Arbiter. My dad's friend. You came from him."

"Excellent deduction," he and Arroyo said. "He was the Arbiter, too. The first one on Earth. Really, the Arbiter is in that crate. Fighting a war and trying to save humanity from inside a box."

"If this is all it took, one man with one bullet, why hadn't you killed the Arbiter yourself?"

“And in my turn become him? I fight a war meaning to *win*, not surrender. And we have won.”

“Become him?” She squeezed Arroyo’s hands. “Is that it? When Arroyo killed the Arbiter he became the next Arbiter?”

Arroyo lifted his head, eyes still closed. “She’s smart.”

“Oh my God.” All of it was just to use Arroyo, to make him into a puppet. She wanted to scream and cry and take Casimir’s head in her hands and just dig her fingernails into his perfect-skinned face. She held Arroyo’s hands, and then he stood.

Casimir raised an arm. “He is asleep.” Arroyo didn’t echo. “When he is awake, he won’t remember me, and when he isn’t awake, I come to play.”

“But why? The only person who ever liked you is dead.”

“I’ll take *hate* just as eagerly as love. You’ll see how alike the two are if you dwell with them long enough. Let everyone hate me, and I’ll show them how to hate.”

“And then what?” She let go of Arroyo’s hands and held fast to her flashlight. She wasn’t afraid. She couldn’t let herself be afraid.

“We will play with our puppet.” He cackled, an echoing half-shriek, and Arroyo turned and clamped his hands around Michelle’s neck, pushing her to her knees. She gasped and drew in nothing. The room disappeared in blackness. She tried to claw at Arroyo’s fingers, but she couldn’t get under them without tearing her own skin.

The crate wheeled past her. The door shut.

She touched Arroyo’s face. “Please,” she tried to say. It barely squeaked out. This wasn’t Arroyo. His name was Casimir. The one whose hands crushed her was named

Casimir. She couldn't cough. Casimir had done this to her mother, killed her dad. If anyone had a chance to stop him... if anyone could do something... if only —

In her palm she gripped the flashlight and smashed it into the side of Arroyo's head. The grip released. She collapsed, gasped and choked and coughed, and she drew in as much of the hot air as she could.

Flashlight still in hand, she felt around until she found him, touched his face with a tender finger. Up from his cheek she pushed her fingers through his hair, feeling his scalp. No blood. "I'm sorry I had to hit you." She tugged on him but couldn't move him. Her arms were still weak. "I have to get you out of here."

Talking aloud made her cough. She could use the chair to help her move Arroyo's immobile body; she just needed to find it. With an outstretched foot, she felt around for the former Arbiter's body. If she could not touch the body, she would be grateful. Her foot touched him, some part of him, and she made her way around him, poking gently with her toe. Her heel slipped through slick viscous blood. At last she touched a wheel of the chair. She rolled it around the body, wheels making a sick sound as they rolled through blood.

Hoisting him by the arms, she pulled him into the chair and wheeled him to the wall opposite the dead man and then to the door.

"Does that thing really protect you from the dark?"

She yelped. Arroyo had said it, but he was still asleep. "Yes."

"Can it save you, then, from me?"

*

Anglis spread his crusted lips and tasted the air once again. His new body moved stiffly. It took him several minutes to get the muscles working in the correct order that would allow him to stand. He tried to listen, to locate the person or object nearest to him, but he was blind to his surroundings. His preternatural senses weren't working. Yet. Hopeful. He brushed the rough bark of a tree with his hands, and he gripped its lowest branch for stability. Ash smeared under his hands.

Still, his mind saw only as much as his eyes could. Hunter's body had been strong, but weeks of being dead had decayed most of that. Even Anglis's residual fire couldn't restore that. Maybe he would never see, would always hobble.

Hunter had been an emergency measure taken only in a desperate moment. He would have just let Hunter die if he didn't consider himself in great danger at the moment. Now, Michelle delivered, the end in sight, what else did he have to do? Whether Casimir won or the Arbiter won mattered little to Anglis. There was no function remaining, no next task to be performed.

Nothing.

He had nothing. He was nothing. Like all fire, he had burned until he had exhausted himself, his worth, yet he was still here. Unless he was killed, he would always be here.

And his sight eluded him. He gripped the tree, afraid to leave it and lose the only object in his consciousness. Afraid. He had never felt that before. His skin was cold.

*

Keaton watched the axe come down and turned away but still heard it split Anglis's skull. Then Agnes slumped. Keaton hurried from the car and lifted her from the body, which had already gone up in flames.

"I really tried," she said.

"Don't exhaust yourself." He laid her down in a patch of dirt off the street and patted the flames away from her. "The fire has sealed your wounds. You'll be fine." But he didn't glance. He didn't need to.

"No, don't lie. I can't even see you and I know it." When she breathed, it sounded like bubbles being blown through a straw. "Just tell Sophia I tried, so she's gotta remember—" She gasped, a horrid gurgling groan.

"Shush, now, my dear. Don't try to do too much."

"Tell her to remember. No, wait. Ask her. She'll like that." Her breath was nonexistent. Her words came out airless whispers. "To remember good things."

"Sophia, I can tell you, is already proud."

"You're... a terrible, terrible liar."

"Please."

Something almost a laugh. "I believe you."

"Good."

"My last breaths should've been — with Hank — those years ago. I ran."

"Not always a mistake. Hank will be proud, too, of what you've done." He sniffed and wiped his eyes. "But don't tell him I cried."

"Promise." Her eyes closed.

"If I may ask. If you see a woman named Rachel — tell her I tried to get to her."

Agnes's arms went limp. "I didn't forget." Her head tilted away. "Or a girl, Ellice, tell her that her daddy never went a day not thinking of her. Not ever." He held her tight.

"Agnes?"

She had stopped breathing. He lowered his head and sobbed. When it stopped, he straightened out her jacket to cover the wound and folded her hands together over her stomach. A slight smile tilted her mouth. He wasn't sure he'd ever seen her smile.

If he'd had time and materials, he would have buried her, but he was still needed. The axe lay by the inferno that had been Anglis's body. He picked it up and carried it inside.

*

Chapter Twenty-Five

Michelle clutched the flashlight and leaned into the back of the chair with her shoulder, pushing it and Arroyo in it uphill through the tunnel. It was still entirely black, so she had to judge where they were going and if they were running into a wall by the resistant Arroyo's feet met. He hit the wall to the left and she corrected, pulling him back somewhere that hopefully was the center.

Since Casimir's threat, Arroyo hadn't spoken or moved. Meanwhile, Michelle held her breath. Though she began to believe it was a bluff – her nightmares had always come from her dad, and she didn't actually know what process Casimir had to go through to build that type of connection.

They should have reached the chamber with the generators – only, she couldn't hear the churning hum, and the air felt colder than it should have. She didn't have to be afraid of the dark, not as long as she had her flashlight. No demons would get her.

The ground leveled out abruptly, and as she tripped the chair rolled out of reach. She lunged for it but caught only air. Off-balance, she waved her arms around, reached forward, to her sides, and back, but she couldn't touch anything, only the ground under her heels. Fear kept her feet stuck.

No. She didn't need to be afraid. There was nothing out there. Nothing, only Casimir, intent on killing her. Her flashlight had protected her this far, at least she could tell herself that.

She inched one toe up, then a little farther. A nervous storm brewed just below her sternum, pounding at her ribcage. Next foot, a full step. Building courage, she started forward. The chair should have been close.

"You haven't died yet." The words breathed onto her neck, her bare shoulders and sent a shudder into her chest. She spun around, flailed, hit nothing, and crouched. Now Arroyo and the chair could have been left or right or behind her. She had no idea.

He couldn't see her. Seth could see in the dark rooms of the palace, but this was completely black. Completely alone. Without light, Casimir couldn't see her. Unless it wasn't really dark. She recalled being near him when Arroyo had visited the palace, how everything had turned dark. She covered her shoulders and clutched the flashlight to her stomach.

"We hate you."

The words knocked her backward, and a hot hand clamped down around hers holding the flashlight, lifted her up, wrenching the muscle in her elbow and shoulder. She kicked and rocked side-to-side. Another hand pried the flashlight from her fingers. She screamed. A metal crunch followed, and she was flung through the air. All sense of direction was lost. She hit something flat and metal ribs-first and heard glass crack. She rolled backward and slammed to the cave floor. To not lose herself in the nothingness again, she pressed her leg against whatever she had hit.

Pain rippled through her torso, but nothing felt cut or broken. Her skirt was around her knees now, but that just made it easier to move. Her breathing quickened. She began to panic and had to remind herself that the flashlight didn't work, it didn't matter, and she could survive without it. *Had* to survive, fight back. But she couldn't see him, and she wouldn't be able to see him unless he chose to reveal himself. "Are you afraid?" she said, trying to keep her voice straight. "Hiding in the dark like that?"

"Is that what you believe is happening?"

He could kill her if he chose to, but he didn't. Just like he hadn't killed her dad, not really, for all those years. The kill didn't matter to him; he enjoyed the pain.

The dirt in front of her face flickered green. She looked left. Casimir, swathed in green fire, clenched and unclenched his fists. His hair hung straight back, his jaw tilted, light cast up and around his beautiful face. Across his lips, his tongue flicked, and then spread a thin smile.

*

Keaton rode the lift and exited into a tunnel, offensively humid. Axe in hand, he embarked.

*

The green fire licked Casimir's hands, climbed up his fingers and sparked on his knuckles. Everything but a path between them was dark still, Casimir a monster emerging from the black. The crate with the Arbiter, and the chair with Arroyo – she supposed, quaking a little, that he was the Arbiter, too – were here somewhere, invisible.

The way Casimir glared at her, she wanted to shrink back and let him kill her as long as it was quick. "We aren't hiding," he said. "You can fight me, if you wish, but it will hurt more."

She didn't want to response. There were no words she could figure that would hit him the way she wanted to hit him.

He vanished. The green fire rose around her in a ring, and she pulled herself in, away from it. But—it wasn't hot. As soon as she noticed that, Casimir's hand took her by the nape of her neck and pushed her forward, slammed her to the floor. The wound in her cheek reopened, and she felt a rush of blood under the bandage.

"Unhand her!" Light came back to the chamber. Heat returned. The hum of the generators grew from the silence. She rolled over and kicked away from Casimir, who loomed over her.

Mr. Keaton charged, axe drawn. Her stomach sank. Trip, stop, turn around, she wanted to scream. Casimir caught the axe, tossed it away, and, fire pluming, launched Mr. Keaton twirling backward until he hit the rock wall and slumped to the floor.

The axe landed closer to her than Casimir. Mr. Keaton's diversion had at least gotten her free, even though she still wished he had tripped. That diversion needed to count. Whatever she could do with the axe, it would be better than she could do with nothing.

She ran for it, coughing, and Casimir glided after her once he noticed, fire whirling. Ducking down, she slid her hand under the axe's haft, scraping her knuckles even through her gloves, and she tried to stop. Her heels dug down. Casimir caught up and slammed into her, grabbed for the axe. She held it away, put her back to him and pulled it close. It was all she had, and it was from Mr. Keaton. If he was going to keep toying

with her, hurting her when he could instead kill her, she needed this chance to even things out.

Blade pulled close, she spun just to try to shake him off her, and he threw a hand up, deflecting the blade. It sent her whirling the other direction faster than she'd been moving to start. Her hands slid down the haft then pulled it even closer, her momentum so strong, for a tighter arc, and she struck Casimir just above the waist. She staggered to find her footing but still dug the blade deeper, wrenched it around.

He screamed. She had to get back. She yanked the axe free and tumbled away, under the height of Casimir's swinging arms. Now the whole chamber was visible to her – at the opening that would lead to the elevator, by where Mr. Keaton lay, sat the crate, the one she knew held that black sphere; closer, the chair she had rolled up sat; from it, Arroyo stirred and stood, peering around. She bit her tongue to keep from shouting to him. Casimir hadn't noticed. The hum of the generators was too much to hear the slight roll of the chair or Arroyo's footsteps.

Casimir wreathed his hands in green fire. "*You.*" His eyes glowed with the fire. "We will keep this world in darkness forever, burn and devour your spirits until *no one* would ever think to oppose us or be our better. But you, we will kill."

Arroyo shambled to one of the computer consoles and began typing things into it. It beeped in response. Michelle's stomach tried to crawl into her throat.

Casimir spun and launched at Arroyo.

"Arroyo!"

He looked up as Casimir hit him, a hook meant for the jaw that snapped his collarbone and spun him to the dirt. “You can’t kill me,” he groaned. “Not without becoming me.”

“We have no intention of *ever* killing you.”

“Hey!” She kicked off her heels and made a dash, her feet landing steadily. Casimir couldn’t kill Arroyo because the Arbiter was now inside his head and would jump to whomever killed Arroyo. But Casimir couldn’t afford to have Arroyo die at all, because that would start his plan all over – he would no longer have someone under his thumb to be the Arbiter. Something about being hit with the axe must have broken his concentration and let the Arbiter wrest Arroyo back, despite how powerful Casimir had become. All those people in the hospital and who knew how many others – she had no hope of fighting Casimir and winning it. He knew it, too, and so he toyed with her. There was just one thing she could do to turn the tables, and it was the last thing she wanted to do.

She skidded past Arroyo’s body, blisters all across the bottoms of her feet, axe raised high. Casimir must have expected her to attack him, because he braced for a block and stayed motionless as she passed.

“Everyone *freeze*.” She was shocked she had enough voice to say that, or enough strength to keep her arms raised, the axe ready to fall.

“What are you planning to do?”

The axe would fall and kill Arroyo. But then she would be the next Arbiter, and Casimir had no power over her. “I know what will happen if I kill him.” Her voice

shook. She looked down at Arroyo, the face she knew, who rolled onto his back and looked up at her with none of the man she loved in the eyes.

Casimir cackled. "You would never do it. You can pretend, but I know that you are weak. You believe that you could bring down that blade and cut through his neck? See the life gone from him forever?"

"It already is!" She wanted to throw the axe at Casimir, cut through his neck, but she stopped that want and kept her focus. She shut out the heat, her aches and bruises and bloodied broken cheek. "He is already gone. You've already taken everything away, destroyed *everything*." It pleased him enough to elicit a crooked grin that, with his frenzied eyes, turned her stomach. "Why me? You hate my dad. Then why kill him instead of me?"

"We hate Michelle the *most*," Casimir said. His eyes twitched. "Born of Jordan Isaac and Sarah Gold, *you* kept her from us, *you* made her love him instead of us—"

"No. I had nothing to do with that. I saw you. Their friend. At their wedding, before I was born. She had chosen my dad already. Why couldn't you just get over it?"

"She was happier with us," Casimir shrieked. His head hunched forward, and he arched his back, his shoulders up. His fingers curled like claws. "We could see it— EVERYONE could see it."

She repositioned her hands on her axe. Her palms were wet, her arms weak. "You're wrong. Now you don't have anything."

"We have our power. We tasted the strength of the Arbiter like a droplet of blood on our tongue when we were created. Now we will have it again, and we will drink from it like a pig feasts at a trough. Unrelenting access."

"No, you won't." She tightened her grip and lifted it higher, shifted her weight back.
"If all I have is my own life, I'll give it to the Arbiter rather than let you take it."

"Wait."

She started to swing then stopped, arms tiredly dipping. It was Arroyo. The Arbiter.

"He isn't gone. I don't kill them."

"What?"

"I have to repress him now because of Casimir, but he is still here."

Tears blurred her vision. Not now. "But he'll always have to share with you. I'll never... he'll never be himself."

"Kill Casimir, and he'll be free."

Cackling again, Casimir built his wake of fire until the flames rose above his lowered head. "We cannot be killed. We draw the strength of thousands and thousands of withered screaming bodies. All ours. Always deserved." The gash she had made in Casimir's side closed. "She knows it is impossible, but she will try, because she cannot kill him."

He leapt at her, fire following, and she had the instant she needed, the choice to give herself up and kill Arroyo to foil Casimir, at least temporarily, and hope that she would live a longer life as Arbiter than Arroyo had, and that someone else would come along like her and come to this point, where, if she could summon the strength, she could end it. The moment passed.

She dodged away from Casimir. He landed and went after her. As long as there was anyone other than the Arbiter in the chamber, he could be defeated and his power could be snatched away, so she was the target, not the Arbiter.

The Arbiter would have lost nothing by letting her kill Arroyo. It had to be the truth, that Arroyo would be free if Casimir died. But even if it was, that meant the Arbiter only had one reason for doing what it did – human compassion. Everything she had thought about it had been wrong.

She ran from Casimir and ducked behind the Arbiter's crate, her back to it. It was flung from behind her, and it sailed down the chamber and burst open on the ground. The black sphere rolled out then stopped.

Arroyo went back to the console. This was *not* the time to be fiddling with technology when Michelle could have had her neck snapped at any moment. There had to be another reason.

She made guarded, defensive swings with the axe to keep Casimir back, but she kept them close in the hope that he wouldn't knock it away or catch it. He was so much taller, so much stronger, than he could have reached over her swings and hit her if she wasn't careful. He made animalistic swipes at her, hands open and fingers spread like he would thresh her. She tried to shrink down to be out of reach. She couldn't keep it up. Needed to make another diversion.

"You're so powerful," she said, stepping back. "Why not just destroy the Arbiter outright?" She gestured to the sphere. There had to be a reason he hadn't done it already, but she was willing to try anything. "You don't *really* need the Arbiter, you just need it out of the way."

Casimir paused. "She tried to deceive but she doesn't know."

"Then I'll destroy it myself." Learn why Casimir needed it, and get Arroyo back. "And find out what happened." She ran for it, and Casimir followed, galloping on his

lanky arms and legs like a dog. Or garr. When she glanced back, she spotted Arroyo crossing the chamber, crossing where they had just been, and start to work on the next console. It was subtle, but the clamor from the first generator had grown.

Casimir slid past her and faced her, barring her path to the sphere. She'd hoped he would do that. A quick swing of the axe chopped the blade into his chest, through his sternum with a snap. He recoiled, arching his back and grabbing at the axe. He snapped it, broke the pieces, and pulled the blade out of his chest. He panted, eyes closing weakly. He tossed the blade away then rose up with a roar and crashed down on Michelle like a wave. She put up her arms but he pulled them away. It felt like he might crush her wrists as he fell on her. Her arms were pinned down, wrists pressed into the rocks. His hair fell around her face, billowing slightly from his heavy uneven huffs. He drew close, and she screamed. He would either kiss her or tear out her throat with his teeth, and each terrified her. The gash in his chest dripped globs of black sludge onto her stomach. He pulled her arms up over her head, straining her healing shoulder, and held them there with one hand. The weight of his lower half pressed into her knees. His skin was so hot this close to her. It felt like blisters all over. With his free hand, he took her neck. She wrestled and squirmed, but couldn't break free. His hold was loose. He smiled and laughed. "What do we do with her? Should we hate her?"

Hasty footsteps moved past her head. She could barely hear it. The heat burned in her ears.

Thump! Something black hit the side of Casimir's head, and his balance faltered enough for Michelle to wriggle away. Arroyo stood over Casimir, holding the Arbiter in both hands. He swung it again and knocked Casimir onto his back.

"Take your friend and run," the Arbiter said.

"No."

He looked at her, Arroyo's eyes. "Michelle, please." He blinked, and Arroyo's eyes were gone.

She glanced at Mr. Keaton. His chest shuddered. On either side of him, the two generators closest to the cavern entrance were worked into a frenzy now.

"We will never give them back their light," Casimir said. *Bang*. Something burst deep below them and shook the ground. His eyes were narrow. "*Never*. Feed us with fear and darkness, and out of want and need we will grow and live eternal."

The ground quaked. She pieced together what the Arbiter had done with those consoles. She ran, fists such tight balls that her nails cut her palms. She stopped at Mr. Keaton and pulled him up. And she looked back to Arroyo. He was still in there, and that made leaving him only worse.

She dragged Mr. Keaton through the tunnel mouth and under the string of lights back toward the elevator. She would take them as far as she could and just hoped it would be far enough. If she needed to die to ensure that Casimir was stopped, she would come to terms with it. Before they turned the corner, she took one last look down into the chamber.

Arroyo wrapped his arms around the black sphere and held it to his chest, head lowered.

There was a flash of light then a wall of dust and an incredible thundering bang that lasted only an instant and was then flooded by ringing. Michelle got Mr. Keaton around the corner. Rocks and metal shrapnel snapped and spun through the tunnel, clanging off

the walls and bouncing past them far up the shaft. Smoke and dust passed over them, blistering her face with pebbles. She clenched her eyes shut, covered her nose and mouth, and tried to cover Mr. Keaton's face. All she heard was the whining ringing. The tunnel shook and cracked overhead. The string of lights broke free from its fastening bolts, and the bulbs shattered from the pressure.

Michelle coughed and fought to breathe. It felt like the explosions had compressed her chest, and her lungs hadn't expanded again yet. The dust became still.

She felt Mr. Keaton's neck, found his pulse, and put her hand over his nose to feel the slight waft of his breath. She put her head against his and sobbed. It was over. Whatever she had left, it was over.

When she couldn't cry anymore, she realized the whine in her ears was mostly gone. She tested her legs. From the knee down, they were sore, black with dust, and bleeding from debris, but she could stand on them. She set Mr. Keaton's head down and rounded the corner.

The light from inside the cavern had gone out, so she took one of the lights on the cord that still worked and dragged it inside with her. A layer of rock and metal debris covered everything. She pulled herself. The back of the chair lay just in front of her. If there was anything left of Arroyo or Casimir, she was sure she didn't want to see it. But after all this, she needed to know, to see for her own sanity that Casimir was dead, and if she had any doubt, she would kill him again.

As she crested a tall heap of debris, the light tried to stay behind. The cord was stretched as far as it would go, so she set it down, light bulb pointed up, and crawled onward.

She scanned the surface and spotted a soft curve in the jagged landscape—a shoulder. Red flesh broke through a torn piece of cloth. She held her breath. It wasn't Casimir. She stopped. If she pulled on that shoulder and it wasn't attached to anything else, she knew she would lose it. No, she couldn't set herself up for that. She turned away with difficulty, shoved the painful anxious curiosity away and dug around at her feet, covered in cuts and scrapes.

Loose rocks and metal scraps came loose easily. A bit of glass. An eye gazed up at her, and she choked down either a scream or vomit or both. It was ringed in black-blue flesh and peered from behind shards of rock. She closed her eyes and covered her ears with her shoulders, picked up a sharp piece of metal, and stabbed it down. Dug it deep. After she let go, she scampered away, eyes still shut, shivers of disgust rippling down her back.

When she opened her eyes, she found herself near the shoulder peeking up. The rest of the body, whatever there was, disappeared beneath the rubble, but she could see a neck and some hair. Before she could think to stop herself, she was digging. The shoulder led to an arm, curled in with a hand, scoops of black marbly rock in it. The neck had a chin, and a face, only lightly scratched. "How the...?"

She rolled Arroyo onto his back. As much giddiness as she could muster wasn't much, barely a sigh and a smile. She recognized the rock in his hands. It had been a sphere. Somehow the Arbiter had shielded him, breaking in his place. Now it was dust and pebbles. It had said it could give him back when it was done, if Casimir died.

When she pulled his legs free, she gasped. Most of him had been protected, but his boots had been shot through and torn to shreds by shrapnel. She lifted his legs under his

knees and pulled. He was too heavy and she too exhausted to be able to lift him, but she inched him along, legs then shoulders, legs then shoulders, mindful of his bloody feet.

“Michelle.”

“Mr. Keaton!” She set Arroyo’s legs down. Mr. Keaton leaned against the rock wall of the tunnel.

“I can’t put any weight on my left leg.”

She hadn’t thought to check his legs before she moved him – there might have been breaks from his collision. “I’m just happy you’re alive.”

“And I am for you, too. Is he?”

“Alive? I think so.” She stopped to rest near the light she brought with her.

“I can try to help – ”

“No,” she said. “Wait there. I’ve got him.”

A little bit at a time, moving the light, checking for sharp metal, then lifting his legs and then shoulders, she brought him closer to the mouth of the tunnel. Once she was in reach, Mr. Keaton took the light from her and helped her pull Arroyo across. She carefully moved him until she had him around the bend and the ground became a bit smoother.

Her entire body burned with pain, and she had to take another break.

“Agnes fought bravely against the burner,” Mr. Keaton said. “But...”

“I’m sorry.”

“I did all I could.”

She pulled his hand to her and clasped it. “You’ve been extraordinary.”

He smiled weakly. “I did all I could.”

“Can I have your jacket?”

He handed it to her, but she didn't want it for herself. It was so hot she wanted to peel off her skin. No, she took the jacket and took care wrapping Arroyo's feet in it.

Mr. Keaton hopped ahead, using the wall as a crutch, while Michelle took Arroyo under the arms and dragged him to the elevator. The coat fell loose twice, and she rewrapped it. Hurrying or rushing didn't matter anymore. As long as the elevator was still there, she didn't care how long it took. The door was open when she reached it, Mr. Keaton inside resting. She pulled Arroyo past the doors and collapsed back.

“You did it, didn't you?”

She shook her head. “I didn't do much at all.”

“Don't be silly! You did battle against Casimir. You walked away, and he didn't.” He paused. “Good heavens, he didn't walk away, did he?”

“No.”

“Aha. A quest worthy of legends.”

“I'll leave that to you.” She couldn't focus on anything but Arroyo. He was alive, medically speaking, but she had no idea if he would wake up, or how much of himself would remain after being the last battleground for Casimir and the Arbiter's war.

She pulled him through the lobby upstairs then acted as Mr. Keaton's crutch and helped him through. Just outside, she settled against a south-facing wall and set Arroyo's head in her lap.

After how hot she had been down there, she didn't notice the cold of a black moonless night. Mr. Keaton rested nearby.

“We can go back,” he said. “Tell Seth, Sophia, and Lee about the whole thing.”

“Not just yet.”

She looked east expectantly. *We will never give them back their light*, Casimir had said. It couldn't have been... there was light on the horizon, real light, just barely blue.

“Mister Keaton, look at that.”

“My God. It can't be.”

No, it couldn't, but there it was. Slowly, it grew brighter, just a glow on the horizon. Each moment, she expected the glow to stop brightening, stop becoming yellower, pinker, but it didn't. It spread skyward until the barely blue glow reached over them and behind them, and the horizon grew in color. It was like a painting, a shifting piece of art. When she watched, it didn't move, but after a few moments, the image had changed. New colors had joined when she hadn't been paying attention. Color stretched over the land, slowly like the grayscapes were unsure that the color was real.

She held Arroyo's face in her hands and noticed the depth of brown in his hair, the fullness of the color in his cheeks, the pale pink of her hands, just shy of white.

The brightness grew until it hurt her eyes. “Did it always last so long?”

“No, it was never so kind.”

The blue grew richer overhead, deep, and then a sliver of fiery yellow-white cut the horizon from the sky and hurt her eyes. She didn't want to look away. Her first glimpse of the sun that she could remember, she wanted to watch it until it was an orb in the sky. She felt the warmth in the air, on Arroyo's face, and in her hands. Feeling came back to her fingers. She took off her gloves to feel his skin. It sent tingles up her arms. “Please wake up.”

The sun rose into the sky, uncovered for the first time in twenty years, and it was bright and more incredible than she had ever pictures.

Once it was fully in the sky, it was so bright she had to put her back to it. The warmth came over her in a steady wave. She held Arroyo's face in her hands, and felt the gentle thump of his pulse. As much as she had tried, he wouldn't wake up. But that didn't matter. She would wait. She would not go anywhere, would not even pull both of her hands from his face. It didn't matter how long she had to wait, she would. And while she did, she watched clouds roll through an airborne sea, an endless stretch of blue.

In color, the destruction and desolation of the landscape seemed so much worse, was so much more heartbreaking. Death was everywhere – crumbling bodies of garr; dried bodies of people, bare trees, white bark. The buildings were hollow.

But she held onto Arroyo and found something worthy of a smile.

"Michelle?" His eyes fluttered, then widened. "Look at the sky."

"I know." She stroked his cheek. All the pain in her body went away, and she felt only through her fingertips, the warmth on her eyes and cheeks, and the weight of his head on her thighs.

"You did it?"

She nodded. "Actually, you did."

"The last thing I can remember is talking to the Arbiter," he said. "I... think I killed him. What happened?"

She put a finger to his lips. "That's a story I'm going to save for another time. For now, I'm just going to enjoy this."

He lifted his head from her lap and settled in next to her. His eyes lingered on his feet, and he winced with every movement. She took one hand from his face and held his with it. The other she kept on his face, and she kissed him. "Just sit with me."

"For as long as you'd like." He squeezed her hand. "Listen, I'm sorry —"

She kissed him again. "Just sit with me. Everything else can wait." She rested her head against his and fought the exhaustion in her body so that she could watch the endless deep blue overhead that she never thought she would see.

The End

Epilogue – Six Years Later

Michelle sat on the steps outside the Center of New Government and closed her eyes. She tilted her chin up and felt the hot waves over her face.

“Are you coming, or do I have to come up there and drag you away?”

She laughed and opened her eyes. Arroyo, at the bottom of the steps, waved to her. “How did it go?” he said.

She bounded down the steps toward him. “Bringing sense back to a broken world isn’t easy, but Lee made a good impression as Mister Keaton’s replacement.”

“Do you think he’ll come back?” He pulled her down for a kiss, and then she took the handles of his wheelchair and pushed.

“I think it depends on what he finds. Everyone is excited that we contacted England, anyway. Just not as excited as Mister Keaton was to be on that boat.”

“Well, that’s good for them.”

“Shush, it’s important.”

“Well, I suppose that’s why I’m just your advisor.”

“Why?”

“You care so much about the little things.”

“You know, I could make you push yourself for a change.” Shrubs, so full of leaves, as if they felt they might never get a chance to soak up sunlight if they didn’t do it right now, lined every walkway. A tiny bird rustled through and poked its head out. It was as if nature had hidden somewhere during the Eclipse, waiting for it to be safe to come back out, and now it had had its chance to wake up and stretch.

“All right,” Arroyo said. “England is important, too.”

She wheeled him to the park across the street from the Arbiter Building, to the Casimir War Memorial. He grew quiet on the way there, probably when he’d figured out where they were going. For a while, he had complained about how frequently she came here, but when she had broken down and started crying hysterically, he must have decided to let it go.

She rolled him along the cement walk through the grass and stopped before the fountain. She kissed him and knelt in front of it.

The list of casualties was too big for a plaque, or a wall, or a town square, so instead there was an archive, always expanding, inside the Arbiter Building. In the middle of the pool stood a garr statue, the main water feature, its shoulders thrust back, its head held high. It had been Seth’s idea. He had said they were just Casimir’s puppets, and since they had all died when the Eclipse ended, they deserved to be remembered somehow. Besides, he had added, in a few years, no one would remember *what* it was, only that it meant the war was over.

Around the edge of the foundation, a shelf was made of tiles etched with memorials of those who fought and died with valor. Over time, as other stories came out, more fountains were built with their own shelves.

Michelle came to visit her mom and dad, buried below her feet. She didn't want the plaques of Jordan and Sarah Isaac to be any bigger or more important than any other. Agnes Warner had one "for commitment to late husband Hank Warner," who also had one. Jake Hunter "for knowing what was right."

"Use the infrastructure already put in place by the Arbiter and build a model using the old system as a... model."

She turned. Seth, bright-faced, smiled down at her and held Sophia's hand.

"Seth!" She leapt up to hug him.

"You said model twice," Sophia said.

"I know. Hush."

"I haven't seen you in months," Michelle said. "Haven't heard from you in weeks. What happened?" He didn't get out much. People often weren't as understanding of what he was – or who his father had been – as they should have been. He wore a scarf to cover the scars on his neck.

"We wanted to make a surprise visit."

Michelle looked to Arroyo. He tried to hide a smile. "You knew?"

"His idea. In January. I think?"

"Speaking of idea," Sophia said, "why'd you lead in with my plan for the government? 'Infrastructure already put in place'?"

"I was trying to give you a good opening."

"Except you said model twice." She jabbed him.

"Look, I'm half-evil, remember?"

Sophia looked at Michelle. "That's his excuse for everything."

"I have to stay in hiding," Seth went on. "I'm practically a vampire."

"Your point?"

"You're lucky I remember how to talk to people."

"Seth," Michelle said. "I'm sure you talk to the walls when no one is around."

He laughed. "Your aim is getting better, sis."

Arroyo wheeled up beside Michelle. "Should we go?"

Sophia stepped sideways sheepishly. "I just want to say hi to Miss Agnes first." She knelt, put her hands on the tile, then cocked her head, one eye open. "If I could?"

"Sorry," Seth said. He took Michelle by the arm and wheeled Arroyo, too. "You two are so rude, listening in on her paying respects like that. But seriously, it seems like her idea is working well?"

"Things are progressing. It will never be the same as it was."

"Is that so bad?" He turned to the fountain. "I'm glad Satan's head isn't dangling from its mouth. That would have been uncomfortable. You know, my other idea was a big statue of you, Arroyo."

"You're too kind."

"No, really. I mean, the huge sword would likely have been overkill, but you basically saved the world. Monument."

Michelle massaged Arroyo's shoulder. He got up from his chair, winced at the weight on his feet, and teetered for a moment. Then he took her hand and met her eyes. "I'd prefer people remember her."

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People weren't going to look at resurrecting oceanic travel as a relevant part of restoring society. Keaton had known this. So he had to make them think it was a good idea, good to figure out what was going on with the rest of the world, and to figure out how to do this together. He had searched for ships that could make the voyage and were in fair enough condition to be renovated without too much effort and expense; he himself had worked to exhaustion on the ship, and he hired all the help he could manage. All while working on fashioning a new American government alongside Michelle. His story alone bought the help of many, though he was loath to give it so willingly. His pain was dear to him. Yet he needed to, and he had. Six years later, the ship was finished, furnished, outfitted, and gone. He captained it himself, though he knew little about captaining, and it touched ground in England.

Keaton left the ship, stretching and favoring his cane. He'd never liked the idea of using it, but Michelle had insisted. And insisted, and insisted.

London had not suffered as much as he had expected, as much as he had seen cities in America suffer. Clearly, it was because London was superior. But that wasn't why he was here. There had been no communication, no word from Rachel or Ellice. As much as he hoped to find them alive, he had fear and apprehension six fold. He asked himself, "What if they don't recognize me, or don't want me?" In many ways, that would be worse than if they were dead, but at least he would know that he hadn't struggled on in vain – they lived.

He breathed the air of the city. Twenty-eight, she would be. It nearly knocked the wind out of him to think it. A whole person, fully formed with a developed mind, none of which he had been there to help form.

His first thought of how to find them was to go to their house. When he arrived, the door was missing, the windows had all been smashed, and inside the place was a mess, clearly untouched in some considerable time. Summoning a glut of courage, he searched the home for bodies.

Instead, he was delighted to find that the baby's stroller was missing along with photographs, clothes, and all manner of stuffed animal. They had clearly moved, then, somewhere safer, or perhaps warmer.

It took him two weeks more, spent looking for clues and talking to people who had remained in the area during the time of the Eclipse, until he learned of a small village to the south where people from the city had relocated. One man told him that, as far as he had heard, a woman named Rachel had built up a kind of farm there. He nearly burst with hope.

He had to hitch a ride on a horse-drawn carriage – which had returned to vogue with the scarcity of gasoline and automobiles – to get there, but he stepped onto wet, slushy grass and looked down a hill onto a small circle of a dozen farmhouses. People milled about, chattered, and he was struck with an absurd amount of nervousness. He hadn't thought finally coming back, finally getting so close, would be so wearying.

He pressed on. Down the hill he strode, cane first, and then he abandoned the cane, held it like a triumphant flag overhead and just endured the pain of his once-broken leg. At the bottom of the hill, he slowed and caught his breath. He shocked a young woman, likely fifteen or so.

"Can I help you?" she said, inching forward. She held a sack of some kind of produce and shyly hid behind it.

"I hope you can. I'm looking for someone incredibly important to me."

"Hershel?"

Keaton stuffed his hands in his pockets, because they started to shake at the voice. He turned. Her hair was graying, her glasses thicker, her body thinner and frailer. It was with no doubt Rachel, but he saw her beneath this woman. It was like Rachel had a film stretched over her entire body, until she came running toward him, and she saw her eyes. Rachel broke through that film in those eyes.

She threw her arms around his neck. "Good heavens," she said. "You're still alive."

"Mum?" A young woman came to follow Rachel, and Keaton nearly thought his heart had stopped. She was a petite girl, weak looking, and she held her arms over her stomach. A cascade of yellow blond hair fell over her shoulders and brightened her otherwise pale face. He closed his eyes and saw his daughter, the photograph Michelle had saved for him. When he opened his eyes, he still saw his daughter.

"Well," he said. His chin wrinkled as his lip bobbed, and tears puckered his eyes.

"You've grown a bit."